

Submission

to

Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education
References Committee

Inquiry into student income support

Submission no: 23

Received: 8/06/2004

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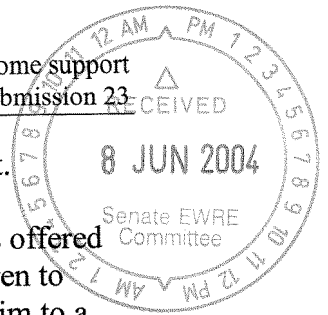
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As a country parent, the matter raised in this Inquiry is very dear to my heart.

We have three children now 28, 27 and 19 years of age. The lack of choices offered by regional central schools was paramount in our decision to send our children to boarding schools. One child had dyslexia, which made it essential to send him to a school offering remedial education. He sat the HSC and continued to Diploma of Applied Science (Agricultural Practice) at Emerald Agricultural College. The two eldest children received Austudy (based on income tax assessments during that period late 1980's, 90's) during secondary and tertiary courses – with other generous school grants and bursaries making the expensive option of boarding school and college within our reach.

The third child is currently at University of Canberra. Because of our family's Exceptional Circumstances Drought Relief, she receives Youth Allowance. Prior to 2003, we had filled in bookfuls of information for Centrelink to enable her to obtain Youth Allowance without success. It appeared that the high expenses of living in the country – fuel, education, vehicle expenses on bad roads- precluded us from qualifying. What a conundrum – the very reasons we were seeking help to pay the huge expenses through the tyranny of distance, ruled us out of receiving the help. The eligibility is not based on tax return information, just household expenses incurred.

Youth Allowance	\$310.10 per fortnight
Rent assistance	+ \$84.15
	\$394.25
Residential fee	\$196.00 per fortnight - NO MEALS

The residential fee per term is payable in advance - \$2,000.00
Plus \$250.00 room deposit (refundable)
IT access \$88.00 per semester plus download costs, printing, photocopying & stationery.
Enrolment Fee per semester \$135.00 amenities and services fee
Textbooks \$494.80
Students Assoc \$40.00
Sports fees for UC hockey team \$220.00 (rego, insce)

Because there is no public or private bus transport between our home and Canberra, our daughter has commandeered the family car for the eight-hour trip. (This is a special difficulty at the moment as I am recovering from a broken leg and unable to drive our other manual farm vehicle, which means I cannot drive independently to town.) However, we do not have the additional expense of taking her to and from Canberra and she has the independence and safety of getting around Canberra with its limited transport options; eg hockey practice at 9.30pm (due to availability of fields) and games across Canberra. This independence is important for her as an adult struggling to stick at studies when seeing other young people with well paid jobs enjoying an independent lifestyle.

In July, she intends to compete at Eastern University Games - fees \$300.00.

I am sure the Committee acknowledges the importance of sport and especially representative sport in rounding out a university education.

In reading the list of Senators on the Inquiry, I was extremely heartened to see Senator Natasha Stott-Despoja's name as she has been very outspoken concerning the higher costs of textbooks after GST came into effect. It is critical that the Government subsidy scheme is continued for students' textbooks after 1 July 2004.

We never thought that we would be happy to be in Exceptional Circumstances Drought Relief but it enabled our daughter to continue onto university following Year 12. The eligibility criteria for Centrelink are impossible to comprehend. To enable her to qualify independently, she needed to prove her earning capability in some dead end job marking time to go onto tertiary study. There were no jobs locally so she would have had to move to a bigger centre with all its attendant costs and risks.

We were unable to work out how we could change our circumstances according to Centrelink. Showing a loss situation on tax returns was no criteria.

'The Australian' newspaper May 18, 2004, **HECS scares off rural uni students** "a report commissioned by the Howard Government has found."

"A damning report by James Cook University analysed the aspirations and expectations of Year 10 to 12 students, parents and teachers in 15 regional areas, and found many school students believed the cost of studying, coupled with university fees, was too high. Researchers found the high cost of accommodation put students off moving out of home to pursue higher education. Students expressed fears that moving to the city to go to university would put too much financial pressure on their parents. This concern over the costs of further study, and its corollary of relocating, placed students in a difficult position, since it was their parents who had to bear the cost, the report says. While students regretted this burden on their parents, they also felt the loss of independence involved."

I can only endorse this report as it applies to our family and most others I know. Unless one falsifies the family situation, it is impossible to get any assistance from Centrelink for one's children.

Your Inquiry is asking for (a) (i) the adequacy of Youth Allowance.

For my daughter, Residential fee of \$196 per fortnight at College from her Youth Allowance of \$396.00 per fortnight (including Rent allowance)

leaves her with \$100.00 per week for food and all other expenses.

Having to pay \$2000 in advance can be helped by Residential Loan scheme (with interest).

Her sister helps with textbook purchases and fortunately we can assist if other big-ticket expenses occur especially car or medical expenses.

She has her Responsible Service of Alcohol and Responsible Conduct of Gambling Certificates but with her limited experience, finds it difficult to obtain casual bar work as opportunities are few in Canberra.

(iii) parental income test threshold.

In our experience, this was not an income test, but an "outcome" test. The high expenditure of our household on fuel, vehicles, telephone, education, etc. ruled us out

of Centrelink assistance yet living in a remote, rural area meant that this expenditure was necessary. Because we are a two-parent family providing a “good” environment for our children to study, we were ruled out of other Centrelink criteria.

(c) The importance of adequate income support measures in achieving equitable access to education: - Very few rural students can afford the expenses of college for tertiary education where they can no longer live at home. Rent, food, transport are large ticket items and just the little things that come with living at home like soap, washing powder, toothpaste, sanitary items all add up on the weekly grocery bill while you decide on this week’s priorities if an extra fee is due.

In our case if we had been a dysfunctional family we would have qualified unreservedly for Centrelink benefits before we came to the extreme category of Exceptional Circumstances Drought Relief.

This anomaly no doubt leads to untruthful claims to Centrelink from genuine families/students from disadvantaged – rural and remote - backgrounds for education access.

So far in 2004 we have received no worthwhile rain so our Exceptional Circumstances criteria may well be extended to 2005 to enable our daughter to finish her course with no interruption to Youth Allowance.

Now that’s looking on the bright side, I think?!?!?