

Dear Members of the Senate Committee

I am a resident of Bunbury in Western Australia, an 'inner regional' area (200km from Perth), and am one of many families adversely affected by changes to the way Independent Youth Allowance is calculated.

I have 3 teenage daughters. The eldest, A, is currently studying a double degree in Law and Psychology at UWA. She qualified as Independent under the old "amount earned" criteria. Our 2nd daughter, K, has just completed year 12 and has applied to study Architecture at UWA. Our youngest, J, has just finished year 9.

Our children do not qualify for dependent YA even though our income is below the threshold, as we have assets over that allowable. We cannot afford the extra \$15,000 to \$20,000 per year that it will cost to relocate them to Perth and fully support them. The courses of study they have chosen have very heavy work loads so more than a few hours a week work is not an option for them. It may interest you to know that UWA offers just 2 scholarships to regional students that fully covers their accommodation costs in Perth.

There are many families in our position; hard working, middle class, whose children do not qualify for the full amount under dependent criteria yet who cannot afford the extra money for one child, let alone 2 or 3 children, to live in Perth. Even if they qualify for a part payment of YA, it would not be enough. The full rate is not enough to live on as it is.

I have several key objections to the 30 hour a week for 18 months work requirement:

1. My biggest objection to the new work requirements is that it requires students to take 2 gap years. This is extremely unreasonable, and a waste of time. Architecture is a 5 year degree, and our daughter would be starting 2 years behind her peers who live in Perth or receive Dependent YA (no mid-year intake). Two years is a long time to put your plans on hold, assuming that the University will hold her place. She had thought about applying to Curtin University, and trying for a scholarship, however they will only hold scholarships for one gap year, not the 2 years. I am worried about her forgetting the physics, maths and computer skills she has learnt in school and will need for her future studies during those 2 years, and this will disadvantage her compared to those going straight from school to Uni.
2. Just working does not make you 'independent' or likely to succeed at University. Most gap jobs are low level and not challenging to bright students. This 30 hours work requirement makes no allowance for taking time off for travel or volunteer work. My daughter K volunteers every summer as a lifeguard for a camp for underprivileged children (Edmund Rice camps) and would like to volunteer to work with children overseas during her gap year. This would make it impossible to fulfil the 30 hour work requirement. Similarly, travelling abroad or within Australia teaches young people far more about independence, resourcefulness, problem solving, budgeting, history, economics, etc, etc, than just working.
3. Even the best laid work plans can come undone. My daughter A qualified as a swim teacher during year 12 so she could start work as soon as school finished. However, half way through the following year the pool suddenly had to close for 12 weeks for major maintenance. There are few job vacancies during winter, so she got a job delivering 2 local papers and junk mail. This would not be counted under the new criteria as she was paid per paper, not per hour and there was no-one who could verify the 'hours worked' even though she was earning money. Similarly, others have been caught when businesses suddenly close down.
4. The availability of work is definitely seasonal, even in Bunbury. It is very hard to find full time or part time jobs (employers don't want to give them to gap students) so most students end up with casual work (often several casual jobs) which is fine when it is busy around Christmas, however later in the year many find their hours are substantially reduced and

certainly less than 30 hours per week. Our daughter A had several casual jobs - swimming teaching (which doesn't run during holidays), house cleaning (hard to prove hours), paper delivery (hard to prove hours) and waitressing (varied from shifts 5 days a week to once a fortnight). She would not have fulfilled the 30 hours criteria despite working very hard during her gap year.

5. I am worried that the 30 hour requirement could lead unscrupulous employers to force students to accept low rates of pay for the guarantee of 30 hours a week.

6. It is unreasonable that some students in the same class as my daughter at school can qualify in 1 year under different guidelines (amount earned) simply because they live in a different area, deemed 'outer regional' by some arbitrary line on a map. This is discrimination.

