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Inquiry into Rural and Regional Access to Secondary and Tertiary Education Opportunities

Thankyou for taking the time to consider my submission to this inquiry. I would specifically like to address the following term of reference:

e) the adequacy of government measures to provide for students who are required to leave home for secondary or post-secondary study:

The Rudd Government's planned changes to the Workforce Participation Eligibility Criteria for Youth Allowance will have a devastating effect on my son's future. They are set to single him out for exclusion and condemn him to give up his dream of a tertiary education.

My son Kieran completed his VCE last year. He also has a vision impairment. It is a degenerative condition, which seriously impacts his central vision and causes significant levels of fatigue. He underwent much soul-searching and doubt prior to the start of the 2008 school year regarding his capacity to cope with the special demands the final year of schooling would bring. His perseverance and hard work, earned him the offer of a place at Deakin University (Burwood) for a combined Arts/Commerce degree, his first preference, along with an Access and Equity Scholarship – an outstanding effort given his ENTER score was based on only four subjects.

Kieran's vision impairment denies him the opportunity to drive. Living on the Mornington Peninsula dictates that his only means of travelling from home to University will be public transport. However, a daily commute to Uni of 5-6 hours would be impractical for most people, while for a vision-impaired person it also raises significant safety concerns. His fatigue levels, already a supreme challenge when studying, would be exacerbated and considerably diminish his effectiveness. Moving away from home to live on, or near campus is his only viable option, and a far safer one – but it's an expensive exercise and would require him to seek some form of financial assistance.

Normally our combined parental income would exceed the allowed limit for Dependent YA, but our family finances have been decimated in recent years by a series of job retrenchments, serious illness and the resultant failure of a home business. Our commitment to our son's continuing education means our goal is certainly to contribute, but we are unable to meet the full financial burden of supporting his "living away from home" expenses, his University costs and the special requirements his vision impairment creates, particularly that of adaptive technology. Even if we were able, Kieran considers himself an adult, and as such, is reluctant to burden us with responsibilities he sees as his own.

After researching his options, Kieran concluded that a combination of his savings, the scholarship and the Independent Youth Allowance, would offset the costs he'd face in moving/living away from home. He was fully prepared to live independently, with all its challenges given his vision impairment. Kieran's plan was to take a Gap Year; both to recover from his physical and mental exhaustion, and to allow him the 18 months to earn the requisite \$19,532, to qualify (under Criteria 2) for income support via the Independent Youth Allowance. He also hoped to save enough to travel briefly, in an effort to challenge himself and improve his confidence in a "visual" world. He therefore deferred the offer from Deakin for 12 months, also declining the non-deferrable scholarship, with the intention of re-applying for it in 2009.

In accordance with his plan my son is currently working three part-time jobs. He did not seek a full-time position immediately on leaving school, as Criteria "2" of the current eligibility rules does not require it, and the scarcity of work meant he had to "take what he could get". He receives no funding in support of his vision impairment, because he is not "blind enough" to qualify for Government allowances.

Kieran had carefully designed his path to independence - qualifying for the Independent Youth Allowance was a critical element of this plan. The Government's proposed changes to strip away two of the three current Workplace Participation Eligibility Criteria will mean that young people like Kieran, have no other option but to work 30 hours/week for at least 18 months in order to qualify for independence.

In the current economic climate, but particularly in youth employment, finding a job is hard. Finding full-time work is even harder. It has taken Kieran 9 months to approximate 30 hours/week, but 30 hours every week is never guaranteed in a capricious industry like hospitality, a primary employment provider in our area. Even if it was, the Government's planned introduction of this measure in January 2010 makes it impossible for him to work the required 18 months in the time remaining. How can a school leaver ever do this without taking two years away from study, or working full-time with a full-time study load?

Kieran is not from a wealthy family attempting to manipulate the system. He has made no assumptions about his Youth Allowance options but has done his research, and he is not "misinformed" about the Government's "reforms" as the Education Minister would have us believe. He will not be picked up in the increase to the Parental Income Test threshold, for the full benefit – an amount that would not even cover his accommodation costs. Nevertheless he is a young person who has earned his Uni place, needs to move away from home and is in genuine need of support to further his education. The Government simply refuses to provide any.

The so-called "toughening" of the independence test for Youth Allowance is disheartening enough for this year's and future VCE students, particularly those who must move away from home for University, but at least they will make their decisions about future study from an informed position. For my son, and the substantial number of 2008 VCE students, who in good faith chose to take a Gap Year in 2009, and made what are now irrevocable decisions about their futures based on the current eligibility criteria, based on "the law", these changes are shameful and appear to verge on discrimination.

A number of tertiary institutions have now graciously offered the option of extending the 1 year deferral to 2 years for the 2009 Gap Year students - Deakin University included. This is a compassionate move on their part, and may help many who've been left in the lurch, but it speaks to an intransigence the institutions appear to perceive in the Government's position. Ensuring these talented young adults can take up the Uni places they've earned, where they will be purposefully engaged in acquiring skills to benefit themselves and their communities, by providing a mechanism for financial support, should surely be a responsibility of Government; but this Government has charged "bull at a gate" at these reforms and seems unconcerned about the collateral damage to rural and regional students, to disabled students such as my son and to any who must leave home to go to University.

Many of the Government's changes to Youth Allowance are positive reforms and commendable, but restricting the eligibility criteria does not achieve their alleged purpose of targeting "students genuinely in need of assistance". They've got a great deal of it "right", but they've seriously miscalculated when it comes to the 2009 Gap Year students. It wouldn't be difficult to set the record straight – remove the retrospective element of this legislation and apply the remaining Workforce Participation Criterion equitably, by extending the implementation date to January 2011. This would allow those 2008 VCE students who took a Gap Year, the opportunity to qualify for Independent Youth Allowance and have a chance at the University education they've worked so hard for!

As for my son, time is of the essence, because his eye condition is degenerative. He dearly wishes to finish his double degree, 4 years of study, while he can still see. He must move away from home to do this. Will the Government's "reforms" provide for him? In their proposed form, they won't even come close.