

Matthew and Amanda Cook

Parliament of Australia
Senate
Canberra

6th August 2009

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

Dear Sir/Madam

We live on a farm on Upper Eyre Peninsula and have a son - Liam, eldest of four, who finished year 12 in 2008. Liam has been working on and off the farm (effectively full-time) since leaving school, having deferred his tertiary studies until 2010. His reason for deferral and working for a period of time was to qualify for the independent rate of Youth Allowance, since he is not going to be able to rely on significant financial support from us, his parents. The Federal Government's move to tighten the qualifications to be assessed as 'Independent' has now made his plans and ours uncertain. This change in policy affects Liam because it is retrospective in the sense that he deferred for a year so that he could work to qualify for Independent Youth Allowance. Now with the rules changing around him, he has been caught in the middle not knowing what to do. He is having to reassess and possibly change his tertiary education plans for 2010.

Addressing the Inquiries Terms of Reference point by point:

- a. The proposed changes by the Federal Government means that students will now have to work for 30 hours per week for 18 months which will force many students to defer their studies for two years or work full time while studying. Both scenarios are unworkable because he wants to get on with his studies as soon as possible. The studies he is planning to undertake are Accountancy and Economics (double degree) which requires a significant amount of contact and study time which would reduce his ability to be able to work 30 hours per week to qualify for Independent Youth Allowance.
- b. There are limited educational alternatives where we live. Regional universities (Whyalla, 300 km away) and TAFE colleges (Port Lincoln, 310 km away) do not provide the necessary courses. The closest tertiary centre that provides Liam's requirements is Adelaide, 610 km distance away from home.
- c. Under the existing Government measures the qualifications are difficult enough and the level of support is marginal for prospective students. With the proposed Government measures the situation becomes even more difficult. The implications are that many country students will have even less opportunity to undertake tertiary education. There is a general lack of understanding by governments of what families living in rural and regional areas endure and what they require. There is an element of 'unfairness' against rural families with students, disadvantaging them compared to people in the city.
- d. The current and proposed policy perpetuates the under-representation of rural students in our tertiary institutions, whether it be in Whyalla, Port Lincoln or Adelaide. The new policy makes participating in tertiary education that much harder, particularly for regional students studying away from home and away from the support of their family and friends. The proposed policy will reduce

tertiary participation rates by country students even further.

- e. Government measures have been inadequate and will be made worse for country students required to leave home. City students have their parents and friends home environment which by default also provides for their food, bed, transport etc. Country students relocating to the city comes at a significant cost to both students and parents. They require rented accommodation, along with the associated costs of setting up with furniture, cooking and electrical appliances etc. Transport to and from home is also costly since there are long distances and no public transport. They are also disadvantaged by not having a family home environment and limited family support and help with their studies.
- f. Rural and regional students have similar aspirations to city students. Their educational needs (both secondary and tertiary) are often not covered in the regional areas and therefore they need to relocate to the larger cities to continue their education. Rural families and students are simply asking that country students be made eligible to receive living away-from-home allowances to help with the additional costs they incur when relocating from their home to the city. As well, it would be very helpful if the qualification period for Independent Youth Allowance be shortened to 12 months, rather than the 18 months, so that students can access income support as they commence tertiary education. This assistance is needed to ensure that country students receive the same education opportunities as city students.
- g. The impact of these Government measures and proposals on rural and regional communities discriminates against country students. They are more likely to be discouraged from pursuing an education away from home because of the difficulties they know they will come up against. Rural communities are affected because there are already significant shortages of people with tertiary qualifications needed in the medical, legal, financial, administrative etc. employment sectors in rural and regional areas. Country students with qualifications are more likely to come back home and live, work and bring up families in rural and regional communities.

Hopefully the “Inquiry into Rural and Regional Access to Secondary and Tertiary Education Opportunities” can result in better outcomes for country students, enabling them to receive the same opportunities in education as their city counterparts.

Yours Sincerely

Matthew and Amanda Cook