

The Isolated Children's Parents'
Association of Australia
ICPA (Aust)



2020 Federal Conference

PORTFOLIO REPORTS

5 and 6 August 2020
By Webinar

BOARDING/ HOSTELS/ SECOND HOME REPORT

Nikki Macqueen

As I write this report, all ICPA State Councils across Australia continue to work hard to ensure their state and interstate boarders are able to return to school during the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic. Frustrations have run high for families desperate to see their children return to their boarding facility and back into their classrooms.

Federal Council actioned twenty-one Boarding/Hostels/Second Home motions from the 2019 Federal Conference held in Adelaide. A total of 53 letters were sent to the relevant Ministers and Senators from ICPA (Aust) regarding those 21 motions which were then followed up at delegations held in Canberra during October 2019. During the COVID-19 period it was advised that the Minister Assisting the Minister for Trade and Investment, Minister for Decentralisation and Regional Education, the Hon Andrew Gee MP, would undertake issues related to Boarding/Hostels/Second Home. ICPA Federal President Alana Moller has met with Minister Gee to discuss these issues and we look forward to continuing that relationship into the future.

AIC

The beginning of the year brought with it the usual Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) issues. Unfortunately once again there were cancellation letters sent to some recipients and we contacted the Department immediately. They too could not believe it had happened again. We also had members contact us with applications proceeding too slowly or rejected. In the past ICPA (Aust) has been able to take these concerns directly to the department on behalf of our members however the Department of Human Services has changed its structure and is now Services Australia. This has resulted in a reshuffle in the department and we are no longer able to take individual members cases to the Department. We have been advised that customers with general business and enquiries should contact the AIC call centre (132318) for their usual business in the first instance. If this does not result in a resolution we should now move on to the Escalated Complaints and Feedback team by calling 1800 132 468. Feedback suggests that this method has proven successful but if further clarification is needed then members should contact a Federal Councillor.

During Term 1 when students were beginning to be sent home from Boarding Schools due to the COVID-19 restrictions, there was talk of continued school shut downs in Term 2 and members became concerned about the payment of the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Boarding Allowance. Some Boarding Schools ceased fees while students were not in the boarding house while others did not, so a one rule applies did not fit every scenario. After some anxious moments it was announced that the AIC would remain intact and unaltered for all of Term 2 and we are pleased to see this continuing for Term 3. We thank the Federal Government and Minister for Families and Social Services, Senator the Hon Anne Ruston for considering our rural and remote families in such a stressful time.

At the end of 2019 ICPA (Aust) was informed that an AIC online application/renewal system was forecast to be rolled out sometime from mid-2020 to mid-2022. Due to the current crisis situation ICPA (Aust) has contacted Services Australia to appeal to fast-track the delivery of this system as self-isolation restrictions may stay in place as we near the end of the 2020 year.

FBT

Work is continuing to raise awareness that the removal of Fringe Benefits Tax (FBT) on contributions to employees' children's compulsory education expenses would potentially encourage families to stay in rural and remote Australia, improve recruitment and retention of staff while encouraging employers to contribute to the increasingly high costs associated with educating rural and remote children. The Government has stated that employers currently benefit from existing FBT concessions for certain

housing related benefits such as electricity, gas or other residential fuel and holiday travel for employees and their families living and working in remote areas. In the Government's opinion any further concessions, including education expenses, would come at a cost to revenue and would need to be balanced against other Government priorities. We shall continue to bring this issue to the forefront whenever possible.

Mental Health in Boarding

Minister for Health, the Hon Greg Hunt MP replied to our letter requesting the Federal Government provide mental health resources which will ensure rural and remote children have the capability to cope with dire situations and to address increasing mental health issues in boarding schools. We were alerted to the Government's investment programs including Empowering our Communities, Reachout and the expansion of Telehealth access to psychological therapies which are all available to boarding school students from rural and remote areas. Interestingly, \$98.6 million has been committed to Beyond Blue to deliver a school-based mental health initiative called Be You which assists early learning educators and teachers to teach children and young people skills for good social and emotional development and recognise mental health difficulties. Boarding schools are eligible to access Be You at no cost and currently there are over 85,300 individual users registered and 6202 schools participating. Federal Council encourages families to make contact with their respective boarding schools to ask about their individual programs.

ICPA (Aust) has met with the Australian Boarding Schools Association (ABSA) to discuss what can be done by boarding schools in regards to the mental health of students impacted by drought and it was also mentioned during a meeting with Dolly's Dream in November 2019. Federal Council appreciates the work of several State Councils who have sent out letters to boarding schools in their states reiterating the mental health concerns of their rural and remote students, hoping to raise awareness of the situation many of these children have been dealing with during the drought, in turn supporting our advocacy.

Socio Economic Status Score Methodology

Another concerning topic for members is the Socio-Economic Status Score Methodology proposed by the National School Resourcing Board Review. This comprehensive review in 2018 saw the Government accept all six recommendations made by that Board. This includes that from 2020 the capacity to contribute of a school should be determined based on a direct measure of median income for parents and guardians of the students at a school.

A Technical Working Group has been established by the Department of Education, Skills and Employment to provide advice on refinement and implementation of the direct measure of the capacity to contribute with particular focus on the impact the new measure has on regional, rural and remote families including boarding schools. The Government believes that the use of parent and/or guardian income in a direct measure is likely to reduce the need for schools to appeal their Capacity to Contribute scores as these scores are based on actual data collected rather than an average for an area.

ICPA (Aust) has raised concern regarding this measure directly with the Minister's office during our delegations in October 2019. Federal Council completed a submission into the Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee Inquiry - Australian Education Amendment (Direct Measure of Income) Bill 2020 [Provisions] to highlight the impacts this new funding arrangement may have on the schools our member families rely upon to educate their children. We also requested that appropriate provisions be put in place to limit these impacts. We continue to hold conversations with the Australian Boarding Schools Association (ABSA) and Federal Council participated in the Direct Measure of Capacity to Contribute Consultative Reference Group Forum on Tuesday 17 March held by the Commonwealth Department of Education, Skill and Employment in Canberra. ICPA (Aust) will continue to raise this issue wherever we can, as we are concerned about the impact it may have on our rural and remote boarders. We have been working collaboratively with ICPA State Councils and have asked for feedback

and information they may have regarding the impact on schools and ICPA families. We would appreciate any further information any State Council or branch may have at this time to help us further this discussion.

In closing I would like to take the opportunity to sincerely thank the Australian Boarding Schools Association (ABSA) for their support not only to this portfolio but to all ICPA both State and Federal Councils. Lisa Slade and myself were fortunate to represent ICPA at the ABSA Conference held in the Adelaide Hills after our Federal Conference in 2019 and 2 Councillors were looking forward to the ABSA International Conference which was to held in WA in September 2020 but wasn't to be. Fingers crossed for 26 – 29 September, 2021 in Fremantle.

Thank my fellow portfolio holders Lisa Slade, Briony Sinclair, Kristen Coggan and Nikki Mahony for their support over the past year. Congratulations and thank you to President Alana Moller for a job well done in her first year at the helm. It certainly has not been an easy year especially in the boarding sphere however Alana has handled every situation with her trademark determination and grace.

COMMUNICATIONS REPORT

Kristen Coggan

This year in Communications we have seen many improvements and concessions made. COVID-19 very quickly identified the downfalls of regional communications in Australia and accelerated some solutions needed to help improve and enhance rural, regional, and remote connectivity services and usage.

The Federal Government, the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications Australia, the Regional Rural and Remote Communication Coalition (RRRCC), the Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN), Better Internet for Regional, Rural and Remote (BIRRR), the Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman (TIO), the National Broadband Network (NBN Co), Telstra and many retail service providers collaborated quickly and effectively to resolve several communications challenges which were raised in motions from the 2019 conference.

ICPA (Aust) continues to work closely with the Federal Government, telecommunications companies and other like-minded stakeholders to seek the maintenance and development of adequate, affordable and reliable communications services for families in regional, rural and remote areas, particularly for the purpose of educational outcomes. Federal Council continues to be a part of the Regional, Rural and Remote Communications Coalition (RRRCC) and we take forward our members' issues to be discussed in the RRRCC forums. ICPA (Aust) also participates in the RRRCC delegations to speak with those in government and this provides opportunity to raise concerns in an additional capacity. As a member of the Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN) and more recently selected to have a representative on the Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman (TIO) Consumer Panel we hope to further increase awareness of communication challenges for rural and remote students and their families. ICPA (Aust) sat on two weekly NBN Co roundtables during the COVID-19 peak, the "Education COVID-19" group and the "NBN Co COVID-19 Response Regional Roundtable". These groups worked through solutions for students and rural families at the onset of the restrictions, children home from school and we continue those discussions as required now. I welcome any feedback from members, good or bad regarding their connectivity experience during this time so I can pass on to NBN Co.

Internet

ICPA members continue to be concerned with internet and seeking appropriate, affordable, and adequate internet services for students.

