

STUDENT INCOME SUPPORT INQUIRY SUBMISSION



Herewith is my submission into the Senate inquiry for student income support. Our family background is as follows; my husband immigrated to Australia, sponsored by his Aunt, as a 16 year old from a hard working Scottish family in 1966. He worked various jobs culminating in 20 plus years in the Australian Army, retiring in 1998. No one in his family went to university. I am a 5th generation Australian, a descendant of an English convict, more recent relatives being farmers and truck drivers, one person in my extended family went to university during the 1970s. Neither my husband or I have a university education. As illustrated we have no first hand experience with a university education.

We chose to move to Meadow Flat, which is 30 km east of Bathurst in 1996 to assist my mother who as a widow was running a 200 acre property as a primary producer. My mother receives a part age pension. Meadow Flat is a tiny village situated on the Great Western Highway with no facilities other than a primary school and a public transport service of a bus run to Bathurst a couple of times a day. I work full time as a library assistant in a secondary college in Bathurst and my husband with his Defence Force pension supplements his income working as a casual employee in the district public primary schools as a general assistant. He has a medical condition for which he also receives a part disability pension. Our combined income in the FY 01/02 was just under the youth allowance threshold.

We have two children a daughter aged almost 20 currently studying at The Australian National University in her 2nd year and a son in Year 11 at the local catholic boys college. Our daughter, on who's behalf I have decided to write this submission, at present receives no support from any government agencies.

Our daughter was an excellent student during her primary and secondary education, we supported her education as all the doctrine says, when parents and teachers work together the student achieves the best outcome. This was true, during her HSC year it became possible that her UAI was going to be high 80s, which would secure many options for her future career path. After always showing an interest in politics and social justice she decided to choose a university course to study International relations. After having supported a child right through their education on the understanding if you'll work hard you'll get a good result, we were looking at the real possibility that our first-born child was to enter a new realm of tertiary education. It was a very proud time for my husband and I. The university in Bathurst, Charles Sturt University does not offer a degree in this subject so it was out of the question but no doubt if it did, she certainly would have commenced her studies there. Our daughter chose ANU with a BA (International relations) as her first choice, and as a result of her own determination and pure hard work she achieved her goal and was accepted into the course. After she was accepted into the ANU we then commenced the steep, winding slippery slope of learning how to get the logistics to work. My husband went to Centrelink in Bathurst, with our daughter and was given armloads of forms and heads buzzing with information came home to complete the details. This should have been a warning, as each query raised its head and a phone call made the information never seemed to make sense. It was assumed the system was incredibly complicated that surely not everyone in Centrelink must understand the intricacies of such a complicated policy as no two people would give the same information to the same question. This became a source of frustration. After revealing everything we owned and knew unto the forms it became apparent that Dale would only receive a mere \$92 a fortnight as our income dared to be too high. It was the fact that she was living away from home that constituted the bulk of this allowance. After securing her accommodation in Fenner Hall the self-catering cheapest university accommodation we could afford apart from setting her up in a "squat" with persons and conditions unknown. We then stopped to assess the situation. Her accommodation was to cost \$224 per fortnight, plus bond, plus food plus living expenses plus setting her up in a room with cooking utensils,

bedding etc not to mention uni service fees, books, stationery, clothes, toiletries, internet and telephone fees and to this the government has given us a helping hand of \$92. They took her portion of Family allowance from me, \$56, so in essence the hand up for a good student who worked hard to commence a university education and was living away from home was \$36 per fortnight. Of course she could not hope to live on this as the government had decreed our income was enough to support her as well. Let me tell you the impact this had on the family

- a. All our reserve cash including redrawing on our mortgage was used to pay in advance her accommodation charges for the year.
- b. The sheer worrying of having your 18 year old daughter living over 300klm away unfamiliar with anyone or anything, living on the barest of basic essentials
- c. Our weekly household spending was cut to severe levels to buy extra food, clothes, toiletries, living expenses etc for her
- d. We had to save and work any extra hours we could to pay for her uni charges and textbooks

Of course when this was happening fortunately mortgage interest levels were low but fuel costs high and due to the enduring drought, food prices have all gone up especially in rural towns where transport costs are high and competition between outlets is less.

At present, mid way through our daughters second year at University;

- a. She continues to be a good student and has been invited to do Honours
- b. She lives in an apartment with two other students who deferred for one year secured work with family companies, achieved the Holy Grail of income and are on full independent youth allowance benefits.
- c. She works as a casual retail employee her work hours can vary week to week from 40 hours (during Christmas) to 8 hours @ \$13 per hour
- d. We now pay her accommodation fortnightly from my salary as we no longer have any cash reserves
- e. First semester she paid for her own fees and textbooks from the money she saved from her salary at Christmas
- f. It's cheaper to buy in bulk, they buy their own food which we supplement when we see her
- g. We thank God she is has not had any health problems that would involve doctor's fees and prescription charges
- h. Our income exceeded the threshold FY 02/03 and her \$92 was ceased
- i. I receive no benefits for her, as they were not reinstated when her Youth allowance ceased.
- e. For some ironic reason, after an extra Honours year, she hopes to work for the government.
- f. If conditions have not changed by 2006, my son will not go straight to university after Year 12, we can not afford it.
- g. Now I'm looking forward to the bonus \$600 (thankyou) to give some money to her to buy shoes and her textbooks for semester 2.

I hope this submission conveys to you that the youth allowance system really needs revision if we want all sorts of good kids to go on to University.

I don't want her to compromise her studies to have to earn money to buy the necessities of life. She enjoys working and it brings relief from her studies and an outlet and helps makes her a well grounded person but the inconsistencies and fluctuations of casual work cannot ensure you have enough money at the times you need it.

I don't consider we earn a considerable amount, before our daughter went to university we had savings and a cash flow for family activities such as holidays and entertainment but now

it is severely curtailed. The threshold certainly needs to be revised and brought in line with the Family allowance scheme. If the government agency decides you can receive a benefit for a child up to combined income of \$82,000 why is this different for youth allowance? Surely it's not just penny pinching.

I think an extra hand should be given to rural/regional kids to give them confidence to make choices for university courses that suit their interests and not their locality. It can only benefit the country to encourage country kids to go to university. Kids from rural communities are disadvantaged in getting access to things kids in the city take for granted, e.g. public transport, accommodation, choice in local universities, extra allowances should be made available to rural students as they compete on a level playing field for the university places so they should receive an advantageous handicap for the practical logistics.

Scholarships and bursaries are all well and good for those exceptional students but good students with lesser UAIs should be given opportunities to make their parents proud too. Youth allowance is no doubt very difficult to administer as each kid has their own set of circumstances but surely the information from Centrelink should be consistent.

We all should really encourage kids to be better educated as the whole country will benefit in the long run. With HECS fees all ready on their accounts, we should try to make the logistics of being at university as accessible as possible and reasonable for all students.

Why should students who go on from school to university be penalized for this decision? Our daughter was of an age and maturity to know in her own mind that she wanted to continue her studies and not be distracted of having to take time off to look for work along side hundreds of other kids in a rural town to reach that Holy Grail of income to achieve independence.

Our daughter became independent when we left her in Fenner Hall with all we could give her and a government cheque of \$92 per fortnight.

Thankyou for reading my submission and I hope it helps other rural families and students.

Mrs Carrol Rogers