

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

I am the Careers Adviser at Young High School which is classified as being in a regional area.

Over the time I have been Careers Adviser at Young High since 1998, approximately 30% - 40% of our Year 12 cohort have been offered places at universities. Throughout this time, the number of students taking up places has dropped. Last year, whilst over 35% of the students were offered places, less than 20% took these offers up.

The most pressing reason why students do not pursue tertiary studies is undoubtedly financial hardship. With no universities locally or within travelling distance, students are forced to move away from home to gain access to university. Similarly, the local TAFE, whilst in itself an excellent institution, offers a very limited number of courses. Many students have to relocate to pursue tertiary studies at TAFE.

The cost of accommodation and transport are the biggest cost for students. Virtually all students defer the actual university fees, however accommodation, transport and meals have to be paid up front. The cost of university accommodation ranges from \$3540.60 for self catered at CSU to over \$15000 for catered accommodation in Sydney. With an average cost of \$10000 per year (forty weeks), this equates to \$250 per week.

At our student pathway evenings we have had parents who have children at university address students and other parents. They put a conservative figure of \$15000 for basic food and accommodation at regional universities or \$20000 per year as the cost of supporting a student in Sydney. This is a huge impost on parents, and one which many simply can't afford. One parent, with three children in three successive years at university, used a very large component of his superannuation payout to fund his children through university. He says it cost between \$150,000 and \$200,000 to educate his children. He considers himself fortunate that he was able to access this money for this purpose. Many other families simply do not have this option.

There is NO public transport in Young. We do not have rail or coach services. The last remaining coach link between Young and Canberra was terminated last year. Rail services are only available to Harden, (30km), Cootamundra (50km) or Yass(85km) There are no buses which link with these services to Young. This means that students have to have their own transport which is an additional major cost.

Over the years, more and more students have taken a gap year to give them access to independent youth allowance and to allow them to save enough money to pay their first year of university. If this option disappears, it will decimate access to tertiary education for students from communities such as Young.

Students already work long hours to help support themselves through university. It is not uncommon for students in Years 11 and 12 to be working 15-25 hours per week to save

up to help them fund their future education. Once at university or TAFE they continue to work long hours to enable them to exist. This is not conducive to enabling students to excel in their studies. Furthermore, it discourages them from extending their university studies as they are keen to get “real” jobs which pay “real” money.

Over the years, the federal government has made it increasingly difficult for students from regional and rural areas to access tertiary education. Scholarships for rural students have disappeared and been replaced by restricted access to equity scholarships. Many students who access youth allowance are not receiving the equity scholarships due to the restricted number of these available.

Students who cannot access university at the end of Year 12 often find jobs locally and never end up going to university because it is out of their reach. If the age for independent youth allowance is increased to 22, many more students will be lost to the tertiary education system.

If we are to have an “education revolution” we need to be supporting students and families from rural and regional Australia to access tertiary study. The fact that students have to move away from home and cannot access public transport means that the government needs to provide equitable access to these students by financial resources. Without this there is simply gross discrimination against people from these rural and regional areas.