

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:

An 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, with particular reference to:”

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

As a parent of three children who I expect to attend University in Adelaide, These proposed changes will make the difference between our family staying in a rural area and leaving. I am the only full time Psychologist in the region and an elected member to the local council. Although there are a few years until the first of my children is ready to leave for University or further education at a city based higher education institution, I know by the state of the region in which we live that this will not work for us. Although I am a professional, I am already disadvantaged living in a rural area with the costs associated with regular attendances at professional development training in Adelaide. However these costs are nothing compared to what we will have to put out for the children to go to the city for further education after school. There are too few jobs for young people as it is in our regions to expect them to find full time employment for two years before starting their University or Further Education course. It is not possible to defer a course for two years so this leads to a level of uncertainty amongst the youth and parents about the chances of gaining a place when they are eligible. This leaves the door wide open to richer families in the city where the children can live at home and be supported throughout their studies to take up the available places thus closing the door on our children. In the Riverland there are few wealthy families after such a long period of drought. As such it will take many years to recover and pay the debts incurred through these very difficult times. These people cannot afford the added expenses of supporting their child for such a long period of time.

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

As a former Flinders University staff member and TAFE lecturer in a regional area, there are few opportunities for young people to study in the region in which they live. Our region is dominated by vines and citrus where rural places at TAFE revolve round Enrolled Nursing, Community service qualifications and hospitality and computing. At the Flinders University Campus in our region again courses are very limited and revolve round nursing and now they have a Paramedics course. There are provisions through the Flinders Rural Clinical School to study Medicine but there are only six places or so per year with most being offered to people from other areas and most of the study still has to be done in Adelaide.

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

It is already very difficult for rural students to study in our Universities. This is a fact known in the Nations Universities for well over a decade. As a former Student and Member of the University Of Western Sydney Policy and Planning Committee I see data on a regular basis on student drop out rates and break down of demographics of those people. The majority tended to be the younger students and those from regional or outlying areas. The fact of the matter is you are taking people away from their families, their friends and social supports. You are introducing them to a totally different environment and asking them to largely support themselves and to study and function in ways they have never had to in the past.

When added with the financial imposts they find themselves under as a result of this relocation the result is often reduced grades, depression, social isolation and drop outs. In my rural psychology practice I see on a regular basis about the same time each year a number of young people who have developed clinical diagnosable mental health conditions as a direct result of having to move away from their families and to study and get by in a totally different environment. The main conditions I see are Depression, Anxiety, Adjustment Disorder and drug and alcohol issues.

In some cases we have families separating in order that a parent can be in the city with their child to offer support. This causes huge financial and personal issues for those families. This happens often in some of our cultural and linguistically diverse communities especially where the daughter is going off to study, the mother may well move to the city to be with them.

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

I can see that there would be a reduction in enrollments from rural and regional students at universities. I believe that TAFE places will stay constant as many of the courses are already over subscribed. It will mean more competition for places but higher unemployment within the youth sector if they are not leaving the town to travel to the city to study.

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

These measures are wholly inadequate. There is by far more pressure placed on the families to financially support their children who are studying in city based universities than their metropolitan counterparts. I agree with the grants offered but only as an addition to the current system not instead of it. Many families have to rent a home in Adelaide and furnish it to make sure that their child has an adequately safe place in order to live and study in the city. This means rent, electricity, gas, furniture, bonds, not to mention the transport costs, the food bills, the computer (which would normally be shared by the family at home if they were there) internet costs, phone set up and bills for internet and calling home. There is no financial support for individuals or families to meet those extra costs. For people in cities these are often choices that are made to live at home or move out. For rural and remote people the choices are not there. If they do not move out they do not receive the education they have earned or have the right to.

f. the educational needs of rural and regional students:

These needs are the same as for metropolitan based students. Here we need to take into account that many students are mature age student. I am a psychologist living in Renmark I need to do my clinical masters in psychology but cannot because I have to travel to Adelaide to do it face to face. My family cannot afford to do this. I will be required to have this qualification in a few years in order to have equal access to many government contracts. This means that at some point I will have to leave the region and take my family and psychological practice with me. It is notoriously difficult to recruit psychologists to rural areas so, after a decade in practice; the region may be left without this service.

As far as other student's needs are concerned, in this region it is very difficult to say. We do not fully understand the impact of the drought and how many farmers will be left in the industry when this has started to pick up. As a local Government elected member, I am involved in a number of cross regional forums designed to look at the longer term impact and future direction of our communities. This is an ongoing process, however the landscape, both social and financial, will be somewhat different at the end of the drought than it was when it started. The focus of our region in the Riverland tends to be in health, community services, computing, hospitality and tourism, with some mechanical trades thrown in. Many of our young people have to go to Adelaide for apprenticeships such as hairdressing and mechanics as well as the more university based courses.

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

h. other related matters

This section takes into account a letter I had already planned to write and submit before completing this current submission. As such I will place sections "g" and "h" here.

