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To whom it may concern,

Parents Victoria has been representing parents in Government Schools since 1925. We also provide information and support to parents and parents groups in both primary and secondary schools. Many of our members come from rural and regional Victoria hence we are very pleased to be able to forward a submission to provide comment to the current inquiry into *Rural and Regional Access to Secondary and Tertiary Education Opportunities*.

Our submission will comprise comments drawn from Parents Victoria policy and feedback we have received from parents and we will also attach some anecdotal evidence which has been forward to Parents Victoria in response to our request for our members thoughts on this issue.

a) the financial impact on rural and regional students who are attending metropolitan secondary schools, universities or TAFE:

The financial impact for rural and regional students who move to capital cities to study is huge. Some students may have family who will take them in but most will need to find accommodation. Parents Victoria believes that alternative low-cost accommodation should be provided by the government for country students studying in city or regional centres.

Even if a student is eligible for the full rate of youth allowance, currently \$371.40 per fortnight and the maximum rental assistance of \$111.20 it is a real struggle to pay rent, food, books, phone etc. In fact it is virtually impossible to rely on Youth Allowance to cover all the costs. Part-time work is not easy to find particularly for students with a heavy course load. When my eldest daughter was at university her class was discouraged from seeking part-time work due to the work load

b) the education alternatives for rural and regional students wanting to study in regional areas:

It is ideal for regional students if they are able to study their chosen course in their home town. They can live at home and don't have to make many of the adjustments students must make when they have to relocate to attend tertiary courses. However many students will still need to move away from home to access courses. Costs are slightly cheaper in regional areas but accommodation may even be more difficult to find. The range of courses and subjects is limited and cuts to budgets have resulted in the employment of many sessional lecturers meaning access to lecturers for assistance outside class time is limited.

There are many courses offered at regional unversities that are the equal to any offered in capital cities but others are poor relatives. The difference in the Enter scores required to gain a place in the same course in a metro versus a regional university can vary by up to 40 points. This suggests that regional students are being offered a second class university experience.

A positive for local students is that they often receive assistance to gain a place at a regional university in the form of extra points to boost their Enter score.

c) the implications of current and proposed government measures on prospective students living in rural and regional areas:

For some students changes to Youth Allowance and the Parental Means Test will mean that they now will be eligible to receive Youth Allowance in 2010. Students who completed VCE in 2008 and deferred their studies until 2010 to gain independent status have been severely penalised by the changes. Most courses will only allow students to defer for one year and these students will have to choose either to commence their course uncertain of how they will fund their education or risk losing their place by seeking to defer for an additional year. Many parents do plan for their children's further education e.g Australian Scholarship Group plans but again students can only defer one year before taking up tertiary studies or risk losing their benefits.

For some students a year (or two) off can be advantageous and they return to their studies fresh and enthusiastic, for others a break is destructive and they find it very hard to recommence studies and may drop out early into their course. This is a huge concern for students who may now have to take a break of two years to gain independent status to receive Youth Allowance.

If the changes to the length of time a student must work to gain independent status stand, the Federal Government must make arrangements with universities for students to defer for two years so that they do not lose their place.

d) the short and long term impact of current and proposed government policies on regional university and TAFE college enrolments:

It is difficult to predict the impact on regional universities and TAFE colleges. The rising costs of TAFE courses especially since payments need to be made upfront unlike university where students can pay for the cost of their course once they commence employment under the HELP scheme, has the potential to make these courses out of reach for many students.

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

My daughter is not eligible for Youth Allowance. She pays \$230 per fortnight rent and fortunately lives within walking distance of the university campus she attends. If she was on Youth Allowance that would leave her only \$125 per week for food, books, transport, personal needs etc. If she was to live in a residential college the cost would be greater than the Youth Allowance rate per fortnight and payments would be required in advance. Worrying about money is just one concern for students living away from home for the first time. They need to make new friends, learn their way about and for many develop the skills to become independent learners in the tertiary environment.

f) the educational needs of rural and regional students:

Parents Victoria believes that State and Federal Governments should recognise the special features of education in rural Australia and initiate and support programs that encourage and enhance quality education whilst addressing disadvantage caused by location and distance.

In many ways the educational needs of rural and regional students are just the same as metro students. At secondary college they need to be able to study the subjects they need to progress to the tertiary course of their choice or to move into paid employment. However this can be challenging in the country where small class numbers and availability of specialist teachers limit the number and variety of subjects that can be offered. Most often there is no choice of school as there is only one in the district. Students also often have to travel long distances to school which can be very tiring. Often there are specific industries located in rural and regional areas and it would be prudent to offer courses in areas that are in demand locally so that graduates can find work in their local environment.

g) the impact of government measures and proposals on rural and regional communities; and

Again the impact of current changes can only be guessed at. Families may chose to move to the city so that their children have better access to educational opportunities. Students who are unable to afford to move to either a regional centre or the metropolitan area will seek employment locally and

potentially take the jobs of others who may not be interested or skilled in tertiary education or join the ranks of the unemployed. Already we have seen cuts to some courses in regional universities

h) other related matters

Many students are not supported by their parents to access tertiary education. This may be because they don't see the value or they don't have the financial means to assist their son or daughter. The Federal government must provide equity and ensure that access to tertiary education is available to all eligible students. Some students are currently finding it just too hard to attend university, not only do they have to worry about the present, they know that once they complete their degree they will still have a heavy HELP debt hanging over their head.

Further anecdotal evidence provided by members of Parents Victoria is attached and forms part of our submission.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide our feedback on this issue which is vitally important to students from rural and regional areas

Elaine Crowle
Immediate Past President on behalf of Parents Victoria