

ISOLATED CHILDREN’S PARENTS’ ASSOCIATION OF AUSTRALIA



2022 FEDERAL CONFERENCE PORTFOLIO REPORTS

Table of Contents

BOARDING/HOSTELS/SECOND HOME REPORT	2
COMMUNICATIONS REPORT	7
CURRICULUM REPORT.....	14
DISTANCE EDUCATION REPORT	16
EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE REPORT	18
RURAL SCHOOLS AND SCHOOL TRAVEL REPORT	21
SPECIFIC EDUCATION NEEDS REPORT	24
TERTIARY REPORT	27
TRAINING REPORT.....	32

BOARDING/HOSTELS/SECOND HOME REPORT

Lisa Slade

The Boarding/Hostels/Second Home Portfolio has been kept busy again this past year keeping abreast of the issues surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic. The Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) continues to be a priority, along with monitoring the change in the school funding model and how it will impact on boarding school fees.

COVID-19

The four motions presented and carried at the 2021 Federal Conference regarding cross border travel and the National Code for Boarding School Students were actioned immediately. In November, ICPA (Aust), along with other key stakeholders, were invited by the then Minister for Regional Education, Senator the Hon Bridget McKenzie to attend a follow-up virtual roundtable regarding the Implementation of the National Code for Boarding School Students. Following on from this, a joint ICPA Council media release titled 'Border Chaos Continues – Enough is Enough' called upon State Governments to adopt the National Code for Boarding School Students endorsed by National Cabinet in September 2021 to ensure the 2022 year was met with informed and clear determinations around cross border travel for students travelling between their home and place of school as outlined in the National Code. ICPA (Aust) thank Senator McKenzie, Senator Perin Davey and Senator Susan McDonald, along with the Australian Boarding Schools Association (ABSA) and other stakeholders for their unwavering support and willingness to pursue this issue with the States and Territories through avenues such as National Cabinet meetings. We would also like to acknowledge the tireless work behind the scenes by both ABSA and Senator McKenzie's office to supporting individual members, helping families overcome the perplexing layers of red tape and mind-boggling inconsistencies across jurisdictions to ensure their children could travel across borders between their school and their home in time for Christmas, when all other avenues had been exhausted. While the foot has come off the pedal so to speak with regards to the boarder/border situation, we are still seeing motions at State Conferences seeking assurances from their State/Territory Governments that should a similar situation arise in the future, these Governments will abide by the National Code.

With the commencement of the new school year across the country, the COVID-19 guidelines (within a boarding environment) varied across each State and Territory and the subsequent implementation of these guidelines by each boarding school was subject to interpretation. This evolved into inconsistent, unjustifiable, and stifling requirements, processes and rules that brought further adversity to an already disadvantaged cohort of vulnerable students. Accounts of extended isolation, families not being able to settle children into boarding at the start of the year, boarding students being segregated from day students and many more stories of heartbreak made these conditions unbearable for both the children and their families. State Councils worked tirelessly within their own States and Territories to address these issues and be the voice for these families and Federal Council worked as a conduit between Councils to share information to help bring a resolution to a fundamentally confused and unworkable situation. In March a further joint ICPA Councils media statement was released - 'ICPA Calls for a Balanced Approach to Risk Management Within Boarding' – outlining the need to urgently address unfolding issues surrounding COVID-19 within the boarding environment. I commend all for their ongoing tenacity in this diabolical situation.

Once again, ABSA along with Senator McKenzie and her office provided much needed support and help during the first term of school in particular, and we thank them greatly on behalf of ICPA members across Australia. In most cases there was a breakdown in communication between the relevant health department and the boarding schools leaving the scope and interpretation of the guidelines quite broad. While each and every boarding school were acting in the best interests of their students while keeping within the guidelines, it was often a case of misinterpretation of the guidelines, due to lack of specific direction within them, that formed the crux of the issue. Some state government departments

communicated far better than others, but importantly ICPA were able to be a part of the conversation and raise concerns to help find a balanced approach to risk management within boarding situations, where the COVID-19 risks could be mitigated without disproportionate constraints on our vulnerable young children.

Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC)

Federal Council continues to seek blanket increases to the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Boarding and Second Home Allowances. In late December, we were invited by then Minister for Families and Social Services, Senator the Hon Anne Ruston, to attend a virtual meeting with her office to discuss the issues raised in the 2021 Federal Conference motion letters. The opportunity to provide extra information added a human element, gave the issues context in a rural and remote setting and fostered a broader understanding of why our members request increases and changes to the AIC. It was a positive meeting, and we were thankful to be given the opportunity to speak on behalf of members and to build a rapport with the Minister's office.

Senator the Hon Matthew Canavan, who chaired the Senate Standing Committee on Education and Employment wrote to notify Federal Council that he would take our request for an increase to the AIC Basic Boarding Allowance to the Senate Standing Committee meeting in late February. We are yet to hear if this eventuated.

Federal Council has been in regular contact with Services Australia and the Department of Social Services since Federal Conference. Following a major reshuffle throughout both of these departments over the past few years, we had been left floundering, losing what were once strong staff connections and dealing with revolving staff, unfamiliar with ICPA. It is pleasing to report that we now have a strong and fluid relationship with both Departments again and that regular meetings have been established.

At the end of November 2021, the Department of Social Services supplied ICPA (Aust) with data showing the breakdown between geographically isolated students (distance education, boarding and second home) and other recipients of AIC by State/Territory. This was a major breakthrough as this data has been requested by Federal Council as far back as 2016 after the Department had stopped providing it. This information is valuable to assist in our advocacy to the Federal Government and relevant departments.

In December 2021 Services Australia provided the 2022 payment rates and payment dates for AIC, which were distributed to members via the Branch Bulletin and uploaded onto the ICPA website. It was a major milestone to not receive messages from members regarding erroneous 'AIC Cancellation' letters over the Christmas period. Federal Council passed on its appreciation to the Department for putting this issue to bed after four or more years.

In January 2022 ICPA (Aust) was contacted by Services Australia investigating families' concerns surrounding the current COVID-19 situation and the return to boarding. We were pleased to report recently that arising from this feedback we were given assurance that the AIC will continue to be paid to families throughout Term 1 and 2 of 2022, regardless of whether a child is at boarding school or learning remotely due to the pandemic. The continuation of AIC basic and additional boarding payments will be reassessed each term according to the COVID-19 situation.

Federal Council was subsequently invited to attend quarterly meetings with the Department of Social Services (DSS) and Services Australia to discuss the AIC, Youth Allowance, ABSTUDY and the Tertiary Access Payment. The first meeting for the year was held virtually in early February. The need for an online AIC renewal form was discussed and feedback indicated that while its rollout was likely delayed due to COVID-19, this is a priority and the departmental team were confident they were gaining traction. Unfortunately, due to the election and subsequent caretaker mode, Federal Council was unable to meet with the department in Canberra at our face-to-face delegations in May but were able to connect virtually again in mid-June. We were pleased to see the same faces following the change in Government and thank DSS and

Services Australia for continuing this important communication network with us.

Direct Measure of Income (DMI) School Funding Model

While much of Federal Council's focus has been on the issues around COVID-19 in boarding, we have begun working with ABSA to monitor the affect the application of this model on boarding schools could potentially have on rural and remote boarding students. ABSA has access to boarding schools across Australia and has been working with the Coalition of Regional Independent Schools Australia (CRISA) around statistical data across regional schools as well as boarding schools.

Federal Council has previously raised concerns regarding this school funding model and in 2020 presented a submission to the Review of the Regional Schooling and Resource Standard Loadings, the findings of which are yet to be released. We also wrote to then Minister for Regionalisation, Regional Communications and Regional Education, Senator the Hon Bridget McKenzie to raise our grave and immediate concern over the impact the Direct Measure of Income (DMI) funding model will have on rural and remote families Federal Council have cited concerns on the impacts increases in either or both tuition and boarding fees or lack of school services as a result of the imminent decreases in funding to Independent Regional Boarding Schools will have on our members.

ICPA (Aust) supports extra loading recommendations which recognise the disadvantages in Regional, Rural and Remote (RRR) educational contexts and acknowledge the establishment of the Choice and Affordability Fund to address funding shortfalls. However, we believe the potential inadvertent negative impacts for rural and remote families due to the consequences of the Capacity to Contribute (CTC) arrangements on Independent RRR Schools need to be thoroughly investigated and provisions made to mitigate these effects on geographically isolated students who access these schools due to lack of access to an appropriate school where they live. ICPA (Aust) has raised the following issues:

- There are simply not enough State Government-run hostels and boarding facilities to accommodate the thousands of rural and remote children who must board away from home for their secondary education
- The lack of inclusion of 'boarding' within the DMI funding model and the need for boarding fees to be taken into consideration in conjunction with in-school costs within the model. When calculating boarding families' capacity to contribute, it is imperative the boarding fees they incur on top of tuition fees are taken into consideration.
- The lack of inclusion of boarding operations expenses of Independent Regional Boarding Schools in providing essential boarding facilities for rural and remote children within the DMI funding model also indicates a lack of acknowledgement by Government of the importance of educational equity for geographically isolated students
- Concerns regarding the use of taxable income to determine the capacity to contribute for rural and remote families who are involved in primary production industries such as agriculture as this can be a grossly inaccurate measure of income for the following reasons:
 - Income and operating expenses within the agricultural industry are highly variable and fluctuate from year to year depending on factors such as the season and commodity prices.
 - Many agricultural operations are private enterprises, often asset rich and cash poor and disposable income is low.
 - The income of families involved in primary production is almost completely dependent on the weather, commodity prices, bushfires, drought, floods and other rural hardships which are entirely uncontrollable and unpredictable in nature.
 - Often with family-owned agricultural businesses and other rural businesses in small towns, the "income" is actually the business earnings, and any profit is reinvested back into the business rather than personal income to be used by a family for other needs.

- Rural and remote families are in an unusual position in that their children need to source an education, which comes at a considerable cost but they have very little disposable income even in productive years.
- Without due consideration of fluctuating incomes and possible inflated and inaccurate income data that the CTC arrangements may generate in relation to families involved in primary production, funding shortfalls for RRR schools may not be identified and therefore not adequately addressed in the Regional Schooling Resource Standard Loadings
- Students from geographically isolated areas often form a very small percentage of an Independent Regional Boarding School's student base which can result in a dilution of their own Capacity to Contribute and yet they are the ones that face the greatest challenge to educate their children.

