



# Tertiary Portfolio

## 2024 Conference Report

Portfolio Leader: Kate Thompson

I proudly present the 2023-2024 Tertiary Portfolio report which will be my final report as Tertiary Portfolio leader.

Despite significant reviews and measures implemented over the last decade, rural and remote students continue to face significant challenges in accessing higher education including geographic isolation, limited infrastructure, socioeconomic barriers, and the financial burden of relocation, tuition, and living expenses. These issues contribute to their under-representation in higher education and exacerbate disparities in access and opportunity compared to metropolitan students.

Key barriers include high up-front and ongoing costs associated with relocating, such as rent, electricity, phone and internet, securing accommodation and travel expenses, amplified by the rising costs of basic living commodities which recur throughout their education. Adequate financial assistance is crucial to mitigate these challenges and increase their participation in tertiary education.

The priority for the tertiary portfolio is to address these barriers to ensure equity of access, improve participation, retention, affordability and educational outcomes for rural and remote tertiary students commensurate to their needs and aspirations enabling them to pursue the career path of their choice. The ICPA (Aust) commends the Federal government's commitment to and prioritising of rural and remote students and will continue to advocate for equitable access to tertiary education.

### 2023 TERTIARY MOTIONS

Motions presented at Federal Conferences continue to highlight the issues that the rural and remote tertiary cohort face when accessing higher education.

All the tertiary motions carried at the 2023 Federal Conference and previous unresolved motions have been actioned through correspondence sent to and delegations with relevant ministers, members of parliament, senators, the Regional Education Commissioner, the Hon Fiona Nash and government departments, quarterly meetings with the Department of Education, Services Australia and Department of Social Services, submissions and consultations. The full 2023 Motion update can be read here:

[www.icpa.com.au/au/resources/motion-updates](http://www.icpa.com.au/au/resources/motion-updates).

### Tertiary Access Payment (TAP)

The Tertiary Access Payment (TAP) is a means-tested one-time payment of up to \$5000 designed to support 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, with parental income below \$250,000. It aims to alleviate the financial burdens associated with relocation, start-up expenses, living costs, education or training expenses and travel costs.

Recommendations from the Australian Universities Accord Final Report, included adjustments to the TAP with the aim to address financial disparities and enhance its accessibility and effectiveness:

- Removal of the requirement to commence an eligible course within 12 months of completing Year 12 (or equivalent).
- Amend the timing of payments to provide timely financial support for relocation costs before students relocate, rather than after they begin their studies.



### **Rural and Regional Enterprise Scholarships (RRES)**

The Rural and Regional Enterprise Scholarships (RRES) program played a crucial role in supporting undergraduate, postgraduate and higher-level vocational education and training (VET) students from rural and remote areas with the financial costs associated with tertiary education. However, the program closed for new applicants after the 2022 round, leaving a gap in ongoing support.

The importance of a permanent equity-based scholarship program for undergraduate tertiary and VET students, is vital. Despite advocating for the reinstatement of the RRES program or the implementation of an equivalent similar program, the response from the Assistant Minister for Education, and the Assistant Minister for Regional Development, Senator the Hon Anthony Chisholm was that the RRES program was a terminal program with no plans for a similar program in place.

### **Recommendations from the *Education in remote and complex environments Report***

The *Education in Remote and Complex Environments Report* highlights several recommendations aimed at improving access to higher education for rural and remote students. These recommendations include:

- Reviewing the current government income support policies and arrangements for students relocating from their family home for further study or training.
- Improving the income support and high quality career information and advice.
- Providing greater flexibility in pathways to qualify for Independent Youth Allowance.
  - access to Youth Allowance as an independent for rural and remote students who successfully complete their first year of tertiary study externally if they relocate to continue study for a further minimum of one year,
  - the reduction of the earnings required for rural and remote students who are qualifying for independent Youth Allowance under the Concessional Workforce test and
  - the review of the changes to the parental means test cut-offs for independent Youth Allowance under the Concessional Workforce test.
- Enhancing the quality and range of student support services, including pastoral care, mentoring programs, and academic support.
- Improving the availability and information on accommodation support for relocating tertiary and training students.
- Ensuring access to affordable, reliable, high-speed internet services.

