

Girton Grammar School Bendigo

Submission to the Senate Committee: Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport

Inquiry: Rural and Regional access to Secondary and Tertiary Education Opportunities

In this submission I want to address the term of reference which I believe directly affects students who matriculate from Girton Grammar School, Bendigo and, by extension, all regional students.

Term of Reference a: the financial impact on rural and regional students who are attending metropolitan secondary schools, universities or TAFE

Girton Grammar School is situated in the Bendigo Electorate which is ranked 132nd of the regions by out of 150 regions by taxable incomes, with an average taxable income of about \$42 000. The school's SES status is 100, which means that half of the students who attend the school are in the lower half of the socio-economic Status spectrum.

The School has a proud record of over 90% of its Year 12 students winning tertiary places year after year. Further, most of these students successfully complete a tertiary qualification. However, increasingly a trend has emerged where greater numbers of our Year 12 graduates are deferring their places for a year or attending the local Latrobe University Bendigo.

The major reason for this trend is the cost of relocating to attend a major city based University. It costs parents between \$15 000 and \$20 000 to allow a student to attend University while living away from home. This is an annual sum which is up to \$10 000 greater than our School fees. For many of our parents it has proved impossible to find this additional sum, so they have become strategic in their approach.

Some parents have informed their children that only one child will have access to studying outside Bendigo. Others have suggested to their children that they will be able to support them to an equivalent amount of the School Fees, but the children will need to make up the difference. Students have traditionally made up this difference using Youth Allowance and part- time work and/or scholarships.

There is no doubt that the removal of access to Youth Allowance will have the consequence of fewer of our students being able to attend University outside of Bendigo. Whilst the latter is a good University, it has a limited number of Faculties. Thus students are often unable to select the tertiary course of their desire and are therefore unable to enter the preferred career pathway.

I realise that the changes made to the Youth Allowance was based on the recommendations of the Bradley Review. In this review, Professor Bradley identified four groups who attend university:

- a. Students living away from home
- b. Students living at home
- c. Students living away from home accessing Youth Allowance
- d. Students living at home accessing Youth Allowance.

She identified that in the final category a significant percentage of students were from

families with high incomes. Unfortunately, the process that removed this problem has had a severe effect on the third group. As a consequence, it has become more difficult for students who are required to move away from home to attend University.

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Given that fewer than one third of students who complete Year 12 in non-metropolitan schools complete a tertiary course, compared to over half of metropolitan students in a similar position, we need to find a mechanism to address this problem.

The major reason for this difference is the cost differential for accessing a tertiary institution for a student who can remain at home and another who is required to leave home. The current proposal makes no attempt to ensure equity of access for regional students because the same income test is used, regardless of whether the students live at home or have to live away from home in order to secure their tertiary education of choice.

Many country schools, Girton included, are achieving excellent results for their students. Many of these students will become the professionals and leaders in their local communities. It would be unfortunate, if they were denied a tertiary education, not because of their ability or desire, but based on the location of their homes.

There must be the realization that it costs significantly more for a student from the country to attend University, and we need to find a way for students from all parts of Australia to have equal access to a tertiary qualification. One means of achieving this is to make it easier for a student from specific locations to access Youth Allowance.

There must also be the realization that the current proposal for students to work 30 hours a week to qualify is totally unrealistic in this economic climate and in regional centres and small country towns. The job market will not support this, no matter how willing the student might be. The proposal also flies in the face of general University policy which permits deferments for one year only, not two years. In any case a deferral of two years is highly disruptive to the education of a student who wishes to pursue studies in areas where sequential knowledge is required. A two year hiatus would put such students at great risk in their first year of tertiary studies.

At the political level there must be the recognition of the rights of regional students to attend the University of choice for which their results have qualified them and an equitable way for these students from all parts of Australia to access a Tertiary

qualification. The current means test is not equitable in that it is applied in exactly the same way to parental incomes, regardless of locality and its very low threshold clearly disqualifies most middle class regional parents from being able to send their children to a city university. The result is reduced choice for country students and a disqualification from the major league universities and the higher professions, a disadvantage which will remain a permanent hindrance to their future career paths and to the development of Australia's regional centres.

The Youth Allowance, as previously configured, needs to be restored to regional students if this "lucky country" is to be one for all Australians, not just those who live in cities. The Youth Allowance, as previously configured, needs to be restored to regional students if the "clever country" is to be fully realized.

I urge very careful consideration of all aspects of these concerns and prompt action to support those who aspire to excellence from country locations.