

## **TERTIARY REPORT**

**Kate Thompson**

2020 has certainly been different for many across Australia and our rural and remote tertiary students have not been immune. The tertiary portfolio continued their advocacy for these students with renewed vigour as the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded and issues were brought to our attention. If a rural and remote student's future direction requires a tertiary education, they must be afforded the necessary assistance to achieve their goals.

Rural and remote students continue to be under-represented at tertiary level and this disparity in participation and attainment adversely impacts these individuals and their communities. The myriad of issues resulting in this disparity include financial, cultural, personal, educational and social support factors and the Australian tertiary system must strive to deliver excellence and equal opportunity for all Australian students. The rural and remote cohort is more likely to be willing to return to their rural and remote communities ensuring viability, economic development and resilience of these communities.

Despite the restrictions and uncertainty surrounding COVID-19, there have been some positive happenings for rural and remote tertiary students in the last 12 months.

**COVID-19** While not only benefiting rural and remote tertiary students, during the COVID-19 pandemic, it was pleasing to note that Australian tertiary students and apprentices in receipt of a student payment through Centrelink may have been eligible for extra payments: Economic Support Payment and Coronavirus Supplement. During the pandemic, if students remained enrolled and plan to return to study even if self-isolating at home or their education provider temporarily closes or reduces their study load they still receive their payments. As is the case at any time, students were reminded to call the Students Line (**132490**) if any of their circumstances change.

For prospective students who are planning to apply for a Centrelink payment during the COVID-19 pandemic, provisions have been made to facilitate the application process. An applicant can use their myGov account to confirm their identity, receive a Centrelink Reference Number (CRN), create a Centrelink online account, link their Centrelink online account to myGov and make their claim online. Additionally, the personal assets test has been removed for Youth Allowance, ABSTUDY and Austudy and the liquid assets test waiting period has been removed for Youth Allowance and Austudy.

Federal Council wrote to the Minister for Families and Social Services in April 2020, asking the government to consider geographically isolated students who have embarked on a gap year in 2020 in preparation to commence tertiary studies in 2021. These students are working to qualify for Youth Allowance as an independent under the workforce participation criteria. There is concern that as a result of COVID-19, job losses and decreased employment opportunities particularly in hospitality, these students may be impacted in their capacity to earn the required 75% of the National Training Wage in their nominated 14-month period. To date, we have not received a reply to our correspondence.

**NATIONAL REGIONAL, RURAL AND REMOTE EDUCATION STRATEGY** ICPA (Aust) welcomed the *National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy – Final Report* (Naphthine Report) on 28 August 2019 which brings rural and remote tertiary students' issues with accessing, participating and attaining a tertiary education, to the forefront of governments' minds. The Government has indicated they accept the aims of the recommendations and the specific actions would be considered. The measures will most likely require a policy change, sector reform, budgetary allocation and collaboration between state and territory governments and the Federal Government.

The report contains 7 recommendations: Improve access to study options; improve financial support; improve other student supports; provide better career advice and strengthen regional, rural and remote schools; enhance support for equity groups; develop regional communities and establish national mechanisms to support the Strategy. There are 33 actions which include expanding Regional Study Hubs; improve internet access; introduce a new tertiary education access payment; reduce earnings requirements of Concessional Workforce criteria; improve information on financial support and improving career advice in schools; all very positive for our rural and remote students.

Of particular note:

**Tertiary Education Access Payment** of \$5000 for all school leavers who relocate for full-time higher-level tertiary education of at least one-year duration from an outer regional or remote area at an institution at least 90 minutes by public transport from their home.

**Independent Youth Allowance** - allowing greater flexibility in pathways to qualify for independent Youth Allowance. This recommendation enables rural and remote students who successfully undertake their first year of tertiary study externally, including at a Regional Study Hub, to access independent Youth Allowance or independent ABSTUDY if they then relocate their place of study for a minimum of one further year and are 90 minutes by public transport from home.

**Independent Youth Allowance Concessional Workforce test** - recommends reducing the earnings requirements and a review of the recent changes to the parental means test cut-offs.

**Practicums** - recommends an Away from Base payment for students who have to travel to complete parts of their course and are studying externally either at home or a Regional Study Hub.

