

Dear Committee members,

I am a mother of four children all of whom are currently studying at university. As we live in Tamworth this means that all of them have to move to the city to gain their degrees.

My husband and I have an income that lies outside the cut-off for our children to receive any assistance from Centerlink. Our income is not excessive and we have made many hard sacrifices to allow them to attend university. Families that live in the city have the considerable advantage of allowing their children to live at home. I have instead the expense of supporting four households in addition to our family home. We get no support for them and they can get no allowances. As a result we deeply regret moving from the city to the country. Rural life has so many disadvantages such as poor health services, transport and now education that it would be fraudulent to encourage young families to regionalise under current government policies.

My children have had to work such long hours to help support themselves that their studies have been severely impacted. My heart aches when I call and they are struggling with assignments when exhausted with such long hours at work.

Centerlink allows independence when a young person cannot live at home for many reasons except the obvious one of not having a university in their home town.

As a science teacher in a secondary school, I can not now, in all conscience, encourage students to aspire to a degree. Instead I warn them of the cost to them and their families because of current government policies, the loss of income while studying, added to the HECS debt and suggest alternatives. I do this while knowing that it comes at a great cost to our nation as our future lies with greater knowledge and expertise.

There was one way to overcome this great disadvantage. It entailed deferring university for a year, work hard while living at home, live on the savings for the first four months of the next year and then qualify for independence under Centerlink guidelines. This path will be blocked by the proposed changes.

Unless these changes make allowance for rural students, then we can only conclude that rural students, especially those in larger families, have been abandoned by our government.

Yours truly,
Carol McHugh