



South West Local Learning & Employment Network

Submission to the Senate Inquiry – Rural and Regional Access to Secondary and Tertiary Education Opportunities

South West Local Learning and Employment Network (SWLLEN) was formed in 2002 as part of the Victorian Government's strategy to increase Year 12 retention and provide education and training pathways for young people aged 15 to 19. It covers the local government areas of Warrnambool, Moyne, Corangamite and Colac-Otway. In subsequent years SWLLEN has delivered a Local Community Partnerships contract on behalf of the Federal Department of Employment, Education and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) in the Warrnambool City, Barwon West, Hopkins and Glenelg regions. SWLLEN has offices in Warrnambool, Colac, Cobden, Hamilton and Portland.

This submission is presented in two parts with four attachments containing supplementary information:

Part A outlines the considerable amount of research conducted and comment made over the past decades on the issue of rural and regional disadvantage for students accessing higher education. It is now clear that inquiries are not the answer – action to redress the inequities is the only way forward.

Part B outlines the community response to the recent changes to the criteria for Independent Youth Allowance announced in the 2009 Federal Budget. The impact of the changes has been gauged by attendance at a public forum, petition signatures, a web survey, media commentary and individual case studies.

Attachments

1. Media article from *The Standard Warrnambool*
2. Notes of Youth Allowance Forum
3. Transcript of Community Petitions
4. Transcript of Web Survey Responses



South West Local Learning & Employment Network 1
PO Box 1060, Warrnambool 3280
Phone: (03) 5561 0047
www.swllen.net.au

Part A – Existing Data

Though published in 2003, the following article is more current than ever before. It uses the data available to provide a snapshot of student disadvantage in rural and regional areas.

Callaghan, Vince. 'Government Financial Support for Students – The Case for Radical Reform', *People and Place, Volume 11, No. 3, 2003. Page 15-16*, Centre for Population and Urban Research, Monash University, Melbourne

Students who live away from home to study

Students who have to live away from home are generally from regional, rural and isolated areas of Australia. However, the group also includes students from urban areas whose course choice requires them to live away from home. This may be because of the time commitment required by their program of study, that travel times involved can be detrimental to the study time available, or to their needs for access to suitable part-time work.

Recent research indicates that there is a very clear correlation between the participation rates of regional, rural and isolated students in post-secondary education and their perception of or their ability to, survive financially.

James et al. in the National Board of Employment, Education and Training (NBEET) publication entitled, *Rural and Isolated School Students and Their Higher Education Choices*,¹³ highlight the financial disincentives perceived by students who would need to leave home in order to study. The study states that, 'At least twice the proportion of the least disadvantaged students believe that the cost of university fees may stop them from attending university'.¹⁴

The research goes on to state that rural and isolated students 'are more likely than urban students to perceive discouraging inhibitors and barriers such as the cost of living away from home. The cost of higher education, including fees and living expenses associated with leaving home, are serious inhibitors or barriers'.¹⁵

It is most interesting to note that the former Minister for Education, Training and Youth Affairs, Dr. David Kemp,¹⁶ acknowledges that there are 'huge regional disparities' in participation rates. In the so-called leaked Cabinet document, he states that the current system 'has no capacity to reduce huge regional disparities in higher education. Nineteen to twenty-one year olds in the top five participating areas- affluent capital city suburbs – are five times more likely to go to university than their counterparts in the five areas at the bottom of the list'.¹⁷

Ian Dobson and Bob Birrell, in an article entitled 'Equity and university entrance – a 1997 update'¹⁸ conclude: 'the poor representation of students from low SES areas is not new, The trend towards higher proportion of private school students amongst commencing undergraduates is one manifestation of this situation. Much more needs to be done if universities are to represent truly the socio-economic make up of Australian society.'¹⁹

The real indictment of Federal Governments over many years is that, although the disparity between urban and regional students has been known for a long time, very little has been done to address the situation. In 1988, for example, following the Country Education Project study, *Three Times Less Likely*,²⁰ there was an acknowledgement that there needed to be a concerted



effort to deal with regional disparity. In 1990, *A Fair Chance for all*,²¹ indicated that Australia's post-secondary education sector should mirror the social make-up of the Australian population overall.

