

Submission for Senate Inquiry

**'Rural and Regional Access to Secondary and Tertiary
Education Opportunities'**

**Rural Health In the Northern Outback
School of Medicine and Dentistry
James Cook University**

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Executive Summary

Aim

The purpose of this research was to investigate access to tertiary education opportunities of medical, allied health and nursing students from James Cook University (JCU), especially those with rural and remote backgrounds. Of particular interest are the implications of current and proposed government policies on students, their families, university enrolment, rural and remote communities and the health services in regional Australia.

Background

In May 2009, the Australian Government announced changes to eligibility criteria for students to receive independent Youth Allowance support through Centrelink. Rural Health In Northern Outback (RHINO), James Cook University's rural health student club is concerned about the potential impact of these changes on students of rural origin, regional universities and the future regional health workforce. At JCU the majority of students studying health degrees are from a rural or remote background. Therefore, the majority of students are required to move away from home and find the financial means to support themselves.

RHINO supports and advocates for university students studying health degrees who are interested in rural and remote health (RHINO: Rural Health In Northern Outback, 2005). This study explores the impact that proposed changes to Youth Allowance may have on students' intentions to study health degrees and their commitment to returning to rural and remote locations to practice once qualified.

Methodology and Demographics

The findings of this report are based on data collected from 232 medical, allied health and nursing students at JCU. Approximately 1500 students studying medicine, dentistry, physiotherapy, occupational therapy, speech pathology, pharmacy, nursing and sports and exercise science were invited to participate in a 10 minute online survey hosted by Survey Monkey. Of the respondents, 76.6% (n=177) were female and over 85% were aged between 18 and 22 years. In addition, 58% of students were in first or second year of their degree. Nearly 11% of students were from an urban area, 46% from a regional area, 30% from a rural area and 11% from a remote location (as defined by their postcode for secondary school). Furthermore, 96% of students reported that they intended to pursue work in a regional, rural or remote community in the future.

Findings

JCU medical, allied health and nursing student respondents reported that their **greatest barriers** to accessing tertiary education opportunities were:

- Financial burden, including the cost of relocation and supporting oneself whilst studying;

- Physical distance of university from family home. The prospect of leaving a familiar environment and established support networks, such as family and friends; and
- Achieving a university entrance mark equal or beyond that required to enrol in their chosen degree as well as fulfilling other entrance requirements such as interviews and written applications.

Students reported that the **greatest enablers** in gaining access to tertiary education were:

- A supportive family (financially and emotionally);
- Appropriate financial support through current Centrelink provisions (including Youth Allowance and Austudy) and Commonwealth, Queensland Government and other scholarships; and
- Personal motivation and a university entrance mark equal or beyond that required to enrol in their chosen degree.

The **financial cost** of attending university was significant for many students and their families. On average, participants reported spending \$10,569 per year of study. In addition to this amount, approximately 70% of those students reported being supported by family who contributed an average of \$6,450 per year. Sixty-five percent (n=151) of JCU health students who responded reported undertaking **work** whilst studying. On average, students worked 14.25 hours per week in addition to their full-time university workloads.

Over 50% (n=120) of respondents reported having received **Youth Allowance** at some period during their degree to support their tertiary education. More than 70% of these students claimed Youth Allowance benefits at the **independent rate** (n=83). Students were also financially supported by gaining employment (68%), parents/guardians (61%) and their own savings (53%). Nearly 60% (n=49) of respondents who received Youth Allowance reported that they had taken a **gap year** in order to become eligible for benefits. Nearly 40% (n=84) of students reported that they had been supported financially through a **scholarship** for some or all of their degree. Thirty percent of these scholarships were **bonded** scholarships.

The data identified that proposed Youth Allowance changes may have an impact on **students and their families, university enrolments, rural and remote communities and the Australian health care workforce**. There was a mixed response about how the changes may affect the abovementioned stakeholders.

The data indicated that nearly 70% of student respondents were required to **move away from their family home** in order to pursue tertiary education opportunities. The majority (79%) reported that this was a negative experience due to the **burden of cost** and the **mental and emotional stress** of moving away from social support networks and family. Regional universities, such as JCU, may be more accessible for many students living in rural and remote Australia; however, the majority of students have to relocate to access tertiary education opportunities.

