

The Rudd Government's decision to remove two of the eligibility criteria for youth allowance is sure to have a significant impact not only on the enrolment and participation of regional students in university courses, but also on the future of rural communities.

I elected to partake in a gap year during 2009 primarily because I didn't want my parents to have to support me while I undertook my university studies in either biomedical science or medicine. Given that I also have a brother who is three years younger than me and both of us intend to study at university, my parents would have had to support two children living away from home for quite a number of years. My gap year has by no means been a holiday. After extensively searching for a job in this economic climate, I have been working up to 53 hours per week since the start of March to make up the \$19 500 I believed would make me eligible to receive Youth Allowance next year.

The proposed legislation is flawed in that it makes no distinction between students who live within a reasonable distance of a university. Students who live in metropolitan areas have a myriad of choices when choosing which university to attend and there is no necessity for them to move out of home. However, students from regional areas would be exceptionally lucky to find the university course they wanted and still be able to live with their parents as there are very few regional universities that offer all the courses available at metropolitan universities. Thus, rural students are forced to pay for all of the necessary costs associated with moving away from home, including rent, electricity, food and water. This is on top of course fees which are often thousands of dollars every year.

The most insulting part of the proposed changes is the retrospective nature. Many students like myself deferred university to take a gap year with the understanding that if we earned \$19 500, we would be eligible for youth allowance and the other benefits associated with being an independent student. Upon deferring our courses there was a condition with most of the universities that our degrees could only be deferred for one year or our place in the course could be surrendered. Thus, students who must now defer for another year to qualify for youth allowance by working more than 30 hours per week over a 12 month period, risk losing their place in the course of their choice. The government has also failed to identify that forcing students to work for two years will cause many of them to lose their momentum and motivation to attend university.

The Rudd Government released a plan to have nearly half of 25 to 34-year-old Australians tertiary educated by 2025 at the 13th Education Forum on Equity in Education, but I wonder how they intend to achieve this by cutting out thousands of students from middle-class regional families. The government also has plans to lift both the quality of teaching in Australian schools and retention rates for disadvantaged students, yet the benefits of these changes will not be seen if university becomes merely an unattainable ambition for many country students. It is good that the government recognises that Australia's place in the world economy depends on having a high proportion of tertiary educated adults, yet removing two of the eligibility criteria for youth allowance will make it very difficult for them to achieve their goals because they are effectively planning to marginalise middle socio-economic families from rural and regional areas.

Previous studies have demonstrated that students who have moved from rural areas to attend universities often move back to regional areas after they have completed their studies. So if the proposed changes have the effect of turning rural students away from university, not only will the student be worse off, but so too will be the regional communities who will be struggling to attract teachers, doctors, nurses and other professionals. This legislation has the potential to not only disadvantage prospective university students from remote locations but have serious repercussions for the future of regional Australia.

While I can appreciate that money needs to be saved wherever possible in the current economic climate, is the best solution to rob students from middle-class regional families the opportunity to attain a university degree? Perhaps the previous eligibility criteria could be reinstated for students who are forced to move away from home to attend the university they were accepted into. This committee has a responsibility to not let government cost cutting affect the education opportunities of regional students and with it the future of rural Australia.

I urge you to please, seriously consider your position on this policy because for me and many other students this piece of legislation could be the difference between being able to afford to go to university or not. In a country like Australia it is simply not good enough for students to not attain a tertiary education because they can't afford it.

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