

Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia Inc.

"Access to Education"



Submission

to the

Department of Education & Training

Into the

Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education

from the

Federal Council

of the

Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia Inc.

ICPA (Aust)

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The Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia, ICPA (Aust), welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education.

Since 1971, ICPA (Aust) has represented families living in rural and remote regions of Australia, who are passionate about the sustainability and prosperity of the industries they work in. Research indicates that the ability to access affordable and appropriate educational services plays a major factor in determining if a family will remain in rural and remote locations. The goal for our 2 700 member families is to achieve equity of educational opportunity for all children living in rural and remote areas, thus ensuring they have access to a continuing and appropriate education determined by their aspirations and abilities rather than the location of their home.

Remote and isolated locations in Australia provide the greatest challenges for improving provision of education options and pathways for children and families. Improving the educational outcomes for rural and remote students requires a national approach that ensures educational delivery of a consistent high standard no matter where the education is provided. The financial cost to families educating children in rural and remote locations continues to rise and can be attributed to many leaving these areas. An increasing number of rural and remote families are separating with the mother and children relocating to larger cities and towns during the years of schooling. A drastic measure such as this by families to reduce educational expenses, negatively impacts the family unit, small communities and rural schools.

Rural education is interlinked with other aspects of rural communities, such as fluctuating populations, economic influences, seasonal conditions and climate. It must be recognised that attempts to address inequities in the provision of quality education would not be effective unless broader economic and social issues are also considered. In order to efficiently and effectively meet the needs of these students, inequity issues must be understood. Some of these children are not considered vulnerable because they are not impacted by extreme levels of poverty. Rather, due to geographic isolation from services, many rural and remote families are expected to cover out of pocket costs for the education of their children from early childhood through to tertiary education, which is not experienced by urban families.

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 volunteer hours holding relevant governments to account to address inequities. Much of this can be attributed to many programs not reaching locations where the programs are costly to administer and jurisdictions not providing additional funding to ensure program objectives are met. Poor communication services also impact greatly on what is available to students and while internet services continue to improve, access for rural students lags well behind that available in metropolitan areas.

Recommendations highlighting the need to focus on inequities in the educational outcomes of rural students which report them to be at least one and a half years behind their metropolitan peers, can be found in documents dating back many years. They mention the endemic problems facing rural and remote education, including significant studies providing guidance and direction to those formulating policy. Despite this, very little action has followed to ensure improvement in educational outcomes for all students in rural and remote Australia.

The 1999 National Inquiry into Rural and Remote Education, Emerging Themes document highlighted the need for change. Yet, almost twenty years on from this report we continue to see similar results in the educational outcomes for rural and remote students. One report suggests the reason for not seeing improvements in educational outcomes may be that the National Framework for Rural and

Remote Education was positioned as a supplementary framework rather than a priority area. In all such endeavours, there comes a point at which research must give way to action.

The direction which rural education must take is obvious if children living in rural and remote locations are to overcome the current educational inequities being experienced. Closing the rural and urban divide must be a priority focus for all children in our isolated communities, thus ensuring they have access to a continuing and appropriate education determined by their aspirations and abilities rather than the location of their home.

Therefore ICPA (Aust)'s focus throughout this submission will be on three areas:

- 1) A call for rural and remote education to be placed on a separate register when delivering and funding education for rural and remote students. ICPA (Aust) believes a National Rural Education Alliance, which would bring together all interested national organisations, led by a Commissioner, would ensure the focus remains on educating students living in rural and remote Australia.
- 2) ICPA (Aust) welcomed the Deputy Prime Minister Joyce's election commitment made on June 22, 2016 where he stated, *"We cannot put a university in every regional town. We cannot put a high school in every corner of our nation. Therefore, we must have the policy settings right so that people get greater access to that ticket to their own future."*

As this review forms part of the commitment to rural and regional education, ICPA (Aust) will be contributing ideas that will better support geographically isolated families in the education of their children. With regards to the \$44.7 million commitment towards isolated children, ICPA (Aust) is proposing the remaining funds are distributed in a way that supports current policy to better support families who do not have access to face to face schooling.

- 3) The key barriers and challenges that impact on the educational outcomes for students living beyond regional centres, including aspirations and access issues for those accessing small rural schools or taking part in distance education programs on isolated stations for their primary school years. The majority of these students will board away from home in hostels and boarding schools for their secondary schooling, noting that while similarities may be seen across all locations the disadvantage becomes greater the further students are from educational services.

Part One

National Rural and Remote Education Alliance

ICPA (Aust) is calling for rural and remote education to be placed on a separate register when delivering and funding education for rural and remote students. ICPA (Aust) believes a National Rural Education Alliance, which would bring together all interested national organisations, led by a Commissioner, would ensure the focus remains on educating students living in rural and remote Australia.

In 2016 ICPA (Aust) raised the idea of a new alliance focused on rural education with the Minister for Education and Training. Minister Birmingham was supportive of the idea and has suggested that the concept of a National Rural and Remote Education Alliance, similar to the National Rural Health Alliance, be raised during the Independent Regional, Rural and Remote Education Review.

The National Rural Health Alliance, has proved to be a very beneficial vehicle for promoting understanding of the health needs of people living in rural and remote areas. Similarly, many national organisations in this country have a keen interest in and a passion for rural and remote education. By forming an alliance these groups will have a common platform to discuss common concerns, share the results of studies, research and coalface knowledge, and inform political policy and decision making. Ultimately, rural and remote students' learning outcomes can only improve as a result of the proposed collaborative approach which will streamline the current piecemeal approach to rural and remote education.

ICPA (Aust) envisages the following points as key areas of responsibility for the Alliance:

- to identify priority needs in rural and remote education and to promote appropriate action
- to research key issues in rural and remote education and develop knowledge about them
- to disseminate relevant information and knowledge to those with an interest in rural and remote education
- to provide feedback to governments on the effect on education of legislation, policies and services in rural and remote communities
- to encourage prominent organisations and urban groups to recognise and support students who are vulnerable by virtue of their geodemographic profile.
- to develop strategic alliances with other groups that have the potential to improve rural and remote education outcomes, and
- to undertake resourced project and contract work that supports the vision of the Alliance.

Part Two –Election Commitment

In the lead up to the 2016 federal election, Deputy Prime Minister, the Honorable Barnaby Joyce, announced on June 22 2016 during a televised session at The Press Club that the Coalition would commit to among other things, “\$44.7 million towards isolated children, which includes an increase of 50 percent to the Assistance for Isolated Children’s (AIC) Additional Boarding Allowance to bring this assistance more in line with the costs of education for isolated families. “

ICPA (Aust) welcomed the Deputy Minister’s election commitment where he stated, *“We cannot put a university in every regional town. We cannot put a high school in every corner of our nation. Therefore, we must have the policy settings right so that people get greater access to that ticket to their own future,”*.

As a key stakeholder in rural and remote education, ICPA (Aust) was asked for considerations on how to best allocate the remaining portion of the funding to maximise the benefit to geographically isolated families in order to access education. ICPA (Aust) made several trips to Canberra in 2016 and 2017 to discuss with government representatives various expenditure models. It was suggested at the time of the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education announcement, that ICPA (Aust) include their proposals regarding the election funding commitment for geographically isolated families in our submission for the review.

Proposal One –

Assistance for Geographically Isolated Families

Since 1973, successive Australian Governments have provided financial support through the Assistance for Isolated Children’s (AIC) allowance to families with children who do not have reasonable daily face to face access to an appropriate government school. Much has changed since the AIC Scheme was first introduced; the duration of compulsory education has increased and access to regional term hostels has decreased due to continual closures. Changes are needed to ensure this allowance meets the needs of families in the twenty-first century.

Accessing compulsory education is a significant financial burden for rural families and is sighted as one of the main reasons for families leaving rural areas. The Assistance for Isolated Children Scheme needs to adequately address the-out-of pocket costs incurred by rural and remote families whether their children need to study via distance education, board away from home or the family sets up a second home in order to access schooling.

ICPA is proposing the promised funds are distributed in a way that supports current policy to better support families who do not have access to face-to-face schooling. The Federal Government recently committed funding for geographically isolated children which included an increase to the Additional Boarding Allowance. ICPA recommends that utilisation of the balance of this funding includes assisting geographically isolated children through the AIC Distance Education, Basic Boarding and Second Home Allowances. This will go a long way in assisting rural and remote families being able to give their children a quality education. While the promised election funding is considered to be ‘non-recurrent’, ICPA feels strongly that significant increase in the levels of AIC is long overdue and that this solution is the most practical way to assist rural and remote families to access compulsory schooling that is not available to them on a daily, face-to-face basis where they live.

The AIC allowance consists of three main categories for geographically isolated students:

- **Distance Education Allowance** for students living at home and undertaking distance education

- **Boarding and Additional Boarding Allowance** for students boarding away from home at a school hostel or private arrangement and
- **Second Home Allowance** for students living in the family's second home so they can attend school daily.

DISTANCE EDUCATION

Families who educate their children via distance education are required to establish and maintain a schoolroom setting, provide extra learning materials and resources, print necessary learning materials which are supplied to students at mainstream schools. In addition, distance education families often travel significant distances to participate in school activities that offer interaction and socialisation for their children. The AIC DE Allowance assists distance education families with some of these necessary expenses in order to educate their children when living in geographic isolation.

Distance Education Allowance increase of \$750 per annum

4050 students receive Distance Education Allowance @\$4 007 per year

- Increase of \$750 per annum = \$3 037 500
- Total funding allocation over forward estimate = \$12 150 000

BOARDING

Many children living in remote regions of Australia must move away from home to attend school. Accessing compulsory schooling through boarding comes at a considerable cost to families. Annual out-of-pocket boarding expenses range from \$10 000 to \$35 000 per child, depending on where families live. This expense is unsustainable for most. Some families are splitting the family and moving to town to access affordable schooling, or in some cases choosing between siblings as they cannot afford to keep all of their children in boarding school. This is negatively impacting the family unit, small communities and rural schools.

The disparity between the Assistance for Isolated Children Scheme (AIC) Boarding Allowance and the actual cost of boarding schools across Australia continues to grow. This growth in disparity is impacting the intent and effectiveness of the allowance. Rural and remote families are required to contribute significantly more towards the cost of their children's compulsory education.

Additional Boarding Allowance increase of \$1 000 per annum

1 100 students - 2016 rate \$1533 per annum

- \$1 000 per annum = \$1 100 000
- Total funding allocation over forward estimates = \$4 400 000

Basic Boarding Allowance increase of \$1 000

4572 students receiving Basic Boarding Allowance @ \$8 015 per annum (or cost of boarding, whichever is lower).

- \$1 000 per annum = \$4 572 000
- Total funding allocation over forward estimates = \$18 288 000

SECOND HOME

The AIC Second Home Allowance assists families with the cost of setting up a second home away from their main place of residence, where a family member lives with the children so that they can attend a school on a day to day basis. The option of establishing a second home while children are of school age, is paramount in efforts to retain families in rural and remote areas of Australia. In many cases, the mother and children live in the second home during school times and return to their rural area

during school breaks and holidays. This allows the family to access schooling, but also maintain their connection and support with their rural community as well as work and live in a rural area. If the Second Home Allowance was not available, more families would move their entire family permanently to an area where appropriate schooling was available. ICPA advocates for the Second Home Allowance component of the AIC to be paid at the same rate as the Boarding AIC.

It is in the National interest to ensure isolated children are not disadvantaged in terms of educational and social development and to ensure their educational outcomes are not compromised. These students need the opportunity to attend a school that is commensurate to their needs which allows them to achieve educational parity with their urban peers. It is imperative for rural and remote families to be able to provide an education for their children while continuing to reside and work in rural and remote regions.

Second Home Allowance - in line with Basic Boarding Allowance - \$1 500 per annum

Less than 1 000 students receive \$234.84 per fortnight (\$6 053).

- Increase of \$1 500 per annum = \$1 500 000
- Total funding allocation over forward estimates = \$6 000 000

Evidence Base

ICPA (Aust) conducted a Boarding School Research Survey for Geographically Isolated Students in April 2016 which supports this information and contains many comments from families towards the end of the booklet: <http://www.icpa.com.au/documents/download/1021/federal-icpa-portfolios/federal-boarding-portfolio/boarding-school-survey-results-april-2016.pdf>

Calculations for Proposal One - Assistance for Geographically Isolated Families

\$44.7 million to increase Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Scheme

Calculations are based on - \$11 175 000 per annum x 4 years

Additional Boarding Allowance increase of \$1 000 per annum

1 100 students - 2016 rate \$1533 per annum

- \$1 000 per annum = \$1 100 000
- Total funding allocation over forward estimates = \$4 400 000

Basic Boarding Allowance increase of \$1 000

4572 students receiving Basic Boarding Allowance @ \$8 015 per annum (or cost of boarding, whichever is lower).

- \$1 000 per annum = \$4 572 000
- Total funding allocation over forward estimates = \$18 288 000

Second Home Allowance - in line with Basic Boarding Allowance - \$1 500 per annum

Less than 1 000 students receive \$234.84 per fortnight (\$6 053).