Recommendations

These data support consideration of the following recommendations:

1. All students from rural and remote Australia who have to relocate for tertiary study should be automatically eligible for the independent rate of Youth Allowance.
2. The cost of relocation for rural and remote students should be supported through an increase in the proposed relocation scholarship and/or a subsidy for accommodation costs.
3. Student income support should be indexed to reflect current cost of living.
4. The rise of the Personal Income Threshold from \$236 to \$400 per fortnight should be brought forward to July 1, 2010.
5. Financial incentives for health students undertaking clinical placement in rural and remote sites should be extended, particularly for allied health and nursing students.
6. Regional universities that provide local access to comprehensive tertiary education should be better supported through Commonwealth funding.
7. The deficiencies in public transport in regional centres and between regional centres and rural/remote areas should be addressed.
8. The range of measures for support of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students should be expanded.
9. The number of places reserved for rural and remote students in tertiary education facilities should be increased.

Addition: RHINO supports the new transitional arrangements announced on 26 August 2009 that will allow 2009 'gap year' students and those already at university, the opportunity to meet the existing workforce participation criterion for independence by 30 June 2010 if they have to move away from home to commence university.

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Introduction

In Australia, approximately one-third of the population resides outside major cities, in regional, rural and remote areas.¹ People living in rural and remote regions of Australia have consistently poorer health outcomes when compared with their urban counterparts.^{1,2} Numerous factors contribute to these health inequities including limited access to health care facilities, distance to regional health care services, socioeconomic status and lifestyle.^{3,4} Current national debate about Australia's health workforce includes a focus on the supply of health workers in rural and remote areas. Access to services is at least partially affected by the number of available health workers per population.^{3,4} Recent studies have shown that medical, allied health and nursing students from rural and remote Australia are more likely to return to rural and remote Australia than their urban colleagues.^{5,6}

In order to create a sustainable rural and remote health workforce, we must encourage and support students of rural and remote origin to pursue a tertiary education. Ideally, this means supporting students financially and socially both during and after completing their degree. In addition, high-quality secondary schooling opportunities for rural and remote students need to be affordable and accessible for families. Current and proposed changes to Commonwealth support for rural and remote health students may be detrimental to redressing the health status of rural and remote Australians.

Research Method

The findings of this report are based on data collected from medical, allied health and nursing students at JCU. A focus group was conducted with RHINO members to provide information that would guide the design of an online survey. The six focus group participants were self-selected from the RHINO executive team. The focus group was led by an experienced researcher and ran for one hour. The discussion was audio taped with the informed consent of participants.

Findings from the focus group guided the design of the online survey. The online survey consisted of 38 qualitative and quantitative questions relating to:

- Participant demographics;
- Barriers and enablers to accessing tertiary education opportunities;
- Financial costs and support whilst completing tertiary education (including Centrelink);
- Impact of proposed changes on students, their families, university enrolment, rural and remote communities and the Australian health care workforce;
- Impact of relocating from rural and remote areas to attend university; and
- Recommendations.

A link to an online questionnaire (hosted by Survey Monkey) was emailed to all RHINO members, medicine, dentistry, speech pathology, occupational therapy, nursing, pharmacy, exercise and sports science and physiotherapy students. Over 1500 students were emailed the survey link over a two week period. Students were invited to complete

the 10-minute online survey at their discretion. This survey gathered student demographics, financial support information and impact of proposed Youth Allowance changes. Survey responses were collected through Survey Monkey allowing participants to remain completely anonymous.

Qualitative data collected was coded independently by the two principal investigators, assisted by Nvivo computer software. Quantitative data from the online survey was analysed using SPSS software. Ethics approval was granted by the JCU Human Research Ethics Committee (H3429).

Respondent Demographics

The survey response rate was approximately 15% (n=232). Of the respondents, 76.6% (n=177) were female. The age and gender distribution of respondents can be seen below in Figure 1.

