

Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia Inc.

"Access to Education"



Submission

to the

Australian National Audit Office's

**Performance Audits of the Administration of the Youth Allowance (Student)
and ABSTUDY Payment Schemes**

from the

Federal Council

of the

**Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia Inc.
ICPA (Aust)**

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The Isolated Children's Parents' Association ICPA (Aust) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Australian National Audit Office's (ANAO) performance audits of the administration of both the Youth Allowance (Student) and ABSTUDY payment schemes with issues and experiences our members have reported.

ICPA (Aust) is a voluntary, non-partisan parent body dedicated to ensuring all geographically isolated students have equity of access to a continuing and appropriate education. This encompasses the education of children from early childhood through to tertiary. The majority of member families of the Association reside in geographically isolated areas of Australia and all share a common goal of achieving equitable access to education for their children and the provision of services required to achieve this. Tertiary students whose family home is in rural and remote Australia, live great distances from their nearest tertiary institution and frequently must live away from home to access further education.

Over the last 12 months, we have consulted with the Department of Human Services with many of these issues and their assistance has been timely, invaluable and most informative.

Issues from rural and remote applicants include:

- **132490 support line**
 - Lengthy wait time during peak times is restrictive due to cost of mobile calls, poor reception and timing out of calls. Some members have reported waits of over 2 hours.
 - ICPA has asked DHS regarding a dedicated contact number for rural students.
 - Positive feedback has been received from our members about their 132490 experiences. The personnel were very knowledgeable, resolved issues and competently answered queries and alleviated uncertainty.
- **Documentation** - The Department of Human Services has compiled a list of documentation/details (e.g. bank accounts, course code, parental income) required to complete a Youth Allowance (YA) or ABSTUDY form for ICPA (Aust), which has been made available to our members.
 - ICPA (Aust) would like to see a list and clearer guidelines available on the website as a guide to prepare all applicants of possible documentation requirements.
 - The uploading of documentation has been problematic for some rural and remote members due to connectivity inadequacies.
 - Physically accessing service centres for lodgment is impractical for many, due to vast distances some applicants have to travel.
 - Frustration has been reported when lodgment has been through a service centre and the documents have not been recorded appropriately, necessitating another trip, which can be hundreds of kilometres, to the centre for lodgment before an application can proceed. A reference number being given to customers at the time they show their proof of identity which they could quote later if there were problems would be very useful.
 - It would be beneficial, if required documentation could be listed on an applicant's online account and noted if it has been received/uploaded to prevent lengthy delays in processing and cancelling of allowances, both which have been reported as occurring.
- **Proof of Identity** – Many of our members have already proven their identity through schemes such as AIC. ICPA (Aust) proposes certified copies of proof of identity for applicants who have already provided documents in person or proving of identity is recognised across all payments/services and recognition of the unique circumstances of particularly remote applicants.

- **Online applications**
 - Reports of problems due to poor internet connections, timing out and freezing of the process.
 - Our members are grateful for the 'save' function that is now on the online application process. ICPA (Aust) would like the ability to download the form, complete forms offline and then upload to online platform.
 - Recording and confirmation on the applicant's MyGov account, of contact including receipt of documentation received electronically, by post or in person and timely notification of the status of an application, would alleviate the uncertainty our members are experiencing. Currently, applicants can only find out if documents have been received or processed, by telephoning. ICPA (Aust) has received instances of information not being recorded (mostly when lodged in person). Many of our rural and remote applicants of Youth Allowance and ABSTUDY travel vast distances to attend a service centre. The system needs the capacity to show documents uploaded, progress of the application or further information required.

- **Processing times**
 - ICPA (Aust) appreciates the processing times are dependent on seasonal demands, peak periods, volume of claims and provision of the applicant submitting all the supporting documentation. With the recent change in dependent Youth Allowance, many rural and remote applicants reported unacceptable approval times and waits on the helpline, which is subsequently causing financial hardship as they are unable to afford the relocation costs of attending study while they wait for their claim to be processed.
 - ICPA (Aust) members have requested information be readily available on the process of fast-tracking applications for financial hardship claims and Centrelink staff are trained to refer these applicants for assessment in a timely manner.
 - Listing approximate processing times (with a disclaimer) on the website and in the application information, would be extremely beneficial as many students do not realise that processing can take several weeks, or even longer, particularly at peak times.

- **Service Centres** - Following reports of incorrect information, incorrect forms and failure to process paperwork by service centre personnel, circumstances necessitate the presence of dedicated Youth Allowance/ABSTUDY personnel in Centrelink offices or these personnel need to be able to access the specific information required to assist our rural and remote applicants.

- **Fares Allowance** - ICPA (Aust) requests that Fares Allowance is listed in the main list for Youth Allowance as it is for ABSTUDY, not just in the "related services".

- **Website**
 - ICPA (Aust) is very appreciative of the websites including the Facebook 'Student Update' page as avenues for transferring information to our members.
 - Easily accessible information on limits allowable for personal savings, assets and parental income for Youth Allowance to prevent having to wait for a claim to be processed to find out eligibility.

ICPA would be pleased to provide the Australian National Audit Office with additional information, should it be required.

