



Australian Government

Australian Government response to the Independent Review of the HELP Debt Reduction Program report

July 2026

Contents

Introduction.....	3
Government response.....	4
Recommendation 1: Review and test proposed changes to eligibility settings	4
Recommendation 2: Refine how remoteness is defined to better reflect local realities	5
Recommendation 3: Simplify the process for annual indexation waivers.....	6
Recommendation 4: Strengthen alignment with other rural and remote workforce initiatives.....	7
Recommendation 5: Strengthen communication with applicants throughout the process	8
Recommendation 6: Strengthen targeted promotion and partnerships to reach the right audiences.....	9
Recommendation 7: Finalise and implement a benefits realisation plan for both initiatives	10
Recommendation 8: Improve baseline data collection to support ongoing improvement of the Program	11
Recommendation 9: Defer program expansion until the Program matures.....	12

Introduction

The Australian Government is committed to ensuring that Australians, no matter where they live, can access high-quality education and primary healthcare.

The HELP Debt Reduction Program (the Program) is one way the Government supports the teachers, doctors and nurse practitioners who choose to serve communities that need them most.

The Program complements State and Territory workforce initiatives and operates within the Commonwealth's legislative responsibility for HELP under the *Higher Education Support Act 2003* (HESA).

The Australian Government welcomes the Independent Review (the Review) of the Higher Education Loan Program (HELP) Debt Reduction Program, conducted by Ms Rachel Hunter AO PSM, and thanks Ms Hunter for her considered analysis and engagement with stakeholders.

The Review was undertaken in accordance with statutory requirements outlined in Section 144-20 of HESA. It examined the effectiveness, uptake, design and delivery of the Program, as well as future opportunities to strengthen its impact.

The Review confirms the Program plays a valuable role as an attraction incentive for early-career health and education professionals in regional, rural and remote Australia, noting the States and Territories are key employers of teaching and health workforces.

The Government carefully considers all independent reviews and welcomes the Review's practical, evidence-informed recommendations.

The Review report can be found at

<https://www.education.gov.au/higher-education-loan-program/resources/independent-review-help-debt-reduction-program-final-report>.

Government response

The boxed text below each recommendation reproduces the relevant recommendation from the Independent Review. The Government's response follows each box.

Recommendation 1: Review and test proposed changes to eligibility settings

Consideration should be given to several adjustments to the current eligibility settings, including:

- Assessing whether targeting medical practitioners from PGY1 rather than PGY3 would better encourage early-career participation in rural and remote practice.
- Considering removal or modification of the 'live and work' requirement to reflect the realities of rural work patterns, commuting arrangements and housing availability.
- Whether the current focus on general practice excludes other relevant clinical roles that contribute to rural service delivery, such as emergency medicine, obstetrics, anaesthetics, psychiatry or other hospital-based specialities.
- Whether the 24-hour minimum work requirement disproportionately excludes part-time or flexible practitioners, particularly women and carers.
- Consider introducing a staged debt relief model for the VRT initiative, allowing participants to access partial HELP debt reduction after completing two years of service in a very remote school, with full relief after four years.

The Australian Government **notes** this recommendation.

Consideration of current eligibility settings would need to balance workforce need, equity, program integrity, fiscal sustainability and administrative feasibility.

Recommendation 2: Refine how remoteness is defined to better reflect local realities

Consideration should be given to refining geo-classification systems by applying additional data overlays to address the limitations of using a purely geographical measure of remoteness. For the VRT initiative, this could include at minimum an overlay of population density (like the MMM approach) to better capture the distribution of workforce need and service access.

Additional overlays could include:

- Service availability and access, to reflect actual community need rather than distance alone.
- Population demographics and cost of living, to account for social and economic factors influencing workforce attraction and retention.
- Consider the preservation of eligibility for participants impacted by changes to geo-classifications.

Refining the geo-classification system to better reflect local realities would also support greater flexibility and stability in how remoteness is applied. Once a school or community is classified as one type of location (e.g., very remote), it should remain eligible even if future boundary updates shift the classification. This would ensure consistency of intent and avoid anomalies between programs.

The Australian Government **notes** this recommendation.

The use of nationally consistent and transparent geographic classification frameworks, while acknowledging the Review's findings regarding local circumstances and the impacts of reclassification is important to maintain consistency, clarity and manageable administrative arrangements.

Recommendation 3: Simplify the process for annual indexation waivers

The Department could review the current approach to annual indexation waivers to reduce reapplication while maintaining compliance with legislative timing requirements. Although indexation is generally applied before a waiver is processed by the ATO, participants could instead have their waiver processed at the end of their service period, once they have met the required timeframe.

Where circumstances change, a mid-point application can be submitted to update details or leave the Program. This approach would meet legislative requirements, ensure integrity, and reduce unnecessary administrative burden for both participants and the Department.

This refinement would retain an annual process where it adds value but remove it where it imposes unnecessary burden on participants and administrators. As outlined, a more proportionate approach would improve user experience, reduce administrative effort, and preserve the Program's capacity to focus on higher-risk or changeable cases.

The Australian Government **notes** this recommendation.

There is scope to reduce administrative burden for participants while maintaining legislative compliance and program integrity. Opportunities to streamline processes have already been enacted and will continue to be considered as part of program administration.

Recommendation 4: Strengthen alignment with other rural and remote workforce initiatives

The Department should consider how the Program complements other State, Territory and Commonwealth initiatives that aim to attract and retain professionals in rural and remote areas. This includes clearer articulation of how the Program supports other strategies such as the Stronger Rural Health Strategy, the National Strategic Framework for Rural and Remote Health, National Teacher Workforce Action Plan and equivalent plans in States and Territories. The particular challenges faced by the community-controlled sector warrants consideration. The Regional Education Commissioner and the National Rural Health Commissioner hold valuable expertise and data relevant to understanding future workforce needs and shortages across education and health. Their continued engagement will be highly valuable in ensuring the Program aligns with broader national workforce priorities and responds effectively to regional and community realities.

