



Dear Senators,

My name is Lachlan Plunkett and I am currently undertaking a 'Gap' year, having deferred my place in civil engineering at Swinburne University in Melbourne for 12 months.

My plan, along with many other rurally based students, was to meet the current criteria for the independent Youth Allowance by working to earn the minimum required amount, as well as saving money towards the cost of moving away from home to study at the beginning of next year. I am currently working fulltime with a water authority in Tatura and was well on the way to achieving my goal.

The recent federal budget announcement regarding the proposed changes to the criteria for eligibility for independent youth allowance, i.e. the length of time and minimum hours of work required to qualify, has put a stop to my plans. In fact if brought in at the beginning of 2010 the proposed changes leave current Gap year students like myself 'high and dry'!

Why is the above change to be brought in so quickly when the announcement included measures to gradually introduce other aspects of the youth allowance such as lowering the age for independence from 25 to 22 years? If all changes were brought in gradually it would allow time for future university students to prepare and adjust their plans. It would also mean that the government would honour the information provided to current gap year students when we made the decision to defer our university places at the end of last year.

Current rules in relation to deferment of a university place restrict students to taking a 'one off only twelve month period'. This does not allow me enough time to qualify for the proposed 18 month minimum work requirement for the independent Youth Allowance without turning down my university place.

As an engineering student, if I continue with my plan to take up my place, I would have a high class and study work load and it would be impossible for me to continue to work a minimum of 30 hours per week (which would also be dependent on successfully gaining work in Melbourne after I move) and meet the independent Youth Allowance criteria.

If I turn down my university place, continue to work (I am on a 12 month contract) and re-apply as a mature age student at a later stage, there is no guarantee I would be accepted as these places are restricted in number.

The cost of re-locating and living in Melbourne in relation to accommodation and general living expenses (separate to my education related costs) is estimated to be \$20,000 per year. I have no option to live at home as engineering is not offered at the regional university where I currently live. This dilemma is not faced by my metropolitan counterparts who have a range of universities within commuting distance of their homes.

I am extremely concerned at the federal government's proposed changes to the independent Youth Allowance and in particular, their impact on rural students currently undertaking a 'Gap' year such as myself. In tough economic times when jobs are scarce, particularly in rural areas, inexperienced young people need to be supported to gain the knowledge and skills to work to help to rebuild the economy. The decision to change the rules in relation to the independent Youth Allowance severely impacts on rural students having this opportunity.

I would appreciate your serious consideration of the concerns raised in this letter and your combined efforts to address this inequity.

Yours Sincerely,


Lachlan Plunkett