

7th August 2009

Emma Greeney

To Whom It May Concern,

I am writing in an individual capacity with regards to the Senate Inquiry into Rural and Regional Access to Secondary and Tertiary Education Opportunities.

It is my understanding that the Government proposes to abolish the \$18 000 in 18 months "gap year" provision from the qualifications for Youth Allowance. With this particular change in mind I refer to the terms of reference sections (a) the financial impact on rural and regional students who are attending metropolitan secondary schools, universities or TAFE; (c) the implications of current and proposed Government measures on prospective students living in rural and regional areas; (e) the adequacy of government measures to provide for students who are required to leave home for secondary or post secondary study; and (g) the impact of government measures and proposals on rural and regional communities.

I sincerely hope that the Government has given adequate thought to the true implications of this policy. Though I agree that the "gap year" provision has been a well and truly abused criterion for many students to accept unnecessary Government assistance and therefore can understand the Government's wish to change this provision, the manner in which the current system is being altered shows little care or concern for the accessibility of tertiary education to students in rural and regional areas.

Often it can be immensely difficult for rural and regional students to make the move to other areas of Australia to take up tertiary studies. With the stress of moving not only out of home but out of their town or city and possibly living self-sufficiently for the first time in their lives, added to the benchmark stresses of beginning at university or TAFE, many first year students in this situation find such a burden too much to handle, resulting in poor initial performance in their studies and possible remittance. Youth Allowance at least enables these people to have some small amount (for indeed, the Youth Allowance money is but a pittance these days) of financial support while they settle themselves into a new lifestyle and begin to study. The reality is the "gap year" qualification is the best option for students finding themselves in this situation, for without some form of financial support, relocation for study is simply not feasible. Being such, a large number of rural and regional students will have elected, at the beginning of 2009, to defer studies in their university or TAFE course of choice to work long hours in a frequently monotonous job over the course of a year in order to save money and qualify for Youth Allowance. With the current changes being initiated in January 2010, no support or consideration is afforded to these students caught between a rock and a hard place. They will have effectively given up a year of their lives for nothing.

I fail to see how a Government who promised us an “Education Revolution” can turn their backs on an entire cohort of young, intelligent, ambitious students simply for the sake of bringing in these reforms as quickly as possible. This flies in the face of equity considerations and the broader desire to increase the accessibility to higher education in Australia.

Given the drive within Universities Australia and the Group of Eight in particular to increase the number of low SES students engaged in higher education to 20% by 2020, and the Bradley Review stating in no uncertain terms that student income support needs to become a priority, it is ridiculous to think that the Government is pioneering an initiative that so directly and so blatantly disregards a very discrete and quantifiable number of students by imposing reforms after such key choices have already been made by the individuals concerned.

Though I could go on at length about the numerous and varied issues regarding access to education, I believe that others, more learned in the field than I, have already elaborated on such matters. Instead I will put my crucial point simply: as a matter of fairness and equity and with great respect for rural and regional students being able to access higher education opportunities, the Government should postpone the introduction of the Youth Allowance reforms to January 2011. This allows for students who are currently in the process of qualifying for the crucial financial assistance they need to do so in the knowledge that we will not ignore their needs or belittle their concerns about the accessibility of higher education.

Yours sincerely,

Emma Greeney