

I would like to write (as I have to Mr Gary Blackwood and Mr Russell Broadbent from our local area, along with Mr Kevin Rudd and Ms. Julia Gillard) in regards to the changes in the criteria for financial independence for Youth Allowance and ABSTUDY. As a parent of a child who has deferred from Medicine at Monash (5 years, Clayton first then Bendigo) to take a GAP year this year, primarily for the reason to gain her independence, I feel that the government has not taken into consideration the costs for students from rural areas. Our daughter will now have to consider travelling long hours, instead of living in at the university, which gives her a considerable disadvantage compared to her metropolitan counterparts. She is, as far as I can see, ineligible for any form of scholarship. In our personal circumstance, we are in a position better than most, with our children attending a local private school, however, we will still find it extremely difficult to cover the costs of our eldest child's university education, accommodation and/or travel costs. This is particularly since we then have three other girls to follow, with none of them likely to take on a trade or apprenticeship. Our eldest, due to the demands of her course, as with many health science degrees, will also be very unlikely to be able to work, without affecting her studies, except during university holidays. For others, doing courses with less contact hours, they would at least have the option of working part time to assist in their living costs. Students should not be disadvantaged due to their rural status, nor for the course that they choose. I thought rural doctors were in demand, and those from rural areas originally are the ones most likely to return to the region are they not???!!!!!

With the tightening of this eligibility most rural students will be severely disadvantaged, due to the difficulty in deferring for more than one year, being able to obtain full time work in rural areas (no easy task, as my daughter has found, travelling between two menial jobs, one hour in travel time apart), and of course the substantially higher relocation costs that they face. I am not against families of low incomes getting assistance, but it needs to be said that rural middle income earners are hit again with trying to stretch the budget when all we are doing is working hard to improve ourselves, and trying to give our children their best possible chance to succeed as well.

Our eldest, also, is extremely upset with this decision, feeling cheated after her decision to defer. The very least the government could do would be to delay the changes for those that have based their decision for a gap year on the previous rulings whilst the policy is overhauled. Once the decision was made, she relished the idea of working hard this year, gaining her independence from us, and being able to feel like the responsible young adult that she is, and manage/own her university education. This is despite our reassurance that we will support her to the best of our ability in any way we can, and never rely on government, or any other assistance, to do so, as they so often let you down. Perhaps, we were the foolish ones, encouraging her with her decision, believing, for once, that our higher education system was a fair, equitable one. Our first rude awakening, and I'm sure not the last as we attempt to educate our girls. Maybe we shouldn't encourage our other girls to have dreams of university? Perhaps being a teenage unemployed single mother would be a better option for them? Otherwise, we could force them to leave home, or advise them to form a defacto relationship for their 'GAP' year, then they could become eligible for assistance. It always seems to be those that try to help themselves that are the ones not rewarded for their behavior! Very frustrating!

I would appreciate you taking my concerns into consideration, as I know that they are also the concerns of many others in rural areas. The entire system is in need of an overhaul I sincerely believe. Spending one or two years in mindless jobs to qualify for government payments whilst your mind is at its peak performance is really not a good use of resources, and the policy is a clear contradiction of our supposedly 'pro-education' government who wants 30% of Australians to have tertiary education by 2020.

Thanking you,

Sharyn Hatswell