



THE RURAL RIGHT TO EDUCATION

**Submission to the
2008 Review of Australian Higher Education**

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This submission specifically relates to the experiences and issues of remote, rural and regional young people accessing and participating in higher education. It is well-documented that remote, rural and regional (hereinafter referred to as 'rural') Australians are disproportionately represented in higher education institutions. The Australian Bureau of Statistics shows that 36.6% of Australia's population live in remote, rural or regional communities outside a major metropolitan area with a population less than 100,000 people (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS] 2004a), consistent with the Rural, Remote and Metropolitan Areas Classification and ABS definitions (ABS 2003a). Data from the (former) Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) shows that 17.9% of Australia's university students have a 'rural' or 'isolated' background (DEST 2005), far below the rural population proportion. Between 1991 and 2005, the proportion of higher education students from a regional background decreased from 20% (DEST 2004 p.15) to 17.9% (DEST 2005 p.21), suggesting that current policies to increase rural participation in higher education are ineffective. This submission specifically refers to Section 3.2, Question 11 of the Discussion Paper:

'What evidence is available from institutions about the impact on individuals or groups of either failure to gain income support or the inadequacy of income support?'

This submission will discuss rural access and participation in higher education, specifically referring to the findings of Godden's 2007 research, *Youth Allowance and Regional Young People: Access to Tertiary Education* (Godden 2007) to illustrate the concerns, and support policy recommendations. Godden's qualitative study involved interviews and focus groups with 95 young people, parents and community members from seven research sites across Australia, including three rural communities, two universities, a boarding hostel and the 2007 Isolated Children's Parent's Association Federal Conference. Godden asked participants to share their experiences, issues and recommendations regarding youth allowance and access to tertiary education. The findings were analysed and published in November 2007.

This submission will discuss:

1. The context of rural Australia and rural disadvantage;
2. The human right to higher education, specifically in relation to rural young people;
3. Financial costs for rural higher education students;
4. Rural students and income support;
5. Australia 2020 Summit
6. Conclusion

Recommendations regarding specific income support policies will be shared throughout the submission, informed by participants in Godden's 2007 study.

It is imperative that the final report of the 2008 Higher Education Review adequately recognise and suggest strategies for addressing the varied issues for rural Australians accessing and successfully completing higher education. This submission argues that to increase rural participation in higher education, adequate income support must be provided for *all* rural young people who must leave home for tertiary education, regardless of parental income or assets. Thus, the key recommendations of this submission are:

Key Recommendation 1: *That all rural young people are eligible for the full rate of Independent Youth Allowance if they must leave from home for tertiary education.*

Key Recommendation 2: *That all rural young people are eligible for a non-means tested Tertiary Access Allowance when they begin tertiary education, for start-up expenses.*

Key Recommendation 3: *That Youth Allowance and Rent Assistance rates are increased to reflect real living costs.*

Key Recommendation 4: *That in the Personal Income and Assets Test, the income cap of \$236 a fortnight, the savings threshold of \$2500, and the income bank threshold of \$6000 are increased, and annually indexed.*

Key Recommendation 5: *That the Commonwealth government significantly increases funding to higher education, including increasing the number of Commonwealth Supported places, reintroducing a textbook subsidy and subsidising accommodation for rural young people.*

Key Recommendation 6: *That the number and value of Commonwealth Scholarships are increased, and eligibility is extended to consider rural families who experience financial difficulties supporting young people but are ineligible for Centrelink benefits.*

1. DISADVANTAGE IN RURAL AUSTRALIA

Rural disadvantage is well-documented. Rural Australians are disadvantaged on almost every social and economic indicator, compared to their urban counterparts. They have reduced access to resources and opportunities, including employment, income, higher education, Internet access and public transport (ABS 2004b p.ix; Senate Community Affairs References Committee [SCARC] 2004; Cheers 1998), are more likely to receive income support (ABS 2004a), and experience worse health and wellbeing (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2006). *Bush Talks*, conducted by HREOC in 1999, concluded that rural Australians experience human rights concerns in health, education and essential needs, for children and young people, and within marginalised groups (HREOC 1999).

There are several causes of rural disadvantage, including rural restructuring (the declining dependency on agriculture and mining), globalisation, rural decline, climactic issues such as drought, the rural skills shortage, and political marginalisation. Research indicates that increasing the skills of rural young people through ensuring access to education, will increase the skills of rural communities, and therefore address the skills shortage and rural disadvantage (Godden 2007; Alston & Kent 2006; Godden 2005). Participants in Godden's study (2007) recognise the importance of tertiary education for employment prospects, to address the skills shortage, and enhance economic and social development. All participants stated that rural young people prefer to work in rural Australia, the intention of half the young participants, but Australia's tertiary education policies disadvantage rural young people from accessing tertiary education.

I don't feel like I'm an idiot and I don't think my kids are idiots, but I guess we are at the lower end of the food chain (Parent, cited in Godden 2007).

