



Rural Schools Portfolio

2024 Conference Report

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As we know, rural schools play a vital role in providing education to children living in remote and isolated areas. This report aims to provide an overview of the current state of rural schools in Australia and highlight some of the challenges and opportunities that they face.

The 2023 Federal Conference had one motion presented in the Rural Schools portfolio requesting federal funding to further incentivise experienced teachers to take up contracts in regional, rural and remote locations. Following Federal Conference, Federal Council sent correspondence to the Minister for Education, the Hon Jason Clare MP with copies sent to relevant Ministers, Members of Parliament and Senators.

Federal Council received a timely reply to our correspondence from the Minister via Assistant Minister for Education Senator the Hon Anthony Chisholm.

Assistant Minister Chisholm advised that the National Teacher Workforce Action Plan is now in progress with a focus on students from across the country in both regional and metropolitan settings. Part of this action plan is the Commonwealth Teaching Scholarships Program and special measures to reduce the HELP debt for teachers in the very remote areas of Australia.

The National Teacher Workforce Action Plan agreed to in December 2022 has several initiatives designed to address teacher shortages. The Commonwealth Teaching Scholarships program for new students commencing an initial teacher education course (ITE) in 2024, with scholarships of up to \$40,000 per student, is available for full-time undergraduate initial teacher education students. (\$10,000 per year for a four-year qualification) and up to \$20,000 for full-time postgraduate ITE students (\$10,000 per year for a two-year qualification).

Applications are strongly encouraged from school leavers and career changers who meet the eligibility criteria. Scholarships will be available for one thousand students every year until 2028.

For more information, please click on this link:

[Commonwealth Teaching Scholarships - Department of Education, Australian Government](#)

During the May 2024 delegations to Canberra Federal Council spoke of our support for these scholarships, however also raised concerns that this is a missed opportunity for rural and remote schools. The criteria for receiving the scholarship is that an applicant will be required to commit to teaching for a time equivalent to the length of their ITE program (up to four years undergraduate and up to two years postgraduate) in a government school or a government run early learning centre, this can be in any location.

ICPA (Aust) believes this scholarship could be an excellent opportunity to include a rural and remote school teaching position as part of the qualifying criteria, or an extra financial incentive if teaching in a rural and remote school was undertaken.

Assistant Minister Chisholm advised that teacher shortages are a national priority and that state and territory governments are responsible for employing teachers and may also have initiatives in place to attract and retain teachers in rural and remote areas with some of the initiatives being similar to the Rural Health Outreach Fund (RHOF).

In New South Wales, the "Teach Rural" program offers financial incentives, rental subsidies, professional development days and locality allowances. Similarly in Queensland, a range of supports and incentives include additional payments, relocation assistance, subsidised housing and wellbeing support.



Assistant Minister Chisholm encouraged ICPA to reach out to our individual State Governments with information on RHOF as they will be able to consider initiatives already in place and determine the merits of adopting the practices under RHOF.

Rural schools in Australia continue to face challenges such as limited resources, teacher shortages, and difficulties in accessing educational technology. During delegation meetings in Canberra, Federal Council also spoke with Ministers, Members of Parliament, Senators and staff from the Education Department and Social Services to raise these concerns with them. However, there have been some positive developments that ICPA (Aust) hopes will help to improve the quality of education in rural and remote areas.

The Federal Government had just announced prior to delegations that for those students studying to be a teacher, nurse, midwife or social worker they would now be eligible to receive \$319.50 per week while on a compulsory practicum placement. The payment, which is part of the 2024 Federal Budget, is due to start in July 2025. The payment will be means tested, however at the time of writing this report ICPA (Aust) is not aware of specific details.

Unpaid practicums are a valuable part of the learning experience for university students, allowing them to apply their theoretical knowledge in a real-world setting and gain practical skills that will benefit them in their future careers. However, the practice of unpaid practicums has come under scrutiny in recent years, with concerns raised about the exploitation of students and the impact on their financial well-being. In 2024, it is estimated that a significant number of university students in Australia are participating in unpaid practicums as part of their degree requirements. For students studying in the city, a country practicum is often welcomed, however the financial implications of continuing to pay rent in their metropolitan residence as well as the time they are on practicum in the country and taking leave from their part time jobs makes this a really difficult time for these students.

During Canberra delegations Federal Council also requested that the paid practicums be extended to include all students from both rural and urban settings in the allied health areas in the recent announcement as we can see that this would have a significant impact in attracting students to rural and remote schools. Assistant Minister Chisholm advised that this was unlikely to happen and that it was more likely that a HECs reduction type scheme would be more beneficial to attracting university graduate students to rural and remote schools.

Despite the challenges that rural and remote schools face, there are opportunities for improvement in rural and remote schools. By investing in programs that provide training and support for experienced teachers and recently graduated teachers in rural schools, we can help to improve the quality of education and reduce staff turnover to help level the playing field for students. Financial and wellbeing incentives to attract and retain experienced teachers in rural and remote schools will benefit the students being taught and the recently graduated teachers providing an experienced support structure which is lacking in many small rural and remote schools.

It is pleasing to see glimpses of government policy addressing student and teacher shortfalls in rural and remote schools, but there are also more opportunities for improvement. The 2018 Halsey Review, Independent Review into Regional, Rural & Remote Education recommended to reduce the impact of administration on workloads to create more time for teaching and learning be implemented. Investing in teacher training and retention coupled with improving access to allied health services, rural and remote schools can become schools where an equity of education is possible. This will ensure that children receive a higher-quality education than is currently possible in many rural and remote schools in geographically isolated locations.

I would like to thank members for their contributions to the Rural Schools portfolio. Your motions, explanations and case studies are what drives the direction of this portfolio. Grateful thanks to fellow portfolio members for their assistance throughout the year.