ICPA (Aust) believes these concerns need to be addressed as a matter of urgency and pose the following recommendations to mitigate any impacts the DMI model may have on our already disadvantaged rural and remote students.

Recommendations:

1. That recurrent funding for schools be extended to include the provision of boarding to ensure the continued viability of Independent Regional Boarding Schools and the accessibility and affordability of these schools for geographically isolated students
2. That the Capacity to Contribute methodology recognises the financial circumstances of geographically isolated families when applied to Independent RRR Schools and Independent Regional Boarding Schools which cater for geographically isolated students
3. Choice and affordability fund – assurance that the quarantined funds for Independent Regional Schools in each State and Territory is distributed appropriately to adequately mitigate the impacts of the DMI model for independent schools with boarding facilities
4. Incremental annual increases to the AIC Basic Boarding Allowance of at least \$500 per geographically isolated recipient, along with incremental annual increases to the AIC Additional Boarding Allowance of \$500 per recipient to recognise the expected increase in boarding school fees incurred by their families to ensure affordable access to a compulsory education for their children.

Fringe Benefit Tax (FBT)

A motion regarding the removal of FBT for businesses who assist employees with boarding fees was actioned in correspondence to the Minister for Finance. Federal Council received a reply from the Individuals and Indirect Tax Division department within The Treasury, on behalf of the Treasurer, who maintained the important role FBT plays. It is believed those who receive other forms of remuneration above their salary and wages are at an advantage to those who are only able to generate an income entirely from their salary. By taxing those additional payments (fringe benefits) it levels the playing field in helping to provide an equitable taxation system within Australia. They believe providing a tax exemption for private boarding fee payment by an employer, as we have requested, would deliver significant disadvantage to those employees and self-employed persons who also pay private boarding fees from their own salary and wages, as opposed to those in receipt of the fringe benefit from their employer.

Unfortunately, the election and ensuing caretaker mode halted much of the movement in the groundwork laid earlier in the year, but like any challenge we look forward to working with the new Government in paving the road ahead.

Useful Links

For the most up to date information please follow these links to the Briefing Papers related to this Portfolio:

Federal Boarding/Hostels/Second Home Briefing Paper

<https://icpa.com.au/au/federal-boardinghostelssecond-home-briefing-paper>

Federal Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Briefing Paper

<https://icpa.com.au/au/federal-assistance-isolated-children-aic-briefing-paper>.

Link to Media Release 'ICPA calls for a balanced approach to risk management within Boarding'

<https://icpa.com.au/au/icpa-calls-balanced-approach-risk-management-within-boarding>

Link to 2022 AIC Payment Rates and Dates

<https://icpa.com.au/au/important-portfolio-update-march-2022>

I would like to thank my fellow Boarding/Hostels/Second Home Portfolio members, Alana Moller, Ali Allison, Julia Broad, Naomi Obst and Wendy Henning for their invaluable support this past year. I would also like to wish the new Council for 2023 all the very best for what will be a busy year getting to know the new Government and making sure they in turn know all about rural and remote children's education!

COMMUNICATIONS REPORT

Wendy Hick

Communications continues to be a lively portfolio, with the connectivity needs of our members remaining a priority for ICPA (Aust), from internet access to telephony service. Communications is a portfolio where developments and changes can occur almost daily.

ICPA (Aust) works closely with key communications stakeholders to ensure we have opportunity to raise topics and issues on behalf of our members. We maintain our involvement with the Rural, Regional and Remote Communications Coalition (RRRCC), Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman (TIO) Consumer Panel and Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) Consumer Consultative Forum, where we are able to raise and seek to address the communications challenges faced by our members. ICPA (Aust) also participates in regular meetings with NBN Co and Telstra to discuss issues and topics from across the country.

Internet Access

The necessity for adequate internet access for geographically isolated families continues to be reflected in motions presented by Branches. Following our 2021 Federal Conference, Federal Council wrote to then Minister for Decentralisation, Regional Education and Regional Communications Senator the Hon Bridget McKenzie and other key Ministers, MPs and Senators, requesting assurance that internet services for the purpose of education are maintained and expanded. In this correspondence Federal Council cited the need for current internet services in rural and remote Australia to not only be maintained, but for further enhancements to be made, to ensure geographically isolated students and their families have access to adequate internet services as reliance on online resources expands across all levels of education. With the recent change of Government, ICPA (Aust) will continue to advocate on this with newly appointed Minister for Communications, the Hon Michelle Rowland MP.

nbn® Sky Muster™ Satellite Services

Many of our members rely on Sky Muster satellite services in order to access internet in their geographically isolated locations and we continue to raise a variety of issues associated with Sky Muster internet, both ongoing and time-sensitive, with relevant parties, including the Federal Government and nbn directly.

In our correspondence following conference to the former Minister for Regional Communications we requested reassurance that the installation of the Sky Muster service and its hardware would continue at no cost to rural and remote student households to ensure affordable access to education for rural and remote students. Federal Council was assured that this would continue and will seek further reassurance following the change of Government.

In recent years, the Sky Muster network has seen enhancements in the form of the Sky Muster Plus product, which provides an extensive unmetered data capacity. For current users of Sky Muster services, we can confirm that all users are eligible to migrate to a Sky Muster Plus plan, including families using an educational port on the Sky Muster network. ICPA (Aust) encourages all members who have a standard Sky Muster plan, whether on an educational port or otherwise, to investigate their options for a Plus plan with a Sky Muster Plus Retail Service Provider (RSP) as education sites as well as all web meeting tools such as Zoom are unmetered on Sky Muster Plus. Members should be aware that not all RSPs have Sky Muster Plus plans, however customers are able to change providers to a RSP that does offer these plans in a few simple steps. All Sky Muster providers can be found here <https://nbn.com.au/skymuster-providers>.



Sky Muster™ Plus changes as of 1 July 2022

As of 1 July, Sky Muster Plus services were further enhanced with a plan upgrade which allows for completely uncapped data usage from Midnight to 4pm. This new upgrade includes Virtual Private Network (VPN) as well as video streaming during these hours which will assist students who require this for their education lessons. Under the new plan, only VPN and video streaming count towards customers' data allowance. These changes came into effect automatically on 1 July for all Sky Muster Plus accounts and are only available on Sky Muster Plus (regular Sky Muster service does not offer this unmetering, and not all RSPs offer Sky Muster Plus plans, so members are encouraged to check their plan with their internet provider). See link above.

nbn® have recently released several tools to help families navigate the ever-growing online world.

- the Online Skills Check & Resources (OSCAR) has been created to help measure online skills and find resources to help families with their digital journey. OSCAR takes users through four essential competencies: online knowledge, device usage, sharing data and e-safety and online communication. Through the answers provided in the online skill check, users online skills are measured and information to relevant resources which may assist are provided. ICPA (Aust) sent out a link to OSCAR with our unique ICPA QR code in the March edition of the Branch Bulletin for members to access this tool or you can scan it here to access the tool and accompanying resources.



- The nbn® Sky Muster Satellite Services Connectivity Guide is an interactive trouble shooting tool which can be downloaded to a device or computer so that it can be accessed if customers are offline. This troubleshooting guide helps users work through their service, troubleshoot and optimise performance. The Guide can be found and downloaded here: <https://www.nbnco.com.au/content/dam/nbn/documents/support/satellite/nbn-sky-muster-troubleshooting-guide.pdf>
- Recently nbn have also released their Fixed Wireless Connectivity Guide which can be found here <https://www.nbnco.com.au/content/dam/nbn/documents/support/fixed-wireless/Fixed%20Wireless%20Connectivity%20Guide.pdf>

Federal Council continues to add useful resources such as this to our ICPA (Aust) website so that members can find them easily. <https://icpa.com.au/au/useful-websites-news-and-resources-communications>

Alternative Internet Services

While Sky Muster has provided welcome internet access not previously seen in rural and remote Australia, ICPA (Aust) advocates that all geographically isolated students need access to adequate communication

services to meet their education needs. In a response from the Minister in December 2021, it was acknowledged that internet access *“via the National Broadband Network (NBN) Sky Muster satellite service is critical to the education of many geographically isolated students”*, and additionally that *“the government remains committed to ensuring that students, regardless of where they live, have access to high quality education and experience the same education opportunities as other students”*. ICPA (Aust) is encouraged by the recommendation in the recent Regional Telecommunications Independent Review that the Government Fund Innovation trials to explore the value and reliability of new technology solutions able to address broadband and mobile coverage across regional, rural and remote Australia and that more and improved internet solutions may emerge in the future.

Transient Families

The need for an affordable internet product for transient families working in remote locations of Australia has been a high priority for Federal Council as the need for an internet connection to access schooling continues to increase. ICPA (Aust) welcomed the recent nbn Mobility Trial and NBN Co’s commitment to testing portable flyaway connection kits with distance education students and families who work in remote areas of Queensland and the Northern Territory late last year. The outcomes of these trials were as expected – the families, and most importantly their children, were ecstatic with the opportunity to be able to access internet and therefore their schooling while on the move.

ICPA (Aust) believes priority must be given to the provision of internet to these children as a matter of urgency in order to ensure their education is not hindered because of their family’s circumstances. Unfortunately, the costs of these kits are prohibitive and we therefore corresponded again with Minister McKenzie and other relevant Ministers and Shadow Ministers in February, requesting provisions for possible subsidies or other assistance to be made available similar to fixed (home) Sky Muster installations, to ensure transient internet connection kits are affordable and accessible for the small number of students for whom they are required. Federal Council will continue this advocacy with the new Government.