It is clear from all recent research that, for regional/rural and isolated students, this has not occurred. The most recent available Department of Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA) performance indicators on access by equity groups are the 1999 data. These show that students from low socio-economic status backgrounds and from isolated areas are participating at 40 per cent of the rate which they should relative to population share.

Timeline of papers, studies and inquiries relating to rural and regional disadvantage 1986 – 2005

This list is not exhaustive. Rather, it gives the inquiry a chronological snapshot and provides evidence that the issue is long standing and as yet unresolved.

1986 *Tertiary Students Who Have to Live Away from Home – A Costly Education*, V. Callaghan and I. Slockwitch, Occasional Paper Warrnambool Institute of Advanced Education

1986 *Review of Efficiency and Effectiveness in Higher Education: Report of the Committee of Enquiry*, Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission AGPS, Canberra

1986 Advice in the Joint Commonwealth/State Working Party on Higher Education Provision in Queensland Regional Centres, CTEC

1987 *Report of the Working Party on Post-Secondary Rural Education*, Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission and Department of Primary Industries and Energy, AGPS, Canberra

1987 *The Post-Secondary Education Needs of Rural Australians: Final Report to the Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission*, the Rural Development Centre, University of New England, Armidale,

1988 *3 Times Less Likely*, Country Education Project and Participation and Equity Program

1989 *The Provision of Post-Secondary Education in Non-Metropolitan Australia: Planning and Policy Considerations*, T. Budge, TAFE National Centre for Research and Development, Adelaide

1989 *Delivery of Rural Education and Training*, Ministry of Education, Department of Agriculture and Rural Affairs,

1989 *A Fair Go. The Federal Government's Strategy for Rural Education and Training*, Minister for Employment, Education and Training, Minister for Primary Industries and Energy



1990 *Austudy Rural Inequities*, The Country Education Project, the Office of Rural Affairs and the Victorian Country Youth Affairs Network Bendigo College of Advanced Education, Bendigo

1991 *Student Financial Assistance*, Report of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training AGPS, Canberra

1992, *Post-Compulsory Education and Training: Fitting the Need*, National Board of Employment, Education and Training, AGPS, Canberra

1992 *Higher Education Series, Urban and Rural Participation*, Department of Employment, Education and Training, Update No.3, Higher Education, DEET, Canberra

1994 *Provision of Post-Compulsory Education and Training in Non-Metropolitan Australia*, National Board of Employment, Education and Training, AGPS, Canberra

2000 *Equity in Access to Higher Education Revisited*, B. Birrell, A. Calderon, I. Dobson and T. Smith, People and Place 8, 2000:50-61

2001 *Paying Their Way: a Survey of Australian Undergraduate University Student Finances*, Australian Vice-Chancellor's Committee, Canberra

2003 *Government Financial Support for Students – the Case for Radical Reform*, V. Callaghan, People and Place 11, 2003:14-22

2003 *Higher Education at the Crossroads*, B. Birrell, V. Rapson, I. Dobson and T. Smith, Centre for Population and Urban Research, Monash University

2005 *Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education References Committee, Student Income Support*, Senate Printing Unit, Canberra

July 2009 *Parliament of Victoria Education and Training Committee Final Report, Inquiry into Geographical Differences in the Rate in which Victorian Students participate in Higher Education*

The continued use of government resources for what seems to be ongoing inquiries into the issues of regional disadvantage has done nothing to make the changes that are required to ensure that all young people have equal access to post compulsory education. Further inquiry is not required; what the young people of rural and regional Australia need is CHANGE that addresses the disadvantage that means that they are less able to access and complete a higher education qualification.



Part B – Community Response

The response has been unprecedented in the life of SWLLEN and local politicians report that the only issue that has generated such public outcry in the past in the introduction of the GST. Toni Hancock, Executive Officer of SWLLEN, has participated in over 20 media interviews ranging from national coverage by *The Australian* and *ABC National* to regional radio and press.

(For an example from the Warrnambool Standard see Attachment 1)

SWLLEN has received feedback on the Rudd Government's proposed changes to the work criteria for Independent Youth Allowance from a number of sources.

Youth Allowance Forum held on Wednesday 3 June from 7.00 to 9.00pm in the Warrnambool Entertainment Centre

The forum attracted over 300 people, 58 of whom were young people who deferred their studies in 2009 and now fear that they will not be able to afford to attend university next year.

