

To Whom It May Concern

I write in relation to the Senate Inquiry into Rural and Regional Access to secondary and Tertiary Education Opportunities.

It is my understanding that this inquiry will act as an assessment of the adequacy of Government measures to provide equitable access to post-secondary education opportunities to students from rural and regional communities attending metropolitan institutions among other points of reference.

I wish to focus my submission on the current and proposed barriers to regional and rural students that can prevent them from undertaking tertiary studies.

The proposed changes to Youth Allowance have both positive points and I believe unreasonable difficulties for rural and regional students in their final 2 years of senior secondary study.

The proposed increase in the parental income threshold will be of benefit to far more students which will help lessen the financial burden on families that have to face the ever increasing costs of their child living away from home and further education. The start up Scholarships which will replace current scholarships (Commonwealth Education Costs Scholarship and Commonwealth Accommodation Scholarship) are not an additional source of assistance as they are already available to eligible students. The increase in students earning capacity limit before their Youth Allowance will be reduced is a positive move and well overdue, this brings income levels a little closer to the average income. These I see as the positive changes to the current system.

The main losers are students who are working or planning to take gap year jobs. In the past many of these jobs allowed the students to claim a higher independent rate of Youth allowance. Hence, the gap year continues to be an important mechanism for low-middle-income, regional and rural families to access income support for the costs of living away from home and the increasing costs of education. The changes will move the goal posts for the students currently in their gap year and will make further study choices and hence career paths for many currently in their final year of secondary school difficult to achieve. The students currently in their final 2 years of secondary school make choices on their course of study guided by career advisors and information that has been relevant for the past few years. This also means that families have made financial plans and decisions for their child's approaching university education needs. These costs involve basically running two households and possibly more if they have several children in the university system. A heavy burden for any family

To many regional students it seems that the Government does not understand the increased costs faced by students who are forced to live away from home to pursue their chosen course and fulfill the potential they have demonstrated by earning that university place. To change the rules for the students currently in the gap year, earning an income to avail themselves to a higher level of Government support and the students currently studying in Years 11 and 12 that have made study choices and future life choices seems grossly unfair. Like many, I find it hard to believe that the Government has made these decisions in the best interest of regional and rural students. Forcing students into Two-year university deferments so that they can qualify for the independent rate of Youth Allowance will only serve to reduce the percentage of regional and rural students that currently attend university.

It appears that the government's proposal is a "one size fits all" solution to a financial problem. Perhaps the Government may need to look at a fairer system for the currently disadvantaged regional and rural students as it is clearly obvious that these students face a far greater financial cost than students living closer to universities and that are able to live in many cases in their home environment.

In closing, I believe that change is inevitable, but gradually phasing in the changes and taking into consideration how these changes affect the students currently in years 11 and 12 and those in the gap year will soften the blow and not only financially but also for the affects that these changes will or could have on these students study choices and career paths.

Yours Sincerely

Leanne McRae