

TERTIARY REPORT

Kate Thompson

ICPA (Aust)'s persistence and continued lobbying for equity of access to an appropriate and continuing education for rural and remote tertiary students is paying off, albeit slowly, with some further positive outcomes. Federal Council and the Tertiary Portfolio have addressed the motions presented at the Federal Conference in August 2017 and unresolved motions from previous years, on a number of fronts: correspondence to government, delegation, submissions and meetings.

COMPONENTS OF THE 2016 ELECTION PROMISE:

The three election announcements in mid-2016 impacting our tertiary cohort have been implemented and are assisting in improving educational opportunities for regional and remote students and addressing the under-representation of rural and remote students at tertiary level.

- a) On 1 January 2018, the time regional and remote students need to be employed under the self-supporting criteria (Part time work or earnings for rural and remote students) under Youth Allowance and ABSTUDY living allowance, changed to 14 months. This change allows students who meet the relevant earnings and associated criteria to prove their independence within one gap year, do not have to further delay commencement of university.
- b) Rural and Regional Enterprise Scholarships for undergraduate, post graduate and vocational education students to undertake STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) studies including agricultural and health fields commenced with the first round of scholarships up to a value of \$18,000 allocated in 2018 and the next round for 2019 will be advertised towards the end of 2018.
- c) The *Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education* (IRRRRE) – this review enabled ICPA (Aust) to put at the forefront, the issues facing our tertiary cohort when accessing higher education: Tertiary Access Allowance, Youth allowance changes (Relocation Scholarship, qualifying criteria including age, parental income limits) and financial assistance for relocation costs to complete compulsory work experience. In January 2018, Professor Halsey, Chair of the IRRRRE delivered the final report to Government and at the end of May 2018 the Government's response accepted all the recommendations, many which aligned with the ICPA (Aust) submission, in relation to tertiary. Recommendations from the IRRRRE specific to our tertiary cohort include: reviewing current income support and arrangements for rural and remote students who have to move away from home to pursue a higher education or training to ensure they are able to commence immediately following school completion, provision of high quality career information and advice, provision of additional financial support to students for travel between university and home, in particular in a student's first year of study, requirement of universities to prioritise beds for rural and remote students, especially those coming from remote areas and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and improve the provision of accommodation and income support information for RRR students.

BUDGET ANNOUNCEMENTS 2018-2019

In the 2018-2019 Budget, the Australian Government announced some significant initiatives to address the outcomes of the IRRRRE, which will further address the inequity faced by students from regional, rural and remote areas accessing tertiary education.

- Youth Allowance - Improved access to regional and remote students who must relocate to study by increasing the regional workforce independence criterion parental income limit from \$150,000 to \$160,000, an additional \$10,000 to the income limit for each additional child in the family and allowing students to use the financial year prior to their gap year as the year when parental income is assessed to provide additional certainty about whether they will meet the parental income limit

before taking a gap year. It's expected 75 per cent more regional students will qualify under this criterion for Youth Allowance. This will take effect from 1 January 2019, subject to the passage of legislation.

- Expand accessibility of sub-bachelor programs (including enabling), with additional places at higher education providers in regional areas, which will give students a better opportunity to obtain a relevant and recognised qualification more quickly.
- Expand accessibility for bachelor students at regional study hubs, for young people in regional, rural and remote communities to transition to further education, training and employment.

TERTIARY ACCESS ALLOWANCE (TAA)

The introduction of a TAA recognises the economic barrier that all rural and remote students, who have to leave home, face when accessing a higher education; the high up-front set-up and ongoing costs associated with relocation: travel, securing accommodation set-up costs (rental bond, electricity connection or residential college fees), communication (telephone, internet) along with the rising costs of ongoing, basic living expenses (rent, food). The TAA will also alleviate the continued disparity in the level of financial assistance provided for relocation to rural students who have qualified for independent Youth Allowance compared to dependent Youth Allowance recipients.

FARES ALLOWANCE

In the IRRRRE report, Professor Halsey identified that in order for rural and remote students living away from home to study, to make a successful transition from school to university, the fares allowance is vitally important to allow students to travel home and be with family and friends especially during the early stages when home-sickness can be a factor. Fares allowance for Youth Allowance recipients must be aligned with the ABSTUDY criteria in relation to the Fares Allowance 3 month eligibility criteria for the first return trip. Federal Council has brought this issue to the attention of the Minister for Social Services and Department of Social Services.

YOUTH ALLOWANCE

ICPA Federal Council has continued to address further aspects of Youth Allowance (YA) including: all rural and remote students being classified as independent, reduction of the age threshold for automatic eligibility for YA, relocation scholarships, removal of the independent YA parental income limit, raising the parental income limit for dependent YA, reinstatement of the HECS-HELP upfront and HELP voluntary repayments and financial assistance for students who need to relocate for compulsory course practicums. ICPA (Aust) has had no further commitment for change but will continue lobbying and pursuing these issues.

RENT ASSISTANCE

Federal Council consulted with the Department of Human Services in relation to the 2017 motions relating to rent assistance. The advice was:

- The circumstances when Rent Assistance (RA) can be paid to YA students varies depending on whether the student is dependent or independent and what their living arrangements are.
- The most common reason RA would **not** be paid for the duration of a rental agreement is where the student moves away from home before they are eligible for the Away from Home (AFH) rate e.g. they move 4 weeks prior to the commencement of their course. As the student is not eligible for the AFH rate they will not be eligible for RA until they commence study on the first day of classes.
- For YA students being paid the independent rate, RA is generally paid from the date they start living outside of the parental home.
- Student eligibility for RA over semester breaks depends on whether the student is maintaining their term accommodation during this period. If a student maintains their term accommodation

or college residence, that is, they are still paying rent and still have access to the property, they may still qualify for the AFH rate and therefore, RA.

