

**Submission to**  
**The Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References**  
**Committee**

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

**August 2009**

**Issues Addressed in this Submission:**

An assessment of the adequacy of Government measures to provide equitable access to secondary and post-secondary education opportunities to students from rural and regional communities attending metropolitan institutions, and metropolitan students attending regional universities or technical and further education (TAFE) colleges, with particular reference to:

- a. the financial impact on rural and regional students who are attending metropolitan secondary schools, universities or TAFE;
- b. the education alternatives for rural and regional students wanting to study in regional areas;
- c. the implications of current and proposed government measures on prospective students living in rural and regional areas;
- d. the short- and long-term impact of current and proposed government policies on regional university and TAFE college enrolments;
- e. the adequacy of government measures to provide for students who are required to leave home for secondary or post-secondary study;
- f. the educational needs of rural and regional students;

**Introduction**

Currently Australian students wishing to access quality secondary and tertiary education which caters to their abilities, interests and needs are disadvantaged if they live in rural or remote, and even in many cases regional areas of Australia. The Federal Government has an opportunity to address some of these disadvantages and inequities at both secondary and tertiary education levels.

The Bradley Report ( 2008) states that "Australia faces a critical moment in the history of higher education. " We agree, but for different reasons. If some of the proposed changes to availability of tertiary education to rural and regional students are implemented by the Federal Government, higher education will be out of affordable reach to many rural and regional students. Also due to location disadvantages, some of these students may not even have the opportunity of admission to tertiary education if they have not had access to a quality secondary education.

We have lodged this submission since our family has experienced difficulties and substantial financial costs in accessing both secondary and tertiary education appropriate for our four children. They are each still benefiting from secondary and tertiary education outside our rural area with a small local school, with our girls particularly thankful for advantages including: opportunities for their leadership abilities to flourish, specialist tuition and performance opportunities for their musical and artistic talents, opportunities for advanced study of languages and specialist university courses in a metropolitan centre, and also opportunities for regular participation in womens' team sports.

**a. the financial impact on rural and regional students who are attending metropolitan secondary schools, universities or TAFE;**

To access boarding schools, universities or TAFE courses in metropolitan or even large regional centres requires a **huge financial commitment**, including costs of transport to and from home, accommodation (whether boarding at school or student hostel, or university college or in off-campus accommodation), tuition and associated fees or charges, as well as communication costs (particularly phone), on top of standard education costs.

This financial commitment may not be eligible for any assistance when eligibility for the AIC allowance or Youth Allowance exclude. Even if these forms of assistance are obtained, they contribute only partly towards the total cost of education away-from-home.

The alternative means of affording a metropolitan or regional secondary school, universities or TAFEs could include the **relocation of all or part of the family unit**, placing stress on family relationships and often also on the actual operation of the family business, such the family farm, where several family members may normally contribute labour to the seasonal operations (eg lamb marking with all children helping out). Unfortunately this move could also entail off-farm employment in the alternative education centre and removal of part of the family from participation in the rural and regional community.

**b. the education alternatives for rural and regional students wanting to study in regional areas;**

For rural and regional students wanting to study in regional areas, the **secondary education** opportunities vary with different centres. The nearest large regional centre to us, approximately 100km away by bus, offers no boarding at schools, only a small student hostel catering for all schools in the centre, or private board if obtainable. Travel by bus entails a two hour trip each way, approximately four hours' travel each day - a substantial commitment, and undoubtedly tiring to the student, even if able to manage homework on the bus. In this case sporting and extra-curricular activities mean extra travel for the parents in a private vehicle. Secondary schools in larger regional centres further afield necessitate boarding at the school, offering a range of opportunities for study and extra-curricular activities comparable with those in metropolitan areas, although with additional travel to metropolitan areas usually required to compete in sporting, academic, and creative arts fields against other schools.

Although small local secondary schools can offer quality teaching and excellence in subjects with appropriately qualified staff, but they cannot always offer enough choice of subjects. This can often be supplemented by study through distance education, particularly successful where students have a high level of support and motivation, and an adequate internet connection. However, there may be only a very small cohort of peers, some of whom may not be highly motivated towards achieving a tertiary education or challenging career outside the local community, which may make the learning environment difficult even in a school.