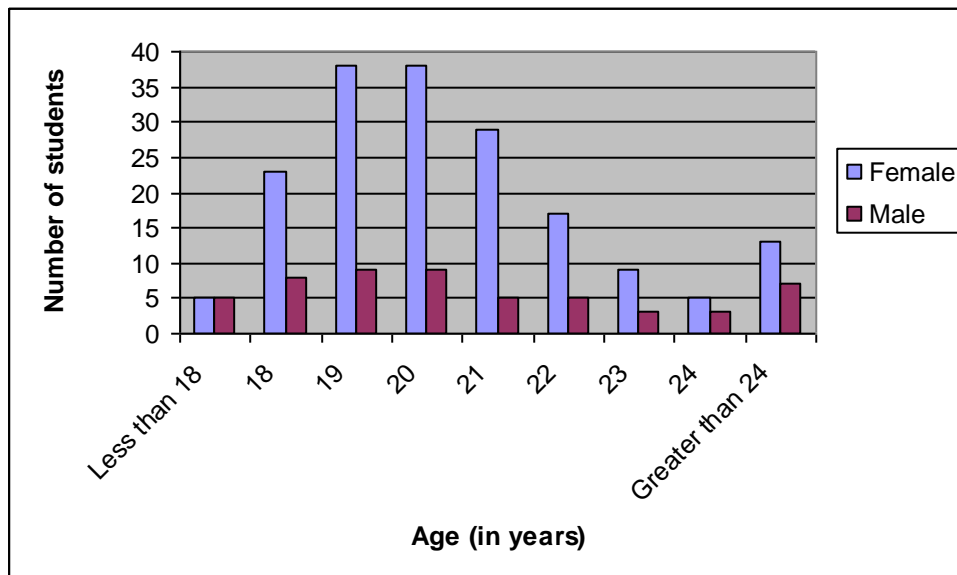


Figure 1: Age gender distribution of respondents

In addition, 58% of students were in first or second year of their degree. Thirty-five percent were in their third and fourth years and only 7% were in the fifth or sixth year of their degree. At JCU, only medicine is a six year degree. The rest are three or four year full-time degrees. Students from a variety of disciplines participated in the survey. Figure 2 below shows the breakdown of the disciplines.

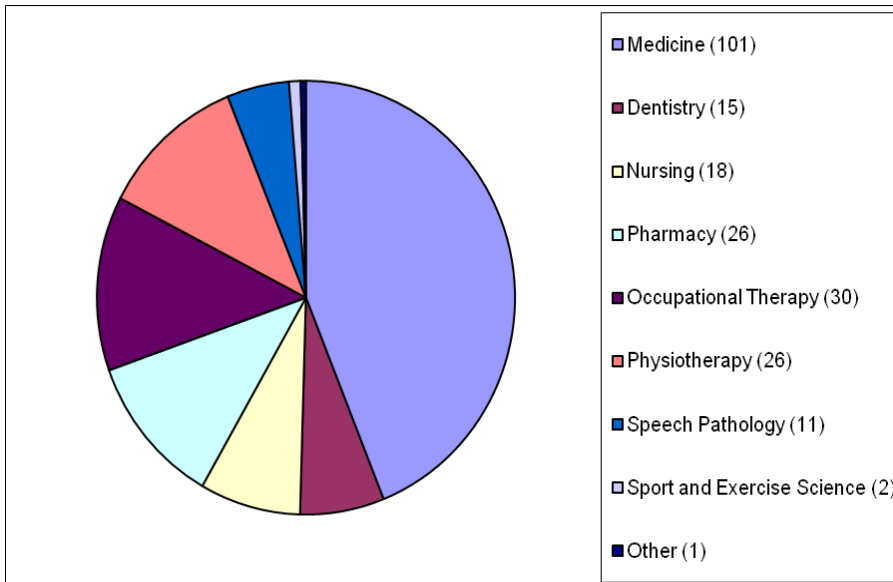


Figure 2: Disciplines of respondents

Students were asked to nominate the postcode of where they spent the majority of their primary and secondary school years. From this information, their Rural, Remote and Metropolitan Area (RRMA) classification could be calculated (Figure 3). Eight percent of students identified as being from an urban area (RRMA 1) in primary school, 37% from a regional area (RRMAs 2 and 3), 31% from a rural area (RRMAs 4 and 5) and 16.5% from a remote area (RRMAs 6 and 7). In high school, 10.5% of students were from an urban area, 46% from a regional area, 30% from a rural area and 11% from a remote location. The change in urban/regional RRMAs and remote RRMAs can be attributed to the number of rural and remote students who leave home in order to attend boarding school. Furthermore, 96% of students reported that they intended to pursue work in a regional, rural or remote community in the future.

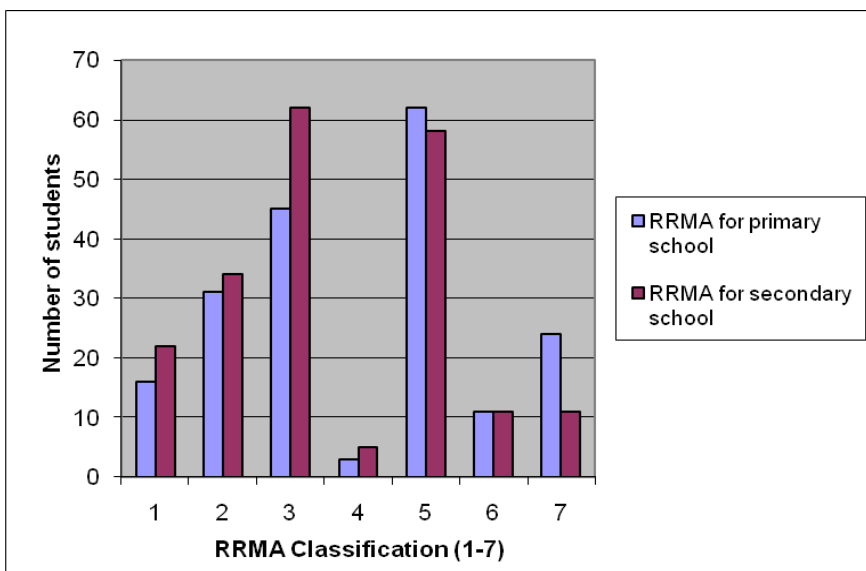


Figure 3: RRMA classification of majority of primary and secondary school years.