Rural young people also experience disadvantage. Rural young Australians have specific challenges moving into adulthood (Fabiansson 2006). Their transition is influenced by limited access to quality secondary education, reflected in low rates of Year 12 completion (Foundation for Rural and Regional Renewal 2007; Alston & Kent 2006; Woodlands, Makaev & Braham 2006; ABS 2003b; HREOC 2000a), an issue targeted in the federal *National Framework for Rural and Remote Education* (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs 2001). Regional young people are

over-represented in the most disadvantaged labour market group (Kikpatrick & Abbott-Chapman 2002; Ainley & McKenzie 1999), and under-represented in post-compulsory education (Alston & Kent 2003; DEST 2003a; DEST 2003b; Kilpatrick & Abbott-Chapman 2002; Stimson & Baum 2001; HREOC 2000a; James, Wyn, Baldwin, Hepworth, McInnis & Stephanou 1999). 'Youth out-migration' from regional communities is common, due to limited education and employment opportunities (Eacott & Sonn 2006; Fabiansson 2006 p.48-49; Alston 2004; Glendinning, Nuttall, Hendry, Kloep & Wood 2003; Alston 2002; Garasky 2002; Gabriel 2000;), restrictive rural life, and lack of 'social capital' (Onyx, Wood, Bullen & Osburn 2005; Kilpatrick & Abbott-Chapman 2002 p.47). Annually, around 10,000 rural young people leave home for higher education (DEST 2003b p.26). Reflecting international trends (Glendinning et al. 2003; Dahlstrom 1996), rural young women are more likely to complete secondary education, aspire for higher education (Alston, Pawar, Benn & Kent 2001; Alston & Kent 2001; HREOC 2000a; HREOC 2000b), and leave their hometowns (Alloway, Gilbert, Gilbert, & Muspratt 2004), due to limited employment options and the rural 'macho culture' (Alston & Kent 2001). Youth migration occurs very early for rural young people (Kirstein & Bandranaik 2004); contradicting mainstream statistics that 45% of males and 35% of females aged 20-24 reside with their family (ABS 2004c). Most young people successfully negotiate the transition to adulthood, but rural young people are particularly vulnerable, and may not access appropriate support (Francis, Boyd, Aisbett, Newnham & Newnham 2006; Bourke 2002).

2. RURAL AUSTRALIA AND HIGHER EDUCATION

In 1990, the Commonwealth Government recognised rural Australians as a disadvantaged 'equity group' in higher education, along with people from a non-English speaking background; people with disabilities; women in non-traditional areas of study; people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds; and Indigenous Australians (Department of Employment, Education and Training 1990). Consequent policy involved funding regional universities, which research suggests does not meet rural students' developmental and educational needs to study away from home (James et al. 1999; Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education References Committee [SWERERC] 2005). In 2003, the Commonwealth Government introduced *Backing Australia's Future* (DEST 2003b) reforms that further deregulated the tertiary education sector (Long 2002) and further shifted the financial burden for tertiary education onto individuals and families. The Higher Education Equity Program (HEEP) has been inadequate in increasing rural participation in higher education, and a more holistic strategy is required. Based on various research conducted regarding rural access to higher education, in particular Godden's recently released report *Youth Allowance and Regional Young People: Access to Tertiary Education* (2007), Alston & Kent's study *The Impact of Drought on Secondary Education Access in Australia's Rural and Remote Areas*, (2006), and Godden's consultation through the 2003 National Youth Roundtable, *Regional Tertiary Students and Youth Allowance* (2005), it is clear that the strict eligibility criteria for Youth Allowance income support is a significant barrier to rural access and participation in higher education. In this regard, major policy change, beyond HEEP, is required to increase rural participation in higher education.

2.1 The human right to higher education:

Article 28.1(c) of the *United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child* stipulates that states must

Make higher education accessible to all on the basis of capacity by every appropriate means (United Nations 2000).

Similarly, the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* specifies that

...higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit (UN 1948)

Australia has ratified both conventions. In 2000, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) conducted a *National Inquiry into Rural and Remote Education Access*. HREOC defined 'accessibility' as '...available to all without discrimination, in law and in fact, physically accessible and economically accessible' (HREOC 2000a p.7). Based on HREOC's interpretation of 'accessible', Australia is therefore obligated to ensure that higher education is 'affordable to all' (HREOC 2000a p.7). This includes, of course, rural young people. However, several research studies have shown that due to the high costs for rural young people to participate in higher education away from home, and lack of financial support, higher education is therefore *not* economically accessible for all rural young people who wish to pursue a higher education. The strict eligibility requirements of Youth Allowance are a financial barrier for rural young people whose families cannot afford to support them studying way from home. As a result, Youth Allowance policy does not ensure the human right to access higher education for all Australians. In her final research report in 2007, Godden concluded that

'As a barrier to access, the current Youth Allowance system denies regional young people their human right to education' (Godden 2007 p.123).

This is a serious concern, and cannot be taken lightly. The particular areas indicating human rights concerns with Youth Allowance policy include eligibility requirements with the low income thresholds for the Parental Income and Assets test and the Independence requirements, low Youth Allowance payments that are at least 20% below the poverty line, and the unrealistic Personal Income and Assets Test applied to Youth Allowance recipients.

