

2 August 2009

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



Dear Secretary,

Considered middle class and living in a rural area, my husband and I are seriously concerned over the Labour Party's proposed Youth Allowance changes.

Amendments are rightly sought to ensure those students currently in their "gap year" would still be eligible to receive Youth Allowance under the present conditions and be able to begin their university courses next year; however we believe it is crucial that the proposed changes be brought under critical review for students of the future as well.

Our youngest child/daughter is currently studying Year 10 and is from a family of five children, two who have recently completed a degree (and found employment immediately upon graduation) and one who is currently studying at university. Having raised five children in a country location, we are aware that this new proposal will make it difficult or even impossible for our fifth child to follow in their footsteps.

Our four older offspring have enjoyed graduating in the top of their respective year groups at our local high school situated 55 kms from their home. On completion of their secondary education, one attended a business college, while three found it necessary to defer their university course and have a "gap year" in order to be deemed financially independent and qualify for Youth Allowance. This was the only way they could receive the financial support required to complete university studies. They worked hard in various occupations (such as plumber's labourer, farmhand, earthmoving operator, maintenance staff and laboratory assistant) throughout their "gap year" and any opportunity available whilst continuing their studies, as Youth Allowance scarcely covers neither basic living expenses nor the high costs of requisite educational resources.

Part of the proposed changes to Youth Allowance is that students will only be considered financially independent of their parents if they work 30 hours a week for 18 months in a two year period. Under such a scheme our daughter will be ineligible for independent assistance until she is a mature age student, when many of her peers will be completing their degrees, as university places can only be deferred for one year.

Living over 100kms from our nearest TAFE institution and over 2hrs away from the closest university will prevent our daughter from pursuing higher education without the assistance of Youth Allowance. This will result in the loss of employment opportunities in an already high unemployment climate.

We understand Ms Gillard's intention is to target exploitation of the current student support system; however the intended changes do not take into account the disadvantages for rural students. My husband and I both have paid employment and would gladly pay for the opportunity for our daughter to complete tertiary studies; it is simply not within our means. Wages are lower and costs are higher in the rural environment. Few "middle Australian" families could afford the \$350+ per week cost associated with living away from home for rural students to attend university. There is a vast difference between supporting a child at home and supporting a young adult at a separate location.

The Government's changes will have an extremely detrimental impact on rural and regional students and we urge the Senate Committee to ensure that rural students receive equitable access to places of higher learning.

Yours sincerely

Mrs Kathy Zouch