

Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia Inc.

"Access to Education"



Submission

to the

Economics References Committee Inquiry

into

Regional Inequality in Australia

from the

Federal Council

of the

Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia Inc.

ICPA (Aust)

April 2018

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Introduction to the Isolated Children’s Parents’ Association of Australia, ICPA (Aust)

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 2500 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 to ensure educational delivery of a consistently 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 is a significant factor leading to families leaving rural 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. Attempts to address inequities in the provision of quality education will not succeed 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 classified as *vulnerable* because they are not impacted by extreme levels of poverty. *But*, due to geographic isolation from services, many rural and remote families are expected to carry a level of out-of-pocket costs not experienced by urban families for the education of their children from early childhood through to tertiary education.

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. Many programs do not reach locations where the programs are costly to administer, and jurisdictions are not providing additional funding to ensure program objectives are met. Poor communication services also impact greatly on 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.

Professor Halsey in his report into the Independent Review of Regional, Rural and Remote Education (IRRRRE)

https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/01218_independent_review_accessible.pdf states, “*The national statistics show there is a persistent relationship between location and educational outcomes when data for the various measures is aggregated.*” ICPA (Aust) hopes that as a result of this Review, action will follow to ensure improvement in educational outcomes for all students in rural and remote Australia.

The cost of travel to access education for average rural residents can be between two and seven times that of their urban counterparts. The National Institute of Economic and Industry Research (NIER) (2009) *Essential Services in Urban and Regional Australia – A Quantitative Comparison Research Report*

<http://www.farminstitute.org.au/publications-1/research-reports/essential-services-in-urban-and-regional-australia-a-quantitative-comparison> found the cost of accessing preschool and primary schools in rural areas is at least twice that in urban areas, rising to the costs of accessing secondary schools being 6.9 times greater for rural residents. Costs obviously increase substantially with remoteness. This particular report only considers travel costs; accommodation, boarding, tuition, books, uniforms etc are additional.

Closing the rural and urban divide must be a priority focus for all children in our isolated communities; ensuring access to a continuing and appropriate education is determined by aspirations and abilities not geographic location of the home.

Executive Summary

“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.” Barnaby Joyce (2016)

With regard to the **Terms of Reference** to this inquiry, ICPA (Aust)’s focus in the following submission will be on the indicators of, and impact of, regional inequality in Australia, with particular reference to government policies and programs in the area of **Education**. Inequality in education impacts **building human capital** and **enhancing local workforce skills** in rural areas. Further, education is one of the greatest predictors of health. Inequality or inequity experienced by regional families educating their family is extensive. As a result, this submission is broad-ranging, comprehensive and expansive.

There are key barriers and challenges impacting on the educational outcomes for students living beyond regional centres for those accessing small rural schools or taking part in distance education programs on isolated stations for their primary school years. Most of these students will board away from home in hostels and boarding schools for their secondary schooling. While similarities are seen across all locations, the disadvantage becomes greater the further students are from educational services.

Regional inequality in education arises from:

- Access to education
- Costs of education – social, emotional and financial
- Educational outcomes and opportunities.

ICPA (Aust)’s submission explores manifestations of regional education inequality under the following headings:

- Boarding including hostels and second home
- Communications
- Curriculum
- Distance education
- Early childhood
- Rural schools
- Specific needs
- Tertiary and training
- Miscellaneous

1. Boarding, hostels, second home

- 1.1 Regional inequality in access to secondary education
- 1.2 Boarding facility funding for students with disabilities
- 1.3 Fringe Benefits Tax
- 1.4 Rural hardship

2. Communications

- 2.1 Regional inequality of internet services
- 2.2 Mobile coverage and telephony
- 2.3 Small Rural schools’ Information and Communication Technology

3. Curriculum

- 3.1 Regional inequality in access to and choice of curriculum
- 3.2 NAPLAN
- 3.3 Teachers and Teaching

4. Distance education

- 4.1 Regional inequality in distance education
- 4.2 Distance Education Tutor
- 4.3 Improving Access to Distance Education programs
- 4.4 Child care programs
- 4.5 Working holiday visa conditions
- 4.6 National Working with Children Check

5. Early childhood

- 5.1 Regional inequality in early childhood education
- 5.2 Early learning through distance education programs
- 5.3 Early learning services in rural and remote locations
- 5.4 Mobile early learning services

6. Rural schools

- 6.1 Regional inequality in rural schools
- 6.2 Teacher incentives
- 6.3 Teacher preparedness and retention
- 6.4 Regional communities and rural schools
- 6.5 Limitations of rural/remote secondary schools

7. Specific needs

- 7.1 Early diagnosis
- 7.2 Access to specialists
- 7.3 Teacher training

8. Tertiary and Training

- 8.1 Regional inequality in tertiary education
- 8.2 Allowances and accommodation
- 8.3 Training
- 8.4 Regional communities and further education

9. Miscellaneous

- 9.1 The **Education Index** is consistently higher than the Consumer Price Index (CPI). Education-related allowances, where they exist, if they increase at all, typically increase with CPI.
- 9.2 A **National Rural Education Alliance**, led by a Commissioner, would enable education of students of rural, remote and regional Australia to be at the forefront of government policy considerations. Inequalities in regional education could be more effectively addressed and a collaborative approach to finding solutions would ultimately equalise educational outcomes for children in the bush. Rural and remote education must be placed on a separate register when delivering and funding education for rural and remote students.
- 9.3 **Roads** in regional Australia are often in a poor state of repair and even dangerous. Physical access to and from towns and departure points can seriously affect the ability of families to access education, and the ability of educators to access regional students.