Two resolutions from the forum called on the Government to:

- Rescind proposed changes announced in the Federal Budget to the eligibility criteria for Independent Youth Allowance for the current group of students deferring university
- Provide longer-term recognition of disadvantage suffered by rural and regional students forced to live away from home for further education

Three key speakers addressed the forum and then participated in a panel discussion:

Vince Callaghan, the writer of the article in Part A, indicated that he has been involved in regional issues including involvement with Senate and House of Representative enquiries over the past 30 years and that successive governments have failed to take action to redress regional disparity and disadvantage. He cited the following facts:

- **Fact 1** – Regional and rural Australian students are almost four times less likely to go on to tertiary education compared to their metropolitan counterparts, mainly because of cost, particularly if they choose a course not locally available.
- **Fact 2** – Staying at home does not substantially alter the family budget, but choosing to study away from home will cost in the vicinity of \$20,000 p.a. (not including HECS fees)

Mary Pendergast, Principal of Warrnambool College discussed the changes in relation to the United Nations Charter of Human Rights and recent government policy statements. She concluded that the following would need to occur to ensure fairness and equity in the new policy:

- Remove barriers to fair access – the current threshold of combined income is too low
- Afford every child the opportunity to access, on merit, their course of choice if it's not available locally
- Create provision for current students who have deferred. The deferral year for regional students is working

Professor Sue Kilpatrick, Pro Vice Chancellor (Rural and Regional) of Deakin University Warrnambool, said that she feared that the changes would make it more difficult for regional students to return to further study and for universities to reach their student number targets. She expressed concern at the contradiction of the Government wanting more people from



regional areas to access higher education while denying them the means to do so. She also said that:

- There is more chance of attracting skilled people back to rural and regional areas if they originally come from a regional area.
- Deakin is concerned about the impact of deferral, with almost 37% of students deferring. Students trying to qualify for Youth Allowance will need to take twice as long, with more chance of them not returning to study. This is an issue for the whole regional economy.

(For a full transcript of the Forum Notes see Attachment 2)

Community Petitions

Two petitions were tabled in the House of Representatives by the Member for Wannon, the Hon David Hawker.

The first with **618 signatures** applied to students who deferred a university place in 2009 to earn the \$19,500 required to gain independent status in 2010. These deferrers and their parents/carers are seeking to have the retrospective nature of the changes to the eligibility criteria for Independent Youth Allowance reversed so that the students can pursue the study pathway they planned under the previous guidelines.

The second with **377 signatures** sought to address the concerns of current students who will have to live away from home in the future to study the course of their choice, and their parents/carers. It asked that these students are supported through an equivalence of the Independent Youth Allowance which recognises the inequity for rural and regional students and families.

(For a full transcript of the petitions see Attachment 3)

Web Survey

183 responses were received endorsing the resolution; *we call on the Federal Government to:*

- *Reconsider the proposed changes to the Independent Youth Allowance announced in the Federal budget*
- *Provide longer-term recognition of regional disadvantage suffered by rural and regional people who are forced to leave home to access further education*

59 respondents (32.8%) made comments which are included in *Attachment 4*.

Case Studies

Some of the web survey respondents mentioned above 'told their story' in the comments section. They related their experiences of regional disadvantage and outlined the effects that the proposed changes to the Independent Youth Allowance would have on themselves and their families. *(See Attachment 4 for a full transcript)*



The following case study appeared in the June edition of the SWLLEN newsletter:

An Aussie Fair Go?

Gladys is a grandmother of two students who did VCE in 2008. One lives in the Warrnambool region and the other in a Melbourne suburb. Both aspired to further education as they realised tertiary qualifications were essential for their career options.

In 2006, the rural-based student, 'Natalie', started working during school holidays and weekends to save for university. A conscientious student, she did extra subjects in 2007 to ensure a high score, while continuing to work part time. The effort paid off and her ENTER score in 2008 was in the top 10 per cent of the state giving her acceptance into virtually any Melbourne-based university.

However, her family was unable to afford this and so Natalie planned to go to Geelong where she could study a similar course (but with less prestige) while living more cheaply. In 2009 she deferred and got a full time 12-month contract job with the aim of being eligible for the Independent Youth Allowance. Natalie also kept her weekend work to help for next year, as her job could be transferable to Geelong and she realizes she will need to work while studying. She also completed a short hospitality course at South West TAFE to help with job seeking for next year.