Mobile Coverage/Service

ICPA (Aust) also included in our correspondence to Minister McKenzie issues raised in regard to the need for both expanded mobile coverage in rural and remote areas, particularly in the vicinity of schools along with the need to ensure current mobile services have sufficient backup power to provide consistent and uninterrupted delivery. In a response received in December these concerns were noted and reference was made to funding available to expand mobile services through the next round of the Mobile Black Spot Program and Round 2 of the Regional Connectivity Program. We do know that previous Mobile Black Spot programs have concentrated on expanding coverage in the vicinity of small rural schools and we expect this to continue. Members are encouraged to investigate opportunities for funding applications for locations of concern. The recent Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committee, included in their 2021 Regional Telecommunications Review Report released on February 14, 2022, recommendations to *“Encourage shared network access and innovative funding for mobile in regional areas”* and to *“Increase Government investment in regional connectivity”*. At this stage we are uncertain of the new Government’s commitment to the Mobile Blackspot Program, however we will continue to raise the need for continual improvements to be made for mobile services in rural and remote areas, not just in regards to coverage but also capacity of mobile networks.

The issue of back-up power reliability and capacity on mobile towers has been raised in a number of forums by Federal Council. Consistent, uninterrupted service is important to families living in geographically isolated areas for the delivery of children’s education programs as well as safety and health concerns. ICPA (Aust) has been working collectively on communications issues and recently Federal and all State Councils attended a communications meeting with representatives from Telstra to discuss the issues members raised at the 2021 conference. At this meeting, information was provided regarding Telstra’s mobile sites being actively upgraded with battery and battery replacements as well as mobile transmission equipment also being upgraded to improve resilience in regional, rural and remote areas. There is currently some

suggestion that this advocacy on backup power should also include the various power supply companies as they are ultimately in charge of overall power sources. Federal Council will continue its discussions on back-up power and work towards better outcomes in areas dependent on these services.

ICPA (Aust) advocates strongly for this investment to be concentrated in areas with maximum advantage for educational access in any future funding opportunities.

3G Shut Down

ICPA (Aust) has continued to seek assurance from Telstra and the Federal Government that rural and remote areas will not be left lagging as the Telstra 3G is gradually shut down leading up to June 2024. Telstra has committed to provide 4G coverage equivalent to their 3G coverage by the time of 3G closure and ICPA (Aust) will continue to advocate both to Telstra and the Federal Government that until it is certain that this commitment met, the 3G shut down should not proceed. A number of new plans are currently being investigated to assist with enhancing current mobile capacity and ensure as many rural and remote locations are able to access adequate mobile coverage.

In May 2022, Optus shut down their 2100MHz spectrum band 3G service, with 3G no longer available to Optus customers on that band. Telstra has given customers notice of the June 2024 changeover date and time to plan for the change to 4G and most technology sold within recent years has been 4G capable. It is important to remember that technology changes over time and all equipment needs to have a replacement plan, similar to computers, printers and other devices. The average recommended life span of technology equipment is between three to five years and replacement or upgrade should be considered and planned for as that time approaches for any communications equipment as devices become incompatible with new technology and services.

Telstra Broadband Upgrades for Education Projects

Telstra has paired with state governments and state education departments with projects to bring about better digital inclusion through upgrades to internet services in schools. The projects will benefit 1258 state schools across Queensland, joining an upgrade for more than 2000 schools in NSW, a boost for more than 1600 public schools in Victoria, an upgrade for more than 500 schools across SA, an upgrade to more than 750 public schools in WA, and upgrades to some regional schools in Tasmania. Education departments in each state should have lists of the schools receiving upgrades, what those upgrades entail and expected date of completion.

The Blue Tick

Recently we have become more aware that not all devices perform well with mobile services in rural and remote settings. In 2007, Telstra put forward the 'Blue Tick' program where mobile devices were thoroughly tested and if given the 'Telstra's Blue Tick' it signifies that a mobile device delivers superior voice coverage in rural and regional areas on the Telstra Mobile Network. The Blue Tick program is still in place and we encourage members to consider looking for devices that have the blue tick for use in rural and regional areas that have mobile coverage. If members are experiencing reduced mobile coverage in certain areas compared to previous times, it can sometimes be a change in the device they are now using, and blue tick devices have been tested to identify their performance in rural and regional areas.

Telephone

In rural and remote areas, telephone connections remain a significant and essential part of the communications services relied on by residents and understandably members continue to request for services to be maintained to adequate standards. Through correspondence to Minister McKenzie and other relevant Ministers and Shadow Ministers as well as recent submissions to the Regional Telecommunications Independent Review and the Carrier License Conditions - Better Reporting on Telstra Delivery of Voice Services consultation, ICPA (Aust) has raised key concerns of our members including:

- The need for customer service and telephone assistance lines to more effectively assist rural and remote students and their families.
- The need for priority, subsidised phone line installations and repairs in rural and remote areas when the purpose is education delivery.
- The need to ensure rural and remote students have consistent access to continuous and reliable telephone communications through regular maintenance of existing telephone infrastructure and the provision of a temporary satellite phone or other service to any rural or remote family where a phone fault is not rectified within three working days.

We have also sought reassurance that for those members who live in nbn satellite and fixed wireless mapped areas, who have non-nbn landlines such as, high-capacity radio concentrator (HCRC), Next G Wireless Link (NGWL) networks and copper lines, the retention and ongoing maintenance of these current services is maintained and prioritised until equal or better alternatives can be identified and installed. Several ICPA members were involved in the Alternate Voice Services Trials which concluded on the 30th June 2022, the report is available on the Department's website. We thank our members who gave valuable feedback on these trials. 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.

The Minister's response to our letter raising these topics in December provided reassurance that the Government was committed to upholding the current Universal Service Obligation (USO) commitments, which should ensure that existing services are adequately maintained until such time as viable alternatives are identified. We are also optimistic that the Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committee recommendations to "*continue but reform existing universal services for the future*" will ensure this commitment is adhered to. Federal Council will highlight the importance of this with new Minister for Communications Hon Michelle Rowland MP and seek a commitment from the new Government to uphold this guarantee.

Telstra Call Centres returning to Australia

In early 2020, Telstra announced that their call centres would be moving back to mainland Australia and assurance was made at the 2021 Federal Conference that Telstra was working towards having all consumer and small business calls answered in Australia. At the start of July 2022, Telstra announced that all consumer and small business calls are now being answered within Australia <https://exchange.telstra.com.au/say-gday-call-centres-back-in-australia/>. ICPA (Aust) is optimistic this will improve members' experiences when making contact regarding their Telstra services and will monitor the outcome of this move.

Telstra RAN

The Telstra Regional Advisory Network (or RAN) is a program that helps Telstra's regional customers (Consumer, Small Business & Enterprise) get connected wherever they are in regional, rural or remote Australia. The RAN program has been designed to help Telstra customers who are having connectivity issues in their home, business premises or on the road. It provides holistic service solutions using Telstra experts from regional Australia, as well as the Telstra Network & IT team and field technicians, to provide Telstra customers with a range of services from a simple fix to fully integrated and bespoke network solutions to ensure they are able to make the most of their connection using the Telstra regional footprint. More info here <https://exchange.telstra.com.au/helping-our-regional-and-rural-customers/> and also at Telstra's Regional Services and Coverage web page <https://www.telstra.com.au/coverage-networks/telstra-regional-australia>

Other Relevant Communications Topics

The Regional Telecommunications Independent Review which ICPA (Aust) robustly participated in, was conducted last year and the Committee tabled its report *2021 Telecommunications Review – A step change in demand* on 14 February 2022. Due to COVID travel restrictions the committee conducted online consultations, holding 26 public consults and receiving over 650 submissions. A number of consultations were successfully conducted over Sky Muster services including the consultation several of our Federal Councillors participated in, as well as the Review's Deputy chair and ICPA member Kristy Sparrow participating in the review via her Sky Muster connection. The full report is available [here](#).

The review committee made twelve recommendations:

1. Adopt a longer-term strategic approach to regional digital infrastructure and skills
2. Increase Government investment in regional connectivity
3. Implement a regional telecommunications resilience fund
4. Trial emerging connectivity technologies
5. Build connectivity literacy and digital capability among regional users
6. Enhance NBN Co's regional fixed wireless and Sky Muster services
7. Implement and enforce new performance and reliability standards for wholesale and retail services
8. Continue with reforming existing universal services for the future
9. Improve information available to consumers about mobile services including coverage and performance
10. Encourage shared network access and innovative funding for mobile service in regional areas
11. Focus on the digital needs of Indigenous communities
12. Improve affordability of telecommunications for vulnerable groups in regional areas

With a new Federal Government now in place, ICPA (Aust) is hopeful that their commitment to acknowledging and enacting the recommendations of the Review Committee are comprehensive. The government is working towards their Better Connectivity for Rural and Regional Australia Plan, which they say will deliver improved broadband and mobile coverage in regional Australia.

Recently the first major milestone of the plan was implemented with \$480 million provided to NBN Co to upgrade the NBN fixed wireless network. After the upgrades are rolled out, nbn Fixed wireless customers will be able to access increased download speeds of up to 100 Megabits per second (Mbps), with up to 85 per cent able to access 250 Mbps. The upgrade will also deliver an increase to typical wholesale busy hour speeds of at least 50 Mbps. This will benefit an estimated 755,000 premises.

Fixed wireless coverage will be expanded to cover a further 120,000 currently mapped for satellite premises, which have allowed NBN Co to increase Sky Muster data allowances and plus plan offerings product, with further enhancements to follow after the upgrades are complete.

This is the first of a number of commitments made by the new government in the lead up to the federal election under the Better Connectivity for Rural and Regional Australia Plan which also includes:

- Boosting NBN speeds on NBN Fixed wireless
- Increasing NBN satellite data allowances un-metering Sky Muster Plus usage between midnight and 4 pm.
- Expanding fibre access in the regions – investing to expand full-fibre access to a further 660,000 homes and businesses in the regions currently relying on copper wire.
- Conducting a national audit of mobile coverage – an independent audit of mobile coverage to better identify black spots and guide investment priorities.
- Boosting mobile coverage on roads – \$400 million to provide multi-carrier mobile coverage on roads with coverage black spots, and in regional communities.

- Solving local connectivity problems – \$200 million towards place-based regional telecommunications projects, such as mobile or targeted fibre, to meet community needs.
- Boosting on farm connectivity – \$30 million program to enable more farmers to extend connectivity in their fields and take advantage of connected machinery and sensor technology.
- Access to speeds of 100 megabits per second or more by late 2025 for 80 per cent of the 3.7 million homes and businesses in regional and remote Australia.

<https://www.alp.org.au/policies/better-connectivity-for-rural-and-regional-australia-plan>

Federal Council will continue to monitor the implementation of these commitments and any developments in this regard and ensure these are communicated to members.