9.4 **Regional Airfares** have been the subject of a recent Inquiry into Regional Airfares. ICPA (Aust) made a detailed submission to the Inquiry. The cost of travel to and from boarding schools, tertiary education and training placements can be astronomical.

9.5 **A Coalition election commitment of \$44.7M** is yet to be allocated. ICPA (Aust) has provided some costed ideas on how this promised funding could best assist isolated students and their families.

9.6 Rural/urban drift

The Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia, ICPA (Aust), welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Economics References Committee Inquiry into Regional Inequality in Australia.

1. Boarding, hostels, second homes

- 1.1 Regional inequality in access to secondary education
- 1.2 Boarding facility funding for students with disabilities
- 1.3 Fringe benefits tax
- 1.4 Rural hardship

1.1 Regional inequality in access to secondary education

- Many regional families need to access boarding schools in order to provide a secondary education for their children.
- A lesser number of families may choose to board in hostels or establish a second home closer to a high school.
- Accessing boarding school, in particular, is a prime example of the inequality in the costs of accessing a secondary education for regional versus urban families.

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 Assistance for Isolated Children (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, the age of students starting secondary school has decreased due to the introduction of 'middle years' and the ability to access regional term hostels has reduced due to closures. **Changes are needed to ensure the AIC allowance meets the needs of families** in the twenty-first century.

In recent years the Assistance for Isolated Children Scheme (AIC) was moved from the (Federal) Department of Education and Training and its policy is now managed by the Department of Social Services and administered through 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. Recipients may have no other association with Centrelink. The AIC does not provide assistance to address multiple or long term social and welfare issues and has no correlation with 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.**

According to rural and remote families surveyed by ICPA (Aust) in 2016, the tuition and boarding fees alone to attend boarding school (without travel, books, uniforms, excursions and extra-curricular activities) after state and commonwealth access allowances have been deducted, average from \$17,000-\$35,000 per annum per student. These out-of-pocket costs are highlighted in the ICPA (Aust) report *Boarding School Access Research for Geographically Isolated Students, April 2016*. <https://www.icpa.com.au/page/attachment/82/final-boarding-school-survey-icpa-aust-with-comments-2016>

AIC Boarding Allowance

Two AIC Boarding Allowances are available:

- **Basic Boarding Allowance** - assists families with students who must board away from home to study. AIC figures for December 2017 indicate that 5,211 students were in receipt of the Basic Boarding Allowance of **\$8,249** (2018 figure)
- **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 2017, 1303 students or a quarter of the students receiving the basic allowance received the AIC Additional Boarding Allowance - **\$2366** (2018 figure). The parental income base limit is currently \$52,706. For income over the base rate, the amount of the allowance reduces by 20 cents per dollar of income over the base rate and also depends on the number of children in the 'Family Pool'.

<https://www.humanservices.gov.au/individuals/enablers/parental-means-test-assistance-isolated-children-scheme>.

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.

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 professionals, for relocating from rural and remote communities is the lack of affordable education opportunities that meet 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.

ICPA (Aust) recommends the parental income limit for eligibility for the Additional Boarding Allowance be increased. The parental income threshold for the Additional Boarding Allowance of \$52,706 which is capped at approximately \$64,536 depending on the number of children in the Family Pool, is far too low and not a reasonable income benchmark for rural and remote families. The parental income figure must be raised to a level which more accurately reflects a *low income*. The Department of Immigration stipulates a 457 visa-holder must be paid at least \$53,900 per annum: the *minimum* amount the Australian Government has determined one requires to live in Australia in 2017/18. If a single overseas worker is decreed unable to live on a wage of less than \$53,900 per annum, it is reasonable to expect an Australian earning less than \$53,900 per annum would be considered low income. Logically, in the context of AIC parental income (the income of *both* parents), a threshold of at least \$107,800 is necessary for a family to live within appropriate means.

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.

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 June Quarter 2016 to June 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.

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 to keep 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 \$10,615 per year (\$8,249 Basic Boarding Allowance plus \$2366 Additional Boarding Allowance if the family qualifies), which goes some way to meet the costs associated with boarding students' great distances from home.

Students who board away from home, despite attending larger schools where they may be have access to wider experiences and assistance of career advisers etc., 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 be influenced by the choices of their peers.

1.2 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 e.g. 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. Additional resources should be allocated to the boarding facilities as well as the school *per se* to support boarders with a disability.