- Increase of \$1 500 per annum = \$1 500 000
- Total funding allocation over forward estimates = \$6 000 000

Distance Education Allowance increase of \$750 per annum

4050 students receive Distance Education Allowance @\$4 007 per year

- Increase of \$750 per annum = \$3 037 500
- Total funding allocation over forward estimate = \$12 150 000

Total funding promised - \$44 700 000

Total funding assigned through this proposal - \$40 838 000

*student numbers are based on the 2016 figures provided by the Department of Human Services

Any remaining funds to be used towards establishing the Assistance for Isolated Children for students undertaking an approved 4 year old early learning program through distance education similar to the AIC Distance Education component.

Additional Information

- The AIC is not 'capped' funding and is paid to all eligible students in geographically isolated areas, in the past, there has been a larger number of students receiving the AIC. Numbers could possibly be less due to smaller families and the population shift from rural areas.
- The Assistance for Isolated Children's (AIC) Scheme has previously been dealt with by the Department of Education and administered by Centrelink. The AIC is NOT a welfare payment but addresses equity of access to a quality education for rural and remote students. It is for this reason that the allowance is different to many other allowances. The AIC does not provide assistance to address multiple or long term social and welfare issues and has no correlation to providing a pathway to long term dependence; rather, the AIC is provided to assist with accessing education during the compulsory years of schooling and must be returned to the Department of Education and Training.

ICPA (Aust) feels strongly that this first proposal is the most proficient means of distributing the promised funding for geographically isolated families to achieve maximum benefit in assisting the greatest number of students in need with access to their education.

In the event that the first proposal is not accepted, ICPA (Aust) has suggestions of a further two proposals.

Proposal Two -

Geographically Isolated Educational Grant Program for Rural and Remote Students

ICPA (Aust) welcomed the STEM scholarship program announced as part of the election commitment to rural students studying at university. Our organisation is proposing that a grant program be set up for students living in rural and remote locations, who attend small rural schools or board away from home and require financial support. While there may be a number of options around the value and the criteria used to access the grants, the value must be truly reflective of the assistance required and location of the family home. It is anticipated that the funding allocated to the election commitment would not be expanded over the forward estimates and ICPA (Aust) recommends that this funding be secured as part of a longer term commitment to families living and working in rural Australia.

It is suggested that Geographically Isolated Educational Grants would consist of the following:

1) Increased assistance for students living in rural and remote Australia who are identified as geographically isolated through the AIC Scheme.

The 50% increase to the AIC Basic Boarding allowance announced as part of the election commitment was most welcome. However, only 1 100 of the 4 500 students, or roughly one quarter, who are eligible for the AIC Basic Boarding allowance qualify due to the low income limit placed on the allowance.

The income limit associated with the Additional Boarding allowance does not consider individual family situations where families may be financially supporting a number of students at boarding school and or university or that the cost of living is typically higher in rural and remote areas. The Educational Grant Program would provide another avenue for assistance in meeting the huge financial costs imposed on families who cannot access compulsory education on a daily basis from home.

These grants would be offered through the AIC applications that geographically isolated families fill out each year. As the AIC is a program that is already in place and has established eligibility criteria, offering the grants through the AIC would avoid a cumbersome or new process. Running the grants in conjunction with the AIC would also ensure that students deemed to be “geographically isolated” are recipients. Implementation would be an automatic payment of the grant to each AIC recipient, similar to what has been done in the past with additional funding into the AIC such as “Exceptional Circumstance” payments which were previously made in times of drought.

These grants could further assist geographically isolated families by also incorporating the following:

2) Keep families in the rural communities by offering financial support in meeting their children’s educational needs during their secondary education.

There are many families who live in or near rural communities with small high schools who feel that the local school cannot meet the education needs for their children in the secondary years, and with no access to financial assistance, these families often leave rural locations. Their decisions are based on the fact that small rural schools are identified as educationally disadvantaged due to their location and are deprived of a variety of educational opportunities within and outside the school gate. Many of these families and students need to be better supported in order to feel that they have a choice when considering where they live and where their children will be educated.

- a) **Rural High Schools grant** should be part of the grant program in order to assist students to cover the costs associated with pursuing educational enrichment opportunities.

- b) **Rural student boarding grant** that supports families living in rural communities to send their children to boarding school when they cannot access the AIC boarding allowance because they have a high school in their community. While small secondary schools provide an important opportunity for schooling for those who attend them, they should not be determined as meeting the needs of all students living in that area. Education is a much broader issue than just basic academic subjects. It encompasses life skills, cultural experiences, sporting opportunities and exposure to experiences often beyond those available in a local rural environment. Most of these cannot be accessed by extension programs via video-conferencing or virtual classrooms. There may be a need for a culture that offers more challenges or greater opportunities for particular students to develop a sense of self-worth and confidence in choosing career pathways. These are vital ingredients for young people in an ever-changing and challenging world in general and particularly in rural and remote Australia. It is envisioned that the grant would need to be available to assist the successful applicant for the duration of their boarding.

In conclusion, this funding allocated for isolated students, if put forward in a Geographically Isolated Educational Grant Scheme, can be extended to assist the most isolated families address the cost of accessing compulsory schooling whilst also assisting to keep families in the bush.

Proposal 3 -

Rural and Remote Education Foundation

It is recommended that a program for Geographically Isolated Children be created similar to the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation (AIEF) which sees federal government, corporate partners and private donors, come together to offer financial support to enable indigenous students in financial need to attend leading Australian boarding schools and universities. AIEF works with leading schools and tertiary residential colleges known as “Education Partners” which have shown a commitment to Indigenous education, student support and pastoral care. AIEF supports their Education Partners by providing financial resources. As their funding base grows, they aim to partner with more schools and colleges and offer more scholarships around Australia.¹

A similar program could be created using the election funding as seed funding to assist all geographically isolated children in need of financial assistance to access education.

¹ <http://www.aief.com.au/scholarships/about-the-program/>

Part Three

Curriculum and Assessment

6.1.1 Is the Australian Curriculum meeting the learning needs and interest of rural and remote students?

Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority Stakeholder Group: ICPA (Aust) has welcomed the opportunity to represent rural and remote families on the Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority's (ACARA), Parents and Principals Peak National Stakeholder group for a number of years. The benefits of having direct involvement during the implementation of the Australian Curriculum, NAPLAN and moving NAPLAN online has meant the challenges associated with living in rural and remote locations have been considered and in most cases addressed.

The need for a more consistent approach to curriculum and schooling has been talked about for many years. Both the National Curriculum and the needs-based school funding are in line with the expectations of the modern-day family, who seek consistency in education and outcomes regardless of where someone lives or their level of disadvantage.

ICPA (Aust) has welcomed a number of changes to the National Curriculum which have and will benefit rural students, including:

Phonics: Many of our member families teach via distance education programs. The use of phonics is well supported and the news that the new curriculum would also mandate the use of phonics to teach children to sound out words and syllables, instead of making them learn by rote or guess words through the contentious "whole language" was most welcome. This year, Minister Birmingham announced the introduction of the assessment of phonological awareness in Year 1 to enable early identification of potential learning difficulties. Support for teachers to do this is most welcomed by rural and remote families who often struggle to get suspected difficulties recognised, especially in the distance education setting and small schools.

Agriculture in Education: ICPA (Aust) welcomed the Australian Government's commitment to investing \$2 million into developing Agriculture in Education. The materials showcase the diversity and economic importance of food and fibre production in Australia. The online teaching and learning resources are aligned to the Australian Curriculum learning areas including science and geography.

New optional area of learning for year 9 and 10 students: Work Studies Years 9–10² is an applied learning curriculum that adapts discipline-based learning to work contexts. This requires a variation in the approach to curriculum design and content descriptors and elaborations, as they need to be active. It also allows for a cross-curriculum disciplinary mode of delivery.

Further expansion of learning areas for high school students: At our recent conference members supported the idea of topics essential to safe driving practices, in the high school curriculum. Stating that, *"The spotlight has been put on the increase of deaths on our rural roads. We believe that with correct training and making our new, young drivers aware of the perils found on rural roads, we can lessen these statistics. Rural students often have difficulty organising this education on their own because of boarding commitments or no services being available in rural towns."* Topics which may be included in this course:

² <https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/work-studies/introduction/>

- Defensive driving practices;
- Safe driving practices;
- Basic first aid;
- Basic car maintenance, and
- Obtaining your Learners' Permit.

6.1.2 Do current assessment processes help to improve the achievements of rural and remote students?

NAPLAN Assessment: Australia's first national test of literacy and numeracy is a powerful tool in measuring students' achievement in core literacy and numeracy skills. The report produced in 2016 by the Grattan Institute (VIC), *Widening gaps*³: what NAPLAN tells us about student progress, outlines a number of concerns for rural and remote students and how changes might be implemented, stating that, *"Policymakers should act on these findings. Student progress and learning gaps should be put at the centre of education policy. In light of the large spread in achievement, policymakers should give schools better support to target teaching to each child's needs. And, given the very large gaps, policy leaders must work harder to improve the progress of disadvantaged students so that every child in every school can achieve their potential."*

NAPLAN Online: ICPA has welcomed consultations with ACARA throughout the development, trialling and implementation associated with NAPLAN going online. While problems around connectivity are a major concern for many of our members, we believe these concerns have been taken seriously and every effort is being made to overcome them. The fact that students will receive results to their tailored test in a matter of weeks, compared to the current process which can take months, will benefit students enormously.

In the future, it is anticipated that a school may be able to determine when the test is taken. For year 7 students who relocate to large cities to board for their secondary schooling, this could mean a student moving from a low performing remote school would be assessed earlier in the year. If left to the school to determine then strategies may be implemented to address their needs, early in the school year.

Students identified as high achievers in NAPLAN: Addressing the needs of students who are performing well below the national benchmark is very important. However, many believe that students being educated in rural and remote locations who are performing well above the school or national average should also be supported in achieving their potential, particularly when there are very limited opportunities in small and often isolated communities.

6.1.3 How can schools be supported to deliver the Australian Curriculum in a flexible way to meet local needs?

Modified Curriculum: In remote communities where there are high schools, the curriculum is often modified to meet the educational and lifestyle needs of indigenous students, in order to address poor outcomes. Issues around placing high schools on By Pass lists is discussed further in this document under the "Improving Access" heading on page 29. Families and students living in or near these communities must have a real choice when accessing education while living in these locations.

³ <https://grattan.edu.au/report/widening-gaps/>

While the matter of funding is often mentioned when addressing inequities, ICPA (Aust) would like to take this opportunity to highlight the level of government funding for students in remote schools with a high indigenous population. In many cases it can be more than \$40 000 per student when the base funding for Schooling Resource Standard for high school students was set at \$13 000 per student. ICPA (Aust) maintains that in keeping families in rural Australia, they should have the option of accessing the Assistance for Isolated Children's Boarding Allowance, currently set at a maximum of \$10 417 per year (\$8 095 Basic Boarding Allowance plus \$2 322 Additional Boarding Allowance if the family qualifies), which goes some way to meet the costs associated with boarding students' great distances from home.

Secondary teachers teaching outside the area they are qualified for: Often, due to staff shortages in rural and remote locations, secondary teachers are teaching subjects that they have little knowledge in. This is a concern for students who rely on the knowledge and expertise of a teacher trained in that field. It is hoped that these issues can be overcome when the difficulties of attracting and retaining teachers to rural and remote locations are addressed.

6.1.4 Are there other examples of innovative ways in which curriculum is being delivered in rural and remote schools?

Secondary Schooling: The Aurora College (The Virtual Selective High School) is a new and unique secondary option for gifted and talented students in government schools in NSW. Classes commenced in January 2015 with over 160 students from across NSW. Aurora College allows students in rural and remote areas to remain in their local school and community while studying specialist subjects which their home school cannot currently offer.

Students connect with their teachers and classmates through a virtual learning environment, which includes web conferencing software and the Department's virtual classrooms. Aurora College offers students expanded career options through innovative programs and strengthened partnerships between schools, TAFE, universities, business and employers. Mentoring opportunities and master classes are key features of both the online and residential school programs.

As connectivity continues to improve it is anticipated that programs such as the Aurora College will expand. Caution should be taken when considering this platform as meeting the learning needs and learning styles of all students in rural and remote locations. Learning via distance education at the secondary level is not conducive to all learning styles. Students need to be independent, self-motivated learners if they are to achieve good results. While one or two subjects being taught through virtual classrooms can be beneficial, to go beyond that can be detrimental for many students, particularly when other life experiences are very limited in their community. The teenage years provide a critical window of opportunity for learning and growth, as children are becoming more independent of their parents and moving into adulthood. They are easily influenced by those around them and the opportunities available to them. Parents place a high priority on accessing education to ensure their children can reach their potential and grow into confident, capable adults, able to give back to society.