The Impact of Current Government Measures on Equitable Student Access to Tertiary Education Opportunities

Factors that enable regional, rural and remote student access to tertiary education opportunities

Student respondents reported that their greatest barriers to attending JCU were:

- Financial burden, including the cost of relocation and supporting oneself whilst studying;
- Physical distance of university from family home. The prospect of leaving a familiar environment and established support networks, such as family and friends; and
- Achieving a university entrance mark equal or beyond that required to enrol in their chosen degree as well as fulfilling other entrance requirements such as interviews and written applications.

Financial Burden

On average, student respondents paid \$10,569 per year of study. The smallest estimate was \$300 and the largest estimate was \$50,000 per year. In addition to this amount, approximately 70% of those students are supported by family who pay an average of \$6,450 per year towards their child's education. Financial support from family ranged from none at all to \$120,000 per year.

Essential costs such as rent, food and transport accounted for the majority of student's reported expenses. Students also reported expenses which they considered essential to keeping them mentally and physically healthy whilst at university. These costs are outlined in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Costs of associated with tertiary education.

Cost	Details
Accommodation	College/on-campus, private rent/board, mortgage
Food	Groceries, food on-campus
Travel	Car (registration, insurance, petrol, service, tyres, repayments, parking permits), Travel home (flights, petrol), bicycle (purchase, maintenance)
Textbooks and stationary	Textbooks, course materials, pens, paper, labcoat, safety glasses, medical/professional equipment (eg. Stethoscope, measuring tapes).
Clinical/placement requirements	Travel, accommodation, food, immunisations, uniforms and appropriate footwear, Senior first aid course
Medical	Medications, doctor/other health care, health insurance, immunisations, first aid kit, massage
Setting up a house	Furniture, white goods, electrical items, bond, household maintenance
Utilities	Phone (landline and mobile), internet, electricity, water, gas
Technology	Computer (PC or laptop), printer/scanner, printer/computer services, printing/photocopying, printer cartridges
University and professional memberships	Professional association memberships and attendance at conferences/seminars, university club/student association membership, university trips
Sports and recreation	Sports club membership, gym membership, sports equipment
Social events	Food, beverages, entertainment, gifts

For the majority of respondents (87%), course fees were not included in their cost estimate due to utilisation of Higher Education Loan Programme (HELP). Only 13% of respondents reported their estimate included course fees.

To financially support themselves whilst at university, 65% (n=151) of respondents worked whilst studying. On average, students worked 14.25 hours per week in addition to their full-time university workloads. The number of hours worked ranged from 2 hours

per week to 40 hours per week. Medical, allied health and nursing students at JCU usually have considerable face-to-face teaching time which limits the time that students are able to spend working and studying. Further, many of the health courses include a number of mandatory clinical placements some distance from campus which students indicated added extra financial expenses and stress. Recent evidence suggests that nursing students in particular are disadvantaged financially by university placement requirements.⁷

Factors that enable regional, rural and remote student access to tertiary education opportunities

Survey participants reported that their greatest enablers in gaining access to tertiary education were:

- A supportive family (financially and emotionally);
- Appropriate financial support through current Centrelink provisions (including Youth Allowance and Austudy) and Commonwealth, Queensland Government and other scholarships; and
- Personal motivation and a university entrance mark equal or beyond that required to enrol in their chosen degree.

Financial Support

Over 50% (n=120) of respondents reported having received Youth Allowance or other Centrelink benefits at some period during their degree to support their tertiary education. More than 70% of these students claimed Youth Allowance benefits at the independent rate (n=83). Students were also financially supported by means outlined in Table 2.

Table 2: Respondents' financial support avenues whilst at JCU (n=228).

Financial Support	Number	Percentage
<i>Gaining employment</i>	154	67.5%
<i>Parents/guardians</i>	139	61%
<i>Centrelink</i>	120	52.6%
<i>Savings</i>	120	52.6%
<i>Non-bonded scholarship</i>	59	25.9%
<i>Bonded scholarship</i>	25	11%

Nearly 60% (n=49) of respondents who had accessed Youth Allowance reported that they had taken a gap year in order to become eligible for benefits. The most common reason (60%) for taking a gap year was to become financially independent of their parents and to qualify for the independent Youth Allowance rate. Students also reported that they took a gap year to gain life experience (27%). Approximately 40% of students who claimed independent Youth Allowance did not take a gap year, which implies that some students may have qualified by working as well as attending university for the first 18 months of university. Others may have been living in marriage-like relationships for at least 12 months or using other avenues of qualifying for independent Youth Allowance.