The need for improved mental health services for young people from regional, rural and remote areas has also increased. The current spotlight on boarders' mental health after the tragic suicide of Dolly Everett makes this suggestion from ICPA (Aust) to address the inequities in access to education even more of an imperative. At present there is not a dedicated mental health section to assist regional, rural and remote students with the unique challenges that they encounter as they try to access education or try to adjust to being so far away from their family and home. Geographically isolated students with rural backgrounds often along with their families, experience devastating fire, flood, drought, industry crisis as well as financial hardship. The pressure of knowing the cost of their

education and the financial struggle this brings to their family, is a significant weight for these students to bear alongside of the feelings of guilt they may feel for not being at home helping where they are needed. In addition to this, rural and remote students often go away to school having had large responsibilities on the family property or in the family business, and a 'wisdom beyond their years' but also can be lacking in social experiences that provide them with the skills to adequately cope with bullying and other situations they may face.

1.3 Fringe Benefits Tax

Exemption from Fringe Benefits Tax (FBT) - 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 employer and the intent of the contribution.

In some cases, the employer chooses to pay a higher wage/salary to the employee rather than incur the FBT on the education assistance. This is also problematic for families as a higher income bracket could affect eligibility for income-tested assistance such as the AIC Additional Boarding Allowance or Youth Allowance.

The Australian Tax Office states some benefits, for example, living away from home allowance, receive concessional treatment in relation to Fringe Benefits Tax (FBT). ICPA (Aust) recommends that benefits paid by an employer to assist an employee with the costs of having their child 'living away from home' for education could be treated in a similar way.

The removal of Fringe Benefits Tax on contributions to employees' children's education expenses 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.

Exemption from Fringe Benefits Tax – Schools/boarding facilities providing accommodation for staff

For many years ICPA (Aust) has lobbied the Federal Government to change policy on Fringe Benefits Tax (FBT) as it applies to essential boarding school staff required to 'live in' to perform their duty of care of residential students in metropolitan boarding institutions. This tax is negatively impacting on the cost of an equitable education for isolated students.

The burden of these taxes is especially onerous given that they are levied on the day-to-day living and employment expenses that boarding schools incur and come on top of already significant costs that families must meet. In addition, the taxes appear to be levied across sectors in a most inequitable and ad hoc manner. For example, FBT on boarding supervisors' accommodation adds an estimated \$1000 per year to the cost of school fees, yet it is not levied on aged care facilities or military establishments. As another example, GST is levied on boarding school food, yet not on the food provided in aged care facilities.

1.4 Rural Hardship

Events such as drought, catastrophic fire, flood, cyclone and other rural disasters e.g. unforeseen industry impacts of live export ban or dairy crisis, can last for numerous years with long-term effects on regional families. Families affected by such events are placed under incredible duress in trying to meet the costs of education of their children. Geographically isolated students should not be disadvantaged or unable to complete their schooling due to such circumstances.

Implications of this inability to meet schooling costs during these toughest 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
- choosing between siblings to send or keep at boarding school and
- negative mental health effects on both parents and students already affected by the hardship event/s is exacerbated by the worry of funding schooling.

The introduction of a **Rural Hardship Education Fund** would ensure educational continuity for children of the many families 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 any more.

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 as a result of rural hardship conditions.

2. Information and Communications Technology (ICT)

- 2.1 Regional inequality of internet services
- 2.2 Mobile coverage and telephony
- 2.3 Small schools' ICT

2.1 Regional inequality of internet services

Students of rural and remote Australia 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 with no access to any mobile network and the majority would also be in the 3% of the population who will rely on satellite to access the internet. These people however, occupy over 98% of the Australia's landmass.

Our member families also attend small rural schools 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. Quite a few rural small schools are not in mobile coverage areas and struggle to receive adequate internet service.

Some of our members are still experiencing problems with ongoing use of the Sky Muster™ satellite internet services including dropouts, poor speeds, slowed services, insufficient data amounts and connection difficulties. There are also ongoing issues around the quality and reliability of the software utilised in some states distance education lessons on the **nbn™** Sky Muster™ satellite service.

Commonplace online activities for those living in cities such as watching lectures, banking, cloud computing, working on research projects or watching television, are nearly impossible for those not very far from the cities themselves. Unlimited internet plans are available in cities, however, are unheard of in regional areas.

Internet connectivity is the key to providing regional 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 comparable opportunities afforded to those children in highly-connected urban settings. **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 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. The Education Port is provided on Sky Muster™ satellite installations for distance education students. The quality of the distance education experience is also determined by the video-conferencing software used by each State Education Department; Western Australia uses Centra Symposium, which South Australia found unsuitable. South Australia uses Webex, the Northern Territory and New South Wales use REACT (a purpose-built Distance Education delivery program) and Queensland uses Blackboard Collaborate. Costs are one factor affecting the State's adoption of one form of delivery over another. Some states' Departments of Education provide hardware and internet connections for interactive distance learning and others require families to provide both hardware and internet. Naturally, the latter involves costs to families. More co-operation between states would avoid the wheel being reinvented. It is also essential that with a digital curriculum, each platform for delivery provides equitable access and quality for students across Australia.

