

Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committee on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Australia

Dear Committee Secretary,

*SUBMISSION TO SENATE INQUIRY
RURAL AND REGIONAL ACCESS TO SECONDARY AND TERTIARY EDUCATION
OPPORTUNITIES*

We are writing to express our disappointment at the Government's intention to change the 'Youth Allowance' criteria; and urge you to consider the enormous implications this decision will have on rural families and potential tertiary students, prior to supporting such a proposal.

This issue directly impacts our family and I outline our particular situation:

Our son Max, first of three children, all of whom intend to undertake tertiary education, successfully completed Year 12 last year and chose to defer his university studies (Psychology) and work in order to qualify for the Youth Allowance Scheme, and hence ease the financial burden of attending university on his family.

We live in a small country town of approx. 1300 people, with local employment difficult to obtain. Max applied for work in the surrounding districts and was fortunate to find part time employment at a factory some 23kms from home. Unfortunately, after three months his hours dropped to only five to twelve hours a week, and in the last few months Max has found it difficult to find work.

Eager to help fund his future living away and educational expenses, Max recently gained casual employment at a steel fabricators company, once again some 27kms from home.

Clearly, this shows his maturity and a genuine commitment to earn his way in life; and a serious approach to his education and life plan.

To assist country students reduce the numerous changes and stresses of having to leave home to attend university, it is common for students, and advisable, for them to live in a residential college for their first few years. The cost to do this is approx. \$12 - \$15,000 per annum.

Even a family with two modest incomes such as ours will struggle to meet such a financial commitment. The only financial support available to us, other than the limited opportunities for scholarships, is 'Youth Allowance'.

You would be aware that although Regional Australians comprise around 36% of the population, only around 17% of university students come from a regional background, and are grossly under represented. We believe the Government should be working towards increasing University education participation rates from Regional and Rural areas, not make it more difficult by insisting a student work full time for 18 months before qualifying as 'Independent' in order to claim 'Youth Allowance'.

As evident in Max's case, it's very difficult to find full time work for a school leaver who has yet to develop skills, especially at this time of economic uncertainty, and particularly in regional areas. We believe employers will be reluctant to take on these young people and train them if their intention is to leave for university after two years. And also it is highly likely that the young person will lose motivation to return to study and attain their educational dream after having this amount of time off after leaving school.

I can understand the need for a refinement of this allowance in order to avoid students who live at home with their parents in metropolitan areas being able to access this payment, but the government is clearly targeting the wrong sector by including students who must genuinely relocate away from country areas to access tertiary education.

Our situation is not uncommon in the rural areas and to change the existing criteria to that which is proposed will be disastrous for many families. Accessing the Youth Allowance by having a gap year has been the only means by which many young school leavers are able to afford a University education.

The government could, at the very least, consider a transitional period for those like our son who is in the process of trying to meet the existing criteria in 2009 and commence university in 2010.

We believe consideration should be given to providing all students from regional areas an appropriate level of financial assistance for costs associated with relocation and ongoing accommodation costs.

We urge you to not support the implementation of the government's proposals; and especially not introducing them retrospectively, and subsequently penalising the young people, who in good faith deferred their studies to work and qualify for the 'Youth Allowance'.

We thank you for the opportunity to provide this submission.

Yours sincerely,

Cathy and Craig Rutjens

3 August 2009

