

August 1st, 2009

Judy Lawless

To whom it may concern,

This is my submission to the Senate Inquiry into Rural and Regional Access to Secondary and Tertiary Opportunities.

I begin by asking those who are making decisions in this inquiry to reflect back on their own experience as a young person moving into the workforce or furthering their education by attending university. I also hope that you know what it is like to have to move away from home to pursue your dreams or shared this experience with your peers of the time.

I also moved away from a small country community to study at university in the city. My university experience in the early 1980's gave me the opportunity to study, have subsidised accommodation, hold down a part time job, participate in teaching rounds and complete my three year degree with no HECS debt hanging over my head. I was not from a wealthy family, but my family was comfortably able to provide the financial support I needed to follow my dream. I left university and headed back to the country to commence my career.

Now talk to the students of today. Moving away to pursue your dream is not only more challenging, but is financially beyond the reach of many rural and regional students. The proposed budgetary change will make this gap even greater for many, many students.

We are a 'middle class' family with three children. I am a primary school teacher and my husband is a customer service officer, both working full time. Currently our first daughter is attending university, our second daughter has deferred her university course for 12 months to work full time and our son is in Year 9. We do not have an extravagant lifestyle and our wages cover the basics and not much more.

The costs involved in supporting a rural student who needs to move to another location to study are astronomical. Depending on which city/university the student attends, accommodation alone can cost anything from \$8000 (very basic/no food/support/transport issues) to over \$18000. Add to this food, books, transport, parking, ICT provision, not to mention a significant HECS debt at the end of their course and the cost is in the vicinity of \$20,000. Finding casual or part time work is also a challenge for students who stay in university accommodation as they can only commit to jobs for the academic year.

All our children aspire to continue on to tertiary education. They have also always been

aware of the range of challenges which result from moving away from home to attend university. Both girls have been very determined to ease the financial strain on us by working toward qualifying for independent status under the current YAL criteria. The paths they have chosen are indeed different.

While accepted into both Melbourne University and ANU, our eldest daughter chose to attend ANU based on the cost of accommodation alone. She decided not to take a 'gap' year, but worked two jobs while studying her double degree full time to meet the criteria to gain independent status. Her studies were severely affected to the point that she considered quitting uni, had to drop subjects and her health was considerably impacted on. Being from rural Victoria, her decision to go to Canberra also meant that she was unable to get home often (or for us to visit her). She now receives Youth Allowance, still works, and is finally on top of her studies and her health.

Our second daughter completed Year 12 last year, and deferred her university studies in Melbourne to work full time and earn enough to meet Youth Allowance qualification in May next year. She chose to do this as we are not in the financial position to support her financially over her proposed five year course and she witnessed the toll it took on her sister, studying and working 20+ hours a week. She made this choice on the advice of a range of careers counsellors, information from Centrelink and based on what the rules were at the time.

The changes to Youth Allowance qualification for students who take a 'gap' year will have a dramatic affect on a huge number of young people (particularly those from rural areas) who couldn't afford to attend university without Youth Allowance. This proposed change has floored our daughter and her many friends who have deferred their studies in 2009 (including over 50% at her school). For our family, it has caused stress and our daughter is anxious about her future.

Students who live in close proximity to their university have the choice to live at home. Most country students don't. It is no wonder that the rates of country students who go on to university fall well below their city peers. Students in the city who cannot access Youth Allowance are still able to attend university because their study costs are considerably less as they are able to live at home.

I appreciate that there are some rural and city families who 'roft' the system. This must not be the reason that the government makes the decision to change the independent criteria – especially for the graduates of 2008. Deferring for two years is not an option for most students –for many rural and regional students this would result in not commencing studies at all.

The new and more 'equitable' Youth Allowance criterion is going to severely impact on families of students who have taken a 'gap' year in good faith. There will be few rural and regional families who will be able to obtain full Youth Allowance now, and while the new sliding scale is a positive step, it still means that many students will only receive a token amount. The Government has announced two new scholarships for those commencing tertiary study, but you have to be in receipt of Youth Allowance to qualify

and are they amount to less than the accommodation scholarships which are currently in place. To conclude I implore you to look at the wider ramifications of the barriers which are being proposed to Youth Allowance and reconsider them to soften the impact they will have on country families. I believe the government should consider:

Allowing students from rural and regional areas who will need to leave home to continue to be able to take a 'gap' year to meet the Youth Allowance qualifications – means tested to represent an 'average' family

Allowing all students from rural and regional areas to access the new 'moving away from home' scholarship

And/or implementing the changes to Youth Allowance criteria after July 2010, to allow the current students completing their 'gap' year to receive Youth Allowance?

Yours sincerely  
Judy Lawless