The COVID-19 virus has seen much discussion of how education will be delivered if/when schools need to close. While a serious situation, it also has highlighted some of the issues already facing rural and remote students such as data restrictions, resourcing and supervision in the classroom for Distance Education students as mainstream schooling families encountered the same considerations when their children required schooling from home for a period.

Sky Muster Plus, has the ability to greatly assist regional, rural, and remote students, including tertiary, boarding and rural school students, by providing unmetered download capacity for educational sites, as well un-metering of anything other than streaming sites and VPN usage. This proved itself during the COVID-19 lockdown where many students were home, working on many different platforms successfully at once. For customers, ordering or changing to Sky Muster Plus is a much quicker and easier process than applying for an education port and Sky Muster Plus offers greater download capacity. ICPA (Aust) was incredibly pleased to see the recent enhancements added to the Sky Muster Plus product. Lower price points added unmetered data and the ability to purchase extra data blocks has seen many families and students able to study in ways that have not been possible before for satellite customers. ICPA (Aust) continues to analyse the costing and services of the Sky Muster Plus product, as this could be a viable alternative to an Education Service (ed port) for many of our members.

The unlimited content with Sky Muster Plus is now quite extensive and NBN Co have been working with ICPA (Aust) to identify further educational sites for unmetering, which we hope may eventually include some educational video sources, therefore allowing greater download ability and better affordability than the traditional Education Port. We are in constant communication with NBN Co regarding developments and look forward to any further improvements to assist rural and remote students.

ICPA (Aust) have been in contact with Telstra regarding unmetering of educational sites for mobile broadband users and hope to have some further discussions with them in this area. Also, Telstra are collaborating with us regarding alternative voice options, timely maintenance and fault rectification processes and suitable temporary alternatives.

Federal Council continues to be part of the discussion around the cessation of 3G and keep the needs and experiences of our members in the fore of this issue.

NBN Co and Telstra assistance packages

With many schools returning to face-to-face teaching, NBN Co and Telstra are continuing to help connect and support families. To help Australians respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, NBN Co is providing up to \$50 million to assist phone and internet providers to support low-income family households with school-aged children who do not currently have an active **nbn** connection at home. This funding helped phone and internet providers create more affordable offers to connect eligible families during term two of school. More than 20 phone and internet providers have agreed to participate in this program. More details can be found at the following links:

<https://www.telstra.com.au/covid19/supporting-you-during-covid-19>

<https://www.nbnco.com.au/campaigns/covid-19/education-assistance-package>

<https://www.nbnco.com.au/campaigns/covid-19>

ICPA (Aust) would like to reiterate again that if you are experiencing problems with your connection, no matter what type, please do not put up with it. Communications should, and can, work very well. The first port of call is to contact your provider. Keep track of any dates of calls, case numbers, etc. If you continue to experience problems, please let ICPA (Aust) know by emailing me with the relevant details, and I will try to assist where I can. My email address is kristen@icpafc.org.au.

Federal Council would also like to advise members that in areas where ADSL remains, it is possible for consumers to have both ADSL and either nbn fixed wireless or Sky Muster internet services.

The need for a transportable Sky Muster service solution for families who do not have a permanent address or location for distance education schooling, i.e. in stock camps, fencing camps, droving, etc. has once again been brought forward. Federal Council has been made aware of several distance education families facing further isolation as their students are unable to participate in online lessons due to unavailability of Sky Muster when a family does not have a permanent address or dwelling to affix it to. A transportable means of delivering internet is needed for these types of families to ensure that their students can join in online lessons, interact with classmates, and keep up with schoolwork. ICPA (Aust) is currently raising this situation with the Minister for Communications, Cyber Safety and the Arts, the Minister for Regional Health, Regional Communications and Local Government, the Minister for Regional Education and Decentralisation and the Distance Education Broadband Working Group.

ICPA (Aust) continues to work with the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications and NBN Co to ascertain rural and remote student requirements and seek expansion to include additional cohorts such as tertiary students.

The new Statutory Infrastructure Provider (SIP) regime requires NBN Co and equivalent companies to provide a download speed of at least 25 megabits per second (Mbps) and an upload speed of 5Mbps during peak hours.

From 1 July that speed is to be available to all whether they live in the city or the outback.

This is part of an expanded Universal Service Obligation, which previously related to just phone lines, but now includes broadband, including Sky Muster and Fixed Wireless services.

Telephone

Motions around telephone services at the 2019 conference highlighted many concerns for members regarding fault restoration and repairs. The Government has assured ICPA (Aust) that it continues to have consumer safeguards in place in relation to telecommunication services. These safeguards include the Customer Ombudsman (TIO). Members who are experiencing protracted difficulties getting service faults resolved should seek advice from the TIO if they are dissatisfied with their service provider.

ICPA (Aust) continues to maintain contact with Telstra to raise members' issues. We can inform members that copper phone lines will not be disconnected in rural and remote areas where no other alternative voice service is available. Federal Council can also confirm that battery backup and replacement batteries can be provided by Telstra and Telstra can advise options for Universal Power Supply (UPS) and other systems with backup capabilities.

ICPA (Aust) has contributed to the discussion for Mobile Blackspot Program (MBSP) Round 5A. We continue to support the expansion of the Mobile Network and increased solutions to mobile black spots. Our members tend to live in the 1% of Australia that does not have mobile coverage. Depending on where our families live, mobile coverage ranges from somewhat available (often through antennae and boosters that families pay to have installed themselves) to non-existent. ICPA's main concern for our members through the MBSP has been to seek the priority of rural schools to be included in future MBSP rounds, for a few reasons - safety, particularly at one teacher schools, as well as the ability to contact parents enroute to and from the school if a situation changes at a small school and parents need to be notified (teacher being sick for example and needing to leave the school). It is also a matter for community safety as rural schools are often an evacuation point or gathering area for shelter in many small rural towns. ICPA (Aust) welcomed then Minister for Regional Communications, Senator the Hon Bridget McKenzie's assurance that schools would be a priority under future rounds, and we advocate that this remain the case.

Our members also seek expansion of the MBSP into rural and remote areas to offer them a second service option for voice and internet at their places of school, work and home. This ensures that schooling (most notably for students enrolled in Schools of Distance Education or Schools of the Air) can continue if the main service (often a landline phone and satellite internet) is down. Again, having mobile service is also beneficial for safety, especially for families who may live quite a distance from their nearest neighbour or point of assistance.

There are a number of rural students whose families travel due to the type of work they are involved in (stock camps, fencing contractors, prawn/fishing trawlers) and they find it very difficult to participate in their school lessons when outside of internet or voice service. Having larger areas covered by mobile service also assists these students to keep up with their lessons and interact with classmates. Having increased access to handheld antennae devices and external mobile coverage would also greatly assist these students.

ICPA (Aust) has previously also commented on MBSP 5A Key Design Point 6 that Mobile Services need to continue for a significant amount of time after any Asset Completion in a geographically isolated area,

it is very difficult for these areas to try to get other options in place or things going again if services are short term.

Alternative Voice Services

ICPA (Aust) continues to consult with the relevant stakeholders and bodies on alternative voice services and trials. Please find our submission here:

<https://www.icpa.com.au/documents/download/1238/federal-submissions/icpa-aust-submission-into-alternative-voice-trials.pdf>

ICPA (Aust) has offered the department and stakeholders the possibility to provide test cases for these trials when they are required.

Digital Tech Hub

As I write this, tenders for the creation and implementation of a digital tech hub close in the next 3 days. This initiative has come about upon recommendation from the Regional Telecommunications Independent Review that was completed in 2018 and its report presented in 2019. Following on from the announcement by then Minister for Regional Communications, Senator the Hon Bridget McKenzie, that this would become a reality, ICPA (Aust) is working closely with Minister Fletcher, Minister Coulton, the Department and other stakeholders including Better Internet for Regional Rural and Remote (BIRRR) and the Regional Rural and Remote Communication Coalition (RRRCC) to ensure education is included in the guidelines for the content of the hub.

ICPA (Aust) has been well supported in our telecommunications issues by the State Councils, our Branches and members and we will continue to raise these concerns wherever it is possible to have them addressed. Thank you to my fellow Communications councillors: Wendy Hick, Sally Sullivan and Jane Morton for their support and encouragement over this last year. This portfolio is truly a joint effort by all involved, and I have appreciated the assistance and discussion provided to me.

CURRICULUM REPORT

Wendy Hick

Curriculum motions at the 2019 ICPA Federal Conference revolved around the inclusion of Primary Production and the processes to provide food and fibre in the Australian Curriculum along with recognition of how important it is to have correct understanding of these topics.