Nearly 40% (n=84) of students reported that they had been supported financially through a scholarship for some or all of their degree. Table 3 outlines the non-bonded and bonded scholarships that students received.

Table 3: Non-bonded and bonded scholarships received by respondents.

Non-bonded Scholarships	Bonded Scholarships
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commonwealth Accommodation/Education Costs Scholarship • Rural Australia Medical/Allied Health Undergraduate Scholarship • John Flynn Placement Program • Pharmacy Guild of Australia Rural and Remote scholarship • Australian Medical Association Queensland • Allied Health Clinical Placement Subsidy Scheme • Queensland Health Clinical Placement Subsidy Scheme 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Medical Rural Bonded Scholarship • Queensland Health Rural Scholarship Scheme

Approximately 40% of students reported inequity in scholarship distribution between medicine, allied health and nursing disciplines. Some students reported that medical students were offered a greater number of scholarships of greater financial value than their allied health and nursing counterparts. Lack of financial support has been reported as a disincentive to undertake rural clinical placements especially for allied health and nursing students.⁷ Students also mentioned that in order to become eligible for many scholarships, they had to be already receiving Youth Allowance.

Personal Motivation and University Entrance Score

Level of personal motivation and university entrance score was both an enabler and barrier for respondents. Over 30% of students reported that personal motivation and a university entrance mark equal or beyond that required to study their chosen degree enabled them to access tertiary education. Conversely, 21% of students reported that achieving the required university entrance score required for their degree was a barrier in getting to university.

Evidence suggests that students of rural and remote backgrounds are disadvantaged with respect to achieving university entrance scores equal to or above their urban counterparts.⁸ Many universities have recognised this inequity and have created special schemes where places are reserved for rural and remote students or these students are awarded extra points to help overcome disadvantage.^{9,10} Similar schemes have been used in order to address inequity faced by Indigenous students, assisting more Indigenous Australians to access tertiary education.

The Impact of Proposed Government Measure on Equitable Student Access to Tertiary Education Opportunities

Survey respondents reported mixed responses to the proposed Youth Allowance changes. Over 30% of students were unsure of how the proposed changes may impact on themselves and their families. Student responses focused on the impact of the proposed changes on:

- Students and their families;
- University enrolment;
- Regional, rural and remote communities; and
- The Australian healthcare workforce.

Students and their families

One-quarter of students believed that they would be affected by the proposed changes to Youth Allowance. Of interest were the 10 respondents who reported that they would be disadvantaged by the proposed changes because they had been working part-time whilst studying full-time in 2009 in order to qualify for independent Youth Allowance in 2010. Students in similar circumstances have been overlooked in the current debate because they are not taking a gap year but still require independent Youth Allowance benefits in 2010 to support their tertiary studies.

As one student reported:

“I was going to qualify for independence [independent Youth Allowance rate] sometime next year, when I earned \$18,000 in 18 months. The changes mean that I will not be independent and will still have to rely on my parents for financial support. As I am studying medicine, I will be a student for a long time, and this is a big financial burden on my parents.”

Table 4: Impact of Youth Allowance changes on students

Impact	Number	Percentage
Will not be affected	86	41.1%
Will be affected	52	24.9%
May be affected	71	34%
Total	209	90%

Students who reported that they would not be affected by the proposed changes were:

- Currently already receiving Youth Allowance benefits;
- Will remain ineligible despite the changes; or
- Will graduate at the end of this year.

Of the students who reported that Youth Allowance changes would affect them, 36 reported that they would be positively affected due to:

- Increased access to financial support;
- A decreased age of independence; and

- An increase in the amount of work allowed per fortnight.

Only five students reported that they would now become eligible for dependent Youth Allowance due to the increase in the Parental Income Threshold Test from \$32,800 to \$44,165.

One-third of respondents reported that their family would be affected by the proposed changes (see Table 5). There was a mixed response as to whether this impact would be positive or negative. Students who felt that their family would be negatively affected reported that they were:

- Concerned about decrease in payment;
- Working in 2009 towards independence but no longer able to apply;
- Independence requires longer gap year which would impact on younger siblings;
or
- Their family would have to continue to financially support them because they remain ineligible.

