



Rural students up against the odds

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RURAL students are severely disadvantaged compared with their city cousins and need more federal support, a Senate inquiry has heard.

The inquiry into rural access to education has been swamped by more than 700 submissions, many expressing concern about the costs and geographical challenges facing rural students and their families.

It also heard first-hand accounts of the problems from students, families and education groups at hearings last week in Perth, Adelaide and Albury.

"There are still major concerns over the Federal Government's proposed changes to youth allowance," inquiry chair, Nationals Senator Fiona Nash, told The Weekly Times.

"There's also a general concern about the huge inequity and costs faced by rural students and their families because they (the students) have to re-locate to cities to get to uni, they have no choice.

"Yet families on the same income in the cities whose kids don't have to leave home to get an education get the same assistance."

The Government is planning to toughen the work criteria for independent youth allowance, while at the same time easing income thresholds to boost eligibility.

The old criterion of being able to earn just under \$20,000 is being scrapped, with the sole requirement being the need to work at least 30 hours a week for 18 months.

In the wake of mounting public concern, Education Minister Julia Gillard recently agreed to delay the starting date by six months to July next year in a concession to existing "gap year" students who would have been unexpectedly forced to defer studies and work for another year to qualify.



But Senator Nash said there were still "strong concerns" from students, families and universities about future "gap year" students having to defer for two years. Another problem was that the 30-hour-a-week work requirement could not be averaged out to account for seasonal work, she said.

"This makes it very messy. The sort of jobs you need are just not there in rural areas, so you'll still have to move and face the same costs you would if you were studying."

Inquiry member Family First Senator Steve Fielding said the inquiry's hearings had "made it clear the Rudd Government is making it harder for country kids to go to university".

"Rural and regional students already do it tough enough, but the Government wants to penalise them even more by forcing them to delay their uni studies by two years just to qualify for youth allowance," he said.

Senator Fielding said the Government should consider his proposal to keep current work requirements for the independent allowance for students forced to move more than 100 km away from home to study.

The Government recently introduced enabling legislation into federal parliament and wants it voted on next month.

Ms Gillard said the reforms to youth allowance would help arrest the decline in university participation by rural and regional students by better targeting support to those who needed it most.

She said the tighter work test for the independent rate was being balanced by an easing of the parental and personal income tests. From the start of next year, the parental income threshold will be lifted from \$32,800 to \$44,165 a year (to qualify for the maximum rate) with a less severe "taper" in payments as income rises above that level.

Ms Gillard said the allowance would finally cut out at a parental income of \$141,000, compared with \$79,000 now.

"These changes will allow 68,000 students to become eligible for income support payments and will result in higher payments for 34,600 students," she said.

From July 2012, students will also be able to earn up to \$400 a fortnight, rather than \$236 currently, before having their payments reduced.

The Senate inquiry has pushed back its reporting date until December with more public hearings planned, but there will be a special one-day hearing soon to look specifically at the legislation.