Teachers and Teaching

Teachers and Teaching - Rural and Remote Schools

6.2.1 What key initiatives are helping to attract 'top teachers' to rural and remote schools?

Most states offer some form of incentives to encourage teachers to rural and remote locations, such as the transfer points system, whereby points are gained in order to transfer to chosen locations. The most effective initiatives in attracting and retaining top teachers seem to be those which prepare teachers for living and working in rural areas and/or offer mentoring support Initiatives which include:

Pre-service teacher incentive programs - for example the Kelvin Grove Teacher Education of Excellence⁴, which works closely with the QLD University of Technology (QUT) to improve teacher preparation into Prep to Year 12 with exposure to rural and remote placements.

Take the Lead⁵ (Qld) –a leadership and development program to develop the skills and capabilities of selected participants as high performing school leaders. The program attracts and recruits high-performing teachers, associate leaders and principals who aspire to higher level school leadership roles in rural or remote locations in Queensland.

NSW- teach.Rural Scholarships⁶, “HSC students and university students currently enrolled in teacher education studies - get paid while you study to become a primary or secondary teacher in a rural or remote NSW public school!”

Remote Areas Incentive Scheme⁷ (RAIS) in Qld for rural and remote teachers provides increased funding dependent on the remoteness of the school as well as the cost of several flights in and out of town.

Incentives to attract and retain other professionals e.g. psychologists, behavioural therapists and speech therapists in rural and remote areas will enable continuity of specific learning programs and take the pressure off teachers to develop management programs for students with specific needs.

6.2.2 How can we improve retention of 'top teachers' in rural and remote schools?

Teacher quality matters. In fact, it could be considered the most important school-related factor influencing student achievement. While academic requirements are important, we also need to value different and multiple teacher characteristics particularly when teaching in small rural schools.

Teachers wishing to take on positions in rural and remote locations need to be better prepared and supported. All too often we hear of young inexperienced teachers taking on hard to fill positions in isolated locations who are unprepared for rural living, isolation from family, friends and colleagues, and the impact lack of educational services has on student outcomes. Training of graduate teachers for the rural and remote experience and engagement in these communities is vital to ensure improved

⁴ <https://teach.qld.gov.au/get-supported/teces/kelvingrove-tece>

⁵ <http://education.qld.gov.au/capability/take-the-lead.html>

⁶ <https://teach.nsw.edu.au/exploreteaching/high-demand-locations/benefits-of-teaching-in-rural-and-remote-nsw>

⁷ [http://ppr.det.qld.gov.au/corp/hr/hr/Pages/Remote-Area-Incentives-Scheme-\(RAIS\).aspx](http://ppr.det.qld.gov.au/corp/hr/hr/Pages/Remote-Area-Incentives-Scheme-(RAIS).aspx)

recruitment and retention of teachers and to achieve the optimum learning outcomes for the students. It is also important that these pre-service teachers/students are made aware of and are able to easily access the assistance and incentives available to them when taking on positions in a rural and remote location. Teachers who are provided with housing and basic services such as internet service as an incentive to teach in a rural area, need to be offered at a minimum, adequate facilities/services.

Specific learning needs and disabilities: Teachers will encounter situations where a proportion of their class/es have specific learning needs or disabilities. Neglecting to equip teachers, in already challenging circumstances, with knowledge of specific needs education is to set them up for failure and will contribute to poor teacher retention rates. In 2016, Minister Birmingham said, “The federal government had forced universities to start training all student teachers to “engage and teach” students with a disability.” ICPA (Aust) welcomes this announcement and encourage universities to ensure their student teachers are trained appropriately.

Teacher and Principal burnout is a factor contributing to poor retention rates in small schools. Supportive group or cluster school structures can reduce the administrative burdens of small school staff and provide the services of supportive specialist senior teachers. Timely and appropriate access to other specialists such as speech pathologists and psychologists will further support rural and remote teachers in diagnosing and managing specific needs students.

Retention of experienced teachers living in rural and remote communities: Retention of teachers in rural and remote areas is influenced by the very nature of the communities they reside in. When residing in such communities, teachers are faced with the unique situation of having to interact daily with students and families both on a professional and personal level. This can raise some difficulties for teachers with regards to code of conduct, privacy, conflicts and other issues. Teachers in rural and remote schools need to be supported to deal with the issues which can arise in these situations.

More than a few ‘top teachers’ reside in rural and remote communities and due to family or business commitments may not be able to teach full-time. The community and students have been served well by such teachers and they are often in a position to continue to provide relief and release teaching hours on a casual basis and to mentor new or young teachers. Commonly however, these teachers are forced to let their Teacher Registration lapse because of the onerous requirements of education departments. Students and the incumbent teachers requiring relief and release time are the big losers and their retention in areas where relief teachers are difficult to find is further diminished.

6.2.3 What professional development should be available for teachers, schools and communities?

In order to ensure teachers are well prepared for teaching in isolated locations, ICPA (Aust) believes education providers who offer teacher education courses, should implement a major in Rural and Remote Education and modules on teaching Specific Learning Needs such as Autistic Spectrum Disorders and Dyslexia.

The course could cover a range of unique challenges requiring specific knowledge, understanding and skills relevant to rural and remote areas. Topics included are those that are unique to teaching positions in an isolated area, including multi-age classrooms, multi-age curriculum tools, web conferencing, online learning tools, and strategies for coping with the unique dynamics that exist in small rural and remote communities and schools. As an adjunct to this major, it is envisaged that students would complete rural and remote practicums ensuring graduate teachers would start their

career job ready and have invaluable insight into the structure, practice and delivery methods of rural and remote education.

More opportunities for teachers living in or near rural communities so they can maintain their teaching skills – teachers who may not be teaching full time due to business or family commitments should have simplified pathways for them to be able to maintain their teaching eligibility. Due to living in small rural communities, they are not able to meet requirements due to ‘recency of practice’ for programs such as “Return to Teaching” because of the limited access hours available (a small school may only have a few opportunities available a year to offer for teaching hours but there may be several people with teaching qualifications in the area trying to access these hours to maintain their teaching eligibility). These community members are essential for relief teaching as well as potentially more permanent positions in the future when they may again be able to teach on a more regular basis.

Specific needs and learning disabilities requires an appropriate level of skill, support and knowledge which would be enhanced with improved teacher education. The delivery of modules in Specific Needs Education would build the teacher’s capacity to identify and assist children with special needs or learning difficulties. It would provide beneficial outcomes for all students by assisting with early recognition, identification, assessment and the implementation of specific learning needs education. Support and resources to identify and cater for specific learning needs such as dyslexia will assist rural and remote teachers to cope.

Teachers and Teaching - Distance Education due to geographic isolation

“Distance education” has become a catch phrase for almost any type of schooling done from the home/online in recent years. Children who must access their education via a state approved Distance Education program due to geographic isolation are becoming a minority, even in some of the purpose designed Schools of Distance Education. The needs of geographically isolated distance education students need to be fully recognised when making decisions around ‘distance education’ as a whole.

In order to ensure adequate educational support and outcomes for rural and remote families undertaking distance education due to geographical isolation, differentiation needs to be made between these families and those who undertake distance education programs as a personal choice.

While it is important to improve retention of top teachers in rural locations, the families who fill the role of distance education tutor in the home also need to be considered and better supported in the delivery of education and access to affordable child care and while often not qualified teachers, home tutors are undeniably on the front line and their wellbeing and retention is critical.

The value of the role of the distance education tutor within a distance education setting needs to be recognised and acknowledged. Without distance education tutors who are supported, prepared and readily able to implement distance education materials on a daily basis within independent home schoolrooms, distance education could not succeed.

Families who have no other option than schooling their children through distance education programs, need more support.

Recognition of the financial impact on families who must provide a distance education tutor:

For around 1500 families living in isolated regions of Australia, the only means of accessing an education for their children is via distance education programs. While the Assistance for Isolated Children's Distance Education allowance assists with the setup of the classroom and ongoing costs associated with this method of education, it is not possible without a tutor present in the home

schoolroom. Families are required to provide and fund the entire costs associated with providing a tutor, which necessitates the employment of additional staff or a family member (often the mother) who must often forgo an income, for many years in order to fill the role. The introduction of a Distance Education Teaching Allowance (\$6 000 per family, per annum), as financial recognition of the essential work a tutor performs is a small cost, considering these families are filling a role the government cannot.

Respect for the home tutor: The distance education tutor *knows their student*, and never more so than when that home tutor is the child's mother. While the tutor *may* not be teacher-trained, they are nevertheless knowledgeable and can have spent many years in the schoolroom. A distance education tutor or parent's concerns about a child's learning will rarely be baseless. It is important that teachers respect the concerns of the tutor and endeavour to work with them in identifying and diagnosing learning difficulties or in providing evidence to the contrary. Mutual respect and understanding will be key to harmonious parent/tutor/teacher relationships which can only benefit the child and make the teacher's life easier too. Belittling, ignoring or dismissing a tutor's concerns are all too common, especially in the distance education setting where specific learning needs specialists may be scarce and where the student is not in a face-to-face situation.

Teachers at distance education schools need to be equipped with an understanding of the nature of geographically isolated students school environment and the role of the home tutor within the home schoolroom. Many of the teachers in distance education, and furthermore policy makers in this area have never visited a home schoolroom and have limited knowledge of the school experience of the families and their everyday life, which, given the nature of distance education heavily impacts on their education.

The Family Assistance Law should be revisited so that In Home Carers or Nannies are able to supervise students in the Distance Education classroom. While child care programs may not have been considered to play a role in this review, they play an intricate part in enabling families to deliver distance education lessons at home in often isolated locations.

The needs of families living in these locations differ considerably to those living in urban areas. If the review and government's response, is to truly make a difference to these families now and into the future, greater flexibility within programs is required, together with the broadening of measures within existing schemes such as the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC), which is intended to assist families whose children remain in their care while taking part in schooling through distance education, especially as more emphasis is being placed on the need for recognised early childhood education. For the parents taking on the role of distance education tutor, (often the mother) they find themselves unable to take part in the workforce due to the enormous commitment which goes unrecognised financially by government.

While our organisation is pleased with some of the changes already introduced which assist in meeting the needs of families unable to access mainstream child care services, ICPA (Aust)'s concerns are with the families who need assistance because the children remain in the care of their parents and they have no choice other than to educate their children through Distance Education schooling (including early childhood learning). A common-sense approach in order to overcome workforce shortages in isolated locations, would be for the carer to also fill the role of Distance Education tutor.

Teachers, Distance Education tutors and Nannies should be added to the current "Specified work" list for Working Holiday Visas, so that they can help deliver Distance Education on rural and remote properties. The 2nd year working holiday visas 417 and 462, are not available for distance education tutors/teachers or nannies from overseas in rural and remote areas, despite being rural work. However, with recent developments in Northern Australia, second-year visa applicants could be

accepted there, on the 462 working holiday visa, if having worked for 3 months in agriculture the previous year. Also in Northern Australia, if working for 6 months for one employer on a working holiday maker visa 417, permission can now be granted to stay another 6 months with that employer; this would help provide work for distance education tutors in other rural and remote areas if the same conditions apply. In the distance education schoolroom, 12 months' support would be more beneficial than just 6 months to support the importance of continuity and consistency.

Occasionally, an overseas couple might wish to work on a rural or remote property; both would enjoy the cultural experience and the husband would be able to work with the livestock, however the wife is unable to work in the distance education schoolroom as this is not on the 'specified work' list. By extending the Northern Australia (Working holiday visa 462 and 417) rules⁸ to other rural and remote areas of Australia, this would make the second-year visa accessible to nannies and distance education tutors available under agriculture, as well as the extension of the 6 months to 12 months working with one employer which would provide a better solution for rural families and a better experience for overseas workers who wish to remain with an employer.

A National Working with Children's Check (WWCC) would help in obtaining top teachers to assist in the Distance Education schoolroom. The process of obtaining the Working with Children Check in every state, is expensive and impedes **(Volunteers for Isolated Students' Education) VISE/ (Retired Educator Volunteers for Isolated Students' Education) REVISE** tutors and travelling teachers who wish to help various families interstate. The length of time it takes to secure a WWCC from different states also delays the commencement of duties for some who take up governing positions. As per Royal Commission Report into Child Abuse⁹, ICPA (Aust) recommends that the Federal Government work with the states to provide a National Working with Children's Check (WWCC). This will enable travelling retired teachers, VISE/REVISE volunteers etc. to provide assistance to distance education families' interstate easily as well as providing assurance to families that these volunteers **can** be trusted on isolated properties with their children.

6.2.1 What key initiatives are helping to attract 'top teachers' to rural and remote schools? *No reply for distance education section*

6.2.2 How can we improve retention of 'top teachers' in rural and remote schools? *No reply for distance education section*

6.2.3 What professional development should be available for teachers, schools and communities?

Recognition of prior learning for Distance Education Tutors. While some States recognise the many years spent as a distance education tutor when applicants take part in formal training, ICPA (Aust) would like to see this extended to all States. All distance education tutors should be given educational recognition of the services they have performed for their children over the years. Educational recognition in the form of Recognised Prior Learning for distance education tutors who have supervised students' learning for a minimum of 2 years, should count towards a distance education/teaching certificate/diploma. A formal recognition of the role of the distance education tutor and the skills acquired would provide incentive for those considering employment in this role.