Natalie's parents downsized their home so extra money would be available to support her but with the budget decision to change eligibility for the allowance she will now have to find another job in 2010. This means it will now be two years before Natalie can start on her career path and she will still have to cope with the work/study/self sufficiency environment of living away from home on limited resources.

Meanwhile, her city cousin 'Jody' completed the minimum subjects for VCE in 2008 and started a part-time job. He had intended to defer university in 2009, work for part of the year and travel for the remainder but he did not obtain the ENTER score needed for his university course so instead enrolled in a TAFE course. He is living at home, not paying board and working part time for pocket money. His biggest problem is getting used to catching a train into the city each day.

Jody is already on his career path which will allow him to transfer to university at a later date. All support and financial help is coming from home. Jody continues with his local sport and social life and his parents are looking to buy a holiday home.

To Gladys these contrasting examples show the inequality and stress the Government policy is having on rural based families compared to those living in the city. In two years these families will be faced with same decisions for two more children. "Please tell me why rural families have such unequal opportunities?" Gladys asked.

This article is based on information supplied to SWLLEN by a Warrnambool district resident concerned about the changes to the Independent Youth Allowance eligibility criteria. False names have been used.



Conclusion

This submission provides both qualitative and quantitative evidence about:

- The number of inquiries held and research papers written over the years that, though well intentioned, have done little to address the issue of rural and regional disadvantage for students who have to leave home in order to access the higher education course of their choice.
- The response of the community of south west Victoria to the proposed, and also well intentioned, changes to the eligibility criteria for the Independent Youth Allowance announced in the 2009 Federal Budget
- The long term nature of the disadvantage that exists for students from rural and regional areas who have to live away from home to further their education. Further supporting data can be found in the two year Deferment Study conducted by SWLLEN which shows that region's year 12 completers defer at 2.5 times the rate of their metropolitan counterparts with the vast majority stating the reason as the need to take a gap year in order to earn money to fund university study. These findings are confirmed by the Victorian government's successive *On Track* Connect surveys which trace the destinations of exit year 12 students for the following year.
- A substantial number of the 2008 year 12 completers year 12 who deferred their place at University in order to become eligible for the Independent Youth Allowance will now not be able to attend University in 2010 as planned. Some say they will not attend at all. This will be entirely due to retrospective changes to Centrelink guidelines which seek to close a 'loop hole' but in doing so, will preclude many rural and region young people from being able to attend there course of choice.

Recommendations to the Inquiry:

South West Local Learning and Employment Network (South West LLEN) recommends that immediate action is taken to address regional disadvantage for those seeking post compulsory education in locations away from their usual place of residence.

This could be achieved by:

- redefining the criteria for independence as it related to the Independent Youth Allowance
- adjusting the Parental Income Thresholds to take into consideration the costs associated with supporting a child living a significant distance away from home in order to study
- granting financial support to all young people who are required to leave home to study as currently occurs for Apprentices and Trainees

Additionally South West LLEN recommends that this Senate Inquiry

- ensures that the proposed changes to the Independent Youth Allowance be reframed to give due consideration to 'rurality' as a separate equity group
- repeals the retrospectivity of these proposed changes



References for Students Who Love Away From Home to Study:

13 James et al., *Rural and isolated School Students and their higher education Choices*, National Board of Employment, Education and Training (NBEET), Canberra, 1999

14 *ibid.*, p. xxi

15 *ibid.*

16 D. Kemp, 'Proposals for reform in higher education'. *Cabinet Submission, Parliament of Australia, Canberra, 1999*

17 *ibid.*, p. 3

18 I. Dobson and B. Birrell, "Equity and university entrance, a 1997 update". *People and Place*, vol 6, no. 3, 1998, pp. 83-87

19 *ibid.*, p. 87

20 'Three times less likely', *Country Education Project, Melbourne 1998*

21 *A Fair Chance for all, NBEET, Canberra, 1990*

Verification Information:

Verification of this submission can be made by contacting:

Name: Toni Hancock

Position: Executive Officer, South West LLEN

Signature:



Submission authorised by: The Board of South West LLEN

Phone: (03) 5561 0047

