

Submission to Inquiry into Rural and Regional Access to Secondary and Tertiary Education opportunities

By Wayne and Mary Lou Gardam

Hay is a small community, less than 3,000 people, 725 kilometres west of Sydney. There is no provision for University education within 300 kilometres of the town. If young people growing up in this community wish to access university education they MUST live away from home – and a long way from home. As parents of three teenage children planning to undertake study at metropolitan universities in order to fulfil their career goals, we were horrified to hear the Budget announcement that the conditions for accessing Independent Youth Allowance (IYA) had changed so drastically. Perhaps the Federal government did need to re-assess the middle class students who were living at home in the cities and accessing this financial support unnecessarily, but the needs of rural and regional students have been ignored in the process. Many students from country areas plan a “Gap” year after HSC in which they defer their university course and seek employment in order to make tertiary study financially accessible.

In your 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 we submit the following in relation to the inquiry’s terms of reference:

a. The financial impact

It costs at the very least \$20,000 a year for a student to attend university and live independently away from home. There are federal scholarships available to students already qualifying for Centrelink payments, but most families where parents work, earn an income and pay tax are not eligible for this financial assistance. The ongoing drought in western NSW has had a huge impact on our business and the lives of most people in this town. The drought has been a reality for eight years but it is particularly in the last three years that the impact has made substantial change to the detriment of the lives and prospects of all people still trying to service this remote rural area of NSW. Our family income could not sustain one child at university, let alone three, even with two parents working. For average families this cost proves to be an insurmountable obstacle.

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

There are regional universities in major centres such as Wagga, Bendigo and Albury – all within a 400 kilometre radius of Hay. Relocating to one of these centres, should an appropriate tertiary course be offered, is just as dislocating and costly as relocating to a metropolitan university.

It is outside our expertise to comment on the suitability or relevance of educational alternatives offered in regional areas, save to observe that all Australian students should be offered equity of access to the range of options available.

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

As already stated the implications of the Federal government’s proposed changes to the qualifying criteria for IYA on students who must live away from home to access tertiary study are profound.

It has always been a challenge for most 18 year olds to find sufficient work, either seasonal or regular, to earn approximately \$19,000 in the time between finishing school and starting a deferred university course 16 months later, but many have worked hard to achieve this to enable them to access the IYA and so be able to afford tertiary study away from home. The proposed changes will mean:

- Students offered a tertiary course through the regular channels post HSC will not be able to defer it for two years – universities only ever offer a one year deferral.
 - In the current economic climate many teenagers in rural areas will not be able to secure regular work for 30 hours a week – most have to rely on casual or seasonal work at present and as businesses tighten their belts and jobs become fewer they are often not the first choice for employers.
 - Students who do relocate to attend tertiary institutions will have to try to find at least 30 hours a week work in their new term-time homes as well as in their vacation base at home if they hope to access IYA – a difficult proposition for any young person, let alone one trying to study.
 - Any student undertaking serious tertiary study would not be able to sustain full time study and a 30 hour a week job – which will now be the expectation for 2 years to qualify for IYA.
 - Tertiary students who have for decades supported their study by working seasonally in their university breaks – this being a logical use of their time - will not be able to work this way and qualify for the IYA.
 - Students from families who live in the rural and remote areas of Australia will not be able to afford to support themselves at university.
- d. The short and long-term impact of current and proposed government policies on regional university and TAFE enrolments

We are not in a position to comment on this criteria but can only assume that students who have no choice to live at home and study will be denied tertiary qualifications while others who might have chosen to attend a regional campus may stay at home in the city to attend other institutions – thus reducing regional enrolments.

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

Government support for students required to leave home for secondary or post-secondary study is, at best, token. Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) usually takes only geographical factors into consideration and is not generally available for students with other special needs. We would suggest that if Australia hopes to become the clever country it needs to provide equity in access to selective and academic programs for gifted country children as well as city children.

The inadequacy of support for working remote and rural families whose children hope to undertake tertiary education, both at present and through the draconian new criteria proposed for IYA eligibility, has been addressed in other sections of this submission.

f. The educational needs of rural and regional students

People most likely to work as professionals in rural and regional areas of Australia are those who have experience of these places – including those who have grown up in them. If we are to maintain population in the bush we need professionals and they need access to the full range of secondary and tertiary educational options. Families currently living and working in rural and regional Australia also need to have adequate provision for their children's educational requirements, as do all people living away from the large cities. The educational needs of rural and regional students are as varied and diverse as the needs of all other Australian students and their access to specialised services needs to be supported. The flow-on from this would be keeping more people, delivering a range of services, living in small rural communities such as Hay.

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

Life is already difficult enough for people trying to maintain services and businesses in remote rural settlements like Hay. If support for tertiary education through the IYA disappears more families and professionals will leave the bush – forced to seek work closer to the educational opportunities available to city dwellers. The persistent drought and resultant tough economic times mean our local population has been shrinking significantly in the twenty-first century, despite having remained constant at approximately 3,000 people through all the ups and downs of the twentieth century, and with each person who leaves the opportunities for all who remain are diminished.

Does the Federal government really support all Australians?

It would not appear to be considering those still living in rural settings with this proposal to change the eligibility criteria for Independent Youth Allowance. Perhaps it should be looking at ways to improve financial support for rural Australians seeking tertiary education rather than making it far more difficult for young rural Australians to access the IYA.

Where do our priorities lie as we face all the challenges of the twenty-first century?

It seems extraordinary that a young Australian, whose parents pay tax, can be paid a range of bonuses and benefits to produce and raise children, or unemployment benefits to do nothing, but cannot be paid to continue his or her education.

If we as a nation are to succeed in addressing the big challenges of climate change, food security, water use and environmental sustainability we need intelligent people living in the bush working towards effective solutions.

Does the government really regard becoming a teenage mother as a better career option for our rural youth than further study to contribute towards creating the clever country?

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