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Financial incentives to bring lawyers to the bush

The Law Council of Australia is calling on the Commonwealth to provide financial incentives to increase the number of lawyers living and working in regional, rural and remote (RRR) locations, through the introduction of a Higher Education Loan Program (HELP) debt reduction and indexation relief initiative.

“About a third of the Australian population lives outside of our capital cities,” Law Council of Australia President, Mr Luke Murphy said. “But less than 10 per cent of solicitors practise in a RRR location.”

“This workforce shortfall adversely impacts access to justice for people who live in these underserved regions. It can be very difficult for them to access timely legal assistance on issues ranging from criminal law matters, family law, child protection, tenancy matters, social security matters, credit and debt, and wills and estates.

“In addition, shortages of private legal practitioners in RRR areas limits availability of legal aid and pro bono assistance in these locations.

“While technology is helping, our RRR areas still face barriers to the uptake of virtual services including unreliable internet and phone connections, and a lack of digital literacy. There remains an urgent need for increased availability of in-person legal services in RRR areas.

“Earlier this year, the Regional Australia Institute reported that two in five urban workers would relocate to a RRR area if a financial incentive was involved.

“Recognising this, the Government has previously implemented incentivisation models to draw more health practitioners and teachers to regional areas. We would like to see these models extended to the legal profession, who also deliver essential services to RRR communities.

“What we are seeking is introduction of a HELP debt reduction and indexation relief initiative.

“Under this scheme, qualified lawyers who live and work in eligible RRR areas will be able to apply for a reduction of their outstanding HELP debt after working in that area for a requisite period, which we suggest should be at least two years. The scheme would also waive indexation on a practitioner’s HELP debt during that time.

“Law degrees are currently among the most expensive tertiary courses in Australia. A law student today is likely to accumulate a HELP debt of at least \$70,000 prior to their admission to practice. This would make an offer of debt forgiveness extremely attractive and we believe an effective lever to encourage early and mid-career lawyers to consider a RRR career.

“We have released a [position paper](#) outlining how we believe this model should work, why it is our preference, and how eligibility could be assessed.

“Financial incentives are not the only factor which will affect the recruitment and retention of legal practitioners in RRR areas, but we believe this is a good starting point and could be provided at minimal expense to the Commonwealth.”

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The Law Council of Australia is the national voice of the legal profession, promoting justice and the rule of law.