

## **EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE**

The issue of accessing affordable early childhood learning and care for families living in rural and remote regions has never been more concerning and is proving beyond the reach of many due to either:

- No services being available; no staff available to fill positions; no flexibility within programs to allow for individual family's needs; high out-of-pocket costs exceeding the family budget and the concern of securing future funding for previously Budget Based Funded Mobile Early Childhood Services.

### **Universal Access to Early Childhood Education**

#### **Extension to the AIC Allowance for 3-4-year-olds**

**The Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Distance Education allowance must be extended to the 3-4-year-old cohort when undertaking a pre-compulsory distance education program.**

The Australian Government recognises the importance of ensuring that 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 formal schooling has never been better. This can be attributed to the Federal Government's commitment to the Universal Access to Early Childhood Education Program. Despite this, ICPA remains concerned about the affordability of accessing programs for those living in rural and remote regions.

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

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, around 200 children access recognised 3-4-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 the use of technology for communication. As with every other early childhood program for three to 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, practise conversation skills and socialise 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 distance education programs are effectively blocked from any funding to assist with meeting the costs of program delivery, setting up their schoolroom and accessing school functions.

These students are deemed ineligible for the Assistance for Isolated Children, (AIC), Distance Education allowance as 3-4-year olds taking part in these early learning programs are not recognised by the Australian Government and no payment is available through the Child Care Subsidy (CCS) as these children are still in their parents' care.

#### **Recommendation:**

**ICPA (Aust) recommends that the Federal Government address the financial inequity facing rural and remote families needing to access an early childhood program through distance education. Equity can be achieved by extending the AIC Distance Education allowance to include three to four-year-old students taking part in pre-compulsory distance education early childhood learning programs.**

#### **More facilities for preschool education in rural and remote communities**

The flexibility of use of school buildings in small rural towns to include preschoolers, more preschool distance education places and more facilitators are required to ensure that all students have access to the required 15 hours per week preschool education. Facilitators should include qualified primary school teachers and diploma qualified educators where Early Childhood teachers are difficult to access. Students commencing formal schooling need to be school-ready, especially as Early Learning Languages Australia (ELLA) and Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) subjects in the form of Early Learning STEM Australia (ELSA) have also been introduced to the preschool curriculum. Rural and remote students will lag behind their urban peers from the very beginning if preschool has not been experienced in their early years.

#### **Child Care**

##### **In Home Care**

For families living in rural and remote Australia, who are able to provide accommodation, previously found the In Home Care scheme an affordable option when it came to accessing child care. However, there are four main concerns continually raised by our members:

- Firstly, that the In Home Care scheme needs to remain accessible for rural and remote families who have no other child care options. The new maximum of 3200 places seemed adequate for members' needs but due to its redistribution, some families in Queensland can no longer access any child care.
- Secondly, IHC educators should be allowed to supervise distance education where face-to-face schooling is not available as teachers are not present to look after the children.
- Thirdly, members continually raise concerns about the difficulty of finding suitably qualified people to employ in their homes to provide child care or to teach the children of rural and remote families who must be educated by distance education. The Transitional Provisions for remote and very remote families should be extended for a further two years and include geographically isolated families who are unable to access child care due to distance. Frequently, the only people prepared to travel and work in remote areas are overseas travellers such as backpackers. While they are a valuable resource, under the conditions of their visas they are not eligible for a second-year visa, as working with children is not an acceptable employable occupation in rural and remote areas.
- Lastly, the process of obtaining the Working with Children Check (WWCC) in each state is expensive, slow and impedes early childhood workers, tutors and teachers who wish to help various families interstate. A national WWCC certification would remedy the situation.

#### **Mobile Early Childhood Services in Rural and Remote Areas**

For many years, various mobile children's services have delivered the important services of being able to provide social contact, professional advice, playgroups and early childhood programs. They play a vital role in offering developmental opportunities for children and parents in small rural communities and outlying, often very isolated, areas. In many cases, these services provide the only face-to-face interaction for children of similar ages. Flexibility and surety of funding for these services is vital in

providing the much needed socialisation component of early childhood programs for these communities.

