

Dear Sirs,

As a Governing Council of a country secondary school of approximately 580 students we wish to make the following submission to the Inquiry into Rural and Regional Access to Secondary and Tertiary Education Opportunities. We refer specifically to the changes to the eligibility criteria for the Youth Allowance ie that is the removal of the criteria requiring a student to earn \$19,600 in the 18month period.

We feel that the changes proposed in the 2009 budget, specifically the changes to the eligibility criteria for Youth Allowance viz the work requirements preferentially disadvantage country students.

The costs of educating a student from a country location are significantly higher than from a city location. These costs are related to the requirement to live away from home and for transport to and from the home location. Under the proposed changes this higher cost, and its associated disincentive to undertake tertiary study, are not recognised by government in any way under any of the reforms to Youth Allowance eligibility criteria.

The disincentive shows in the lower participation rates of country students in tertiary training **under existing schemes**. This has resulted in the need, recognised by all tertiary training institutions, to enact positive, proactive programs to increase these participation rates eg the bonus points schemes operated by universities as part of their entry selection programs. If these poor participation rates exist under the existing scheme, they will surely be even poorer when the Youth Allowance scheme eligibility requirements are tightened.

The new work eligibility criteria of 30 hours work for 18 months is simply unrealistic for many school leavers and again preferentially disadvantages country students, where opportunities for such work is lower. The work available to school leavers is substantially part time. The more rural the location, the more restrictive the planned changes become.

The additional costs for country students create additional pressures on students from country locations – principally to undertake work in addition to study – pressure not faced by city students. These are in addition to the social and emotional pressures faced by country students of

- the emotional upheaval of leaving the family home
- disbanding existing social networks (eg friendship groups, sporting teams, clubs and societies, church groups etc) and having to establish new ones
- the time pressures faced by many country students who are forced to live independently

all of which occur at the critical time of first engaging tertiary study. City students simply do not face these pressures. To add financial pressures to the inherent disadvantages, further exacerbates such disadvantage.

The levels of training in rural industries are very low by international standards and the proposed changes make it more difficult to overcome this. This is part of a more sinister issue for country students - “brain drain”. Anecdotal information in our community is that many mobile professionals compare the cost of living in rural locations with their city counterparts. The teachers in our school are one such group. Teachers in our school are faced with the additional costs of tertiary education for their children **by comparison with their city based colleagues**. This has two flow-on effects: firstly it is a disincentive

to teachers to come here in the first place. It is already difficult to attract teachers to country locations. Secondly it provides a strong incentive for teachers to relocate at the point in their lives when their children need to move away, so there isn't the need to operate two households, one in the country and one in the city. This situation occurs **regardless of any changes to means testing criteria**. It doesn't arise from comparison across socio-economic groups, as reflected in access to the Allowance based sliding scales of parental income. It comes from comparisons between people in the same occupations (and therefore same socio-economic group) in the country and in the city. As a teacher why would you work in a country school when you could live in the city and not incur the additional costs of educating your children away from home (estimated at \$60 000 for **each** child)? This applies to all people who are mobile, not just teachers, and results in a shortage of professionals working in country locations.

The proposed changes, by potentially reducing the number of people from country communities who are tertiary educated, reduces the pool of such people who return to the country. It is well understood that the people most likely to return to the country are those who come from the country in the first place.

The proposed changes, impact on the psychology of country students. These people are recognised as adults in all jurisdictions and for every purpose under Australian law. They are legally beyond the influence of their parents and are independent in every decision that they make. They live apart from their family (by necessity). Under existing criteria, they have the capacity to be financially independent yet under the proposed changes they must remain financially dependent upon their parents until they are twenty two.

The retrospective nature of the proposed changes is simply unfair on those of our children who have "followed all of the rules" and "done the right thing" by taking a gap year to earn the required amount in order to become eligible as independent students, as is their right as adults in contemporary Australian society. They now find, through no fault of their own, they are no longer eligible.

There are significant flow-on disadvantages to not longer being eligible for Youth Allowance— eg access to scholarships who in turn have "eligibility for Youth Allowance" as an application criteria and access to rent assistance are but two.

The proposed changes, by potentially reducing participation in education fly in the face of the government programs to make Australia "the clever country". They certainly drive a move into the trades, based on training delivered locally – many of our children are saying to us that to stay at home and do a trade is looking very attractive. Unfortunately the number of such openings is very limited in country communities. In addition the notion that, as a nation, investment in education is the best one we can make is directly countered by the proposed changes.

Our community is very concerned about the long term impacts of the proposed changes. These changes are forever in the lives of our children and we are being faced by the difficult decisions about which of our children we will be able to support to go away to study. This is very distressing within families.

This decision hits us at a time we are already in dire economic straits – in the midst of the worst drought in the history of European settlement, a global financial crisis and

when we are faced with great uncertainty about our futures as we deal with the issues of water restrictions being face in Murray Darling Basin.

We urge you to abandon the proposed changes and to create an equitable environment in which all Australians have equal access to tertiary Education.

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