While there has been a response from the Assistant Minister for Education and Assistant Minister for Regional Development, Senator the Hon Anthony Chisholm indicating efforts in areas identified by the Naphthine Review, ICPA (Aust) continues to urge the Federal Government to implement all recommendations outlined in the report. The Regional Education Commissioner has also been briefed on these matters, as they fall under her responsibility. Further details and the full report can be accessed here: [www.education.gov.au/access-and-participation/resources/national-regional-rural-and-remote-tertiary-education-strategy-final-report](http://www.education.gov.au/access-and-participation/resources/national-regional-rural-and-remote-tertiary-education-strategy-final-report)

### **Regional University Centres (RUCs)**

The Federal Government's continuing commitment to the expansion of Regional University Centres (RUCs) is welcomed as a means of providing greater access to tertiary education and Vocational Education and Training (VET) in rural and remote Australia. RUCs offer campus-like facilities and support services, including study spaces, computer facilities, internet access, administration and academic support, and pastoral care, allowing students to study online while they remain closer to their community, social and family supports resulting in an affordable alternative choice. The establishment of additional centres is a recommendation in the Australian Universities Accord Final Report along with a suggested name change to Regional Study Hubs to recognise VET and higher education.

The benefits of RUCs for rural and remote students include affordability, choice, ease of access, peer and supervisor support, and flexibility in course delivery options. Many students consider engaging in face-to-face campus activities, including social, sporting, cultural, and academic pursuits, as essential to their tertiary



education experience. Therefore, having facilities available for rural and remote students to access these opportunities closer to home is highly beneficial.

However, it is important to note that many students who live in rural and remote areas may still need to relocate significant distances even if they choose to study at an RUC, bearing the associated high costs.

### **HELP Debt Reduction for all Rural and Remote Health Professionals**

ICPA (Aust) has raised the need for the scheme to reduce the Higher Education Loan Program (HELP) debt, currently limited to rural doctors and nurse practitioners to be expanded to include all health professionals, including speech pathologists, psychologists and physiotherapists and those who work with geographically isolated children with specific education needs. Reductions or waivers of indexation on HELP debt would assist in incentivising these health professionals to work in these areas to support the educational and developmental well-being of children, particularly in the early assessment, identification and management of those with specific needs.

A response to this request on behalf of the Minister for Health and Aged Care, the Hon Mark Butler MP, reiterated the Government's commitment to improving access to health services and workforce recruitment although there are no immediate plans to expand the current HELP debt reduction program. However, it will be reviewed in 2025 and 2028 to assess its effectiveness in attracting and retaining health professionals in rural and remote Australia. Information on several ongoing programs and initiatives particularly for the rural health workforce can be found at:

[www.health.gov.au/topics/rural-health-workforce/programs](http://www.health.gov.au/topics/rural-health-workforce/programs).

### **HELP Debt Reduction for all Rural and Remote Teachers**

Extending the Higher Education Loan Program (HELP) debt reduction scheme to include teachers committed to all rural areas, not just very remote regions, will address teacher shortages, providing incentives to consider this move and help with the recruitment and retention of high-quality teachers and enhance educational outcomes for students in these areas. Teachers in rural and remote areas face similar challenging conditions as very remote areas.

Correspondence from the Assistant Minister for Education and the Assistant Minister for Regional Development indicated that the Regional Education Commissioner, Hon Fiona Nash, will review programs including HELP debt reduction for very remote teachers.

### **HECS-HELP Debt Repayments**

Concerns regarding the repayment of HELP loans upon completion of a student's course have been raised by members. The Department of Education's HELP Policy Team explained that repayments are made through the income taxation system, with repayments not credited to an individual's HELP account until the completion of their tax return. This process aims to help individuals meet their tax obligations when due and prevent large tax bills upon tax return completion.

The recommendations for fairer and simpler indexation and repayment arrangements to alleviate the financial pressure of HELP loans in the Australian Universities Accord Final Report are welcomed. Proposed measures include:

- reducing student contributions on high-cost courses e.g. humanities, communications,
- aligning student contributions with projected potential lifetime earnings and
- changing the timing of indexation for HELP loans so amounts withheld are accounted for before indexation is applied.

### **Availability of 'Certificate IV in School Based Education'**

The availability of a 'Certificate IV in School Based Education Support' in all tertiary institutions nationwide would provide crucial support to geographically isolated distance education home tutors who educate



children with specific understanding, knowledge and skills to effectively manage the home distance education school room.

In correspondence received from Universities Australia, most universities do not offer qualifications at the Certificate IV level, whereas dual sector universities that provide both higher education and VET courses do. Universities Australia has passed our correspondence on to the dual sector universities: Charles Darwin University, Central Queensland University, Federation University, RMIT, Swinburne University of Technology, and Victoria University.

