

The Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committee on Rural and Regional
Affairs and Transport
P.O. Box 6100
Parliament House
CANBERRA 2600

Senate Inquiry on Youth Allowance for Rural and Regional Students.

I welcome an opportunity to make a submission to the Senate Standing Committee on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport in relation to the above matter.

In theory the Government is attempting to address disadvantage for students who have to leave home to study in Metropolitan areas. The reality is that the money available to students who currently qualify for youth allowance or who will under the new arrangements is inadequate to enable a student to leave a rural area such as Gippsland and study in Melbourne. Given the fact that the first thing that a rural student has to do is find a place to live if they wish to study in a metropolitan area, only students who are fortunate to have relatives, a large scholarship or who come from a wealthy background are likely to be able to find appropriate accommodation and study at the institution of their choice. Most rural students either have to choose a course that suits their budget or geographical location to be able to afford to undertake any form of tertiary study. I recommend that the Committee undertake a survey of rural students to verify that what I am suggesting is correct.

The Government should be taking steps to remove disadvantage from tertiary study options available to rural students. The Committee could help achieve this by recommending that there should not be a means test to receive youth allowance for any rural student who meets the entrance standard for a course at a tertiary institute more than 100km from their normal place of residence. The Committee could also recommend that the initial scholarship available to such students be at least double the proposed scholarship amount. Finally the Committee could consider a recommendation that any outside income the student receives not be means tested against the youth allowance. These special allowances to be made available to rural students for a period of up to four years. After that time all normal rules for youth allowance to apply.

Historically, many Victorian rural students went into the teaching profession due to the fact that the Education Department in Victoria provided both studentships and residential accommodation at teachers colleges. I recall that about 75% of the students who left school with me at the end of 1969 and went onto tertiary studies did exactly that. These opportunities disappeared by the late 1970's and eventually teacher shortages developed, particularly in rural schools. Lack of teachers in many rural schools especially in math's and science positions is an ongoing problem today.

Recommendation:

That the Committee investigate a way to invest in the future by encouraging rural students to enter the teaching profession at all levels.

Perhaps there should be additional funding for tertiary courses in regional areas, either at University or TAFE. Perhaps there should be more hostel places for students from rural areas in metropolitan locations. Perhaps rural students should be required to pay back part of any assistance they receive over a period of years after they finish their studies unless they relocate to a location at least 100km from the GPO of a capital city for a period of at least three years.

We need to maximise the opportunities for all young people in Australia. There is no doubt that geographical location is a disadvantage to rural people that prevents them having easy access to a range of services that city people take for granted. If you live more than 100km from a major city you are isolated in comparison to your city counterparts. The ability to access resources is difficult. Public transport is often limited or even non-existent. Access to the internet can be either slow or expensive. The further away a student is from a major city the worse the problem can become. This is particularly true for students who are attempting to complete tertiary studies. Apart from the lack of public transport problems can include lack of suitable courses at tertiary institutes or lack of accommodation.

Recommendation

That the Committee call on The Government to undertake a comprehensive review of the needs of rural students in relation to access to tertiary study and then implement a tertiary study support programme for rural students that enables them to obtain appropriate tertiary qualifications.

Garry Stephens A.F.A.I.M., Grad Dip of Bus Mgt (Monash), A.R.M.I.T., J.P.