Federal Council made contact with various Ministers, Members of Parliament and Senators to request that Agricultural Production studies are embedded in the Australian Curriculum, including the actual “where, why and how” of producing food and fibre and that this be taught to all students in schools across Australia to create a better opportunity for understanding. As part of this correspondence, ICPA (Aust) highlighted the critical part Agriculture plays in the Australian economy and the importance of dispelling apparent misconceptions and misunderstandings around agricultural production in Australia. In our October delegation meetings with the Senior Adviser to then Agriculture Minister Senator the Hon Bridget McKenzie, we were informed of \$5 million in funding being made available to state-based farming organisations to implement agricultural-related subject matter in schools. This funding has been made available for three years beginning in 2020 through the Educating Kids about Agriculture: Kids to Farms Grant Program (Community Grants Hub).

<https://www.communitygrants.gov.au/grants/educatingkidsaboutagriculturekidstofarms>

Applications for these grants closed on 26 February 2020.

Current Federal Minister for Agriculture, the Hon David Littleproud MP announced on 13 July 2020 the successful state and territory farming organisations who will receive grants to implement the Kids to Farm program, commencing in late 2020 and concluding on 30 June 2022. A list of the successful recipients and further information can be found at <https://minister.awe.gov.au/littleproud/media-releases/kids-to-farms>.

In addition to our meetings with those in government, Federal Council has also discussed with groups such as Primary Industries Education Foundation of Australia (PIEFA), Agforce Qld and National Farmers’ Federation the importance of ensuring food and fibre production is part of schools’ curriculum and how we can support and further its implementation. ICPA (Aust) is now an Associate Member of PIEFA and also has a representative on the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) Peak Parents Stakeholder group where we have been able to include in discussions the need for better inclusion of food and fibre into the Australian Curriculum.

As part of the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) Peak Parents Stakeholder Group, ICPA (Aust) also has the opportunity to represent rural and remote families throughout many elements of the Australian Curriculum which ACARA manages.

NAPLAN

NAPLAN testing has remained a focus of the curriculum sphere for ACARA in 2019 and 2020, with commitment made to a review of NAPLAN testing “to identify what a standardised testing regime in Australian schools should deliver, assess how well NAPLAN achieves this, and identify potential short and longer-term improvements.” Federal Council welcomed the opportunity to make a submission to this review to ensure the key issues associated with the delivery, implementation and use of results from NAPLAN for rural and remote students were identified. One of the key components of the Review of NAPLAN has been to identify shortfalls of the current reporting of NAPLAN results, especially to limit the availability of comparison information between schools, with a focus more on individual student results. Consultations with key stakeholders in the Review of NAPLAN were delayed as schools and education systems responded to changes in educational delivery due to the impact of COVID-19. As a result, the timeframe for the NAPLAN Review has been extended, and Stage 2 will now report to

Education Council in September 2020. Stage One of the NAPLAN Review is completed, and the Interim Report can be found at:

https://naplanreview.com.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0003/1158420/NAPLAN_Review_Interim_Report_Final.pdf

With the onset and subsequent impacts of COVID-19, the Education Council, which consists of State and Federal Education Ministers, made the decision to cancel NAPLAN testing of students as well as the scheduled testing of the NAPLAN Online platform for 2020. The communique on this decision can be found at:

<http://www.educationcouncil.edu.au/site/DefaultSite/filesystem/documents/EC%20Communiques%20and%20media%20releases/Education%20Council%20Communique%20-%20-%20March%202020.pdf>

At this stage, NAPLAN testing will re-commence in 2021, however on the 02 June 2020, the Education Ministers made the decision to defer full transition to NAPLAN Online from 2021 to 2022. With issues arising with NAPLAN Online in 2019, this delay will allow for refinement of the program, which would otherwise have been conducted this year, to be completed next year. It remains to be seen in 2021 exactly how NAPLAN testing will look.

The Australian Curriculum

An ongoing call to declutter the current Australian Curriculum has been addressed recently by the Federal Government, with the announcement in June that a commitment has been made to review the Australian Curriculum by 2021 for all eight Key Learning Areas from Foundation to Year 10, except Languages. Languages will be reviewed and reported on by the end of 2021. The purpose of the Review of the Australian Curriculum Foundation to Year 10 will be to ensure the Australian Curriculum is still meeting the needs of students and providing clear guidance for teachers and it will be overseen by ACARA, who aims to work with stakeholders throughout the process. ICPA (Aust) will continue to monitor the progress of the review and put forward the needs of rural and remote students where possible. More information on the Curriculum Review can be found here:

<https://www.acara.edu.au/curriculum/curriculum-review>

ACARA has been working to develop closer relationships with key stakeholders over the past twelve months. ICPA (Aust) had the opportunity to participate in a survey in late 2019 to provide feedback on ACARA's interaction and engagement with key stakeholders. Following on from this survey, ACARA has focused on improving and strengthening stakeholder interactions and engagement. As part of this engagement, Federal Council has had the opportunity to participate in collaboration and information sharing across topics. ACARA has been providing ICPA (Aust) with regular updates for our members which we have shared in our Branch Bulletins. ACARA also provides resources and information specifically for parents through their website portfolio, and Federal Council encourages members to look at the content and information available to them from ACARA.

Members may wish to know that the Australian Curriculum website has a separate section with information specifically for parents https://australiancurriculum.edu.au/parent-information/?mc_cid=be42ba9715&mc_eid=39a00b9dc1 and there is also an overview for parents to learn about how the Australian Curriculum is organised, including information about the learning areas, general capabilities and cross-curriculum priorities.

https://australiancurriculum.edu.au/media/6517/the_australian_curriculum_an_overview_for_parents.pdf

Recently, ACARA has been seeking to identify constructive changes which would improve their website resources for parents. ICPA (Aust) was contacted seeking feedback to assist in improving the access and usability of these resources, and this request was shared across our social media to give members the opportunity to provide feedback.

ICPA (Aust) continues to ensure that rural and remote students and educational contexts are recognised and considered in all aspects of curriculum design and implementation. Through engagement with key national curriculum stakeholders and the Federal Government we have had the opportunity to put forward the concerns of our members and we will remain active in these discussions.

DISTANCE EDUCATION REPORT

Alana Moller

ICPA (Aust) continues to advocate for recognition and support for those families who must educate their children by distance education or School of the Air because of being geographically isolated.

Following on from the 2019 Federal Conference, Federal Council has focused on our advocacy for a Distance Education Teaching Allowance, along with continuing to raise the necessity for Distance Education and School of the Air schools to be based in rural and remote locations and requesting a separate category for geographically isolated students in the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Scheme in recognition of the unique needs of these students.

Distance Education Teaching Allowance (DETA)

Seeking the establishment of a Distance Education Teaching Allowance continues to be one of Federal Council's major points of advocacy. ICPA Federal Council has and will continue to advocate strongly for the establishment of a Distance Education Teaching Allowance (DETA).

The DETA topic was raised in a motion letter sent to the Federal Minister for Education, the Hon Dan Tehan MP and other relevant Ministers, members and senators shortly after the 2019 Federal Conference. The topic has also been comprehensively covered in Federal Council Delegation Briefing Papers and during delegation meetings and further raised in correspondence with the Minister in a letter in December. Federal Council received correspondence from Minister Tehan's office indicating that the topic should be taken to State Education Ministers citing that "the delivery of school education is the responsibility of the relevant State or Territory. Distance education in government schools is a matter for State and Territory education authorities who have provision for distance education of their students in specific circumstances." This was raised with representatives from all State Councils at the Joint Councils meeting in February along with discussion on how to approach the DETA advocacy. We continue to see many branches and state councils across Australia requesting for Federal Council to pursue a DETA at a federal level and this reaffirms our commitment to continuing to seek the establishment of a DETA by the federal government and members can be assured we will do so.

Federal Council utilises every opportunity to raise the request for a DETA within submissions, meetings, delegations and other avenues, along with raising the profile of the distance education tutor and the extensive and essential role they play in achieving distance education success. A short video played at Federal Conference last year was released across our social media platforms showcasing the distance education tutor in distance education schoolrooms across Australia. The necessity for a distance education supervisor was thoroughly expounded in our submission to the Inquiry into Education in Remote and Complex Environments and we used this opportunity to highlight how fundamental the distance education tutor is to distance education success in remote educational environments.

Most recently, the topic has been raised in conversations and correspondence with the Minister for Decentralisation and Regional Education, the Hon Andrew Gee MP and with Queensland's Senator Susan McDonald and as part of other opportunities presented to highlight disadvantages of remote learning faced at all times by geographically isolated students and their families. The move to remote learning across Australia during the COVID-19 pandemic, saw a heightened awareness of these challenges and prompted an understanding of the need for a tutor or supervisor available to assist and supervise students while participating in online learning or learning from home a commitment for remote distance education students and their families at all times, while juggling other responsibilities and obligations, such as maintaining their businesses. While the AIC DE Allowance is available to assist with incidental costs incurred by geographically isolated families whose students undertake distance education, it is specifically stated in section 5.4.1 of the Assistance for Isolated Children Guidelines last

updated in April 2020 that “this payment is not intended to meet the ongoing cost of provision of education such as costs associated with teaching, tuition and supervision” and no specific recognition, support or assistance is available, though it is a major ongoing obligation for those families who must educate their children via remote learning at home at all times due to being geographically isolated.