**Tertiary courses** through university studies offered in regional areas near us are currently quite limited, although the range is expanding each year to cover additional fields, particularly in the medical sciences. The traditional universities in metropolitan areas tend offer a larger range of specialist courses for study, and provide associated opportunities which will never be as available in regional areas, particularly in relation to some of the creative arts (orchestras, art galleries), some areas of scientific research, and numerous other areas based where the research is being carried out. Some regional universities outside our area have however developed their own fields of specialty and excellence, for instance in the field of agricultural sciences and economics.

TAFE courses offered in regional centres near here tend to cover a broad range of courses, providing valuable training for apprentices in many varied skilled professions. However, students undertaking apprenticeships often need to relocate to live away from home to access a broader range of businesses and TAFE courses, necessitating costs of relocation and accommodation.

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

**Current government measures** would assist some prospective students from rural and regional areas. For instance, some students satisfying the strict guidelines for eligibility may be able to obtain some financial assistance through the AIC allowance. However, this AIC allowance should be more widely available where a local school does not offer a range of opportunities suited to the student, whether these be subject choices, leadership opportunities, regular team sport participation (for example, there may not be enough students for a team), music tuition, gifted and talented opportunities, or any others.

At the tertiary level, the government's Youth Allowance has been available subject to several eligibility criteria, including the proof of independence by "(b)earning a specified amount in an 18-month period since leaving school." (Bradley, 2008). This eligibility has often been achievable for rural and remote students in regional areas, due largely to the availability of seasonal unskilled work in agricultural enterprises (such as fruit picking, seedling propagation, weed control/chipping in crops, machinery operation, and many others). If able to secure seasonal work and part-time employment while studying at university or TAFE (if the course time requirements permit), earning the required amount of income has even been possible without a "gap" year and deferring studies.

Although the Youth Allowance is only a small amount in relation to the substantial total costs of tertiary education, it is beneficial. However, raising the income threshold for Youth Allowance and Abstudy to \$400 before penalties, as proposed by the Federal Budget, would be beneficial in covering education costs; introduction before 2011 would be wise, to encourage students' independence and self-sufficiency even more.

However, we totally disagree with the **proposed Government changes** to eligibility for Youth Allowance, as announced. We believe that the requirement for proof of independence by working 30hours/week over 18 months has not been well enough considered, particularly as universities currently do not defer for more than two years, longer-term jobs are less available since the economic downturn, and also since a period of two years out of the education system is likely to disengage a potential student completely, and encourage them to remain in the workforce in an unskilled position. Implementation of such a condition could do a great deal of harm and make tertiary education for potential rural and regional students far too expensive and unobtainable. In fact we believe it would be "throwing the baby out with the bath water", when the stated intention of the Bradley Review (2008) is to increase the participation of rural and remote students in tertiary education. It would no doubt do the opposite.

**d. the short- and long-term impact of current and proposed government policies on regional university and TAFE college enrolments;**

Although we are not adequately qualified to comment in any detail on this aspect, we would suggest that in both short- and long-term the enrolments of rural and remote students and students from smaller regional centres would be less likely to enrol in university study, whether at a regional or metropolitan university, where it necessitates moving away from home and there is the anticipated difficulty in qualifying for the Youth Allowance under the new independence criteria proposed. Regional TAFE college enrolments could see an increase, depending on the availability of associated employment.

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

As noted above, the current government measures of assistance for students who are required to leave home for **secondary study** are inadequate, particularly in the area of strict eligibility criteria for the AIC being based on distances. These should be reviewed, and the context of the local school meeting the needs of the individual student given greater emphasis.

The current government assistance for **tertiary students** is also inadequate, but the proposed changes to eligibility through independent status would make the Youth Allowance unobtainable for many rural and regional students wishing to further their education away from home.

**f. the educational needs of rural and regional students;**

As noted above, if an equitable situation existed, rural and regional students would be able to access quality education opportunities at a secondary and tertiary level, irrespective of their address. At the moment, they are disadvantaged by having to move away from their home at considerable financial cost to access these education opportunities.

Even the Bradley Review (2008, p.xi) acknowledges ".....groups currently under-represented within the system, that is, those disadvantaged by the circumstances of their birth: Indigenous people, people with low socio-economic status, and those from regional and remote areas."

**References**

Bradley, Emeritus Prof. D (2008), "Review of Australian Higher Education Report"

Executive Summary, DEEWR