As a rural Psychologist, Local Government Councilor, Criminologist and former TAFE lecturer, I feel that the changes to the criteria to prove independence to qualify for the Youth Allowance will further disadvantage our rural and regional young people. The last five years or so has brought huge financial hardship and psychological distress to many in our struggling communities. As such the state and federal governments have recognized the plight of people in our communities and in doing so, have allocated counselling resources and support programs worth millions of dollars. They have set up various groups to manage the current situation as well as planning for the future. They have even committed significant funding to ensure the long term training of our young people and unemployed to work in trades learned in the newly developed trade schools.

However, in one swift action this plan will erode much of these much praised initiatives. We talk about our rural communities being resilient. As a psychologist who works in several states across many rural areas, I am here to tell you that we are not. The fact that people have to survive does not make them resilient, it just makes them survive. In doing so more and more in our community are becoming depressed, anxious, and developing a number of clinical conditions which are overloading our health systems. Rural areas already have high rates of suicide especially among

our young people. Many of which may go miss classified as single vehicle accidents on our roads. We already have huge drug and alcohol issues much of which is to block out the issues they face in their lives.

One thing we do have is hope. Hope that we can send our children to University with the assistance of the government so that they can have a better future. Also in the hope that they will return with their new qualifications to build and further support the communities in which they were brought up. Hope of the young person that there will be a future for them after school. The hope of employment, the hope of further education, the hope of a stable and self determined future.

This proposed change to the youth allowance will have (if it goes through) massive Psychological and social consequences to our communities. Such as:

1. Create a further deflation in an already deflated parent population who struggle with the concept of loosing their child to the city. They often have to struggle to gather the extra money the young person needs to meet the day to day living costs that are rarely born by city based students.
2. Often children from rural areas hold that University place as the reason to finish their year 12. I believe that some students will give that away if they have to work full time for two years before receiving the youth allowance and starting University. Especially since obtaining full time employment in a rural area is almost impossible for most people let alone school leavers who would normally fill the part time and casual markets.
3. Even for those students who would normally not go on to university it would increase the sense of hopelessness that many of our young people feel going through school. Statements such as: If people like that can't get into uni what hope do we have? or If those guys are competing for jobs here because they can't go to university what is the point of even trying?
4. Because there will be more young people remaining in the rural areas youth unemployment will increase. There are not the jobs here to support that number of young people where they already are the highest unemployment group.
5. Given the proven link between unemployment and crime. There is an increased chance that crime will in fact increase in rural and remote areas.
6. When people have lost their sense of hope, there is evidence to suggest that as a coping mechanism they will turn to drugs to get them through difficult times. This will put added pressure on our already stretched medical systems. Not to mention the personal and social toll this would place.
7. This proposal will make it more difficult to attract professionals such as doctors, psychologists, physiotherapists, dentists and their families to rural areas if their children's prospects of getting into university are reduced. We need to break down these barriers not increase them.

8. Indeed instead of attracting professionals, I believe that it will force those families whose children have a chance at University and higher education at the various colleges in the city, to move away from their communities. They will be forced to make a choice between an education for their children and an uncertain future for their children. We have already seen some of our families leave our communities because we cannot compete with the range of subjects that the city offers and we have a campus of Flinders University in our Region. The issue is there are only a small number of courses offered and those are competitive places being offered to people from outside the region as well as inside.

These are just some of the issues which will face young people and the community in rural and remote areas if this proposal goes through. The fact is that many of our rural communities are very fragile systems with delicate and vulnerable economies, many of whom are already in decline. This will further exacerbate their situations and will tip other communities over the edge. We need our young people to receive the best education and opportunities we can. This proposal reduces those opportunities for many of these young people.

If this proposal goes through then it I believe the financial impost on higher education to provide those opportunities in the rural and remote areas would be far greater than the amount the government hopes to save with the proposed policy framework. However, as previously stated, this is not just an access and equality issue. The social ramifications of this bill on those communities given past research on communities in decline indicate increased unemployment, crime, drug use, premature school drop out rates increasing and families either moving away from the area or not coming to that area in the first place. The Government may see this policy as an opportunity to create avenues for cost savings whilst making young people more independent and self sufficient. It will in fact have the reverse effect. History has proven this to be the case.

Our rural communities have long since been the bread basket and mineral backbone of the country. They now require a policy which stimulates and assists equality both in terms of finances and of access for our students young and old. This is not just about our youth it is also about those mature age students who are unable to receive the same benefits of further and higher education as their metropolitan counterparts. If you have a family and you want to study outside the very limited scope of the courses provided already, you will more often than not have to leave your community and move closer to town. This further reduces the viability of some of our communities.

