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The Secretary  
Senate Rural and Regional Affairs  
and Transport References Committee

Parliament House  
ACT 2600

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To Whom it May Concern:

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

I am currently in my final year of my PhD at the Whyalla Campus of the , Centre for Regional Engagement. My PhD research topic is titled 'Life after school for rural youth: Transitions associated with leaving school as experienced by rural youth during their first year after completing Year 12'.

A prominent theme in the findings of my research was the impact of financial resources and support on rural youth's ability to pursue their desired paths. This is illustrated by the fact that of the 33 participants in the qualitative panel study, only three attended university the year after leaving school. In comparison, 13 deferred university. Of those that deferred, all identified finances as being at least part of the reason for them deciding to defer from university. In total, ten were deferring in order to work and meet the eligibility criteria for Independent Youth Allowance to enable them to attend university the following year. A number of those that did not defer or attend university also identified finances as a barrier to them attending university. These findings highlight the need for more financial support for rural youth during the transition from school. I believe that the changes to the independence criteria for Youth Allowance would increase the difficulty of the transition from school for rural youth and further deter them from pursuing higher education.

Please find enclosed my submission to the inquiry into Rural and Regional Access to Secondary and Tertiary Education Opportunities. I hope that my submission assists in this enquiry. If you have any questions or require further information, please do not hesitate to contact me on the number or email address provided above.

Yours Sincerely,

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Jane Cowie BSW (Hons)  
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As stated in the preceding summary. This submission is based on the findings of a PhD research thesis entitled 'Life after school for rural youth: Transitions associated with leaving school as experienced by rural youth during their first year after completing Year 12'.

The aim of the research was to find out what the transition from school is like according to the experiences of youth from rural areas. In particular, it focused on the transitions made and changes experienced by rural youth during the first year after completing Year 12 of high school. This included finding out youth's aspirations and expectations in regard to leaving school and how these compared to their experiences of the transitions and changes that took place. Reasons for, and short-term effects of transition choices, the effects of these, and how they were dealt with were also explored, along with aspects of the transition process that are specific to, or stronger in, rural areas. This was done in the aim of developing an understanding of what the transition from school is like according to the perspective of those currently going through in order to gauge whether rural youth are pursuing their goals, the reasons for their choices, and areas where further support is needed.

#### Increased need for further education

The experiences of youth upon leaving school have changed significantly over the last 30 years (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2003b). Prior to the 1970s, it was common for youth to move straight from school to employment, hence gaining financial and social independence concurrently (Mc Donald 1995). However, due to numerous societal changes resulting in a sharp decline in the number of entry-level jobs for youth and increased need for qualifications, the transition to adulthood is no longer a linear process (Hill, Vail & Wheelock 1999). Consequently, the need for youth to complete Years 11 and 12 of high school and go on to post-secondary education and training has increased (Skelton 2002). This is reflected in the statistics of Year 12 completion during the past 20 years, with the overall proportion of Australian secondary students who stayed at school through to Year 12 increasing from 36 percent in 1982 to 75 percent in 2002 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2003b, Australian Bureau of Statistics 2001). The increased need for higher education is further demonstrated by the fact that in 2001 69 percent of Year 12 graduates went on to either university or TAFE (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2003b, Jones 2002).

A longer transition to adulthood can have positive and negative aspects. On the positive side, youth now have more time to increase their skills and gain experience and self-knowledge. However, this favours those who have the ability or privilege to take advantage of expanding educational options (Mortimer, Larson 2002). For those who have less access to resources and opportunities for development there are few institutionalised pathways to success. This results in an increased expectation for

participation in further education also creating greater possibilities for failure and marginalisation for those who cannot, or do not, access it (Mortimer, Larson 2002, Wyn et al. 1999).

