

Changes to the Youth Allowance

It is with great concern regarding the changes to Youth Allowance that I write. The changes create inequity in the ability of Rural School Students to access Tertiary level education. In particular my concerns are with the time frame for income earning prior to eligibility for Youth Allowance, the number of hours of work required and the retrospective nature of date of introduction of the new scheme.

Our family lives 400 km from the capital city in which the majority of Tertiary course options are provided. Whilst there is a satellite of a University 20kms away, the course offerings are small and not all courses provide full requirements enabling students to attend locally to graduation. Our eldest son will finish high school this year and as with our other son, is looking for further education at a Tertiary level. To enable our children to achieve at the highest level of education they will need to move away from home.

To live away from home will require a place of residence and income to support their daily requirements along with the cost of Tertiary fees. The planned changes will impose a great burden on our children and our family income that is unacceptable.

On one hand, there is a requirement for students to work for a minimum number of hours before being eligible. My concern is the need to work those hours for a period of up to 18 months. A student who has applied for and achieved entrance into a Tertiary course of study, typically enters the course at the beginning of Semester One in February of each year. Granted, some Universities have a second Semester intake, but most courses will begin with an autumn Semester of units that are pre-requisites for Spring Semester units. Entry in second Semester is problematic. Does this mean the student must delay the start of the Tertiary studies for a second year? Further, some courses of study will not allow a student to defer the start of the course for more than one year. Does this mean that students will have to reapply for entrance – run the race twice? Full-time work over twelve months fits neatly into the academic calendar for deferral of studies.

On another hand, there is a requirement that the students earn a minimum amount of money whilst working. Why a minimum? Where is the incentive for students to store up their earnings for the lean years ahead when work options can be limited and earnings low? How does it help develop a culture of independence when the bar is set at a low level? Encourage students to earn as much as they can without imposing negatively on their eligibility for Youth Allowance.

The planned introduction date for these changes, pulls the rug from under the feet of the students who, when graduating from high school last year and achieving entrance to a Tertiary institution, now find that they are still not eligible for Youth Allowance. Despite planning for their future and playing the game at that point, the goal posts have shifted and they are now disadvantaged. Introduce the changes progressively so that students and families of regional communities can plan effectively.

In the current climate of bruising fees and demoralizing scrutiny of independent status, it is difficult to imagine how rural high school students can be encouraged to part with their families, travel away and survive without the support base they have grown with, to expand and develop the intellectual level and skill set of our Australian society. Where is the support and encouragement? My preference is for a system that requires students to work full-time for 12 months prior to entry into Tertiary studies, that they can stockpile the total value of their annual salary or whatever part thereof they can manage to save and it will not be included in calculations for eligibility for Youth Allowance. The aim should be to develop independent skills and motivation for savings for the future. Lastly, the changes should be implemented at least two years out, so that students and families have time to plan appropriately.