Education Port for non-distance education students

The provision of an Education Port is a huge assistance for those studying via distance education however it is not currently available to students' 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, the internet could be a great equaliser but instead of bridging the divide it is in fact accentuating the widening gap. 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.

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.

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 2017, by the former 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 on mobile broadband. This has assisted many families who need to access their curriculum this way by allowing them to reduce data usage significantly, however only those in a mobile footprint are able to take advantage of this benefit.

Support services

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. Service providers responding to regional customer queries, concerns and issues MUST have a comprehensive understanding of their clientele's regional circumstances. **nbn™** has recently acknowledged this need by establishing 'nbn™ local'; a new team dedicated to improving the customer experience on the **nbn™** access network for regional and remote Australia.

The offering of tailored 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.

2.2 Mobile coverage and telephony

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 lucky enough to have it as it affords a backup for the voice and data services of 'on-air' lessons when landlines and/or internet services 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). Many educational sites are unmetered by Telstra; a boon for many families that are able to access their curriculum this way.

The selection of priority regions for the implementation of Mobile Phone coverage should include a **priority for rural and remote schools** currently without mobile phone service. Most rural and remote schools are evacuation points in the event of emergencies occurring in the district.

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 their School of Distance Education. As 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 and regional families.

2.3 Small Rural Schools' ICT

Educational outcomes in small communities are compromised by the absence of adequate internet connectivity in their local schools. In regional areas, specialist subjects e.g. languages and music, require technology because specialist teachers are based elsewhere. Interaction with specialist teachers cannot be accessed consistently, if at all, in some small schools. 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.

Professor Halsey in his IRRRRE report states, *"ICT access is an issue not just for schools, but also for homes with school-aged children who attend day/boarding schools as well as those who study through distance education or home-schooling. NBN Co has recently expanded eligibility to include home-schooled students who are isolated for geographic/medical reasons."*

Online NAPLAN, which is being rolled out across all states 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 through digital extension is also not possible in many schools' due to unreliable internet.

ICT in regional Australia is a whole of government problem as it goes to the very heart of keeping our rural communities and schools alive. **Reliable, fast, affordable connectivity in the modern era is necessary to provide an urban-comparable education in rural and remote schools.**

3. Curriculum

3.1 Regional inequality in access to and choice of curriculum

3.2 NAPLAN

3.3 Teachers and Teaching

3.1 Regional inequality in access to and choice of curriculum

Regional inequality in access to and choice of curriculum options arises from difficulties attracting and retaining mainstream teachers as well as specialist teachers. Even for students in regional towns with high schools, boarding schools in metropolitan areas can offer a greater breadth of curriculum and extra-curricular offerings. Curriculum is often one of the reasons cited in the selection of a particular boarding school. Students opting to stay in regional areas for secondary school may need to access some subjects online or by teleconferencing with classes delivered by a teacher based elsewhere. ICPA (Aust) is adamant every student is different and regional families must have choices in order to see their children achieve their potential.

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.

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 etc.), 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.

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. In 2017, Minister Birmingham announced the introduction of the assessment of phonological awareness in Year 1 and stated, "The Australian Government is committed to introducing the Year 1 check to ensure that every parent and teacher is able to judge if a student is receiving effective literacy and numeracy instruction in the early years of schooling. It will identify, as early as possible, those students experiencing difficulties in literacy and numeracy so that appropriate intervention strategies can be put in place before the achievement gap grows."

https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/faqs_year_1_check_-_for_website_-_updated_31082017_clean_0.pdf.

Support for teachers is 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 invest \$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. The incorporation of

Agriculture into the Curriculum can assist with engagement of regional students and can broaden the aspirations of urban students to consider vocations in regional areas: potentially having a positive impact on the workforce, human capital and economic viability of rural communities.

New optional area of learning for year 9 and 10 students: Work Studies Years 9–10 <https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/work-studies/introduction/> 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.

Safe driving practices in high school curriculum

At our recent conference, ICPA members proposed that topics essential to safe driving practices be incorporated into the high school curriculum, stating: *'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: defensive driving practices, safe driving practices, basic first aid, basic car maintenance and obtaining your Learner's Permit.

Modified Curriculum: In remote communities with high schools, the curriculum is often modified to meet the educational and life-skills needs of indigenous students, in order to address poor outcomes. Such high schools may be declared *Bypass* or *Limited Program Schools* by government, which allows some families who live relatively close to the school to be eligible for AIC and to school their children elsewhere. In some communities, declaration of a bypass school is controversial. One argument maintains enabling families to access the allowances to send children elsewhere for schooling is detrimental to a small community. Conversely, it is argued keeping some children in the community is detrimental to their education. ICPA (Aust)'s firm stance is families and students living in or near these communities must have a real **choice** when accessing education while living in these locations.

3.2 NAPLAN

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. A 2016 report by the Grattan Institute (VIC), *Widening gaps: what NAPLAN tells us about student progress* <https://grattan.edu.au/report/widening-gaps/> outlines a number of **concerns for rural and remote students** and how changes might be implemented. The report states, *"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 and teachers enormously.