CENTRELINK:

ICPA (Aust) has continued collaborating with the Department of Human Services in relation to the issues that members are reporting when applying for Youth Allowance. In November 2017 and May 2018, Federal Council met with the Department of Human Services, Department of Social Services and Department of Education and Training in Canberra and many Youth Allowance issues were discussed. In May 2018, Federal Council presented numerous suggestions to the Department of Human Services in relation to the Youth Allowance application online process and the current website. The Departments assured us that efficiency measures are reviewed constantly and improvements to the application platform implemented. The Department is keen to be informed of any issues as part of their quality and improvement processes and appreciate comments and advice from members.

TEACHER EDUCATION

The importance of high quality teachers in rural and remote schools is apparent, with more than 4,000 schools located in rural, regional and remote locations educating almost 30% of all students in Australia. Federal Council has continued to raise the inclusion of rural and remote education majors and modules such as Autistic Spectrum Disorders in teaching courses with Government, in the IRRRRE and at every opportunity highlighting the uniqueness and challenges faced when educating students in the rural and remote context. It has been identified that specific rural training aids in the recruitment and retention of teachers and assists in the sustainability and resilience of these rural communities.

Professor Halsey in the IRRRRE report, recommended the provision of funding and opportunities for teacher education students to undertake placements and the introduction of a unit on teaching and living in rural and remote schools and communities to attract and retain high quality teachers for rural and remote Australia.

TRANSPARENCY OF HIGHER EDUCATION ADMISSIONS PROCESSES.

The decision to apply for a university course can be a daunting process with a plethora of information which in the past, has not been consistent in its presentation. By the end of 2019, the reform of the admissions process will be complete and a transparent, consistent process will be available; standardised presentation of admissions information including study options, entry requirements and application processes, adoption of common admissions terminology, adoption by Tertiary Admission Centres of more consistent approaches, reporting and streamlining interstate application processes and a national admissions information platform.

These recommendations have been agreed to by all registered Australian higher education providers and will deliver to students, parents, teachers and career advisors, the knowledge and capacity to more easily navigate higher education admissions policies and processes. The Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) will continue to monitor and report on admissions transparency in the higher education sector and in 2020 will complete a comprehensive review and evaluation of the recommendations and implementation.

REGIONAL HUBS

The Australian Government has committed to assist in the establishment and maintenance of up to eight community-owned, regional study hubs with infrastructure including study spaces, video-conferencing, computing facilities and internet access as well as pastoral and academic support for students studying via distance at partner universities, to improve access to higher education for regional, rural and remote students. In May 2018, applications opened for the next stage with the

release of the “Regional Study Hub Application Guide May 2018”. The application process has commenced with the closing date 27 July 2018.

INDEPENDENCE CRITERIA

We continue to lobby the Federal Government on behalf of students who have to relocate in order to access the most appropriate tertiary course for their needs and aspirations, be recognised as a separate disadvantaged group and be considered financially independent of their parents for the purpose of accessing financial assistance on course enrolment. In the IRRRRE report, it was identified that *‘consideration needs to be given to investigating how a bona fide post-secondary offer to undertake higher education and/or further training to a student could be used to qualify for direct financial support for the student...reviewing the parental income test rules in terms of whether they accurately reflect the ability of parents to provide support to their children who have moved away to study’* strengthening our policy.

ACCOMMODATION

Further to the motions from 2015 concerning the affordability and accessibility of accommodation for rural and remote students, the IRRRRE report recommended universities be required to prioritise beds for rural and remote students, the establishment of dedicated accommodation advisers and brokers, and improve the provision of accommodation and income support information for rural, regional and remote students.

In February 2018, the Department of Education and Training, commissioned Urbis to complete the *Regional Student Accommodation Assessment*, on the supply of affordable accommodation for regional, rural and remote students. This report highlighted the issues facing regional, rural and remote students: high rental prices for on-campus accommodation, lack of availability due to high demand and difficulty in the private rental market due to the students’ age and lack of rental history and recommended the provision a ‘one-stop-shop’ information platform to better inform students while making choices for their university studies and address some of the challenges including timing of offers, accessing private rental and accessing government support.

YOUTH ALLOWANCE DOCUMENT

An overview of Youth Allowance has been collated by ICPA (Aust) with advice from Department of Human Services. This guide, updated at the end of 2017, aims to be complimentary to the Youth Allowance website and can be viewed on the ICPA (Aust) website - *Youth Allowance Overview*. <https://www.icpa.com.au/page/attachment/61/youth-allowance-overview-2018>

As responses to our lobbying has proven over the years, some very positive changes in the last 12 months which, off the back of the previous changes especially with Youth Allowance, have progressed some long-standing issues and motions. Along with following up on issues we have not yet had a response to, ICPA (Aust) will continue to lobby and raise the profile of our members’ issues through the avenues available to us to see the implementation of changes and measures beneficial to our tertiary cohort and to ensure rural and remote students who aspire to a tertiary education, can do so.