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The Committee Secretary,  
Senate Standing Committee on Rural and Regional Affairs  
PO Box 6100  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600

**Submission on  
Inquiry into Rural and Regional Access to Secondary and Tertiary  
Education Opportunities**

*(a). The financial impact on rural and regional students who are attending metropolitan secondary schools, universities or TAFE*

Families of rural and regional students who have to live away from home to gain a secondary and/or tertiary education face severe financial disabilities.

Suitable accommodation has to be found, and the operative word is 'suitable'. Parents want to know that their children are safe and will not be abused. This is a constant worry when parents are a long distance from their children. Things that are obvious when observing a situation can be hidden when the closest communication is by phone.

Teenagers and young adults who are put into a foreign environment where shopping, transport, and recreation are unfamiliar, face great emotional and physical stress which impacts negatively on their study. The moral and emotional support from family and close friends is lacking, hence these young people do not have the means to be able to talk things over when advice is needed immediately.

Boarding schools and residential colleges are expensive however parents may opt for these solutions because they hope that their children will be supervised and safe.

An alternative for young adults is having to find rented accommodation. Young people have no rent history and find it extremely difficult to source suitable accommodation. Landlords are generally wary of renting to several young people.

Families are then required to pay for accommodation, food and general costs to run a second household. Students are expected to learn how to live away from home without support networks, learn how to go to university (a whole new experience), and transport themselves in unfamiliar territory on public transport that is generally previously unknown. Most families need the student to try and get some part time work to supplement day to day living expenses, an added stress particularly with some demanding uni courses. These young people also have to fend for themselves, doing their own food shopping, cooking, cleaning and laundry. It is no wonder that country students drop out of tertiary studies to return home because the stress and pressure become too great.

By comparison, children and young adults of city families do not face any of these problems. They have the advantages, comfort and security of their familiar home surroundings while their parents are not stressed about the cost of their education. They usually have a part time job, so very little changes happen to their lives.

Incomes from agricultural businesses are notoriously unpredictable, and young people face the prospect of their education being terminated because they have to return home due to their parents being unable to continue to pay the cost of them living away from home.

**CASE STUDY** Adelaide family with children at university. The mother stated that university was cheaper than (private) school fees. The children continued to live at home, supported by family and graduated without HECS debts. A related family at Port Lincoln with children at university. The family struggled to support their children who had to adjust to life away from family, get part time work, and also ended up with \$30,000 and more HECS debts compared with their debt free cousins.

*(b). The education alternatives for rural and regional students wanting to study in regional areas*

Education alternatives are limited. While country people are proud of their schools and tertiary facilities where they exist, choices are limited due to lack of appropriately qualified teachers/lecturers, a small number of subject choices, lack of mental and educational stimulation through being unable to visit businesses and industries outside the small selection that makes up a rural community.

Some subjects can be taught by distance education however this, too, is limited because of poor and slow internet access, poor or non-existent broadband services and necessary hardware and software.

Where tertiary institutions exist in some larger rural towns, most students still have to live away from home to attend them, therefore all the disadvantages outlined in (a) above apply.

*(c) The implications of existing and proposed Government measures on prospective students living in rural and regional areas*

Young people in rural and regional areas are overcome by the obstacles they have to face to gain a tertiary education and hence do not consider this avenue for their future. The changes to Independent Youth Allowance will strengthen this perception and outcome.

As it presently stands, students have been able to defer chosen university studies for a year while they work in order to qualify for Youth Allowance. Generally uni courses can only be deferred for one year, and the proposed changes will not enable students to defer studies.

Eventually there will be a less educated subculture in rural and regional areas, with people less able to accept advances in technology and general knowledge. Health and the environment are two areas that would suffer as a result.

Country students gaining tertiary degrees are more likely to return to country practice than students who have always lived in the city. Eventually there will be an even greater shortage of health, education, environment professionals thus adding to the downward spiral of quality of life in rural and regional Australia.

**Note:** with reference to case study reported previously – both graduates **did** return to live and work in rural SA on completion of their studies.

*(d) The short and long term impact of current and proposed Government policies on regional university and TAFE college enrolments*

Students are unlikely to enrol in tertiary courses when they do not see tertiary education as a positive future for them. When the obstacles become too great, and/or parents are unable to support their children living away from home to access tertiary study, then enrolments will drop. This then becomes a downward spiral as courses and facilities are curtailed, leading to less involvement by rural and regional students.

*(e) The adequacy of Government measures to provide for students who are required to leave home for secondary or post-secondary study.*

The financial cost of students moving away from home must be more strongly recognised and acknowledged. This is usually seen as a 'country' thing, however until recently, students living in Adelaide who wanted to study veterinary science had to move interstate because South Australia did not have a veterinary science course. This brought home to those families the costs and disincentives facing country students who have to live away from home to study. Of course there are a myriad of cases where students study interstate to access specific courses.

The changes to the Independent Youth Allowance rules make it almost impossible for rural and regional students to fulfil the requirements to be classed as 'independent' and so qualify for financial assistance. Part time employment in the country is virtually non-existent. If a person has spent two years in a job (as proposed changes to the Allowance would necessitate for the person to qualify for assistance), it is even more unlikely that he or she would give that up to work to then relocate to study. The momentum has changed. The number of children from rural and regional Australia who gain tertiary qualifications is lower than for their city counterparts. **The proposed changes would make this inequity even greater.**

*(f) The education needs of rural and regional students*

Basically, the needs are the same as for city students. Country students have less opportunities to socialise and to develop interactive social skills, and they have less prospects of gaining interest in a wide variety of occupations and professions, so these are two areas where Government action can remove these problems. Funding for educational excursions, or short term specialised courses probably in the city, would alleviate these disadvantages to a great extent. Sport is an area where rural and regional students may excel because it

is one of the few avenues for acceptable community involvement where excellence is praised. This could be tapped into through information on professions/jobs associated with sport, or through sports clinics where above average achievers could be pointed to a career as a professional sports person.

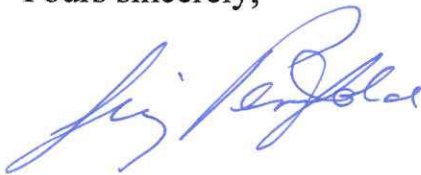
*(g) The impact of Government measures and proposals on rural and regional communities*

Refer to (c) above. A diminution in qualified people able and willing to work in the country lowers the quality of life in rural and regional areas. This eventually impacts on businesses as they close and move out of the district, with less people in the region negatively affecting sports, all community activities such as ambulance services, numbers of children in schools, and so the downward spiral goes on.

Rural and regional communities require mechanics, builders, road makers, airport builders and many other types of workers and tradespeople. Business administration is another area where training is an advantage and/or necessary (as in local government administrators).

Australia needs people populating rural and regional areas and those people should not be disadvantaged because they don't live in metropolitan areas.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Liz Penfold', written in a cursive style.

**Mrs. Liz Penfold MP**