

ISOLATED CHILDREN'S PARENTS' ASSOCIATION OF AUSTRALIA



2023 FEDERAL CONFERENCE TERTIARY PORTFOLIO REPORT Kate Thompson

The disparity in tertiary participation, retention, attainment and opportunities for rural and remote students continues to be evident in the under-representation of this cohort in tertiary education compared to their metropolitan counterparts. The priority for the tertiary portfolio is to address the barriers to ensure equity for these rural and remote students.

Tertiary students and their families from geographically isolated locations face unique disadvantages and challenges to accessing a tertiary education. Factors such as a lack of social support, distance from tertiary education institutions, the high costs of relocation, tuition and ongoing living expenses all contribute to lower choice and opportunity for these students. These barriers increase the more remote a student resides from their chosen university.

Members continue to voice the greatest impediment to accessing a tertiary education is the high cost for students to relocate, often hundreds of kilometres away, to access their chosen pathway, along with living away from home. Adequate financial assistance is imperative to increase the engagement of rural and remote students at this level.

ICPA (Aust) seeks to ensure that students from rural and remote areas who have the ability, ambition, motivation and desire have access to tertiary education options which will enable them to pursue the career path of their choice.

Tertiary Motions

Motions presented at Federal Conferences continue to highlight the issues that the rural and remote tertiary cohort face when accessing higher education. In particular the high financial cost and the lack of adequate financial means to fund this access greatly impacts student's ability to attend university.

High up-front costs, along with on-going costs of relocating and setting up away from home (including rent, bond, electricity, phone and internet), securing accommodation, travel to access their place of study, amplified by the rising costs of basic living commodities, all impact on rural and remote student access. Some of these costs are borne not only in the first year of a student's course but are recurrent over the duration of their higher education. The full 2022 Motion update can be read [here](#).

The tertiary portfolio has addressed the 2022 motions along with the motions from previous years through correspondence and collaboration with relevant Ministers, Members of Parliament and Senators, the Regional Education Commissioner, the Hon Fiona Nash, government departments including the Department of Education, the Department of Social Services and Services Australia, along with delegations and submissions.



Tertiary Access Payment (TAP)

With the high cost of relocation, up-front set-up expenses and ongoing costs of living expenses being the greatest restraint on rural and remote students' ability to attend university, the Tertiary Access Payment (TAP) has been welcomed to ease the burden of these costs.

The Tertiary Access Payment (TAP), which is in its third year, is a one-off, means-tested payment of up to \$5000 available for eligible school leavers from inner regional, outer regional, remote and very remote areas who relocate more than 90 minutes by public transport from their family home to undertake a full-time, eligible higher level tertiary education course (Certificate IV or above) following year 12 or equivalent and whose parental income is below \$250 000. The Australian Government Department of Education has confirmed that the TAP is a permanent scheme and the program numbers are not capped.

Whilst implementation of the TAP has been a positive measure, 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. Federal Council continues to recommend 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 education. ICPA (Aust)'s recommendations include:

- Aligning the TAP with the Relocation Scholarship in terms of payment rates, an annual payment to recognise that the costs are ongoing throughout a 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 must relocate from their home to access their apprenticeship.

In response to the TAP queries identified in the 2022 motions and other queries raised directly with Federal Council, the following update has been received from the Department of Education.

TAP Eligibility

- The latest *Tertiary Access Payment Program Guidelines 2022-2024* (Program Guidelines) clarify that a student may commence studies at any point in the year following completion of Year 12 or equivalent. The Department of Education website has been updated to reflect the scenario that if a student who undertakes eligible tertiary study in Semester 2 would qualify for the TAP (subject to meeting all other criteria).
- In relation to the reference to the "academic year" the criteria on the website refers to **Study a course with a minimum duration of one academic year**. It has been confirmed that 'academic year' effectively means 12 months and is irrespective of when in the year a student starts. The above is now clearly visible on the website as well as in the Program Guidelines [here](#). ICPA (Aust) has been advised that the department will ensure that all universities are using the updated language as per the current Guidelines in their promotion of the TAP.
- **Commencement of a TAP application:** The TAP Program Guidelines state individuals can apply for TAP in the calendar year immediately following completion of year 12 (the year their TAP qualifying tertiary study commences) and that they must submit their application between 1 January and 31 December (inclusive) of that year.
- **Commencement of the TAP Payment:** The Program Guidelines stipulate that the first instalment of the Tertiary Access Payment (TAP) will be paid to eligible applicants 42 days after their course has commenced and they have confirmed their enrolment. The second instalment



of TAP will be paid 42 days after 1 August – or after 1 February the following year for those who commence their course in the second half of the calendar year.

