

Committee Secretary
Senate Rural & Regional Affairs & Transport Reference Committee
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To Whom it may Concern

I write in support of rural and remote students who are going to be severely disadvantaged by the proposed changes to the criteria for establishing independence to access the Independent rate of Youth Allowance.

For students whose family own farming and grazing land, this is the only way that they can obtain financial support whilst studying, as most farming land does not meet the asset test requirement.

The current system, where the student can work for one to two years prior to going onto university studies has worked well and offers flexible options as to how this can be achieved.

The new system whereby students have to work for 30 hours per week for at least 18 months in any two year period is discriminatory and unrealistic for rural and remote students. One of the other options, is the student has a baby!! Is this what the Federal Government wants to encourage?

I know of a person wanting to enrol to study at university in 2010. This is her third year out of school. In the first year she worked in a supermarket in Denmark (where she lived at the time with her parents). Last year she worked on a cattle property in North Queensland. This year she is at Big W in Young, NSW – a reasonably large country town. She has been employed there since February on a casual basis (cannot get permanent status) and only now does she get three or four shifts per week. A shift is four hours, so after six months she is getting about 12 hours per week. She receives Centrelink assistance to make up any shortfalls. She has to pay rent on a flat, gas and electricity, run a car and eat. At the end of the week, she has absolutely no money left and has a bank loan to assist her. My argument is that it is unrealistic to assume that young people can walk into a 30 hour per week job between leaving school and going to university, especially in rural and remote areas of Australia.

If a student's family live on a remote property then the only way that the student can gain employment is by living away from home. Surely, if a student has to live away from home to study or gain employment then they must be considered independent. Naomi Godden's research into Youth Allowance supports this, as does Professor Margaret Alston of CSU Wagga Wagga.

The current system of proving independence does offer the student some flexible options, the proposed system, offers none except that of getting married or having babies! Or perhaps somehow proving disadvantage in education or employment. An option that rural and remote students may have to resort to but what a sad option and a reflection that rural and remote Australians are not considered in planning processes.

Students who have to live away from home to study or to work, that is, they cannot reasonable commute on a daily basis, should be considered as independent the moment they leave home.

Thank you for establishing this inquiry and listening to the concerns of many people who want their children educated but cannot afford to “keep” them whilst they achieve this.

Sue Gordon

7th August 2009