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Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee

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Inquiry into Rural and Regional Access to Secondary and Tertiary Education Opportunities

Terms of Reference

On 16 June 2009, the Senate referred the following matter to the Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee for inquiry and report by 29 October 2009:

Please find below my assessment of the adequacy of Government measures to provide equitable access to secondary and post-secondary education opportunities to students from rural and regional communities attending metropolitan institutions, and metropolitan students attending regional universities or technical and further education (TAFE) colleges, I have made particular reference to the stated terms of reference of the committee.

In today's The Age newspaper (3Aug09) there is an article headlined "Uni entry biased to city pupils" p5. This article reports the findings of the Parliament of Victoria's Inquiry into *Inquiry into Geographical Differences in Participation in Higher Education in Victoria* this inquiry was conducted over a 12 month

period and received 188 submissions from a range of people in rural, regional and metropolitan areas of Victoria. The Age reports that this 'cross party' committee 'attacked the Federal Government's changes to student income support - announced in May's federal budget - saying that they would "greatly restrict" many students from qualifying for help. I think it would be helpful for Ms King (my local federal member) and Ms Gillard to read this report, as both these women seem to think that the proposed changes will enhance the opportunities and financial support for students from rural and regional areas to participate in higher education.

Another significant finding of the inquiry as reported in The Age - was the increasing number of students from rural and regional areas who defer entry into Higher Education. The Age reports that 1 in 3 country students deferred their entry to higher education in 2007-8. The main reason given for this is the high cost of tertiary education. Victorian students in more remote parts of the state had a deferment rate of 40%.

The Age further reports that the committee was critical of recent Government changes saying 'the committee does not believe these changes will significantly improve access to higher education for those who must live away from home to study...'

Did I need to read The Age today to know these findings - no I did not! I live in a regional city and have a daughter who intends to further her education and has been offered a place at a Metropolitan University. My daughter deferred her offer to Sydney University because of the high costs of living away from home and the cost of a tertiary education. It was her intention to participate in a Gap year so that she would qualify for independent youth allowance according to the rules the Federal government had published during her VCE year 2008.

It was with considerable shock and dismay that we learned in the Federal budget in May that her plans would be thrown into disarray - it would now be impossible for her to qualify for independent youth allowance and still accept her offer to study at Sydney University.

My daughter is a very independent and competent young woman she has achieved success in her studies and sporting endeavours. She has shown leadership in her school and local community. She is a young woman who with the opportunity of a tertiary education will have much to offer her country and rural and regional Australia in particular. She has worked part-time since being permitted by law at age 14.9 months, this has mostly been casual work in a local supermarket - like many of her peers - she received regular 4 hour shifts mostly at weekends and

fitted her sporting commitments around these shifts - she is very experienced in juggling work/study/sport/family commitments. She knows the value of money and the difficulties of regional transport as she often needed to catch a taxi home after a late finish losing 20% of her earnings in the process.

The proposed changes to the youth allowance criteria that require working 30 hours per week for 18 months is impossible for my daughter to achieve. Such jobs are not available in regional Victoria. She has been unable to work 30 hours per week since leaving school - despite working at two jobs - three days a week as a receptionist in Melbourne, plus her supermarket shifts did not equal 30 hours in many weeks. As she has deferred a place at the University of Sydney which she must take up in February 2009 and as she would be unlikely to be able to find 30 hours of work in Sydney - qualifying for independent Youth Allowance will be impossible. Even if all this was possible she would still not qualify as these changes have been announced mid year of her 'gap year', and she is being retrospectively assessed.

Please just stop and think what you are asking young people to do.

I sincerely doubt many older adults would be capable of such a transition even if the job opportunities were present - and in regional areas in the current employment environment they are not. It is very difficult to find a job when you do not live in the area - attending interviews, speaking personally with prospective employers etc, which is the requirement for a young person moving from the country to the metropolitan area. Remember the young person has to find a job of 30 hours per week and an employer who is willing to take them on for 3 months while they commence their tertiary studies - it is highly unlikely any employer will want to waste his/her time training a young person who will be highly distracted by their university start or alternatively the young person jeopardises the start of the university year through being over committed to work.

Please base your considerations of these proposed changes in the realities of people's lives - my daughter has worked usually 2 shifts of 4 hours per week, with some additional shifts in holiday periods, since Year 10. She has been successful in gaining an additional casual job packing school books over the Christmas holidays this year, when this job ended she then gained a part-time casual receptionist job in Melbourne. Each of these jobs paid the minimum wage, the daily transport costs to Melbourne further reduced her net pay as the benefits of a weekly ticket do not apply to a person working 3 or less days per week. She was well on the way to meeting the target \$19870 to achieve independent youth

allowance - even if she would not be eligible at the very start of her University studies - she would qualify soon after by obtaining some casual work in Sydney. However, despite her diligence in finding and keeping work in a difficult economic period she is no where near the requirement of 30 hours every week for 18 months.

The points I have made below address further the terms of reference of the committee, however, the impact the proposed changes will have on the personal lives of families and young people goes well beyond statistics and financial numbers we need to encourage and support our young people to develop their skills and abilities - tertiary education is one such pathway that young people should be supported to pursue.

1. the financial impact on rural and regional students who are attending metropolitan secondary schools, universities or TAFE;

1. Higher costs of transport eg daily train tickets are \$15 Ballarat to Melbourne, as compared to \$2-70 for MET travel within Melbourne to Monash or Latrobe Universities.
2. Additional costs of rural and regional students to live away from home - rent, food, utilities etc as opposed to metropolitan students who may still live at home and continue their post secondary studies.