Thus ICPA (Aust) has every intention of continuing to raise, advocate for and pursue the DETA at every opportunity to address this.

Location of Schools of the Air/Schools of Distance Education

Federal Council continues to maintain the position that Schools of the Air and Schools of Distance Education should remain in rural and remote communities and we have reiterated this to the Federal Minister for Education, the Hon Tehan MP and other members and senators. We thoroughly understand the importance of this and while decisions of this nature are principally state-based, Federal Council will support States however we can to ensure Schools of the Air and Schools of Distance Education remain in rural and remote communities and maintain the resources and support provided for geographically isolated students who have no choice but to be educated via these schools.

Assistance for Isolated Children – Distance Education Allowance (AIC-DE Allowance)

With the changing nature of distance education schools, the request for a separate category for geographically isolated students to be established within the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) scheme was raised with the Minister for Families and Social Services, Senator the Hon Anne Ruston to ensure that adequate support and assistance is maintained for these students. Federal Council has emphasised that financial assistance needs to be provided to help with the costs associated with educating geographically isolated students who do not have daily access to face-to-face appropriate schooling due to distance, as per the original intent of the AIC scheme. Further to this, in our Briefing Papers we suggested a review is needed to ensure the AIC allowance is adequately meeting the needs of geographically isolated students. Within submissions, meetings and delegations and most recently in our submission to the Inquiry into Education in Remote and Complex Environments, Federal Council has highlighted that geographically isolated students need to be recognised as a unique disadvantage group who require specialised support and assistance in order to allow them to achieve equitable educational outcomes. Federal Council aims to use every opportunity to highlight and promote the unique needs of geographically isolated students.

Most recently, Federal Council wrote to Minister Ruston and other Members of Parliament in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis, requesting assurance that with a move to schooling at home across much of the community, that the AIC-DE allowance would not be eroded noting that more families may become eligible for this allowance and the fact that our members do not have access to local schooling at any time because of where they live, not just in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis would not be overlooked. We welcomed reassurance in a reply from the Minister that stated, “AIC Distance Education Allowance will not be payable where the student's only reason for not being able to attend an appropriate state school is because their local school has been temporarily closed, or has encouraged students to study from home, in order to manage an outbreak of COVID-19, as this is outside the scope of the AIC Scheme.”

This response is encouraging as it shows a distinct recognition of the unique circumstances of those rural and remote students who receive the AIC Distance Education allowance, not only through the COVID-19 crisis, as well as a commitment to ensuring the intended scope of the AIC scheme is maintained.

One of the greatest impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic felt across education in Australia, was the inception of the majority of students having to learn from home with their families required to supervise, support and implement online lesson delivery. ICPA (Aust) was able to provide advice and

guidance to families across Australia faced with managing this challenging and unprecedented situation. This also gave rise to an opportunity to draw attention to the insights and experiences, and tell the stories of the difficulties faced by and the tenacity and resilience of geographically isolated families who always must educate their children at home and provide resources and a distance education tutor for their students as a matter of course, not just in the midst of a crisis. There is an opportunity to build on this newfound insight and appreciation of the challenges for geographically isolated families educating children at home that has occurred across Australia as a result of COVID-19.

As always, Federal Council encourages all ICPA members to actively participate in opportunities to raise the profile of the nature of geographically isolated distance education and the importance and value of providing adequate resources and support for geographically isolated students who have no other options to access their compulsory education. However, we assure members that Federal Council will continue to emphasise the unique nature of geographically isolated distance education wherever possible and highlight all of the topics, concerns and issues associated with geographically isolated distance education on your behalf.

I would like to take this opportunity to show my appreciation to Christie Goddard, for leading the Distance Education Portfolio for part of the Federal Council year and to my fellow Distance Education Portfolio members, as well as all of Federal Council for their support this year.

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE (ECEC) REPORT

Jane Morton

ICPA (Aust) is working hard to ensure rural and remote families can and will access high quality, affordable early childhood learning and child care; whether that be through Preschool or Kindergarten, Long Day Care in rural and remote areas, Mobile Early Childhood Services including Mobile Playgroups or In Home Care.

AIC Distance Education Allowance for Pre-Compulsory School Students and Universal Access to Early Childhood Education

ICPA (Aust) is continuing to advocate the Federal Government for the extension of the AIC Distance Education allowance to pre-compulsory distance education students and increased access to Preschool/Kindergarten in rural and remote areas, particularly as the Federal Government has provided \$449.5 million to states and territories in 2020 and committed \$452.3 million for 2021 under the National Partnership Agreement to provide Universal Access to Early Childhood Education. This funding should ensure that all children have access to 600 hours of early childhood education prior to formal schooling.

Federal Council met with relevant Ministers, Senators and Members of Parliament with an interest in rural and remote education on delegations in Canberra last November where the need for an Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Review which would include the extension of AIC to those pre-compulsory distance education students studying a recognised program, was discussed along with all the other early childhood education and care concerns.

Long Day Care in Rural and Remote Areas

Concerns regarding the plight of Long Day Care (LDC) services during the prolonged drought were brought to the fore at the last Federal Conference. The Department of Education, Skills and Employment informed child care services including In Home Care in rural and regional areas that they can still apply for a one-off Special Circumstances grant under the Community Child Care Fund to address any current viability or natural disaster issues such as drought and then bushfires, however this closed on 3 April 2020. Federal Council expressed our members' concerns in the recent Universal Access National Partnership Review and the National Quality Framework consultation. It was good to see that the transitional provisions for Early Childhood Teachers have been extended for 2 or 4 years depending on the state or territory.

In Home Care (IHC)

Federal Council continues to advocate for flexibility within the new Home Care model since its inception in July 2018. Many letters have been written to the Minister for Education, rural politicians and the Department of Education, Skills and Employment and we have followed up with this on delegations and whenever the opportunity arose. Federal Council was pleased to hear the announcement just before Christmas that the Transitional Provisions for IHC have been extended for two years until December 2021. However, some service providers have been slow to accept this and there has been confusion over the definition of 'remote and very remote areas' where families reside. According to the [IHC Handbook](#) on page 25, "IHC Support Agencies will use the Accessibility and Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA+) (2016) as a measure to guide the consideration of remoteness and isolation from approved child care services. Families that live in a location designated as Very Remote, Remote, or Moderately Accessible (Outer Regional) in the ARIA+ (2016) measure may be able to demonstrate that they are isolated from approved child care services primarily based on the distance from their home to the nearest available, appropriate approved child care service."

ICPA (Aust) has also been seeking government assistance regarding the plight of two or more families on a single large remote property who require child care, as one IHC educator is unable to care for more

than one family's children at one time and having more than one educator accommodated on a property proves very expensive and is not feasible. Family Day Care has been suggested by the Department of Education, Skills and Employment but this would still be difficult to set up in the circumstances.

Since seeking clarity in the issue of IHC educators supervising distance education, the Education Minister has reinforced the legislation from the Family Assistance Law citing that only caring for children completing their homework and regular child care, but not supervising formal schooling, is permissible in order for the family to receive the Child Care Subsidy (CCS). The Department of Education, Skills and Employment has recommended that a private arrangement between a family and the IHC educator be made to ensure continued care during those 'formal schooling hours' but families will not be able to claim the CCS during that time.

And then the COVID-19 pandemic hit!

The [ECEC Relief Package](#) announced on 9 April 2020 with its provision of about 50% funding for services, really affected IHC and Family Day Care services in rural and remote areas where there was not a reduction in educators and children requiring child care, so providers had to look elsewhere for extra funding in order to pay their current educators properly. [JobKeeper](#) or the [Exceptional Circumstances](#) supplementary payment became available for eligible providers and educators but there was much confusion and applications took a long time to be processed with some being rejected with others requiring reapplication and providers would not employ extra or replace much needed educators for rural and remote families during that time. Families were not allowed to supplement the educators either, so despite back payments being promised, some educators saw a reduction in their income to only 20% of their regular wages during this time.

By late May the ECEC Relief Package 4 Week Review Report recognised that Family Day Care and IHC services required extra funding, so \$12 million was provided for child care services that had more than 30 per cent of full-time equivalent staff ineligible for JobKeeper payments and \$800,000 provided to IHC services to increase their level of funding. However, some families were still unable to access a replacement or new educator due to lack of funding from the providers in early June as payments were either rejected or had to be applied for several times.

The ECEC Relief Package concluded on 12 July with JobKeeper payments for services and sole traders finishing on 20 July 2020. The Child Care and Additional Child Care Subsidies returned on 13 July, however a Transition Payment was also provided to child care services from 13 July and runs until 27 September 2020 on top of the Child Care Subsidy, amounting to 25% of the fees received in the reference fortnight in February. For the period of the transition, there are several conditions, as per media release:

- "Child care fees will be capped at the level of the reference period (17 February to 1 March).
- Services will need to guarantee employment levels to protect staff who will move off the JobKeeper Payment.

