

20 JULY 2009

Submission to the Enquiry into Rural and Regional Access to Secondary and Tertiary Education Opportunities.

Submission from the Trustee of The Cowan Grant, a private charity providing financial help to tertiary students.

Background to the Cowan Trust

Established in 1994, the Trust gives grants to rural and regional students attending Tertiary Institutions, mostly in Adelaide. The primary criterion for a grant is financial need, not academic brilliance. Accordingly, strong preference is given to rural and regional students, since we understand the disadvantage that regional students face. Since inception the Trust has given over \$1.5m. Around 60 students are helped each year with grants of between \$1 000 and \$7 000.

Item “f” in the Terms of Reference

We comment on this topic first. It is covered well in the Bradley Report, which discusses the much lower Tertiary Participation Rate (TPR) of rural and regional students. In our region, the S.E. of S.A., the TPR is about 17, compared with the national average of 29. Worse, 70% of these 17 are female, which means that TPR for males is around 10, which is an unacceptable waste of talent. This level of TPR is common in the regions.

As we understand it, the Government accepted the recommendation in the Bradley Report to improve both the TPR of the whole community (to 40) and importantly, the TPR of rural and regional students, as a subset of disadvantaged students. If this is so, why has the government deliberately made it harder for these students by the latest changes to Austudy?

Item “a” in the Terms of Reference

The Cowan Trust funded research by Adelaide University into barriers for regional students to attend any University in Adelaide. The results showed 2 major constraining influences; most importantly, parental indifference, and secondly the influence of the school, particularly the Career Advisor. Parental indifference is not surprising, as parents are primary funders for students. It does raise the issue, though, that the Committee might consider, “What action can and needs to be taken to raise awareness of the benefits of Tertiary Education in Rural and Regional Areas?” It is apparent that in the regions, the lower proportion of graduates, the fewer professionals, the lower (and reducing) proportion of professional public servants, all lead to apathy and indifference to tertiary studies by rural and regional communities. However, studies by Prof. Lee of UniSA demonstrate that disadvantaged students will perform just as well as advantaged students at tertiary level, if given the chance.

Items “a” & “b” in the Terms of Reference

Summary of the disadvantages faced by rural and regional students having to leave home for tertiary study.

- Finding somewhere to live. (with relatives, other students, or in College)
- Finding finance to live (\$10 000 to \$15 000 in the first year)

- Leaving behind all social structure, parents, friends, at a critical time, the late teens,
- Leaving behind job, part-time or full-time
- Usually a lower academic score
- Usually a lesser understanding of tertiary academic requirements

City students living at home face none of these.

It is little wonder that around 70% of rural and regional students who defer for a year, do not go to university after their gap year, whereas around 70% of city students do resume their study.

Item “c” in the Terms of Reference

The most disappointing recent change in Austudy rules concerns the requirement to work for 18 months. We understand the purpose, namely, to restrict the rorting of the system by wealthy city students. In fact we argue that no city student living at parental home with parental income higher than about \$100 000 should receive Austudy.

Has the government thought through the difficulties facing rural and regional students having to comply with the 18- month requirement?

- Previously students could leave school in November, and commence University in February 15 months later, and be unfunded until receipt of Austudy until May, but at least only delaying Tertiary for 1 year. Our Trust has assisted students in this position. Now the delay must be at least 18 months, and in practice 2 years.
- Rural and Regional students must leave their jobs at the end of 18 months; city students can continue, even if part-time.
- Temporary jobs are usually harder to find in rural areas than in the city.

There is no question that this change will reduce the TPR of rural and regional students.

What is needed.

We really believe that the level of disadvantage is well known; there have been a number of enquiries and reports highlighting the problems. We acknowledge some positive changes in the recent budget: some scholarships now not counting as income for Centrelink payments, and the small, rather token, grants to rural and regional students. However, it is apparent that the overriding aim of the recent changes was to save money, not to improve the system. We are most disappointed because we had hoped for an improvement from the policies of the previous government.

We feel unable to set out detailed plans: there are government professionals qualified to do that. But perhaps the principles should be;

- Clear recognition that there is disadvantage endured by Rural and Regional students in a statement from the Committee.
- Acceptance that there needs to be positive discrimination in favour of rural and regional students for a time. After all this has been accepted for some rural medical students, not to mention gender preference.
- An advocate for rural and regional students to be included in any committee, which works on changes to Austudy policy.
- Recognising that some financial constraint is currently needed, strategic plans should be spelled out now, with a timetable for implementation. In the interim, the following could be implemented:

- City-based tertiary students, (say within a 50 km radius of University, or from nominated urban High Schools and Colleges) who live at home with parents earning over \$x per year, (say \$100 000) should not be eligible for Austudy for the first 4 years of study.
- Students who must move to tertiary study, more than, say, 250 km from home or from nominated rural High Schools, should receive preference. Call them distance students.
- Distance students must be able to take a 1-year-only gap (obviously with earning conditions to be met), to be able to access Austudy.
- The parental income limit for distance students should be \$2x. (say \$200 000)
- The Government should introduce these changes with a campaign alerting regional communities to the benefits of Tertiary Education.
- The Government should at least fix the 18-month working gap now.

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