

The Secretary  
Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee  
P O Box 6100  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600

27th July 2009

Dear Sir/Madam,

Inquiry into Rural and Regional Access to Secondary and Tertiary Education  
Opportunities

I would like to make the following submission to the abovementioned inquiry, providing my family's perspective of the systems currently in place to support my children through their tertiary education studies.

To give some personal information, we live on our family property at Rankin's Springs - situated 90 kilometres north of Griffith, in the Riverina area of New South Wales. Our family consists of my husband and I, and our four children – Claire (20 years of age), Elise (19), Rianne (16) and Damian (13). All of our children have had to board away from home for their secondary schooling due to geographical isolation from our nearest high school. Fortunately, we are eligible for the Assistance for Isolated Children Allowance (AIC), without which we could not afford to send them away.

Unfortunately, we are also isolated from tertiary institutions, and this has made access to university for our two eldest daughters very difficult. I would now like to detail their individual experiences.

Claire finished Year 12 in November 2006. She obtained early entry to Charles Sturt University (Orange campus) through the Principal's Report Entry Scheme (PREP), to study her chosen course. This meant that she commenced study in early March 2007, fully dependent on us for all her expenses – moving away from home, accommodation, study needs, textbooks, food, fuel to travel home, etc., etc. We applied at this time for Dependent Youth Allowance, but the value of our farming assets was too high, and Claire's application was unsuccessful. She found some part time work as a waitress in Orange, but found that the demands of her course meant that she was unable to work enough hours to be independent of us. Claire decided to work towards becoming independent (for Youth Allowance purposes), and found work during university holidays to earn the required \$18,500 in an 18 month period since leaving school. She achieved this, and was successful in her application for Independent Youth Allowance in May 2008. This meant that (with the help of a Commonwealth Accommodation Scholarship) she was able to become financially independent of us, even though she had been independent in every way (except financially, of course) since she left home in February 2007. She completes her course at the end of the year, and is looking forward to independence with financial security when she commences work full-time.

Elise completed Year 12 in November 2007, and also obtained early entry to her chosen course at Charles Sturt University (Wagga campus). She achieved a high enough University Admissions Index (UAI) to defer her acceptance of the course for 12 months, so that she could work to qualify for Independent Youth Allowance. She worked all through 2008 to earn the (by then) required amount of \$19,500 before she commenced university in March 2009. She was successful in her application in May 2009 for Independent Youth Allowance, and is looking for part-time work so that she can become

financially independent from us. Elise is in the first year of a four year degree, and has quite a heavy work load, so she won't be able to work long hours either. We would not be able to afford to have two children at university and two children at boarding school without Independent Youth Allowance. We do not qualify for Dependent Youth Allowance as our farming assets are above the allowable limit. If 100% of farming assets were discounted, this would put us on an equal footing with all other families who only have to fulfil an income and personal assets test to qualify. Even then, our income can fluctuate markedly each year. Currently, during the drought, our income is below the required threshold, but if we achieve a reasonable harvest this year (and I certainly hope that we do) our income would certainly be above that threshold. If our girls were on Dependent Youth Allowance, this would mean disaster and disappointment for them as we would not be able to support them while they attended university, and they would probably have to leave study. The likelihood of them then working for 18 months in a two year period to qualify as Independent, and then returning to study, would be extremely remote.

Claire was fortunate to be awarded a Commonwealth Accommodation Scholarship this year, which took a lot of pressure off her financial situation. Elise was not as fortunate, and is struggling to make her on-campus accommodation payments. If she cannot find part-time work, we will have to help her out. With the changes that the Federal Government have brought in for next year, Elise will not be eligible for any financial support for accommodation costs. The new Relocation Scholarship is only available to Dependent Youth Allowance recipients, which seems very unfair to me. Why can't all Youth Allowance recipients who have to leave home for tertiary study receive this scholarship? I also disagree with the change in the purpose of the scholarship, from helping with accommodation costs, to helping with relocation costs. Accommodation costs are significant and ongoing, and remain the same each year, with many students struggling to pay their way. The Relocation Scholarship is \$4,000 for the first year, and \$1,000 for each year after that, a large reduction on the previous Accommodation Scholarship of approximately \$4,400 for each year of study.

Our third daughter, Rianne, is currently in Year 11, and I am very concerned about her ability to access tertiary studies after she completes Year 12 at the end of next year. If the Federal Government's proposed system is in place, she will have to leave home to find work (for 18 months in a two year period) to be eligible for Independent Youth Allowance. The population of Rankin's Springs is around 100 – no job prospects there! The closest large centre is Griffith, where jobs for a school leaver are not plentiful, and where she would be competing with kids from a wide area for these limited opportunities.

It would also be very unlikely that she could find full-time work when the prospective employer knows that she will be leaving in the short term to commence university. What is wrong with school leavers earning a set amount by doing part-time work in an 18 month period after completing secondary study? To me, this shows initiative, as well as determination to achieve a goal, especially if they are studying at the same time! (This is how Claire achieved her "independence".) Once a rural student has to leave home (whether for study or for work), why do they not qualify as "independent"? They are out in the world, fending for themselves and organising their own affairs, and not relying on their parents for every little thing.

I cannot understand why the Federal Government is working so hard to make all tertiary

students remain dependent on their parents. Wouldn't it make more sense to help them become independent? Students would feel more in control of their own lives, and parents would have a significant reduction in stress levels. For their children to remain eligible for Dependent Youth Allowance, farming families would have to be ever mindful of their taxable income situation, always supposing that the value of their farming assets is below the allowable threshold.

Students from rural, regional and remote families are finding the challenges of attending a tertiary institution extremely daunting. They have to be determined and resourceful to make their dreams a reality. No student wants to delay their studies for a year to qualify as "independent" from their parents – they want to commence their tertiary education immediately after completing secondary school. Again I make the point - the actual act of moving away from home to study should be enough to qualify for Independent Youth Allowance. We should be encouraging rural kids to pursue tertiary study – they are more likely to return to rural areas to work after they have achieved their qualifications.

If the Federal Government is so worried about "independent" students living at home and receiving Independent Youth Allowance, why don't they change the meaning of "living at home"? How can a student be independent and still living at home anyway?? Rural students should not be penalised for the actions of some unscrupulous metropolitan students who rot the system.

I agree that the current system has its flaws, but the changes that will be introduced in January 2010 are not in the best interests of rural and regional students. In fact, some are a giant backward step, especially for those students who have this year deferred their course for 12 months to qualify as Independent for Youth Allowance purposes.

I hope that your inquiry will expose these inequities, and recommend some constructive changes to the Federal Government's planned legislation.

Yours faithfully,

Mrs Ellen M Walker