

To; The Senate Committee

Rural and Regional Access to Secondary and Tertiary Education Opportunities

Independent Youth Allowance (and a mention of Hurlstone Agricultural High School)

1. Our Family's Story

My husband and I have 3 children - aged 21, 20 and 18.

We have a grazing property which has gone from supporting us to being a break-even sideline over the last 25 years. Now my husband and I both work extremely hard off farm and run the farm on our days off.

Our eldest son, Max attended Hurlstone Agricultural High School and is now at Sydney University studying Pharmacy - he hopes to return to this area as a pharmacist in the future. He receives Independent Youth Allowance, and finds it extremely hard to support himself in Sydney on that. We frequently end up helping him financially. Pharmacy is a difficult course for Max and he has trouble passing, it also has many face to face hours and so we have not expected him to work more than a few hours a week except in the holidays.

If he had not attended HAHS it is extremely unlikely that he would have achieved entry into Pharmacy. If he had not taken a year away from study and worked and subsequently qualified for Independent Youth Allowance either he would not have been able to attend University (and gain all the experiences that brings) or our family would have had to make major sacrifices in basic areas to allow Max to go to Uni.

Our second son, Charlie did distance education through Karabar Distance Education Centre (a NSW Public School) for years 9-12 after attending Monaro High School for years 7-8. He now attends Sydney University and is studying a Bachelor of Arts and Sciences (with mainly Business subjects). He is also on Independent Youth Allowance having worked since he left

school and qualified for it. He has no idea what he wants to do in the future, but is at least exposed to a variety of ideas, people and places to give him a chance to find out. He has been nearly able to support himself since he left school, with the help of Independent Youth Allowance.

Our third child, Annie is the hardest worker of them all and did the HSC at Monaro High School in 2008. She has deferred a Bachelor of International Studies at Wollongong University until 2010 and is currently working in retail in Jindabyne. She had intended to qualify for Independent Youth Allowance in May 2010 to help support herself through University. Now she is desperately trying to save and has had all her plans changed. We feel very sorry for Annie if these changes go ahead - we know she will hate to have to ask us for money, but there is no way she can earn enough to support herself. It is also going to be very hard for us to work out what is fair among the children.

We consider ourselves very lucky; at least two of our children had a chance to receive Youth Allowance. Imagine if the changes had been made before Max. Then we would have had 3 children all living in major cities over 450 km from home. That is incredibly expensive. Should all our children finish their courses as quickly as possible we will have 3 children living elsewhere as students for the next 3 years and then another year of 2 away.

We deliberately chose not to send our children to private schools; one reason was because we saw better value in saving to help them with tertiary education. Even although the boys receive the Youth Allowance it is still costing us money to keep them in Sydney.

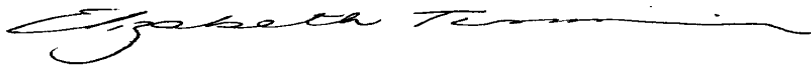
2. The points we would like to make

- At University the boys have met students who live at home, have attended elite private schools, spent the "gap" year travelling, were paid wages by their parents' family business and have thus qualified for Independent Youth Allowance. We agree this is a loophole which should be closed.
- The manufactured gap year programmes involving work overseas which are designed to allow qualification are often used by people who may otherwise still be able to support their children through university; but there are many others who use these programs to gain experience in another country and would otherwise not be able to travel or attend university.
- There is a big difference in cost between moving to a city from the country to attend university and attending university in the same city where your family lives.

- It is very hard for many rural and regional students to find work in their home area over holidays. In our area there is winter work, but over the long summer holidays work is almost impossible to find. This means that the children cannot come home over the holidays and so have to continue with the extra living away from home expenses all year. It also means that they do not get a chance to keep as much contact with us, their friends and the area as they would like.
- Our family fails most income and asset means tests. Our asset is our farm which produces not much income and our income is expended in repaying significant debt, paying expenses, saving for the future and supporting our extended family. We do not think that means testing is the answer for Youth Allowance as it can only be set at one level and the cost for rural and regional families is so much higher, particularly when there are several children. In our case we are in the position now when our income is quite high, but it has only been high for 4 years and only will be for another 3 and those few years just happen to coincide with our children's university years. Really we would like to use this income to provide for our future and repay as much debt as possible.
- The reason the 18 month independent Youth Allowance Test works at the moment is because universities allow 1 year deferrals. The new system can only be used if 2 year deferrals are introduced, because otherwise students will do their HSC and have no idea whether they are going to be able to do their course at Uni after they work for the required time. Under current selection procedures it is very hard to get into University if you have left school 2 years ago.
- The new system encourages people to take even longer to get a university education - for most students it would mean the earliest they could get a Bachelor degree would be at 24. Most professions then have extra qualification requirements. It seems to be a major disincentive to tertiary education, particularly when the students end up with a significant HECS debt.
- Cohesive communities depend on people from different backgrounds having contact with each other. We need city people to know students from the regions and visa versa. Attending university together is a great way to overcome cultural divides.
- Regional areas have trouble attracting professionals. I would suspect it is less expensive and more successful to encourage students from regional areas to attend

university and return to a regional area than encourage people from city backgrounds to move to the country.

- If changes are made to Allowances like this it is unethical to make them so that people who have already planned their actions (like Annie) and are well into their qualification period are suddenly ineligible. Changes in this instance should have been made with an earliest starting date of 1 July 2010, so that students who had left school in 2008 could still have their 18 month period to qualify.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Elizabeth Timmins". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping underline.