Students identified as high achievers in NAPLAN: Addressing the needs of students who are performing well below the national benchmark is very important. Also, 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.

3.3 Teachers and teaching

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.

Further information on Teachers and Teaching and other topics relating to rural and remote education inequalities were included in our submission to the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education.

<https://www.icpa.com.au/documents/download/1094/federal-submissions/federal-submissions-2017/submission-independent-review-into-regional-rural-and-remote-education-2017.pdf>

4. Distance Education

- 4.1 Regional inequality in distance education
- 4.2 Distance Education Tutor
- 4.3 Improving Access to Distance Education programs
- 4.4 Child care programs
- 4.5 Working holiday visa conditions
- 4.6 National Working with Children Check

4.1 Regional inequality in distance education

Regional inequality in distance education arises from the significant cost to geographically isolated families with no choice other than to educate their children via a distance education program. Further inequalities arise from the extreme paucity of child care services for younger siblings and the cost and rigidity of In Home Care programs and the exclusion of nannies and governesses from agricultural work in working holiday visa dispensations. These inequalities are very real factors affecting the retention of families in rural and remote communities and have workforce implications. ICPA (Aust) has developed several proposals to help alleviate these inequalities which are outlined below.

‘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.

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

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.

4.2 Distance Education Tutor

Families undertaking distance education are required to provide a supervisor for the home school room, usually known as the ‘home tutor’ or ‘distance education tutor’. This role is a full-time, demanding and long-term commitment. Often the role is filled by the mother who is then foregoing an opportunity to be a wage earner or to work on a family farm. Families may have to employ more staff to compensate for the loss of the mother from the workforce. Alternatively, some families may choose to employ a home tutor, usually a governess. Whether through foregoing a wage, employment of more staff or employment of a home tutor, the cost to families of distance education cannot be underestimated. Also, significant numbers of families leave rural and remote areas or split up families rather than tackle distance education. Sometimes they have tried and failed or cannot afford the loss of a wage-earner or a carer for younger siblings.

While it is important to improve retention of top teachers in rural locations, the individuals 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. While often not qualified teachers, home tutors are undeniably on the front line of children’s education 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 acknowledged through both financial incentives and a formal recognition of their skills. 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.

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 (AIC) 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 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. ICPA (Aust) advocates the introduction of a Distance Education Teaching Allowance (\$6,000 per family per annum), as financial recognition of the essential work a tutor performs. This is a small cost, considering these families are filling a role the government cannot.

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.

This was mentioned in Professor Halsey's report into the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education (IRRRRE) where he said, *"After discussions with a number of these parents as part of the Review and on previous occasions as well as through reading submissions, it is time to formally recognise their expertise. A way to do this is by using the established protocols of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) as detailed in the Australian Qualifications Framework. (AQF) Regulatory and accreditation bodies would need to work with states and territories to ensure the necessary compliance and quality teaching requirements are met.*

The RPL process should not be onerous but provide sufficient evidence to enable a confident determination of the level of an award, for example, a portfolio of the learning and skills a person has developed through being a distance education home tutor and an opportunity to speak about their experiences. The DE School they are associated with, or were, could be invited to assist with verification as well as determining the award. The criteria for AQF level 3 or 4 appear to be a good fit."

The role of distance education tutor/supervisor in the home classroom does not meet the 'teaching criteria' for recognised teaching time. 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 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.

Pre-service teachers and those who already hold teaching accreditation could be supervised remotely by a principal or senior teacher at the School of Distance Education (SDE) they are working with to allow the logging of their teaching hours (even if at an adjusted rate). This 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.

Distance Education tutors need ongoing support from the Schools of Distance 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.

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.

Furthermore, 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.

4.3 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 and based in regional and rural communities. 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 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 schools 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 peers more regularly. It is also imperative that distance education for geographically isolated

students continues to be based in regional and rural communities to ensure ongoing opportunities to interact with their teachers and peers and participate in school activities.

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 Scheme (RASS) <https://infrastructure.gov.au/aviation/regional/rass.aspx> 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.

4.4 Child Care Programs

The Family Assistance Law should be revisited so In Home Care Educators and Nannies are explicitly able to supervise students in the Distance Education classroom.

Child care programs could potentially play a very important part in enabling families to deliver distance education lessons at home in often isolated locations where no child care services exist.

The needs of families living in these locations differ considerably to those living in urban areas. 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 educator to also fill the role of distance education tutor.

4.5 Working holiday visa conditions

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 they 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 applied. 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 while one partner might be able to work in the paddock, the other partner 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) rules http://www.apph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/rp1617/Quick_Guides/WorkingHoliday to other rural and remote areas of Australia, the second-year visa would be accessible to nannies and distance education tutors available under agriculture. Also, 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.

4.6 National Working with Children Check

A National Working with Children 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 VISE (Volunteers for Isolated Students' Education) and REVISE (Retired Educator Volunteers for Isolated Students' Education) 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 the Royal Commission Report into Child Abuse, <http://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/getattachment/7ecd3db9-0b17-483e-9a0e-8fb247140f3e/Working-with-Children-Checks-Report>. 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.

