

Submission to the  
Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Committee  
  
Inquiry into Rural and Regional Access to Secondary and  
Tertiary Education Opportunities

I make this submission from the perspective of:

- a) a **parent** of a 2008 HSC student currently working to qualify for Independent Youth Allowance to enable her to attend a metropolitan university in 2010 and another daughter currently in Year 10 who has university aspirations;
- b) a **Careers Adviser** with ten years experience in a high school in a large regional centre;
- c) a **teacher** of senior students for over twenty years.

**My main concerns regarding proposed changes to the Independent Youth Allowance are that:**

1. Students in rural and regional areas are being adversely affected because of the Federal Government's aim to reduce the numbers of city-based students who are qualifying for Independent Youth Allowance and then living at home while attending a metropolitan university;
2. Middle class and "working poor" families are being targeted;
3. The economic reality and job situation in rural and regional areas means less students will qualify for Independent Youth Allowance;
4. Current deferment policies of universities will restrict access;
5. The costs incurred by rural and regional students attending universities are much greater than those incurred by metropolitan students attending metropolitan universities in terms of travel and accommodation;
6. They will limit the future provision of professionals to live and work in rural and regional areas;
7. The inequality of linking relocation and other scholarships to only those meeting the new eligibility guidelines for the Independent Youth Allowance, despite all country students needing to move to attend universities incurring relocation costs.

I feel strongly that the proposed changes are unjust and do not think the widespread ramifications of them have been thought through properly. They will affect my children, the students I teach and advise about their careers, as well as many thousands of other young people and their families across rural and regional Australia.

Regarding the Inquiry's stated areas of reference; I wish to comment on these:

### **a. The financial impact on rural and regional students who are attending metropolitan secondary schools, universities or TAFE**

Here my concerns relate to costs which are not experienced by metropolitan students attending metropolitan universities, namely:

1) **Travel costs:** To attend the university which offers her chosen course in 2010, my daughter has to move from Tamworth to Sydney, a distance of over 450km from home. She, like many others, will have long distance travel costs to and from university to home several times.

As a Careers Adviser, I see the numbers of students who need to move to cities to attend university. There are also many who move to attend TAFE colleges which offer courses which are not available in their home town.

2) **Accommodation:** My daughter is applying to live in an on-campus residential college, at least for the first year of her course. Both school and university advisers recommend this option for first year students to ensure they gain support (pastoral, academic and social) to assist them with moving away from home and starting tertiary studies, both of which are major changes. Many rural students do not know others with whom to share accommodation or have family to stay with in Sydney or other cities.

At metropolitan universities, the cost of on-campus accommodation fees start from \$10,000 per year with many costing more than this eg \$15,000+. This is not a cost borne by students who can stay at home in suburban Sydney and travel to university daily. On-campus catered accommodation at regional universities can cost \$8,000pa.

### **b. The education alternatives for rural and regional students wanting to study in regional areas**

The reality is that not all courses are offered at all universities and TAFEs. To be forced to attend a regional university because it is closer to home with reduced travel costs and lower accommodation costs will limit the educational options and career choices for students from rural and regional areas which are not experienced by those living in cities. For students in Tamworth to be forced to choose to study at the nearest university (University of New England in Armidale 110km from Tamworth), this means not all courses are open to them as they are for other students across the country.

Some may be forced to study externally while staying at home. This reduces the

number of courses open to them, as not all courses are offered externally. It also deprives students of the “university experience” and onsite access to resources, support and teaching.

### **c. The implications of current and proposed government measures on prospective students living in rural and regional areas**

Through the costs involved in attending university, other than those of the course itself, many families will find it very difficult or impossible to fund their sons and daughters who aspire to tertiary education.

Many families have relied on their students successfully meeting the guidelines to qualify for the Independent Youth Allowance, as the means to fund the move from home to tertiary study. This has been part of the financial planning for families because this has existed for many years.