#### Policy implications for youth

Policies concerning education, employment, training, and income support have long been recognised as being highly influential upon the direction of young people's lives (Blakers 1990). Current government policy has been identified by the literature as restricting the ability of young people to lead independent adult lifestyles and adding complexity to the transition from school (Hill, Vail & Wheelock 1999, Irwin 1995). This is due to policy direction over the past decade holding families financially responsible for their youth by introducing parental means tests and reducing youth's entitlements to a range of state benefits. This legislation prevents a number of youth from receiving government financial assistance. This combined with rising tertiary fees and low youth wages has increased the dependency of youth upon their parents even if they are not living with them. The amount of financial support available is a large determining factor for youth in deciding what to do after completing school, as lack of financial resources may limit one's ability to pursue certain paths such as further education (Mc Donald 1995, Blakers 1990). This has long-term effects, as it restricts many youth's life choices by excluding them from a variety of occupations that require further education, increasing their risk of unemployment or settling for a low-paying, insecure job (Mortimer, Larson 2002, Youth Studies Australia 1998).

#### Rural Youth

Rural youth have been recognised as being subject to a number of additional stressors during the transition from school compared to their city counterparts due to reduced access to higher education and employment opportunities (Quixley 1992). Rural youth often have to choose between the limited opportunities available locally and moving away from friends, family, and other support networks in their hometown in order to access higher education, training, or employment in larger regional towns or capital cities (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2003c). This is reflected in figures released by the (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006) identifying that in 2001, 22.5 percent, or almost one in four youth aged 15 – 25 years from country areas moved to a larger town, with 13.9 percent moving to capital cities throughout Australia since 1996 and 8.6 percent moving to larger regional centres. Research indicates that many youth from rural backgrounds who move to the city after leaving school experience problems associated with being a long way away from home during the initial stages of this transition. These include: homesickness; lack of friends and support networks; and the cost of living away from home combined with extremely low incomes (Quixley 1992, Pavis, Platt & Hubbard 2002, Quine et al., Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, Higher education division March 1999).

#### RESEARCH DESIGN & METHODOLOGY

The research was a longitudinal panel study conducted over 15 months (September 2006

to November 2007). Qualitative data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews, with participants participating in two interviews each – one shortly before they completed high school and the second one year later. The sample consisted of youth from three South Australian rural locations that were due to complete Year 12 at the end of 2006. The towns chosen for the study were Whyalla (regional centre/industry based), Roxby Downs (isolated mining town), and Kimba (agricultural/farming area). These towns were selected for comparison due to their differences with respect to population size, industry and economic base, and remoteness classifications.

The first round of interviews was conducted in September 2006 and gathered baseline information on participants' aspirations, plans, preparation for, and expectations of their first year after leaving school. The second (final) round of interviews, were conducted in November 2007, after participants had been out of school for approximately twelve months. The second interview explored the transitions and changes that had taken place during participants' first year after leaving school, the effects of these, how they were dealt with, and how they compared to participants' expectations, plans, and goals.

#### RELEVANT FINDINGS

When asked what effect living in a rural area had on their options for life after school, responses tended to focus on the more negative aspects. The most commonly identified factor was limited options for life after school, with 19 participants identifying this as a negative associated with living in a rural area. Of these, 14 stated that they would have to move to the city in order to pursue their desired career. Female participants also made comments about the available jobs being predominantly in industry and trades more suited to males. Another factor identified as having a negative effect on options for life after school included the expenses associated with moving to the city in order to access further education, such as rent, food, bills and other expenses associated with living independently.

“But being in a rural area it makes it hard because you tend to get discouraged because we have the uni campus here, but it doesn't offer nearly the range of subjects that the Adelaide campuses do or anywhere else state-wide. And so a lot of people get deterred and think, well I'll just go to TAFE and do a welding course, which is fair enough, but I think it's hard because ... and a lot of people here they're not sure if they are going to make it in Adelaide because it's so expensive” (Whyalla male 1st interview).

“It's made it hard, because obviously I have to try and go to Adelaide and get money and stuff and find somewhere to live. And then I'm going to have to do that by myself, so that makes it hard as well, and your options are somewhat limited if you can't do that, if you can't afford to go to Adelaide...”(Whyalla female first interview).