Table 5: Impact of Youth Allowance changes on families

Impact	Number	Percentage
Will not be affected	90	43.5%
Will be affected	69	33.3%
May be affected	48	23.2%
Total	207	89.2%

Students who believed their family would be negatively impacted were concerned that an increased time required to work to become eligible for independent Youth Allowance might deter their younger siblings from pursuing a tertiary education. One student wrote:

“...my sister, who would have done a gap year, will now not qualify for Youth Allowance; as a result the burden of paying for her uni (as she cannot live at home while she studies) will fall heavily on her and my parents. She will likely have to work during uni and have less time to focus on her studies.”

A student reported that their family would be positively affected:

“...my parents will soon be changing jobs... this will push them over the lowest threshold of earnings and mean that such a small change will reduce my Centrelink payments. If the government increased the threshold for parental income this would help significantly.”

University Enrolment

Nearly two-thirds (n=111/170) of participants believed that proposed Youth Allowance changes would have a negative impact on student enrolment at tertiary education institutions. Respondents reported that fewer students would be able to attend university because of the two year timeframe and 30 hours per week criteria for the independent Youth Allowance rate. They also reported that most students would not be eligible for the dependent rate. Fifteen percent of students reported that regional, rural and remote students and students from low-income families would be most disadvantaged by the

proposed changes because they would be required to move away from their home in order to pursue 30 hours per week of employment and therefore qualify for the independent Youth Allowance rate.

As one student wrote;

“...the ‘earn, then learn’ concept was a great one to help people from the bush get to uni.”

Furthermore, over one-third of students reported that the proposed changes could potentially impact on the demographics of the university student body. Students perceived that university enrolments may develop a bias towards those who could afford to attend university rather than those who deserved to attend but could not afford it. Students also reported that the increase in gap year to two years would mean that many students may not come back to university because they may not retain their place and would prefer to keep working and maintain established social networks.

Another student commented that:

“I think that it [Youth Allowance changes] will change the diversity of those applying for university education. Extending the period of time that students need to work makes it more difficult to qualify for Centrelink. With less students qualifying for financial support, those that will be affected most will be those from lower socio-economic backgrounds and from rural areas (who have had to move away from home to study) ...therefore, I think that university will be less accessible to these groups and they will have less representation in higher education enrolment.”

Rural and Remote Communities

Recent evidence suggests that students from rural and remote Australia are more likely to return to these areas than their urban counterparts.^{5,6} Over the past 10 years, universities and medical schools in particular, have focused on attracting and retaining rural and remote students to their degrees. JCU has had great success in enrolling rural and remote health science students. These students have also been shown to be more likely to return to rural and remote areas after graduation.¹¹ This measure aims to address the health workforce shortage in rural and remote Australia.

Fifty percent of students felt that the proposed Youth Allowance changes would have a negative impact on rural and remote Australia and its future health workforce. Reported reasons for the negative impact on rural and remote communities included a decreasing number of medical staff and other healthcare professionals practicing in rural and remote Australia.

One student stated that;

“Being from a remote community myself, there are so many more costs associated with attending university than for those from metropolitan areas. I, and many other people, have the additional costs (and stress) of living away from home and

added travel expenses. It is already difficult for young people from remote areas to attend higher education, and if the government is removing some of the minimal financial assistance [access to independent Youth Allowance] that is available then these people will have to bear the financial costs themselves, meaning many will be unable to attend. I am very grateful for the [independent] Youth Allowance I receive every fortnight, as I know it helps my parents out financially with the costs of my decision to undertake university education.”

Another student reported;

“It is already hard enough living away from my rural town of 4000 people to study. Without claiming independence through Centrelink I couldn't afford to study or live away from home. Flights home cost \$800 return and there is only an off-road track to drive on 6 months of the year. You need to support remote students the most because we're the ones who are willing to work in these areas and improve healthcare to these communities.”

Students also felt that changes to the independent Youth Allowance eligibility criteria would mean students had to move away from home in order to work or that they would take the employment of locals in their home town and then leave for tertiary studies.

A student stated

“Rural and remote students have to travel to university and therefore may rely more heavily on support from Centrelink. If the young people from these communities have to look for full-time work for 18 months, they may take positions away from others in the community, or have to move away from their communities to work in metropolitan areas, which is quite a burden. I think the prospect of having to delay their university studies for at least 18 months, would put some rural students off the idea of tertiary education.”

The other 50% of students reported that the proposed Youth Allowance changes may have a beneficial effect on rural and remote communities by increasing the number of rural and remote health students and thereby the number of health and medical graduates returning to rural and remote areas. However, some students exhibited a limited understanding of the issues involved. As one student stated

“It would give them [rural and remote students] less of an excuse not to attend tertiary study.”