**Fares Allowance** - recommends expansion of the Fares Allowance to enable students who have relocated to return home during their first year of study.

ICPA (Aust) welcomed the announcement by Minister for Education the Hon Dan Tehan MP on 19 June 2020, outlining the implementation of measures from the *National Regional, Rural and Remote Education Strategy* to assist students from rural, regional and remote Australia to participate in and attain a tertiary education. The announcement included the provision of the tertiary education access payment, additional Regional University Centres and improvements to Fares Allowance, to make it easier for relocated students to travel home during their first year of study.

The full media release on the reforms announced by Minister Tehan can be found here.

<https://ministers.dese.gov.au/tehan/tertiary-reforms-unleash-potential-regional-australia>. ICPA will continue to advocate for the implementation of the recommendations in the final report not announced including reviewing the earning requirements under the workforce participation criteria for independent Youth Allowance and the recent changes of the parental income cut-off.

**TERTIARY ACCESS ALLOWANCE (TAA)** The introduction of a [TAA](#) remains a high priority and ICPA (Aust) has continued to highlight this long-standing motion as opportunities present including through correspondence to Government, during our delegation to Canberra in October 2019 and in the submission, *National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy*. The Tertiary Access Allowance amounts are aligned with the Relocation Scholarship payments, and ICPA (Aust) has strongly advocated for the Tertiary Access Allowance for rural and remote students irrespective of eligibility for Youth Allowance. ICPA will closely follow the tertiary education access payment announcement and its passage through legislation and will respond to ensure it is akin to the Tertiary Access Allowance.

### **YOUTH ALLOWANCE (YA)**

**Liquid Assets Waiting Period** – The Department of Families and Social Services reinforced that the Liquid Assets Waiting Period is applied if liquid assets are over \$5,500 for a single student and is tapered up to \$11,500 meaning there is a maximum 13-week waiting period. Under Youth Allowance rules, a tertiary student's liquid assets may be reduced by allowable deductions either incurred or likely to be incurred relating to their course including up-front course fees, HECS-HELP payments, student union fees, textbook costs and tools or equipment required to undertake the course.

**Youth Allowance Overview 2020** - The Youth Allowance Overview document, created as a guide to YA eligibility and application, has been updated in consultation with Services Australia and is available in the January 2020 Pedals and on the ICPA (Aust) website. This document aims to summarise the lengthy YA website information for rural and remote students planning to study full-time and intend to apply for Youth Allowance. **It is a guide only.** For more information, advice, clarification and further assistance, please phone **132490** (dedicated Youth Allowance phone number) or visit [www.humanservices.gov.au/customer/services/centrelink/youth-allowance](http://www.humanservices.gov.au/customer/services/centrelink/youth-allowance).

**Centrelink** - ICPA (Aust) has collaborated with Services Australia and sent correspondence to the Minister for Government Services concerning issues that members are reporting when applying for Youth Allowance. Reports of issues when contacting Centrelink are still coming in from members including inconsistent and incorrect information from Centrelink staff, staff's lack of knowledge of current criteria and failing to escalate the enquiry to informed staff and long-wait-times on the 132490 support line.

**Wait time on 132490 phone line** - the Minister reinforced that the Department is aiming to streamline services to provide services that allow better access to face-to-face, telephone and online service and reduce the need for customers to call.

**Centrelink staff and misinformation** - ICPA (Aust) has been assured once again that Centrelink staff manning the 132490 phone line have extensive training, have the resources to answer all queries efficiently and where a Youth Allowance, ABSTUDY or Austudy enquiry is complex, staff have access to specialist staff. We emphasised to the Minister for Families and Social Services that this does not always occur. For our members, this misinformation can have devastating consequences including rejection of a claim, a claim not being submitted because they believe they are not eligible, delayed payment or a payment being cancelled.

Any member who has contact with the 132490 phone service or attends a Centrelink office, Access Point or Agent is encouraged to obtain a reference number for their visit or call which can be used later in the event of misinformation. While ICPA (Aust) cannot contact Centrelink on behalf of a member because of Privacy Laws, we can contact them with the issue generally. Federal Council will forward information and present suggestions to the Department concerning the Youth Allowance application online process and the current website as they are brought to our attention.