The Government will also ease the activity test until 4 October to support eligible families whose employment has been impacted as a result of COVID-19. These families will receive up to 100 hours per fortnight of subsidised care during this period.

This will assist families to return to the level of work, study or training they were undertaking before COVID-19." See <https://ministers.dese.gov.au/tehan/return-child-care-subsidy>.

ICPA (Aust) recently discussed the unique needs of IHC in rural and remote areas along with other educational issues with the new Minister for Decentralisation and Regional Education, the Hon Andrew Gee MP; hopefully he will address these concerns and the need for IHC families in rural and remote areas being regarded as a separate entity from other child care services.

Mobile Early Childhood Services

Federal Council has recently received assurance from the Federal Government that funding for ex-Budget Based Funded Early Childhood Services such as Mobile Playgroups is ongoing. Future funding arrangements are being considered and the department is committed to ensuring service providers are forewarned. Future grant opportunities will be announced as they come available at www.communitygrants.gov.au and www.grants.gov.au. Federal Council will continue to advocate for the funding to expand the Katherine Isolated Children's Service (KICS) and other Mobile Early Childhood Services into geographically isolated areas and communities where there is no Early Childhood service at all and for the continuation of opportunities for future funding for their current services.

Working with Children Check (WWCC)

ICPA (Aust) continues to work with the Federal Government in the implementation of a national WWCC certification. A national working party is working on this, but it will take some time to complete due to the different rules and regulations of states and territories. Unfortunately, we have received no further news regarding a national certification at this stage, even though an announcement is due, but we will forward any information as it comes available.

Working Holiday Maker Visas

Despite not receiving any motions last year (but there have been in previous years) changes have been made in regard to [Working Holiday Maker Visas](#), which were announced on 17 February 2020 following the bushfire crisis. This ensured that paid or 'bushfire recovery volunteer work' would qualify as 'specified work' for overseas workers and the visa would be increased to 12 months.

Unfortunately, these changes still do not apply to nannies and distance education tutors, though the Minister has indicated that the government will see how recent developments pan out before considering any more changes.

ICPA (Aust) will continue to work with the Federal Government and other bodies available to us to further ECEC concerns and we will share any more developments with you. I would also like to thank my portfolio members for their support during the year.

RURAL SCHOOLS AND SCHOOL TRAVEL REPORT

Jo Camilleri

It is a privilege to be able to deliver this report for the first time as leader of the Rural Schools and School Travel Portfolio. Despite many challenges across the past year, ICPA (Aust) has continued to advocate for access and equity in educational outcomes for families whose children attend rural schools and those with travel requirements for attending their places of education.

The 2019 Federal conference established four main areas of focus for Federal Council's attention in this portfolio:

- Supporting the implementation of the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education (IRRRRE) recommendations
- maintaining the chaplaincy program in schools
- advocating for the establishment of student concessional fares
- advancing the residential fares scheme in air travel.

These areas have remained a focus for Federal Council as well as the other areas of advocacy that remain in policy for the Rural Schools and School Travel portfolio. An outline of all areas of advocacy can be found in the current ICPA (Aust) advocacy document.

<https://www.icpa.com.au/documents/download/1241/federal-current-issues/current-icpa-aust-advocacy.pdf>

Rural Schools

Remote and isolated locations in Australia provide great challenges for improving delivery of education options and pathways for children and their families. The options for educating children in rural and remote locations continue to diminish and can be attributed to many leaving these areas.

While all Australian governments recognise the social and economic benefits of a high quality and equitable school education system, ICPA (Aust) continues to devote an enormous amount of time holding relevant governments to account to address inequities in rural schools.

Recommendations highlighting the need to focus on inequities in the educational outcomes of students in rural schools have been presented for many years, however little change to policy in this area has been forthcoming. Federal Council was thrilled when the government response to the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education (IRRRRE) included direct recommendations made by ICPA (Aust). The Australian Government response to the IRRRRE saw regional, rural and remote areas at the forefront of the outcomes presented. <https://www.education.gov.au/independent-review-regional-rural-and-remote-education>

Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education (IRRRRE) – Final Report

Following on from the motion presented in 2019 requesting that ICPA (Aust) supports states to lobby to implement the recommendation “to reduce the impact of administration on workloads to create more time for teaching and leading learning” (Halsey, 2018, p.37), Federal Council has ensured all State and Territory Rural Schools portfolio leaders have received a copy of the final report. An invitation has also been extended to contact Federal Council if there are suggestions of ways we can support implementation of this initiative at a state level and to share real-life scenarios and case studies to help us to present the reality of what rural schools are facing in a meaningful and robust way and arm us with the pictures that will keep things relevant.

If any member, Branch or State Council has any further information or case studies that they can share with us, we welcome the information. Federal Council will continue to look at ways to support State and Territory Councils in addressing this concern.

Chaplaincy Program in Schools

Federal Council welcomed the announcement that the Australian Government is investing \$247 million over four years (2019-2022) to renew the National School Chaplaincy Program (NSCP). Federal Council wrote to the Hon Dan Tehan MP, Minister for Education and other relevant shadow ministers, passing on ICPA (Aust)'s appreciation for the announcement of further continued funding for the Chaplaincy program and reinforced the importance of and the need for ongoing funding for the Chaplaincy Program in rural and remote schools. ICPA (Aust) is heartened that funding will continue to support approximately 3000 schools per year to access the services of a qualified chaplain including providing access to these services in our nation's most remote or very isolated areas. During our delegation meeting in October 2019 with Minister Tehan, Federal Council reinforced the necessity of the ongoing provision of the Chaplaincy Program for our rural and remote students.

School Travel

Regional airfares should be affordable and services adequate, consistent and reliable to better assist regional residents trying to provide equitable educational opportunities for their children. Air and road travel are essential modes of travel for rural and remote living as long distances are not avoidable and most times difficult with current challenges for families and Federal Council continues to lobby for recognition of this. Road safety for students also remains an ongoing concern.

Federal Council has taken forward member requests that rural and remote students should receive a Student Fare Allowance that reflects the actual costs involved to get students from their home to their place of education within Australia. The inequity that exists for school travel across Australia is to the detriment of rural and remote students, particularly given the limited options for education where they live.

Currently there are inequities in Student Travel Allowances offered by the Commonwealth. Whilst the Federal Government has in place Fares Allowances to assist with student travel under the ABSTUDY and Youth Allowance Schemes, there is no provision for travel in the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Scheme which is the assistance a large number of geographically isolated children access.

Student Concessional Fares

Federal Council has raised the need for student concessional fares directly with relevant airlines as well as in discussions during delegations to Parliament. Given airlines and relevant transport authorities are reluctant to provide student concessions across the board, to date we have had little traction. We do however recognise the genuine need for a solution and will continue to raise this issue wherever possible. Further opportunities for negotiations regarding discounted regional fares directly with airlines have not been possible this year due to continued travel bans and restrictions resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic that have placed considerable direct pressure on airline operations.

Resident Fares Scheme

Federal Council has continued our discussions with QANTAS in relation to their Residents Fares Scheme. We welcomed the announcement in August 2019 that QANTAS will invest up to \$10 million each year in providing flight discounts for residents in 16 towns across Queensland, Northern Territory and Western Australia.

The improvements to the program include the removal of the \$99 flight change fee for new bookings made through the resident fare website. While this does not yet allow for one way fares to be booked within the scheme, it is hoped that the flexibility provided in being able to change bookings without penalty will allow for trips for boarders' weekends and end of term breaks to be made in advance. We

recognise that although this goes part of the way to help address this issue, it does not provide a solution for families who cannot afford to purchase advance fares. A further improvement is the capping of fares at some locations so that the maximum residents will pay will be approximately \$400 per sector when booking return journeys.

The initial rollout of the program expansion happened in Mount Isa, Cloncurry, Longreach, Barcaldine, Blackall, Karratha, and Kalgoorlie. Regional airports and councils in these towns committed to reducing the fees they charge each passenger, which are built into airfares.

QANTAS is consulting with local airports and councils in the other towns in the program: Moranbah, Roma, Charleville, Broome, Port Hedland, Newman, Paraburdoo, Alice Springs and Yulara (Ayers Rock) and has called on these regional airports and councils to implement similar fee reductions for residents.

Following concerns that some privately owned airports were not taking on board capping of airfares, at the Joint Councils meeting in February, Federal President Alana Moller spoke with State Presidents on the possibility of State Councils approaching the relevant entities in their state to encourage them to consider capping.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a considerable effect on both the ability to travel and the availability of flights. With airlines initiating a major wind back of services, redundancies and cost cutting exercises, many are unable to provide certainty of future viability. The ongoing ripple effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are still quite unknown however Federal Council are maintaining our contact with QANTAS and regional airlines, and we will continue to raise issues wherever possible.