- **Proof of Identity for TAP applicants:** TAP claimants can confirm their identity online through strong digital identity mechanisms, such as the myGovID app www.mygovid.gov.au. However, video chat is not available for identity verification for TAP as it is for Youth Allowance. Once a TAP claimant has proved their identity using the app, they can then apply for TAP using their Centrelink online account. If a TAP claimant has previously had their identity confirmed for another payment, they will not need to do this again.

ICPA (Aust) recommends changes to the TAP to address the continued disparity in the level of financial support provided to assist with relocation costs for rural and remote students who have qualified for independent Youth Allowance or are ineligible for Youth Allowance compared to dependent Youth Allowance including the TAP should:

- Be an annual payment for the duration of the student's full-time course.
- Be available to all rural and remote students including those who have taken a gap year.
- Be equivalent to the Relocation Scholarship (2023 - \$5,080 in the first year, \$2,541 in the second and third years and \$1,269 in the fourth or subsequent years).
- Not be classed as income and hence not jeopardise the student's eligibility for existing support payments such as Youth Allowance.
- Be a non means-tested allowance.

Regional Universities

In correspondence to the Minister for Education, the Hon Jason Clare MP, ICPA (Aust) applauded the policy to deliver up to 20,000 new university places and the prioritisation of places to universities that offer opportunities to under-represented groups including students in regional and remote areas, those who are the first in their family to study at university and First Nation Australians. Additionally, ICPA (Aust) requested that regional universities were prioritised to enable rural and remote students' greater choice to study within the regions, remain connected to their communities, help to improve the academic outcomes for this cohort and improve accessibility and affordability. In response Minister Clare reassured ICPA (Aust) of the availability of the Regional University Centres (RUCs).

Regional University Centres (RUC)

RUCs provide physical, campus-like access in rural, regional and remote areas which support students who are studying online at any Australian university allowing those students who wish to remain within their communities the opportunity to do so. RUCs offer infrastructure (study spaces, computers, high speed internet and video-conferencing), administration and academic support services and student support services (pastoral care, advice) resulting in an affordable alternative choice.

It must be remembered that most students who live in rural and remote areas would still be required to relocate considerable distances even if they chose to study at a RUC or Regional University.

Rural and Regional Enterprise Scholarships (RRES) Program

The concerns of late RRES payments affecting students was passed on to the Australian Government Department of Education who in turn raised the issue with Queensland Tertiary Admission Centre (QTAC) who administered the RRES. The Department of Education also shared this concern with other relevant teams, including the team responsible for administering the TAP, to ensure awareness of the importance of timely payments for students is considered in future programs, particularly those that are administered by external agencies.



ICPA (Aust) has been grateful for the RRES program that has supported rural and remote undergraduate, postgraduate and higher-level vocational education and training (VET) students with the costs of studying at university or VET institution. Pleasingly on the 22 May 2023, the Assistant Minister for Education, Senator Anthony Chisholm announced the extension of the RRES program with an additional 360 scholarships available in 2023. ICPA (Aust) has been recommending the continuation of the RRES program or a similar program.

Liquid Assets Waiting Period

Members have been asking for the removal of the Liquid Assets Waiting Period for rural and remote students who have fulfilled the self-supporting criteria for Youth Allowance as an independent and have to relocate to access tertiary education, to recognise the high cost of relocation, set-up, living and educational expenses these students face. In order to commence receiving Youth Allowance without fulfilling the liquid assets waiting period, prospective single students can only have \$5,500 in their bank account which is an unrealistic amount to cover the high costs they face. These students are penalised for having saved these funds when the Liquid Assets Waiting Period is applied.