Regional Tech Hub

ICPA (Aust) would like to remind members that the Regional Tech Hub is a free Federal Government initiative which offers independent advice to regional, rural and remote Australians on the best communications connections (phone and internet) for their needs. The Regional Tech Hub was established after requests from ICPA (Aust) , the Better Internet for Rural, Regional and Remote Australia (BIRRR) team and other organisations for regional, rural and remote communications assistance and independent advice to be made available. Federal Council encourage members to become acquainted with the Hub services and make contact with the team to assist with addressing communications issues which may arise. The Tech Hub can be contacted by:

Telephone: 1300 081 029

Email: helpdesk@regionaltechhub.org.au or

Website: <https://regionaltechhub.org.au>.

They also have a social media presence by way of an interactive Facebook Page where members of the public can raise and discuss communications issues. Federal Council work closely with the Hub staff and were part of the Regional Tech Hub Stakeholder Reference Group and currently have a representative on the Regional Tech Hub Advisory Panel.

CURRICULUM REPORT

Wendy Henning

The 2021 Federal Conference in Longreach saw no Curriculum motions presented. Federal Council has used the time since conference to work on past motions in policy and to continue fostering the relationship with the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA). ICPA (Aust) continues to partake in regular ACARA meetings as part of the Parents and Principals Peak National Bodies group. With the recent Curriculum Review and the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) undergoing changes to delivery processes, ICPA (Aust), has been kept informed of changes and also provided feedback from our members and experiences.

Foundation – Year 10 Australian Curriculum Review

Federal Council took part in the Foundation – Year 10 Australian Curriculum Review which has been completed and endorsed by Education Ministers on 1 April 2022. ACARA has now made the new version 9.0 available on an improved, specially built website at this link v9.australiancurriculum.edu.au. The previous version 8.4 website will be maintained and will support all resources until all states and territories have fully transitioned to the new version. The link to this version is [existing Australian Curriculum website](#).

This was the first time the curriculum has been reviewed in its entirety since its inception, with the intention of scaling back the curriculum amid concerns it is too overcrowded. Further, the syllabus will be simplified in an attempt to ensure children have a solid grasp on foundational numeracy and literacy. While ACARA was responsible for the review and its finalisation, State and Territory Governments are solely responsible for the implementation of the changes within their jurisdictions.

National Assessment Program- Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN)

In 2022, online National Assessment Program- Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) testing was fully implemented as well as the change from the previous three day national testing to a two week testing window. Further changes are being implemented going forth, with the NAPLAN testing window moving to Term 1 (March) in 2023. It is envisaged that this will allow for more timely return of results, meaning that the data will be available earlier in the year to inform teaching and learning programs within schools and to give parents information about their child's performance earlier in the year. Further information on these changes can be found here: <https://www.acara.edu.au/docs/default-source/media-releases/improvements-to-naplan-from-2023---final.pdf> and here: <https://www.nap.edu.au/home>

Following the 2021 Conference, Federal Council made contact with then Federal Minister for Education, Hon Alan Tudge MP to raise concerns regarding the proposed reforms and planning for NAPLAN. ICPA (Aust)'s main concern about the changes was the possible adverse effects they may have on geographically isolated students, citing *that the unique circumstances of the geographically isolated distance education students we represent, specifically regarding timing and accessibility of NAPLAN testing*. Federal Council also encouraged State Councils to make contact with their respective Education Ministers to raise these concerns, as all changes were to be signed off at the Education Ministers' Meeting. The priority for ICPA (Aust) in all jurisdictions is that while geographically isolated students have idiosyncrasies in their learning and living locations, away from their mainstream urban counterparts, they are a dynamic group that cannot be dismissed in considerations as their "data" for learning is as imperative as are all of their cohorts. Federal Council was encouraged to receive a response from then Acting Federal Minister for Education Hon Stuart Robert MP noting our concerns and committing to reiterating them at meetings to discuss the proposed NAPLAN reforms.

Despite assurances to the contrary, Federal Council has been made aware of instances where the circumstances of geographically isolated distance education students have meant they have been unable

to participate in NAPLAN testing due to allowances not being made for their unique situations. Federal Council have raised this with relevant bodies and have been reassured that measures are in place to avoid issues and efforts will continue to avoid such situations.

While the 2022 NAPLAN results are yet to be released, the 2021 result data brought to the fore a clear picture that for those children educated in rural and remote areas of Australia with significant gaps and clear trends between the results of regional, remote and very remote students compared to metropolitan students from 2016 - 2021. The results highlighted that educational opportunities and outcomes for rural, remote and very remote are simply not equivalent to their urban counterparts and more needs to be done by all levels of government to recognise and rectify this trend. ICPA (Aust) published a Media Release titled 'ICPA Message As Important As Ever'

<https://icpa.com.au/au/icpa-federal-media-releases-2021> calling on all Governments to address and rectify these trends. The message cannot be clearer. Living in rural and remote Australia should not mean that an inequitable education is tolerated.

ICPA (Aust) will continue to actively participate in discussions on the Australian Curriculum and provide information and background on the learning environments of geographically isolated students where possible with a view to improving these outcomes.

DISTANCE EDUCATION REPORT

Ali Allison

I was honoured to be given the role of leader of the Federal Distance Education portfolio and have enjoyed learning a lot whilst working in this portfolio. ICPA continues to be a strong advocate for geographically isolated families in Australia who have no choice other than to educate their children via distance education. I have taught both of my sons over the past decade in our geographically isolated schoolroom via distance education and am very aware of the issues and challenges families face.

Distance Education Teaching Allowance (DETA)

Metropolitan, regional and rural families across Australia now have lived experience of educating their children at home, due to school lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic. ICPA (Aust) hopes that this experience and understanding of the challenges faced when educating children at home may help with our continued advocacy for a Distance Education Tutor Allowance (DETA). Remuneration and recognition for Distance Education Tutors continues to be a dominating issue for geographically isolated families. Over the past decade motions have continued to be brought to federal conference by branches asking for ICPA to lobby the relevant authorities for a DETA.

Following the 2021 Federal Conference in Longreach a letter was written to Senator the Hon Bridget McKenzie, former Minister for Regionalisation, Regional Communications and Regional Education. Her response outlined that this issue was a state and territory issue.

In response to this letter Federal Council wrote an open letter to all stakeholders who value rural and remote education, including the relevant ministers and shadow ministers. In this letter we emphasised that, *"The unique issue of supervision and delivery of these (distance education) programs within individual family's schoolrooms across rural and remote Australia goes beyond standard educational delivery and requires a distinctive multi-faceted approach."*

We also drew particular attention to the extensive, unremunerated work performed by the home tutor, as detailed in the table below.

Family member as geographically isolated distance education tutor	
Average hours per day	6-8 hours per day, approx. 40 weeks per year
Average years spent as DE tutor for one child	8 years (kindy/preschool plus primary school)
Average total hours spent tutoring one child	9 600–12 800 hours
Minimum Wage	\$20.33 per hour
Unpaid Work/Wages forgone (number of hours x Minimum wage)	\$195 168 - \$260 244
Superannuation @ 9.5% foregone	\$18 540 - \$24 721

ICPA (Aust) raised the need for a collaborative and consistent solution involving both State and National tiers of government to address this situation which is so important to rural and remote Australia.

ICPA (Aust) continue to raise awareness of this issue through the Geographically Isolated Distance Education Day (GIDE). Last year we continued the campaign over December and into January 2022. We feel it would be beneficial to boost awareness and understanding of this issue by putting the faces of our amazing distance education tutors out into the world and sharing some of the staggering statistics of time spent in the schoolroom and the forgone wages and superannuation. We would like to see this campaign continue and are calling out for the 85% of Mums who are tutors in their distance education schoolrooms to share their stories with us.

Much work has been done in this area and it will continue.



Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) - Distance Education

In April, Federal Council was very pleased to receive a breakdown of AIC data by State/Territory, by eligibility categories and by allowance type. This data will assist Federal Council's advocacy by giving a good understanding of the number of people and families in the categories relevant to ICPA (Aust).

Two motions were brought forward at Federal conference in Longreach regarding the AIC, requesting ICPA (Aust) advocate for:

- An increase to the AIC for geographically isolated students who are completing their secondary schooling via distance education, and
- An inclusion in the eligibility criteria for the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) allowance for students who travel with their families for the purpose of rural work to areas without access to schooling and live away from their listed permanent place of residence for the majority of the school year.

Correspondence was to Senator the Hon Anne Ruston, then Minister for Families and Social Services, in December 2021 regarding both issues and Federal Council received a response in March. In a response from Senator Ruston, it was acknowledged that there may be some issues with AIC eligibility for itinerant families, with a commitment made to progress work to update the Guidelines to reflect this. While the ICPA (Aust) request for an increase to the AIC Distance Education Allowance for secondary students was noted, no commitment was made to address this request.

Federal Council began regular meetings with representatives from the Department of Social Services and Services Australia in February. These meetings are an opportunity to raise issues associated with the AIC, both from a legislation and implementation perspective and ICPA (Aust) is confident this quarterly meeting format will ensure the needs of member families can be addressed timely and effectively.

I look forward to continuing work in the Distance Education portfolio and working towards equitable access to education for geographically isolated families whose children study via distance education.

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE REPORT

Julia Broad

Issues with Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) have continued to underpin and shape the disadvantage faced by children in rural and remote Australia, hence Federal Council's strong advocacy for giving these children a better start to their education.

ICPA (Aust) views quality Early Childhood Education and Care in rural and remote Australia as an educational imperative. Accessing affordable ECEC for families living in rural and remote regions has never been more concerning and is proving beyond the reach of many.

ICPA (Aust) welcomes the acknowledgement by the new government that Early Childhood Education requires a dedicated ministry to address the endemic failures and disparities in the current centre-based childcare system. We particularly would like to acknowledge the Government's recent response to the New South Wales and Victorian Governments' commitments to preschool education that "Investment in early childhood education isn't welfare. It's critical economic reform."

Federal Council have taken the opportunity to introduce our issues to the new Minister for Early Childhood Education, the Hon Ann Aly MP, with a letter sent in June.

