



# Progress Report 2023 Federal Conference Motions Tertiary Portfolio

Compiled March 2024

All the tertiary motions carried at the 2023 Federal Conference and previous unresolved motions have been actioned through letters sent to relevant ministers, members of parliament, senators, and government departments, quarterly meetings with the Department of Education, Services Australia and Department of Social Services, submissions and consultations. Where we have not received official replies at the time of writing, we will follow-up.

## **Tertiary Access Payment (TAP)**

The TAP is 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 TAP is to assist eligible students with the costs of relocating to undertake tertiary study including start-up expenses, costs of living, direct costs of education or training and the cost of travelling home in semester breaks.

In correspondence to the Minister for Education the Hon Jason Clare MP, ICPA (Aust) recommended the expansion of the TAP to include those rural and remote students who take a gap year and ensuring that TAP payments are paid in a timely manner (ideally prior to commencement date) to assist with the high upfront costs of relocation. Pleasingly recommendations from the Australian Universities Accord Final Report, to which ICPA (Aust) provided a submission, included these two recommendations:

- removal of the requirement to commence 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 tertiary study before moving.

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

The RRES program closed for new applicants after the 2022 round. An ongoing commitment to a permanent equity-based scholarship program is required, particularly for undergraduate tertiary and Vocational Education and Training (VET) students, to assist with the financial costs to undertake their course of study and relevant internship and to increase the access to educational opportunity, engagement, participation and attainment of students from regional and remote areas.

A response from the Assistant Minister for Education, and Assistant Minister for Regional Development, Senator the Hon Anthony Chisholm did not confirm a plan for a similar program.

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

The *Education in remote and complex environments Report* – Recommendations 9 and 12 relate to the implementation of recommendations and actions from the Halsey and Naphthine Reviews to ensure all rural and remote tertiary students are able to access their course of choice. The implementation of these additional recommendations would further reduce the disparity in access to a tertiary education and ensure equity and improved participation, achievement and affordability for rural and remote students aspiring to and undertaking tertiary education 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 and improvement of income support information.



- The provision of 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.
- 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.
- Improved availability 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 regional, rural and remote Australia.
- Support for tertiary providers to implement tailored initiatives for those experiencing rural hardship.

We have had a response from the Assistant Minister for Education, and Assistant Minister for Regional Development, Senator the Hon Anthony Chisholm reassuring that the federal government is working on areas identified by the Naphthine Review such as student support services, geographical classification, internet access and affordability, Year 12 retention and career mapping for rural, regional and remote students. The Regional Education Commissioner, the Hon Fiona Nash has also been briefed on all tertiary motions and recommendations as these issues come under her responsibility including communications issues for tertiary students.

ICPA (Aust) continues to urge the federal government to implement all of the recommendations made in the Report, which is available 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**

Regional University Centres, provide physical, campus-like spaces and supports for students to access courses at university or vocational education and training while they remain closer to or within their community, social and family supports. The government has committed to investing in the Regional University Centres with a further 20 announced at the end of 2023 and further support recommended in the Australian Universities Accord Final Report released recently.

### **HELP Debt reduction to all rural and remote health professionals**

The current scheme to reduce the Higher Education Loan Program (HELP) debt for rural doctors and nurse practitioners needs to be expanded to include all health professionals including speech pathologists and those who work with geographically isolated children with specific education needs in rural, remote or very remote areas of Australia. This would assist in incentivising these health professionals who are vital in rural and remote locations 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 on behalf of the Minister for Health and Aged Care, the Hon Mark Butler MP, reiterated the federal government's commitment to improving access to health services and the recruitment and retention of medical and health professional staff across Australia. The current HELP debt reduction for doctors and nurse practitioners is still in the early stages of the program and at this stage there is no plan to expand it but it will be reviewed in 2025 and 2028. This evaluation process will assist in whether an expansion will attract and retain other health professionals to 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)

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

Members expressed concerns relating to the repayment of the HELP loans on completion of a student's course. The HELP Policy Team within the Department of Education explained that the HELP loan repayments are made through the income taxation system and HECS debt repayments are not credited to an individual's HELP account at the time they are withheld and forwarded by the employer because the compulsory repayment for a financial year can only be calculated once an individual completes their tax return. The PAYG objective is to allow an individual to meet their tax obligations when they fall due and reduce the likelihood of a large tax bill when individuals complete their tax return.

There are recommendations in the Australian Universities Accord Final Report which will address these issues:

- Reducing the burden of HELP loans by introducing a fairer and simpler indexation and repayment arrangements.
- Reducing student contributions on high-cost courses e.g. humanities, communications and moving towards a student contribution system based on projected potential lifetime earnings.
- 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' in all tertiary institutions**

The inclusion and availability of a 'Certificate IV in School Based Education Support' in tertiary institutions across Australia will support the role of geographically isolated distance education home tutors who educate children enrolled in distance education with the understanding, knowledge and skills to manage the home distance education school room, so they can effectively deliver the components of the school day and strategies to support the child's education.