2.2 Factors affecting rural participation in higher education.

Research identifies many causal factors for low rural participation in higher education, including:

- family socio-economic background (Alloway et al.; James et al. 1999);
- personal and familial attitudes towards tertiary education (James et al. 1999);
- the emotional impact of studying away from home (Godden 2007; Kilpatrick & Abbott-Chapman 2002);
- secondary education access, participation and completion rates (Alston & Kent 2006; HREOC 2000a; James et al. 1999); and
- university fees and expenses to study away from home (Godden 2007; Alston & Kent 2006; Godden 2005; Alloway et al. 2004; James et al. 1999).

In her 2007 study, Godden identified several factors affecting rural participation in higher education, including: rurality (including distance, isolation, culture, identity, and disadvantage); access to quality and affordable secondary education (including limited information and career guidance, and completing secondary education away from home); family attitudes, expectations, and socio-economic status; access to information and enrolling in higher education; the financial costs to study away from home; emotional difficulties in the transitions to independent living away from home and higher education (including homesickness, depression and fear); stress and poor health caused by compounding emotional, financial, and educational challenges; and gender (Godden 2007).

Participants in Godden's study reflected on the 'culture shock' in the transition to independent living, the city, and tertiary education, mentioned by 70% of interviewees and in every focus group.

...some of them go off to uni never having seen Perth before let alone a university before...they're very unprepared for the city. (Teacher, cited in Godden 2007).

Furthermore, every focus group, and 30% of the interviewees, reported that some rural young people experience homesickness and depression. Travel expenses, time, study and work commitments make visiting family difficult. University participants experience stress from the pressures of study, coping with transition and finances. Five interviewees mention poor health due to stress and malnutrition, exacerbated by limited finances. A significant minority of participants observed young people leaving university because they could not cope (Godden 2007).

However, participants stressed that the most significant factor affecting rural participation in higher education was the high financial cost of studying away from home. Rural Australians are disadvantaged by the costs, particularly middle-income families, because they are ineligible for Youth Allowance, yet they are unable to financially support their children. University fees are another disincentive for rural young people (Godden 2007).

3. FINANCIAL COSTS FOR RURAL STUDENTS

The Universities Australia study, *Student Finances 2006*, outlines the financial status of university students. A full-time undergraduate's mean income is \$12,560, with mean expenditure of \$15,950, a deficit of 27% (James, Bexley, Devlin, & Marginson 2007 pp.24-25). Consequently, 24.4% of students have loans, up from 10.7% in 2000 (James et al. 2007 p.28) Participants were critical of income support eligibility criteria and payments (James et al. 2007 p.4). It must be noted, that although the Universities' Australia survey had a sample of over 40,000 students, and represented every public university, it lacked a specific rural focus. Mean figures may be conservative compared to rural student's financial costs when living away from home.

In Godden's 2007 study, participants estimated that it costs \$15-20,000 per year for a rural young person to study away from home, plus start-up and relocation expenses of \$3-6000 (not including a vehicle). Expenses for rural students include:

- **Start-up expenses (\$3-6000 plus a vehicle):** Travel and accommodation to enrol, attend Orientation Week, and source accommodation; bond; computer; moving costs; setting up a house; and a vehicle.
- **Living Expenses (\$250-400 per week):** Private accommodation – rent, utilities, and food; Residential Accommodation - fees (up to \$12,000 a year), and parking fees. Expenses for all students include: phone; transport (car, fuel, car maintenance, registration and insurance, and/or public transport); clothing; sporting fees; work uniform and travel; health; socialising; and unexpected expenses.
- **Study-related expenses:** printer; internet connection; stationary; lecture notes; textbooks; short courses; and student association fees.
- **Travel home:** Bus, train, aeroplane or car travel; and travel and accommodation costs for family to visit children.
- **Fees:** upfront TAFE fees; or HECS-HELP fees if not deferred.

One participant in Godden's study provided her daughter's first year budget (cited in Godden 2007, p.53). This budget reveals that the annual costs for the participant's daughter in her first year at university was \$19,240 for living costs plus \$4,950 for start up costs, a total of \$24,190.

Figure 1: Example rural student budget (Godden 2007).

EXPENSES	AMOUNT
<i>Start-Up Expenses</i>	\$4950
University costs	\$500
Books (more for science)	\$800
Organising accommodation, travel to look, accommodation bond	\$2000
Basic furniture (bed, desk, share fridge etc)	\$500
Computer	\$1000
Travel to enrol etc	\$150
<i>Weekly living expenses</i>	\$370/week
Travel	\$50
Rent	\$170
Food, gas, electricity, phone, general living	\$150

Godden found that rural young people and families cover the costs through a combination of methods, including parents' contributions, Youth Allowance, semester work, holiday work, 'gap year', savings, preparation, scholarships, debt, families moving to the city, Australian Scholarship Group, and other means. Many parents and young people experience financial stress, affecting their relationships, physical and mental health and educational performance, forcing some rural young people to leave tertiary education. All university participants in Godden's study believed they should cover the expenses, and felt guilty relying on a 'handout' from their parents. They avoid asking for money, aware of their parents' financial difficulties. Parent interviewees reported making sacrifices to support their children, including working overtime, working off-farm and during holidays, accruing debt, retrenching employees, and delaying retirement savings. Similar sacrifices were reported in the community focus groups. For example, a participating parent reported that her family has a debt of \$140,000 from financially assisting four children studying in Adelaide. This places enormous pressure on young people (Godden 2007).