The role of distance education tutor/supervisor in the home classroom does not meet the "teaching criteria". While some of these fully qualified teachers are working in the home classrooms, their time there does not count towards recency of practice. Pre-service teachers who participate in Distance

⁸http://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/rp16_17/Quick_Guides/WorkingHoliday

⁹<http://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/getattachment/7ecd3db9-0b17-483e-9a0e-8fb247140f3e/Working-with-Children-Checks-Report>

Education classrooms also do not have their teaching time recognised, this is partially due to interpretation of their being “supervised” by another teacher, despite being the day to day managers of an often multi-age classroom, at times for an extended period of time.

A system where Pre-service teachers and those who already hold teaching accreditation can be supervised through distance by a principal or senior teacher at the School of Distance Education (SDE) that they are working with so that their teaching hours, even if done so at an adjusted rate, could be counted towards their teaching hours would be a huge benefit in enabling existing teachers to remain current and for Pre-Service teachers to consider working in a distance education home schoolroom.

6.2.4 What innovative approaches could be taken to support a high-quality teaching workforce for rural and remote school communities?

Distance Education tutors need ongoing support from the Schools of Distances Education (SDE). SDE teachers should also have training in Specific Needs so that they have the ability to provide flexibility in the delivery of the curriculum to assist Distance Education tutors in the planning of the student's schoolwork according to his/her needs.

It would be beneficial for distance education teachers to be encouraged to become familiar with their students or families, perhaps in the format of home schoolroom visits, as occurs in some Schools of Distance Education.

Leaders and Leadership

6.3.1 What needs to occur so rural and remote principals can devote most of their time and attention to student achievements in and beyond school? *No reply*

6.3.2 What changes could be made to attract and retain experienced educational leaders for country schools?

Support and encouragement of educational staff showing initiative and passion can foster an interest in leadership roles. Programs which reward educational leaders similar to the Taking the Lead program in Queensland mentioned in the Teaching Section by valuing their skills and offering them roles of responsibility, may see others strive for leadership roles as well as setting benchmarks and providing examples to follow.

Allowing schools flexibility to make decisions that best suit their area, community and students may also see an increase in leadership initiative in those in rural and remote areas as well as perhaps encourage others to consider placements in rural and remote schools.

6.3.3 What innovative approaches could be taken to support high quality leadership for rural and remote school communities?

A program worth noting as supporting and developing leadership in school students is the Sony Foundation Children's Holiday Camp Program.¹⁰ These camps involve a respite program that sees high school and university students take on the responsibility for the care for children with special needs,

¹⁰ <https://www.sonyfoundation.org/about/childrens-holiday-camps/>

under supervision, which allows the children's families to have a valuable weekend off. It exchange the participating students learn incredible life lessons during the week and often consider them life changing after being involved. Several boarding schools offer this program over the school holidays and it is a unique opportunity for rural and remote students to participate in and something they may have very little exposure to in their own communities where they live. Students who participate in these camps often go on to become school leaders and then leaders in their communities.

School and Community

School and Community - Rural and Remote Schools

6.4.1 What new and innovative approaches are you aware of that improve the connection between schools and the broader community?

ICPA (Aust) often hears of new and innovative programs being conducted to improve the connection between schools and the broader community. These connections are valuable particularly for high school students when considering career opportunities. Programs that offer connections and mentoring through universities and local businesses who offer traineeships and apprenticeships are highly valued in exposing students to new career options.

When considering career pathways, a platform to share information across state borders about successful programs designed for rural and remote students would be beneficial.

6.4.2 What motivates rural and remote students to succeed and how can they be supported to realise their aspirations?

Students bring individual motivational characteristics to the classroom including self-perceptions that influence their school success, multiple goal orientations and different types and degrees of motivation. These characteristics are influenced by past and present achievement, along with feedback from teachers, family and peers. The motivations that students develop at home and in school influence their future goals, expectations and intentions. Rural and remote students are often motivated by a sense of helping community and recognising a need for a solution in a particular area. They are often influenced by their own life experiences.

Rural and remote students who attend small high schools or board away from home could be better supported by considering their cultural background and where they live. All too often student's (particularly boys) with rural backgrounds are stereotyped and not motivated by teachers and peers to aspire to careers outside the family farm once they leave school. These students should be offered tailored support as they approach decisions regarding further study or career paths. In many cases boarding schools will only have a small cohort of boarders who live remotely, special consideration and support needs to be given to their aspirations. They need outside school support to follow and act on these goals.

Students in rural high schools need to be supported in following their career path. Rural high school students who wish to sit exams for university entry (or other exams such as the Under Graduate Medicine and Health Sciences Admissions Test UMAT) often feel alienated and it can be difficult for students to then continue on this path, if not well supported by the school. In addition, a student who wishes to do a traineeship or follow a vocational path, can feel very out of place if surrounded by those who are pursuing the university pathway. Rural and remote families have very little opportunity to discuss or gather information about various future pathways and this makes it difficult for them to support their students and assist with their decisions.

Students who board away from home, despite attending large schools can also find themselves estranged from the rest of the boarding house cohort when not following a stereotypical career path. This is particularly so for boarding students, whose family may be over a thousand kilometres away, leaving them only peers and school staff with which to discuss their goals, often leaving them to be influenced by what others are doing around them rather than their own true ambition. These students often are not exposed to a wider influence or knowledge of available opportunities and without significant support, can easily decide to blend in and follow along with what the majority of students around them may be pursuing.

Financial concerns also play a large role in determining whether or not rural and remote students will pursue their aspirations. At the 2017 ICPA Federal Conference, ICPA members supported a motion asking for the production of a document containing all the information associated with eligibility and entitlements for rural students for secondary and tertiary education, including apprenticeships and traineeships, to be provided to all rural high schools and final year primary students. A document such as this would be beneficial in providing information to rural and remote students and their families so that they are aware of what financial assistance is available as they discuss and try to assist their children with decisions about their future.

Along with financial issues, the requirement to relocate to larger centres also has a significant impact on rural and remote students pursuing their aspirations, both at a secondary and tertiary level. The impact on a student who has to leave their family unit as well as their local community for educational purposes is significant. Emphasis on supporting students in these transitions, or more opportunity to be made to pursue aspirations at a local level is essential.

6.4.3 Are there untapped priorities in rural and remote settings which, if utilised, could help students realise their potential?

The close and essential relationship between community and schools could be enhanced and utilised more effectively to enrich students' learning experiences. Previously, under the Country Area Program (CAP), which was targeted federal funding directed towards assisting rural and remote schools and their communities to enhance the learning outcomes and educational opportunities for students in geographically isolated areas; community and schools worked closely together. CAP funding was available for projects either run by community members or schools themselves which supported:

- Curriculum Enhancement
- Information and Communications Technology
- Professional Development
- School Support

CAP projects in the states and Northern Territory were highly valued by students, schools and communities. These projects enabled students to participate in many learning experiences that they otherwise would not have been able to access. In an adjustment of school funding policy, CAP funding is no longer targeted, but rather given to states and the Northern Territory to administer as they deem necessary. This has eroded the relationship between community and schools in some areas as community members are now often excluded from the decisions around school projects and many valuable CAP projects no longer take place.

6.4.4 What role does/could the philanthropic sector play in improving outcomes for rural and remote students in relation to school achievement and post— school transition?

Community groups and the philanthropic sector play an important role in improving outcomes for rural and remote students. Scholarships offered to rural and remote students by various groups to

assist with costs for training or university study are extremely helpful to families struggling under the financial burden of access to education.

Several examples include:

- The Country Education Foundation of Australia (CEF) which provides financial grants, scholarships, mentoring and support to disadvantaged rural and regional students to assist with transition into university, training, TAFE and careers.
- The Connellan Airways Trust supports families in distance education by assisting with a portion of accommodation costs associated with attending school functions throughout the school year in addition to offering annually one significant scholarship for a student studying in a field with the intention of making a contribution to the outback community.¹¹
- The Winchester Foundation has been instrumental in helping numerous rural students to undertake or maintain their studies at primary, secondary and training/tertiary level by assisting their families with schooling costs.¹²

Without groups such as these, many students who live in rural and remote areas would not be able to consider furthering their education due to the seemingly unsurmountable cost to access education from where they live.

Other philanthropic groups benefit rural and remote students by providing services or access to services that are not normally available in the areas these students live. As mentioned in the Discussion Paper, the Foundation for Rural and Regional Renewal supports a large number of initiatives in rural and remote areas. Other programs such as Think Digital¹³, with its bus equipped with the latest in technology, which travels through Outback Australia offering assistance and learning experiences about modern technology offer instruction and learning opportunities.

Rural communities as a whole are usually very supportive of rural schools and rural students (both local rural schools and distance education schools). School events, fundraisers and projects are almost always supported wholeheartedly by businesses, councils, organisations and individuals from the local community and often the wider community. This support enables rural and remote students to participate in numerous events and activities that would not otherwise be possible.

School and Community - Distance Education

6.4.1 What new and innovative approaches are you aware of that improve the connection between schools and the broader community?

The implementation of web conferencing programs within distance education has meant real time interaction between schools and their students. Along with participating in their lessons, students are able to participate, along with their peers and teachers in whole school activities such as ANZAC Day ceremonies, special guest school visits and award ceremonies, despite vast distances between schools and students.

Social media allows for schools and families to showcase distance education experiences to a wide audience.

¹¹ <http://www.connellanairwaystrust.org.au/>

¹² <http://winchesterfoundation.org/>

¹³ www.think.digital

6.4.2. What motivates rural and remote students to succeed and how can they be supported to realise their aspirations?

Rural and remote students studying via distance education are often inspired by hands on knowledge and experiences. They are extremely adept at making do with what is at hand. Where they see a need, by the very nature of where they live, they search for a solution and a way to implement it. Their aspirations can also at times be determined by the experiences they have had. In order to support rural and remote students who study via distance education to succeed, there needs to be greater understanding of their background when students are being considered for positions in courses and further study or training. Often distance education students have a unique ability to work independently and be self-motivated due to the nature of their time in distance education. Interview questions rarely lend themselves to allow distance education students to showcase their skills and abilities as these often do not fit the 'niche' in the line of questioning. A better understanding of the way distance education students learn and the experiences they have had would enable them to shine through when seeking to move on to their next level of education, training or career path.

Motivation of students to succeed and reach their aspirations within a distance education setting is largely underpinned by the home tutor. Without the support of home tutors to implement distance education materials on a daily basis within independent home schoolrooms in an effective, positive and competent manner, distance education students could not reach their potential.

6.4.3 Are there untapped priorities in rural and remote settings which, if utilised, could help students realise their potential?

Communication technologies are in some instances being under utilised in schooling due to a lack of infrastructure, technological support and at times unreliability of service. Support is required for further enhancing the capabilities of using methods such as web conferencing/video conferencing etc. to further allow distance education students to interact with teachers/peers. In some states video conferencing enabling students to interact with their classmates and teachers in a greater capacity is not being used to its full potential at the moment as the video portion of distance education lessons is not always able to be used due to internet issues.

Information and Communication Technology

6.5.1 What has to be done to ensure ICT supports education in rural and remote schools and communities like it does in the 'best of the best' city schools?

Whilst students whose family home is in rural and remote Australia and who are enrolled in Schools of Distance Education, rely heavily on telecommunications to access daily lessons, via both telephone and internet, most would be in the 0.7% of the population that have no access to any mobile network and the majority would also be in the 3% of the population that will rely on satellite to access the internet.

Our member families also attend small rural schools that are dependent on internet for schoolwork, research, teacher assistance/mentoring, specific needs sessions as well as landlines for contact for teacher support, emergencies and general administration tasks of a school. There are quite a few rural small schools which are not in mobile coverage areas and struggle with receiving adequate internet service.

Some of our members are experiencing problems with ongoing use of the Sky Muster™ satellite services including dropouts, poor speeds, slowed services, insufficient data amounts and connection difficulties.

Commonplace online activities for those living in cities such as watching lectures, banking, cloud computing, working on research projects, or watching television is nearly impossible for those not very far from the cities themselves.

Telephony is also a major concern particularly for those students studying via distance education. Landline telephone services play a significant role in providing the voice services to accompany 'on air' lessons with teachers and classmates, as well as additional lessons and seeking assistance from teachers at the School of Distance Education Centre. Because a large portion of geographically isolated distance education students live outside of mobile coverage areas, maintaining landlines and ensuring that these services continue is paramount for distance education students. When internet services fail, the availability of landline phones ensures that distance education students still have connectivity and are able to continue participating in their lessons, even if the video/online portion is out. At this time, VoIP is not considered to be a reliable or suitable source for audio in distance education lessons, and until such time as an alternative, appropriate and reliable voice technology is available, landline telephony services need to exist for distance education students.

Internet connectivity is the key to providing students with access to endless curriculum opportunities and extra-curricular endeavours. Virtual reality is a part of everyday life for today's children and yet students in rural and remote educational settings are rarely being provided with sufficient opportunities afforded to those children in urban settings where connectivity is often not an issue. Access to reliable and adequate internet, with regard to speed, quality, capabilities and cost of the service must be a priority for state and federal governments so that we can ensure the gap between urban and rural education does not continue to widen.

