

Dear Senator/s,

RE: Inquiry into Rural and Regional Access to Secondary and Tertiary Education Opportunities

I am a full time working parent of three young Australians, aged 23, 21 and 18.

We live in Regional Victoria (Warrnambool).

We are middle income earners. (Not far above the cut off and not eligible for any government assistance through Centrelink).

As parents, we have supported our children and their educational endeavours and made it our priority to give them every opportunity available to make the most of their education. This has been a very challenging and expensive task and one that we have chosen as the best for their future as citizens in this great country. Coming from a regional centre, this has meant numerous trips to our capital city and interstate to help them follow their dreams.

All our children, with our encouragement, aspire to a University education, realising the increased opportunities in life with a higher education qualification. Warrnambool is a wonderful regional city, which has afforded us great educational, recreational, spiritual and community connections. Deakin University is to be congratulated on its presence in the city and the courses that it offers are outstanding however, they do not provide the courses that my children wish to pursue.

My eldest son has recently graduated from ACU Ballarat as a Primary school teacher qualified to teach in both the government and private sectors of education and is enjoying his first year of full time employment. He had to move away from home (200km) to pursue this opportunity and as we were not in a position to be able to support him fully (rent, food, text books, uni costs, living costs) he took the option of a gap year and worked three jobs at the same time to reach the financial goal that would qualify him for Independent Youth Allowance. This consisted of a Traineeship in Sport and Recreation, Life guarding at the local pool and casual work at McDonalds. It definitely wasn't a year off.

My daughter is currently attending the University of Ballarat to pursue her goal in Exercise and Sport Science. Like my son, she took a gap year to qualify for Independent Youth Allowance working three jobs; as a Pharmacy assistant, Aerobics Coach and After School Communities Activity provider at a local Primary School.

My dilemma arises when my third child, currently in Year 12, who was also planning on taking a gap year and work to gain Independent Youth Allowance (a 12 month traineeship and part time work) prior to hopefully attending Latrobe University in Bendigo (3 and 1/2 hours drive) to do Secondary Physical Education and Outdoor Education, will no longer be able to qualify.

There is no way we are going to be able to afford for him to attend University in Bendigo if he doesn't get Youth Allowance. The next closest University to offer his preferred course is Monash Peninsula (4 and a half hours away and more expensive than Bendigo.) We have discussed his options if the new rules are not changed:

1 - Take two gap years so that he can work for a total of 18 months full time. Which increases the chance that he won't actually end up going to Uni at all. (According to studies done by Government bodies.)

2 - Not do the Traineeship he wants (Cert III in Sport and Recreation - which is directly related to his university course) and try to find a high paying full time job and save as much money as he can in one year to try to cover the costs of the next four years and then also get a part-time job while at Uni (which will probably mean working weekends and not being able to get home to see family hardly at all.) His chances of getting a highly paid full-time job are not very high.

3 - Change courses and go to Deakin University in Warrnambool - not going to happen. Why would you do a course you don't want to do just because it is close to home - no future in that.

This all seems like a fairly unreasonable amount of pressure to put on a 19 years old and one would have to agree that it is definitely making it very hard and is not encouraging our regional students to go to University at all.

With this in mind, if I was a parent of younger students and the government was making these changes, I would have to ask myself; Why would I bother trying to encourage my children to go to University at all when it is made so difficult. I can see this would lead to students not even bothering to finish year 12 and for that matter, what point is there in going to school beyond 16 years of age when they can just go out and get a job, part time or otherwise or maybe they will just go on unemployment benefits instead and maybe start a family. Where is all this leading to??

I would also like to suggest that the direct effect of these proposed changes could include:

- i) Fewer regional students attending university, including those from Metropolitan areas wishing to attend a regional university to do their preferred course.
- ii) The two-year gap year means again, not as many students attending uni/TAFE.
- iii) The financial effect this will have on the Universities, jobs for lecturers and the impact on the knowledge wealth of this nation.
- iv) The effect on secondary education and the lack of motivation and drive for the students, which will be created by the financial difficulties imposed. Teachers have enough to deal with, let alone more disengaged students added to the mixture.

In Warrnambool there is great support for our Year 12 students. There are many community groups, businesses and schools that offer Traineeships specifically designed for students in their gap year. The proposed changes will also have an effect on these businesses and the cities economy as a whole.

I congratulate the government on its initiative to provide financial support to those young Australians who have chosen to do an apprenticeship that takes them more than 90 minutes from their home but why is it that they obviously consider them more worthy of support than University students. Should they not at least be on equal footing and offered the same financial support – we are talking about the future of our Nation here. Are we going to have to import our ‘brains’ from overseas?!!!

Just because our metropolitan counterparts see the gap year as a great opportunity to have a holiday overseas and be paid a wage from their parent’s company so as to claim Independent Youth allowance on return, doesn’t mean that our government should tar our hard working regional and rural students with the same brush.

Our kids work harder and do more hours than most adults to try to qualify for Independent Youth Allowance under the current rules. Why make it any harder? The government should be looking at ways to encourage more Rural and Regional students to attend University and put in place ways to support them more readily – not making it more difficult. Any students wishing to attend University away from home should automatically qualify for Youth Allowance – no questions asked.

This can become a very emotional debate and every case is different. Please don’t punish our kids for being part of a Rural/Regional community, they are Australians too and should be treated fairly and with the respect they deserve.

Delia Jenkins