

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

26 July 2009

Re: Inquiry into Rural and Regional Access to Secondary and Tertiary Education Opportunities

We – mother and son - are writing to express our view that Government measures to provide equitable access to secondary and post-secondary education opportunities to students from rural and regional communities attending metropolitan institutions are woefully inadequate.

As a parent of one student who is already studying at university in Melbourne and two more (Hamish included) at our local high school who have hopes of following him, I am particularly concerned about the huge costs for students and their parents for living away from home expenses whilst attending university. What is especially galling is that students who come from rural areas and necessarily have additional accommodation costs (estimated at \$20,000 per year) are treated the same way in terms of eligibility for Youth Allowance as students from metropolitan areas who can, in most cases, live with their parents while they attend university.

Surely it would be infinitely fairer if students who have to live away from home to attend tertiary studies were automatically given an allowance to do so? As it is, this only applies once the student actually gets Youth Allowance, and it is not easy to be eligible for this allowance. Again, in neither the means test for parents nor the earning requirements for students is any consideration made for whether the student will need to live away from home. This is inherently unfair because, of course, the costs will be much higher.

We live two to three hours away from universities in Melbourne and are not high earners, but we still do not qualify for Youth Allowance for our children, so low are the earning limits. Have another look at the figures. We think you will find that most people who earned that little would not be able, even if their kids got Youth Allowance, to send them to uni. We are fortunate to have family in the city with whom our eldest son can board temporarily, but there are two siblings hot on his heels (Hamish included) and it is unfair that we have to rely on the good will of family members. Countless other rural students are not so fortunate and so it is hardly surprising that so few go to university – the costs are simply too great.

The measures proposed by the government regarding Youth Allowance will not improve matters. It still remains that in assessing eligibility absolutely no consideration is given to rural students and their parents who must pay accommodation costs – and yet they will have to foot a \$20,000 annual bill. As for requiring students to work for 30 hours per week for eighteen months to get Youth Allowance as independents - that will be near impossible as most tertiary institutions do not allow students to defer a course for longer than a year, and it is unfair to expect students to study full-time while working 30 hours a week. Furthermore, there are few full-time jobs available for untrained young people in rural and regional areas. The proposal is outrageously unfair for any of last year's school graduates who are undertaking a Gap year in the expectation that they will have earned sufficient money to qualify for

Youth Allowance. They will find on January 1, 2010 that the goal posts have shifted and they are suddenly ineligible. It is particularly common for rural and regional students to take a year off – so that they can earn enough to live on at uni as it is so difficult to get Youth Allowance any other way.

Thank you for this opportunity to express our views on what we have long considered an extremely inequitable system. Hopefully your review will make it patently obvious what an unfair system it is and why such a low proportion of rural and regional students go onto tertiary studies – the costs are simply too great.

Yours sincerely,

Wendy Williamson
& Hamish Williamson.