

5/8/2009

Dear Sir/Madam:

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

We write to express our considerable consternation over proposed changes to the Youth Allowance and its impact on the opportunity our four children will have to access tertiary education as well as the finances required to support them. The Youth Allowance is one of the few Government initiatives that actually benefits rural students. We, the undersigned, are both the first of our respective families across the generations to receive a Tertiary Education, being beneficiaries under the free Tertiary Education system that was still in place in the 1980s and as such are committed to improvement through education.

In our profession as teachers we have lived in large cities (Geelong and Ballarat) and for the past 20 years in small rural communities in Wycheproof in the Mallee and now Camperdown in the Western District. We have witnessed at first hand the commitment of country people to the education of their children and the value they place upon educational opportunities.

To access Tertiary Education our own four children have already, or will, be required to leave the family home. The cost to establish them all away from home is prohibitive without the assistance of the Youth Allowance.

Changes to the amount required to be earned for Youth Allowance eligibility are simply unattainable in the present financial climate, particularly in rural Victoria. In better times in 2006 our eldest child Adriana still had to leave our hometown to obtain employment during her gap year, fortunately my brother was prepared to take her in to allow her to meet the then required targets. This was an excellent learning opportunity for her - mopping floors in a hotel and having patrons throw up on her helped steel her resolve to work hard and achieve her dream. The taxes she paid during this period she benefitted from in the form of the Youth Allowance in subsequent years.

Our second child Joshua was also prepared to take a gap year so that he too could go to university. Fortunately he received a rural bonded scholarship to study medicine. He values rural life and is happy to return to practise medicine in the country for the 6 years required of his scholarship.

Our third child Hugh is presently finishing Year 12, he too understands the importance of working to help provide his way through university. He is worried about his employment prospects in a gap year as he has watched the local job market dry up! Even in his present part time job he finds that as an 18 year old he is now being looked over for shifts in favour of younger employees - he is now down to one shift a week which does not auger well for next year - he too may have to leave home to earn the money required to qualify for Youth Allowance.

Our youngest child Connor, God bless him, has taken a keen interest in discussions about these changes. He was initially keen to study radiography in Melbourne, but given the financial burden this would place on his family he has already began talking about alternative courses at the University of Ballarat where he could stay with extended family to save costs. Changes to the Youth Allowance are impacting on Connor's dreams for the future – surely this was not the intention of these changes.

For the first time in our lives we voted Labour at the last election believing that Australia needed leadership for all Australians. There was no mention in the Education Policy launches that changes to the Youth Allowance were proposed! We believe that this new policy was made in haste without considering the needs of working families in particular working, rural families.

We believe that taking a gap year provides a valuable lesson in life for our children. They are not in the position to go swanning off to Europe and have their eligibility for Youth Allowance produced through creative accountancy. Our children work their butts off! We believe that in becoming eligible for Youth Allowance they are taught the importance of working hard to achieve their life goals, to understand the dignity of all workers (an honest day's work for an honest day's pay) and that they get to meet a greater range of Australians and come to appreciate those people who struggle from week to week.

Rural students can't stay at home and commute to University as their city colleagues can. It is simply not a level playing field! Changes to the Youth Allowance discriminate against Rural Students, they are not equitable and they impact significantly on family life.

Yours sincerely

Michael & Jo-Anne Saunders