Godden found that university students work long hours and multiple jobs to support themselves while studying, reporting working between 15-35 hours a week, which negatively affects their academic performance. A focus group reported young women involved in stripping and prostitution for financial support.

I knew a girl...she was a topless waitress...She was so desperate for money. She was in a nudie calendar for like \$100...Had my parents cut me off or whatever, you know I might actually have to consider that (University student, cited in Godden 2007)

Holiday work was also common.

You hear heaps of stories of people working on grain bins, in abattoirs, 12 hour days, 6 days a week...to save...money...(University student, cited in Godden 2007)

Other methods include budgeting (including eating poorly) and student debt. Scholarships, particularly Commonwealth Scholarships, support some rural students. However the small number of scholarships and strict eligibility exclude many students. Many rural young people take a 'gap year' after Year 12 to work for Independent YA and save money. Godden found that 75% of the university interviewees and all focus groups reported that young people experience financial stress, affecting their relationships, physical and mental health and educational performance, forcing some rural young

people to leave tertiary education. Half of the university participants had considered this option.

With enormous costs and financial strain, James asserts that:

Many rural students and their families face an extremely difficult decision in assessing...costs versus...benefits of higher education. For many financially disadvantaged rural families, the costs are well beyond their income capacity...
(James 1999 p.xvi)

4. RURAL AUSTRALIA AND INCOME SUPPORT

There is a myriad of literature available regarding income support and higher education in Australia. However, rural issues are often marginalised within research studies, reports and government inquiries. The Australian welfare system reflects neoliberal ideology to increase individual responsibility and reduce government expenditure, and conservative concerns to reinforce traditional institutions such as the family (Mendes 2003 p.26). Research suggests this approach negatively affects higher education students (Godden 2007; James et al. 2007; Alston & Kent 2006; SEWRERC 2005). In 1998, the Commonwealth Government introduced Youth Allowance. The scheme's strict eligibility criteria indicate the Commonwealth's diminishing responsibility to financially support students. Universities' Australia revealed that 30.4% of surveyed undergraduate students received Youth Allowance (James et al. 2007 p.14).

Income support policies exacerbate student financial hardship. Youth Allowance payments are at least 20% below the Henderson poverty line (Australian Council of Social Services 2002; see also SEWRERC 2005), and students cannot meet living costs (James et al. 2007). However, student poverty is a common and accepted characteristic of youth, and so is peripheral to the policy agenda (Bessant 2003). Although education and training have a fundamental role in determining the risk of youth poverty and unemployment, a finding from the 2004 Senate Inquiry into Poverty and Financial Hardship (SCARC 2004 p.287-289), student poverty negatively impacts on participation in education. Poverty significantly affects students' participation, retention in and completion of higher education (Godden 2007; James et al. 2007; Alston & Kent 2006; Godden 2005; NUS 2004; Birrell, Calderon, Dobson & Smith 2000). While Governments attempts to maximise Australia's skills, Youth Allowance policy discourages young people from entering university or studying full-time (Birrell et al. 2000; see also Long 2002).

Youth Allowance shifts responsibility for student welfare away from the government and onto the family. The age of Independence, 25, is an unreasonable expectation for families to meet and increasingly difficult with rising debt and living costs (ABS 2007). Student financial difficulties cause emotional hardship for students and families. For example, research reveals some rural parents deliberately discourage children from pursuing higher education, to avoid the financial burden (see Alston & Kent 2006; Godden 2005; James et al. 1999). Youth Allowance policy burdens individuals and families, exacerbates student poverty and affects rural participation in tertiary education. Yet income support is necessary for the future of rural Australia:

Access to financial resources for tertiary education for rural young people is one of the keys to rural revitalisation. An educated rural population and a skilled population base are significant factors in the future development of rural Australia
(Alston 2004).

The Senate *Inquiry Into Student Income Support* indicates a clear correlation between rural tertiary education participation rates, and their perception of their ability to survive financially. Regarding Youth Allowance,

...students from households with low to modest incomes, from regional and remote areas and indigenous students are often hardest hit by rules which appear to lack any clear policy rationale (SEWRERC 2005 p.xv).

Youth Allowance eligibility criteria do not assist moderate-income rural families who cannot financially support their children to participate in higher education away from home (Godden 2007; Alston & Kent 2006; Godden 2005; NUS 2004; Terry 2004 p.3; Birrell et al. 2000). A student from the University of Western Australia shared his story:

Tom's Story (cited in Godden 2007)

Tom moved from rural Western Australia to Perth for higher education. During his first semester at the University of Western Australia, Tom resided in a 'one-bedroom asbestos beach shack' 90km from Perth, commuting three hours every day. He received \$220 of Youth Allowance per fortnight. To save fuel money, Tom often slept overnight in his car in Kings Park, significantly affecting his grades and health. As he moved closer to university, his marks increased by 'seven percent per semester'.