Rather than only highlight the issues with this policy, it is also the responsibility of the writer to provide alternatives to these issues. As an active participant in the system we have a responsibility to do so. As such, some of the require changes are listed:

1. The system should provide an allowance which allows a person young or old to relocate to the city and cover some of the rental and establishment costs required for them to study in a metropolitan based course. These additional costs can be in the order of \$15,000 dollars when bonds, furnishings for apartments, connection of electricity gas and the like are taken into consideration. Often almost a second house has to be established for the person who has had to relocate. These costs do not take long to add up and many parents cannot afford to set their children up.

2. Universities, TAFE's and other colleges offering full time courses should be encouraged to make better use of technology and deliver the majority of their courses either on line or through video link up. This will give more equitable access to courses for our rural and remote students as well as those who cannot attend through disability, injury or illness. Access to this form of delivery could be controlled through Student Services which would ensure only those who need the service have the service.
3. This increase in technology and system change should be financed by the government for its initial setup and for the first 3 years which would enable the new system to become fully operational with most of the glitches ironed out.
4. Universities should be encouraged to offer Trimester system of further education for many if not all their courses. This would enable students to complete a three year degree in two years. The writer believes this has been trialed in the past especially at the University of Western Sydney.
5. Austudy should be made available to students studying for Honors, Masters, or PhD at our Universities. These courses are slowly becoming minimum standards within professions and as such, should be given the same status as an under graduate degree. Take Psychology as an example. In order to become a full member of the Australian Psychological Society, You require an accredited 6 year master degree or equivalent. There is an alternative route of four years and two years supervised training. However this is currently under review and is expected to change with the changes to the National Registration Scheme being introduced in July 2010. The changes in Medicare in the last few years have ensured that the standard of training in these areas and across the board in Nursing, Physiotherapy, Dentistry, Medicine and the like is expected to be higher. The government has to respond to these changes with support packages.
6. It can recoup some of the additional expenditure by increasing the rate of HECS required from the courses at a time when those people are in a better position to pay for the assistance. This should be limited and structured to allow rural and remote students discount so as to make the system more equitable.
7. A more streamlined and cross-fertilization of courses between Universities, TAFE's and other Colleges through an all inclusive course and subject accreditation scheme could be introduced so that courses taught at a TAFE for example was equivalent to a first year University course within the same discipline. This is done to some degree at the moment where if you complete a certificate IV in community services at TAFE, you can get credit for the first year of a Social Work Degree at some Universities. If this was expanded to include other degrees and broken down to subject areas it would make the system more equitable.
8. Expanding on this and other themes, some degrees could be made up of either in house or externally delivered subjects within a university or even between Universities. Again there have been some areas where you can do sections of your degree at a recognized

affiliated university in another country. This has been working so there is no reason why we could not do it on a wider scale here.

9. These principles to some degree require wider system Higher Education reform. However, perhaps this is in fact the way we have to head. This system would deliver flexibility, equality and accessibility to all our Students. Perhaps it is time to stop filling in the holes in a disjointed system but to redesign the system and the whole system so that it makes sense and works for the states, industry and the population.

In conclusion, I would like to refer the Senate Review Committee to the Objectives of the Labor Part as outlined on their organizations Web site. I have taken the liberty of highlighting the areas within these objectives that I believe the current policy proposal is at odds with within the parties own objectives. As such these could and to some degree should be the test as to whether the current policy is fair and equitable for rural and remote students and communities.

“Objectives of the Australian Labor Party”

“Labor's enduring values, which were born in the collective struggle **for better living** and working conditions in the last century, are reflected in the progressive and reformist tradition which the Party embodies and in the continuing pursuit of a society which values our security; **champions fairness and equality; believes in communities and families; promotes social justice and compassion;** values environmental sustainability; supports freedom, liberty and enterprise; and strives **for opportunity and aspiration.**

- We value our nation's long-term prosperity—achieved through a modern, competitive economy and **ensuring quality of life for all Australians.**
- We value our security—security for our family, our community and our country. We are proud of our men and women who have served our nation and those who have died in the service of their nation.
- **We value fairness and equality and believe in a fair go for all**—we believe that a nation should be governed in the broader interests of all, not in the sectional interests of a few.
- **We value our communities and our families. Our families are the bedrock of our communities which we need to nurture, protect and support.**
- We value our democratic and public institutions, which have the power to address **exclusion and disadvantage.**
- **We value compassion and dedicate ourselves to social justice. We believe that it is the Australian way to work together to help alleviate suffering and disadvantage when we can.**
- We value the environment that sustains us all—and which we must now sustain with our

country's united and urgent effort.

- We value liberty—the freedom to hold whatever beliefs we choose while respecting those of others; the freedom to express those beliefs without fear or favour; and the economic freedom to pursue our own employment and enterprise.
- **We believe in opportunity, creativity and innovation as the basis for individual aspiration and being rewarded for hard work, achievement and success.**

I respectfully commend this document to the Senate Committee for its enquiry. I hope it serves as being of assistance in your proceedings and offers some food for thought if not guidance in these matters.

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