

SUBMISSION TO THE SENATE INQUIRY INTO RURAL AND REGIONAL ACCESS TO SECONDARY AND TERTIARY EDUCATION OPPORTUNITIES

Date: Monday 27th July, 2009.

From: Anita Hallett



To Whom It May Concern,

I am writing in relation to the Senate Inquiry into "Rural and Regional Access to Secondary and Tertiary Education Opportunities".

I understand that this inquiry will be assessing the adequacy of Government measures to provide equitable access to secondary and post-secondary education opportunities to students from rural and regional communities attending metropolitan institutions, and metropolitan students attending regional universities or technical and further education (TAFE) colleges.

Whilst acknowledging the difficulties regional students face in completing secondary education I wish to focus on the current and proposed barriers to regional students that can prevent them from undertaking tertiary studies.

It is with this in mind that I refer to the terms of reference sections (a) the financial impact on rural and regional students who are attending metropolitan secondary schools, universities or TAFE; (c) the implications of current and proposed government measures on prospective students living in rural and regional areas; (e) the adequacy of government measures to provide for students who are required to leave home for secondary or post-secondary study; and (g) the impact of government measures and proposals on rural and regional communities.

The vast majority of students from rural and regional areas have to move away from home to access tertiary studies, many having to relocate to capital cities. While it is difficult to put an exact figure on this cost, which will vary with individual circumstances, I believe it would cost most students moving to a capital city about \$20,000 to live away from home for the university year. On-campus accommodation and metropolitan rental markets are extremely high. **This is the major difference between students from rural and regional areas, and those from capital cities: students who live in capital cities can stay at home while they attend university, whilst the vast majority of rural and regional students are forced to move out of home and pay the high cost of accommodation and food in the city. There is no other choice for them.**

To exacerbate the problem, average incomes in rural and regional areas are much lower than average incomes in the cities. Many country students come from families that simply cannot afford to pay high accommodation and living costs so that their child can pursue tertiary education in the city. This is why so many country students have to take a year off after school, to work and try to get some money behind them before starting their studies. Providing they earned sufficient money in that year, these students could also access Independent Youth Allowance. This money from the Government would then help towards their living costs once they began their study. Without this assistance, many country students simply cannot contemplate leaving home to study, because their families cannot afford to set up another home in the city. To further complicate matters, many families can have 2, 3 or even 4 children accessing tertiary education at the same time. The costs of housing and keeping this number of students away from the family home places onerous burdens on families, hence many students cannot take up the opportunity to further their studies. I have known some families struggling to keep 3 students at

universities, in 3 different locations. How can anyone be expected to pay these costs without some government assistance, especially when these families are on much lower incomes than most city people?

I understand the concern of the Government that some families of high incomes have had students work for 18 months, thus enabling them to access Independent Youth Allowance, even if the student then lives at home. However, these students are in a minority, and I believe that most of those rorting the system would not come from rural and regional areas. Rather than make drastic changes that will cut out assistance to so many students who have a legitimate need, surely the Government could deal with the problem by looking at the family's income, and not allowing access to Youth Allowance to those students whose families have large incomes, and the students who do not have to move out of home to access University. This would still allow those students who are forced to move out of home to further their studies, and those from lower income families, to access some assistance from the Government.

Many students from rural and regional areas are currently completing a 'gap' year to assist in shouldering the financial burden involved in moving away from home to complete tertiary studies. The Education Minister has not guaranteed that these students will not be affected, which has effectively meant that the rules they were told to follow by their teachers and careers officers have become virtually useless. Like many, I find it hard to believe that the Federal Government has made these decisions in the best interest of regional students. Forcing students into two year deferments so that they can qualify for the Independent rate of Youth Allowance will only serve to reduce the percentage of regional students that currently attend university. Also, the majority of University places can only be deferred for one year, so a two year deferral is not possible.

By providing the appropriate levels of support and reducing the financial burdens, more regional students will be encouraged to undertake tertiary studies which will provide benefits back to their local communities. Regional communities are continually crying out for further help in relation to health and education services. It has been well documented that many professionals who choose to work in rural and regional areas are from such areas themselves. **If you want professional people to work in the country, then educate country students, because these are the people most likely to return to country areas to work.** By not providing some assistance to students from these areas, many cannot further their education, causing even greater problems with getting professional people to work in such locations. With government support for students, regional communities will have the chance to prosper when these students return. The outcomes for these communities would be far greater than if the young people of the area were prevented from attending university and were not afforded the opportunity to provide essential skills and services to their local communities in the future.

I believe the Government has made a huge mistake in making these changes to accessing Independent Youth Allowance. For a Government who pretends to care, it shows a gross misunderstanding of the financial barriers to rural and regional students wanting to further their tertiary education. While pretending to be concerned about the number of country students accessing further education, the Government has taken away the most important element in the equation of whether a student can go on with higher studies. The differences between rural and city incomes will only widen with such short-mindedness.

In closing, I believe the government should be doing more to protect and nurture the regional young people who will provide the platform that will launch the future Australia.

Yours sincerely,

Anita Hallett

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