The Education Port offered as part of nbn's public interest premises policy has gone a long way to address the gap but for some remote students that study via distance, there is also the mode of delivery to consider and what is offered by each State Education Department; Western Australia use Centra Symposium, which South Australia found unsuitable. South Australia use Webex, the Northern Territory and New South Wales use REACT a purpose-built Distance Education delivery program whilst Queensland use Blackboard Collaborate. There needs to be more co-operation between states so that the wheel is not constantly being reinvented. It is also essential that with a digital curriculum, each platform for delivery provides equitable access and quality for students across Australia.

Priority internet repairs for Distance Education students residing in rural and remote areas must be factored into policy as currently students can be offline for many weeks waiting for their service to be repaired.

6.5.2 How could ICT be used to improve educational outcomes for rural and remote students?

Education Port

The provision of an Education Port is a huge assistance for those studying via distance education however it does not assist those studying at a tertiary level, students of rural schools and students returning home from boarding school during holiday breaks who are required to complete assessments. Again, it could be a great equaliser but instead of bridging the divide it is in fact making

the gap wider. The concern over reliability is causing a negative impact in uptake though many of our members have no option but to utilise the **nbn** Sky Muster™ satellite for their internet needs.

The Fair Use Policy (FUP) in place with Sky Muster™ plans negatively impacts those same students. The FUP is an impediment for rural students and not at all comparable to what is offered in metropolitan areas. Peak and off-peak times are very constrictive and limiting and *Shaping*, which happens when the monthly data allowance is exceeded, restricts much of our members' ability to conduct their business or study unless they are a distance education student.

The announcement in late June, by Senator the Hon Nash, Minister for Regional Communications and **nbn** to confirm the increase in wholesale data capacity for the Sky Muster™ satellite service was very welcome. The doubling of the maximum monthly wholesale data limits and increasing average peak downloads plans by up to 50 per cent on the Sky Muster™ platform will make some difference to regional, rural and remote students.

Unmetered educational websites: An added bonus for many families has been Telstra's initiative which has seen the unmetering of educational websites. This has assisted many families who need to access their curriculum this way by allowing them to reduce data usage significantly.

Mobile service coverage in rural and remote black spot areas: With regards to rural and remote education, having mobile coverage is highly valued by those who have it as it affords a backup for the voice and data services of "On Air" lessons when landlines or other internet sources are out. Having mobile coverage also allows distance education students to continue their schoolwork and lessons if they are travelling between home and town or away from their main schoolroom (i.e. in a stock camp for a few weeks with their family). The added bonus of many educational sites being unmetered by Telstra is a bonus for many families that are able to access their curriculum this way.

"..after a successful installation providing 5 bars of mobile service for us, we couldn't believe our eyes! With the constant issues we seem to have here with an unreliable landline, being able to have access to these services is very much appreciated." - Queensland ICPA member.

ICPA (Aust) is of the view that the selection of priority regions for the implementation of Mobile Phone coverage should include a priority for rural and remote schools that are currently without mobile phone service. Most rural and remote schools are evacuation points in the event of emergencies occurring within the area and surrounding communities.

6.5.3 What are the main barriers to rural and remote schools realising the full potential benefits of ICT?

There is currently a gap in understanding, individual problem-solving and knowledge broker services for telecommunications in rural and regional Australia, which in turn affects rural students. Rural users are struggling to keep up with changing telecommunications, infrastructure, plans and providers. Rural and remote telecommunication users require support for understanding new internet and phone options and a 'third-party' problem-solving resource to identify best solutions, best providers and best plans in different locations.

The offering of telecommunications support services, including advocacy, education and problem solving with technology issues and opportunities, in rural and remote Australia would be of huge benefit for these students and their families.

Small schools' latest technology: Educational outcomes in small communities are continuously being hindered by the absence of adequate internet connectivity in their local schools. Curriculum offerings which cannot cater for face to face interaction due to the lack of specialist teachers (e.g. Languages, music) cannot be accessed consistently, or if at all. Online access to services like speech therapy and other Allied Health offerings cannot be relied upon to complement the sparse face to face services in small communities. Online NAPLAN, which is due to be rolled out across all states in the near future is reliant on the availability of adequate bandwidth for students to complete the assessment online. This is bound to be problematic for many rural and remote schools. Furthermore, the access for rural and remote secondary schools to a full senior curriculum is also not possible in many schools' due to unreliable internet.

This is a whole of government problem as it goes to the very heart of keeping our rural communities and schools alive. Connectivity is the silver bullet which will serve to provide the type of education in rural and remote schools which families expect and deserve from the various state education systems.

Entrepreneurship and Schools

6.6.1 What kinds of support would be needed for a school or group of schools to specialise in entrepreneurial education?

A revitalized Country Areas Program (CAP) discussed in Schools and Community question 6.4.3 would be a way to provide support enabling schools and students to establish entrepreneurial endeavours. The private sector and local community can also be encouraged to interact with schools to offer mentoring and guidance in specific business or industry areas.

6.6.2 What other entrepreneurial education opportunities exist for rural and remote schools?

Some schools have begun growing vegetable gardens for students to learn not only about the production of food but to also hold 'farmers markets' to experience business transactions and gain an understanding of commerce. Secondary schools have set up small 'shops' and interest based enterprises such as coffee shops operated by the students. These activities are particularly advantageous for rural and remote students who are able to participate while attending boarding school as they often do not have similar opportunities for firsthand experience of this type where they live.

6.6.3 Are there other examples where entrepreneurial education has improved outcomes for rural and remote students?

The Australian Indigenous Education Foundation (AIEF) sees federal government, corporate partners and private donors, come together to offer financial support to enable indigenous students in financial need to attend leading Australian schools and universities. The AIEF is a private sector-led, non-profit organisation which focuses on empowering young Indigenous people who have a financial need to build a brighter future for themselves and their communities.

AIEF provides scholarships that enable Indigenous students to study at leading Australian schools and universities, as well as mentoring and career support to ensure students make a successful transition from school to further studies, employment, productive careers and fulfilling lives.

According to the AIEF website, "A product of a strong partnership between the Australian Government and the private sector, AIEF currently supports around 500 secondary and tertiary scholars, continues

to support a network of over 400 graduates, and ultimately aims to provide quality education and career opportunities to 7,000 Indigenous students.”¹⁴

A similar program created to assist all geographically isolated children in need of financial assistance to access education would be extremely beneficial.

6.6.4 What gaps need to be addressed to help students transition successfully to further study, training or work? *No reply*

Improving Access

6.7.1 Are there changes that could be made to the ways schools are organised and function that would improve opportunities for rural and remote students?

It is concerning that schooling arrangements are strongly contested during Federal and State elections and prove to be of even greater concern for those living in isolated areas where addressing disadvantage does not attract votes. For this reason and all reasons mentioned below around long-term planning and certainty, education policy and planning may be better served by an independent statutory authority as we are currently seeing with Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority (ACARA).

The educational outcomes of rural and remote students would benefit from a national approach that ensures national consistency no matter where education is provided. Part One of this submission highlights the need for a Rural and Remote Education Alliance that offers a vision for the future in rural education.

6.7.2 What could be done to expand the opportunities available to rural and remote students to access high quality education?

ICPA (Aust), maintains that educational opportunities must commence with the early learning years, with a focus on the year prior to starting formal schooling and proposes the following changes in order to expand and enhance the opportunities for rural and remote students.

Early Learning years

The Australian Government recognises the importance of ensuring children are not disadvantaged in terms of their early physical, social and educational development. Researchers throughout the world report that the social and developmental gap in children’s functioning and achievement can be significant by age six. These differences in the cognitive, non-cognitive and social skills are strong predictors of later academic, occupational and life achievement.

The delivery and accessibility of early learning programs for children in the year prior to starting school has improved throughout Australia in recent years due to the introduction of the Federal Government’s commitment to the Universal Access to Early Childhood Education Program. ICPA members from all over Australia continue to present a large number of motions on this matter, sending a clear message to those with the ability to make change; families in rural and remote regions

¹⁴ <http://www.aief.com.au/about/>

value early childhood learning. Rural families want and need access to affordable early childhood learning and child care. ICPA (Aust) believes many issues could be addressed for families living in rural and remote Australia by allowing greater flexibility within a number of policy areas to cater for their needs.

ICPA (Aust) maintains that the impact of not being able to access affordable early learning for children living beyond the metropolitan boundaries is evident in the gap between educational outcomes for rural and remote students when compared to those living in large centres. A significant contributor to this is likely due to learning difficulties going undiagnosed in the early years and having very limited opportunities to socialise and interact with other children.

Early childhood education programs provide opportunities for early identification and intervention for learning difficulties. Training of early childhood educators and access to specialist advice are important factors in enabling the detection of potential specific education needs.

Early learning through Distance Education Programs.

All States and Territories offer early learning programs delivered by distance education and this is the *only* avenue available for many families living in rural and remote areas. Families wanting to access these programs are bearing the entire cost associated with administering, resourcing and teaching the lessons. Across Australia, approximately 280 children access recognised 4-year-old programs in their homes through distance education, which today includes a mixture of hands on play-based learning and teacher-led structured lessons which involve using information technology for communication.

As with every other early childhood program for four-year-olds, these distance education lessons are designed to help children transition from home to school. The children need a designated learning space in which to learn school behaviours, such as the ability to sit at a desk for enough time to complete a task, to use the technology required for distance education, to appropriately interact with their peers and teacher and to understand the formal concept of school.

It is vital that young children have opportunities to socialise face to face with other children of their age. This often requires families to travel great distances to attend school functions which provide an opportunity for the children to participate in group activities such as sport, practice of conversation skills and socialisation with their peers. These functions are also valuable in providing teachers and other professionals with both group and individual evaluation and diagnostic opportunities.

Families undertaking these distance education programs are effectively blocked from any funding to assist with meeting the costs of program delivery and accessing school functions. These students are deemed ineligible for the Assistance for Isolated Children's Scheme, (AIC), Distance Education Allowance as 4-year-olds taking part in these early learning programs are not recognised by the Australian Government and no payment is available through Child Care Rebates (CCR) or Child Care Benefits (CCB) as these children are still in their parents' care. ICPA recommends that the Assistance for Isolated Children's (AIC) Distance Education allowance be extended to include four-year old students taking part in recognised distance education early childhood learning programs. Further information can be found in the ICPA (Aust) Briefing paper- AIC for 4 Year Olds November 2016¹⁵. ICPA (Aust) identifies this discrepancy seems to be seriously at odds with the Universal Access to Early Childhood Education Program.

¹⁵ <http://www.icpa.com.au/documents/download/1067/federal-current-lobbies/briefing-papers-november-2016.pdf>

Early Learning Services in Rural and Remote Locations.

ICPA members continue to raise concerns regarding the universal access to early learning programs not being met in rural and remote areas. Amongst the issues raised are that the participation target is not being applied in these areas, disadvantage is not recognised and funding is not targeted.

Our organisation is deeply concerned that the participation targets are not being met in rural and remote communities. Generally, our member base does not have access to child care centres or preschools and are requesting that the Federal Government work collaboratively with all jurisdictions to create practical access to early childhood education. Small rural and remote townships must have greater flexibility when it comes to meeting National Quality Framework (NQF) requirements. While it is important for States and Territories to broadly align with the NQF in order to maintain quality programs and facilities, that should not be at the expense of a program being delivered at all. ICPA (Aust) appreciates that a number of states have addressed this issue and deliver the 4-year-old programs in schools, however, ICPA NSW and Qld have identified a number of remote towns which have no programs at all, despite there being vacant facilities at schools. It is claimed this is due to not meeting the NQF requirements.

Small rural towns that do wish to offer an early learning program, often struggle with accessing an early childhood teacher to implement the program, especially if the program is only offered part time. Rural communities and ICPA members have put forward a recommendation that in instances where an early years program exists but no early childhood qualified teacher can be sourced, that a qualified teacher or diploma qualified educator be allowed to deliver early childhood programs.

ICPA (Aust) believes every rural and remote community should be supported in providing an early childhood learning service for children in the year before commencing school. Geographical isolation should be included as a category of disadvantage under the National Partnership Agreement for early childhood education. As noted in the Productivity Commission's Report into Childcare and Early Childhood Learning¹⁶, our families are experiencing the same lack of equitable access to quality early childhood programs as others in disadvantaged groups.

ICPA members would also like to see a separate target, of at least 95%, established for access of rural and remote children to preschool programs satisfying the Universal Access agreement, to ensure that state governments focus on creating similar access regardless of geographic area. The Australian Bureau of Statistics Preschool Education data for 2016¹⁷ indicates that of all the children in NSW regional and remote areas already accessing preschool, only 65% do so for 15 or more hours per week, clearly well short of the national target.

In order to further assist with the introduction of early learning in isolated locations and ensure the longevity of the programs, ICPA recommends that the Federal Government sets up a targeted funding program to states and territories as a support for early childhood services. The lack of access and funding for preschool programs for rural and remote children should be addressed through a separate participation target with recognition of disadvantage and targeted funding.

