

## **DISTANCE EDUCATION REPORT 2021**

**Jo Camilleri**

ICPA (Aust) continues to advocate for recognition and support for those families who must educate their children by distance education because of being geographically isolated.

One of the greatest impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic felt across education in Australia was seeing the majority of students having to learn from home with their families required to supervise, support and implement online lesson delivery. While Federal Council were able to provide advice and guidance to families across the nation who were faced with managing this challenging and unprecedented situation, this also gave rise to an opportunity to build on a newfound insight and appreciation of the challenges for geographically isolated families always needing to educate children at home. ICPA (Aust) remains hopeful that this newfound appreciation will help raise the profile for the much-needed Distance Education Teaching Allowance, Assistance for Isolated Children, distance education resources and learning support.

### **Distance Education Teaching Allowance**

The ICPA (Aust) Distance Education Portfolio has continued to raise the need for a Distance Education Teaching Allowance (DETA) at every possible opportunity. A heightened awareness through the COVID-19 pandemic of the challenges associated with educating children at home highlighted the difficulties faced by geographically isolated families who, due to living in remote parts of Australia, have no choice but to educate their children by distance education. It has also validated the necessity of an adult tutor to be available to assist and supervise students while they participate in online learning and learning from home, drawing attention to the commitment, responsibility, time and financial impost required to facilitate children's full-time learning in the home environment.

On 1 December 2020 Federal Council launched the inaugural Geographically Isolated Distance Education (GIDE) Day to recognise and honour the ongoing plight of geographically isolated families who must educate their children at home at all times. ICPA (Aust) also used the day to call on the Federal Government to formally recognise the role that parents play in distance education. We look forward to continuing with the GIDE Day campaign again this year and encourage all members and supporters to get on board.

Following on from GIDE Day and well-documented acknowledgement by Governments of the challenges parents faced educating their children at home during COVID-19, Federal Council wrote to the Prime Minister urging him to consider, recognise and acknowledge GIDE families in this regard.

Federal Council has since written to the Minister for Decentralisation and Regional Education and other relevant Ministers, MPs and Senators imploring the Government to recognise the estimated 1500 families for who distance education is a way of life because of where they live. Federal Council appealed for the inception of a DETA as a way of acknowledging those who must undertake the role of the tutor in these contexts. We also raised this topic as a key issue during virtual delegation meetings and in meetings with representatives from the Department of Education, Skills and Employment.

The request for a DETA was again included in the 2021-22 Pre-Budget Submission earlier this year and is a key focus in our recently updated DE Briefing Papers. The topic was raised again in recent delegations and discussions with government representatives, including the Minister for Decentralisation and Regional Education. In light of the suggestion that the provision of such financial assistance should be the responsibility of State governments, Federal Council has been recently

highlighting that where families are unable to provide a tutor or continue with geographically isolated distance education, they may instead move to a second home or send children to boarding schools, for which the Federal Government provides financial assistance which equates to significantly more costs than a \$6 000 payment per family to assist with the provision of a tutor would cost.

**Table 1. AIC Allowances Comparison – Boarding, Second Home, Distance Education**

Second Home		Boarding		Distance Education		
Up to three children	Up to \$19443.84 per family per year (2021)	One child	Up to \$11 011 per family per year (2021)	One child	Current	With addition of \$6000 DETA
					\$4278 per family per year (2021)	\$10278 per family per year
				Two children	Up to \$22022 per family per year (2021)	Two Children
		Three children	Up to \$33 033 per family per year (2021)	Three children	\$12633 per family per year (2021)	\$18633 per family per year

ICPA Federal Council has and will continue to appeal to the government at every given opportunity for the establishment of a Distance Education Teaching Allowance. We also continue to seek updated numbers of geographically isolated distance education Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) recipients to assist with our advocacy around DETA and other topics.

### Research

Federal Council lent their support to a team from the University of Southern Queensland in 2020, conducting a study into distance education tutoring across Australia, with the view to “mapping the experiences and perceptions of Australian Remote Education Tutors”. The study commenced with a survey across Australia to gather data to inform their research. Federal Council has devoted an enormous amount of time and effort over many years to advocate for Distance Education tutors, including our own research in the ICPA’s Distance Education Research for Geographically Isolated Families survey:

<https://icpa.com.au/sites/icpa.com.au/files/inline-files/DETA%20SURVEY%20RESEARCH%20Final%20Nov%202015%20.pdf> through a range of other endeavours and this additional research and data will certainly be useful to support and build upon our work. We look forward to working together with the team into the future.

### Assistance for Isolated Children - Distance Education (AIC-DE) Allowance

Federal Council has sought assistance from many Ministers, Members of Parliament and Senators in accessing up to date statistics regarding the number of Geographically isolated families and students accessing AIC Distance Education Allowance to assist with our advocacy for this cohort.

Following concerns from members about the changing nature of distance education schools and schools of the air across much of Australia, with increased enrolments of non-geographically isolated students, Federal Council has continued to advocate for a separate category for geographically

isolated students to be established within the AIC scheme. We have emphasised that geographically isolated distance education students are a unique disadvantage group who do not have any daily access to face-to-face appropriate schooling due to where they live, and financial assistance needs to be maintained and assured to assist with the costs associated with educating these students, as per the original intent of the AIC scheme.

Within submissions, meetings and delegations, Federal Council has highlighted that geographically isolated students need to be recognised as a unique marginalised group who require specialised support and assistance in order to allow them to achieve equitable educational outcomes. Federal Council aims to use every opportunity to highlight and promote distinctive needs of geographically isolated students and hopes up to date data will assist in accurately advocating for the need for the AIC Distance Education Allowance to be maintained and indeed increased to better reflect the out-of-pocket costs incurred by geographically isolated families undertaking distance education. This issue was raised during delegations in Canberra in May 2021.

#### **Location of Schools of the Air/Schools of Distance Education**

Federal Council continues to maintain the position that Schools of the Air and Schools of Distance Education should remain in rural and remote communities. The importance of this is thoroughly understood, and while decisions of this nature are principally state-based, Federal Council will support States however possible to ensure Schools of the Air and Schools of Distance Education remain in rural and remote communities and maintain the resources and support provided for geographically isolated students who have no choice but to be educated via these schools.

#### **Appropriate learning resources for distance education students**

ICPA (Aust) is aware that the provision of learning materials and resources for distance education is the responsibility of state governments, however, requests the support of the Federal Government to ensure appropriate resources continue to be supplied to distance education students across Australia. Distance education students access their daily learning in a variety of ways, and most depend on a blend of learning materials determined by the school and communications infrastructure. Working, well-maintained landline phone services and internet access are also vital for geographically isolated distance education students as these services provide necessary access to distance education programs.

#### **Support for volunteer remote educational support for rural and remote students' programs**

Federal council is working to ensure the continued support and funding for Volunteer for Isolated Student's Education (VISE) services across Australia. From ICPA research, 85% of the geographically isolated distance education tutors across Australia are the mothers of the children who must study via distance education. This person receives no assistance, support, respite, nor remuneration for this role as they are required to supervise and assist their students on an ongoing, daily basis in the schoolroom. Volunteer Remote Educational Support for Rural and Remote Students programs aim to support the education of rural students and, in particular isolated families involved in distance education, and we continue to support these programs however we can.

In closing, I wish to thank the incredible Distance Education Portfolio team, being Alana Moller, Briony Sinclair and Lisa Slade.