

Submission to the Senate Enquiry into Rural and Regional Access to Secondary and Tertiary Education Opportunities

My name is Gary Walker; I am a Senior High School Careers Counselor and parent of teenage children. I would like to present the following points based on the position that;

`The proposed changes to Youth Allowance presented by the Federal Government discriminate against young people living in regional and rural areas - an already disadvantaged group, and are clearly not in the best interests of the development of regional communities and Australia in general`

Reference point B

The education alternatives for rural and regional students wanting to study in regional areas

My family live in Bunbury, which is a regional centre in Western Australia. We only have an annex of one Perth University (Edith Cowan). The courses offered by this university are extremely limited and cater for the needs of only a minority of local university bound students – less than 20%.

There is no indication that the local university has any plans to significantly expand their offerings in the short to medium term. Having discussed this issue with local university lecturers, impediments such as difficulty in attracting academic staff to Bunbury, lack of financial support for new courses, viable student numbers and a lack of infrastructure indicates that the situation is unlikely to change in the future.

The vast majority of university bound students from this region are required to seek their tertiary education in Perth, as the courses are only available there, placing them in a disadvantaged group having to cope with financial and social impediments not experienced by students who can live at home in the metropolitan area. The lack of equal opportunity for young people from this region will be compounded by the proposed changes in making access to independent Youth Allowance more difficult to obtain, discouraging them from pursuing their preferred tertiary study.

Reference point E

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

Students wishing to study the majority of university courses in Western Australia are required to move to Perth, which imposes significant financial hardships on the students and their parents. Even with the current level of youth allowance support rural and regional students living away from home are already significantly disadvantaged even after qualifying as independent.

The proposed changes to Youth Allowance (qualifying for independence) suggests that middle-income families have the capacity to fully support their children living away from home in Perth. This is simply not the case, it is estimated that it costs up to \$20,000 per year to fully support a tertiary student.

In my experience as a Senior School Careers counselor over the last 10 years many academically capable students from middle-income families have indicated to me they are only able to complete University study in Perth by working for a year and qualifying for Youth Allowance. By increasing the independence requirement to 18 months of full time

work I believe many will choose Apprenticeships, Traineeships or employment over University study because of the combined cost burden of living away from home and HECS. This hidden `brain drain` will damage our economy and regional communities in particular.

Reference point G

The impact of government measures and proposals on rural and regional communities

It has been well documented that young professionals are far more likely to work in rural and regional areas if they were raised in those areas. Any reduction in the number of rural and regional students completing professional studies at university is certain to have a significant impact on the number of professionals returning to work in the regions. This effect will have significant implications for the development of rural and regional Australia, Western Australia in particular. A lack of services is a significant disincentive to families living in rural and regional areas. The proposed changes to youth allowance will have the effect of reducing the number of trained professionals returning to work in the regions. The rules governing Youth allowance must be different for students from rural and regional areas compared to students from the city.

Other related matters

Under the proposed changes many middle-income families will need to find upwards of an extra \$10,000 per year per child to support them living away from home to study at University. The total cost of supporting 2 children living in Perth to complete a 4 year degree will rise in the vicinity of \$80,000 and will need to be borrowed. Many parents of University students are nearing retirement age and this money will be repaid with superannuation payouts. The flow on effect will be a reduced capacity for parents to self-fund retirement and place greater demands on the pension scheme. A counter productive scenario indeed.

Indeed, fewer students from low socioeconomic backgrounds attend university and this group should be supported to do so. As an experienced Senior High School careers counselor I can assure the Senate Committee that the proposed changes to Youth Allowance will result in fewer regional and rural students attending University. Under the proposed changes in trying to address one problem the Government will be creating an even larger one.

Recommendation

Students who are required to live away from home (over 100 kilometers) to access a University course not available in their local area should have separate rules to qualify for Youth Allowance. The qualification for independence must remain unchanged for students from rural and regional areas.

Gary Walker