This option, and the requirements for eligibility, was still on the Centrelink website when the May budget was released. This formed part of the class of 2008’s financial planning and decision-making. To suddenly take this away has caused immense angst, worry, uncertainty, anger and fear for these students and their families. When the budget was released, I will admit to experiencing several sleepless nights wondering how to fund my elder daughter at university from 2010, and then my younger daughter currently in Year 10 who also has aspirations of attending university.

Many middle class working families are struggling because of the global financial downturn’s flow-on effects, mortgages, increasing number of retrenchments in rural areas (*30 workers lost their jobs this week in nearby Armidale due to the closure of a major retail store*), the travel and accommodation costs. Even families where both parents earn incomes up to \$75,000, are struggling financially and many still have younger students to support and educate.

In the future many students will be unable to meet the proposed new qualifications to entitle them to receive the Independent Youth Allowance. Many will simply see the doors to university education and certain career paths closed to them as they are unable to meeting the number of hours, the time limit and the earnings required.

Ever since the proposed budget changes became known, the senior students at my school have been angry, upset and worried. As Careers Adviser, I have received phone calls from parents who are wondering what to do as their financial plans to send their child to university were undermined. I have received many concerned emails from ex-students from 2008 who are currently working to earn the \$19,532 Centrelink required to qualify for the Independent Youth Allowance.

Our school community sent a petition to our local member, Tony Windsor. I, along with two other staff members who are parents being affected, met with him to discuss this matter. Many staff and parents have sent emails to various politicians outlining their concerns. Current and ex-students appeared on the local television news and in the

local newspaper on this issue. There is a high level of anger in rural and regional communities, not only in Tamworth, but across the country regarding the discrimination against rural students and the lack of understanding on the part of the Federal Government of the implications that such changes will have for so many families.

#### **d. The short-term and long-term impact of current and proposed government policies on regional university and TAFE college enrolments**

As I mentioned earlier, many will see university education as beyond their means. This will result in changed career options and paths, possibly reduced earning potential during their lifetime for students affected.

Universities and TAFE will suffer financially as enrolments will be down and their funding will suffer accordingly. Some who take time to work and earn to support themselves at university will not end up there. Another major problem is the impact on university enrolment processes. Currently students on a gap year, working to earn the required amount must have deferred their university studies.

All but two universities in NSW and the ACT state that the period of time that a student can defer is “one year only” according to the new *UAC Guide 2010* (pp104-105). Now this means that all students in the future, who must work the proposed 18 months, cannot attend most universities. From leaving school after the HSC in November 2009 to starting university in late February 2011, is a maximum of 15 months so students cannot possibly work the 18 month time period and still commence university.

This also means universities will have to change their enrolment and admission procedures if they are to allow students who have to work for 18 months according to the proposed changes to defer and then take up their places at university.

The only regional university that will allow for a deferment of two years is the University of New England in Armidale. Not all courses are offered there and not all deferring students want to attend this university.

#### **e. The adequacy of government measures to provide for students who are required to leave home for secondary or post-secondary study**

The intention of linking scholarships (eg Relocation) to the new qualifications for the proposed Independent Youth Allowance is unfair. This means students who can't meet the new guidelines will receive no government support at all. All regional and rural students leaving home to attend university incur travel and accommodation costs, regardless of family income or the independent status of the students. This also means that the students who leave Sydney to study medicine and other courses at the University of New England in Armidale or pharmacy in Orange or other courses at Charles Sturt University in Wagga will also incur these costs.

Now there will be no government support for students required to leave home to improve their education, to enable them to pursue certain career paths and improve their career potential. Many rural and regional students will be forced to find part-time work while attending university to support themselves and this may adversely affect their studies.

#### **f. The educational needs of rural and regional students**

The proposed changes will see rural and regional students being treated like second class citizens in their own country as their access to further education is being limited and put in jeopardy. Employment prospects in rural and regional areas are lower than those in city and metropolitan areas and career options are more limited.

