

11 April 2010

The Hon Julia Gillard MP

Deputy Prime Minister; Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations; Minister for Education; Minister for Social Inclusion
PO Locked Bag 14
Werribee Vic 3030

Dear Ms Gillard

Re: Equity in Access to Tertiary Education for Regional Students

I am writing to you today to express my disappointment and concern regarding the current policies in place to help regional students access tertiary education.

I followed with interest the Senate debate and enquiry regarding new policies for eligibility for Youth Allowance etc. I was hoping that common sense and logic would prevail, with some consideration for the difficulties faced by regional students. Some small concessions were made but not nearly enough.

Our son, who finished Year 12 in 2009, is now in Brisbane at the University of Queensland studying a combined Bachelor of Music/Bachelor of Education (Secondary) degree. My first issue is with the fairness in relation to the gap year. For my son, the gap year was not even really a consideration. Because he is studying a creative arts type degree, the main criteria for selection to these courses is based on Audition. If you are successful in being offered a place, it is not an option to defer these courses. You either have to just take the offer and go or take the chance and audition the next year and hope that you get a place again. This is a risk that most students are not prepared to take. Trying to gain independence to qualify for Youth Allowance is not really an option.

So now, here we sit in Kingaroy continually told that my husband and I earn too much for our son to be eligible for Youth Allowance, but somehow we have to find somewhere between \$15,000 to \$20,000 each year to have him accommodated at an on-campus College in Brisbane. How is this not discrimination? A family living in Brisbane can earn exactly the same amount (or more) as we do but do not have to come up with nearly \$20,000 every year for their child to attend University. The income limit for regional families should be significantly more than for those families living in capital cities. The Government wants people to live and work in regional Australia but offers no assistance to average families to help make the dreams of their children a reality. **ALL STUDENTS living in regional areas who have to relocate to study should be provided with some form of rental assistance, regardless of parental income.** I also don't think the Government realises how difficult it is for our students, both emotionally and financially, to have to leave home and relocate in another city to undertake their study, without the emotional support of family at home.

I believe the above discriminatory policies of the Government towards regional students then have a flow on effect in the relation to HECS fees. Many parents in capital cities, who do not have the burden of an approx. \$20,000 annually for University accommodation and other costs, often pay the HECS fees upfront for their children (thus also gaining the 20% discount advantage). I am afraid that after coming up with the money required just to house and educate them in Brisbane (our closest capital city), it is not possible to then find the additional funds for HECS fees. This then places regional students at further disadvantage than their city counterparts, finishing University with a considerable debt (not to mention what it cost their parents!).

My next issue is with the new system you plan to use to rate eligibility for which type of gap year the students qualify for, and presumably eligibility for Youth Allowance etc. This system I believe is to be based on the **flawed** "Australian Standard Geographic Classification – Remoteness Areas" system. I have attached a map for you to show just how stupid, flawed and inequitable this system is. I don't know what criteria has been used or how the "lines on the map" were determined, but there does not seem to be any logic involved here. I presume that population forms part of this

calculation of "remoteness", but what does population really have to do with geographical distance from a major centre. It does not really matter if your town has 300 or 3000 people when there is no University close to either. It is fairly obvious that this system was initially introduced as a way to place health professionals in regional areas. However, it is not a relevant system to use when determining eligibility for assistance to attend university – the targets of the original scheme have already completed their tertiary studies.

On the attached map I have highlighted in 2 different colours to show towns near here classified "Inner Regional" and "Outer Regional" to demonstrate the idiocy of bureaucracy at its best. This is what you are going to use to determine what students/families are eligible for, but it is based on very flawed logic. You will note that we, here in Kingaroy ("Inner Regional"), have to travel through Blackbutt ("Outer Regional") on our way home from Brisbane. In fact, Blackbutt is at least three-quarters of an hour closer to Brisbane than Kingaroy. To travel from Kingaroy to Brisbane takes between 3-3.5 hours. How does one class a town that distance from Brisbane as "Inner Regional". Blackbutt is also closer to Toowoomba than Kingaroy. You will see from the attached map that Kingaroy (together with Yarraman, Nanango, Memerambi & Wooroolin) is part of a little pocket of "Inner Regional" in the middle of "Outer Regional" towns. Try and find the logic in that! I don't really know why we have "Inner" & "Outer" regional. If you are regional, you are regional! It should really be a circular line from the Capital City, denoting a predetermined distance.

I find it very disappointing also that you are attaching eligibility for Accommodation Scholarships etc. to Youth Allowance. So here we have one group of students who will get everything, and another who cannot get any assistance at all. Why not leave the Accommodation Scholarships for those students from regional areas who cannot qualify for Youth Allowance?

Families and students should not be discriminated against because they live in regional Australia. Not everyone can live in capital/large regional cities. Most likely our children will be more prepared to work/live in regional Australia after completing their University degree than others who have never been out of a capital city. It is about time the Government enacted policies that were fair to ALL STUDENTS.

I look forward to receiving your response to these concerns.

Yours faithfully

Mrs Fiona Ezzy

Att: Map showing "Inner" & "Outer" Regional Towns (near & including Kingaroy)

Copy: The Hon Mr Bruce Scott MP
Federal Member for Maranoa

The Hon Christopher Pyne MP
Manager of Opposition Business

Dorothy Pratt MLA
Independent Member for Nanango