

Students in Rural and Remote areas of Queensland have no option for post secondary education but to attend universities and TAFE which are all located in metropolitan centres and/or major regional towns. There are no post secondary educational facilities in rural areas and the regional towns usually only have TAFE facilities. Universities are only located along the coast of Queensland and Toowoomba. This means that inland Queensland residents cannot access face to face university tuition unless they move to the coast or Toowoomba. Apprentices also need to regularly move to the larger regional towns or cities to access block training as there are no TAFE facilities available locally.

As there is no assistance for students who wish to access post secondary education which, in most cases, is not available in any way in their local area, families must bear the total cost of sending their children away to access this education. The average cost of accommodation and food alone is around \$20,000 a year. University books, fees and other requirements cost extra. Most university colleges charge \$240 a week for accommodation and food and private rents can make renting a dwelling even more expensive. Apprentices have even greater problems because their training blocks are usually 4 or 6 weeks in duration and no TAFE's have accommodation facilities. Staying in a motel for 4 -6 weeks is a prohibitive cost apprentice's can't afford and neither can their parents. Otherwise they have to stay with relatives or friends – if they have any in that location. Apprentices may also have to pay rent in the town where they are employed as well as accommodation fees in the town where they attend TAFE, thus doubling their financial burden.

Many students have in the past worked for a year in order to be able to access Independent Youth Allowance . Parents still have to supplement this income as it certainly only goes part way to ease the financial burden of having to relocate to another centre for their post secondary education. Parents whose students can access Youth Allowance based on parental income still need to supplement their children's living expenses as the youth allowance isn't sufficient to cover the basic needs. This need to supplement their children's living expenses however they qualify for Youth Allowance can be a financial burden that would create hardship for many families at present due to years of drought in rural and regional areas leading to reduced incomes and the global financial crisis. Considering students also need to pay TAFE fees up front or will have a university tuition debt of many thousands of dollars when they complete their university study, the financial burden is huge.

Students who want to remain in regional areas and complete post secondary studies have few alternatives. Some TAFE and university courses can be studied externally but the number of courses where this is available is very limited. Apprentices, as part of their apprenticeship, must attend block training at a TAFE so they must actually attend the TAFE where they are enrolled for face to face instruction. There are some online courses available from some universities but the number is very few and in limited subject areas.

The implications of the proposed government measures on prospective students is immense. Currently, students who wish to access Independent Youth Allowance must earn a certain amount of money in the 18 months after they leave school before they can apply for Youth Allowance. Many students in rural and regional areas take up this option as a “gap” year, knowing that they will only need to fully support themselves for 3 – 4 months from the beginning of the study year till when the 18 month time

period is up. This way they often only take one year off from study before starting their post secondary education. The new proposal of having to work an average of 30 hours a week for 18 months out of the 2 years after they have finished school means that most students will delay returning to post secondary study for 2 years – if they ever return at all! After 2 years in the work force many students would have established jobs and incomes that they would be loathe to give up. This would result in fewer rural and regional students undertaking post secondary study. Also, finding a job that averages 30 hours a week in these tough economic times in a rural or regional town is difficult; sometimes impossible. If students can't find employment they are in a no win situation – they can't afford to relocate to undertake post secondary studies and they can't find work so they won't qualify for Centrelink assistance. Increasing the parental income threshold is also of no help as many families have had little income for years due to the drought and can't provide the extra money needed for students living away from home costs, therefore their children can't even contemplate doing post secondary study. The new proposed government measures affecting prospective students are also quite unfair for students who completed Year 12 in November 2008. These students did all their planning on the rules and measures that were in place in November 2008 and would not have been able to foresee the changing of the rules that would be brought into effect within the 18 month period after they finished school. These students have been left in limbo not knowing if they will be able to apply for Independent Youth Allowance and what the retrospective rules will be that they will have to have abide by. In short, many will not even apply for entry into universities or TAFE because they do not know if they will be able to relocate to attend the institution. The proposed relocation allowance in the new measures will not go very far to help with living away from home expenses.

The proposed government policies will mean that less rural and regional students will go on to post secondary education. This will create a divide between metropolitan and rural and regional residents – the 'haves' and the 'have nots'. Those who have access locally to post secondary education and those who do not have access locally to post secondary education. As many people who come from rural and regional areas go back to work in these areas after further education, whereas those in metropolitan areas do not, these policies could, in the longterm, result in a further shortage of qualified people in rural and regional areas than there already is. Australian governments talk about making the country smarter but these sort of policies are a deterrent to further study. The current policy goes some way to allowing rural and regional students attend post secondary education. A better policy would be to create a scheme such as Assistance For Isolated Students for those who do not have access to post secondary education in their local community – similar to the scheme applicable for secondary education. A post secondary education or tertiary allowance could be made available to only those students who could not access the course they wish to enrol in locally. If it is available locally but they choose to go to another institution they should not be eligible for the allowance. If funding of this sort was available it would encourage more students from rural and regional areas to undertake post secondary education – something many students do not contemplate because they know their parents cannot afford to support them through their studies. Even if the funding covered accommodation costs only it would be a great help.

Current funding and processes of applying for funding are totally inadequate and do not reflect the actual costs of living away from home to access education. Local

TAFE and Uni students are opting out of full time study and trying to study externally as they cannot afford the costs of living away from home any longer and have had to return to their home town. This seriously affects the students studies to such a degree that many do not complete them. For Australia to progress and compete globally it needs as many people as possible to gain post secondary education qualifications. If students in regional and rural areas are disadvantaged and effectively discriminated against because they lack access to post secondary education it will create social and economic barriers that will affect the Australian population and economy in the long term. It is not fair that rural and regional students do not have equal access to education as those students who live in metropolitan areas do. Current government measures do not provide for fair and equitable access to post secondary education for all students no matter where they live.

Rural and regional students have the same need for post secondary education as those students who live in metropolitan areas. They have the same career choices and students from metropolitan areas and should therefore have the same access options in order to be able to achieve those career choices. Currently there are not the same access options available to rural and regional students as are available to metropolitan students. Metropolitan students have a choice of at least one TAFE and University in their town and may have a choice of several. They do not have to leave home to access their post secondary education unless their particular career choice is not offered at their local educational institution – though this is rare. Students from rural and regional areas have the same needs as metropolitan students but have no choice but to move away from home to access university and they often have to move away from home to access TAFE.

In summary, educational opportunities should be available equally to all Australian citizens regardless of where they live. Allowances, policies and measures need to be put in place to create equitable access to post secondary education for all Australians.