The previous requirement of earning a set amount over the 18 months was much fairer, more practical, and easier to assess. It meant that students prepared to work long hours, do unpleasant work, etc. could earn their money quicker when there was work readily available, and do volunteer work, unpaid work experience or travel during winter to enhance their personal development. The amount earned is already assessed by the tax department and it means jobs like delivering newspapers can be easily assessed.

Best of all it means that students only need to take 1 gap year before starting University. I do not want my daughter to waste 2 years in a dead end, boring job when she could be studying towards her dream career. It is no wonder so many parents advise their children to just go to TAFE or try to get an 'OK' job instead, it would be much easier.

I have a huge issue with the terminology "independent" in relation to Youth allowance. If a person is living 200km from their family, renting a flat, paying bills, studying full time and maybe working part time as well, then THEY ARE INDEPENDENT. The government would be happy to support this person if they had a baby, or lived in a defacto relationship, or was unemployed, but because they are studying in order to become a productive, tax paying member of society, to fill key vacancies in professional employment shortages, the government thinks they should rely on their parents for support. What message is this sending to our young people? What does this say about what our society values most? To me, it encourages lying and deception because I often hear stories about school leavers faking defacto relationships, or faking being 'kicked out of home' towards the end of year 12 in order to qualify for Youth Allowance so they don't have to fulfil the Independence criteria. Well, I don't want my 17 year old to have to live with a boyfriend so she can go to University and get Youth Allowance and I don't think this is something we should be encouraging.

I believe the new criteria are especially discriminatory to girls. Many country towns like Bunbury would seem like a return to the 1960's in their attitudes, to you city dwellers. For girls the choices are: get out, move to the city and university, and have a career; or, stay in Bunbury, get a reception or retail job, get married young or get pregnant. I have seen many girls who were very bright in primary school almost discouraged to achieve in high school because their parents know they can't afford to send them to university in Perth and know how hard it will be for them in Perth. I can't believe how many are already settled into a defacto relationship or have had a baby by the age of 19, which to me seems such a waste of talent and potential. (Not to mention drain on social security).

It is slightly easier for the boys if their parents can't afford to send them to University as they have the possibility of getting an apprenticeship which can lead to a proper career with good prospects in terms of income and advancement. This is still a real waste of talent when many of these boys could be studying Engineering (where there is a huge world wide shortage), etc.

The worry for me as a parent of girls is that 2 gap years at home will take them off the university / career path and they will get settled into the 'stay in Bunbury' track. With my older daughter, A, I could see this happening after just one year. She had a steady boyfriend a few years older who had many friends getting married and having babies. You could tell she was weighing up the "easy" option of living near the family in Bunbury, working in an easy job, and

heading towards early marriage, compared to the "hard" option of moving away from all her family, to a strange city, having to be responsible for paying bills, finding a new doctor, studying a very difficult course, being homesick, and struggling to make ends meet on her savings until she could get YA mid-year. She did move to Perth and has survived her first year at University but it has been a very difficult year for her. (NB. she had a TER in the top 2% of the state. Wouldn't it be a waste if she didn't go to University?)

Anyone who thinks University is the easy option needs to think again, and yet that seems to be the attitude coming through in the YA debate - our regional students seem to be depicted as bludgers having an easy time at university living the high life on Youth Allowance. Well, you can't even live on YA alone, it doesn't even cover the cost of living in University accommodation. (\$350 per week at UWA)

I urge you to return Australia to being "the clever country" and make University education an option for all students, especially those in inner regional areas who are currently discriminated against. University education for country students should not be just for the rich (or poor) but for everyone. Australia needs educated and qualified young people and we have students ready to go to University who simply can't afford the cost of relocating and living away from home. Please allow inner regional students to qualify for Independent Youth Allowance in 1 year under the same criteria as Outer regional students, effective immediately.

PLEASE STOP THE DISCRIMINATION AGAINST INNER REGIONAL STUDENTS.

Yours sincerely

Linda Brown