Mobile Early Childhood Services

In recent times, government was made very aware of how vital Mobile playgroups are to families living in rural and remote areas, when it announced the demise of the Budget Based Funding (BBF). As these services are not 'child care' services where the children are being cared for solely by the service, there

¹⁶ <http://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/childcare>

¹⁷ <http://www.abs.gov.au/Ausstats/abs@.nsf/0/6DA742EC957DE0ADCA25786800152118?OpenDocument>

were serious concerns that these mobile services would not be eligible for continuation of funding under the new Jobs for Families Child Care Package and these services will be lost to families living in geographic isolation. For families who may live hundreds of kilometres from the nearest small rural town (which often does not have a child care centre), assurance that mobile services which provide early childhood learning and socialisation for these children would continue, was well received. It was pleasing to learn that these services will continue to be supported under a new funding model, although the exact funding model enabling the continuation of these services has not been revealed.

ICPA (Aust) is adamant mobile playgroups provide an irreplaceable service to families of young children in rural and remote areas. They provide opportunities for play-based learning, socialisation and offer support, resources and comfort to new and isolated parents. Potential developmental issues may be detected in these settings.

Improving Access - Rural and Remote Schools

6.7.2 What could be done to expand the opportunities available to rural and remote students to access high quality education?

Low enrolments and access pathways

While small secondary schools provide an important opportunity for schooling for those who attend them, they will rarely meet the needs of all students living in that area. Education is a much broader issue than just basic academic subjects. It encompasses life skills, cultural experiences, sporting opportunities and exposure to experiences beyond those available in a local environment. Most of these cannot be accessed by extension programs via video-conferencing or virtual classrooms. Some students will need an environment which offers more challenges or greater opportunities in order to develop a sense of self-worth and confidence in choosing career pathway; vital ingredients for young people in an ever-changing and challenging world in general and particularly in rural and remote Australia.

It is in the national interest to ensure isolated children are not disadvantaged in terms of educational and social development and to make sure their educational outcomes are not compromised. These students need the opportunity to attend a school that is commensurate to their needs allowing them to realise their educational potential and presenting a pathway which provides educational parity with their urban peers. It is imperative for rural and remote families to be able to provide an education for their children while continuing to reside and work in rural and remote regions.

One of the key factors cited, particularly by professional people, for relocating *from* rural and remote communities is the lack of affordable education opportunities for their children in the high school years. Our organisation believes measures are needed to ensure families can access an education that meets their children's needs when a community is impacted by a lack of appropriate education on offer. The process of accessing assistance through the Assistance for Isolated Children's scheme must be clear and predictable in order to avoid the blame game taking place between tiers of governments in communities that support bypassing of the local high school. Most families indicate that they would stay in rural communities if they were able to access financial assistance to board their children in larger centres for their secondary schooling. This again supports the need for a focus on rural and remote education systems that consider the needs of *all* students being educated in these locations.

A small number of families are not eligible to receive the AIC Boarding Allowance for their children due to living in or near small communities with a small state secondary school. These high schools are considered by state education departments as providing an appropriate education and not eligible to be bypassed.

Families unable to access financial assistance or relocate the whole family for secondary education, are resorting to extreme measures. It is concerning to our organisation that families are separating, with the mother and children moving to larger towns to access education. Members have indicated that the main reason for making this decision is to reduce the cost of boarding. Other issues that may impact this option include social, learning difficulties and emotional/mental health issues.

In the discussion paper for the *Reform of Federation White Paper Roles and Responsibilities in Education*¹⁸, ICPA (Aust) outlined concerns regarding the impact on communities when programs that focus on specific vulnerable cohorts are introduced in order to address the needs of communities with high indigenous populations.

Although most of the work for vulnerable cohorts is done in partnership between the States and Territories and Commonwealth, there have been instances where national policies and agreements are perceived as being too prescriptive to genuinely complement activity by the States or Territories, or have adopted a 'one-size-fits-all' approach, rather than allow for jurisdictional differences. Similarly, while States and Territories are responsible for schooling, the Commonwealth is responsible for employment and welfare programs, higher education and national job markets. These junctures between governments lead to different programs being developed by different levels of government that focus on only one end of the student experience.

Unfortunately, the impact that these programs have on community members who are not considered vulnerable are not being considered and the question needs to be asked, "How will this intervention impact the education of all students in the community?"

Improving Access – Clusters

The Outback Advantage and Literacy¹⁹ in Qld, started as a network of nine one-teacher schools, which worked together through IDEAS (a Research-based Framework for Enhancing School Outcomes in Qld) and with the Staff College to enhance the quality and sustainability of initiatives in their rural and remote schools. They now have an alliance of 13 one and two teacher schools that have created an active, supportive and challenging network. Cluster school initiatives like these help to support and strengthen ties between one and two teacher rural and remote schools and are an example for other rural and remote communities. Similarly in the NT, 'Group Schools' provided a supportive structure and connections between staff in small schools. Unfortunately, some of the supportive group school structures were dismantled several years ago.

Improving Access – Distance Education (DE)

A variety of methods of learning should be provided in Schools of Distance Education. In South Australia for example, all students' studies are online, so if their internet is dropping out or very slow or even 'shaped' due to full usage of data for the month, an alternative method of accessing and doing schoolwork should be provided. Communication problems are hindering educational opportunities for these families.

Distance education delivery methods for geographically isolated families need to remain flexible. Difficulties in accessing an online program not only apply to South Australian students, there are many DE families undertaking their schooling from stock camps, campdrafts, fencing camps, travelling

¹⁸ *Reform of Federation White Paper Roles and Responsibilities in Education*, <http://www.icpa.com.au/documents/download/1018/federal-submissions-1/submission-discussion-of-education-issues-reform-of-federation-white-paper-2015.pdf>

¹⁹ <http://education.qld.gov.au/staff/development/ideas/journeys/outbackadv.html>

shows/circuses all across Australia and even some out at sea (students on prawn trawlers and fishing boats, etc.), who would find their study compromised if they had to access their learning materials solely online. While most other states still have Schools of Distance Education (SDE) that will provide print based materials for families requiring them, not all SDE school's still have this option for families. Some DE schools do not supply print based material even if requested. If a family requires print based materials, they may enrol their children in another SDE which may not necessarily be their local SDE but does supply print material or is flexible with materials. When students are unable to attend their closest SDE, they can have difficulty accessing community or school activities where they would be able to interact with school friends more regularly.

Distance education students access their daily learning in a variety of ways, and most depend on a blend of learning materials determined by the school and communications infrastructure. Currently, a large portion of distance education students utilise Sky Muster satellite services for internet and are dependent on landline phones for the voice portion of their 'on air' lessons and supplementary sessions. To date, VoIP has not been highly successful for the voice portion of distance education lessons. VoIP among other things has latency issues, has been unreliable and depends on a power source at all times in order to work. Several Schools of Distance Education recommend that their students do not use VoIP for their school voice requirements. After the release of the Productivity Commission's Report into the Universal Service Obligation earlier in 2017, there has been great concern that the USO that ensures that landlines remain available to families with no other reliable telephony service may be dissolved and the future of landline phones uncertain. Working, well-maintained landline phone services are vital for students and families living in rural and remote areas as these landline services provide necessary voice access for distance education.

Distance education and specific education needs – without face-to-face teacher interaction, students in the distance education setting can potentially be ignored. As in many mainstream schools, distance education schools should have teachers trained in specific learning needs to assist in early identification and management of difficulties and can assist home tutors and teachers to adapt the curriculum and ensure it meets the needs and abilities of the student. Online lessons should be relevant, interactive, and achievable and engaging for all students and extension activities for some students could be conducted in extra lesson time. It is important for ALL students to have the opportunity to succeed.

As connectivity continues to improve it is anticipated that secondary subjects not being taught in rural schools will be accessible via distance education programs. Care should be taken not to assume this platform meets the learning needs of all students in rural and remote locations. Learning via distance education at the secondary level is not conducive to all learning styles. Students need to be independent, self-motivated learners if they are to achieve good results. While one or two subjects being taught through virtual classrooms can be beneficial, to go beyond that can be detrimental for many students, particularly when other life experiences are very limited in their community.

The Remote Air Subsidy Scheme²⁰ (RASS) is a service that improves access to education for distance education students by subsidising a regular, weekly air service which carries essential goods such as educational materials and is highly valued by the families and the more than 366 communities that it services. When programs such as RASS, which provide essential services to those living in remote areas and communities, are being evaluated, consideration must be given to the true lack of access to basic services and goods that the people in these areas have. Support for these programs must be maintained and the application guidelines must be practical for those isolated families seeking to access the service.

²⁰ <https://infrastructure.gov.au/aviation/regional/rass.aspx> .

Improving Access - Boarding Schools and School Term Hostels

Increasing and improving the provision of educational options and pathways for children in remote and isolated locations, present an immense challenge to authorities. The teenage years provide a critical window of opportunity for learning and growth, as children are becoming more independent of their parents and moving into adulthood. They are easily influenced by those around them and the opportunities available to them. Parents place a high priority on accessing education to ensure their children can reach their potential and grow into confident, capable adults, able to give back to society.

Since 1973, successive Australian Governments have provided financial support through the AIC Boarding Allowance to families with children who do not have reasonable daily access to an appropriate government school. Much has changed since the AIC scheme was first introduced; the duration of compulsory education has increased and the ability to access regional term hostels has decreased due to closures. Changes are needed to ensure that the AIC allowance meets the needs of families in the twenty-first century.

The Assistance for Isolated Children's (AIC) Scheme has previously been dealt with by the Department of Education and administered by Centrelink. The AIC is NOT a welfare payment but addresses equity of access to a quality education for rural and remote students. It is for this reason that the allowance is different to many other allowances. The AIC does not provide assistance to address multiple or long term social and welfare issues and has no correlation to providing a pathway to long term dependence; rather, the AIC is provided to assist with accessing education during the compulsory years of schooling and must be returned to the Department of Education and Training.

AIC Boarding Allowance

Two Boarding Allowances can be paid:

- **Basic Boarding Allowance** - assists families with students who must board away from home to study. AIC figures for December 2015 indicate that **4 572** students were in receipt of the Basic Boarding Allowance - **\$8 015** (2016 figure); and
- **Additional Boarding Allowance** - a means-tested supplementary payment to provide additional support for lower-income families who are in receipt of the Basic Boarding Allowance. In 2015, **1 140** students or a quarter of the students receiving the basic allowance received the AIC Additional Boarding Allowance - **\$1 533** (2016 figure). The income base limit is currently \$51 027. The allowance payable falls as the income rises until it caps at \$58 649.

Attending boarding school to access an appropriate education is a necessity (not a luxury) for many children from rural and remote areas due to the distance they are from appropriate face-to-face schooling on a daily basis. Rural and remote families are expressing a growing concern about the affordability of educating their children during the compulsory years of schooling when boarding is the only option. Alternatively, an increasing number of rural and remote families are separating, with the mother and children relocating to allow their child to attend school on a daily basis. This is a drastic measure by families to reduce educational expenses and negatively impacts the family unit, small communities and rural schools as the younger siblings move away from the area as well. These issues were highlighted in the ICPA (Aust) report "Boarding School Access Research for Geographically Isolated Students, April 2016"²¹.

²¹ <http://www.icpa.com.au/documents/download/1021/federal-icpa-portfolios/federal-boarding-portfolio/boarding-school-survey-results-april-2016.pdf>

Ongoing rural communities' stability and sustainability relies on the availability of affordable educational opportunities for their children. One of the key factors cited by families, and particularly by professional people, for relocating from rural and remote communities is the lack of affordable education opportunities that meets their children's needs.

Boarding school costs have increased greatly and rural and remote families are being asked to contribute significantly more towards the cost of their children's compulsory education. The disparity between the Assistance for Isolated Children Scheme (AIC) Boarding Allowance and the actual cost of boarding is widening exponentially. This increasing disparity is impacting on the intent and effectiveness of the AIC allowance to provide affordable and equitable access to education for geographically isolated families and assist these eligible families with the out-of-pocket expenses associated with accessing compulsory education when unable to attend an appropriate government school on a daily basis.

Australian Bureau of Statistics data show the CPI Education Sub-index is consistently and significantly higher than the (All Groups) CPI. For example, for the Jun Quarter 2016 to Jun Quarter 2017, the CPI was 1.9% while the Education sub-index was 3.3%. CPI-based increases in education allowances will therefore inevitably lead to the observed divergence between allowances and costs, as described above.

ICPA (Aust) recommends that the parental income limit for eligibility for the Additional Boarding Allowance be increased. The parental income threshold for the Additional Boarding Allowance of \$51 027 and capped at \$58 649 is far too low and not a reasonable income benchmark for rural and remote families. ICPA (Aust) feels it is imperative that the parental income figure be raised to a level which more accurately reflects a "low income". Recently, the government made a statement regarding the fair amount an overseas worker can expect to be paid while working in Australia and the amount was considered to be approximately \$53 000 per year with anything less being deemed inappropriate. It was stated that anything below the approximate \$53 000 per year would not allow a person to live within average means. If one overseas worker is unable to have appropriate means to live at a wage of less than \$53,000, then it should be reasonable to expect that any Australian earning less than \$53,000 per year would also be considered low income and therefore parental income, which combines the income of both parents, would suggest an amount in excess of \$106,000 may be necessary for a family to live within appropriate means. A more appropriate figure needs to be used for consideration of the AIC Additional Boarding parental income test.

The Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Allowances: Basic Boarding and Second Home Allowance must be increased significantly and the annual increase aligned with the CPI education sub-index.

Boarding facility funding for students with specific needs: While schools may be funded for the education of students with disabilities, boarding facilities are often not provided with extra resources to cater for these students. ICPA (Aust) advocates that additional resources be made available to boarding facilities for students who board away from home and are identified on the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability (NCCD). Broadly speaking a disability is classified as a condition that may require class or curriculum adjustment – for example this could include health conditions such as asthma, diabetes or allergies, mental health conditions and recognised cognitive learning difficulties. Boarding facilities play a significant role in supporting boarding students to participate fully in their education. It is reasonable therefore to suggest additional resources should be allocated to the boarding facilities as well as the school per se to support those boarders with a disability.

Rural Hardship Education Fund

During periods of drought, catastrophic fire, flood, cyclone and other rural hardship (unforeseen industry impacts – live export ban, dairy crisis), which can last for numerous years with long-term effects, families are finding it impossible to meet the costs of education of their children. Geographically isolated students should not be disadvantaged or unable to complete their schooling due to these unforeseen circumstances. Implications of this inability to meet schooling costs during these times include rising education cost debt (in many cases families going further into overdraft), children being removed from boarding school, splitting the family and moving to town in order to access schooling or in some cases choosing between siblings to send or keep at boarding school and the negative mental health effects of both parents and students already affected by the hardship due to the worry over finding the funds for schooling.

The introduction of a Rural Hardship Education Fund would address the grave concerns of the many families when under financial pressure due to times of long-term drought, periods of drought recovery and other rural hardships, who simply cannot afford to educate their children and will ensure educational continuity.

Mental health is a large concern in rural communities and struggling to pay educational fees exacerbates the pressure. There is parental anguish at not being able to fund a basic requirement for their children and the children themselves are well aware of the cost and financial sacrifice that their families are making in order for them to be educated, creating feelings of guilt and helplessness, a burden a child should not have to bear when it comes to education.

ICPA encourages the establishment of a Rural Hardship Education Fund to assist families when the out-of-pocket costs associated with educating children at boarding school cannot be met.

Removal of Fringe Benefits Tax - Employers Assisting with Educational Costs for Employees

In an effort to attract and retain staff in rural and remote locations, some employers offer their staff a financial contribution towards educational expenses of their children. However, these payments incur a fringe benefits tax which negatively impacts the intent of the contribution.

In some cases, the employer chooses to pay a higher wage/salary to the employee rather than incur the Fringe Benefit Tax on the education assistance. This is also problematic for families as it often puts them in a higher income bracket and can see them become ineligible for income-tested assistance such as the AIC Additional Boarding Allowance or Youth Allowance.

The removal of Fringe Benefit Tax on contributions to employees' children's education expenses is an initiative that will potentially encourage families to stay in the bush, improve recruitment and retention of families and inspire employers to contribute towards the increasingly high costs of boarding school. These outcomes would be consistent with 'Developing the North' aspirations.

Improving Access - Specific Education Needs

The diagnosis and treatment or management of specific education needs of rural and remote students falls short of parent and even teacher expectations. One of the contributing factors is access to professionals qualified to make assessments and recommendations. Families of students with special needs often meet serious barriers because their problems span both education and health systems. In many instances, neither the education nor the health system offer assistance with the travel and accommodation costs or professional fees associated with the diagnosis of a learning difficulty. YET without a diagnosis, resources cannot be allocated to supporting the student. Timely and affordable access to doctors, specialist medicos, speech pathologists, ophthalmologists, psychologists etc. is

always problematic for rural and remote families. Strong links between education and health sectors are vital for the best outcomes for students.

Frustrated ICPA members across Australia have provided ICPA (Aust) with many proposals to improve access to a high-quality education for students with specific education needs and their families:

- **Early identification and intervention** for learning difficulties (refer to Teachers and Teaching Section).
- **Distance education and small schools' teachers to be trained in recognising and catering for specific learning needs** such as dyslexia and that distance education supervisors be provided with information and support (refer to Teachers and Teaching Section).
- **Universities that provide teacher training should include modules such as Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASDs)** in their curriculum. With the alarming rate of increase in the diagnosis of ASD, a newly graduated teacher is likely to have a student with ASD in their class. Knowing how to manage this condition with an appropriate level of skills and knowledge in behaviour management strategies for ASD would provide beneficial outcomes for the whole class. This training could reduce teacher burnout and increase retention of teachers in rural and remote areas, as well as having obvious benefits to the student/s.
- **Workshops and seminars to assist students, families and teachers of children with specific learning needs including for gifted children.** Online delivery and improving communications may facilitate the delivery of workshops and seminars.
- **In 2015/16 the government agreed or agreed in principle to nearly all of the recommendations of the National Dyslexia Working Group.** ICPA (Aust) requests in implementing these recommendations, that provisions be made specifically for the student studying by distance education.
- **Ensure current funding models provide adequate funding for students with disabilities in boarding schools, distance education and rural and remote schools.** Sometimes having a disability in a remote area is referred to as having a 'double disability'.
- **Specialist services** – regular and timely access to special needs teachers and therapists is paramount. This could take the form of mobile teams of specialists and therapists. Online appointments have been proven to be appropriate in some instances such as mental health consultations and speech pathology. In some instances, the establishment of specific learning needs centres might be viable, such as Kintore St School in Katherine NT. Should specific learning needs centres be available then due consideration must also be given to accommodation for those accessing such centres. Adequate funding/resourcing for specialist services for both school and home-based therapy programs is necessary for their success.
- **Provision of incentives to attract and retain qualified professionals and specialised teachers** to rural and remote areas to enable continuity of specific learning needs programs.
- **The cooperation of ALL relevant agencies (government, private and voluntary) is required.** These students fall into the gap between education and health departments. For example, in the NT, a family with a child exhibiting a learning difficulty will not receive any assistance from the education department to travel to see a professional for assessment and diagnosis. Nor will they receive any assistance from the health department, even though they may be consulting a health professional, because the student's condition is not perceived as a medical problem.
- **The National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) adds a new dimension to the specific education needs field, however there are still some very grey areas and under-resourcing is still likely to affect access to an appropriate education for rural and remote students.** NDIS needs to cover reasonable travel and accommodation costs for geographically isolated families. Some participants in the Scheme may be attending school and require additional support as a result of their disability. The Scheme will fund supports that enable participants

to attend school education such as: assistance with self-care at school, specialist transport, transportable equipment and specialised or intensive support to transition between schools, or from school to post-school options. The education system has a responsibility to provide the staff and resources necessary for education per se. The NDIS participant's plan will include the supports the Scheme will fund for participants and those supports which are the responsibility of the education system. As AIC is also designed to support students to attend school education, in regional areas there may be some interaction between AIC entitlements and NDIS supports.

- **Telehealth services are offering exciting opportunities for delivering services to rural and remote students. Such services include speech pathology, mental health consultations, occupational therapy intervention to aid fine motor skill development and even capacity building to support educators and parents dealing with children experiencing difficulties.** Royal Far West and University of NSW are partnering to research the use of telehealth to provide intervention for children with behavioural and emotional difficulties. On the downside, the extent and advancement of service networks, internet capabilities in the bush and the Medicare system combine to create a lag in the widespread availability, accessibility and adoption of these technologies.
- **Medicare rebates** - From November 1, people in rural and regional Australia will be able to claim a Medicare rebate for online videoconferencing consultations with psychologists and other mental health professionals. This initiative will hopefully provide a precedent for other telehealth services where there is clear evidence of its effectiveness. At present, no rebate exists for Speech Language Pathology (SLP) via Telehealth delivery. However, research into one-on-one sessions for Allied Health appointments via Telehealth suggests it is as effective as face-to-face sessions. Parents can claim about \$52 per session for 5 sessions a year for face-to-face consultations, but no rebate exists for telehealth sessions. As Telehealth web conferencing is growing exponentially as a recognised mode of delivery, especially for rural and remote students, a Medicare rebate must be assigned to Telehealth appointments as a matter of urgency.

Diversity

6.8.1 Noting the findings of the Red dirt education project, what do you consider to be the purpose/role of education in remote communities?

In the case of rural and remote students studying via distance education, given the temptations lying just outside the school room door (property life, mustering, animals, among others things), online lessons and units of work must be engaging and inclusive. While students should emerge with some worldliness, the tailoring of coursework to ensure the interest and engagement of students is important. For example, agriculture in schools can serve to integrate many facets of the curriculum while being relevant to the rural student.

The Red Dirt Project found non-local teachers need to be 'contextually responsive' and recognising the importance of local language and culture of indigenous people. Similarly, the Distance education teacher needs to be cognisant of the context in which their students are responding; the lives their student's lead. In recent article in 'Light Out' the quarterly magazine of the Australian Boarding School's Association, Casey Brealy, a boarding school staff member talks about how important it is to build genuine and authentic relationships with students. She found a very effective means of doing this has been to visit boarding families. During a visit, one of her students said "You can tell someone

how much something means to you and people can read books, but until you come out and see it, and feel it and smell it, you don't understand truly". The importance of truly understanding where your students come from, Indigenous or not, cannot be understated in the boarding context, both in the boarding house and at school.

6.8.2 What does educational success look like in remote communities?

Educational success in remote communities would see students engaged in their education, and the promotion of positive role models/mentors within these communities. Teachers would choose to be there. Students would be reaching their potential and pursuing their aspirations. For some remote students, this may mean studying or training in their communities and remaining there. For others, this may mean studying or training elsewhere and they may or may not return. Remote students would have choices and not be limited by their geographic location. They would be encouraged to pursue their educational aspirations and provided with adequate resources and financial and emotional support to do so. Students, families, teachers and whole communities would work together, with the support of government and policy makers, to ensure successful educational outcomes for all students. For all bush kids though, indigenous or not, with the unique experience of being a rural and remote student, be assured their rural or remote community will be where their heart lies.

6.8.3 How can schools/teachers in rural and remote areas be supported to meet the individual learning needs of all students?

Diagnosis and management of specific education needs of rural and remote students. Schools and teachers need a tremendous amount of support from families and the health and education systems to best manage students with specific education needs or disabilities. The many suggestions regarding Improving Access –Specific Needs Education (under Question 6.7.2) would serve schools and teachers well in supporting the individual learning needs of these students. Ideally, having professionals who can straddle the health and education departments would assist teachers and families to navigate the process from early assessments through to diagnosis and interventions.

ICPA members have highlighted the need for student and parent workshops for gifted students. The Minister for Education and Training was contacted regarding this proposal last year and he responded saying that the matter should be raised in this review. The Gifted Education Research, Resource and Information Centre (GERRIC) at the University of New South Wales has been contacted by ICPA (Aust) regarding the potential for delivering workshops. Workshops such as those delivered by GERRIC 10 years ago were enormously useful in enabling both parents and remote staff to support gifted students emotionally, socially and academically. Indications from GERRIC are that our request is in keeping with their policy position. ICPA (Aust) would like to see this proposal introduced as soon as possible. Options for working with the University of New England School of Education are also being explored.

6.8.4 How can we create and sustain vibrant, high quality learning environments in rural and remote schools? *No reply*

6.8.5 What can be done to address the directional flow of rural and remote students towards cities?

Addressing the directional flow of rural and remote students towards cities is underpinned by the

very items which this review into rural and remote education is examining and the factors mentioned by ICPA (Aust) in this submission.

The focus should be NOT on ensuring rural students **stay rural**, but rather on attracting students, regardless of whether they are from a country or urban background, to rural and remote areas with their skills when on completion of their studies. Rural, remote and regional students should not feel locked in to only being able to study at the regional level and not being allowed to access higher educational opportunities in larger centres. Even if a completely comparable experience could be offered at the regional level, rural students should still be afforded the same choice as their city counterparts of studying where it best suits their needs. The main focus should be on attracting students and graduates from all backgrounds out to rural and remote areas by offering certainty of sustainable, vibrant communities, gainful employment and an opportunity to be valued for the skills they can provide.

In an environment where not only students, but entire families are leaving rural and remote areas to pursue 'superior' educational opportunities, it is clear that many aspects of education in these areas are lacking. Thus consideration needs to be taken to improve rural and remote education so that it is equitable to that received in urban Australia. This can only be done by taking into consideration and giving some autonomy to the very people who themselves are immersed within rural and remote communities and therefore best understand what is needed while supporting these stakeholders to be able to best implement these changes

This is where an alliance as suggested by ICPA (Aust) would be a suitable way forward, by bringing together those who have an intimate understanding of rural and remote education to support each other towards providing the best future outcomes.

Transitioning Beyond School

6.9.1 Are there changes that should be made to education, training and employment policies and practices which would improve post school opportunities for rural and remote young people?