#### Moving to the city

Having to move to the city was identified by many participants as having influenced their decision to defer university for a year so that they could work and save money for university the following year.

“Probably yeah where I come from has made me want to take the year off more as well because if you’re in the city you don’t necessarily have to move out of home or anything, where here you’ve got to move a long way away and it’s kind of a big change to go to Adelaide or wherever you’re headed” (Roxby female first interview).

#### Finances

Finances appeared to play an important role in participants’ plans for the following year. Almost one third identified finances as a complicating factor or potential inhibitor of university attendance. In total, only 3 of the 33 participants attended university the year after completing Year 12, compared to 13 who deferred for a year. Of those that deferred, 10 identified that they had done so in order to work to meet the eligibility criteria for Independent Youth Allowance. It is also interesting to note that 2 of the 3 planning to attend university the year after completing school were already receiving Youth Allowance.

“I am going to defer from uni if I get in and just yeah get money so that I can get help, like Youth Allowance, yeah I’m going to live with a couple of my friends there and then hopefully the year after I will go to uni, hopefully” (Kimba female 1st interview).

“Um well I applied for university...but um at this stage I’m going to take a year off first um. My main reason behind that is to become financially independent, so you get that bit extra from Centrelink. Um and yeah in that year I’ll probably um hoping to get a job somewhere in this region...” (Roxby female 1st interview).

Having people come and talk to us who are at uni and studying and stuff and that made me think that I need an allowance because the people talking to us had their parents paying most of their way and I knew that if we have a bad year at the farm ... my parents won’t be able to pay my way so that’s sort of why I thought I should try to make as much money as I can so that I can get the allowance, yeah. ... If I get so much money then I can get an allowance for the year after so that I don’t have to be so worried about working and uni at the same time (Kimba female 1st interview).

#### Pathways of Participants during their first year after leaving school

Participants followed a variety of pathways during their first year after leaving school. By far, the most common pathway was deferring university to work for a year (13). Other pathways included: University (3); Returned to school) (5 - two as an alternate to deferring); Full-time employment (4); Business college then full-time work (2); Apprenticeship (4); Navy (1); and unemployment (1).

When asked how what they were doing during their first year after leaving school compared with their plans for life after school, only one third of participants stated that they were following their desired pathways. Regardless of whether participants followed their desired paths or not, a majority drew attention to the fact that they experienced unexpected difficulties during their first year of the transition from school. Of those that

moved most mentioned experiencing financial difficulties at some stage, with two moving back to their hometown for a few months in the middle of the year because they could not afford to support themselves in the city.

“Money, I was having trouble you know, gathering money together to even live here... Yeah the last couple...the last five months I think...when I was really scraping the bottom of the barrel for money ...so it was...yeah the last five months, that big block was really hard, cos my job they were just ...in the end I was working six hours a week for them. And I had rent and yeah cos... (flat mate) moved out and (other flat mate) and I we had to share the rent so that was like \$250 a fortnight was being taken out, so I barely made that...that was bloody hard" (Kimba female – moved to city- 2nd interview).

“I’ve been quite broke a few times...that was actually quite...quite scary...um I managed to last a week without having to ask my parents for just a little bit of money so I can buy um like some food or toothpaste or something. Yeah. I guess it shows you...awe you don’t really need money that much, but yeah, you do need it for the essentials” (Roxby male moved to city- 2nd interview).

In comparison, some participants in receipt of Youth Allowance identified this financial assistance as assisting them to pursue their desired paths.

