

To Whom it may (or should) concern

I write to express my alarm and concern at the proposal to change the eligibility criteria for youth allowance for students. My wife Rosemary and I are parents of 4 young people. Our elder son is now a tradesman pursuing a career in the automotive industry, our first daughter is halfway through an education degree at Edith Cowan University with a view to primary teaching. She receives youth allowance and lives rather modestly in shared accommodation to be able to get by. She like many in our community took a year off between high school and uni, during which time she worked hard, saved and took a trip to a third world country paid for by a high school scholarship she won. As parents we saw a huge growth in her and a significant maturing during that year. Without the year of work she could not have funded her first semester's study and without youth allowance she could not have continued.

Our second daughter has likewise taken a year between high school and uni. She has been working near full time. She also wishes to be a teacher, in particular a high school maths specialist. Her motive is not one of a love of maths, which she excelled at, rather a love of kids and a desire to make a significant positive contribution into the lives of others. Both our daughters while totally different in personality are driven to contribute in such a manner.

Our second son is currently in high school where he is working towards the fields of engineering or architecture. The plan is also a gap year for him.

When we factor in the issue that we live 370 km from the institutions that offer the training our children require, youth allowance becomes a vital link in the chain of their education. In the gap year our daughters have learned how to budget, purchased and maintained a car and saved for the following year. We have used this as a means to teach them basic life success skills. We see it as inappropriate to fund a path direct to university for them, instead seeking to instill the notion of reward for effort. The system as it currently stands does that for those in the situation we face which would be common for many rural families.

We run a small business in our local community, are engaged in some significant local endeavours in the community and relocation of the whole family to Perth for the education of some is not an option.

While we don't starve we are not in the position to fund the accommodation, food and travel requirements for the kids even if we wanted to. The reality is they have to make it work.

When we contrast the situation with that of our city cousins it seems less than equal with the urban kids having the luxury of continuing to live at home, having the networks in place to make the most of positions and opportunities that may be available and generally having better access to facilities.

With the proposed changes to the youth allowance eligibility criteria our rural youth would be forced to take another year off for work. This would have the effect of some kids not going on to further study.

With the shortage in many rural areas of certain professions it seems incomprehensible that the Govt would seek to discriminate against those most likely to return to rural Australia as professionals. In the case of our second daughter she was awarded a couple of scholarships by the university she chose to attend. She has been able to defer these for 12 months. We understand that she will lose this assistance if she does not attend next year. These scholarships were won as a result of a commendable effort on her part. To now be faced with the prospects of losing them simply because she can't afford to live where she needs to live to go to uni seems so inequitable and discriminatory.

If the proposed changes were to be implemented it would mean rural kids would effectively be two years behind their peers. At the age that they may well be expecting to marry and start a family they would be barely started in their careers. Within the teaching profession there is a significant number of women who have raised their families and returned to the workforce. These women generally completed a 3 year degree or diploma, taught for a few years then set about raising their own families. Twenty years later they have returned and offer a lot of skill gleaned from their life's experience. This proposed change coupled with a now 4 year degree will have a significant negative effect on the teaching profession in a couple of decades.

It is understandable that the Govt may wish to trim costs. It would be more palatable if the criteria were more equitable. I contend with some pride that each of our children is a positive and contributing member of society. I have the highest regard for my daughters' morals and standards. However if my daughter was to just clear off from school, get pregnant, give up her child, not work, save or show any real responsibility she would be deemed as independant and would be eligible under the guidelines of the Youth Allowance as supplied to me by Centrelink yesterday.

However under this proposed change if she has worked hard for about a year, earned about \$21,000, bought and maintained a car and saved enough to live on for 6 months she is not considered independant or worthy of any support or encouragement.
What message is the Government trying to send here?

Perhaps if the Government wants better education outcomes perhaps it could consider the Polish option where all uni students were required to work in the real world for a certain period before they were able to attend university.

We urge the Government not to implement these proposed discriminatory changes which would only serve further disadvantage the rural youth of Australia.

Your sincerely

Anderson & Rosemary Dufty.