5. Early childhood

- 5.1 Regional inequality in early childhood education
- 5.2 Early learning through distance education programs
- 5.3 Early learning services in rural and remote locations
- 5.4 Mobile early learning services

5.1 Regional inequality in early childhood education

ICPA (Aust) maintains 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.

Regional inequality in early childhood education arises from lack of access to early childhood programs and the cost of accessing programs. One of Professor Halsey's recommendations in the IRRRRE final report says, "*Ensure Regional, Rural and Remote (RRR) children start school with a strong foundation for learning.*"

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 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 and their urban counterparts. 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.

5.2 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 the current 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 2016.

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

ICPA (Aust) identifies this discrepancy seems to be seriously at odds with the Universal Access to Early Childhood Education Program.

5.3 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), now the new National Quality Standard (from February 2018) requirements. States and Territories should broadly align with the NQF in order to maintain quality programs and facilities, but 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 NQS requirements.

Small rural towns wanting 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 year's program exists but no early childhood qualified teacher can be sourced, 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 Learning <http://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/childcare> 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 2016 <http://www.abs.gov.au/Ausstats/abs@.nsf/0/6DA742EC957DE0ADCA25786800152118?OpenDocument> 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.

5.4 Mobile early learning 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 were serious concerns that these mobile services would not be eligible for continuation of funding under the New Child Care Package and that these services would 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.

6. Rural schools

- 6.1 Regional inequality in rural schools
- 6.2 Teacher incentives
- 6.3 Teacher preparedness and retention
- 6.4 Regional communities and rural schools
- 6.5 Limitations of rural/remote secondary schools

6.1 Regional inequality in rural schools

Regional inequalities in relation to rural schools arise from:

- the difficulty in attracting and retaining quality staff
- limited relief and release time for staff and burnout
- the difficulties associated with a multi-level classroom (for students and teachers)
- limited program offerings
- the cost of accessing extra-curricular activities (sport, cultural experiences).

6.2 Teacher incentives

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 e.g. the Kelvin Grove Teacher Education Centre of Excellence <https://teach.qld.gov.au/get-supported/teces/kelvingrove-tece> 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 Lead (Qld) <http://education.qld.gov.au/capability/take-the-lead.html> is 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.

Teach.NSW Scholarships <https://www.teach.nsw.edu.au/>

“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 Scheme (RAIS) [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) 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.

6.3 Teacher preparedness and retention

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. Professor Halsey in the IRRRRE report says, *“Attracting and retaining school leaders for regional, rural and remote schools, as with teachers, continues to be a major challenge for most education systems.”*

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 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.

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 Teacher Registration. 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.

Clusters

The Outback Advantage and Literacy program in Qld <http://education.qld.gov.au/staff/development/ideas/journeys/outbackadv.html> 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.

6.4 Regional communities and rural schools

Rural schools are part of the fabric of a rural community. The presence and quality of a rural school determines whether families are attracted to come and stay in a rural community. Physically, the school often provide a community resource and venue and are often emergency evacuation points as well. Rural schools provide employment in struggling communities and teachers are often valued and highly contributing members of small communities.

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.

Motivation of rural and remote students to succeed and how they can 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 students (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) can feel alienated and it can be difficult for students to then continue on this path, if not well-supported by the school. Conversely, a student who wishes to do a traineeship or follow a vocational path, can feel 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.

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.

Relationships between communities and schools and the (discontinued) Country Areas Program funding

The close and essential relationship between community and schools could be enhanced and utilised more effectively to enrich students' learning experiences. The Country Areas Program (CAP) 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. Schools and their community worked closely together to develop CAP-funded projects. 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 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 e.g. Canberra trips. In an adjustment of school funding policy, CAP funding is no longer targeted, but rather given to states 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.

6.5 Limitations of rural and remote secondary schools

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.

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 factors 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* <http://www.icpa.com.au/documents/download/1018/federal-submissions-1/submission-discussion-of-education-issues-reform-of-federation-white-paper-2015.pdf> 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. This disconnect between governments lead to different programs being developed by different levels of government that focus on only one part 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?"

7. Specific Education Needs

- 7.1 Regional inequality for specific education needs
- 7.2 Access to specialists
- 7.3 Teacher training

7.1 Regional inequality for specific education needs

Sometimes geographically isolated people with disabilities are referred as having a **double disability**; that of the disability *and* that of being isolated from services. The same could be said for children with specific learning needs in regional Australia. Access to services required for timely diagnosis, early intervention and management of specific needs is abysmal in much of regional Australia.

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 offers 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
- **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 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 1 Nov 2017, Rural and regional Australians can now claim a Medicare rebate for online videoconferencing consultations with psychologists, other mental health professionals and occupational therapists. 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 more Telehealth appointments as a matter of urgency.

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. 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.

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.

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.

8. Tertiary and Training

- 8.1 Regional inequality in tertiary education
- 8.2 Allowances and accommodation
- 8.3 Training
- 8.4 Regional communities and further education

8.1 Regional inequality in tertiary education and training

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**. 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 2013, conducted by ICPA (Aust), clearly supports this.