In Home Care (IHC)

ICPA (Aust) were pleased to welcome staff from the In Home Care (IHC) Project Management team to the 2021 Federal Conference and we have continued to engage in fruitful discussions regarding issues associated with In Home Care in rural and remote contexts. The IHC Management team sought feedback to ascertain why Family Day Care is not a viable option for multiple families on one remote property and has therefore not been a suitable solution to providing childcare in the above circumstances. ICPA (Aust) were advised that Department staff were conducting an internal review of the In Home Care program from December. This was expected to be complete in February however will be completed following the election of the new Government in May. We envisage there will be upcoming news from the Department over the coming months.

Ongoing correspondence and meetings will continue to seek opportunities to raise the unique needs of geographically isolated families requiring In Home Care.

Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) for Pre-compulsory Distance Education Students

AIC Distance Education Allowance for 3-4 year old geographically isolated children accessing an approved distance education early learning program has continued to be on the agenda for this portfolio. Correspondence with then Minister for Families and Social Services, Senator the Hon Anne Ruston has, this year been answered with '*state and territory governments have the responsibility for supporting the participation of all children in quality early childhood education programs.*'

Currently all states and territories do provide distance education early learning programs, however, families who need to undertake these programs due to being geographically isolated incur expenses associated with accessing these programs, similar to those incurred by families with students studying primary or secondary distance education programs. The Assistance for Isolated Children Scheme Guidelines, last updated May 2022, section 5.4.1 outlines the purpose of the Assistance for Isolated Children – Distance Education Allowance:

"The Distance Education Allowance contributes towards incidental costs incurred by geographically isolated families whose students are undertaking their education by distance education methods."

Given that families undertaking early childhood distance education programs incur the same incidental costs ICPA (Aust) believes that it is incongruous that they are not eligible for the same assistance.

The topic was raised by ICPA (Aust) in a meeting with Minister Ruston's advisers in December. It was also included as one of the six recommendations in Federal Council's 2022-23 Pre-Budget Submission. It was also included as a key ask during the 2022 election campaign.

Thank you to State Councils, who helped Federal Council to ascertain there had been a slight increase in the numbers of children enrolled in pre compulsory programs across Australia from approximately 200 in 2018 to around 250 currently. Obtaining these numbers allowed us to provide clear costings within our Pre-Budget Submission as noted in the table below

AIC – DE Allowance for 3-4 year-olds

Number of Students	Funding required per Child	Total Funding per annum
250	\$4428	\$1 107 000

*student numbers are based on the 2021/22 figures in each State and Territory.

With a new government in place, ICPA (Aust) will continue to fervently call for this request to be implemented.

Mobile Early Childhood Services Funding

Addressing funding issues for remote mobile early childhood services is ongoing. The Katherine Isolated Children's Services (KICS) and Remote and Isolated Children's Services models were used as examples in our advocacy to the previous Minister for Education and Youth the Hon. Alan Tudge MP. Unfortunately, after changes in the leadership of this department, we were assured our letters were passed on, but no reply was forthcoming.

There is some hope for a new early childhood and mobile playgroup service in the Alice Springs region with RAISEducation receiving charity status and working with their sponsors and donors to provide individualised learning programs for remote classrooms and a mobile playgroup with professional assessment, intervention, and support of transition from early learning to primary school.

National Working with Children Check (WWCC)

In reply to correspondence from ICPA (Aust), The Hon Karen Andrews, the then Minister for Home Affairs, detailed the progress that has been made with the National Standards for Working with Children Checks (WWCC) through the National Office of Child Safety. Steps have been taken toward national consistency since 2017 and the release of the Working with Children Checks Report of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (Royal Commission). National Cabinet agreed on December 10, 2021, to explore avenues to further improve national consistency in the WWCC. They aim to eliminate unnecessary red tape, duplication, and regulatory barriers around WWCC without sacrificing safety standards. I feel we're making slow but steady progress on this issue.

Employment and Training Incentives for Rural and Remote Early Childhood Education Staff

Given the complexity of the issues affecting employment and training of rural and remote early childhood education staff, correspondence was sent to then Minister for Education and Youth as well as other key Government and Shadow Ministers citing examples of the shortfall in staff detailed at the 2021 Federal Conference and suggesting possible incentives to improve this issue. Federal Council would welcome any further case studies exemplifying challenges being experienced due to early childhood staffing shortfalls in rural and remote areas to strengthen our advocacy around this request.

Other Early Childhood Education and Care Advocacy

ICPA (Aust) has been part of the Thrive by Five Rural and Remote Action Group meetings and supported

the launch of their Five Point Plan to address the lack of childcare services across regional, rural and remote Australia that were reported so clearly in the Mitchell Institute Report [Childcare deserts and oases: How accessible is childcare in Australia](#).

The intention of the Rural and Regional Five Point Plan recently developed by Thrive by Five in conjunction with Royal Far West and other stakeholders is to consider the unique needs of this community. Research shows that two in five children, living in rural and remote areas, begin compulsory schooling developmentally delayed, and therefore not fully prepared for optimising their opportunities at school. This then translates into poor educational outcomes, possible mental health issues, higher risk of unemployment, social and emotional difficulties, and homelessness.

The Rural and Remote Five Point Plan is based around three pillars:

1. A fairer, more accessible funding model
2. Workforce incentives and assistance to attract and retain teachers in remote and rural areas
3. The need to have a unified system across States and Territories with fair and equitable access for all, no matter the postcode.

The Plan calls for the following actions:

1. A dedicated funding model for a sustainable and viable early childhood education and childcare system in rural and remote communities regardless of location, setting, income or hours.
2. Early childhood education and childcare to become part of the National Cabinet reform agenda to deal with complexities of the system and build a true national universal system.
3. Agree to a new national agreement to deliver universal three-year-old preschool across the country to match the partnership agreement in place for four-year-old preschool.
4. Make the Childcare Subsidy available to all children regardless of the setting and the income or work status of the parents. Lift the Childcare Subsidy to 95% for all children and set agreed fee caps.
5. Start workforce planning for universal access.

This Plan has been supported by the following organisations.

- Royal Far West
- Community Connections Solutions Australia (CCSA)
- Contact Inc
- Bourke & District Children's Services - Yanmali
- Regional Early Education and Development (REED)
- Connected Beginnings - Yanmali - Bourke
- Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia (ICPA Aust)
- Royal Queensland Bush Children's Health Scheme (BUSHkids)

Thank you to our Federal ECEC team of Alana, Laura, Jane and Ali for your support and guidance as I have developed my understanding of this portfolio. I look forward to working with you further on these important issues.

RURAL SCHOOLS AND SCHOOL TRAVEL REPORT

Naomi Obst

I feel very privileged to be able to present this report as the Rural Schools & School Travel Portfolio (RSST) leader. I certainly did not intend when I joined Council as an online conference participant in 2021 to be put straight on as a portfolio leader, however the RSST portfolio is an area that is very relevant to my day-to-day life, so I hope that I am able to assist Council with my knowledge in this area. My thanks must go to Alana Mahony and Nikki Mahony who have helped steer me on this portfolio path and the support of Anna McCorkle and Wendy Hick as assistants on this portfolio.

It all seemed very weird at first, here I was elected to a Federal Council but hadn't even met most of the people I would be working with. On my first delegation to Canberra in May of this year it was not the face of a fellow Councillor that had come to pick me up at the airport that I recognised; it was her voice as she chatted to another Councillor. How strange, but so very real has the zooming world become for many of us!

There were no Rural Schools Motions presented at Federal Conference in 2021.

While the pandemic has no doubt brought many challenges, the opportunities in our small rural schools have also opened many doors that were resisted previously just because "that's the way it has always been done".

The ability for staff in small schools to collaborate to get online lessons out to students in 2022 so effortlessly is a huge testament to the way it was done in 2020 and 2021. School closures in 2020 saw many students given work packs to collect from the school's front gate, whereas in 2022, there has been an opportunity to collate and distribute via various modes of technology for those students who are in isolation. The ability for staff at rural schools to upskill themselves and their students for the online delivery of lessons is commendable. The staff are not only training their students but the whole family is benefitting. Many families that previously had limited internet service and skills are now confidently navigating their way through the online world and for rural and remote schools this means that their students may now have access to a larger choice of resources compared to the past.

The benefits to education are obvious but the flow on effect that this has had on the rural economy and the ability for the skills in small communities has also grown.

The enabling and normalising of staff meetings to be held online over the various platforms has reduced the amount of time staff spend out of school. When travel is required, this can amount to considerable time away from the classroom throughout the year. Many small rural schools rely on their Principal to also teach in the classroom and time absent from their school is an obvious educational disadvantage to these students.

National School Chaplaincy Program (NSCP)

In 2019 and again in 2020, ICPA members raised the need for continuance of the National School Chaplaincy Program (NSCP). Federal Council received assurance from then Minister for Decentralisation and Regional Education Hon Andrew Gee MP that his government had committed to permanent funding of the Program. With the recent change in the Government, ICPA (Aust) understands that there may be some amendments to the current Program. While official information on these proposed changes is not yet available, Federal Council will keep abreast of any developments in this regard and ensure these are communicated to members.

School Travel

Four travel motions were presented and carried at the Federal Conference in 2021.

Travel to and from schooling includes vast distances on roads, rail and by air for geographically isolated families. A motion requesting the inclusion of a Fares Allowance in the Assistance for Isolated Children allowance, similar to Youth Allowance and ABSTUDY, was actioned with correspondence sent to the then Minister for Families and Social Services, Senator the Hon Anne Ruston and all relevant Ministers and Shadow Ministers for this to occur following Conference.

Federal Council also met virtually with Senator Ruston's advisors late last year to provide further information as to why our members are requesting the inclusion of a Fares Allowance in the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Scheme. This was a positive meeting, and we will continue to raise this issue with the new government.

Affordable airfares for students continue to be a concern for many of our members, with two motions focussed on this topic. The pandemic has created obvious difficulties in the advocacy for more affordable airfares for geographically isolated students whose only reasonable measure of transport is flying to and from educational facilities. As the country is getting back into the air, Federal Council is hoping to continue these discussions with the new Government.

ICPA (Aust) is aware of several initiatives and developments across some States which address, to some extent, the need for improved access to affordable transport options for rural and remote students and their families.