2. the education alternatives for rural and regional students wanting to study in regional areas;

1. Students who live in more remote rural and regional areas are often required to move to larger regional centres for post secondary education given the points made elsewhere about the even more limited job opportunities in remote rural and regional areas the expectation that students will work 30 hours over and 18 month period is highly discriminatory and unachievable as a result it would be expected that students would not be able to take up post secondary education thus further reducing the skills development of remote rural and regional areas

3. the implications of current and proposed government measures on prospective students living in rural and regional areas;

1. It is difficult for young people to find sufficient work in rural and regional areas. Most jobs available to young people are in the

larger regional areas and these are mostly part time retail and service industry jobs. Typically these employers offer 4 hour shifts per day so that working 7 days a student may only work 28 hours per week - less than the required 30 hours per week under the proposed legislation. In reality it is most unlikely that a student would achieve 28 hours per week as they would not be allocated sufficient shifts and working days to achieve this number of hours due to the size of the business in rural and regional areas or the number of students competing for the limited number of jobs available and employers desire to 'share the work available around' to as many people as possible.

2. In smaller regional a rural areas job opportunities are even more restricted with the small number of positions available being job shared among local young people.
3. Some young people will go to capital cities to find additional work meaning they leave home as soon as high school finishes or commute both options incur additional financial burden as they make the transition to post secondary school choices as compared to metropolitan young people who can continue to use their home as a base while they establish themselves and transition to their working life.
4. Often young rural and regional young people will undertake part time work from age 16 to support their families and their own needs and requirements. Students will often reduce their part time work hours during their VCE/HSC year to concentrate on their studies. The government's proposed legislation runs counter to this requiring students to work 30 hours over an 18 month period students must choose either to work additional hours during the VCE/HSC year or continue working 30 hours when they start their tertiary studies.
5. Students who defer their tertiary place may only do so for 12 months under the governments proposed legislation students will need to continue to work 30 hours per week for up to the first 6 months of their first year of tertiary studies to meet the requirements for independent youth allowance.

4. the short- and long-term impact of current and proposed government policies on regional university and TAFE college enrollments;

1. The Victorian Parliament Inquiry makes significant observations on this matter. I refer the committee to its report.

5. the adequacy of government measures to provide for students who are required to leave home for secondary or post-secondary study;

1. The governments proposed parental income cut off amounts do not reflect the realities of working families in an era where women are encouraged to work. A family with both parents working is likely to earn more than the \$48000 cut off where a students youth allowance begins to be reduced. A student from a family with two parents on average weekly earnings would receive a significantly reduced amount of Youth Allowance such that it would be very difficult to imagine how a student would provide for their needs on this amount of youth allowance even allowing for the increased earning capacity students will have under the proposed legislation
2. The notion that parental income should impede students undertaking post secondary studies runs counter to the requirements of the social and commercial needs of Australia in the 21st century where to keep pace with the changing environment when need an educated society - this has been mocked in the past as the aspiration of the 'clever country' and now we have the 'education revolution' the bottom line is to compete internationally we need an educated population whether this in trades through TAFE or professions and higher education through universities post secondary education should be encouraged for all young people as the the continuation of 'life long learning'.

6. the educational needs of rural and regional students;

1. Rural and regional students defer their continuation to post secondary studies at approximately 2.5 times the rate of metropolitan students. Being able to achieve independent youth allowance during this period enables students to be supported to move away from home to continue their studies as most universities are located in the larger regional or metropolitan areas

2. Rural and regional students must be encouraged and fostered to continue their post secondary education as often they will relocate back to rural and regional areas bringing with them much needed skills in areas of high skill demand

7. the impact of government measures and proposals on rural and regional communities; and

1. Due to the limited job opportunities for the population generally and young people in particular in rural and regional areas young people will be forced to relocate away from such areas in order to meet the governments proposed requirements for 30 hours work over an 18 month period
2. As 38 hours is considered full time work this is an excessive burden to place on young people. In many rural and regional communities under employment is a significant issue for many adults. Requiring students who have deferred a post secondary education place to compete with other job seekers when the students will only require to job for up to 18 months does not reflect the realities of rural and regional communities' labor markets where work is characterised as seasonal and part time.
3. The increased burden being placed on rural and regional students will lead to families considering the costs and complications of living and working in rural and regional areas. Many families will weigh up these options and some may decide to relocate to city areas for the final years of their children's schooling or post secondary education. The proposed measures will only further exacerbate the migration of people from rural and regional areas taking the much needed skills that these people have. It is unlikely children of such families would return to rural and regional areas given the decision of the family to resettle in a city location again entrenching the skills drain from rural and regional areas. This is the opposite of the situation where rural and regional students are supported in their post secondary education and continue to see the country home as a base these students are more likely to return to a rural or regional location upon completion of their studies or later in their careers as they have established an ongoing and a strong link to a rural and regional home base.

8.h. other related matters.

1. Consistently over the last 10 years published employment figures, and this has been repeated this week (ending 7Aug) have noted an increasing trend of a reduction in full time work

positions and an increase in part time positions. The government's requirement that young people work 30 hours per week means that they are directly competing with this under employed workforce. While some adults will chose to work less than full time hours in rural and regional areas such under employment is often the result of limited opportunities for full time work.

2. I would happy to be contacted to provide further evidence or explanation of this submission.