The government, being on Centrelink...like I was on that when I was at school and getting onto that, they’ve basically kept going with that and cos I’ve moved out they’ve given me an extra sixty bucks rent assistance for living on my own ...that’s been helpful (Roxby male 2nd interview)

Of those that deferred in order to work to finance university the following year, 10 were planning to attend the following year and 3 were not. Of those that were not planning to attend the following year, all had gained employment in their hometowns, with two specifically stating that they had weighed up the costs and benefits of going to university and had decided to get a job locally instead because they did not want to struggle financially whilst in university (Roxby male and Whyalla male). During their first interviews whilst still in Year 12, some of those planning to defer the following year were worried that they may lose the motivation to attend university the following year.

“I’m worried about deferring because I don’t want to go out of wanting to do it, but hopefully I will just, with perseverance and stuff, it’s something I really want to do, so I want to go for it, get it done and be a nurse” (Kimba female 1st interview).

And now, this last couple of days I’ve decided that maybe I should have a year off where I will make money, and then go to uni, but then again, that will be weird if I stop for the year, going from a fifty thousand or so dollar a year job, into uni, yeah, that will kind of suck, yeah, it will suck making that choice, if I actually go that way, but it’s what I want to do so I guess I will have to do it (Whyalla male 1st interview).

These concerns raised by participants during their initial interviews suggests that there is

a high likelihood that increasing the hours students are required to work to 30 hours per week for at least 18 months in a two year period would deter many rural students from attending university. This is further evidenced by the fact that three of the thirteen participants that deferred university the year after leaving school had found alternate employment and were not intending to go to university the following year.

In addition to this, current youth unemployment rates suggest that there are not enough unskilled full-time positions for all rural youth to work at least 30 hours per weeks for 18 months in order to be eligible for Independent Youth Allowance. This is illustrated by the fact that in 2001, of the 31 percent of Year 12 graduates that did not enter higher education, only 13.5 percent gained full-time employment (Jones 2002, Dusseldorp Skills Forum (DSF) August 2003). In 1966, for instance, 58 percent of 15 to 19 year-olds were employed full-time compared to sixteen percent in 1999 (Jones 2002, Dusseldorp Skills Forum (DSF) August 2003, Australian Bureau of Statistics 2003d, Aspin 1994).

Another concern, if the Independent Youth Allowance eligibility criteria were to change, is the fact that most university courses can only be deferred for one year. If rural youth were required to work a minimum of 30 hours per week for at least 18 months in a two year period, by the time they were eligible for Independent Youth Allowance and could afford to move to the city, they would not have their position at university. Given that the proposed changes would require youth to work at least 30 hours per week, it would not be possible for them to attend university in addition to working these hours after deferring their position for one year. These changes may cause rural youth to view attending university as being too hard and may deter them from attending altogether.

Rather than increasing the difficulty for rural youth to meet independence criteria for Youth Allowance, findings from this research indicate that there is in fact a need to make it easier for rural youth to receive financial support to enable them to move to the city and participate in tertiary education. A number of the rural youth interviewed in this research identified that they would have attended university directly after completing Year 12 had they have not had to take a gap year to meet the eligibility criteria for Independent Youth Allowance.

“I probably would have went to uni this year, but I needed to work to earn money so that I can go to uni...yeah to get the allowance, I have to make that much money...Um hopefully (next year will be) easier now that I know what I have to do. I know that next year I will go to uni and still work part time and hopefully get Youth Allowance, so hopefully it gets easier now” (Kimba female 2nd interview).

“Um...I think if I grew up in the city I might have (gone to uni), yeah, because I'd have my family down here, you'd still have that um sort of support I suppose you could say and easily (emphasis) go to uni, whereas you need that Centrelink allowance to keep you going down here all by yourself, whereas if you're living with your parents and going to uni, it would be like school I suppose and have their support. Mmm...yeah so I think that would affect where I might be now” (Kimba female 2nd interview).

“I think I would have gone straight onto uni if I lived in the city, because I think the main reason that I deferred is so that I could earn some money and um stay with my family and stuff. Like if my family....so I can afford to get a house or a place to stay there. If my family lived in Adelaide I'd still be able to live with them and still go to uni, so it would probably still be the easy thing. Whereas moving from a small town to the city would be quite hard cos in the city you have to pay for things, and you're by yourself in the city, which would be scary. So yeah, I would have probably have went straight on from school to uni, because I would have had somewhere to stay and people to go back to and call on and stuff... If I had of lived in Adelaide I would have just gone straight on to uni, cos it's easier” (Roxby female 2nd interview).

