

SUBMISSION TO THE SENATE INQUIRY INTO RURAL AND REGIONAL ACCESS TO SECONDARY AND TERTIARY EDUCATION OPPORTUNITIES

RURAL EDUCATION FORUM AUSTRALIA

REFA is a collective of twenty national educational and allied rural organizations. We advocate the principles of social justice, equity and improved access to quality education for rural students.

There are many issues impacting on why rural and remote young people are less likely to take up tertiary studies, REFA would encourage you to refer to a report commissioned by Country Education Inc. (Victoria) called, "Three Times Less Likely".

However, in recent times REFA has become aware of one recent policy change which it believes will have a large impact on rural and remote young people engaging in tertiary studies, namely the changes to the Youth Allowance.

We believe there is an unintended impact on rural students as a result of the changes to the criteria to prove independence to qualify for the Youth Allowance. Without access to the Youth Allowance (or similar), tertiary study will become impossible for many rural young people and be mainly available to the children of wealthier families.

We are all aware of the impact of prolonged drought and the economic downturn on economic activity in a large number of isolated and remote rural communities. It is simply not possible for most young people to qualify for independence in these areas. Forcing them to move to large centres to qualify, and then to study is going to deter them from taking up tertiary places. The low participation rate of rural students is well documented. It is difficult to see how these changes will improve the inclusion of our constituents, and is another blow to communities already feeling excluded from improved educational outcomes.

From 1991 to 2005 the proportion of regional university students decreased from 20 percent to 17.7 percent. During this period it is estimated that the costs involved in gaining tertiary qualifications for rural and remote students is conservatively \$15,000 per year more than metropolitan students. Added to this are the relocation, upfront accommodation and travel costs. For most rural students a gap year has been necessary to qualify for youth allowance, and therefore fund tertiary studies. To extend the qualification period to two years will reduce those able to participate, and prevent entry in some courses where the deferment period is only twelve months.

Why is there discrimination against young people on the basis of where they live? Sustainable rural communities are important to our national identity and economic viability. This policy is simply bad policy. It further alienates rural people from mainstream Australia.

It is critical that a model inclusive of a rural/distance factor be developed to provide a more realistic incentive for young people in remote and rural areas to take up tertiary study. Distance from a major provincial/metropolitan tertiary provider should automatically qualify students for Youth Allowance. We believe that the changes to the independence allowance are generally supported. However, we would strongly urge the development of a rural and remote allowance to support students from these communities. On current estimates we believe this to be approximately \$22,000 to \$25,000 per annum.

Alternatively, a tax rebate could be given.

Rural students are the victims of an attempt to prevent metropolitan students from defrauding the system.