Transitioning Beyond School – University

Engaging in tertiary education at an institution of choice, should be an option for all Australian students who have the ability, ambition, motivation and desire to pursue their goals regardless of their socio-economic status or geographic location. Ability to access education is one of the key considerations in determining whether a student can take up this option. The single greatest barrier to rural students' access to tertiary education is cost i.e. having inadequate means to meet those costs. Rural and remote students continue to be under-represented at tertiary level and face many barriers to accessing tertiary education including costs of relocation, tuition and living expenses, socio-economic status, distance from tertiary education institutions and preparedness.

Financial assistance is imperative to increase the engagement of rural and remote students in tertiary education. Some families are educating younger siblings at boarding schools as their older children enter higher education, exacerbating financial pressures. A family's ability to financially support their adult children while studying can be beyond their means.

Our members strongly voice that it is the high cost of accessing university that has the greatest impact on their ability to attend university. The findings outlined in a research report, Tertiary Access Research, May 2013²², conducted by ICPA (Aust), clearly supports this.

Students isolated from tertiary education due to location, must be recognised as a separate disadvantage group when assessing for Youth Allowance to address the distinctly unique requirements of rural and remote students. Those students, who must relocate to access a tertiary education should be able to access income support in their own right and must be considered independent of their parents for the purpose of accessing financial assistance once they commence their tertiary studies.

Youth Allowance, both dependent and independent provides financial assistance for many rural and remote students to access a tertiary education. ICPA (Aust) has welcomed the changes to dependent Youth Allowance eligibility criteria (removal of the Family Assets Test and the Family Actual Means Test and the changes to the Family Pool) in 2015 and further changes would ensure equity of access for rural and remote students.

Independent Youth Allowance – the Parental Income Test MUST BE removed from eligibility criteria for rural and remote students qualifying under the workforce participation criteria as it does not recognise that the student has proved their independence from their parents, does not take into account all siblings of the applicant, being supported at primary, secondary, or tertiary levels (Family Pool) and is not indexed.

Tertiary Access Allowance

The introduction of the Relocation Scholarships was an acknowledgement by the Government that relocation has an associated cost and can pose a real barrier when accessing higher education. Currently it is only available for recipients of dependent Youth Allowance yet does not adequately recognise the additional costs incurred by all rural and remote students having to relocate each year to access higher education. The high up-front set-up and ongoing costs associated with relocation: travel, securing accommodation set-up costs (rental housing bond, electricity connection or residential college fees), living expenses and communication (telephone, internet) along with the rising costs of basic living commodities, are all impacting on rural and remote student access. Some of these costs are borne not only in the first year of a student's course but are recurrent over the duration of their tertiary education.

Despite recent changes to the youth allowance criteria, designed to assist rural and remote students, ICPA will continue to advocate for the introduction of a Tertiary Access Allowance, equal to the Relocation Scholarship for those rural and remote students who must relocate and live away from home to access a tertiary education and not be contingent on the receipt of dependent Youth Allowance.

Online Tertiary Education

There are numerous benefits for students studying online from home, such as affordability, choice, ease of access, the potential to speed up learning and allow students to enter the workforce more rapidly and the ability to better balance work and family demands due to flexibility in course delivery options. For certain students, some or all of these elements may be beneficial as they undertake their tertiary study, however online tertiary education is not appropriate for everyone or every course and it is important that online learning is seen as an option for students and not a replacement for face-to-face, on-campus attendance. The opportunity to partake in campus social, sporting cultural and

²² <http://www.icpa.com.au/documents/download/779/federal-icpa-portfolios/federal-tertiary-portfolio/icpa-tertiary-access-research-may-2013.pdf>

academic life is seen by many students as a vital component of tertiary study and contact with both academics and peers are a critical element of both relationship building and personal development. These factors can be seen as even more important when considering rural and remote students who may have spent their entire formal education in a one teacher school or home classroom. Studying online is reliant on efficient, effective and affordable internet services.

ICPA (Aust) supports the expansion of regional learning hubs to assist in online learning. However, it is critically important that online learning remains as an option for rural and remote students and not a replacement for face-to-face, on-campus learning.

Transitioning to Tertiary Education

Information on Post-Compulsory pathways is imperative to allow rural and remote students to make informed decisions about courses available, course delivery options, institutions to apply to, entrance requirements, alternative entrance options (early entry, school recommendations and scholarship entry), application processes, course costs, accommodation options, campus facilities and support available.

Information must be delivered in different modes (phone, on-line, face-to-face or through schools, teachers or career advisors) to cater for rural and remote students. Many of these rural and remote students cannot attend open days or have poor internet capacity limiting their options for virtual tours and web conferencing, to gain course information or assistance with applications. Having “student mentors” that prospective students can access to enquire about how courses operate and the university itself can be very helpful. A national platform for all information will ensure consistency.

A national approach to managing applications across borders would simplify our students’ applications to their chosen tertiary institution, especially if applying interstate. Many rural and remote students planning on a tertiary education, by nature of where they live, do not necessarily go to an institution in their home state.

Isolation brings communication issues so it is important to have an appropriate and effective range of communication options. For boarding students, this information needs to be accessible to both parents and students to facilitate parents to assist their children with both understanding the information and decision making. This would also ensure consistency of information. ICPA (Aust) would encourage the timely implementation of the “Improving the Transparency of Higher Education Admissions” recommendations.

Improve pathways to a quality Tertiary Education

ICPA (Aust) was very grateful for the introduction of Rural and Regional Enterprise Scholarships to improve access to educational opportunities for regional, rural and remote students, announced as part of the Election Commitment in June 2016.

However, it must be noted that at present, degrees in Agricultural Science or Veterinary Science are not eligible for HECS-HELP relief as are most other science, maths, nursing and education courses. HECS-HELP Benefit is a reduction in HECS Debt that is available for up to 5 years after graduation. To be eligible you must have graduated from an eligible course in Maths, Science, Education or Nursing and you must be employed in specific and relevant occupations.

The reduction to HECS debt is significant, for example, in the 2015/16 year the maximum available is \$1 798.48 and the 2016/17 year is \$1 825.46, depending on the number of weeks worked. Agricultural Scientist and Agronomist are both listed as eligible occupations.

Animal Science, Wine Science, Environmental Science, Marine Science and just about every other science is listed as an eligible course but not Agricultural or Veterinary Science. How is it possible to be an Agricultural Scientist or an Agronomist without studying an Agricultural Science degree? Agricultural Science as well as Veterinary Science may have been precluded from the list of eligible courses accidentally and some mention of this may trigger their inclusion.

Transitioning Beyond School - Training

Engaging in vocational education and training (VET) sector should be an option for all young Australians to pursue who have the ability and desire to succeed in apprenticeship or training vocation, regardless of their socio-economic status or geographic location. However, for many students living in rural and remote areas it is proving difficult to undertake training opportunities due to their inability to meet relocation, tuition and living expenses.

Rural and remote apprentices and VET students experience significant disadvantage in their efforts to pursue their chosen courses.

- Relocation - as with tertiary students, it is necessary for the majority of these students to relocate to larger centres to access training centres and businesses with the capacity to train them, incurring high costs.
- Course practicums - Many of these apprentices have further costs when attending course placements, as a consequence the cost of travel and additional accommodation are a significant impost and often impossible to fund without outside help from employers or family. Recognition needs to be made that rural and remote students may need to relocate to short-term accommodation while attending training institutions and/or compulsory practicums away from their usual residence.
- Additional expenses - While VET FEE-HELP is useful paying the upfront course costs, it does not assist with living expenses or with the costs of accessing the courses. Recognition needs to be made that rural and remote students may need to relocate and source accommodation while attending training institutions away from home. Access costs are typically a major deterrent to rural and remote students participating in the VET system at the same rate as their metropolitan peers who can often live at home while attending training colleges/centres, at much lower living costs than for rural students who need to move away from home in order to participate in a training course.
- VET students are unable to access the Relocation Scholarship. Youth Allowance (YA) is accessible as long as it is a fulltime course and they meet the independent or dependent criteria.
- Providers – ongoing regulation of the VET/apprenticeship providers is welcomed.
- Rural and remote students who often live great distances from training centres and have poor internet and communication services, need access to various means of delivery. A variety of communication means need to be employed to support our rural and remote students.
 - By way of example: A remote-living Cert IV Vet Nursing student has enrolled in an online course; completing much of the theory online (with unreliable internet) whilst being employed by her parents. Being too far from town for the usual urban one day/week work placement to be practical, she has to relocate to a town for 3 months to complete the UNPAID work placement requirements of the course. The course was classified as part-time so she was ineligible for Youth Allowance. She had no assistance with relocation and living costs and could do little paid work because of time required to complete both the theory and practical components of the course.

Affordable access to training is vital to building sustainable rural and remote communities. Potentially, many VET students will return to rural areas post-training, bringing back skills to the community and help to strengthen their communities. This in turn assists in further attracting and retaining residents, thereby boosting the economic and social sustainability of these communities.

The following points must be considered in order to support students who relocated for training:

- The needs of VET students living in rural and remote locations differ considerably to those living in urban areas and recognition of these needs through separate targeted funding is vital
- Financial assistance to re-locate to access their chosen apprenticeship which doesn't have to be re-paid unlike the Trade Support Loan
- Financial assistance with re-location for short-term compulsory practicums of approved courses
- Strategically placed regional hubs be available for online learning/support as communication is a major problem in many areas
- VET students studying approved courses able to access the Relocation Scholarship
- Financial assistance with attracting suitable, qualified staff to rural and remote areas enabling students to engage with educators with skills relevant to courses studied.

6.9.2 Are there innovative models of accommodation delivery that could benefit rural and remote tertiary students studying away from home?

The college environment is the accommodation of choice for many rural and remote students and for some, it is their only option. College accommodation provides an educational, pastoral and social support network which many rural and remote students seek.

Accessing a tertiary education for many students from rural and remote Australia involves relocating away from the family home and travelling to a major centre. For these students, leaving home, beginning university and also trying to find accommodation just prior to the university commencement date can be competitive, stressful, time consuming and costly. The uncertainty of not having secured residential places at college and the anxious wait for confirmation until just before university courses begin makes the planning process more difficult and if unsuccessful students then have to search for private rental accommodation off campus which is at a premium. The necessity to find alternative accommodation has resulted in students deferring, not pursuing their courses or withdrawing and this has contributed to the lower participation at tertiary level of rural and remote students compared to their metropolitan counterparts.

We appreciate that many university colleges do acknowledge the difficulty that rural and remote students face when relocating to university and some do offer early entry and allocated places for these students once they have acceptance of their university course place. ICPA (Aust) understands that each college has their own application process, which generally involves an interview and we are not suggesting to change that process.

ICPA (Aust) continues to encourage colleges located in the metropolitan centres to offer early entry/provisional places even before these students have acknowledgement of their university course place. For example, Curtin University, Perth, WA is currently offering rural students who are applying for entrance to Curtin via the ATAR examinations, a provisional Offer of Accommodation for on-campus housing, even before they have been offered a place at Curtin. Once examination results are published and academic offers are sent out by the University, the applicants have 48 hours to confirm their acceptance of a room.

ICPA (Aust) has asked colleges to either consider the introduction of an early entry scheme for rural and remote students by offering early confirmation or allocate a higher distribution of residential accommodation places to rural and remote students, to ensure they have a place in a metropolitan residential college when a university course place is offered.

6.9.3 What can be done to address the directional flow of rural and remote students moving to cities for further education and/or training?

For students living in rural and remote locations there will most likely always be a need to relocate in order to access further study or training due to limited universities, training centres and opportunities where they live. Whether students relocate to a regional centre or a city, a cost to relocate is involved. The chosen study location often comes down to course availability and being accepted into their chosen course. As discussed earlier with advancing communication services, learning online may become another option available to rural and remote students but one that shouldn't be seen as meeting all students' educational needs.

Further Regional Study Hubs, which were announced in the 2017-2018 Federal Budget, will also assist some students to remain in regional areas in order to access higher education. These eight Regional Study Hubs (six new Hubs as well as the two already in existence) are designed provide the infrastructure and study support necessary to support regional students to study courses locally, delivered by distance online from any Australian university. However, it must be remembered that most students who live in rural and remote areas would still be required to relocate considerable distances even if they chose to study at a Regional Study Hub or Regional University.

The focus should be NOT on ensuring rural students do not move to the city, but rather on attracting students, regardless of whether they are from a rural or urban background, to locate to rural and remote areas with their skills on completion of their studies. Rural, remote and regional students should not feel locked in to only being able to study at the regional level and not being allowed to access higher educational opportunity in larger centres. Even if a completely comparable experience could be offered at the regional level, rural students should still be afforded the same choice as their city counterparts of studying where it best suits their need. The main focus should be on attracting graduates from all backgrounds to rural and remote areas by offering certainty of sustainable, vibrant communities, gainful employment and an opportunity to be valued for the skills they can provide.

Conclusion

ICPA (Aust) welcomed the opportunity to share our knowledge and ideas on how educational outcomes for rural and remote students might be improved and how families who aspire to a sustainable and prosperous industry in which they live, could be better supported when accessing education for their children. We are more than happy to provide additional information on any of the topics we have raised and look forward to reading the recommendations that will be presented to government following this review.