

Att: Committee Secretary
Senate Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Committee
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Australia

Dear Sir / Madam,

I am writing in response to the call for public submissions on the '*The Social Security Amendment (Income Support for Regional Students) Bill 2010*' and to voice my long-held concerns over the lack of support available for students who HAVE to relocate to undertake tertiary education but also to put forward an alternative view to the whole policy principle behind the concept of an 'independent student'.

1. The proposed amendment seeks to open the three existing criteria to students in the ASGC 'inner regional category'. Firstly, this is a good thing, as all students who have to relocate to continue education overall have to undertake the same processes of relocating to undertake university studies, regardless of whether that is 3 or 15 hours away from their family home. The degree of remoteness does provide a significant extra challenge, but overall ALL students that are required to move from their home region to undertake their chosen field of study, undergo significant personal and financial strain in continuing their education.
2. However, I would like to challenge the basis behind these three categories as forming the basis of 'an independent student' and propose a different approach that provides a fairer and more equitable solution for ALL students nation-wide.
3. From the age of 18, these students have legal rights. Additionally, students that HAVE to relocate for their studies are immediately acting in a very independent scenario, both financially and in the conduct of their studies and lives from the age of 18. Having financial independence is a very important thing during this time, and the pressure to have family support at this very expensive time is stressful on both student and parents, regardless of whether the parents are above the very low means tested criteria levels currently bounding youth allowance.
4. Additionally, virtually all of my extended family lives in metropolitan Sydney, and from first-hand experience, their transition to university and 'independence' is nothing like what I have seen my three children undertake, from moving to Brisbane, Wagga Wagga and Newcastle for their studies, but no level of financial support was available to any of them.
5. Overall, I have a large objection to the concept of a 'gap year' being promoted as an incentive for financial independence to 17 or 18 year olds. As an educator and parent, I believe it very important that students feel enabled to continue with the momentum of education and study from year 12. My own daughter (now 20) was very seriously considering a year out in order to qualify for this payment, however this did not sit well with me as an educator and as she was 18 and had a very low earning capacity and skill set, therefore attaining this level of income was not a guarantee, additionally the 18 month criteria actually can make it a year and a half break. Several of her friends attempted this gap year, and the majority of them have not managed to hit the relevant criteria in their year out to qualify for this payment. Additionally, some of these high-achieving students have not actually returned to study and are now continuing to work low-skilled jobs and are not looking like advancing their education or

utilise their academic aptitude.

6. Additionally while part-time work is important to both the students and the economy, the focus of these tertiary students should be allowed to be on their full-time course of study for the 3,4 or 5 years they are undertaking their studies. For some degrees with a high workload and high intellectual strain, finding 15 hours (i.e. over 2 full-time shifts a week) to work steadily is an additional pressure these students do not need.
7. I understand there is constant pressure on the welfare dollar, but I would like to see a shift in thinking on how we support the tertiary students of Australia. These students are training for qualifications that will form the basis of our future society and we offer the majority of them very little financial support and give them large HECS bills at the end of it all.
8. Internationally, many countries have strong financial support systems for all students that undertake tertiary education. Denmark, for example, has a base grant for ALL students aged over 18. This is capped at 6 years of entitlement, so can't be abused in that fashion and there are also additional favourable student loan schemes available. This is on top of free education. Other countries have similar base grant schemes that offer all students independence and an ability to focus on their studies.

We have recently made a very favourable welfare paradigm shift with the introduction of the paid maternity leave scheme, that acknowledges that ALL parents require financial support and should be allowed to focus on caring for their children, rather than worrying where the maternity leave money will come from.

Education is also a core societal building block, and I cannot understand why a modified policy scheme could not be considered that could entitle all students (particularly ones that are forced to live outside their family home to undertake their course of choice) some level of financial support.

This could be in the form of a reduced amount of hours for part-time work to qualify for this allowance, that acknowledges that rural kids will need to be able to return home in non-semester periods and that this may impact on their ability to get and hold down a part-time job.

Or following in the direction of some other countries that allow a reasonable base grant or rent assistance for all university students during semester times capped at 6 years; as well as the additional welfare net for disadvantaged students and other facilities such as reasonable student loans.

The amounts don't have to be huge, but I think every parent and child from a rural area would agree that SOME level of support would be wonderful in getting through these few years of studies and living away from home for study purposes, and that by doing this, rural students would be more likely to pursue the educational path that they are capable of and be on an equitable playing field with the metropolitan students that can study their course of choice and choose to remain at home to reduce their living expenses.

I certainly know from my perspective of supporting 9 years of tertiary education (with another 3 to come) that some additional criteria to the independent student allowance, that doesn't encourage a 'gap year' and a break in education, for my 3 VERY independent students would have been invaluable.

Sincerely

Lorraine Critchley