Federal Council would welcome any further information from members who may be aware of initiatives or options which help to address this issue.

Road Travel – School Bus Routes

The request raised at last year's Conference for federal funding for local councils in rural and remote areas to ensure prioritisation and maintenance of unsealed roads that are travelled by families accessing schools and school bus routes was made in a motion letter to the then Assistant Minister for Road Safety and Freight Transport, the Hon Scott Buchholz MP. ICPA (Aust) understands that while roads funding is largely a State responsibility, there are federal programs in place which deliver funding for local road maintenance, such as the 'Roads to Recovery Program'.

Further information can be found here <https://investment.infrastructure.gov.au/about/local-initiatives/roads-to-recovery-program/index.aspx>. Federal Council has requested a dedicated, federally funded road maintenance programs be allocated so that local government has the financial ability to prioritise school bus routes. While we have not received a response to these requests, we will continue to raise this topic wherever possible.

Prior to the May 2022 Federal election, several initiatives were announced by the former Federal Government in the Federal Budget 2022-23 for improving regional roads, including \$500 million to local councils to maintain and deliver priority road and community infrastructure projects across Australia. This included \$385.4 million for the Northern Australia Roads Program, as well as \$678 million for further sealing of roads on the Outback Way, a 2,720km route that links Laverton in Western Australia with Winton in Queensland via Alice Springs.

With a new Government now in place, ICPA (Aust) are hopeful that the 2022-23 Budget announcements will be upheld and prioritised so that families and school buses using rural and remote roads can travel safely on roads which are maintained to a high standard. Federal Council will monitor this and ensure members are informed of further developments.

More information can be found here: <https://budget.gov.au/2022-23/content/regions.htm>

Other Portfolio Activities

At the end of April 2022, I welcomed the opportunity to facilitate a virtual joint ICPA Council portfolio meeting with members from each State Council. Motion updates and progress on the current motions were discussed. It was pleasing to hear from NSW State Council that 34 years after it was first suggested that seat belts be fitted to all school buses that this has now been achieved. Sometimes the wheels on the bus go around very slowly but maybe as our world gets more instant focused these sorts of decisions will take a little less time!

We continue to encourage members to contact Federal Council to share real-life scenarios and case studies to help us present the reality of what members are facing, a meaningful and robust way to arm us with the information that keeps conversations relevant. Federal Council will continue to look at ways to support State and Territory Councils in addressing disparity across the board.

Thank you to all representatives at Branch, State and Federal level for all the contributions you make to our rural and remote children. Your experiences collectively tell our story and enable us together, to make our geographically isolated students' educational journey the best it can be.

SPECIFIC EDUCATION NEEDS REPORT

Sally Sullivan

The focus for the Specific Education Needs portfolio this year has continued to be advocating for an expansion of telehealth services along with Medicare and other Private Health Fund rebates, early intervention services, universal access to Federally funded health clinics and mental health program needs for rural and remote students.

Allied Health Telehealth – Medicare Rebates

Thanks to COVID-19, more Australians have come to see the benefits of and place for telehealth which has seen the Government expand Medicare assistance for telehealth services. Following the 2021 Federal Conference, ICPA (Aust) wrote to then Minister for Health Hon Greg Hunt MP and other relevant Ministers, asking for *online* allied health services, such as Speech and Occupational Therapy, to be permanently included as Telehealth Medical Benefits Scheme items to help with the cost of such therapies for rural and remote children.

In response to this correspondence in late April we received a reply from the Department of Health Medicare Reviews Unit Assistant Secretary outlining that *“From 1 January 2022, this includes 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... Telehealth consultations by GPs have also been made permanent since 1 January 2022, through which relevant referrals to allied and medical specialists may be provided.”*

Unfortunately, in order to access this Medicare rebate for Speech and/or Occupational Therapies, a child needs to first have a General Practitioner Management Plan (GPMP, previously Chronic Disease Management Plan). Further, Medicare benefits are only available for telehealth with the General Practitioner if the ‘patient’ has seen the GP (or been to the GP’s practice) face-to-face in the previous 12 months. The well-known and ongoing issues associated with accessing a GP makes these restrictions extremely challenging for rural and remote families and result in long delays and increased expense at the detriment of the timely and satisfactory treatment and development of a child.

It was also recommended in the response that ICPA (Aust) raise this with the incoming Government following the election. With a new Federal Government in place ICPA (Aust) is encouraged by the appointment of an Assistant Minister for Rural and Regional Health, Emma McBride MP by the new Government. Federal Council will earnestly raise this with Minister McBride along with new Minister for Health and Aged Care the Hon Mark Butler MP. While to date we are unaware of specific policy from the new Government in this space, we do know that there has been a commitment to strengthening Medicare, with a view to making access to General Practitioners easier. More information can be found here <https://www.alp.org.au/policies/medicare-and-your-health>

Telehealth - Private Health Funds

Following receipt of correspondence requesting that the rebates provided by Private Health Insurers extend to Allied Health Services to assist with the educational development of geographically isolated children, Dr Rachel David, CEO of Private Healthcare Australia responded with the following, *“Private Health[care] Australia was very pleased that the industry was able to quickly move to allowing telehealth rebates for customers from March 2020. Telehealth has generally been a success for many Australians, and as you have recognised, funds have either extended access to telehealth or made it a permanent feature of their products. We are confident that each of our member funds will provide rebates for telehealth permanently.*

While telehealth is going to be a permanent feature of Australian health care, there are still some issues to

be considered to maximise access for Australians accessing telehealth. These issues include quality standards, training for practitioners and ensuring that city- or overseas-based services do not affect the viability of existing providers living and serving in remote communities. Any further feedback or advice from your membership to improve access, quality and service continuity would be most appreciated."

Dr David kindly forwarded ICPA (Aust)'s letter to each of Private Healthcare Australia's member health funds for their information and consideration.

For the interests of our members, the peak organisation, Speech Therapy Australia, lists Private Health Funds allowing customers who have extras cover for speech pathology (May 2021) to make a claim for speech pathology services delivered via telehealth [here](#).

Early Intervention Services in Rural and Remote Areas

Early intervention needs to have started before these children attend Primary School, to make sure they have the best start to their education however many pre-school aged children in regional and remote Australia continue to have no access to vital early intervention assessments or programs. A Medicare rebate is available for some services, however accessing those services and the accompanying rebate in rural and remote Australia can be difficult due to a lack of services or the distances needed to travel to access a service. While there are some existing early intervention service providers in rural and remote Australia without consistent and guaranteed funding, it is challenging, if not impossible for to expand to service areas without any access to services. There is also little incentive for new services to commence in these areas.

The lack of and need for increased support for early intervention services in rural and remote areas was raised following the 2021 Federal Conference, with then Minister for Health and Aged Care, the Hon Greg Hunt MP, with a request to increase financial support for existing organisations to expand and support new organisations willing to take their Early Intervention Services into regional and remote Australia. Federal Council also requested an increase to the number of sessions covered by Medicare. In the correspondence we referred to data from the Royal Far West POSITION PAPER – JULY 2017 SUPPORTING CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT IN REGIONAL, RURAL AND REMOTE AUSTRALIA which clearly illustrates the developmental vulnerability of children in rural and remote areas. The Position Paper can be found [here](#). No response was forthcoming from the former Minister.

ICPA (Aust) will continue to advocate for more support for early intervention services with the new Government at every opportunity, to ensure all rural and remote students have improved access to interventions and services necessary to enhance the educational outcomes of geographically isolated children.

Universal Access to Federally Funded Health Clinics in Rural/Remote Areas

During the Conference in 2021, ICPA (Aust) heard of distressing situations whereby remote families were being refused treatment at federally funded 'local' health clinics as they "don't meet the criteria" whereupon they must travel vast distances to access treatment for what could have otherwise been dealt with closer to where they live. In a letter sent to the then Federal Minister for Health and other relevant Ministers and agencies in December, ICPA (Aust) articulated that discrimination based on race, demographic or any other criteria by publicly funded health facilities is unacceptable, ever, let alone in a situation where there are no local alternatives for rural and remote families to 'conveniently' access. Unfortunately, no response has been received and we are still hearing of circumstances where this is occurring. ICPA (Aust) are committed to ensuring that this issue will be raised in upcoming meetings, consultations, delegations and further correspondence.

Mental Health Program Needs for Rural and Remote Students

ICPA (Aust) has written to the Federal Government, including the Minister for Health and Aged Care and

the Minister for Education and Youth, requesting they “urgently implement age appropriate and high-quality mental health programs within both schools and external services for youth in regional and remote Australia.”

While a response was received from the former Minister in March, referencing strategies the Government had put into place to improve access to mental health services ICPA (Aust) harbours concerns for the lack of urgency in addressing this matter.

With the new Federal Government now in place, ICPA (Aust) is pleased to note their commitment announced during the election campaign to Restore Regional Mental Telehealth Services by reinstating ‘the 50 per cent loading, allowing regional and rural Australians to access bulk billed telehealth psychiatry consultations’ <https://www.alp.org.au/policies/regional-mental-telehealth-services> as well as the ‘Students Wellbeing Boost’ program, with plans to deliver:

- A \$200 million Student Wellbeing Boost to get students’ mental health and wellbeing back on track. This will mean more school counsellors and psychologists, and extra funding for camps, excursions, as well as sporting and social activities that improve kids’ wellbeing
- A voluntary mental health check tool so primary school students who are struggling can get extra help.

ICPA (Aust) look forward to seeing these commitments come to fruition and are hopeful they will provide much needed assistance, without delay.

To assist members, ICPA (Aust) has collated a selection of resources and contacts on its website for members to access where required. This page can be found [here](#). Federal Council will continue to add relevant services and resources to this page to assist members to support their children. Should members have any suggestions of possible further resources to be included, we would welcome you to contact Federal Council.

TERTIARY REPORT

Kate Thompson

For rural and remote students who aspire to attend university, the pathway must be accessible and affordable. The disparity in participation, retention, attainment and opportunities must be addressed to ensure equity for this rural and remote student cohort. Students from this cohort are faced with barriers which has led to under-representation. These barriers include lower access, choice and opportunities in rural and remote areas, connectivity (reliability, high speed and affordability) and the high cost of relocation and ongoing living expenses. Relocation is out of necessity rather than choice and challenges increase the more remote a student resides from their chosen university.