**Call Back Service** - The Department has trialled and implemented a call back service for other services, but this is not in their plans to implement for youth and student services including AIC and YA. The service overall is continuously under review with respect to efficiency and customer service.

**Proof of Identity** - ICPA (Aust) has been told the reason a student is required to present to a Centrelink office, access point or agent to prove their identity is to protect individuals from identity theft and other forms of identity fraud. In the instance of a claimant having "genuine difficulty" in attending a rural and remote Access Point or Agent to meet the identity requirements, alternative identity provisions can be applied and other channels used to lodge identity documents.

With the current provisions in place for proof of identity during the COVID-19 pandemic, ICPA (Aust) believes this provision should be able to be applied to rural and remote applicants who are unable to attend a service centre potentially resulting in a delay in the submission of their application. ICPA (Aust) would like to see an application commence with an online proof of identity, the applicant then presents at a service centre for confirmation of identity documents once relocated to their place of study which would be most likely be prior to their commencement date and therefore before the commencement of Youth Allowance payments.

**Relocation Scholarship** - While on delegation, the Department of Social Services again reinforced that the Relocation Scholarship is an adjunct payment and not available as a standalone payment. ICPA (Aust) is continuing to push for the Relocation Scholarship to extend to independent Youth Allowance recipients to address the continued disparity in the level of financial assistance provided to help with relocation costs for rural students who have qualified for independent Youth Allowance compared to dependent Youth Allowance assistance. Aligning the TAA with the Relocation Scholarship amounts will benefit the youth allowance students qualifying as an independent as well as students' ineligible for Youth Allowance.

**RURAL AND REGIONAL ENTERPRISE SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM (RRESP)** The Rural and Regional Enterprise Scholarships Program (RRESP) has supported students in rural, regional and remote areas with the costs of studying at university or a vocational education and training institution. During delegation, in October 2019, Federal Council discussed the RRESP with the Department of Education, Skills and Employment. At that time, round 3 was being administered, and further rounds being funded depended on the acquittal of the program to date.

Excitingly the RRESP Round 4 was announced and applications opened 20 January 2020 for applicants that have commenced the first year of their eligible Course of Study in Semester 1, 2020, continuing in Semester 2 or be starting in Semester 2 of 2020 and further consideration to students affected by drought and bushfire. Applications will remain open throughout 2020 with offers being made on an ongoing basis through the academic year or until available scholarships are fully allocated.

The scholarships which remain valued at up to \$18,000, are available to support regional and remote students studying in any discipline from Certificate IV to PhD level with an eligible higher education provider or vocational education and training institution, with a duration of six months full-time and up to 8 years part-time, delivered on campus, or through online and distance education. There is an additional \$500 to support an internship.

Applicants who are unsuccessful for one round, can get feedback on their application and may be able to submit a new application in a future scholarship round.

In terms of untimely payments being experienced, the Department of Education, Skills and Employment assured us that there had been issues identified with the timing of payments and they were working with QTAC to rectify the delays. Recipients of the scholarships have obligations within their Scholarship agreement, and the prompt return of these throughout their scholarship assists in part to ensure their payments are timely.

**TEACHER EDUCATION TRAINING IN SPECIFIC LEARNING NEEDS** ICPA (Aust) contacted the Australian Councils of Deans of Education (ACDE) urging them to encourage education providers to recognise the unique circumstances surrounding the learning context of rural and remote students and ensure all teachers preparing to work in geographically isolated schools, are trained in specific learning needs including Autism Spectrum Disorder. To date, we have not had a reply. In previous years, ACDE has responded positively stating they would take this request to their Board, but ultimately university course content is up to the individual university, and ACDE can only make recommendations.

In closing, I would like to sincerely thank the State Tertiary Portfolios, my fellow Tertiary Portfolio members, Nikki Macqueen, Jane O'Brien, Suzanne Wilson, and Nikki Mahony and all of Federal Council for their continuing support, knowledge and assistance. To our members, thank you for raising your issues. We will continue to raise your new and ongoing issues at every opportunity through all avenues available to us, to achieve the changes and measures needed to ensure our rural and remote students have the opportunity to complete a tertiary education commensurate with their aspirations and career plans.