In the response from the Minister for Social Services, the Hon Amanda Rishworth MP, it was noted that a tertiary student's liquid assets may be reduced by allowable deductions either incurred or likely to be incurred relating to their course including up-front course fees, HECS-HELP payments, student union fees, textbook costs and tools or IT equipment required to undertake the course.

Rent Assistance

For many years members have been requesting that Rent Assistance be substantially increased for rural and remote students receiving Youth Allowance to more closely reflect the real cost of living and the actual rental market. The rental market is extremely competitive and accommodation costs are rising exponentially. Rent Assistance has not kept pace with the increases in rental costs.

Pleasingly the 2023 Federal Budget included the announcement of:

- An increase of \$40 per fortnight to income support payments (Austudy and Youth Allowance).
- An increase of 15 percent to the maximum rate of Commonwealth Rent Assistance.

Long-standing Tertiary Issues

Federal Council continues to advocate for the implementation of changes to address the issues that have been on the Tertiary agenda for many years including:

- The significant increase in the dependent Youth Allowance Parental Income limit.
- The removal of the independent Youth Allowance Parental Income limit.
- Changes to the independent Youth Allowances eligibility criteria to include all rural and remote students who must relocate to study be considered independent for Youth Allowance purposes.
- The expansion of the Relocation Scholarship.

Delegations and Meetings

The Tertiary Portfolio has been involved in regular quarterly meetings with the Department of Social Services and Services Australia, advocating on behalf of our tertiary students. This forum has been a productive opportunity to timely address issues brought to Federal Council particularly around Youth Allowance and Tertiary Access Payment applications.

Regional Education Commissioner

ICPA (Aust) continues to work with the Regional Education Commissioner, Hon Fiona Nash 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. While some have occurred the implementation of all recommendations from the Naphthine Review would see important measures introduced for rural and remote students including:



- A review of the current government income support policies and arrangements for students that relocate from the family home to access further study or training.
- Improvement of income support information.
- The provision of greater flexibility in pathways to qualify for independent Youth Allowance.
- Improvements to the quality and range of student support services including pastoral care, mentoring programs and academic support.
- Improvement and support of high quality career information and advice.
- The improved availability of and information on accommodation support for relocating tertiary and training students.
- Improved access to affordable, reliable, high speed internet services.
- Improved access to high quality VET programs in rural and remote Australia.
- Support for tertiary providers to implement tailored initiatives experiencing rural hardship.

Youth Allowance Overview 2023 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 2023 Pedals and on the ICPA (Aust) website. For further information, advice, clarification or assistance, please phone **132490** (dedicated Youth Allowance phone number) or visit: www.servicesaustralia.gov.au/youth-allowance.

Submissions

In the last 12 months, Federal Council has contributed to three tertiary-related submissions highlighting the key issues and challenges concerning access to tertiary education for rural and remote students. Submissions can be viewed [here](#).

Review of Australia's Higher Education System

ICPA (Aust) contributed to the Review of Australia's Higher Education System highlighting the key issues and challenges raised by ICPA members concerning equity of access to tertiary and training education for rural and remote students. This submission allowed ICPA (Aust) to incorporate all the issues from motions, some that have been on the agenda and in policy for many years.

ICPA (Aust) believes that the following issues must be addressed to ensure equity of access to a tertiary education, improve the educational outcomes and participation rates of rural and remote students and to ensure rural and remote tertiary students have access to a high-quality tertiary education commensurate to their needs and aspirations.

ICPA (Aust)'s Recommendations:

- Students isolated from tertiary education due to location, must be recognised as a separate disadvantage group when being assessed for support mechanisms such as Youth Allowance to address the distinctly unique circumstances and requirements of rural and remote students.
- Enhancements to the Tertiary Access Payment to ensure it meets the needs of all rural and remote students who need to relocate to access tertiary study.
- Support payments and adjunct payments must be appropriate and commensurate with the costs incurred by rural and remote students who have to live away from the family home to access a tertiary education.
- The current parental income limit for dependent Youth Allowance be significantly increased to be more reflective of the actual cost of supporting a dependent student at a tertiary level.
- The Parental Income Test be removed from the eligibility criteria for rural and remote students qualifying for Youth Allowance as an independent under the workforce participation criteria.



