

THE ADEQUACY OF GOVERNMENT MEASURES TO PROVIDE EQUITABLE
ACCESS TO SECONDARY AND POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION
OPPORTUNITIES TO STUDENTS FROM RURAL AND REGIONAL
COMMUNITIES ATTENDING METROPOLITAN INSTITUTIONS

SUBMISSION TO THE SENATE RURAL AND REGIONAL AFFAIRS AND
TRANSPORT COMMITTEE

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Louise Fitzpatrick Leach,
Secretary
Ouyen P-12 College Parents' Association
P O Box 12,
Ouyen. 3490.

Thankyou for the opportunity to make comment on the issues related to this topic.

a)

The costs involved in sending a student to a metropolitan secondary school are usually those associated with paying the tuition and boarding fees at private schools. Even greater are the costs for a whole family of relocating to a metropolitan or larger regional area, to enable the student to live at home while completing their studies. This does happen. Once gone, these families are not likely to return to their former community, and it's hard to estimate the costs involved for the community in such a loss.

For tertiary education, it is impossible to nominate a precise figure for the costs involved in supporting a child living away from home to attend a metropolitan or regional university or TAFE. Recent research estimated expenses of \$15,000-\$20,000 per year, plus up to \$6,000 for start-up costs. The private rental market may seem a cheaper option than on-campus accommodation, but there are added costs involved in finding and securing suitable accommodation and setting up house, and much greater stresses on a young person living away from home for the first time without any organised support. The costs of both on-campus accommodation and the private rental market are increasing far more rapidly than the corresponding government support.

b)

The education alternatives for rural and regional students wanting to study in regional areas are much more limited than those available to metropolitan students. Secondary colleges struggle with staffing problems in many subject areas, and subject choices are limited especially in the more "academic" range. This increases pressure on families to consider sending their secondary college student away, usually to boarding school, to complete VCE, which in turn further reduces the students enrolled and the staffing available.

Despite critical shortages in some fields of work, eg qualified early childhood teachers, the relevant tertiary courses are not widely available regionally and many

students would still need to live away from home to attend (eg a childcare worker living in Mildura wishing to study for a degree in early childhood teaching would have to travel to Melbourne – as would one living in Bendigo have to do).

c)

Current and proposed government measures will have a substantial impact on prospective students living in rural and regional areas. The Federal Government does not seem to understand the seriousness of the increased costs involved in having to live away from home to access a particular course of study. Its decision to change the eligibility criteria for the Independent rate of Youth Allowance means that students will be forced into two – year deferments so that they can qualify for the Independent rate.

This will have the effect of reducing the percentage of regional and rural students who attend university. Not only would students usually have had to sacrifice any scholarships they may have been offered (as these generally cannot be deferred), but they would have begun to lose the study skills necessary to be able to return successfully to full-time study. This is assuming that they were able satisfy the requirements of gaining employment quickly, possibly in rural or regional areas where full-time employment opportunities are already limited, especially without prior training or qualifications. In turn, they will have taken the job of another potential employee who may have chosen to continue with on-going employment but who was deprived of this opportunity.

Many students are already completing a “gap” year, having deferred a place at university to help their families with the financial burden involved in moving away from home to complete tertiary studies. The Education Minister has not guaranteed that these students will not be adversely affected. They are stuck in a no-win situation, not eligible for the Independent rate of Youth Allowance, because they followed the advice offered to them in good faith by schools and careers counsellors, based on the rules laid down by the government itself.

d)

It is hard to see how these changes can have any but a detrimental effect, both in the short and long-term, on regional university and TAFE college enrollments. As tertiary study becomes harder to access, and the personal and financial costs involved increase, competition for places at “prestigious” metropolitan institutions will increase correspondingly. Without significant policy changes, regional institutions are more and more likely to be seen as “second-rate”, with a more limited range of course options which may not seem worth the costs involved (especially with the greatly increased costs associated with TAFE courses now being proposed.) A suite of policy changes, already proposed at the 2020 Summit, would help to address these problems, such as extending Commonwealth Scholarships to TAFE students.

e)

Government financial support for students who are required to leave home for secondary or post-secondary study are inadequate, not having been increased for many years. Why is it that the amount of a full Youth Allowance is even less than the rate of unemployment support, although one could argue that the costs of full-time study are as great (the cost of text-books alone each semester can be considerable)?

f)

How are the “educational needs” of rural and regional students to be defined? They need what all young people need:

- opportunities to engage as learners in a range of real educational experiences,
- to be part of a learning context that encourages and supports their endeavours,
- to be able to see the potential to achieve in as wide a range of professions and jobs as possible,
- to be able to access appropriate training for jobs available within their local as well as the wider Australian community.
- They also need the tools of the 21st Century, especially fast, cheap download of information (which is still often unavailable to homes in rural areas).
- They may also need access to particular (possibly urban or cultural) experiences to promote life-skills to support their studies.

Rural and regional educational services should receive the funding necessary to help them offer such a “complete” curriculum.

g)

Government measures and proposals will have a large impact on rural and regional communities. Some students will be forced to forego tertiary education completely, others will struggle and some will drop out, families will be burdened with debt that suburban families do not have to take on, whole families may have to relocate to larger centres (a factor that only exacerbates the whole problem), and these communities will lose the future health, education, and other professional workers that many of these students may have become if they had been able to complete tertiary study while retaining personal links with their rural or regional community.