4.1 Dependent Youth Allowance

The Dependence criteria for Youth Allowance assess parental income and assets. The income threshold for the maximum rate of YA is currently \$31,400 per annum, and the asset threshold is \$535,750. Eligible families in Exceptional Circumstance (EC) declared areas (due to drought) are exempt from income and asset testing.

Income threshold

The 'Dependent' Youth Allowance test disadvantages moderate-income families, particularly farming families who are often 'asset rich' but have limited cash flow (Godden 2007; Alston & Kent 2006; Godden 2005; Kenyon, Sercombe, Black, & Lhuede 2001).

Because the parental earnings means test is placed at such a low level, most students from blue and lower white collar backgrounds are not eligible unless they become independents (Dobson 2004 p.56).

Participants in Godden's 2007 study perceive the Dependence criteria as strict and unrealistic (Godden 2007). All participants believe the income threshold is too low, as middle-income parents above the thresholds cannot afford to support their children studying away from home. Parents are aware that career choices (including accepting wage rises) affect eligibility for YA.

...we work so our children can have a better opportunity. And we get penalised...
(Parent, cited in Godden 2007)

The income threshold does not consider real costs to support a child studying away from home, nor rural prices. This is glaringly obvious in expensive rural communities, and families with a business or farm.

...they couldn't get Dependent Youth Allowance because I have two jobs, which I have to take off-farm, in order to provide them with a secondary education and keep the farm afloat during...six, seven years of drought...(Parent, cited in Godden 2007).

Recommendation: *That the assessment for Dependent Youth Allowance holistically considers the family and individual's experience, and each case is individually assessed.*

Recommendation: *That the income threshold for the Dependence criteria is reviewed and increased, to better reflect local living costs*

Recommendation: *That the Dependent Youth Allowance income threshold and additional amounts per child reflect actual costs.*

Recommendation: *That the Dependence criteria consider debt within the assessment.*

Assets threshold

Many families in Godden's study described themselves as 'asset rich but cash poor'. Most farms are valued above the assets threshold (after the 75% reduction), due to land and equipment necessary to generate income, and debt is not considered. Additionally, liquid assets (including savings for business expenses) do not necessarily represent the family's disposable income.

You can't go and sell the wheel off the tractor...your assets are your means of making...money... (Parent, cited in Godden 2007).

[Our farm is] not like a holiday house, it's not like a second home, it's not a luxury. That's where our house is and that's our income. (Parent, cited in Godden 2007).

Recommendation: *That the assets threshold is increased.*

Recommendation: *That land and assets used to generate income are not considered within the income and asset tests.*

Exceptional Circumstances

In Godden's 2007 study, participants from the Isolated Children's Parent's Association explained that when Exceptional Circumstances [EC] finishes, their children are no longer eligible for YA, further burdening drought-affected families. Some young people who receive Youth Allowance through Exceptional Circumstances must still work for Independent Youth Allowance, to ensure they have an income support once EC ends.

...when a student starts a university course, they've suddenly got Youth Allowance because of no test because of EC. Drought's over, EC disappears, and they're halfway through a course. Drought's over, but the crops haven't been sold, and the wool cheque hasn't been, well they're still waiting to hear. And that students suddenly then has no Youth Allowance. Now I think once they start a tertiary course, if EC disappears, the little bit of investment for the government to keep that Youth Allowance til the student finishes their degree is well worth it. (Parent, cited in Godden 2007)

Recommendation: *That when Exceptional Circumstances finishes, families who were previously eligible for Youth Allowance due to EC continue to be eligible for Independent Youth Allowance to complete tertiary education.*

Major themes

The income and assets threshold for Dependent Youth Allowance are unrealistic for rural families. It is generally impossible for rural middle-income earners above the threshold to provide \$15-20,000 per year to each child studying away from home; particularly if there are multiple children. Further, the assets threshold is very inequitable for farming and business families, as assets are their means of income and cannot be sold. The criteria and forms for Dependence Youth Allowance make income support for rural families inaccessible.

4.2 Independent Youth Allowance

A common pathway to Independence is through *Workforce Participation*, where young people must work for 18-months after completing secondary school and earn \$18,525. Researchers recognise the irony of 'Independence' which is based on financial means rather than living independently (Godden 2007; Alston & Kent 2006; Godden 2005).

Godden highlights that metropolitan young people who have completed Workforce Participation can remain at home and receive Youth Allowance, while rural young people who are not financially Independent, yet live independently away from home, cannot receive Youth Allowance (Godden 2005). Participants in Godden's 2007 study described the Independence criteria as 'inequitable', 'arbitrary', and 'short-sighted'. Every participant believed the criteria does not reflect 'independence', particularly the high age of Independence (25).

