

My son Matthew completed year 12 in 2008 and was successful in securing a place at UWA in Perth (200km away) to do Law. Based on the legislation in place at the time he decided to take a gap year with the aim of meeting the independence criteria to obtain a youth allowance to help support him during the 5 years in Perth to complete his degree. He applied for all jobs advertised in the local media and through centrelink for which he met the criteria and also took his resume to any businesses in the area that might have employment. Eventually he got a job at McDonalds in Bunbury at the end of February, after 3 months of applying for jobs. He completed a senior first aid certificate in between to help his job prospects, however is not allowed to complete any tertiary course during the deferral of his degree(part of the requirements of the universities) to improve his job prospects. ie he cannot even do part time TAFE courses for hospitality etc. The 2 major employers in the area currently have a hiring freeze and many businesses, such as Bunnings refuse to take on gap year students. At 17 years old, like many of his friends, he will not earn a full wage and can only get a max of 30 hours per week, many cannot even get that. His wage is approx \$11 per hour including allowances and under the award there is no allowance for shift loading, hence this is his salary even if he works overnight or on the weekends. He is also a qualified soccer referee and takes on as many jobs for this as he can. Despite this over a period of 12 months, ie until university commences in Feb 2010 it will be impossible for him to earn the required \$18800 to meet the criteria for youth allowance. If the law is changed and he is required to work a minimum of 30hours per week for 18 months, he cannot meet this criteria either. Perhaps if he was 18 for the whole year and hence paid a higher salary or if he was in the city with more job options he could make the current criteria, but not even then could he meet the proposed criteria. I rang Centrelink and asked what support there was in place for rural tertiary students, the response, there is none.

Transport to Perth from Bunbury takes 2.5 hrs each way by car, train or bus so is not a viable option financially or time wise. He will need to move to Perth to attend university. The course he has been accepted for is not offered in Bunbury or anywhere else in WA. The costs to support him in accomodation in Perth will amount to a minimum of \$10,000 per annum (after tax) without food etc. That is for our first child, when his brother attends Uni in 2 years time will need to find a further \$10,000 a year. With no form of rural support students like Matthew may not reach their full potential or have to find work while doing their degree to fully support themselves, not just to socialise with as their city counterparts can. City students are not put under these stresses, they do not have to find accomodation, do not have to find another \$20000 per annum and do not need to find work to support themselves through university. No wonder the drop out rate for rural students is higher than for city students they are discriminated against financially. Accomodation is also a major issue. Matthew has applied for accomodation at the university colleges. He is still on the waiting list from last year and has not got a firm place for 2010, despite getting into Law having good references, ie there are very few places available and with the current economic crisis students who would normally vacate their places at the end of 1st or 2nd year have chosen to stay on limiting the intake for 2009. So what's ahead for Matthew? Uncertainty. Uncertainty about accomodation, uncertainty about financial support, Uncertainty about being able to complete his chosen tertiary education to the best of his abilities due to lack of government support. A government that supposedly supports decentralisation and education!! May be only if you live in the city!

Merran Courtney