- Changes be made to the Youth Allowance qualifying criteria for rural and remote students who must relocate to study so that, on course commencement, they are considered independent for Youth Allowance purposes (where students are ineligible for dependent Youth Allowance).
- The Liquid Assets Waiting Period be removed for rural and remote students who have fulfilled the self-supporting criteria for Youth Allowance as an independent and who have to relocate from the family home to access tertiary education.
- The criteria for the Relocation Scholarship be extended for those rural and remote students who must relocate and live away from home to access a tertiary education and not be contingent on the receipt of dependent Youth Allowance.
- Rent Assistance be substantially increased for rural and remote students receiving Youth Allowance to more closely reflect the real cost of living for this cohort and the actual rental market.
- Additional assistance to supplement student travel costs and accommodation to attend course practicums.
- The continuation of Rural and Remote Enterprise Scholarships or implementation of a similar program to improve access to educational opportunities for rural and remote students.
- Information on tertiary courses, admission requirements and processes must be readily available, accessible and comprehensive.
- Regional University Centres continue to be available for rural and remote students as an option for access to tertiary education.
- Online learning continues to remain an option for rural and remote students and internet services are reliable, effective and efficient to support this mode of delivery.
- All the recommendations from the Napthine Review are implemented.
- Apprentices and VET students – see Training Report 2023 for these recommendations.

Developments in Higher Education Admission Practices

ICPA (Aust) contributed to the discussion paper *Developments in Higher Education Admission Practices* and highlight the key issues and challenges for rural and remote students navigating the tertiary admissions process.

ICPA (Aust)'s Recommendations:

- The opportunity to obtain admission information in various mediums, including phone, internet and face to face including through school teachers and/or career advisers.
- Access to comprehensive, readily accessible, up-to-date information and support for senior secondary career pathways planning.
- Higher education institutions must be transparent in their admission processes and offers including course availability, delivery options, entry requirements, alternative entrance options, bonus points allocation and eligibility, application processes, course costs, accommodation options, campus facilities and support available.
- Staff delivering career's advice at schools are well-versed and knowledgeable in university admission information and processes and have access to resources and training to be able to provide adequate advice to students.
- The availability of support for students in years 11 and 12 via teachers, careers advisers and schools, online assistance and a dedicated call centre to assist rural and remote students in understanding the influencing factors regarding the process of acceptance into particular tertiary institutions.
- The range of non-ATAR related admission options including At-school offers, school recommendations and scholarship entry is transparent and readily available.
- Rural and remote students and their families are well-informed of options available to them, such as specific allowances and remoteness considerations.
- A national approach to managing applications across borders.



Teacher Education Expert Panel Discussion Paper

ICPA (Aust) contributed to the *Teacher Education Expert Panel Discussion Paper* and to highlight key issues specifically related to initial teacher education, teachers and teaching in rural and remote Australia. Teachers must be well-prepared for the unique circumstances surrounding these learning contexts. Education providers must ensure the initial teacher education content delivered, both theoretical and practical, is contextually appropriate.

ICPA (Aust)'s Recommendations:

Education providers who offer initial teacher education courses should implement a more extensive course structure to include:

- A major in Rural and Remote Education to prepare students and graduates for the complexities, challenges and uniqueness of teaching in rural and remote schools including the distance education environment.
- Modules on teaching students with specific learning needs to prepare students and graduates to recognise and facilitate early recognition, identification and assessment learning difficulties and assist, manage and meet the needs and abilities of children with specific needs and learning difficulties and assist and support distance education Home Tutors.

In conclusion, ICPA (Aust) is very appreciative of the Federal Government's continued commitment and prioritisation of tertiary education and the measures already in place which have benefited rural and remote students. Federal Council will continue to progress and raise the profile of our members' issues at every opportunity and advocate for the implementation of changes/measures to ensure rural and remote students have the opportunity to access, participate and complete a tertiary education of their choice commensurate with their aspirations and career plans.

I would like to thank my fellow Tertiary Portfolio members Anna McCorkle, Julia Broad, Naomi Obst, Alana Moller, Federal Council and the State Tertiary Portfolios for their invaluable support, guidance, and knowledge. It has been a pleasure to again lead the Tertiary Portfolio and I look forward to further developments in the tertiary sphere for the benefit of rural and remote tertiary students.