A kid that lives at home until they are 25 because their parent lives 5 minutes from the uni is being judged the same way as your kids who are 3,000 kilometres away.
(Community member, cited in Godden 2007)

Participants' definitions of 'independence' included young people living away from home, having responsibility (including 'doing your own washing') and paying their own expenses. They expressed anger that urban young people can be 'Independent' and still reside at home while receiving Youth Allowance payments (Godden 2007).

Recommendation: *That all rural young people are immediately eligible for the full rate of Independent Youth Allowance if they must move away from home for tertiary education.*

Recommendation: *That the age of Independence is reduced to 18.*

Recommendation: *That young people who must leave home for TAFE and other post-secondary institutions instead of secondary education are considered Independent.*

Recommendation: *That the Independent Youth Allowance form includes a clear checklist of requirements and attachments.*

Forced deferral

Studies have shown that many rural young people defer after secondary education, to meet *Workforce Participation* criteria (Godden 2007; Teese, Nicholas, Polesel, & Mason 2007; Alston & Kent 2006; Godden 2005; Terry 2004; Birrell, Dobson, Rapson & Smith 2003; Department of Family and Community Services [FaCS] 2002 p.83). Rural deferral after secondary education is disproportionately high. In 2007, the Victorian *On Track* survey found that one-in-six school graduates from regional Victoria defer higher education after Year 12, compared with one-in-fifteen from Melbourne (Teese et al. 2007). Additionally, a comparison of three Western Australian government secondary schools of the same socio-economic status ('H' index), found a marked difference between rural and urban deferral regarding students graduating in 2002 (Godden 2005). Comparing data from three schools, Godden found that in 2003:

- At Margaret River Senior High School (rural), 19 of the 23 students (82.6%) who were offered a place at university deferred their course.
- At Kelmscott Senior High School (urban), 4 of the 65 students (6%) who were offered a place at university deferred their course.
- At Governor Stirling Senior High School (urban), 5 of the 36 students (14%) who were offered a place at university deferred their course.

In her 2007 study, Godden found that within a rural South Australian school, Loxton High School, in the 2006 Year 12 cohort, 26 of the 73 students attended university in 2007 while 15 students deferred to work for Independent Youth Allowance. Although some participants had positive attitudes about deferring (predominantly about earning money and maturing), most participants were angry that rural young people *must* 'drop out' to work. Godden found that participants believed that forced deferral puts young people 'back a year', and breaks the continuity of study. Some participants said this was particularly potentially detrimental in courses such as maths and languages. Several participants also believed that deferral was not economical (Godden 2007).

...in the gap year you earn the \$18,000 mark, I thought...why not finish uni and earn...\$60,000...? (University student, cited in Godden 2007)

...when they earn \$18,000 they pay \$4000 a year in tax...if they went to university straight away, earning \$5000 a year, and qualified a year earlier, the government would be better off (Parent, cited in Godden 2007).

A considerable risk for rural young people is that after deferring and obtaining employment, rural young people may never return to study due to financial security, disengagement from education, and increased attachment to the local community (Godden 2007; Alston & Kent 2006; Godden 2005; Alloway et al. 2004; FaCS 2002; Birrell et al. 2000). Hence, 'the young person and the community do not get the skills training it needs' (Alston & Kent 2006 p.167). All participants in Godden's study knew of rural young people who did not participate in tertiary education after deferring due to their income and lost motivation.

...the Year 12s from last year...said they like the work and the money's coming in, so they're not going to bother going to uni now. (Secondary school student, cited in Godden 2007.)

It is also evident from several studies that drought has had a significant impact on rural deferral, as drought-affected families are generally unable to financially support their children studying away from home (Godden 2007; Alston & Kent 2006; Godden 2005).

Workforce Participation

The Workforce Participation requirements create particular difficulties for rural young people. The 18-month employment requirement for *Workforce Participation* is too long. It does not align with the academic year; therefore, rural young people who only defer for one year cannot receive YA payments until May of their first university semester - 18-months after the students finish secondary school. The income amount of \$18,525 is also too high, and is difficult to earn in rural communities with limited employment or while studying full-time. In her 2007 study, Godden found that several students work multiple jobs and long hours to meet the criteria, and at least two participants had previously left university because they could not meet the target while studying. Several studies have also found that limited employment in rural communities also compounds the challenges of *Workforce Participation* (Godden 2007; Alston & Kent 2006; Godden 2005; Alloway et al. 2004; FaCS 2004; Black et al. 2001). A concerning finding of Godden's study was that many participants had observed rural young people creating 'innovative' ways to reach YA eligibility, such as earning a 'wage' through a parents' business to meet the Independence criteria.

Recommendation: *That the 18-month period and amount to earn for Workforce Participation are reduced.*

Recommendation: *That the income amount for Workforce Participation can be earned in any period up to 18-months, and young people are eligible for Youth Allowance as soon as they earn the required amount.*

Major themes

Many rural young people are forced to defer their studies after finishing secondary school, to work for Independent Youth Allowance. The criteria create a significant number of barriers for rural young people, including difficulties with deferral, finding employment and earning the required amount, and ineligibility for Youth Allowance until May of their first semester at university. Young people who work for Independent Youth Allowance while studying have difficulties finding enough work to meet the income target, and their work often affects their university performance, and visiting their family. The criteria impose additional burdens on rural young people, who have

employment disadvantages and additional costs with accessing tertiary education. The author, reflecting the opinions of all participants, firmly believes that the criteria for Independent Youth Allowance create significant barriers for rural young people accessing tertiary education.