### **Diplomas and ECEC Degrees**

To address the shortage of early childhood educators and to encourage early childhood educators to work in rural and remote communities, greater accessibility to early childhood diplomas and degrees is needed. This can be achieved through targeted programs and incentives such as financial support, scholarships, flexible learning options, professional development opportunities, mentorship programs, and community engagement initiatives.

Recommendations from Universities Australia to the Australian Universities Accord Review include improving access to higher education for regional and remote students, particularly those studying education to stay in regional or remote areas for their studies and placement.

### **THE FOLLOWING MOTION ISSUES HAVE CONTINUED TO BE PURSUED:**

#### **Liquid Assets Waiting Period**

The Liquid Assets Waiting Period is the number of weeks a student who has been deemed eligible for Youth Allowance, must wait before their payment begins if they have savings of over \$5500. Rural and remote students who have proven their independence through part-time work or earnings and have been assessed as eligible for Youth Allowance as an independent, are often penalised by the Liquid Assets Waiting Period. These students require their saved income to fund the high relocation and ongoing costs of living and attending university, before their payment begins.

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. Despite this, ICPA members request to have the waiting period removed has continued to be pursued.

#### **Independent Youth Allowance (YA) Parental Income Limit**

ICPA (Aust) continues to advocate for the removal of the Parental Income Test as a criterion for rural and remote students qualifying for Youth Allowance as independent under workforce participation criteria as these rural and remote students have demonstrated their independence from their parents through earning the required amount in a 14-month period.

#### **Rent Assistance**

Despite the increase to Rent Assistance of \$40 per fortnight to income support payments (Austudy and Youth Allowance) in the 2023 Federal Budget, rural and remote students relocating to major regional and large cities for tertiary studies continue to struggle to secure accommodation with the rental market being very competitive and rental costs rising significantly. Rent Assistance has not kept pace with the exponential rise in rental costs and does not reflect the real living costs and the actual rental market. Affordable rent is paramount to these students' retention and success at tertiary level and further assistance is required to combat the rise in cost of living. There was an increase to rent assistance announced in the 2024-2025 Budget which has been welcomed.



## SUBMISSION

### Australian Universities Accord

ICPA (Aust) contributed to the Australian Universities Accord, the recent significant review of the Australia's Higher Education System, through submissions and consultations with the Regional Education Commissioner, Hon Fiona Nash, highlighting the key issues and challenges concerning access to tertiary education for rural and remote students. Issues included Regional University Centres, online learning and services to support this mode, Rural and Regional Enterprise Scholarships or equivalent program and financial assistance; Tertiary Access Payment (TAP), Relocation Scholarships, Youth Allowance including eligibility criteria, liquid assets waiting period, rent assistance, HELP debt and transitioning to tertiary education. The ICPA (Aust) submissions can be viewed here:

[www.icpa.com.au/au/2023-icpa-aust-submissions](http://www.icpa.com.au/au/2023-icpa-aust-submissions).

The Australian Universities Accord Final Report, released on 25 February 2024, outlines 47 recommendations aimed at reforming and improving the quality, accessibility, affordability and sustainability of Australia's Higher Education system.

The report recognises regional tertiary education as a priority area, building upon previous reviews and strategies focused on rural and remote education; the 2017 Halsey Review, the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education and the 2019 Naphthine Review, the National Regional, Rural and Remote Education Strategy. ICPA (Aust) welcomes the recommendations specific to rural and remote students, some of which align with longstanding requests from ICPA members and are crucial for addressing the unique challenges faced by families in rural and remote Australia:

- Expansion of Regional University Study hubs for both VET and higher education including increasing the use of existing infrastructure, extending eligibility to existing universities, and potentially renaming the program to Regional Study Hubs to reflect its role across both vocational education and training (VET) and higher education.
- Tertiary Access Payment:
  - Removal of the requirement to commence an eligible course within 12 months of leaving year 12 and
  - amend the timing of payments to provide timely assistance with the cost of relocation for eligible rural and remote tertiary students before moving.
- Improved student income support to alleviate financial burden and reduce the cost-of-living pressures by:
  - Increasing the Parental Income Free Area for dependent Youth Allowance to \$68,857 per family, indexed to the higher of the Consumer Price Index or Male Total Average Weekly Earnings.
  - Expanding the income support eligibility by providing pro rata student payments to students who study part-time (studying 50%-74% of a full study load).
- Eligibility criteria and payments are reviewed including for rural and remote students.
- Introduction of financial support for mandatory unpaid work placements. Financial support for placements aims to support students, particularly from rural and remote areas, to alleviate the financial strain of mandatory unpaid placements by covering additional accommodation, travel expenses and additional expenses incurred during these placements.