The Australian Health Care Workforce

There was a mixed response regarding proposed Youth Allowance changes on the Australian health care workforce. As in the previous section, 50% of students felt the proposed changes would impact negatively on the health care system, whilst 50% felt that they would be positive. Half the responses indicated that there may be a decrease in the number of health care workers, specifically in rural and remote locations and a decrease in the quality of care delivered. A number of these responses mentioned the specific phrase ‘changes will intensify the rural health workforce shortage’.

The other half of responses indicated there may be an increase in number of health care workers, especially in rural and remote areas. The mixed responses to the proposed Youth Allowance changes indicates that we cannot predict how these changes will affect students, their families, university enrolments, rural and remote communities and the Australian health care workforce. **Greater consideration of all the possible outcomes of the proposed Youth Allowance changes is vital.**

The Adequacy of Government Measures to Provide for Students who are Required to Leave Home for Tertiary Study

Nearly 70% of students (n=158) reported they were required to move away from their family home to pursue higher education goals. Of the 141 students who responded when asked what impact moving to university has had, 112 students (79%) believed it had had a negative impact compared to 29 respondents (21%) who believed it had had a positive impact.

Students who reported that moving away from home had been a negative experience quoted a number of reasons for their attitude:

- Financial burden of accommodation, food and transport was the most restrictive factor;
- Social impact of leaving family, friends and established support networks;
- Relocation and distance from home to university;
- Diminished support networks and learning to manage university study contributed to emotional stress; and
- Having to become independent and increased responsibility.

As one student reported:

“...it had quite a big psychological impact – homesickness, anxiety, panic attacks. Very big financial impact.”

The impact of travel expenses were mentioned frequently by students and severely impacted on their ability to visit family and friends and increased their level of social isolation. As students wrote:

“...it is often difficult to make a trip home during the semester as it is expensive which makes me depressed and affects my studies.”

“...social isolation from support networks, especially with ill parents has had a huge emotional impact on me, especially with the massive cost of flights to see them. I get to see them maximum twice a year.”

Many students reported they had experienced or were still experiencing social isolation in their transition from home to university. Some students described experiencing a culture shock when they relocated from their home town to the “city”. One student commented:

“I have lived in rural areas my entire life and having to move away from my family and into the city was difficult. Not only was it hard to adjust to the difference of now living in a city, I was also not able to receive the support from my family had I been living closer to home.”

Participants who believed leaving home to pursue tertiary education had impacted positively commented on making new social networks; developing important life skills; maturing and increasing independence as the main reasons for a positive transition.

Many respondents who commented on the positive aspects of leaving home to attend university also recognised the negative impacts they had experienced. One student reported:

“...it has been a positive experience but there has been great financial sacrifices for my family”

The adequacy of government support in providing rural and remote students with access to tertiary education cannot be measured simply in terms of financial assistance through Centrelink but must also take into account scholarships, funding of university programs which support rural and remote students throughout their social, emotional and cultural transition and support of policy which aims to reduce the cost of leaving home to attend university.

Conclusion

Over 70% of student respondents reported that they were required to move away from home in order to study medicine, allied health or nursing at JCU. Studies have shown that students of rural and remote backgrounds are more likely to return to serve country Australia upon graduation. However, these students and their families are burdened with greater financial cost of attending university. On average, medical, allied health and nursing student respondents reported spending \$10,569 per year of study. In addition to this amount, approximately 70% of those students reported being supported by family who contributed an average of \$6,450 per year. Sixty-five percent (n=151) of participants undertook work whilst studying. On average, students worked 14.25 hours per week in addition to their full-time university workloads. Over 50% (n=120) of respondents reported having received Youth Allowance at some period during their degree to support their tertiary education. More than 70% of these students claimed Youth Allowance benefits at the independent rate (n=83).

Currently, it appears that students accessing Youth Allowance deem it to be a major source of financial assistance and an essential enabler to participation in tertiary education. Anticipated outcomes from proposed changes include:

- Decreased tertiary education enrolments;
- Decreased rural and remote student access to tertiary education opportunities; and
- Decreased low-income student access to tertiary education opportunities.

The data identified that proposed Youth Allowance changes may specifically impact on rural and remote communities and the Australian health care workforce. Therefore it is important that government carefully considers the impact of any changes to Youth Allowance and other financial support systems on regional, rural and remote students prior to their introduction.

Recommendations

From the findings of the data collected from 232 medical, allied health and nursing students at JCU, RHINO recommends that:

- 1. All students from rural and remote Australia who have to relocate for tertiary study should be automatically eligible for the independent rate of Youth Allowance.**

Rural and remote students face extreme financial and emotional hardships in their endeavour to access and complete tertiary education. Research suggests that these students are more likely to return to their communities of origin, helping to serve the health needs of rural and remote Australia. In order to build strong rural and remote communities with better health outcomes and access to education, we must ensure that students studying medicine, allied health, nursing, and other vital occupations such as teaching, law and accounting return to rural and remote communities.

