

The Committee Secretary  
Senate Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Committee  
PO Box 6100  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600

30 November 2010

Dear Sir / Madam

We live in Bowral, a small country town located approximately 130 kms or two hours drive from Sydney. The nearest university is at Wollongong (80kms away) but unfortunately not all courses are offered there and therefore the closest option for our children to attend university is Sydney. We have three children, aged 20, 18 and 16. The eldest is already at university in Sydney where he is studying medicine at UNSW which is a 6 year undergraduate course. His travelling time to UNSW from Bowral by public transport is 2 1/2 hours each way, and it is therefore necessary to live away from home. He qualified for Youth Allowance under the "old" system, is considered independent and lives in a residential college on campus. His rent and food cost approximately \$15,000 per year and his university studies cost \$9,000 per annum which he is accruing as a HELP debt. If you do the maths, it is going to cost approximately \$100,000 (allowing for increases in accommodation costs over the next 6 years) in after tax money just to cover his rent and food alone for the duration of his undergraduate degree. We are very grateful that he receives Youth Allowance which covers a large part of his accommodation costs and allows us to help him with other expenses such as textbooks, medical equipment etc. I should say he also has a casual job to earn some pocket money but as his course becomes more demanding over the next couple of years, he will most likely have to give that away. We were very concerned last year when Youth Allowance was overhauled that he would miss out as he was one of the students who completed the HSC in 2008 and then took a planned gap year to earn the required amount to be declared independent. Fortunately reason prevailed and those students who had already planned and embarked on their gap years were not disadvantaged as will be students currently on gap years and all inner regional students.

Our daughter completed the HSC in 2009, is nearly 19 and has been working in England in a school for the past 12 months. Like her brother, she too wants to attend university in Sydney but will not qualify for Youth Allowance under the current rules. We are self employed in small business and are struggling to pay our two staff and having to reduce our own income to keep the business afloat. We don't have other sources of income and are not in a position where we can increase our income to pay for her additional educational expenses. We are wondering how we are going to be able to send her to university as we cannot afford to pay her college fees. It is unreasonable to ask her to defer for another year. She has a minimum of 5 ½ years study ahead of her and in any case, the university will not allow it. Nor is there a mid year intake. Without Youth Allowance, we will not be able to provide her with the same level of education as her brother and we frankly cannot understand why the government would discriminate so blatantly against inner rural students.

I haven't even told you about our third child who also wants to attend university in Sydney. There doesn't seem much point as unless the law is changed, she too will be blatantly discriminated against and will not be able to realise her dreams. So much for wanting / needing extra doctors in rural areas. I thought you were crying out for them but when you make it so hard for country kids to leave home to study, it becomes obvious why these places are not being filled.

Please consider this matter very carefully. We are supposed to be a country which does not discriminate. We ask you to support the proposed changes and return to a fair and equitable assessment system for all country students who have to leave home to study, whether they be classified as inner or outer regional, rural etc. That means one year gap year only to qualify for Youth Allowance. If you achieve little else during your term of office, at least do this one thing to make study away from home equally accessible to all country students.