

July 31st 2009  
Committee Secretary  
Senate Standing Committee on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT

To Whom It May Concern,

We write in relation to the Senate Inquiry into Rural and Regional Access to Secondary and Tertiary Education Opportunities.

It is our understanding that this inquiry will act as an assessment of the adequacy of Government measures to provide equitable access to secondary and post-secondary education opportunities to students from rural and regional communities attending metropolitan institutions, and metropolitan students attending regional universities or TAFE colleges.

In this submission we wish to focus on the proposed changes to the Youth Allowance, and in particular for those students who are currently in the middle of a 'gap' year.

It is with this in mind that we refer to the terms of reference sections: (a) the financial impact on rural and regional students who are attending metropolitan universities; (c) the implications of current and proposed government measures on prospective students living in rural and regional areas; (e) the adequacy of government measures to provide for students who are required to leave home for post-secondary study; and (g) the impact of government measures and proposals on rural and regional communities.

We are parents of two children, aged 21 and 19. Our daughter, aged 21, currently attends university in Melbourne and receives Youth Allowance as an independent student living away from home. She also works for approximately 15 hours per week in addition to this, in order to meet the ongoing costs of living in Melbourne. Having completed a 'gap' year in 2007, in which she worked full-time, she qualified for the Independent Youth Allowance in 2008.

Our son, aged 19, completed Year 12 in 2008 and has deferred his Melbourne University offer for twelve months, in order to work as a full-time assistant at a local secondary school in Sale. He did not make this decision lightly. He would have preferred to have gone straight to university, but could see the enormous expense involved in relocating and subsequently living in Melbourne for the duration of his course, and so made the decision to take a 'gap' year to both save for university and to meet the criteria for becoming an independent student.

Some people may say that he could do his commerce degree at the nearest university to our home, but this is still some distance away and he would still need to relocate, or travel for 2 hours each day. Also, we do not believe that he should be limited to that option just because he lives in Sale. Country students should be encouraged to widen their horizons

and not be limited in their choices. He worked hard in Year 12 in his quest to gain a place at his chosen course at Melbourne University. He has now made a decision to support himself by taking a 'gap' year, acting upon advice from his careers advisor, Centrelink staff and his older sister. We believe that it is grossly unfair that the criteria which he was aiming to meet have been changed midway through, when he has already locked himself into this process.

The government have been addressing the answer to our plight by saying that more families will qualify for assistance under the new arrangements. However we believe that this has been very misleading information. With a combined income of just under \$100,000, we will not qualify for any financial assistance at all, not even the relocation allowance. We know that it will cost about \$20,000 for our son to attend university just for accommodation in 2010 alone. This means that he will need to obtain employment in Melbourne and work a considerable number of hours per week, whilst also attending university, in order to meet some of the expense. City students who are able to live at home whilst studying do not have to bear this financial burden and so this is another way that rural students are disadvantaged. It seems that the government does not understand the increased costs faced by students who are forced to live away from home to pursue their chosen course.

Whilst the university will offer him an option to defer for a second year, the job he has is only a 12 month position, so he could not continue working there for another six months in order to meet the new regulations as proposed in the recent changes. We also believe that a twelve month break is sufficient time to be away from study and that it is in his best interests to commence university in 2010 as planned.

If the proposed changes to the criteria for Independent Youth Allowance were to be phased in over the next couple of years, as most other proposed budget changes seem to be, rural and regional people would be in a better position to make financial decisions accordingly. It is grossly unfair to start any process and change the rules halfway through, after the 'game' has commenced. Unfortunately, for rural and regional students currently in their 'gap' year, this is not a 'game' – this is their livelihood and their future we are playing with.

In closing, we believe the government should be doing more to protect and nurture the regional young people who will provide the platform for the future of Australia.

Yours sincerely

Julie and Michael Riley