In correspondence received from Universities Australia, it was pointed out that the majority of universities do not award qualifications at the Certificate IV level whereas dual sector universities offering both higher education and VET courses do. Universities Australia have passed our letter onto these universities. Dual sector universities include:

- Charles Darwin University
- Central Queensland University
- Federation University
- RMIT
- Swinburne University of Technology
- Victoria University

### **Diplomas and ECEC Degrees more accessible**

Early Childhood diplomas and degrees need to be made more accessible by offering targeted programs and incentives including financial support, scholarships, flexible learning options, professional development opportunities, mentorship programs and community engagement initiatives to encourage early childhood educators to work in rural and remote communities and to address the shortage of Early Childhood educators in rural and remote Australia.

Universities Australia have made recommendations to the Australian Universities Accord Review concerning teacher education including Early Childhood Education. The Accord has recommended increased and improved



access to higher education for regional and remote students including students studying education to stay in regional or remote areas for their studies and placement.

The Minister for Education has announced the commencement of the Commonwealth Teaching Scholarships designed to address the teacher workforce shortages including early childhood teaching. Over the next five years, 1000 scholarships worth up to \$40,000 each will be allocated annually. Recipients of a Commonwealth Teaching Scholarship will need to commit to work as a teacher in government schools or government-run early learning settings, for the equivalent duration of their teaching degree.

More information can be found here: [www.education.gov.au/teaching-scholarships](http://www.education.gov.au/teaching-scholarships)

### **Australian Universities Accord Final Report**

On Sunday 25 February 2024 the Australian Universities Accord Final Report was released outlining 47 recommendations to reform and improve the quality, accessibility, affordability and sustainability of Australia's Higher Education system. ICPA (Aust) contributed to the Australian Universities Accord with a submission and consultation with the Regional Education Commissioner, the Hon Fiona Nash.

Key issues addressed in ICPA (Aust)'s submission 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.

ICPA (Aust) welcomes the recommendations, particularly those specific to the rural and remote cohort that will address some of the issues that ICPA members have been requesting for a long time specifically:

- Financial Support for unpaid work placements.
- Increasing the Parental Income Free Area for dependent Youth Allowance.
- Expanding the income support eligibility by providing pro rata student payments to students who study part-time.
- Further review by the Minister for Social Services and the Minister for Education:
  - 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.
- Needs-based funding model that takes into account the location of higher education delivery.
- Continued expansion of Regional University Study hubs for both VET and higher education.

It is pleasing to see regional, rural and remote tertiary education has been again identified as under-represented group and separate priority area.

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).

ICPA (Aust) will continue to advocate for rural and remote students to ensure these recommendations are implemented.



The following issues were presented as motions and actioned but to date we have had no response:

### **A review of the Liquid Assets Waiting Period**

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, require their saved income to fund the relocation and ongoing costs of living and attending university including high set-up costs associated with relocation: travel, accommodation set-up costs (rental housing bond, electricity connection or residential college fees), living expenses and communication (telephone, internet) along with the rising costs of basic living commodities. Applicants who have saved funds over the \$5500 are penalised for having these saved funds when the Liquid Assets Waiting Period is applied. This is impacting the ability of rural and remote students to meet these high up-front set up, relocation costs and ongoing living costs. The Liquid Assets Waiting Period should 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 to access tertiary education.

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

The extension of the current HELP debt reduction to include teachers who commit to 'rural' not just very remote areas will assist in the recruitment and retention of high-quality teachers to these areas, improve the teacher shortage and the educational outcomes for students.

ICPA (Aust) suggests this reduction in HELP debt by either the waiver of the indexation on accumulated HELP debt or the reduction of accumulated HELP debt could be pro-rated based on the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Remoteness Structure.

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

Members once again requested the removal of the Parental Income Test from the eligibility criteria for rural and remote students qualifying for Youth Allowance as an independent under the workforce participation criteria. ICPA (Aust) continues to raise that this Youth Allowance category recognises these rural and remote students have earned the required amount in a 14-month period and proved their independence from their parents, therefore their parental income should not be a criteria.

### **Rent Assistance**

Despite the recent increase to Rent Assistance in the 2023 Federal Budget, rural and remote students relocating to major regional and large cities for tertiary studies are finding accommodation is becoming increasingly difficult to obtain, the rental market is very competitive and accommodation costs are rising significantly. Rent Assistance has not kept pace with the increases in rental costs and does not reflect the real living costs for this cohort who have to live away from home in order to access a tertiary education and the actual rental market. Affordable rent is paramount to these students' retention and success at tertiary level and increased support is critical.

ICPA (Aust) applauds the federal government's continued commitment and prioritisation of Higher Education in Australia and its focus on rural and remote tertiary education. The introduction of all the above measures would ensure equity of access for rural and remote students to a tertiary education. ICPA (Aust) will continue to pursue and raise the profile of these current, previous and ongoing issues to ensure our 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. Federal Council will inform members of any developments as they come to hand.

*Portfolio Leader- Kate Thompson*

To view the full 2023 Federal Conference Motion Update Report click [here](#).