“It's more that I couldn't go to uni straight away because I wouldn't have the money to do it. If I was in Adelaide I could've gone straight away because I could've just gone to uni because you know, just get the HECS fees going and not have to worry about the whole accommodation, bills, all that sort of money crap. Yeah, I guess the difference is me taking that year off, and me trying to get some money...If the government gave me a huge lump sum and told me to go to uni and they'd pay for it... it wouldn't be such of a hassle then. When you don't need to worry about money you can focus on your education. If I didn't have to defer I could've gone to uni straight away and just been in there doing my thing. So yeah, finance is I guess for me a huge part of it, from where I stand....There's the bonus points thing (for university entrance) but still, financially it does nothing. The bonus points are always good, it can help you get to uni, like it did with me, but it's nothing in terms of money” (Whyalla male 2nd interview).

“It does effect you because if I was in Adelaide I could've gone to uni this year and I wouldn't have had to think of my parents paying rent and stuff for me. I could've still lived at home with them and yeah basically. It does affect you because a lot of other students who wanted to go to uni won't because it'll cost their parents too much and it's too far away to go. It's basically really the only thing that affects you for after school if you want to pursue a career or something. A lot of people don't get a chance to because of money” (Whyalla female 2nd interview).

“I suppose it made things difficult cos I'll be moving out of town away from family. And I need to have a bit of money behind me and get a job, whereas if I was living in Adelaide I'd probably still be at home with my parents, while doing uni, which would have made it easier” (Whyalla male 2nd interview).

Unlike their city counterparts, rural youth must make the early transition to independent living whilst also adjusting to the transition to university and juggling part-time work to supplement their income. Rural youth are already significantly disadvantaged when it comes to participation in higher education due having to move away from their family, friends, and support networks in order to attend university. Current statistics identify



that youth in rural areas are less likely to participate in further education than urban youth due to geographic, financial, cultural, social, and schooling barriers (Wyn et al. 1999, Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, Higher education division March 1999, Centre for the study of higher education 2003).

The expenses associated with moving and living away from home in order to participate in higher education are recognised as inhibitors or barriers for rural students, as most higher education institutions are situated in cities (Centre for the study of higher education 2003, Weston, Mcmillan & Durrington 1998, Croce 2002). This limits the education and training options of many youth in rural areas who cannot afford to leave home and live independently (Quine et al 2004). Cultural and social factors have also been identified as influencing rural youth's ability or motivation to pursue further education, as it may not be viewed as important or necessary, by influential family or community members (Centre for the study of higher education 2003).

Rural students are also less likely than urban students to stay on to the final years of secondary school, which results in them being less likely to meet higher education entry requirements (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2003a). The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2003) have identified that in 2001, 62 percent of young people aged 15-19 years who had left school in major capital cities had completed Year 12, and that of these, 68 percent were undertaking further education. In comparison, only 46 percent of young people in regional areas completed Year 12, of which 54 percent were undertaking further studies (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2003a).

As reflected in current education statistics and the findings of this research, rural youth already face a number of barriers inhibiting them from pursuing higher education. Therefore the adequacy of the proposed Government measures to provide equitable access to secondary and post-secondary education to rural youth needs to be re-evaluated to ensure that they are not disadvantaged further. Given the fact that such a high percentage of youth take a gap year in order to meet the eligibility criteria for youth allowance, extending this period further postpones their plans to attend higher education and may potentially discourage their attendance all together. The findings of this study indicate that even prior to the proposed changes to the youth allowance eligibility criteria, rural youth require more financial support than they are currently receiving. Rather than increasing the barriers to participating in higher education, more measures need to be put in place to support rural youth.

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