

PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY



TERRY REDMAN MLA MEMBER FOR BLACKWOOD-STIRLING

Minister for Agriculture and Food; Forestry;
Minister Assisting the Minister for Education.



Our Ref. BM 209/Sub-32

22 July 2009

Ms Jeanette Radcliffe
Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committee on Rural and Regional Affairs
and Transport
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Ms Radcliffe

RE: Inquiry into Rural and Regional Access to Secondary and Tertiary Education Opportunities

I am pleased to provide a submission on behalf of the many students within my electorate for whom recent changes to Youth Allowance will sadly signal the end of any aspirations to higher education. These changes will have very serious long-term repercussions, but in the short term it is those students currently in their gap year, and their parents, who will bear the immediate brunt.

I will submit that the imbalance in higher education participation rates between students from country and urban areas, and the issues that flow from that imbalance, present a compelling case for relaxing Youth Allowance criteria, rather than for making it even more difficult to access.

The electorate of Blackwood-Stirling, comprising approximately 25,000 square kilometres, is situated in the south west of Western Australia. As in other areas of country Western Australia, the options for higher education are limited. In the main, tertiary campuses are restricted to the Perth metropolitan area or to the larger regional centres outside the electorate, such as Albany or Bunbury. The reality is that most regional students must relocate to Perth or another city in order to study at tertiary level in their chosen field.

In *Regional Young People and Youth Allowance: Access to Tertiary Education*, Pg 10, Godden, N, Nov 2007, it was estimated that living away from home costs for rural students were between \$15- \$20,000 per year. When that annual figure is multiplied by the several years of an average course of study, it's clear that the financial cost to rural students and their families is extremely burdensome. For many rural families it is absolutely crucial that this cost is offset to some extent by access to Youth Allowance.

The changes to Youth Allowance criteria are placing enormous pressure on students currently in their gap year, and their families. Many rural students have taken time out from study in order to work for the designated period to meet the independence test. They took this step on the understanding that this would qualify them for assistance to undertake their studies in 2010. It has been shattering for these students to learn that the rules have now changed. There is no doubt that many will be placed in a position where they must terminate their study and career plans.

The criteria changes obviously also place additional strain on rural students currently in years 12 and 11. They now face the prospect of two years in the workforce before they can commence further study or the seemingly impossible task of combining their studies with 30 hours employment per week in order to qualify for Youth Allowance in two years time.

The difficulties rural communities experience in attracting and retaining skilled workers are extremely well documented and acknowledged. Those difficulties will only be compounded by the further tightening of Youth Allowance eligibility criteria. It is clear that when rural students move to metropolitan areas for study, only a proportion will return to the country to practise their professions. If young country people are discouraged from tertiary studies because of financial hardship, then that will further reduce the pool of country born or raised professionals who may choose to return to regional areas to work.

As a means of reducing financial strain, skilled workers living in country areas will often move back to the metropolitan area so that their children can live at home whilst furthering their studies. This creates a further drain on rural skills and services.

There can be no justification for encouraging young people away from higher education. Certainly at a time when unemployment rates are higher than for some years, it simply makes no sense to encourage young people away from further studies and in to the workforce. Country children should not be denied the opportunity to reach their full potential should that involve further study rather than entering the workforce.

Parents in Blackwood-Stirling have been contacting my office in despair as a result of the changes to Youth Allowance. They know that those changes present them with the choice of either taking on substantial debt or seeing their children sacrifice the opportunity to pursue their chosen career through higher education.

Country students deserve the right to equal participation in higher education. I submit that recent changes to Youth Allowance will deny many country students that opportunity and that it is imperative changes are made to enable equal opportunity. Those changes must be made as a matter of urgency to allow those students in the gap year to qualify for Youth Allowance in 2010.

Yours sincerely



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Minister for Agriculture and Food; Forestry
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