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Ms Jeanette Radcliffe
Committee Secretary
Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Ms Radcliffe

Thank you for inviting me to provide a submission to the Senate inquiry into the Social Security and Other Legislation Amendment (Income Support for Students) Bill 2009.

The Northern Territory (NT) fully supports initiatives which increase access to and better target income support for students who most need it. I understand that the proposed amendments will implement relevant recommendations from the Bradley Review, which are to have an end result of increased access to and participation in higher education, in particular of people from low socio-economic status backgrounds. Although the full extent of the impact of the proposed reforms for the NT is not yet clear, I would like to raise matters from an NT context that affect Territorians' ability and aspirations to undertake higher education, let alone benefit from the proposed reforms.

Of a population base that comprises only 1 per cent of the national population, and which is spread across one-sixth of Australia's land mass, 44 per cent of the 210 627 people that live in the NT reside in either remote or very remote areas. According to the Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia classification of the population by geo-location, the NT has no urban areas and the only area classified as provincial is the greater Darwin region. The entire NT population is located in the three most remote categories as defined in the Index. Remoteness affects access to goods, services and opportunities for social interaction, and increases costs associated with service delivery (including education) to remote and very remote areas.

Approximately 30 per cent of the NT's population is Indigenous. The proportion of Indigenous is even greater in the school-aged population, with approximately 41 per cent of students enrolled in Transition to Year 12 identified as Indigenous compared with the national average of just over 4 per cent. A high proportion of these students have English as a second language, or a third or fourth language. Over 50 per cent of NT Government schools are in the bottom 10 per cent of the Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas Index of Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage list of Australian schools.

There is a large disparity between the educational achievement of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. Most Indigenous Territorians leave school early and few complete Year 12 and achieve a Northern Territory Certificate of Education, although these numbers are increasing. Of the high achieving students who complete Year 12, many leave the Territory to study interstate, contributing to a high mobility rate of young employable citizens.

The NT has a young population with nearly 16 per cent (33 645) being between 15 and 25 years of age in 2007. In 2006, nearly 27 per cent of this age group undertook Year 12, 12 per cent were engaged in certificate level training and 5 per cent undertook higher education qualifications. Education levels for NT youth are lower than those for Australian youth and without the skills gained through education and training, early school leavers face significant challenges in the workforce over time.

These realities have a significant impact on Territory students accessing secondary and tertiary education, and benefiting from the reforms proposed in the Bill.

Higher education provider data indicates that current and potential higher education students studying in the NT may be eligible to receive the range of support offerings outlined in the reform package. In 2008, almost half of the students studying in the NT identified the NT as their place of permanent residence, at the same time a similar number (2 398) of students from the NT undertook higher education courses in other parts of Australia.

The ambitious national attainment and social inclusion targets that the reforms have been aligned with as a result of the Bradley Report, and other youth allowance announcements set some key challenges for the NT:

- *40 per cent of 25-34 year olds have attained a qualification at bachelor level or above by 2025.*

In 2006, 15 per cent of the NT population in the 25-44 year age group had a bachelor degree or higher level qualification. It is estimated that by 2020, 14 per cent of the estimated resident population in this age group will hold a

bachelor level qualification or above¹. To increase this proportion by 2020, quantum improvements in the overall proportion of people undertaking and achieving qualifications need to be made.

- *20 per cent higher education enrolments at undergraduate level are people from low socio-economic status backgrounds by 2020.*

Student profiles of both of the NT's dual sector providers, Charles Darwin University and in particular Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education are representative of the NT's geographic and demographic profiles. Whilst figures available show that both institutions are either on track to meet or exceed this target, it should be noted that this is starting from a low base of enrolments with capacity to grow.

Of all the young people residing in regional, rural and remote communities in Australia, there is overwhelming evidence that it is Indigenous students in discrete remote Indigenous communities who have the highest needs. The biggest challenge for students in the remote NT context – the vast majority of whom are Indigenous - is to get to senior secondary school level having attained a level of literacy, numeracy and English language competence to take advantage of senior secondary and tertiary opportunities, and to be prepared for the world of work. These issues need to be systematically addressed as part of any approach to improve Indigenous educational outcomes. Addressing the secondary and post-school educational needs in isolation of other barriers and issues will not deliver the outcomes desired.

Although the NT may generally have high representation of people for both proposed targets as outlined above, quantum improvements in school, training and higher education outcomes are required, including Year 12 retention and attainment, transitions to tertiary education, and improved pathways and articulation from vocational education and training to higher education.

When taking the above issues into consideration, it is of concern that the proposed reforms may not have as significant an impact in the NT as they may have in other jurisdictions.

I thank you for the opportunity to provide a response to the inquiry and I hope the above comments assist you in your deliberations.

Yours sincerely



PAUL HENDERSON

15/10/04

¹ Data source:

Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2008 Higher Education data Collections