This is denying rural and regional students' choice of careers and for many, the chance of further education. For them, the much heralded "education reforms" of the current government will stop at the end of high school, despite the claims of Deputy Prime Minister Julia Gillard that more students from lower-socio economic backgrounds will be able to attend university. This will be at the expense of many students from middle-class working families. Why not support and encourage *all* who aspire to tertiary education and have proved that they have the ability and need to do this?

#### **g. The impact of government measures and proposals on rural and regional communities**

The proposed changes will mean many students will simply not qualify for Independent Youth Allowance in rural and regional areas as they will be unable to meet the new qualifications of working for 30 hours a week over 18 months.

Tamworth is a major regional centre/hub with a population approaching 50,000. There are 7 large secondary schools (Tamworth High, Oxley High, Peel High, Farrer Memorial Agricultural High, Carinya Christian College, Calrossy Anglican School and McCarthy Catholic College). Most of these will have HSC enrolments of 50-120 in Year 12. This means at the end of any given year, about 600 Year 12 school leavers will be seeking either full time employment or employment before they attend university.

In my ten years as a Careers Adviser, I have seen a sizable increase each year in the numbers of students deferring university to earn money to finance their studies and pay for accommodation. The number of students going straight from Year 12 to university has declined and university statistics will support this statement.

The reality is that there is simply not enough jobs for all the unskilled Year 12 school leavers in town. My daughter currently has 3 part-time jobs and is working to earn the \$19,532 amount set by the government as per the Centrelink website. Some weeks she works 27 hours and other weeks she works a total of 34 hours depending on how many shifts she is offered. Her aim was to qualify for Independent Youth Allowance and use this, plus the money she has saved, to pay for her accommodation in Sydney.

Many of her classmates from 2008 are struggling to find enough work to qualify now, let alone work for 30 hours per week for 18 months. The competition for part-time work by all the deferring students from the local high schools in a large regional town is intense and this would be reflected in many other large regional centres as well as smaller country towns where employment prospects for school leavers would be much reduced.

## **h. Other related matters – a proposed solution**

A fairer proposal would be to revamp the Independent Youth Allowance to support young people wishing to attend university in several situations ie

(1) Those who are genuinely independent because of family circumstances and who come from a low socio-economic background

AND

(2) Those students who need to travel and leave home to attend university. It is evident that students who have to leave home to attend university and do not live at home are, independent. **The main feature of this would not be the income of parents, but the distance between the student's home and the university they wish to attend.**

I propose a distance of over 100km.

### **Advantages:**

1. This will restrict the number of students who abuse the existing Independent Youth Allowance scheme by claiming this and attending university while continuing to live at home.

2. This is a way of encouraging and supporting rural and regional students who wish to attend university. This ensures we will have educated professional graduates who are willing to live and work in the country eg that there are speech pathologists, architects, town planners, nurses and teachers servicing communities in rural and regional Australia. Otherwise we will see further disadvantage suffered by those living in rural and regional areas and a further decline in the number of people who do so.

**There is a need to treat these two situations separately and have separate schemes to cater for each one.**

## Conclusion

Therefore, I urge the **Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Committee** through the *Inquiry into Rural and Regional Access to Secondary and Tertiary Education Opportunities* to stop the unfair proposed changes to the Independent Youth Allowance in the Budget becoming a reality and causing much hardship, distress and anxiety for so many rural and regional families and in particular to:

a) The Year 12 students of 2008 who are in the midst of meeting the existing requirements that were outlined on the Centrelink website when they made the decision to defer university studies, and whose families made financial plans based on the existing legislation when such plans were made and put into place.

b) Rural and regional students who seek to attend university in the future who will:

- have difficulty meeting the proposed criteria regarding employment and hours
- not meet university deferment criteria
- incur higher travel and accommodation costs than their city-based counterparts

My main concern is that rural and regional students are disadvantaged because of the increased costs associated with tertiary study, regardless of parental income or the amount of money they earn themselves.

To take away the Independent Youth Allowance from students, especially those from rural and regional areas, who cannot meet the criteria, will impose financial hardship on families whose sons and daughters seek a university education and will deter many from doing this to the detriment of our country.

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