4.3 Unreasonable to Live at Home Circumstances

The Unreasonable to Live at Home criteria consider situations where parents cannot exercise their parental responsibilities. Having to leave home for tertiary education is not considered 'unreasonable to live away from home'. Godden found several issues with the criteria for rural students (Godden 2007). Firstly, most participants do not understand why it is not considered 'unreasonable to live at home' when young people MUST leave home for tertiary education. Secondly, it is evident that many rural parents consider making false claims so they can fulfil the criteria and be eligible for Youth Allowance; reflecting the desperation of rural families. One-sixth of the interviewees in Godden's study have considered fabricating circumstances that fit the 'Unreasonable to Live at Home' criteria.

I've got a friend, they pretended they were estranged, super-doooper fighting with their son. (University student, cited in Godden 2007)

The majority of participants in Godden's study expressed anger that the Unreasonable to Live at Home criteria does not recognise that it is unreasonable for rural young people to live at home and participate in tertiary education. The enormous financial burden on families to support their children, and strict eligibility criteria for Youth Allowance, causes families to resort to desperate means to ensure their children are financially supported. As a university student states, if families must resort to this situation, 'there is obviously a problem with the system' (cited in Godden 2007).

4.4 Personal Income and Assets Test

Students who are eligible for Youth Allowance are subject to a Personal Income and Assets Test. They may earn up to \$236 a fortnight (gross) without affecting their payments, after which their payment decreases by 50 cents for every \$1 earned above this amount. They can accrue an Income Bank up to \$6000. Students are allowed \$2500 in savings, and some non-liquid assets.

Youth Allowance rates

Numerous studies and inquiries have shown that Youth Allowance and Rent Assistance rates are far too low (Godden 2007; James et al. 2007; Alston & Kent 2006; Godden 2005; SWERERC 2005; SCARC 2004). The *2005 Senate Inquiry into Student Income Support* found that Youth Allowance is at least 20% below the poverty line (SWERERC 2005). Participants in Godden's study stated:

...that would barely cover very much. That's what I'm worried a about because I know that it costs more than that to live for two weeks. (Young person, cited in Godden 2007).

They're forcing uni students to live on bread and water...it's like they forcing us into being poor. (University student, cited in Godden 2007).

Youth Allowance cannot cover living expenses, let alone start-up expenses, study expenses (such as textbooks and a computer) and costs to travel home. The full rate of Youth Allowance, plus additional income of \$236 a fortnight, is still a struggle for rural young people. Further, Centrelink payments are not automatically taxed, and some students receive tax bills at the end of the financial year.

Recommendation: That Youth Allowance and Rent Assistance rates are increased to reflect real living costs.

Employment and Earnings

Godden found that the income cap of \$236 per fortnight for Youth Allowance recipients is too low for students from rural communities (Godden 2007). This figure has not been indexed since 1993, reported in the *2005 Senate Inquiry into Student Income Support*. The Inquiry found that if the amount had been indexed annually, in 2005, Youth Allowance recipients would be able to earn \$4-500 per fortnight (SWERERC 2005).

If I get a pay rise, I'll be in the shit. So you can't get pay rises, you can't get experience, because you'll get the money for it and lose the Centrelink (University student, cited in Godden 2007).

Students who are unable to receive the full rate of Youth Allowance experience further difficulties, because their parents are generally unable to further assist them; however, they are still limited by the \$236 a fortnight income cap.

Due to compounding pressures, limited time and financial difficulties during semester, many students work during their university holidays to save for the upcoming year. Holiday earnings and subsequent savings can affect Youth Allowance payments. The Income Bank can be very useful for rural students who work in their holidays, but the amount of \$6,000 (an amount which has not been indexed since 1998) is inadequate (Godden 2007).

Recommendation: That the income cap of \$236 per fortnight is increased and indexed annually.

Recommendation: That the Income Bank amount is increased and indexed annually.

Savings threshold

The savings threshold of \$2500 is also too low for rural students. Godden found that students are unable to save for unexpected costs, such as replacing a car (which is often necessary for rural students to visit their family) (Godden 2007).

...you've just got no safety net if anything does go wrong... (University student, cited in Godden 2007).

University students in Godden's study stated that they require savings for additional and unexpected costs such as a car, travel home, a computer and emergencies.

...I wouldn't have had any of my jobs without cars. My first job I didn't need one, but the other ones, I need a car. So if you want to save for a car you can't, unless you want a really crap car that you're paying money for all the time (University student, cited in Godden 2007)

Recommendation: That the savings threshold is increased and indexed annually.

