

The Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committee on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra
2600



Re: Student Allowance

Dear Sir/Madam,

I am the father of 3 sons, aged 18, 16 and 14, all due to go to University in the next 4 years. The proposed changes to Student Allowance eligibility will create financial hardship that will make it unlikely that any of my sons will be able to gain a university education.

My eldest son Matthew aged 18, completed VCE last year, attaining a score of 86, and was offered a place at Melbourne University to study Architecture. Matthew elected to defer for one year, so that he could save enough money to pay for his accommodation in the first year of study, and so that he could qualify for student allowance. He is currently working in a full time job, which would have allowed him to claim independent status under the current student allowance eligibility criteria. Under the proposed new eligibility criteria, Matthew must now work for a minimum of 18 months. The University does not offer the option of deferring for 2 years. If Matthew is to attend university our family will have to find a minimum of \$15,000 p.a. for 5 years, for accommodation expenses. I am separated from my wife and I have recently been retrenched by my employer Heinz, so I am unable to support Matthew's accommodation expenses. The result is that Matthew will not be able to afford to attend university.

Even if the universities change their rules to allow deferment for 2 years, there is a grave risk that many students after working for 2 years, will elect to stay in the workforce and will not complete a university education. The result will be that the number of country students completing a university degree will be diminished. It is well known that a high proportion of country kids who attend university in Melbourne, return to the country to live and work in their profession.

Already there is a shortage of skilled professionals in country regions. The proposed changes will exacerbate the skills shortage in regional Australia, increasing the need to import more skilled people from overseas countries. It is very unfortunate that our government is bringing in changes which will eventually result in Australia's regional citizens taking second place to overseas citizens.

My other 2 sons Simon 16 and Luke 14 are both high achievers. Both of these young people are active in community service organisations. Simon has been awarded entry to a Scouting exchange program where he will spend time in Japan as an ambassador to Australia. He will soon be hosting a young person from Denmark or Japan to spend time in Australia. People of the calibre of Luke and Simon are the community leaders of tomorrow. These are the young people who will

return to regional areas after they have finished university, to take on leadership roles in industry, civic affairs, community affairs and volunteer organisations. I have brought up my 3 sons to understand that a university education is an expectation, not an option. Being from the country, we have no choice but to pay for expensive city accommodation when our children attend university. My family and most other country families cannot afford to pay for student accommodation on top of their regular living expenses.

What is quite unfair about the proposed changes is that my city-living counterparts can send their children to university while they are living at home, and their families are not bearing any extra financial burden at all.

The only option that I can see is to relocate my family to Melbourne. It is quite ludicrous to consider a scenario where every country family with intelligent children is forced to relocate their families to live in Melbourne, just so that their kids can have the opportunity to gain a university education. It is worth considering the fact that current government policy is to reduce the environmental strain on Melbourne and Sydney by encouraging city people to consider moving to the country. It was probably not considered by the Bradley Review that the changes could result in the opposite effect, with many country families being forced to move to metropolitan areas.

As a last resort it has been suggested to me, that early marriage is an option for country students to gain eligibility for student allowance. It is a sad state of affairs when people are driven to resort to these extremes, just to gain a university education, something that should be considered a right, not a privilege.

It is my presumption that the Bradley Review panel and the politicians and public servants that proposed the changes, have simply overlooked the situation of country students. I cannot believe that any government would deliberately place their country constituents in such a disadvantaged position.

I hope that the Australian Government will realise the plight of country students, and will act quickly to throw them a lifeline. The situation is made worse by the fact that the changes are retrospective, which places students doing their gap year now, in an impossible situation. These students need to know now that the government will not desert them, and will provide financial assistance, so that they can make plans for next year's university studies, in the next few months.

If the Senate Standing Committee requires country citizens to attend the inquiry in person, I am happy to volunteer.

Kind Regards,