Key elements include:

- Government Funding for placements in nursing, care, and teaching professions.
- Employer Contributions for placements in other fields by both public and private employers.
- Reduce the burden of HELP loans by introducing a fairer and simpler indexation and repayment arrangements:
  - Reduce Student Contributions: Lower contributions for high-cost courses such as humanities, society and culture, communications, and human movement, transitioning to a system based on projected potential lifetime earnings.



- Marginal Rate Repayments: Move towards HELP loan repayments based on marginal rates, benefiting low-income earners.
- Indexation Timing: Change the timing so that amounts withheld are accounted for before indexation is applied to HELP loans.
- Align HELP Loan Growth with Wage Growth: Set the indexation rate to the lower of the Consumer Price Index (CPI) and the Wage Price Index (WPI).
- Further review by the Minister for Social Services and the Minister for Education to address the social security system complexity with a report due by early 2025 to ensure:
  - Focus on students with the most need with eligibility criteria regularly monitored.
  - Allowing students to undertake reasonable amount of work while studying – reviewing arrangements such as the income bank.
  - Eligibility criteria for youth payments should take into account regional students have specific needs including high relocation costs and that they are effectively independent once they have left home and therefore should be considered for eligibility for Youth Allowance as an independent.
  - Adoption of a needs-based funding model which includes:
    - Per-student funding for each under-represented student.
    - Location-Based Funding providing additional funds for courses delivered in regional and remote areas to address equity issues and higher delivery costs.
    - Completion Bonus - introducing a bonus for higher education providers who achieve agreed completion targets, focusing on supporting students with significant barriers to success.
    - Increase Commonwealth Supported Places: Significantly increase places allocated to universities with regionally based medical schools to attract and retain medical graduates in these areas.
- Increase participation in tertiary education among under-represented groups and foster greater aspiration, participation, and success in tertiary education through effective outreach programs including:
  - Prepare students for higher education.
  - Establish a consistent national framework for career guidance.
  - Ensure post-school pathways are visible and integrated into the high school curriculum.

All these measures aim to enhance students' financial security, provide support services, reduce barriers, improve access, participation, retention and attainment of rural and remote students which will address the under-representation in higher education. Federal Council will continue to advocate for prompt and effective implementation of all the recommendations.

The Final Report and Summary report can be viewed here:

[www.education.gov.au/australian-universities-accord/resources/final-report](http://www.education.gov.au/australian-universities-accord/resources/final-report).

### **Commonwealth Teaching Scholarships**

The Commonwealth Teaching Scholarships commenced in 2024, offering 1000 scholarships annually worth up to \$40,000 each over five years. Recipients are required to commit to working as teachers in government schools or government-run early learning settings for the equivalent duration of their teaching degree. These scholarships aim to support undergraduate and postgraduate teaching students financially while addressing teacher workforce shortages, including in early childhood education. Eligible applicants include high-achieving students, First Nations peoples, individuals with disabilities, and those from regional, rural, or remote locations.

More information on the Commonwealth Teaching Scholarship including eligibility criteria can be found here:

[www.education.gov.au/teaching-scholarships](http://www.education.gov.au/teaching-scholarships)

### **National Teacher Workforce Action Plan Consultation**

The National Teacher Workforce Action Plan, agreed upon by Education Ministers in December 2022, aims to address teacher workforce shortages in Australia. It encompasses initiatives across five priority areas:



- Improving teacher supply to increase the number of people choosing teaching as a career
- Strengthening initial teacher education to ensure initial teacher education supports teacher supply and delivers classroom ready graduates.
- Retaining existing teachers to improve retention by increasing support for teachers, enhancing career pathways, reducing unnecessary workload and freeing up teachers to focus on core teaching tasks and collaboration.
- Elevating the teaching profession's status to recognise the value teachers bring to students, communities and the economy.
- Better understanding future workforce needs to improve the information available for teacher workforce planning.

