

Submission to

Inquiry into Rural and Regional Access to Secondary and Tertiary Education Opportunities

As a current gap year student from regional Victoria I wish to address this Senate Inquiry. My comments refer in particular to the following terms of reference:

- a. the financial impact on rural and regional students who are attending metropolitan secondary schools, universities or TAFE;*
- c. the implications of current and proposed government measures on prospective students living in rural and regional areas;*
- e. the adequacy of government measures to provide for students who are required to leave home for secondary or post-secondary study;*
- f. the educational needs of rural and regional students;*
- g. the impact of government measures and proposals on rural and regional communities*

Under the new system students will have to work 30 hours a week for 18 months to become eligible for independent youth allowance. There are a limited amount of jobs available especially in regional and rural areas that are accessible to students who have just completed their secondary education.

With the current economics situation it is a challenging ask to try and find 30 hours of work a week. I am from Ballarat in Victoria and am currently in a gap year. I have deferred a place at the University of Sydney. As I was looking for stable work preferably in administration, I found that many businesses were not willing to employ you for only 12 months as they were looking for people who they could keep in the business for a number of years. This left me with two options; working shift work in supermarkets or take away stores where the hours are unreliable or moving into Melbourne where there are more available jobs.

In the end I have been doing both working part time as a receptionist in Melbourne and working at the local supermarket on weekends. Some weeks I work 30 hours a week and others I fall short by about four hours depending on the shifts I pick up from the supermarket.

It is not just people in my age group who are struggling to find employment. In Ballarat this year a local manufacturing company went bankrupt and all their workers were suddenly out of work. Also another truck building company earlier this month has been forced to retrench

a large number of workers. This means that students who have limited skills and experience are competing with adults who have been in the work force for years and have established skills which we have not had the time to acquire. Some of these adults have families that need to be supported. I heard on ABC National that an estimated 5,000 people would be losing their jobs every month. Maybe if the 30 hours a week were averaged this criteria would be a more achievable goal.

For students living in rural areas a lot of their work is during harvest time and their hours come in bulk of up to 50 hours per week during the season. However there is not enough work for 30 hours a week but if the hours were averaged then it would give these students a better chance at becoming eligible under the new requirements.

Rural and regional students need to be considered differently from those students in the city simply because we usually need to move away from home to access tertiary education. Metro students can live at home whilst being able to choose from a full range of tertiary courses and the government's changes are suited to these students. They also do help to cut out those students whose families are well off and who really don't need the payments. But they do not stop students whose parents own their own businesses from putting their children 'on the books' so that they appear to have a job in the family company – and are then able to claim Youth Allowance – **this is the real abuse and it will continue in the proposed changes.**

For rural and regional students often the only opportunity is to move away from home as there are not many options available for them locally. On campus accommodation ranges from \$10,000 to \$26,000 per year and for young people who have had to move away from home being in a college is a supportive environment to be living in when your family is so far away.

For a family that earns around \$95,000 per year it is a demanding ask to spend a 5th of that on supporting their child.

I was told by my local member that the argument that rural and regional students should be treated differently to metropolitan students didn't hold much weight because most of these students would be eligible under the Parental Income Test however assets are included in the test and that means that many students on farms will not qualify. Also the money that a student would receive on dependent youth allowance is hardly enough to live off. For a parental income of \$95,000 with one student living away from home this student will receive \$3.75 per week. If this student became independent they would be entitled to \$371 a fortnight. This is a huge difference and

although the government has been saying that so many more students will have access to youth allowance because of the parental income test has been increased many students will only be eligible for very small amounts of money which will offer no real assistance.

Also we hope that those of us who are half way through their gap year will be allowed to finish what we have started as we made our decision based on the current criteria.

My family cannot afford to support me living away from home next year as I have two younger brothers at secondary school. As they are under 16 they are not considered in the Parental Income Test for Youth Allowance. I may not be able to defer my course for another 12 months. My only option is to save as much as I can this year and hope that I can get work in Sydney when I move there, but I do not think this will be easy as I am unfamiliar with the area and will be competing with locals who have a better knowledge of the area.

It is hard enough to move to a new city in another state and start a university course without the need to find enough work to support myself. I feel that the proposed changes will make it really difficult for rural and regional students to continue tertiary studies. I am going to try my best, but I fear that many will just give up.

Caroline Geoghegan

PS. Since writing this submission, the Victorian Government's report on the *Inquiry into Geographical Differences in the Rate in which Victorian Students Participate in Higher Education* has been published. This report supports the case I have made above. The Chair, Mr Geoff Howard MP, in his forward said:

Student income support is therefore a major contributing factor in university participation. While the Committee welcomes recent national reforms to enable more students from low-income families to access Youth Allowance, it is concerned that the specific circumstances of rural and regional young people still have not been adequately addressed. Already, many such students defer their studies to meet eligibility criteria for income support and this route to financial independence is set to become even more difficult under the new system. In the Committee's view, all young people who must relocate to undertake their studies should be eligible to receive student income support.

I urge the Senate Committee to read this report which address the very real inequities faced by rural and regional students.