

30 July 2009

To Whom It May Concern

I write in relation to the Senate Inquiry into Rural and Regional Access to Secondary and Tertiary Education Opportunities.

It is my understanding that this inquiry will act as 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.

Whilst acknowledging the difficulties regional students face in completing secondary education I wish to focus on the current and proposed barriers to regional students that can prevent them from undertaking tertiary studies.

It is with this in mind that I refer to the terms of reference sections (a) the financial impact on rural and regional students who are attending metropolitan secondary schools, universities or TAFE; (c) the implications of current and proposed government measures on prospective students living in rural and regional areas; (e) the adequacy of government measures to provide for students who are required to leave home for secondary or post-secondary study; and (g) the impact of government measures and proposals on rural and regional communities.

It is my firm belief that the financial burden placed on regional students attending university cannot be narrowed down to a certain figure as many students' circumstances differ. I believe a figure of around \$20,000 is an appropriate estimate of the cost of living away from home for the duration of the university year for each student. The cost of on-campus accommodation and the metropolitan rental markets across Australia are only ever going to increase and it's quite probable that they will increase at a superior rate to levels of government support.

This has been one of the main motivating factors giving rise to the current protests over recent proposals by the Federal Government to change the eligibility for the Independent rate of Youth Allowance. To many regional students it seems that the government does not understand the increased costs faced by students who are forced to live away from home to pursue their chosen course.

Many of these students are currently completing a 'gap' year to assist in shouldering the financial burden involved in moving away from home to complete tertiary studies. The Education Minister has not guaranteed that these students will not be affected, which has effectively meant that the rules they were told to follow by their teachers and careers officers have become virtually useless.

Like many, I find it hard to believe that the Federal Government has made these decisions in the best interest of regional students. Forcing students into two-year deferrals so that they can qualify for the Independent rate of Youth Allowance will only serve to reduce the percentage of regional students that currently attend university.

By providing the appropriate levels of support and reducing the financial burdens, more regional students will be encouraged to undertake tertiary studies which will provide benefits back to their local communities. Regional communities are continually crying out for further help in relation to health and education services.

With government support for students, regional communities will have the chance to prosper when these students return. The outcomes for these communities would be far greater than if the young people of the area were prevented from attending university and were not afforded the opportunity to provide essential skills and services to their local communities in the future.

In closing, I believe the government must be doing more to protect and nurture the regional young people who will provide the platform that will launch the future Australia.

Yours sincerely

Vickie Tait.