The tertiary motions presented at the 2021 Federal Conference continue to highlight the breadth of issues facing rural and remote tertiary students when accessing higher education. The Tertiary Portfolio has addressed the motions through correspondence to and collaboration with Ministers and Government departments including the Minister for Families and Social Services, the Minister for Regional Education, the Department of Education, Skills and Employment and the Department of Social Services and Services Australia.

Pleasingly, Federal Council can report that there have been some welcome outcomes from our advocacy which will positively impact rural and remote tertiary students.

Tertiary Access Payment (TAP)

Cost is the greatest restraint on rural and remote students' ability to attend university and the TAP is designed to ease the burden of these costs, which include:

- the high cost of relocation
- up-front set-up expenses including accommodation (rental housing bond or residential college fees, electricity connection) and
- ongoing costs of living expenses, travel and communications (telephone, internet).

The Tertiary Access Payment (TAP) is a one-off, means-tested payment of up to \$5000 for school leavers from inner regional, outer regional, remote and very remote areas. Eligible students are those 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) in the year following Year 12 or equivalent and whose parental income is below \$250 000.

The second year of the TAP commenced in 2022. Late in 2021, Federal Council participated in the evaluation consultations of the TAP, recommending changes to the program so all rural and remote students who have to relocate for study/training are afforded equity of access to a tertiary/VET education. ICPA (Aust)'s recommendations included:

- Aligning the TAP with the Relocation Scholarship in terms of payment rates, transitioning to an annual and ongoing payment to recognise that the costs are not just being borne in the first year of the student's course.
- The availability of the TAP for all rural and remote students on commencement of university including after a gap year.
- Removal of the \$250,000 parental limit as many parents are already facing huge costs as they support other tertiary students already at university and younger siblings at boarding school.
- The inclusion of rural and remote Australian Apprentices who fulfil the TAP criteria.
- Eligibility extended to eligible inner regional students.
- The administration of the TAP solely through Services Australia.

- The uncapping of TAP availability by removing the ‘first-in, first-served and best-dressed’ criteria.

Senator the Hon Bridget McKenzie, former Minister for Regionalisation, Regional Communications and Regional Education and Senator the Hon Linda Reynolds CSC, former Minister for Government Services, in a joint Media Release, announced changes to the delivery, eligibility and payment structure of the TAP on the 17 December 2021 in response to the evaluation of the program.

Changes included:

- The extension of eligibility criteria to include eligible inner regional students.
- The application and payment process for all TAP applicants whether attending a university, a Vocational Education and Training (VET) provider or other higher education provider to be administered solely through Services Australia.
- Eligible students from outer regional, remote and very remote areas will continue to receive up to \$5,000 and students from inner regional areas will receive \$3,000.

Information on the TAP can be found at:

www.servicesaustralia.gov.au/individuals/services/centrelink/tertiary-access-payment
www.dese.gov.au/tertiary-access-payment.

Whilst the introduction of a TAP has been a positive development, ICPA (Aust) is working with the Government to ensure this payment meets the needs of all rural and remote tertiary students and the guidelines used reflect our longstanding advocacy for a Tertiary Access Allowance.

Delegations and Meetings

Federal Council met with Senator the Hon Anne Ruston, former Minister for Families and Social Services’ advisors via teleconference in December 2021. Tertiary issues raised included:

- A thank you from ICPA (Aust) for the 2020 and 2021 COVID-19 measures for gap year students, liquid assets test and proof of identity, Fares Allowance changes and the Tertiary Access Payment.
- The Tertiary Access Payment and the issues mentioned above.
- Youth Allowance:
 - The need for significant increase in the parental income limit for dependent students.
 - The need for the removal of the parental income limit for independent rural and remote students.
 - The need for the implementation of the Napthine Report recommendations, namely
 - the provision of greater flexibility in pathways to qualify for Youth Allowance,
 - reduced earning requirements for Independent Youth Allowance and
 - a review of the parental income cut off limits for Independent Youth Allowance.
 - The need for the Relocation Scholarship criteria to be extended to include all rural and remote students who must relocate and live away from home to access tertiary education not just if in receipt of Dependent Youth Allowance.
 - The need for flexibility in the Proof of Identity process for Youth Allowance.

The Tertiary Portfolio has been involved in the Department of Social Services and Services Australia quarterly meetings, advocating on behalf of our tertiary students.

Proof of Identity for Youth Allowance

The initial confirmation of identity for many rural and remote students who live vast distances from a Centrelink service centre or rural and remote access centre has long been an issue. These students have not been able to start or proceed with their application for Youth Allowance until these original documents

have been sighted at an access or service centre leading to delays in the application, approval and commencement of Youth Allowance payments.

Following correspondence from Senator the Hon Linda Reynolds, former Minister for Government Services and discussion with the Department of Social Services, ICPA (Aust) is pleased to report that a new process of identity confirmation has been established. Processes are now in place for students to confirm their identity and commence their application for Youth Allowance online, removing the need for the applicant to present in person to an access or service centre.

Proof of identity can be verified:

- Online - for students applying for Youth Allowance online, applicants have the option during the online claim process of booking a video for sighting and verification of original identity documents which allows the applicant to proceed with the application process.
- over the phone, or
- in person.

More information can be found here: www.servicesaustralia.gov.au/how-to-prove-your-identity-with-centrelink?context=43916.

Regional Education Commissioner

The appointment of the Hon Fiona Nash as Regional Education Commissioner has been welcomed and ICPA (Aust) looks forward to working closely with the Commissioner on the implementation of the National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy (Naphthine Review) recommendations to achieve positive outcomes for rural and remote tertiary students.

Recommendations from the *Education in Remote and Complex Environments Report*

ICPA (Aust) has welcomed the measures from the *Education in remote and complex environments Report*, the *Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education* (Halsey Review) and the *National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy* (Naphthine Review) which have been implemented for rural and remote tertiary students including the introduction of the Tertiary Access Payment, the Rural and Regional Enterprise Scholarships, the Regional University Centres, the Course Seeker website, the appointment of the Regional Education Commissioner and improvements to the Fares Allowance scheme. These have considerably improved access, outcomes and opportunities for regional, rural and remote students' access to higher education.

ICPA (Aust) continues to seek the implementation of **all** the recommendations which would ensure rural and remote tertiary students' access, participation, retention, completion and success in the course of their choice. These measures include:

- Improved availability, information and support of accommodation, income support and high-quality career information and advice.
- Improved access to high quality VET programs in regional, rural and remote areas.
- Reduction in the earnings requirements of the Independent Youth Allowance Concessional Workforce test and a review of the recent changes to the parental means test cut-offs.
- The provision of greater flexibility in pathways to qualify for Youth Allowance. This recommendation enables rural and remote students who successfully undertake their first year of tertiary study externally, including at a Regional Study Hub, to access Independent Youth Allowance or Independent ABSTUDY if they then relocate to their place of study for a minimum of one further year and are 90 minutes by public transport from home.
- Improved access to affordable, reliable, high speed internet services.

- The implementation of an Away from Base payment for students who have to travel to complete mandatory units and practicums of their course and are studying externally either at home or a Regional Study Hub.
- Improved quality and range of student support services including pastoral care, mentoring programs and academic support.

The Report from the *Inquiry into Education in Remote and Complex Environments* included two recommendations that by May 2021 the Minister for Education publish a comprehensive implementation plan for the recommendations and actions outlined in the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education (Halsey review) and the National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy (Naphthine review). The measures recommended in these two reports would ensure access, participation, retention, completion and success for rural and remote tertiary students for which ICPA (Aust) has been advocating for many years.

Rural And Regional Enterprise Scholarships (RRES) Program

This program supports undergraduate, postgraduate and higher-level vocational education and training students in rural, regional and remote areas with the costs of studying at university or a vocational education and training institution. These scholarships continue to be valued at up to \$18,000, available to regional and remote students studying in any discipline from Certificate IV to PhD level at an eligible higher education provider or vocational education and training institution, with a duration of 6 months full-time and up to 8 years part-time, delivered on campus, or through online and distance education including an additional \$500 to support an internship.

Round 6 of the RRES program is available for students commencing study at any time during the 2022 academic calendar year. For more information and the application process for the RRES and the Creative Arts Scholarships for regional and remote students visit the Queensland Tertiary Admissions Centre (QTAC) www.qtac.edu.au/rres-program/.

School Leavers - National Careers Institute 'Your Career' Website

NCI has developed information and resources for school leavers and their parents/guardians transitioning to university, vocational education and training (VET), apprenticeships or employment. These include:

1. The **School Leavers Information Kit** (SLIK) provides information and support to assist with post-school career pathways decisions, work and education options such as university, vocational education and training (including apprenticeships and traineeships), volunteering and community service, tips and resources to assist with job applications and resources outlining available government financial support and subsidies.
2. The **School Leavers Information Service** is a free phone, text or email support to navigate the School Leavers Information Kit and the website. The service also offers a free 45-minute personalised career guidance session with a qualified career practitioner.
3. The **Parents and Guardian's Guide for School Leavers** to facilitate careers conversations at home.
4. **Webinar series.**

These resources and information can be found on the Your Careers website here:

www.yourcareer.gov.au/school-leavers-support/

Youth Allowance Overview 2022 Document

The Tertiary Portfolio has updated the Youth Allowance Overview in consultation with the Department of Social Services and Services Australia as a guide to Youth Allowance eligibility and application. This document summarises the lengthy Youth Allowance website information for rural and remote students planning to study full-time and intending to apply for Youth Allowance and is available in the January 2022 Pedals and on the ICPA (Aust) website. For more information, advice, clarification and further assistance,

please phone **132490** (dedicated Youth Allowance phone number) or visit:
www.humanservices.gov.au/customer/services/centrelink/youth-allowance.

ICPA (Aust) is very appreciative of the Federal Government's continued commitment and prioritisation of tertiary education for rural and remote students. The recent positive and significant measures have addressed many current and past motions, albeit in part. ICPA (Aust) will continue to progress and raise the profile of current, previous and ongoing issues rural and remote students face when accessing a tertiary education through all avenues available to us at every opportunity, to ensure they have the opportunity to access, participate and complete a tertiary education of their choice commensurate with their aspirations and career plans.

