

August 7th , 2009

To the Secretariat
The Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee

Re: Inquiry into Rural and Regional Access to Secondary and Tertiary Education Opportunities.

On Thursday August 6th, Bright P12 College held a Forum to discuss the proposed changes to Youth Allowance and how these changes will impact on students in the Bright area. Bright is small regional town, positioned in the Alpine Shire around 400 kilometres from Melbourne.

The Forum was well attended with around 50 parents, teachers and students. This submission is a summary of discussion and outcomes.

There were feelings of desperation and uncertainty expressed by students and their parents – especially those students present who had deferred their studies in 2009 for the 2010 University intake. The proposed changes to Youth Allowance for these students seemed unclear. There was a feeling that the government was not providing equitable access to education opportunities to students from rural and regional communities attending metropolitan institutions. The financial impact on rural and regional students was discussed. It was felt that cost is the main reason fewer regional students make it to university.

It would seem that there are more country students, either, do not go to university, or defer for a year, compared with city based students. A report issued by Department of Education and Early Childhood Development on Bright p-12 College - “On Track” – listed the reasons for Year 12 students not studying. Over 30% of Year 12 students from Bright College in 2008 deferred their studies – to take a “gap” year, to qualify for Youth Allowance and finance their move from home to university (the majority to Melbourne or Albury). Students who had made a decision to defer and had planned to start university in 2010 – working on the basis of becoming “independent” by May of 2010. They now find the criteria has changed and they may need another year to become eligible for Youth Allowance – a two year break from studies was felt to be too long. Those students who have qualified under the present Youth Allowance guidelines felt they should still qualify for 2010. It was felt the changes should be retrospective.

The government need to address all regional students directly and explain the changes and reassure these students that Regional Students will not be disadvantaged by the changes to Youth Allowance. High cost of university studies, particularly the cost of living away from home seems to be responsible for the high university deferment rate – this is a trend we found in Bright and common in other rural and regional areas.

The Australian Government (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations) - new Youth Allowance guidelines – states: “Fairer Support for more students. Youth Allowance is changing to create a fairer system for more students and to ensure increased support for those who need it most. The changes particularly benefit students who have to move away from home to study, rural and regional students.....” We welcome the government’s statement but need convincing! We look forward to a “Fairer Support for ALL students” not “more students”. At face value, the changes to Youth Allowance do not seem fair and equitable for rural students.

Prepared by Lucie Lolicato(President) on behalf of the Bright P12 College Council.