

TERTIARY REPORT

Kate Thompson

Participation of rural and remote students at university remains remarkably lower than urban students, with the cohort only making up around 20% of undergraduate enrolments. The tertiary portfolio has continued to address the many factors which contribute to under-representation. In 2015/2016 ICPA year, financial access to university has become a reality for many more rural and remote students as the result of changes to dependent Youth Allowance. Following on from 2015 Federal Conference, the Tertiary Portfolio has continued to progress the tertiary motions through submissions, media releases, meetings, delegations, correspondence and forums. We have made significant progress on some long standing issues.

YOUTH ALLOWANCE (YA):

The most significant achievement for ICPA in 2015, was the passage of the *Social Services Legislation Amendment (More Generous Means Testing for Youth Payments) Bill 2015*. The changes in this legislation should mean more rural and remote students are eligible to qualify for dependent Youth Allowance. Some of the measures changed in this bill have been on the ICPA agenda for many, many years. It was a very emotional time when the announcement was made and coincidentally ICPA Federal Council was in Canberra, some meeting with the Department of Human Services and some at Parliament House. Hard work, dedication and persistence has paid off from all levels of ICPA on this issue.

Family Assets Test and Family Actual Means Test: These two measures: the removal of the Family Assets Test and Family Actual Means Test commenced on January 1, 2016. In particular, the removal of the Family Assets Test has had a significant impact for rural and remote families.

Family pool for youth parental income testing: Additional measures were introduced from July 1, 2016: the Family pool will take into account all dependent siblings in the family under the age of 22, resulting in the raising of the parental income limit, used to determine dependent Youth Allowance eligibility and payment rates.

Independent Youth Allowance Parental Income Limit: ICPA has continued to lobby the government in regards to the Parental Income Limit, which is a set figure (\$150 000) and absolute. This income test is not indexed and does not take into account other dependent siblings that the parents are supporting at school or university. These students applying for independent Youth allowance, have already proved that they can live independently of their parents and are denied relocation scholarships on the assumption that they are independent so their parent's income should not be used. We will continue lobbying to have this income test removed.

Relocation Scholarships: We have received correspondence from the Department of Social Services, on behalf of the Minister for Social Services, in response to our letters about extending Relocation

Scholarships to independent Youth Allowance recipients and rural and remote students who have to relocate to access tertiary education. The Federal Government have justified only providing the relocation scholarships to dependent YA recipients as independent YA students have had provisions made under the concessional workforce participation arrangement to access independent YA. The relocation scholarships are predominately targeted at students financially reliant on parents. We will continue pursuing this issue.

Student Start-up Scholarship: As of January 1, 2016, the Student Start-up Scholarships became a voluntary income contingent loan for new recipients of Youth Allowance. The Student Start-up Loan will be recovered through the tax system only after the HELP loan is repaid, following the repayment requirements of the HECS-HELP loan. If students are already in receipt of the Start-up Scholarship, they will continue to receive it as a scholarship provided they have not had a break in payment.

HECS-HELP Benefit, Upfront Discount and Voluntary Repayment Scheme: The HECS-HELP Benefit has had very limited take-up but is currently still able to be claimed. The upfront discount and voluntary payment scheme will stay in place for 2016 but will be removed from 2017.

Other motion outcomes: ICPA Federal Council has addressed further aspects of Youth Allowance including all rural and remote students being classified as independent, reduction of the age threshold for automatic eligibility for youth allowance and reducing the qualifying time for independent Youth Allowance through workforce participation. A 2016 pre-election commitment by the Deputy Prime Minister, Barnaby Joyce included \$83m to reduce this qualifying period for regional students from 18 months to 14 months before they can qualify for Youth Allowance and ABSTUDY payments. Correspondence from the Minister for Education and the Department of Social Services on behalf of the Minister for Social Services gave explanations for the current services and payment criteria but no alternatives or commitment for changes.

