

Liz Darley

July 2004

In 1996 I was the recipient of an Australian Postgraduate Award (APA) at the University of Western Sydney, Hawkesbury campus. I took this scholarship on a part-time basis so that I could look after my two children who were only 4 and 6 years old at the time. The scholarship was paid at the half-time rate plus the amount deducted for taxation purposes.

It is common practice for PhD students, whether or not they hold a scholarship, to work a few hours per week in some academic capacity such as tutoring or demonstrating for practical laboratory sessions. The maximum number of hours that a PhD candidate can work (at least at UWS) is 10 hours per week. I was employed for part of my candidature as a demonstrator and I worked 6 hours per week. Had I been in receipt of a full-time scholarship, the only taxable income that I would have incurred would come from the 6 hours work per week. But because my scholarship was part-time, it was considered taxable income. My scholarship was \$8253 per annum (taxed) plus I was making around \$4500 as a casual demonstrator, so my total taxable income was around \$12,753. Had I taken the scholarship full time, my taxable income would have been just the \$4500, which is below the income tax threshold. The taxable status of a part-time scholarship also impacted on the amount of Child Care Rebate and home Child Care Allowance I was able to apply for.

That year my marriage broke up and I became a 'sole parent'. I took leave from my studies for a year, but I ended up having to give up my scholarship because of my changed circumstances. I did not want to put my children into childcare for long periods of time, especially after a family breakup, and could not survive financially on the scholarship plus the money I earned from demonstrating. Yet I was earning too much to receive a sole parent benefit. Consequently, I recinded my scholarship and began working on a part-time basis at the University, which I continue to do to this day. I have been able to support myself and my children without a sole parent benefit, except for the year that I took leave from my studies. Now that my children are older (13 and 11) I have been studying part-time for a Graduate Diploma which I have just completed. I have paid some of the fees for this up front, and the rest have been added to my PELS (HECS) debt.

I hope that this information can help to initiate a change in this unfair example of 'legal' discrimination.

Sincerely

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