The plan includes measures to attract more people to teaching, support teacher education, enhance retention through career pathways and workload reduction, recognise teachers' value, and improve workforce planning. The Australian Government is investing \$337 million to implement the plan, with states and territories contributing \$5 million for a national campaign. Collaboration among jurisdictions will ensure coordinated implementation of the five priority initiatives. The plan aligns with efforts to address workforce challenges in early childhood education. The plan can be read here:

[www.education.gov.au/teaching-and-school-leadership/consultations/national-teacher-workforce-action-plan](http://www.education.gov.au/teaching-and-school-leadership/consultations/national-teacher-workforce-action-plan)

### **Centrelink Issues**

Federal Council has been made aware of an increasing number of rural and remote students having issues getting through to the 132490 Student phone line, experiencing a lengthy wait-time on hold, receiving automated messages to use the MyGov app and a sudden cutting off from the call. Services Australia have been contacted. These concerns will be reiterated at the quarterly meetings with the Departments.

### **Youth Allowance Overview 2024 Document**

The Youth Allowance Overview 2024 document aims to simplify the Youth Allowance eligibility and application process and provide information to help rural and remote students planning to study full-time, to navigate their Youth Allowance applications effectively including eligibility criteria, application process, payment details and available additional payments and services. This guide has been updated by the Tertiary Portfolio in collaboration with the Department of Social Services and Services Australia.

It is available in *Pedals* and on the ICPA (Aust) website here: [www.icpa.com.au/au/federal-tertiary-financial-assistance](http://www.icpa.com.au/au/federal-tertiary-financial-assistance).

For further information, advice, clarification or assistance, please phone **132490** (dedicated Youth Allowance phone number) or visit: [www.servicesaustralia.gov.au/youth-allowance](http://www.servicesaustralia.gov.au/youth-allowance).

### **Budget 2024/25**

Measures announced in the Budget will benefit rural and remote students include:

- As part of the response to the Australian Universities Accord,
  - A tertiary attainment target of 80 per cent of the working age population to have a VET or higher education qualification by 2050. To achieve this target, the Government is committing \$1.1 billion over five years, and an additional \$2.7 billion from 2028–29 to 2034–35, to expand access to higher education and support future productivity.
  - Needs-based funding - Universities will receive additional funding to provide dedicated support to students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds, First Nations students, students with disability and students studying at regional campuses.
  - HELP debt - Cap the HELP indexation rate to be the lower of either the CPI or the Wage Price Index and will back date relief for HELP, VET Student Loan, Apprenticeship Support Loan and other student support loan accounts that existed on 1 July 2023.



- Commonwealth Prac Payment - Commencing 1 July 2025, the Commonwealth Prac Payments will be paid to eligible students studying nursing including midwifery, teaching and social work students in higher education and nursing students in VET. This is a means tested payment to assist students financially while they undertake mandatory placements. Eligible students will receive payments of \$319.50 per week for the duration of their placement. The Program Guidelines are yet to be developed. More information on the Commonwealth Prac Payment can be found here: [www.education.gov.au/higher-education/commonwealth-prac-payment](http://www.education.gov.au/higher-education/commonwealth-prac-payment)
- An Australian Tertiary Education Commission to be established by 1 July 2025, to be responsible for tertiary education system stewardship, delivery of funding arrangements for higher education, ongoing tertiary harmonisation and data collection and reporting.
- Commonwealth Rent assistance – increase maximum rates of Commonwealth Rent Assistance by 10% from September 2024.
- Accommodation - The Federal Government will work with the higher education sector to develop regulations requiring universities to increase their supply of student accommodation.
- Destination Australia program - From 1 July 2024 the Federal Government will cease funding rounds of the Destination Australia program. All current Destination Australia scholarship recipients will continue to be supported for the remainder of their studies, for up to four years, provided they continue to meet eligibility criteria.
- Services Australia staff – Funding for more frontline service delivery staff 4030 new staff in 2024-2025 and a further 3530 the following year.

At every opportunity Federal Council will continue to pursue, progress and raise the profile of our members' issues and advocate for the implementation of measures and recommendations to ensure rural and remote tertiary and training students have the financial assistance, support and services to access, participate and complete a tertiary education of their choice commensurate with their aspirations and career plans. Where we have not had responses to issues, we will continue to follow these up and will inform members of the outcome or any developments.

I would like to thank my fellow Tertiary Portfolio members Julia Broad, Anna McCorkle, Naomi Obst and Miffy Waugh, 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 following further developments in the tertiary sphere for the benefit of rural and remote tertiary students.