

3 August 2009

The Secretary
Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee
Po Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

RURAL AND REGIONAL EDUCATION – YOUTH ALLOWANCE

I am writing to object to the recent Federal Government's plan to eliminate the Youth Allowance for those seeking financial independence. This will affect our family first hand as we have a daughter who has deferred a university placement in order to qualify for the independent allowance.

Thousands of rural students like our daughter will be disadvantaged by these unfair changes. Students are unable to defer a university placement for more than one year and are subsequently further disadvantaged as to whether the four additional rural points will be still applicable.

My daughter, again like thousands of others, currently works three casual jobs to meet the independent status. The new arrangements requiring thirty hours of work per week for 18 months to 2 years will virtually be unobtainable in most country towns.

With the current economic crisis, how does the Rudd Government propose to create employment opportunities for these young adults when the official unemployment rate for the country is at its highest? Where are all these jobs going to come from? In turn, this extended time period will result in students struggling to meet the new criteria and many may not bother to pursue a university degree at all.

Rural parents are already burdened with large financial costs in sending their children to university. These include relocation costs, transportation, medical and accommodation including hefty bonds. Although the current Youth Allowance greatly assists in meeting some of these expenses, depending on where the child attends university and the location of their accommodation, financial assistance from parents is also essential.

Most rural students have no other choice but to move away to pursue a university degree. Rural students are already disadvantaged by not being able to continue their studies immediately after finishing their HSC. This will further delay them receiving a professional salary by two years and further impact the financial burden imposed on their families. No doubt in some circumstances the idea of attending university will be nothing but a dream for many rural students.

The Rudd Government is unbelievable! On the one hand they are handing out money through the stimulus package but with the other they are taking away thousands of students' chance at a university degree. It will result in students simply not being able to afford to attend university as it will be beyond their reach.

If nothing else the Youth Allowance changes should be amended to allow the current 'gap year' students to comply with the requirements currently in place. Many thousands of students have been working extremely hard to meet the criteria that they were of the understanding they were required to meet and to change the goalposts at this time seems beyond unreasonable. Their chance to gain financial independence will be dramatically reduced if not impossible which will result in their opportunity to attend university being taken from them.

These young people and the thousands to come are the backbone of our country. Rural students deserve every opportunity metropolitan students enjoy and with the changes that are on the table there has been a line drawn in the sand of which rural students will struggle to cross.

Perhaps the government should spend more time thoroughly investigating the consequences of legislative changes to ALL students as these amendments obviously affect rural students over their metropolitan counterparts. More analysis of current university locations would no doubt show that it's the students in the Metropolitan areas that have easier access to these facilities over rural students. Without a doubt University attendance will become even more opportune for Metro students only.

Keep in mind Mr Rudd that you are playing with the lives of our countries future doctors, lawyers, teachers, scientists etc. Do you want rural kids to be taught to settle for second best simply because of their families wealth and status in the community and because they choose to live in a rural location. It's every child's right to deserve and expect that they have access to an education and they should be able to attend university as part of that right.

Also remember that these current gap year students and future ones will have their opportunity to have their say via the polls in the not too distant future – I'm sure their voice will be heard loud and clear and the results will only reiterate their unhappiness with the path the current government has chosen to take with their futures.

In conclusion, I wish to voice my disappointment with the Youth Allowance changes and insist that fair policies are put in place to ensure the future of ALL students, both rural and metropolitan wanting to attend university as the changes to be introduced are far from satisfactory.

Yours faithfully