SPECIFIC EDUCATION NEEDS REPORT

Briony Sinclair

The past 12 months has been an incredibly busy and enlightening time for ICPA both at Federal and State level. The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic has brought about so many changes to communication, health, travel, boarding and education as a whole. There were times when it was incredibly difficult to keep up and that was just from a personal point of view, not from the perspective of someone tracking legislative changes which were happening by the day and sometimes by the minute.

Those who serve as volunteers for any community organisation deserve mention in this space as so much has fallen to them over the past 6 months which has affected and driven many decisions by families and business in rural areas. I would like to say a particular thankyou to those who serve as representatives for ICPA at all levels, without your ongoing resilience and dare I say stubbornness, rural Australia would be a much poorer place.

Medicare Rebate

So, to my actual portfolio report, there was one Specific Education Portfolio Motion presented to the 2019 Federal Conference in Adelaide last year by Kindon Branch.

“That ICPA (Aust) lobbies the Minister for Health and Federal Treasurer to extend the Medicare rebate to include patients wishing to access speech pathology and paediatrician appointments through telehealth deliveries.”

The singularity of the one motion does not do justice to the sometimes insurmountable challenges families who are raising children with Specific Needs face in educating those children in rural and remote areas of Australia.

ICPA (Aust) corresponded with several Ministers and departments to raise this issue and received a reply from the office of then Minister for Regional Services, Decentralisation and Local Government the Hon Mark Coulton MP. He outlined the plans the government has for the future of telehealth, mentioning that the Government has a 10-year plan focusing on primary healthcare in the short term, and in the longer term, aimed at reforming the system so that primary health providers are better equipped to assist those in rural and remote areas. He also explained that the Government’s Australian National Digital Health Strategy has highlighted the importance of digital health in the clinical setting and that under the Strategy, the Australian National Digital Health Agency is developing options to harmonise telehealth models by reviewing current use and addressing barriers to embedding telehealth services into clinical settings. Federal Council was also informed that applications for new or amended medical services to receive public funding can be made to the Medical Services Advisory Committee (MSAC) which advises the Government about what services need to be on the Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS). No mention was made however, of possibilities of real impact for rural and remote families raising children with specific health and education needs.

Telehealth

Since the COVID-19 pandemic has arisen there has been increased access to Telehealth for certain disorders, especially mental health, and Medicare rebates have expanded to cover these services. This increase was much needed and appreciated however it still did not cater to the needs of all students and pre-schoolers in remote and rural locations with specific health issues affecting their learning. These changes have a limited lifespan and are currently due to expire in September.

ICPA (Aust) is determined that there should be an extension/expansion of a Medicare rebate for telehealth services for a range of allied health services for all remote students who rarely/never have access to specialist support due to their geographic location, not just in times of crisis. This issue was

mentioned in our most recent submission to the Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training's "Inquiry into Education in Remote and Complex Environments - Home Learning and Teaching in COVID-19". The request for the addition of an MBS number for telehealth appointments specifically related to a child's educational success will remain in policy and Federal Council will continue to advocate for this on behalf of our members.

National Rural Health Alliance (NRHA)

Part of my role is to liaise with the National Rural Health Alliance (NRHA). They are a body of 44 national organisations representing health consumers, health care professionals, service providers, health educators, students and the Indigenous health sector which make up the Alliance. The Alliance collects and shares information, determines key issues that affect health and wellbeing in rural and remote areas, and provides advice and evidence to governments, educational and research institutions, and other professional bodies.

ICPA (Aust) were pleased to meet with the driving force behind the NRHA, Dr Gabrielle O'Kane during our face-to-face meetings in Canberra in October last year. We were able to discuss with Dr O'Kane our members' concerns regarding healthcare access in rural and remote areas and pass on individual stories which always gives credence to our discussions.

The NRHA has also set up a subcommittee for Rural Digital Health. The main focus of this group is

1. Connectivity
2. Interoperability
3. Funding Models
4. Digital Health Literacy

I have joined this subcommittee with a hope to give input which may assist our members in the long term.

National Rural Health Commissioner

The National Rural Health Commissioner role will continue for another term. The National Rural Health Commissioner role is a world first and Emeritus Professor Paul Worley has used his time since Nov 2017 to comb through 20 years of documentation, discussing issues with stakeholders both local and professional, finishing by writing a report for Minister Coulton regarding Allied Health Delivery in Rural Australia. If you would like to read his findings and the ensuing recommendations you can do so here [https://www1.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/815AFEED0337CF95CA2581D30076D095/\\$File/National%20Rural%20Health%20Commissioner's%20Allied%20Health%20Report%20to%20the%20Minister%20June%202020.pdf](https://www1.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/815AFEED0337CF95CA2581D30076D095/$File/National%20Rural%20Health%20Commissioner's%20Allied%20Health%20Report%20to%20the%20Minister%20June%202020.pdf).

Professor Worley is stepping down from this role and Associate Professor Ruth Stewart has been appointed to the role which has been expanded along with the offices. Associate Professor Stewart's Office will include Deputy Commissioners who will support the Commissioner and provide expertise across a range of vital rural health disciplines such as nursing, allied health and Indigenous Health. The Office will contribute to significant health reforms already under way, including in primary health care reforms, workforce and training. The Professor will drive innovation, with a clear focus on supporting on-the-ground improvements.

The expansion of the role and offices of the National Rural Health Commissioner is a major boon for those living in rural locations. Having a specific office which looks to our communities and their health service requirements is very exciting and I look to the future of this appointment with hope that there will be measurable and practical improvements for our members' families and their health and learning.

Delphi Study

ICPA (Aust) also recently participated in the Delphi Study which looked at ways to improve delivery of health services to children in diverse settings including rural and remote regions. The study was

conducted by a PhD candidate working in the healthcare sector. Our participation in these types of studies helps to guide researchers and healthcare workers to providing better service delivery to clients and their families in the long term.

Digital Health for the Bush

ICPA (Aust) was represented on a panel at a 'Digital Health for the Bush' workshop in the Northern Territory last year. The workshop was presented by the Australian Digital Health Agency, Asia Pacific College of Business and Law, CDU and organisers of Broadband for the Bush. The main aim of the workshop was to gain a better understanding of stakeholder's experiences of digital health and telehealth in the Northern Territory and how improved access could benefit regional and remote communities. ICPA (Aust) was able to give important feedback to the leaders of digital health provision in Australia on behalf of our members.

It remains to be seen if the developments of the past twelve months and especially those that have come with COVID-19 will be maintained, however ICPA (Aust) will continue to ensure that the needs of our rural and remote children with specific learning needs are raised. Despite the pandemic and all of its challenges for ourselves and our students it has been a productive 12 months and I look forward to the next 12.

TERTIARY REPORT

Kate Thompson

2020 has certainly been different for many across Australia and our rural and remote tertiary students have not been immune. The tertiary portfolio continued their advocacy for these students with renewed vigour as the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded and issues were brought to our attention. If a rural and remote student's future direction requires a tertiary education, they must be afforded the necessary assistance to achieve their goals.

Rural and remote students continue to be under-represented at tertiary level and this disparity in participation and attainment adversely impacts these individuals and their communities. The myriad of issues resulting in this disparity include financial, cultural, personal, educational and social support factors and the Australian tertiary system must strive to deliver excellence and equal opportunity for all Australian students. The rural and remote cohort is more likely to be willing to return to their rural and remote communities ensuring viability, economic development and resilience of these communities.

Despite the restrictions and uncertainty surrounding COVID-19, there have been some positive happenings for rural and remote tertiary students in the last 12 months.

COVID-19

While not only benefiting rural and remote tertiary students, during the COVID-19 pandemic, it was pleasing to note that Australian tertiary students and apprentices in receipt of a student payment through Centrelink may have been eligible for extra payments: Economic Support Payment and Coronavirus Supplement. During the pandemic, if students remained enrolled and plan to return to study even if self-isolating at home or their education provider temporarily closes or reduces their study load they still receive their payments. As is the case at any time, students were reminded to call the Students Line (**132490**) if any of their circumstances change.

For prospective students who are planning to apply for a Centrelink payment during the COVID-19 pandemic, provisions have been made to facilitate the application process. An applicant can use their myGov account to confirm their identity, receive a Centrelink Reference Number (CRN), create a Centrelink online account, link their Centrelink online account to myGov and make their claim online. Additionally, the personal assets test has been removed for Youth Allowance, ABSTUDY and Austudy and the liquid assets test waiting period has been removed for Youth Allowance and Austudy.

