

Loxton High School Governing Council

Submission to the Senate Inquiry into Rural and Regional Access to Secondary and Tertiary Education Opportunities.

Introduction

Loxton High School Governing Council has headed a campaign for the past six years to redress the inequities concerning rural students accessing tertiary education.

We believe the current arrangements around Youth Allowance work against rural students accessing tertiary studies compared to city students as evidenced by their current under representation at university.

Whilst acknowledging the proposed changes to Youth Allowance will result in more families gaining some financial assistance, we argue that this assistance is still insufficient and the proposed changes fail to acknowledge the financial barriers many rural families face accessing university.

Facts

1. Country students are under represented in tertiary education.
2. Country students must relocate to metropolitan areas or large regional centres to undertake tertiary study.
3. Country students must live away from home and therefore pay for accommodation.
4. If country students seek to become independent they will find it extremely difficult to consistently find thirty hours of work per week for eighteen months in order to qualify, especially in areas of extreme rural hardship such as the Riverland.
5. Many university courses currently will not allow students to defer for longer than twelve months, if at all.

Response

- a. **The financial impact on rural and regional students who are attending metropolitan secondary school, universities or TAFE.**

There has been a decline in the participation rate for rural and remote students in tertiary education (Bradley Review of Higher Education, 2008). Under the proposed new arrangements our experience tells us that this decline will continue under these new proposals as families will be less able to afford the costs of having a student(s) living and studying away from home.

We propose that an increase in the university participation rate for rural students will only be achieved through appropriate financial support that is reflective of the true costs of having a student living and studying away from home.

Access to tertiary education for rural and remote students is both a moral and equity issue.

We believe the disparity between metropolitan and rural students in accessing tertiary study will continue to widen under the proposed arrangements. The barriers to country students accessing tertiary study that need to be addressed include

- Relocation expenses and board
- Transport
- Insufficient support provided through Youth Allowance, which fails to cover basic living expenses.
- Impact on the family – social, emotional, financial.
- Impact on local community – sporting, community and service groups.

Despite the proposed new measures there still exist extra costs for rural students compared to city students that go to the heart of our long quest for equity for rural and regional students. The situation becomes critical for rural families when two or more students from the one family are at tertiary study together - the financial burdens are prohibitive in these situations.

b. The education alternative for rural and regional students wanting to study in regional areas.

The tertiary education alternatives in South Australia are extremely limited. Relocating to a regional centre which accommodates a university is extremely problematic i.e. there is no guarantee that the course desired is available in the regional centre. Again, there may well be the costs referred to in part (a) including board and transport. Metropolitan centres contain large reference libraries, archives and knowledge hubs which are primarily only available in urban areas. Rural students must not be discriminated against if they choose to study at a tertiary institution outside their regional area.

c. The implications of current and proposed government measures on prospective students living in rural and regional areas.

Students studying under the proposed government measures will be even more financially disadvantaged than students who are currently receiving the full Independent Rate of Youth Allowance. Currently, by deferring university for 12 months and earning the required amount money (currently \$19 532) within the 18 month period, (which is the option the vast majority of country students choose) students are able to qualify for full Independent Youth Allowance.

Full Youth Allowance is a very modest allowance (well below the Henderson Poverty Line) and does not cover all students living and accommodation expenses, yet this full independent youth allowance is significantly better than the proposed offering. If these budget changes are passed, most rural students will be receiving less financial assistance from the government via Youth Allowance than is currently available and possible for most rural students.

Few students will gain independence as a consequence of the near impossibility of consistently securing 30 hours of work per week for the eighteen month qualifying period. In addition, and associated with this eighteen months of work, is the loss of place in a university course offer due to deferment for greater than one year.

Finally, the closure of the Commonwealth Accommodation Scholarship scheme and introduction of the Relocation Scholarship would remove vital assistance and adds extra financial burden to the rural student and their family. This change is a real and critical reduction in assistance to country students and should not be dismissed (\$13 200 reduced to \$6 000 over a three year degree).

We draw the Inquiry's attention to the previous comprehensive studies listed here:

1. "Senate Sub-committee Inquiry: Student Income Support, June 2005".
2. Naomi Godden "Youth Allowance and Regional Young People. Access to Tertiary Education, November 2007."

d. The short and long term impact of current and proposed government policies on regional university and TAFE college enrolments.

In South Australia there will be little impact due to there being minimal regional university infrastructure.

e. The adequacy of government measures to provide for students who are required to leave home for secondary or post-secondary study.

The proposed government budget measures are manifestly inadequate, for the following reasons:

- Changes to the youth allowance workforce participation criteria. Few rural students will be able to qualify for full independent youth allowance.
- Removal of significant Commonwealth Accommodation Scholarships
- Introduction of a lesser Relocation Scholarship.
- Under new Parental Income Test thresholds a greater number of students will be eligible to receive Youth Allowance; however the amounts received are less than currently available and will serve to perpetuate the inequity between city and rural students.
- Living and accommodation expenses for rural students are rising faster than the increases in Youth Allowance.

Again please refer to the 2005 Senate Sub-committee Inquiry into Student Income Support and the 2007 research of Naomi Godden. Loxton High School Governing Council on behalf of communities with the Federal Electorate of Barker has been challenging the inequities around Youth Allowance for rural students for the past seven years. The Loxton community was a key participant in the research into Youth Allowance undertaken by Naomi Godden. (pg. 122, 17 key recommendations).

The cost of a second student studying away from home exacerbates the financial burden on families.

f. The Education needs of rural and regional students.

The educational needs and ambitions of rural students are identical to those of metropolitan students. In theory all government policies are geared towards equity of access and participation for all students irrespective of geographic location. In practice the proposals will continue to work against rural students access, participation and success at tertiary level education.

Conclusion

Despite the stated aims for rural and regional students contained within the Bradley Report, we strongly believe that these proposed changes to Youth Allowance in the 2009 Federal Budget will not have a positive effect. It will not significantly reduce the rate of decline in participation and success at tertiary level education by rural students, because the necessary on-going support is insufficient to maintain students from outside the cities.

The current Youth Allowance arrangements actively work against rural young people accessing tertiary study. The proposed changes will only further exacerbate this inequity.

We have, and will consistently argue that rural and regional students should automatically receive full Youth Allowance because of the additional costs and barriers to accessing and succeeding in higher education. These measures would significantly aggravate the current inequity between rural and city students access and success at tertiary study.

We request a face-to-face meeting with the Senate Inquiry should a meeting be held in South Australia.

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