<https://www.icpa.com.au/page/attachment/85/tertiary-research-2013>

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.

8.2 Allowances and tertiary education

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. ICPA (Aust) has welcomed the reduction of time, 18 months to 14 months rural and remote students need to be employed under the self-supporting criteria to qualify for independent Youth Allowance.

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 school leavers 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 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 advisers) 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.

ICPA (Aust) welcomes the recommendations of the Transparency of Higher Education Admissions Processes, including the national approach to managing applications resulting in the simplification of students' applications to their chosen tertiary institution, especially if applying interstate and looks forward to the timely implementation of all the recommendations. 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) 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.

Accommodation and tertiary education

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. The Department of Education and Training have recently conducted a Regional Student Accommodation Analysis: [https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/regional student accommodation analysis report final.pdf](https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/regional%20student%20accommodation%20analysis%20report%20final.pdf)

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) has continued to ask 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.

8.3 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 Student Loan 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.

8.4 Regional communities and further education

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 does not 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.

Directional flow

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.

9. Miscellaneous

- 9.1 The **Education Index** is consistently higher than the Consumer Price Index (CPI). Education-related allowances, if they increase at all, typically increase with CPI.
- 9.2 A **National Rural Education Alliance**, led by a Commissioner, would enable education of students of rural, remote and regional Australia to be at the forefront of government policy considerations. Inequalities in regional education could be more effectively addressed and a collaborative approach to finding solutions would ultimately equalise educational outcomes for children in the bush. Rural and remote education must be placed on a separate register when delivering and funding education for rural and remote students.
- 9.3 **Roads** in regional Australia are often in a poor state of repair and even dangerous. Physical access to and from towns and departure points can seriously affect the ability of families to access education, and the ability of educators to access regional students.
- 9.4 **Regional Airfares** have been the subject of a recent Inquiry into Regional Airfares. ICPA (Aust) made a detailed submission and attended a Public Hearing pertaining to the Inquiry.
<https://www.icpa.com.au/documents/download/1118/federal-submissions-1/regional-air-fare-inquiry-submission-feb-2018.pdf> The cost of travel to and from boarding schools, tertiary education and training placements can be astronomical. Geographically isolated families also require air travel at times to access specialist help for learning needs.
- 9.5 A **Coalition election commitment of \$44.7M** is yet to be allocated. ICPA (Aust) has provided costed ideas on how this funding could best assist the isolated students and families it was dedicated to/directed at.
- 9.6 **Rural/urban drift**

9.1 Education Index and CPI

The Education Index is consistently and significantly higher than the All Groups CPI. Education-related allowances, if they increase at all, typically increase with CPI. For example, in the 12 months to September 2017, the All Groups CPI was 1.8 and the Education Index for the same period was 3.1. 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.

CPI-based increases in education allowances will inevitably lead to the observed divergence between allowances and costs, as described in Section 1.1.

<http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/allprimarymainfeatures/1B0B340B7B402978CA258225000D6CFD?opendocument>

9.2 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.

Professor John Halsey on page 77 of his Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education Report recommended that the government *"Establish a national focus for RRR education, training and research to enhance access, outcomes and opportunities in regional Australia."* ICPA feels that a National Rural Education Alliance could help fulfil this recommendation.

9.3 Roads

Some roads in rural and remote Australia are federally funded, particularly in the NT. The appalling condition and deterioration of remote roads has become a major concern for remote residents that have no choice but to travel on roads that are clearly not safe and are indeed impassable for weeks at a time.

Roads are vital and play an integral part of the safe delivery of students to face to face functions, correspondence materials delivery and the safe passage of Distance Education Staff to students' home visits and for all Department of Education and Community Services staff visiting communities as well as health workers and child care services.

Government has to urgently commit to a long-term maintenance strategy with adequate funding to bring these roads back to all weather and safe trafficable surface. Families and teaching staff have no option other than travelling on roads with extremely undesirable driving conditions which not only affects a safe lifestyle but is also having a detrimental effect on education, and the business operations which sustain the lives of those in the bush.

9.4 Regional airfares

Due to geographic isolation, many rural and remote families need to travel large distances in order to access not only education and learning experiences, but also specialist assistance. Families also need to travel at times to support their students who can be attending schooling hundreds if not thousands of kilometres away. The availability of Air Travel in regional areas allows families to cover the distance necessary to travel to get to schooling or specialist services (such as speech language

pathologists) much more quickly and directly, however this travel often comes at a huge cost. In addition, many families have to drive significant distances just to get to a regional airport before they begin their journey by air.

Air travel also offers the chance to access learning experiences that are not available in the regions where many of these students live, school excursions and camps for example.

People also travel into regional areas such as specialist coaches, music teachers, artists and many others to work with children who live outside of city centres at various times of the year. The cost of bringing in these people with specialised skills can be very difficult to meet for rural and regional schools and school communities.