Federal Council wrote to the Minister for Families and Social Services in April 2020, asking the government to consider geographically isolated students who have embarked on a gap year in 2020 in preparation to commence tertiary studies in 2021. These students are working to qualify for Youth Allowance as an independent under the workforce participation criteria. There is concern that as a result of COVID-19, job losses and decreased employment opportunities particularly in hospitality, these students may be impacted in their capacity to earn the required 75% of the National Training Wage in their nominated 14-month period. To date, we have not received a reply to our correspondence.

National Regional, Rural and Remote Education Strategy

ICPA (Aust) welcomed the *National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy – Final Report* (Naphine Report) on 28 August 2019 which brings rural and remote tertiary students' issues with accessing, participating and attaining a tertiary education, to the forefront of governments' minds. The Government has indicated they accept the aims of the recommendations and the specific actions would be considered. The measures will most likely require a policy change, sector reform, budgetary allocation and collaboration between state and territory governments and the Federal Government.

The report contains 7 recommendations: Improve access to study options; improve financial support; improve other student supports; provide better career advice and strengthen regional, rural and remote schools; enhance support for equity groups; develop regional communities and establish national mechanisms to support the Strategy. There are 33 actions which include expanding Regional Study Hubs; improve internet access; introduce a new tertiary education access payment; reduce earnings requirements of Concessional Workforce criteria; improve information on financial support and improving career advice in schools; all very positive for our rural and remote students.

Of particular note:

Tertiary Education Access Payment of \$5000 for all school leavers who relocate for full-time higher-level tertiary education of at least one-year duration from an outer regional or remote area at an institution at least 90 minutes by public transport from their home.

Independent Youth Allowance - allowing greater flexibility in pathways to qualify for independent 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 their place of study for a minimum of one further year and are 90 minutes by public transport from home.

Independent Youth Allowance Concessional Workforce test - recommends reducing the earnings requirements and a review of the recent changes to the parental means test cut-offs.

Practicums - recommends an Away from Base payment for students who have to travel to complete parts of their course and are studying externally either at home or a Regional Study Hub.

Fares Allowance - recommends expansion of the Fares Allowance to enable students who have relocated to return home during their first year of study.

ICPA (Aust) welcomed the announcement by Minister for Education the Hon Dan Tehan MP on 19 June 2020, outlining the implementation of measures from the *National Regional, Rural and Remote Education Strategy* to assist students from rural, regional and remote Australia to participate in and attain a tertiary education. The announcement included the provision of the tertiary education access payment, additional Regional University Centres and improvements to Fares Allowance, to make it easier for relocated students to travel home during their first year of study.

The full media release on the reforms announced by Minister Tehan can be found here:

<https://ministers.dese.gov.au/tehan/tertiary-reforms-unleash-potential-regional-australia>. ICPA (Aust) will continue to advocate for the implementation of the recommendations in the final report not announced including reviewing the earning requirements under the workforce participation criteria for independent Youth Allowance and the recent changes of the parental income cut-off.

Tertiary access Allowance (TAA)

The introduction of a TAA remains a high priority and ICPA (Aust) has continued to highlight this long-standing motion as opportunities present including through correspondence to Government, during our delegation to Canberra in October 2019 and in the submission, *National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy*. The Tertiary Access Allowance amounts are aligned with the Relocation Scholarship payments and ICPA (Aust) has strongly advocated for the Tertiary Access Allowance for rural and remote students irrespective of eligibility for Youth Allowance. ICPA (Aust) will closely follow the tertiary education access payment announcement and its passage through legislation and will respond to ensure it is akin to the Tertiary Access Allowance.

Youth Allowance (YA)

Liquid Assets Waiting Period – The Department of Families and Social Services reinforced that the Liquid Assets Waiting Period is applied if liquid assets are over \$5,500 for a single student and is tapered up to \$11,500 meaning there is a maximum 13-week waiting period. Under Youth Allowance rules, 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 equipment required to undertake the course.

Youth Allowance Overview 2020

The Youth Allowance Overview document, created as a **guide only** to YA eligibility and application, has been updated in consultation with Services Australia and is available in the January 2020 Pedals and on the ICPA (Aust) website. This document aims to summarise the lengthy YA website information for rural and remote students planning to study full-time and intend to apply for Youth Allowance. 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.

Centrelink

ICPA (Aust) has collaborated with Services Australia and sent correspondence to the Minister for Government Services concerning issues that members are reporting when applying for Youth Allowance. Reports of issues when contacting Centrelink are still coming in from members including inconsistent and incorrect information from Centrelink staff, staff's lack of knowledge of current criteria and failing to escalate the enquiry to informed staff and long-wait-times on the 132490 support line.

Wait time on 132490 phone line - the Minister reinforced that the Department is aiming to streamline services to provide services that allow better access to face-to-face, telephone and online service and reduce the need for customers to call.

Centrelink staff and misinformation - ICPA (Aust) has been assured once again that Centrelink staff manning the 132490 phone line have extensive training, have the resources to answer all queries efficiently and where a Youth Allowance, ABSTUDY or Austudy enquiry is complex, staff have access to specialist staff. We emphasised to the Minister for Families and Social Services that this does not always occur. For our members, this misinformation can have devastating consequences including rejection of a claim, a claim not being submitted because they believe they are not eligible, delayed payment or a payment being cancelled.

Any member who has contact with the 132490 phone service or attends a Centrelink office, Access Point or Agent is encouraged to obtain a reference number for their visit or call which can be used later in the event of misinformation. While ICPA (Aust) cannot contact Centrelink on behalf of a member because of Privacy Laws, we can contact them with the issue generally. Federal Council will forward information and present suggestions to the Department concerning the Youth Allowance application online process and the current website as they are brought to our attention.

Call Back Service - The Department has trialled and implemented a call back service for other services, but this is not in their plans to implement for youth and student services including AIC and YA. The service overall is continuously under review with respect to efficiency and customer service.

Proof of Identity - ICPA (Aust) has been told the reason a student is required to present to a Centrelink office, access point or agent to prove their identity is to protect individuals from identity theft and other forms of identity fraud. In the instance of a claimant having "genuine difficulty" in attending a rural and remote Access Point or Agent to meet the identity requirements, alternative identity provisions can be applied and other channels used to lodge identity documents.

With the current provisions in place for proof of identity during the COVID-19 pandemic, ICPA (Aust) believes this provision should be able to be applied to rural and remote applicants who are unable to attend a service centre potentially resulting in a delay in the submission of their application. ICPA (Aust) would like to see an application commence with an online proof of identity, the applicant then presents at a service centre for confirmation of identity documents once relocated to their place of study which would be most likely be prior to their commencement date and therefore before the commencement of Youth Allowance payments.

Relocation Scholarship - While on delegation, the Department of Social Services again reinforced that the Relocation Scholarship is an adjunct payment and not available as a standalone payment. ICPA (Aust) is continuing to push for the Relocation Scholarship to extend to independent Youth Allowance recipients to address the continued disparity in the level of financial assistance

provided to help with relocation costs for rural students who have qualified for independent Youth Allowance compared to dependent Youth Allowance assistance. Aligning the TAA with the Relocation Scholarship amounts will benefit the Youth Allowance students qualifying as an independent as well as students ineligible for Youth Allowance.

Rural and Regional Enterprise Scholarship Program (RRESP)

The Rural and Regional Enterprise Scholarships Program (RRESP) has supported students in rural, regional and remote areas with the costs of studying at university or a vocational education and training institution. During delegation, in October 2019, Federal Council discussed the RRESP with the Department of Education, Skills and Employment. At that time, round 3 was being administered and further rounds being funded depended on the acquittal of the program to date.

Excitingly the RRESP Round 4 was announced and applications opened 20 January 2020 for applicants that have commenced the first year of their eligible Course of Study in Semester 1, 2020, continuing in Semester 2 or be starting in Semester 2 of 2020 and further consideration to students affected by drought and bushfire. Applications will remain open throughout 2020 with offers being made on an ongoing basis through the academic year or until available scholarships are fully allocated.

The scholarships which remain valued at up to \$18,000, are available to support regional and remote students studying in any discipline from Certificate IV to PhD level with an eligible higher education provider or vocational education and training institution, with a duration of six months full-time and up to 8 years part-time, delivered on campus, or through online and distance education. There is an additional \$500 to support an internship.

Applicants who are unsuccessful for one round, can get feedback on their application and may be able to submit a new application in a future scholarship round.

In terms of untimely payments being experienced, the Department of Education, Skills and Employment assured us that there had been issues identified with the timing of payments and they were working with QTAC to rectify the delays. Recipients of the scholarships have obligations within their Scholarship agreement and the prompt return of these throughout their scholarship assists in part to ensure their payments are timely.

Teacher Education Training in Specific Learning Needs

ICPA (Aust) contacted the Australian Councils of Deans of Education (ACDE) urging them to encourage education providers to recognise the unique circumstances surrounding the learning context of rural and remote students and ensure all teachers preparing to work in geographically isolated schools, are trained in specific learning needs including Autism Spectrum Disorder. To date, we have not had a reply. In previous years, ACDE has responded positively stating they would take this request to their Board, but ultimately university course content is up to the individual university and ACDE can only make recommendations.