My sincere thanks must go to my fellow Tertiary Portfolio members Jane O'Brien, Sally Sullivan, Anna McCorkle and Lisa Slade, the State Tertiary Portfolios and all of Federal Council for their ongoing support, guidance, knowledge and dedication.

TRAINING REPORT

Anna McCorkle

The children ICPA represents are often born into or grow to contribute as if they have a job at a young age. Rural family life can be so much a part of the family business that many fit in work tasks around school days or terms right through their early childhood, primary and secondary education, developing valuable skills and knowledge to contribute positively to the community around them. The ability of rural and remote students to learn on-the-job, which is the very core of Vocational Educational and Training (VET) does not need to be questioned; but the ability of our students to access the opportunity to learn and gain skills, knowledge and VET credentials (to secure future employment) at any stage of their education journey can certainly be questioned.

The VET system provides nationally recognised qualifications developed through skill and knowledge-based competency attainment. There are around 1,800 qualifications on offer, covering accredited courses, industry-recognised skill sets, units of competency and specific skills training. VET training takes place in classrooms, workplaces, online, and can be full-time or part-time. It appears on paper that VET is an incredibly good fit for regional, rural and remote students due to its diverse delivery options. As we know the reality can be more troublesome.

Employment in our contemporary world is rapidly changing and more of our workforce are highly skilled and micro or fully qualified. Completing Year 12 (or equivalent) is the minimum requirement for most employers and many more are seeking people with post-school qualifications. Apprenticeships, traineeships, diplomas, or certificate III or IV level qualifications can set young people up for a stable and rewarding career. In 2020, 69% of Australians aged 20-64 years had a post-school qualification, increasing from 57% in 2005. There were nearly 300,000 apprentices and trainees in 2021, working across more than 500 different occupations, including many non-trade occupations. The success of rural communities relies on this figure having a fair representation of rural and remote students.

ICPA (Aust) advocates for those who live and work in rural and remote areas who are under-represented in long term reports on both Training and Tertiary certification. With the national completion rates for VET qualifications frequently reported at an alarming 50%, it is clear that Governments are falling short of supporting those on a trade career pathway across all areas of Australia, whilst facing a chronic National Skills Shortage. Established funding and support programs are still centred on the employer or Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) rather than the student/trainee/apprentice. Our advocacy will continue until we see this addressed.

Training Motions

At the 2021 Federal Conference members presented three Training motions seeking continued advocacy on increases to the Commonwealth Living Away from Home Allowance (LAFHA), the need to address issues with the LAFHA application process and a request for relocation assistance for Australian Apprentices and trainees needing to relocate to access their chosen pathway process.

Following Conference, correspondence was sent to then Minister for Employment, Workforce, Skills, Small and Family Business the Hon Stuart Robert MP, in relation to the need to increase the LAFHA, copying in the relevant Ministers and Shadow Ministers. Federal Council also raised the need for provision of relocation assistance and the inclusion of Australian Apprentices and Trainees in the Tertiary Access Payment (TAP) to assist with costs associated with moving away from home to access their chosen trade/training pathway. While to date we have not received replies to our correspondence, with the change of Government, we will continue to raise these topics where possible and will inform members of any developments.

ICPA (Aust) has sought advice from the Department of Education, Skills and Employment (DESE) regarding the processes for applying and receiving the LAFHA and raised concerns that this process needs improvement to ensure eligible Australian Apprentices are able to access the assistance. DESE confirmed that there should only be a three month wait on payments and that they are handled by the Australian Apprenticeship Support Network (AASN) providers.

<https://www.australianapprenticeships.gov.au/>.

Furthermore, DESE has advised that there is a provision for LAFHA to be claimed and paid for up to three months in certain circumstances without an approved training contract from the date of commencement or recommencement, however each jurisdiction determines the requirements from the RTO to approve the training contract. The Guidelines for the Australian Apprenticeship Incentives Program can be found here:

<https://www.dese.gov.au/skills-support-individuals/resources/australian-apprenticeships-incentives-program-guidelines>.

Federal Council is continuing the advocacy of previous Training motions and member enquiries highlighting concerns that VET Certified Training remains unobtainable for rural and remote students. Issues include:

- The frequent lack of availability of courses/qualifications, which is further influenced by chronic teacher/trainer shortages
- The lack of access to the face-to-face component of training, assessment and mandatory workplace experiences
- The high costs of travel and accommodation to fulfill training and assessment requirements.

National Review of VET Delivered to Secondary Students

In March 2022 Federal Council contributed to the National Review of VET Delivered to Secondary Students in Regional, Rural and Remote areas and raised the following issues affecting rural and remote students:

- The limited opportunity to participate in VET courses due to the availability of courses and local workplace experience and training
- The lack of access to qualified VET staff (both trainers and assessors) including the recruitment and retention of trained staff, teaching out of specialty, the funding capacity of schools to run and resource VET and to employ specialised staff often related to remoteness, VET staff maintenance of credentials
- The distance to providers or workplace training and assessments, the cost of travel and accommodation to placements, including if VET program is accessed from another school or facility, and the impact on the family when parents need to accompany the student i.e., time away from home and cost
- Online courses are either not the course of choice for the students or they are hindered by limited and unreliable internet capacity
- The need for VET qualifications to be recognised beyond school.

ICPA (Aust)'s Recommendations:

- Funding and support to rural and remote schools to deliver VET programs
- Incentives and provision of extra funding and allowances to assist with additional costs such as travel, accommodation and other costs unique to rural and remote contexts
- Virtual VET programs partnering with bigger centres that deliver VET programs
- Ensuring adequate and affordable communications technology is available for online courses
- Pathways for VET Trainers (teachers) which consider their unique situations in rural and areas
- Ensuring the VET pathway is valued equally as a higher education pathway or a direct employment pathway.

Current Government Initiatives

Current national initiatives for apprentices and trainees are based around the Skills Priority List and the Australian Priority List which identifies occupations assessed as experiencing national skills shortages.

<https://www.dese.gov.au/australian-apprenticeships/resources/about-australian-apprenticeship-priority-list>

These programs include fee-free employer incentive payments or reduced student course fees to address the National Skills Shortage and targeting specific industries and occupations.

It was positive to see attention given to the Skills Shortage area in the 2022-23 Federal Budget. The proposals below from the Budget are presently being reassessed by the current Government with final announcements yet to be released.

Australian Apprentice Incentive Scheme and Financial Assistance Employer Incentives

Employers who engage an Australian Apprentice in an occupation on the Australian Apprenticeships Priority List may be eligible for a wage subsidy of up to \$1,500 per quarter for the first two years of the apprenticeship and up to \$750 per quarter for the third year.

Hiring incentives are available for employers of Australian Apprentices in occupations not identified on the Australian Apprenticeships Priority List of up to \$3,500 in the first year of the apprenticeship. Federal Council are currently seeking further confirmation of these initiatives.

Apprentice Incentives

Australian Apprentice Training Support Payment

Commencing 1 July 2022, the Australian Apprentice Training Support Payment is available to eligible apprentices undertaking a qualification at either Certificate III, IV, Diploma or Advanced Diploma level leading to an occupation on the Australian Apprenticeships Priority List. It is a payment of up to \$5,000 for the first two years of their Australian Apprenticeship to support apprentices with the cost of undertaking an apprenticeship.

Commonwealth Living Away from Home Allowance is available for eligible Australian Apprentices in the first three years of the apprenticeship.

Trade Support Loans are available to eligible Australian Apprentices to assist with everyday costs while completing your apprenticeship.

Information on eligibility and application for financial assistance for Australian Apprentices is available at <https://www.australianapprenticeships.gov.au/aus-apprenticeships-incentives>

National Skills Agreement - Skills Reform Priorities

While the Australian, State and Territory Governments had committed to work collaboratively on long-term improvements through the National Skills Agreement ensuring that Australians have access to a high-quality Vocational Education and Training (VET) system, we understand that with the new Government now in place, the commencement of this Agreement has been delayed. Federal Council will keep abreast of any developments in this regard and ensure these are communicated to members.

JobTrainer Fund

The JobTrainer Fund commenced in July 2020 to provide school leavers and job seekers access to free or low-cost retaining and upskilling opportunities to assist in job attainment in high-priority areas. Funding was also allocated for the Supporting Apprentices and Trainees wage subsidy.

Funding for the JobTrainer Program was further extended in the 2022-23 Budget with additional places pledged and investment for a further two years contingent on matched funding from States and Territories.

The extension and expansion of JobTrainer will help to address the increase in demand for skilled care workers, particularly aged care, supporting existing care workers to get the skills they need and providing affordable access to training for new care workers. It will also provide more training places to support the growing demand in Australia's digital workforce.

Job seekers and young people, including school leavers, may be eligible and can take advantage of subsidised training to learn skills for jobs in demand. Under the extension, any Australian who wants to enrol in an aged care, digital skills, disability care or childcare qualification can also access a JobTrainer place, regardless of their age, employment status or prior qualifications.

JobTrainer funding is available for full qualifications and short courses, based on a list agreed between the National Skills Commission and State and Territory Governments.

Training places under JobTrainer are now available. Further information on the JobTrainer Fund is available on the following websites:

- Your Career: www.yourcareer.gov.au/jobtrainer
- My Skills: www.myskills.gov.au/jobtrainer
- Department of Education Skills and Employment: <https://www.dese.gov.au/skills-reform/jobtrainer-fund>

Federal Council will maintain contact with the relevant Government Ministers and Departments to raise any concerns that members have so please make contact with us.

Websites that offer additional information include:

- National Skills Commission: www.nationalskillscommission.gov.au
- National Careers Institute: www.dese.gov.au/nci
- Your Career: www.yourcareer.gov.au

To conclude I would like to thank everyone on Federal Council for welcoming me in November 2021. I seem to have jumped in boots and all on a steep but well supported learning curve. I am grateful for the encouragement and guidance that is always available. I did not expect to be heading up a portfolio team right off the bat! The Training Portfolio continues to work closely with the Tertiary Portfolio on many issues that overlap. Thank you, particularly to those within the Training Portfolio Alana Moller, Kim Hughes, Kate Thompson, Jane O'Brien and Sally Sullivan and the Federal Council Team who are always on hand.