

To Ms Radcliffe,

My name is Katherine Nix. I am writing on behalf of students at La Trobe University Bendigo in regard to recent budget decisions made by the Federal Government to change the eligibility criteria for Centrelink benefits for students in Higher Education. It seems strange that while our government aims to improve the participation rates in higher education among low socio-economic status Australians, they have also increased the amount of time a person must spend in the workforce before they are able to qualify for Centrelink benefits as a student.

The Bendigo Student Association's chief concern is for those students who completed their VCE studies in 2008 and have been working during 2009 so that they might qualify for financial support in 2010. It seems extremely unfair that these students who began their GAP Year under the previous budget should be subject to the new eligibility criteria.

For many Australians who wished to begin study in 2010, this change to eligibility criteria is likely to cause many potential students to make the decision to forego their university place all together. Bendigo itself is a university town. La Trobe University not only provides jobs on campus for Bendigo residents, it also provides the local labour market with fresh graduates who are happy to call Bendigo home. It would be a shame to see the number of graduates in Bendigo decrease due to an inability of our government to adequately support students.

Furthermore, those students currently undertaking their GAP Year may decide to attend university in 2010 without financial aid. Not only will this see a dramatic increase in student poverty, but it will also put a great deal of pressure on families to provide financial aid for their children when they just can't afford it. Bendigo supports several of Victoria's most impoverished shires- this tells us that most of our students cannot live without financial aid.

We believe that subjecting current GAP students to the new eligibility criteria is extremely unfair. The Bendigo Student Association fervently believes that in order to increase participation rates in higher education our government needs to show its support for students through the provision of fair, honest and encouraging financial support. We strongly recommend that this problem be rectified.

Yours sincerely,

Katherine Nix

President, Bendigo Student Association