ICPA is not aware of any “Student Concession” fares available for air travel. Bus services and railways often offer student concession fares to make student travel less expensive, but not airlines. Airlines also tend to have higher airfares for school holiday times, which are the times that many students who live in rural and remote areas need to travel to and from their place of schooling to their home. Furthermore, there are inequities in Commonwealth Student Travel Allowances. While the Federal Government has in place Fares Allowances to assist with student travel under the ABSTUDY and Youth Allowance Schemes, there is no provision for travel in the Assistance for Isolated Children Scheme which is the assistance a large number of geographically isolated children fall under.

ICPA (Aust) recommends:

- Governments consider further subsidisation of rural/remote/regional routes that show a demonstrated need
- National student concessions be available for air travel
- Airlines retain a number of seats at “normal” pricing for a certain block of dates leading up to School terms beginning and ending.
- Commonwealth Fares Allowances to be more uniform across assistance programs
- Airlines should be encouraged to work together for the benefit of customers in forming partnerships and make connecting to destinations more seamless.
- Programs such as the Remote Air Services Subsidy Scheme RASS are supported, and expansion provided for.

9.5 Coalition’s Election Commitment for Regional, Rural and Remote Students 2016

In the lead up to the 2016 federal election, the former Deputy Prime Minister, the Honorable Barnaby Joyce, announced on 22 June 2016 during a televised session at the National Press Club that the Coalition would commit to among other things, “\$44.7 million towards isolated children, which includes an increase of 50 per cent 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 former 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 (DE) 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

5,268 students receive the Distance Education Allowance @ \$4124 per annum (2018 rate)

- Increase of \$750 per annum = \$3,093,750
- Total funding allocation over forward estimate = \$12,375,000

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. After

state and commonwealth assistance, ICPA member families have reported that on average their out-of-pocket costs (boarding and tuition fees) range between \$17,000-35,000 per child per year in order to access compulsory schooling depending on where they live. The majority of rural and remote students require boarding 7 days a week due to the vast distance their homes are from the schools that offer boarding. See www.boardingschools.com.au. 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 (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 out-of-pocket costs towards their children's compulsory education.

Additional Boarding Allowance increase of \$1000 per annum

1303 students - 2018 maximum rate \$2366 per annum

- \$1000 per annum = \$1,303,000
- Total funding allocation over forward estimates = \$5,212,000

Basic Boarding Allowance increase of \$1000 per annum

5,211 students receiving the Basic Boarding Allowance @ \$8,249 per annum (or cost of boarding, whichever is lower).

- \$1000 per annum = \$5,211,000
- Total funding allocation over forward estimates = \$20,844,000

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 - \$1500 per annum

Less than 1000 students receive \$240.30 per fortnight (\$6,247.80).

- Increase of \$1500 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: <https://www.icpa.com.au/page/attachment/82/final-boarding-school-survey-icpa-aust-with-comments-2016>

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 \$1000 per annum

1303 students – 2018 maximum rate \$2366 per annum

- \$1000 per annum = \$1,303,000
- Total funding allocation over forward estimates = \$5,212,000

Basic Boarding Allowance increase of \$1000 per annum

5211 students receiving Basic Boarding Allowance @ \$8,249 per annum (or cost of boarding, whichever is lower).

- \$1000 per annum = \$5,211,000
- Total funding allocation over forward estimates = \$20,844,000

Second Home Allowance - in line with Basic Boarding Allowance - \$1500 per annum

Less than 1000 students receive \$240.30 per fortnight (\$6,247.80)

- Increase of \$1500 per annum = \$1,500,000
- Total funding allocation over forward estimates = \$6,000,000

Distance Education Allowance increase of \$750 per annum

5268 students receive the Distance Education Allowance @\$4124 per year

- Increase of \$750 per annum = \$3,093,750
- Total funding allocation over forward estimate = \$12,375,000

Total funding promised - \$44,700,000

Total funding assigned through this proposal - \$44,431,000

*student numbers are based on the December 2017 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 1303 of the 5,211 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 helping 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) <http://www.aief.com.au/scholarships/about-the-program/> 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.

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.

Further Suggestion

- Since the Regional Airline Senate Inquiry, it has been suggested that the election commitment funds promised for rural and remote students should be allocated to a travel allowance added to the AIC to enable geographically isolated students access their compulsory education, namely boarding school, similar to the Fares Allowance within Youth Allowance and ABSTUDY for tertiary students.

CONCLUSION

Despite ICPA (Aust) lodging a Pre-Budget 2018-19 submission regarding this election funding and discussing the allocation of these funds with various Members and Senators, it is a serious concern

that regional, rural and remote students will miss out on receiving this funding especially as it is nearly 2 years since the announcement was made by the former DPM Barnaby Joyce. A promise was made to geographically isolated students and their families to use this funding to assist them in accessing education and provide them with opportunity to participate on an even playing field with their urban counterparts. ICPA earnestly requests that the federal government ensures that these funds do not disappear.

9.6 Rural/urban drift

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.

Final Conclusion

ICPA (Aust) welcomed the opportunity to share our knowledge and ideas on how educational inequality for regional 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. ICPA (Aust) is more than happy to provide additional information on any of the topics that have been raised and looks forward to reading the recommendations to be presented to government following this review.