In closing, I would like to sincerely thank the State Tertiary Portfolios, my fellow Tertiary Portfolio members, Nikki Macqueen, Jane O'Brien, Suzanne Wilson and Nikki Mahony and all of Federal Council for their continuing support, knowledge and assistance. To our members, thank you for raising your issues. We will continue to raise your new and ongoing issues at every opportunity through all avenues available to us, to achieve the changes and measures needed to ensure our rural and remote students have the opportunity to complete a tertiary education commensurate with their aspirations and career plans.

TRAINING REPORT

Sally Sullivan

ICPA (Aust) continues to address the unique considerations associated with rural and remote training and endeavours to support states with the specific issues identified in their respective jurisdictions. At the 2019 Federal Conference, a motion requesting Federal Council support the states in their efforts to stop the impending closure of Agricultural Colleges, following the decision to close Agricultural colleges in Queensland in 2019, was actioned.

Closure of Agricultural Colleges

The closure of Queensland's Emerald and Longreach Agricultural Colleges and the attempted closure of Moora Residential College in Western Australia has been of concern to rural people across the nation.

Federal Council has been in contact with Queensland ICPA Tertiary, Trade and Training Portfolio leader, Louise Winten to follow up on the situation in that state and offer our support. ICPA Qld was hopeful of a resolution such that facilities and accommodation will continue to be used for education and training and be available for use by the local community. ICPA Queensland are continuing talks with TAFE and universities.

In February 2020, an agreement was signed that would see the Longreach campus utilised for community events, training and commercial interests and retain the former College's memorabilia and other historical elements through to November 2020. This agreement, reached in consultation with a stakeholder committee and local community is the first stage of what will become a more permanent arrangement. Negotiations on the future of the Emerald facility are continuing. The full media statement can be found at: <http://statements.qld.gov.au/Statement/2020/2/19/agreement-on-future-of-longreach-agricultural-training-college>.

Work is continuing with the state government to transition the college into a local entity in the next five years and there is confidence that not only will agricultural training will be part of the future for the site but training and education will go wider than just agriculture.

Concern has been expressed regarding the short time frame (until November 2020) of the occupancy agreement the loss of teachers and resources from the district already since the closure and the lack of progress to continue agricultural education in western Queensland. Unfortunately, COVID-19 restrictions have halted all proposed activities and will most likely not occur at all in 2020, with the focus now on 2021 and beyond.

In Western Australia, Moora Residential College's largely federally-funded building upgrade is progressing and on 19 February 2020, the Deputy Prime Minister, the Hon Michael McCormack MP, visited to view the progress with several colleagues.

Federal Council are committed to ensuring that agricultural colleges and agricultural training opportunities are maintained and expanded and will continue to follow the developments across states and assist wherever possible.

Assistance for rural and remote apprentices and trainees

In October 2019, Federal Council met with advisers to the Assistant Minister for Vocational Education, Training and Apprenticeships, the Hon Steve Irons MP. Discussions centred around the challenges faced by rural and remote apprentices such as accessing study or assessment blocks where travel and accommodation costs are incurred, servicing of rural and remote trainees by training organisations and the costs and challenges of moving away from home in order to participate in apprenticeship or training

programs. The Assistant Minister's advisers agreed the rural and remote space also provides challenges from their perspective because of the costs and logistics of servicing training needs in rural and remote areas and the difficulties of disseminating information to rural and remote cohorts or prospects. One suggestion to come out of the meeting was to find rural and remote alumni within the Australian Apprenticeship Alumni Network to mentor rural and remote apprentices and trainees and promote those pathways. A request was made for suggestions of any rural/remote alumni who could be ambassadors for and promote/mentor rural and remote apprenticeships. Federal Council is currently following this up. The Assistant Minister's office also advised they could send information to distribute for rural and remote apprentices.

Assistant Minister Irons' office drew our attention to the National Careers Institute <https://nci.dese.gov.au/> established in 2019 to ensure Australians have access to high quality career information and support regardless of their age and stage. The Commonwealth Government hopes this site will assist the engagement of, among others, rural and remote people in training opportunities.

In recent conversations with the Assistant Minister's office, discussions were also had regarding Centrelink staff and improvements to the website to assist navigation by apprentices and trainees. Support for rural and remote apprentices who are ineligible for Youth Allowance was discussed, including the Commonwealth Living Away From Home Allowance (LAFHA).

The opportunity was also taken to raise the issue of recipients of the federal LAFHA not being on the list of eligible existing payment recipients' Income Support Payments for the Economic Support payment or Coronavirus Supplement. Federal Council will continue discussions regarding whether LAFHA should or could be included with other Social Income support payments for the purposes of assistance measures such as those available during the COVID-19 pandemic. One suggestion from the Assistant Minister's office was for apprentices requiring support to take out a Trade Support loan, however this would need to be repaid in time like Higher Education Contribution Scheme - Higher Education Loan Program (HECS-HELP) loans. Trade Support Loans are available to apprentices at any time, regardless of hardship.

The *National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy: Final Report* contained promising recommendations and actions to assist the rural and remote training cohort access to high quality programs including:

- Further expand Regional Study Hubs and to include vocational education and training (VET) students.
- Improve service provision and access to high quality VET programs and ensure consistent regulations between jurisdictions.
- Ensure the VET sector focuses 'more on practical learning and technical and professional skills development'.
- Support states and territories to improve access to VET and improve choices for rural, regional and remote students by
 - reducing barriers for RTOs from providing training places across states and territories,
 - expand access to courses and qualifications relevant to rural and remote industry and
 - increase the availability of subsidised places for VET courses in rural and remote areas based on demand including employment opportunities.
- Ensure availability and consistency of support programs for rural and remote VET students including improving transport services for rural and remote students travelling to VET programs and study hubs.
- Build aspiration, improve career advice and assist rural and remote schools to prepare their students for post-school success by establishing aspiration-raising initiatives targeted at students and families - an ambassador program and local alumni networks similar to or build on the

Australian VET Alumni program which incorporates the Australian Apprenticeships Ambassadors program.

- Ensure consistency of delivery and improve access to high quality VET in Schools programs based on successful VET models delivered in conjunction with RTOs and school-community partnerships that have shown to improve local employment outcomes.
- Improve career advice and work experience for rural and remote students delivered by professional career advisers conversant with schools, tertiary education providers including VET, industry and local community knowledge and improve online career information and advice and virtual work experience.
- Incorporate work integrated learning (WIL) placements including internships, mentorships, practicums, research, teaching and tutoring placements to enhance the skills and employability of students and attract and retain students in rural and remote areas.

ICPA (Aust) welcomed the announcement by Minister for Education the Hon Dan Tehan MP on 19 June 2020, that the Federal Government would be implementing measures from the *National Regional, Rural and Remote Education Strategy* to assist students from rural, regional and remote Australia. At the time Minister for Employment, Skills, Small and Family Business, Senator the Hon Michaela Cash said these measures would complement the Government's reforms in vocational education and training, through the \$585.3 million *Skills Package Delivering Skills for Today and Tomorrow*, developed off the back of the [Expert review of Australia's vocational education and training system](#), which incorporated specific detail on supporting VET in rural and remote Australia:

- There is a strong need to adapt or create policies to support rural and remote students engaged in VET. To address this, flexible and innovative delivery models need to be considered for these areas. One potential solution lies in the regional study hub model, which provides infrastructure and academic support for students studying via distance at partner universities
- The Commonwealth Government to expand the university-based regional study hub model to provide funding to VET providers to participate in regional study hubs.
- To ensure the model's viability, dedicated funding grants could be provided, in addition to the national rural and remote subsidy loading proposed earlier.

The Expert Review of Australia's Vocational Education and Training System: A Regional Education Expert Advisory Group has been established to advise Government on the ongoing education and training needs of regional, rural and remote communities which has explored how to improve access, opportunity and choice in tertiary education for regional, rural and remote learners, including exploring the expansion of the regional study hub model.

Further information can be found at

<https://www.employment.gov.au/delivering-skills-today-and-tomorrow>

<https://ministers.dese.gov.au/cash/inaugural-report-national-skills-commission-australian-labour-market-and-covid-19>

https://www.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/publications/strengthening-skills-independent-review-australia-vets_1.pdf

Most recently, off the back of the COVID-19 pandemic, the government has announced the new JobTrainer Skills Package, which will invest \$2 billion into reforms into the VET sector, including to guarantee support for thousands of apprentices across the country to assist business to subsidise their wages to keep their training and employment secure. While additional details are to come, further information can be found at <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/jobtrainer-skills-package-economic-recovery-and-growth>.

The circumstances of rural and remote trainees and apprentices are unique in nature and ICPA (Aust) will continue to advocate on their behalf to ensure they receive adequate support to reach their aspirations and full potential through various training settings and contexts.