

My name is Robyn Lowrie and I have 2 children who live 500 kilometres from home in order to complete their choice of study. Although we do live in a university town the courses of study chosen by the children are not offered by our local rural university which has therefore forced our children to undertake their study away from home. Although I am writing this from my perspective I know of many families who are in a similar situation where their children have had to move away from home to undertake their choice of study. I am also aware of those students who come from remote and rural areas who do not live close enough to the university to do daily travel and are therefore also forced to live away from home to complete their study.

Therefore I feel it is important for the members of the senate inquiry to carefully consider the proposed changes to the guidelines for Youth Allowance. There are three main issues that need to be addressed in relation to these proposed changes. Firstly, the disadvantage that will occur to all students across the country who thought they were (in good faith) able to seek employment in a gap year context in order to support their higher education studies. Second, the ongoing disadvantage that will occur for students living in rural and remote areas who will find it increasingly difficult to participate in higher education when they are required to live away from home for the duration of their studies. Thirdly, the problematic nature of the proposed regulation stipulates that students must continue working in their first year of study even though studying full time.

In relation to the first point, it is extremely problematic to take away an incentive from any student when in fact they were convinced that such strategies or approaches to foster their education would be honoured. Irrespective of the perceived (and often factual) loopholes that occur in the current system it is unimaginable that any Australian law could be retrospectively changed without warning. In almost all instances of change, procedures and protocol are adapted prospectively and thus reducing the likelihood of disadvantaging particular members of the community. In relation to wealthy families manipulating the system so that their siblings receive payment in order to go to university, I recognise that some changes need to be undertaken to address inequities. The Senate should recognise however that students who are required to live away from home should be considered in a different light than those who can live at home. Thus, in relation to this matter I would appeal to the committee to ensure that the current regulations are not retrospectively changed and that these changes be adapted (if this must happen) for students who complete their high school studies in 2009. The 2008 cohort should be able to receive benefits which were in place when they first planned for their gap year experience. If and when changes need to be made to the current system I would encourage the Senate to consider variations in the rules be applied to students who are required to live away from home in order to complete their studies.

In relation to students who live in rural and remote areas, supplementary rules need to be considered. It is widely recognised that these students are already disadvantaged in relation to resources and educational equity and removing current benefits would disadvantage these students further. A high proportion of these students have to live away from home in order to attend university either because there is not a university in close proximity to their home or the course they wish to study is not at a university in their town. Very few metropolitan students would be required to travel for more than two hours in order to undertake studies at a preferred university and even a preferred course. It would be a huge burden on the families of students living in rural areas if they were not

able to receive income from the government. The prospect of paying for accommodation and living expenses in a city or regional town (where rents are high) is both unimaginable and inequitable when other families can ensure their children can live at home.

Thirdly, the problematic rule that students are required to gain ongoing work even after they have finished a gap year in order to receive government support. Under the proposed “new” regulations student will be required to work for the first six months of their university life in order to fulfil their requirements for government support. This too dramatically impacts on rural students because they will be required to seek employment in cities where they do not have social networks and thus the likelihood of gaining employment is less likely. So not only are these students being disadvantaged with a requirement of having to pay for accommodation they also are being disadvantaged by the nature of the new regulations which require them to maintain a substantial work commitment when in fact they are supposed to be studying full time. This point is not just about receiving a supplement for income when living away from home—which presently exists for students deemed independent—this is about the capacity to actually receive support (and thus qualify as being independent). For students who are required to live in an unfamiliar and often foreign environment the current gap year policies meant that these students could actually concentrate on their study in their first year of university rather than being forced to work to support themselves. The new regulations result in middle income earners will not being able to support their children to go to University when they are required to undertake studies in cities. The current regulations do allow for this to occur—provided the students are able to demonstrate independence.

Most rural students choose to have a gap year in order to ensure that they can study away from home without the continual pressure of having to work long hours to support themselves. The proposed regulations take away any encouragement for students to pursue careers that students in metropolitan areas can take for granted. If the government is committed to equity and access for all Australians, and provide opportunities for all young people to fulfil personal goals, these proposed changes must be altered. And indeed, current regulations should be upheld for ALL students who undertook a gap year in order to receive support from the government.

Yours Sincerely
Robyn Lowrie