

7 July 2009

Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committee on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Australia



RE: Proposed changes to the Independent Youth Allowance Criteria

The Riverland Futures Taskforce commenced in early 2009 as an initiative of the former Minister for Regional Development in South Australia. It provides a mechanism for State & Local Government in conjunction with the SA Murray Darling Basin Natural Resource Management Board and the Riverland Development Corporation to work together to work towards a sustainable future for the Riverland Region

The Riverland Futures Taskforce would like to raise their concerns in relation to the proposed changes to the Independent Youth Allowance and the impacts this will have on many young regional people who are considering attending university.

Riverland Parents of tertiary students are concerned that even fewer country students will be able to attend university because of changes to Youth Allowance eligibility announced in the recent federal Budget.

The bottom line is that many country parents simply cannot afford the estimated \$15 000 per annum per student to cover the accommodation and educational costs for their children studying in the city

The full Youth Allowance at about \$9,600 pa covers a significant portion of student costs, with the balance either made up by parents or by the student working at casual jobs during university.

Without access to Youth Allowance the burden is simply beyond that which many regional families will be able to afford.

Many Riverland students take a gap year participating in seasonal work to earn income to support themselves while living away from home attending university. The proposed changes to the criteria from earning \$19,500 to be eligible to having to work 30 hours a week (effectively full time employment) for 18 months will make this task almost impossible. The reality is that in many parts of regional Australia full time employment can be very difficult to obtain and these students will be competing with adults in an already scarce job market.

The Riverland is currently under extreme economic pressure due to the drought and low water allocations with job redundancy being on the increase. The chances of Riverland students meeting the proposed criteria for independent youth allowance will be further diminished and combine this with the increased financial pressure Riverland families are under due to the current economic circumstance many young Riverland people will be effectively be deprived off the opportunity to pursue a tertiary education at all.

It is important to recognise that many young regional Australians leave their homes to attend university but after completing their studies a considerable proportion of these people return to their regional roots becoming integral to the fabric of these country towns and providing professional services that can often be difficult to attract to regional Australia.

Riverland parents and students feel these changes effectively discriminate against country students and make it even harder for Riverlanders to achieve their full potential. Most city students have the choice to live at home, better access to the independent youth allowance is critical for country kids who move away to study.

The Riverland Futures Taskforce understand that the proposed changes in the Independent Youth Allowance criteria were in response to the Bradley Report which found a considerable number of students are actually living at home and at times from quite high income families yet still accessing funding support.

This scenario would be very unlikely to apply to regional students as the majority of these students are required to move away from their family home and relocate to the major cities to attend university.

It is with these points in mind the Riverland Futures taskforce ask that you would re-consider the proposed changes to the Independent Youth Allowance criteria and develop a model that will provide fair and equitable opportunity for all young Australians including those in regional and remote areas to participate in tertiary education.



Ruth Firstbrook
Chair, Riverland Futures Taskforce