TERTIARY ACCESS ALLOWANCE (TAA):

While the changes to the dependent Youth Allowance has meant that more rural and remote students are eligible for the associated Relocation Scholarship, the need for a Tertiary Access Allowance remains, to assist in the high cost of relocating to tertiary education. The TAA still dominates the tertiary motions and remains an important ongoing lobby for ICPA. We took this issue to the Federal Government at our delegation in November 2015 and at the Regional Higher Education Forums and in the issues paper. We will continue to lobby for a Tertiary Access Allowance as opportunities present but we have no new information to offer at present, to strengthen the case for implementation of a new access allowance.

REGIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION FORUMS/ISSUES PAPER:

ICPA Federal Council attended three of the Regional Higher Education forums held around regional Australia. These forums gave students, parents, teachers and other interested community members the opportunity to suggest ideas on how rural and remote students can be better supported to gain a university degree and to discuss the barriers to accessing higher education. Present at the forums were Senator Bridget McKenzie, the Chair of the Senate Standing Committee on Education and Employment and representatives from the Department of Education and the Department of Social Services. An interim report from the Interdepartmental Committee on Access to Tertiary Education for Rural and Remote

Students had identified barriers to accessing higher education: costs, socio-economic status, distance, school experiences, preparedness and aspiration. Following the forums, ICPA Federal Council submitted an issues paper to this committee highlighting the complicated application process for YA, the current YA eligibility tests (Family Assets Test, Family Actual Means test and Parental Income test), YA eligibility for students commencing tertiary education, qualifying timeframe for independent YA, relocation scholarships/assistance for students and compulsory practicums, Commonwealth Scholarship Scheme, accommodation availability and deregulation of university fees, as major concerns. An internal report by the committee will provide advice to Government who will consider the findings as part of student assistance reform and higher education funding arrangements in the future. Thank you to the members who provided case studies to support our arguments.

DEREGULATION OF UNIVERSITY FEES:

The policy to deregulate university fees has been put on hold by the government while alternative plans were announced in the budget including funding cuts to the higher education sector. The original deregulation plan had the potential of escalating course fees up to \$100 000 but the effect on the FEE-HELP student loan scheme has been cited as an issue to that plan. Other plans proposed include lifting student contributions up to 50% (from 40%), reducing the repayment income level (currently \$54 126 – 2015/16) and increasing repayments from high income earners. Any measures will not start until January 1, 2018. ICPA Federal Council will be monitoring any proposed measures, to ensure access to higher education is not compromised for rural and remote students. We have been reassured that Commonwealth Scholarships, when established will include rural and remote students in the disadvantaged criteria and will not be dependent on receiving Youth Allowance.

CENTRELINK:

The online platform for Youth Allowance application has changed and it appears to be a simpler process. In response to motions from 2015 and calls from members, ICPA Federal Council has reported all issues with applications for Youth Allowance to the Department of Human Services through emails and by meeting with department representatives at delegation in November 2015 and May 2016. Changes to Youth Allowance eligibility meant a high volume of applicants resulting in the application approval time being delayed and lengthy waits on the helpline. Individual application problems need to be taken up by the applicant via the 13 24 90 helpline or visiting a service centre. We are glad to report, previous issues with the online application not saving have been rectified.

UNIVERSITY COLLEGES:

Letters were sent to over 30 metropolitan colleges asking for consideration of rural and remote students either by providing places specific for this cohort or an early entry scheme. We had a great response from the colleges, with the majority claiming to have these provisions in place and many reporting places still available after commencement of the university year.

SUBMISSIONS:

We responded to the Higher Education Standards Panel on the “*Consultation on the Transparency of Higher Education Admissions Processes*” emphasising aspects applicable to rural and remote students

when applying to university: appropriate advice of tertiary options including career, institution and course information, early entry, alternative entry requirements to ATAR, bonus points allocation, financial implications of relocation and recognition that rural and remote students are a disadvantaged group and entitled to equity of access to tertiary education. We attended a public consultation in July where we further discussed our submission.

Members can be assured that Federal Council will continue to progress and highlight tertiary issues through all avenues available to us. We have not had responses to some issues and we will follow-up on these. I would like to thank the State Tertiary Portfolios for their support and my fellow Tertiary Portfolio members.