**Recommendation:**

**ICPA (Aust) recommends that the Federal Government ensures that Mobile Early Childhood Services, in particular Mobile Playgroups in rural and remote areas, continue to be supported with future funding for these services being secure.**

**Working Holiday Maker Program**

**Working Holiday Maker Visas and the Shortage of Distance Education Tutors and Nannies in Rural and Remote Australia**

Due to geographical isolation, there is a distinct lack of Australian workers, including qualified child care and educational workers, who are willing to undertake work where remoteness is an issue. It is extremely difficult to attract and retain Australian child carers, home tutors (distance education tutors) and teachers to rural and remote areas. Frequently, the only people prepared to travel and work in remote areas are overseas travellers looking for a cultural exchange experience and our rural and remote members rely on the employment of overseas workers to fill these positions. While these workers are a valuable resource, under the conditions of their visas they are not eligible for a second-year visa. Plant and animal cultivation, fishing and pearling, tree farming and felling, mining and construction are currently the specific fields of work that qualify an applicant for a second-year visa. Measures including extending the eligibility for a second-year visa to include child care and education provision under rural work are incentives for backpackers to holiday and work in rural and remote Australia.

**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 Second Year Working Holiday visas 417<sup>1</sup> and 462<sup>2</sup>, are not available for distance education tutors/teachers or nannies from overseas in rural and remote areas, despite being rural work. However, with recent developments in Northern Australia, second-year visa applicants could be accepted there, on the 462 Working Holiday visa, if having worked for 3 months in agriculture, tourism or hospitality 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. If child care or distance education supervision were eligible as specified work, this would help provide workplaces for distance education tutors in other rural and remote areas if the same conditions apply as for other second-year visa seekers. In the distance education schoolroom, 12 months’ support would be more beneficial than just 6 months to support the importance of continuity and consistency.

At times, overseas couples wish to work on a rural or remote property; both would enjoy the cultural experience and one partner is able to work with the livestock, orchards etc., however the other partner may wish for a less physical type of work. She is unable to work in the distance education schoolroom or assist with child care on the property to gain eligibility for a second-year visa as this is not on the ‘specified work’ list.

Making the second-year visa accessible to nannies and distance education tutors under agriculture would provide a better solution for rural families seeking to employ staff and a better experience for overseas workers who wish to remain with one employer.

**Volunteer Work Activities**

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<sup>1</sup> <https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/visas/getting-a-visa/visa-listing/work-holiday-417/specified-work>

<sup>2</sup> <https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/visas/getting-a-visa/visa-listing/work-holiday-462/specified-462-work>

The removal of eligibility of volunteer work activities in application for a Second Year Working Holiday visa as of 1 December 2015, compounded the issue of shortage of work support in rural and remote areas. Families find it harder to find willing workers to assist in running the farm and managing their children's distance education. Many visitors to Australia appreciate 'real life experiences' on farm and are willing to volunteer their time in return for meals and accommodation e.g. 'WWOOF' program (Willing Workers on Organic Farms). If volunteer hours were once again reinstated as eligible for a Second-Year Visa, rural Australia's employment pool would expand relieving pressure on its families.

### **Temporary Work (Skilled) Visa (subclass 457)<sup>3</sup>**

This visa was replaced with the completely new Temporary Skill Shortage (TSS) (subclass 482) visa in March 2018 which supports businesses in addressing genuine skill shortages particularly in rural and remote areas. Visa applicants for this will need to be sponsored by a business up to 2 or 4 years as per specified skill. Skilled Early Childhood teachers, Primary and Middle School teachers, Private Tutors, Regional Education Managers and Child Care Centre managers are all on the approved occupation list. There is a real shortage of people willing to fulfil distance education supervisor/tutoring roles. If qualified teachers were happy to work with distance education students in remote classrooms, it would be an excellent option, however more often it is a skilled worker such as a nanny or governess who is willing to accept distant education opportunities. It would be extremely beneficial if nannies and governesses could be added to the TSS Occupations List and Private Tutors and Teachers could also be approved for distance education classrooms.

**ICPA (Aust) recommends that the lack of distance education tutors and nannies be addressed by the provision of Working Visa changes allowing for governesses, nannies and distance education supervision to be included in the "Specified Work List" as well as the list of TSS approved occupations.**

### **Working with Children Check**

The process of obtaining the Working with Children Check (WWCC) in each state or territory is expensive, slow and impedes early childhood workers, tutors and teachers who wish to help various families interstate. A national WWCC certification would help resolve this and was recommended in the Royal Commission into Child Abuse Final Report<sup>4</sup>.

ICPA (Aust) supports all the Governments' efforts to progress a national WWCC certification soon to efficiently fulfil the staffing needs of rural and remote families.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/trav/work/work/skills-assessment-and-assessing-authorities/skilled-occupations-lists/combined-stsol-mltss/>

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/sites/default/files/final\\_report\\_-\\_recommendations.pdf](https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/sites/default/files/final_report_-_recommendations.pdf)