The Australian Government **accepts** this recommendation.

Clearer articulation of how the Program complements other Commonwealth, State and Territory workforce initiatives is underway. Engagement with relevant advisory roles, including the National Rural Health Commissioner and the Regional Education Commissioner, will support alignment with broader workforce strategies.

Recommendation 5: Strengthen communication with applicants throughout the process

The Department should continue building on recent improvements to communication practices and ensure the resourcing necessary for the new ICT system to be fully implemented and enhanced as planned.

The new ICT system includes functionality for automated communication and real-time status tracking through the applicant portal. Ensuring these features are fully implemented and actively used will allow applicants to receive confirmations on submission, alerts when further information is required, and reminders for annual confirmations. This will improve transparency, reduce processing delays and align with the ICT project's intent to centralise communication and streamline assessment.

Embedding clear and proactive communication across every stage of the applicant journey, from initial enquiry through to outcome, would improve the applicant's experience. Updated guidance materials could include detailed examples of eligible roles, locations and work patterns, as well as common reasons for ineligibility. Progress updates at key points in the application process could also improve transparency and applicant confidence.

The Australian Government **accepts** this recommendation.

Ongoing improvements to communication and guidance materials will continue to be progressed through program administration.

Recommendation 6: Strengthen targeted promotion and partnerships to reach the right audiences

There is the opportunity to improve promotion of the Program to reach those most likely to be eligible and benefit. This could include a structured communications plan and partnering with trusted intermediaries such as State and Territory governments, universities, professional colleges, community-controlled organisations, rural workforce agencies and unions. These partners are well placed to share information through existing networks, training pathways and recruitment processes, ensuring potential applicants are aware of the Program early in their career.

A partnership-based approach would build program visibility, improve understanding of eligibility and processes, and reinforce alignment across related initiatives.

The Australian Government **accepts** this recommendation.

More targeted promotion of the Program to improve awareness among eligible cohorts and recognises the role of partnerships with employers, professional bodies and other stakeholders in reaching potential participants is important.

Recommendation 7: Finalise and implement a benefits realisation plan for both initiatives

Developing a joint benefits realisation plan covering both Med-HELP and VRT would provide a consistent framework for measuring and demonstrating the outcomes of the whole HELP Debt Reduction Program. Building on the existing Med-HELP plan, the framework could be expanded to capture teacher-specific indicators and adapted to reflect the distinct settings of the education sector. This would enable a single set of metrics and reporting arrangements across both initiatives, simplifying performance monitoring and supporting a clearer line of sight to the Program's overall objectives.

The joint plan could draw on existing program logics and monitoring materials to ensure continuity in data collection and avoid duplication. It would capture short-term indicators such as awareness, application volumes and processing timeliness, alongside medium- and long-term measures such as workforce retention and community outcomes. A unified benefits realisation plan would provide a clearer evidence base for future evaluation, support transparent reporting to stakeholders, and present a comprehensive picture of the Program's contribution to rural and remote workforce outcomes.

The Australian Government **accepts** this recommendation.

Recommendation 8: Improve baseline data collection to support ongoing improvement of the Program

A more structured approach to data collection would strengthen the Program's ability to measure outcomes and inform continuous improvement. Establishing a clear schedule for baseline data collection and using existing administrative datasets would create a consistent evidence base across both Med-HELP and VRT. This foundation would also support future evaluations and provide ongoing feedback to refine design and delivery settings.

Opportunities for regular and linked data collection could include:

- Embedding baseline measures from a joint benefits realisation plan, such as application volumes, processing timeliness and workforce participation rates, to ensure consistent year-on-year tracking.
- Undertaking a periodic participant survey to capture satisfaction, awareness and perceived barriers, supplementing administrative data with qualitative insights.
- Linking existing datasets such as the Tertiary Collection of Student Information (TCSI) with workforce data to track educational pathways, employment locations and duration of rural service.
- Using workforce and service data from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Medicare, and state education departments to assess distribution, retention and access outcomes.

These processes will help with the improvement of the Program, particularly when combined with regular reporting cadences.

The Australian Government **accepts** this recommendation.

Consideration will be given to strengthening the use of existing data sources, while ensuring proportionality, privacy and appropriate data governance.

Recommendation 9: Defer program expansion until the Program matures

Expansion of the Program to additional professional groups, such as registered nurses, midwives, oral health staff, allied health professionals (such as speech pathologists and occupational therapists), and alternatively authorised teachers, should be deferred until the current initiatives are more mature and evidence of their effectiveness is available. These groups have been identified by stakeholders and research as critical to addressing workforce shortages in rural and remote communities. However, expanding too early risks embedding existing design and administrative challenges before they are resolved.

While the Terms of Reference for this Review are confined to questions of expanded eligibility to the health workforce, there have been other professional groups which have sought eligibility consideration for remote workforce incentives in legal and veterinary practice (noting the Occupation Standard Classification for Australia (OSCA) code as of 2024 includes Veterinarians and Veterinary Technologists as Health professionals).

Both professions face similar remote workforce attraction and retention challenges as experienced by health and education. There is important work underway in their counterpart Commonwealth Departments to better quantify the dimensions of regional and remote workforce shortages within these professional groups. This work will be vital to informing any policy decisions about eligibility for a like program.

The Australian Government **accepts** this recommendation.

