

I would like to submit the comments below in regard to the Inquiry into Rural and Regional Access to Secondary and Tertiary Education Opportunities

These comments are to support the debate regarding an assessment of the adequacy of Government measures to provide equitable access to secondary and post-secondary education opportunities to students from rural and regional communities attending metropolitan institutions, and metropolitan students attending regional universities or technical and further education (TAFE) colleges, with particular reference to:

a. the financial impact on rural and regional students who are attending metropolitan secondary schools, universities or TAFE;

Our family live in Muswellbrook and our son completed Year 12 in 2008. He studied hard during his HSC year to achieve his goal of studying medicine. He was offered a place to study a Bachelor of Medicine at Newcastle University in 2009. He applied for on-campus accommodation, however was rejected and when faced with the costs of living off campus he decided to defer for a year to save money and become independent so he could survive financially while studying. Rural students have a huge financial disadvantage as they need to live independently from their families and the additional costs they face include: Accommodation, Food, Travel, Parking, Internet, Phone, Electricity, Water etc. The Bachelor of Medicine course structure is very full and does not allow much time to work part-time. The Government's proposed changes to youth allowance will effect him severely as there is no way he could work 30 hours per week on top of studying medicine full-time. The fees for medicine are also a lot more expensive than those of other courses. He took a gap year in the belief that if he worked for a year under the current system he would qualify for the essential Government support he would need to survive financially at University. We believe it is totally unfair and unsatisfactory to change the criteria to qualify for Youth Allowance at this late stage when students have made decisions based on the criteria in force when they made those decisions. Also, our son turned down funds offered to him by way of Scholarships (which were on offer as long as he went to university the year after leaving Year 12) as these funds would not be as valuable as taking a Gap Year and working to qualify for Youth Allowance...now he finds that not only does he not have the Scholarship funds....he may not even qualify for Youth Allowance if the proposed changes are implemented. Our son is not seeking Youth Allowance to rip off the Government...he genuinely needs this financial support to survive and meet the costs of living away from home.

b. the education alternatives for rural and regional students wanting to study in regional areas;

There are no alternatives to study medicine in our area. The nearest medical training facility is in Newcastle and as stated above would mean enormous relocation costs. The rural community needs to have rural services and it's essential that rural students be given all the support they can have so they can bring back those important skills.

c. the implications of current and proposed government measures on prospective students living in rural and regional areas;

The proposed changes will effect our son's future as he will struggle to survive financially while living away from home to study. Due to the full study program for the Bachelor of Medicine course he will be unable to work enough hours to support himself and cover all of the costs associated with living away from home including Accommodation, Food, Travel, Parking, Internet, Phone, Electricity, Water etc.

d. the short- and long-term impact of current and proposed government policies on regional university and TAFE college enrolments;

Our son may be faced with the difficult decision of having to decide whether he can afford to go to University and study for 5 years without the essential assistance of Youth Allowance. We also know of several other students who have taken a gap year to work prior to going to University who will now probably not be able to afford to fulfil their dreams of a university education. Perhaps they would have made different decisions at the end of Year 12 in 2008 had they known that the Government would change the Youth Allowance eligibility criteria. I believe in the short-term the Government's proposed changes will mean many gap year students, including our son, will need to make difficult choices regarding their place at university in 2010. They cannot take another year off to work and meet the two year criteria without losing their place at University. This is quite unsatisfactory and sends the wrong message to students who I believe in the long term will turn away from goals of seeking a University education.

e. the adequacy of government measures to provide for students who are required to leave home for secondary or post-secondary study;

The Government needs to know that the proposed new criteria for qualifying for Youth Allowance, ie: working for 2 years, 30 hours per week, is absolutely unachievable for students who have just left Year 12 and who need to relocate for study. For a start they can only apply for a 1 year deferral and once studying there is no way they can spare 30 hours per week on top of studying full-time. The Government needs to also address the fact that rural students who need to relocate and live independently from their families have an added pressure of doing all their own cooking, laundry, shopping etc that students who live with their families in cities do not face and they would find it easier to work as they have assistance, not just financially, but also personally (shopping, laundry, cooking etc). For us, the enormous costs to fully fund our son's 5 year Bachelor of Medicine is going to be a big financial step and we are disappointed that after our son made the decision to defer his university place for 1 year and work, so he would qualify for Youth Allowance, the rules could change at this late stage. I don't think it's fair that just because he comes from a rural area that we (his parents) need to be disadvantaged financially by meeting all the costs when students who can live at home with their families in cities are treated the same. It's the community who benefit from rural people studying medicine at University and if the Government wants to turn their back on rural students, perhaps rural people will choose not to pursue a University education if they are going to be disadvantaged financially.

f. the educational needs of rural and regional students;

As stated above, I believe the needs of rural students differ from those of students living in cities due to the fact that rural students have to cover many more expenses associated with living away from home. Rural students also don't have the support of parents assisting them with shopping, laundry, cooking etc and would find it easier to work 30 hours per week to support themselves and hence qualify for Youth Allowance. I don't believe Rural students would have the same playing field, regarding working to support themselves and meeting the proposed changes to the criteria of Youth Allowance, as their city counterparts.

g. the impact of government measures and proposals on rural and regional communities;

I believe the proposed changes would have a huge impact on rural communities as future students will not be able to afford to survive financially living away from home to study at University for 3-5 years. This will mean our rural communities won't have skilled, university/TAFE trained individuals returning to work in rural areas. It will mean people in rural areas will see a decline in services and I think the Government really needs to look at the detrimental implications of the proposed changes.

h. other related matters.

In closing I'd like to state that personally I believe it is essential for the Government to consider assisting rural students and not turning their back on them financially. Also the unfairness of changing the criteria at this late stage affects us personally as our son took a gap year based on the criteria available at that time. He has been working hard to meet the guidelines which may now be irrelevant if the changes are implemented. There is no way he can possibly meet the new criteria, as if he applies for another deferral he will lose his place at University. I believe it would be fairer to at least implement the changes in 2011 and give students the chance to make informed decisions with all the information at hand.

From:

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