

7 August 2009

Dear Committee Secretary,

I am writing about the Labor Govt decision to abolish Youth Allowance in its current form. My husband and I have three children, all of whom are aiming for a tertiary education. Our eldest, Ben Rossiter, has received a position in Medicine at UWA. He deferred his enrolment until 2010 to work for a year. We live in Binningup, rural WA and studying most tertiary courses necessitates living in Perth.

There are three reasons for my request that this decision is reviewed.

1. Justice. The decision to study a course which is not provided locally, means that Ben will live away from home. No matter what your criteria for independence is, the reality is that by needing to move away from home, he becomes independent.

2. Equity. I understand that during an Apprenticeship, should an apprentice need to travel to Perth to study, he is paid an allowance of \$32 per day. Apart from the resounding inequity of being paid to work during an apprenticeship versus paying HECS to study at a tertiary level, the payment of an extra allowance (the amount of which is now seen as inadequate) to study compounds the inequity.

3. Unforeseen consequences. We have worked in the Southwest for 22 years. My husband is the Principal of a Primary School and I am a Physiotherapist at Bunbury Hospital. I have accessed a SARRAH (rural) scholarship in the past to update my skills in an area (treatment of stroke) which was recognised as being lacking at the hospital. The effect of this policy is that we won't be able to afford to stay in rural WA, but will be forced to move to Perth so that our children will be able to access tertiary education while living at home. There will be a shift of skilled workers to centralised urban centres where they are not as needed in the workforce. The Southwest will lose a respected and experienced Principal and Bunbury Hospital will lose the skills which it has supported me in acquiring. There will be reluctance for skilled professionals to move to rural areas for their careers if these areas cannot supply the same educational opportunities for their children, and there is not some support for access to these opportunities.

Your program of supplying high speed internet access and updating education infrastructure throughout Australia is meeting some of the needs for the Education Revolution. It seems ludicrous that at the final step towards creating a clever country, you have erected a huge obstacle.

This policy discriminates so obviously against country students and has huge ramifications for workplace issues that it begs to be reviewed or altered to reflect the justice and equity which were once at the heart of the Labor Party.

Yours sincerely,  
Pat O'Leary

Dear Committee members.

My name is Ben Rossiter, and I am doing a gap year, working as a short-order cook, and -even now- still plan to study medicine next year, despite now not being eligible for the Youth Allowance. Now, if the new changes to the eligibility criteria do go through, I admit that my parents could still partially support me- picking up the slack- as I move on campus, to the university I have enrolled in, 2 hours away from where I live now. Although I must concede that some students aren't going to be so lucky. For some, giving up their hard-earned place at university for another year, with no guarantee of future admission will be the only option. It would be my choice to go to uni next year, instead of working for another year then re-applying to medicine (which involves a difficult UMAT test, and an interview).

The main concern here, is that I would have to work whilst studying. And, perhaps more than others, this would be detrimental to my studies (as medicine is, I hear, quite difficult). So not being eligible for the Youth Allowance disadvantages me, as a rural student, when attempting to complete my studies. There is not enough time to effectively study and work part-time, let alone full time. I would have to work, however, and consequently I would unavoidably miss out on studying opportunities. This on-going time-prioritizing concern could epitomize with me not passing medicine, where before I had a much better, more equal, and less distressing chance at becoming a doctor.

Furthermore, as these changes are being brought in without a phase-in, as other government reforms are, we who are 'enjoying' a gap year now are being left directionless. -The path we had chosen before, based on long-standing principles, is now non-existent, and we are left in a kind of limbo. This is not an attempt in any way similar to the pre-emption of the recession, or it's clumsiness and seeming lack of consideration could be forgiven. So why is such an emphasis being put on bringing it in at the start of 2010? -All this is effectively doing is pissing a lot of people off. Because we were EXPECTING this allowance and planning how we were going to live, we effectively already "owned" this allowance. We earned this allowance in the hundreds of hours of work we have already done in our communities. The overwhelming sentiment of us 30,000 'gap yearers' is one of "losing" \$400 a fortnight. As if the government had stolen it from us. -Of course, it may be presumptuous to believe that we own money we cannot yet see, or indeed make plans with such. In fact, it is becoming blatantly obvious that this ideology is presumptuous and potentially erroneous. It could be argued that this money is a privilege, and not a right, conferred upon us by our magnanimous government. But I argue that this is a NECESSARY privilege. It allows rural, remote, and students from disadvantaged households to study at the university of their choice, and- hopefully- achieve all that they can do. It bridges the abyss of classes that separates rural from city students in higher education. The uni student's glass ceiling, as it were. By plundering this assistance system from aspiring rural students, the government is re-acquainting Australia's youth with class separation, and constraining some rural students to an education, and moreover a life, of second preferences. Of missed chances at achievement. Where the young people, the youth and future of Australia are encouraged to aim lower, because it is so much easier. Such a course of action contradicts Australia's long held principles of equity, opportunity, and a 'fair go', and is inconsistent with the Rudd government's proposed 'Education Revolution'.

Some argue that it doesn't matter, in the end, whether the changes to the eligibility criteria was brought in before we were expecting it or not, we are all still 'getting screwed'. But there are specific disadvantages and unfair ramifications that this current group of 30, 000 'gap' year students will face. For one, a change of plans in this difficult transition time. It is impossible to retrospectively amass the necessary amount of working hours. As a consequence, aspiring students are left with a difficult choice; whether to go on and study without financial aid, or give up their place at uni, work for another year, then claim independence. -The logical fear this choice engenders is that students will be unable to achieve their desired place in competitive courses, or choose simply -in the end- not to go to university at all. Subsequently Australia becomes a less equitable, poorer culture, in all senses of the word. Finally, perhaps more pragmatically, some scholarships become unavailable when someone defers a place at uni. The sacrifice I, and others, made is now without gain. And we feel unfairly, and unnecessarily, cheated.

Let me try to make my point clearly; Aspiring students from the country who wish to study at university to further their skills and practice their vocation, will inevitably incur additional costs of

living. Accommodation, food and groceries, transport, etc. These unlucky students are therefore at a disadvantage to city students who, mostly, can continue to 'live off' their parents. Rural students, in overwhelming majorities, will need financial aid from the government. Most students, however, are now unable to become eligible to be considered independent, under the new scheme. If you don't want the already poor admission of rural students to universities to get a whole lot worse, these changes need to be addressed, before the groups of prospective students undertaking a gap year start to give up their university offers.

I accuse the Rudd government, and it's education policy, of negligence. With these policy changes, Australia actively becomes poorer, and with the decline in deserving graduates, has less future prospects for wealth. Prospective students have been caught by an attempt to squeeze a little more out of education for Budget savings. This comes at a time when an investment is most needed in education (as called for, years past, in the Bradley review). The independence criteria has become a bit of a loophole for accessing the Youth Allowance, true. However, earning the money in a gap year is the only way that middle to low income families, "working families" can access it. -So why remove the loophole? Is it now a greater sin for anomalies to claim extra support when they don't need it? Or is it worse for the majority of aspiring students to miss out on their dreams and give up in the pursuit of their destinies, for lack of financial aid? I would assume the latter, but the best course of action would be a compromise. All we wish is to go to university to focus on our studies, and not become caught in a financial quagmire of housing and living expenses that most city students don't have to contend with. Please work together with us the students of Australia, or simply as the realistic representatives that you are, and re-assess the criteria for eligibility.

Yours sincerely,  
Ben Rossiter.