

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

Our family lives in the greater Bunbury region, in the South West of Western Australia, approximately 200km south of Perth. Our daughter completed secondary school in 2008 and was successful in attaining acceptance into her chosen tertiary course of pre primary teaching. While there is a University in Bunbury, her chosen course unfortunately is only run at Universities in Perth, requiring her to relocate to Perth to complete her studies. To ease the burden on her parents of having to support her in the form of providing her some place to live while studying in Perth, she elected to carry out a 'gap year' as many of her school mates have done. This, I thought displayed a very mature and responsible attitude, as we will struggle to afford both our own home mortgage, living expenses as well as rental board for our daughter in Perth.

There are two issues I would like to raise in relation to this inquiry, first is the issue of shifting the goal post mid game, so to speak. Our daughter, as have many of her school mates, chosen to take on the gap year to help out her parents in good faith, after carefully assessing the rules. I believe changing the criteria mid stream will result in disillusioned youth, who will lose faith in our government. These are our future voters and leaders. They are at a very impressionable age and quite likely to just decide it is all too hard, why should they bother because the rules are just likely to be changed again. Our daughter has worked hard at finding work, but in these difficult economic times, this has not been straight forward. The bulk of work available in the greater Bunbury region for young people seems to be in the form of casual work and quite commonly in the hospitality area. This work, by nature is a bit irregular so achieving a minimum of 30 hours each week is difficult, some weeks she may work 30 plus hours, another week if it is wet, she may only work 20 hours or less. To try and overcome this she has taken on two casual jobs. Work during the summer period is usually more reliable and thus allows her to catch up on her income to hopefully lift it into the minimum income for the 18 month period and she is on track to achieve this. However, if the minimum income stream is removed and she has to work 30 hours a week for the full 18 months then she has already failed. I just don't believe this sends a good message to our youth. We should be doing everything we can to encourage them to step up and become sensible, responsible adults. We teach them to set targets and work towards them. If we then change the rules mid stream they may decide it's all just a crock. I believe as a bare minimum, your government should allow current 'gap year' students to continue to operate under the rules and regulations they engaged in good faith. If you so feel the need to change the rules for future students, then they will at least know where they stand from the start.

The second issue I would like to raise is in relation to requesting that you consider the need of families living outside of the major metropolitan regions. In most circumstance, country youth have no options but to relocate to the major metropolitan regions for their tertiary education and the burden of financing this fall onto the shoulders of their families. The cost of having a student live away from home is quite considerable, I've been told to expect to have to find an extra \$15,000 to \$20,000 per child. In our case, we hope to have a second child progress to tertiary education as well during the time our daughter is still attending, thus increasing the cost further. Our metropolitan counterparts, on the other and can have their children remain at

home while attending tertiary education. This is a great disincentive for people considering work opportunities outside of the main metropolitan regions. Now, we chose to live in Bunbury for both work opportunities and lifestyle, we are not expecting easy handouts from the Government, though some increased tax breaks would be welcome for country families with tertiary students, to provide us and our children with equal opportunities to city families, without increased financial burdens. We thought the current 'gap year' options provided a reasonable opportunities for us to get our children to university without crippling the family budget. I would like your government to consider carefully the new option they are considering. A full 18 months of employment at a minimum of 30 hours a week. If our Children elect to take on a gap year so as to qualify for the independent allowance, they will have to find employment essentially from the day they complete year 12 and continue with this employment right up until they start to attend University lectures. This allows for no time to find a job, or any short period time without a job, or for that matter, time to actually relocate to Perth. A task that I believe most will find very difficult and may well discourage them from even trying. Essentially, you are now requiring them to take two years off before going to University, this may just prove a little too long for many students and for that matter, many Universities do not offer a two year gap period, therefore the student would have to give up their placement and try again later, if they bother. I don't believe this is in the best interests of our country in the long term.

It is hard enough on our country youth that they have to relocate away from their family unit, and create new support networks, in order to carry out their tertiary studies. Why burden them with the extra pressure of feeling that they are creating extra stress on their family unit back home as well, because of the extra financial pressure of them attending University? I also suspect that this decision will make a lot of families reconsider their living situations and may choose to relocate back to the major metropolitan regions. It is already difficult to maintain strong country communities, without this extra burden.

Please consider our country youth and families carefully when reviewing the opportunities for rural and regional access to secondary and tertiary education.

Yours truly,

Karen McCarthy and Alec McCarthy
Also on behalf of Felicia and Taran McCarthy