

Submission to Senate inquiry into Rural and Regional Access to Secondary and Tertiary Education Opportunities

From Robin Muller

I am the parent of two sons who are 16 and 20 years old. I live in Echuca in rural Victoria, 200 km from Melbourne where there are many tertiary opportunities, 80km from Shepparton, where there are limited tertiary opportunities and 100km from Bendigo where there are tertiary opportunities within certain fields.

My older son completed Secondary school in 2007, gained entry into the course of his choice, which is only available in Melbourne-not in regional areas, deferred and spent 2008 working locally to meet the Centrelink requirements for independence. He moved to Melb to commence his tertiary studies in 2009 and began receiving Centrelink payments in June this year.

Each year he is in Melbourne, even living frugally, will cost around \$20,000. His Centre Link payments this year will be in the order of \$6500. Leaving a shortfall of \$13,500. Next year, because he will be eligible for Centrelink payments all year leaving a short fall of \$8500. Similarly for the future years of his course.

He has experienced more difficulty than he expected finding part time work to supplement his payments. The economic downturn has impacted on the availability of part time hospitality work in the inner city area. He is limited to the inner city because he does not have a car in Melbourne as it costs extra to garage a car at his accommodation. His course has 25 hours a week in contact hours, with some lessons finishing as late as 9pm as well as homework and a fieldwork component. This also limits his availability for part time work.

All this is to give an indication of the monetary cost of accessing tertiary studies for a rural student.

Additional to this there are other issues which arise which impact on the finances as well as health and wellbeing of both the student and the family. Some of these include:

- The cost of travel for my son to visit home regularly to stay connected to his family, his friends and his community.
- The cost of travel and accommodation for us to visit my son in Melbourne and be part of his new life and offer support when needed. My sons' accommodation does not have the space or facilities for our family to stay with him. The cost of a moderately priced motel nearby is \$140 per night.
- Several trips to Melbourne to take down his belongings
- Trips to Melbourne to bring his belongings back at the end of the year if his accommodation does not continue through the Christmas break.
- Or paying for accommodation through the Christmas break to ensure he can secure accommodation for the next year.

Additional setup costs for my son to relocate to Melb include the purchase of a suitable laptop computer, enrolment fees, stationary, internet access accommodation and advance rent.

My husband and I have a combined income in the order of \$110,000 and although my son saved money during his time working in 2008 and has used that money for his living costs we are assisting him financial to enable him to participate in tertiary education. This impacts on our families' budget. It restricts our spending on other things. This has a flow on effect in our local rural community. We are not spending locally.

The effect is people living in rural areas focusing their spending, beyond the cost of living, on paying rent in Melbourne and not spending within their communities. Items I believe we will not spend on over the next few years while my sons are at university include:

- Vehicle replacement
- Carpet replacement
- Home maintenance and renovation
- Participation in social events in our community
- Holidays
- Membership of clubs and recreational activities

All of these have a detrimental effect of communities already impacted by drought economic downturn and the drift to the cities.

My second son will completed his secondary education at the end of 2011 and intends to pursue tertiary education. He appears to be headed for a course of study that has only limited availability regionally and will most probably end up in Melbourne too. Even if he were to seek a regional opportunity it would be in Ballarat 250 km which would again require him to move away from home.

For 12 months we will have two students requiring financial support necessitated by moving away from home.

Families with multiple children following along in close secession are hugely impacted on by the costs of the children seeking tertiary study away from home. A family could end up with 3 or 4 children all costing approx \$20,000 each per year.

Changes to the independence conditions will stop rural students accessing youth allowance as a means of financial support to undertake tertiary studies. Although the intention is to stop rorting by students living at home there needs to be some financial assistance available to students who genuinely need to move away from home.

Possibly a new type of support needs to be developed and suitable conditions for qualification set in place to support rural students who need to relocate to undertake suitable tertiary studies.

The current Centrelink process, because the use by rural students is incidental and not the main focus, does not even as "do you need to move

away from home to access your tertiary study” “how far is it” “can you pursue a course at your current location”

None of this is currently viewed as a reason to seek the payment.

The current rent assistance goes nowhere near assisting with rent for students who are required by necessity to live at expensive, sort after locations near to tertiary institutions.

The proposed relocation allowance goes nowhere near meeting the actual costs of country kids’ relocation to Melb or other provincial cities.

The parental income levels are not realistic. They do not cover the range of groups impacted by the need for rural students to relocate for study. At a cost of \$20,000 per student per year, even families earning well above a minimum wage find it financially difficult to be able to support their student away from home.

The proposal that they can find 25 hours a week part time work for two years is unrealistic in the current financial climate.

Working 25 hours a week does not promote diligent study and maximising of the opportunities available through tertiary study.

Remember these students are also undertaking shopping, washing, cooking, cleaning and other household tasks that students who are Melbourne based and living at home are not undertaking.

If my son was unemployed and living in the country he could receive the same amount of Centrlink payments as he does whilst trying to undertake tertiary study, better himself, provide for his own future, and contribute to Australia becoming a smarter nation, meeting the Government dream of greater participation in Tertiary education.

The Government needs to view the financial support of Rural students as an investment in the nation’s future, a means of increasing participation in tertiary education, and both long term and short term support of rural communities.

I hope will you consider my submission as representative of middle Australia living in rural communities trying to educate our children for the betterment of both Australia’s’ and our children’s future.

Robin Muller