- 2. The cost of relocation for rural and remote students should be supported through an increase in the proposed relocation scholarship and/or a subsidy for accommodation costs.**

As discussed above, rural and remote students face extreme hardship when relocating for tertiary education. RHINO supports the introduction of a relocation scholarship for rural and remote students however this scholarship should be increased to represent the true cost of accommodation, travel and food for these students. On average, student respondents pay \$10,500 per year, whilst their families contribute an additional \$6,450 per year. Cost of accommodation is the most expensive element of relocating and therefore should be subsidised for rural and remote students who move to regional or metropolitan centres to pursue tertiary education. Current Centrelink Rent Assistance eligibility criteria must be reviewed to reflect the current cost of accommodation as well as reflect the various forms of accommodation which students reside whilst completing university.

- 3. Student income support should be indexed to reflect current cost of living.**

Current student income support, such as Youth Allowance, does not sufficiently meet basic living costs. Even those students on the maximum benefits report that the amount available does not provide a satisfactory level of benefits to enable students to support themselves. Many students currently receiving income support must still work significant additional hours in paid employment to survive. This affects their ability to devote time to study and engage with the university community and impacting negatively on mental health.

- 4. The rise of the Personal Income Threshold from \$236 to \$400 per fortnight should be brought forward to July 1, 2010.**

According to the recent Bradley review of higher education in Australia, greater financial support is urgently required for students of low-income families as well as rural and regional students.¹² Students should be able to work for more hours per week without penalty from the income support system. The personal income test for Youth Allowance is 'too severe'.¹² Most significantly, the maximum amount that can be earned without recipients losing some Youth Allowance benefit, currently set at \$236 per fortnight, has not been indexed since 1993.¹²

5. Financial incentives for health students undertaking clinical placement in rural and remote sites should be extended, particularly for allied health and nursing students.

Students undertaking health and medical degrees at James Cook University are often required to undertake lengthy (from 2-14 weeks) placements in rural and remote areas. Medical students are often well-supported financially on these placements as accommodation is often free or provided at minimal cost. However, allied health and nursing students are required to pay for these placements themselves. Costs on placements such as these include accommodation (both at the placement site and centre of study), food (increased cost in rural and remote areas), clinical uniform and equipment and travel to and from rural and remote communities. Two week placements can cost students thousands of dollars.

6. Regional universities that provide local access to comprehensive tertiary education should be better supported through Commonwealth funding.

Universities such as James Cook University provide access to tertiary education for students from remote locations in northern Australia. Universities such as these hold the key to sustaining and building rural and remote communities through the training of health, medical, teaching and other professionals. The good work of these universities should be recognised and supported through special funding grants designed specifically to support rural and remote student intake. Regional universities should also gain access to special research funding in order to retain and attract staff.

7. The deficiencies in public transport in regional centres and between regional centres and rural/remote areas should be addressed.

Regional cities in Australia generally lack good access to public transport facilities. As a result, many students require their own vehicle in order to travel around their regional centre. In addition, rail and bus services between regional centres and rural/remote areas are often poor, inaccessible and very expensive. Improvements in these areas would significantly reduce the financial burden facing students studying in regional centres such as (but not limited to) Townsville, Cairns, Mackay, Rockhampton, Darwin, Katherine, Broome, Bendigo, Tamworth, Wagga Wagga, Albury/Wodonga, Orange, Bathurst and Dubbo.

8. The range of measures for support of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students should be expanded.

Students of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent face many complex issues in gaining access to tertiary education opportunities. Not only do they face many of the same hurdles as rural and remote students, they also face issues of discrimination, alienation and relocation from communities. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who choose to pursue a tertiary education should continue to be financially supported by Commonwealth Government funding. Furthermore, a strong Indigenous curriculum should be promoted at all universities and there should be adequate emotional support provided to Indigenous students and staff.

9. The number of places reserved for rural and remote students in tertiary education facilities should be increased.

In acknowledgement of the inequality in education opportunities between urban, rural and remote settings, students from these backgrounds should be encouraged and supported to access tertiary education opportunities. These incentives or reserved places should exist across a range of degrees including medicine, allied health, nursing, education, accounting, engineering and law.

Addition: RHINO supports the new transitional arrangements announced on 26 August 2009 that will allow 2009 'gap year' students and those already at university the opportunity to meet the existing workforce participation criterion for independence by 30 June 2010 if they have to move away from home to commence university.

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Further Information

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