Low Income Healthcare Card

Godden found that many rural students must participate in holiday work to earn enough money to study away from home (Godden 2007). However, holiday work can affect Youth Allowance payments and eligibility for a Low Income Healthcare Card, a disincentive to work.

I lost [my healthcare card] early on because of work, but then I wasn't earning much during uni, but then they count your holiday work. So you lose your health care card. And it helps; the health care card is awesome when you've got it. But it can easily be taken away. (Young person, cited in Godden 2007).

...earning money over the summer, and working every holidays, you put yourself out of the position of getting it. I've just had some x-rays done that cost me \$350 (University student, cited in Godden 2007).

Major themes

The cost of living, including rent, is rising dramatically. Rural young people studying away from home cannot survive on a fortnightly income of Youth Allowance, Rent Assistance and the allowable income of \$236, which is calculated at a maximum of \$660-\$700 per fortnight (depending on the student's living situation). This amount is inadequate for rural young people to cover living and study costs, travel home to visit their family, and responsibly prepare for their future. The system forces students to either live below the poverty line or work long hours while studying – and both significantly affect their educational performance, wellbeing and links with their family. Further, when students lose their Low Income Healthcare Card, they face additional costs and financial pressures, further exacerbating their financial stress.

4.5 Scholarships

Many scholarships targeting rural students require the students to prove low socio-economic status, generally through being eligible for Centrelink benefits. This applies to Commonwealth Scholarships and various university equity scholarships. Yet, many rural young people are ineligible for Youth Allowance. Additionally, many young people who defer their studies to work for Independent Youth Allowance are not eligible until May of Semester One (18-months after completing secondary school), and cannot prove financial hardship before scholarships applications are due. As a result, many first year rural students miss out on a Commonwealth Scholarship or other scholarship in their first semester at university, the most financially difficult period of their degree. Some rural young people will later receive a scholarship after their first semester, if their grades are strong enough (because merit-testing is also applied to Commonwealth Scholarships and other scholarships). Many participants express anger at this inequitable situation, imposed by an 'arbitrary' 18-month Workforce Participation criteria.

Furthermore, the Commonwealth Scholarships Programme does not adequately acknowledge that rural families above the Dependence income threshold struggle if they financially support their children studying away from home. Parents in Godden's study were angry that merit rankings are applied to Commonwealth Scholarships applications. Many rural young people miss out on scholarships due to their grades; yet students' grades may be low because they have had to work to financially support themselves until they are eligible for Independent Youth Allowance (Godden 2007).

Recommendation: *That eligibility for Commonwealth Scholarships considers familial ability to financially assist young people.*

Recommendation: *That the Commonwealth Government provide more Commonwealth Scholarships.*

Many participants in Godden's study praised rural scholarships such as the Rural Australia Medical Undergraduate Scholarship, Rural Allied Health Undergraduate Scholarship and the John Flynn Scholarships, which are not bonded but give rural students an annual sum and involve mentoring with rural professionals. Participants in Godden's study suggested similar scholarships are available in all courses.

Recommendation: *That a scholarships fund is developed for university students from rural backgrounds studying courses who can rural skills shortage.*

Importantly, most scholarships other than Commonwealth Scholarships are taxable and can affect Youth Allowance payments, because they are considered 'income'; therefore, imposing further financial difficulties.

Recommendation: *That all scholarships are not considered income within the Personal Income and Assets Test for Youth Allowance recipients.*

Major Themes

Rural families have limited information about available scholarships. Additionally, many families are ineligible for scholarships because they are ineligible for Youth Allowance, creating further inequities. While Commonwealth Scholarships can markedly assist rural young people, the criteria for the current scheme, particularly with merit-testing, eliminates many financially struggling rural young people. Other scholarships, which are taxed and are considered income for Youth Allowance purposes, may not adequately address the rural financial issues with accessing tertiary education.

5. AUSTRALIA 2020 SUMMIT

There are widespread concerns about the state of education in rural Australia, which was consistently voiced at the recent Australia 2020 Youth Summit, and the Australia 2020 Summit (although inadequately reported). Following the Australia 2020 Summit, ten members of the Rural Communities and Rural Industries stream developed a collaborative proposal entitled 'Rural Access-Equity-Excellence in the Education Revolution' (see Appendix 1). Developed by rural leaders, including academics, business people, young people and professionals, this proposal provides a blueprint for the future of rural education. It presents 11 'Big Ideas' for rural education, which would ensure the human right to education, address the rural skills shortage, and revitalise rural communities. These ideas include:

1. 'National Voice' for rural education - a funded peak body for remote, rural & regional (RRR) education;
2. National rural education strategy to insure that RRR Australia is not left behind;
3. Flexible online learning opportunities to provide specialised education courses in rural communities;
4. 'State of the Art Satellite Education Centres' providing high tech, high speed, interactive, innovative education delivery that encourage metropolitan Australians to relocate to rural Australia for education;
5. Non-means tested Youth Allowance and Tertiary Access Allowance for all rural tertiary students to overcome the financial barriers to education and make tertiary education a viable option;
6. Commonwealth Scholarships for TAFE and other post-secondary students who have to leave home for formal training;
7. Mentoring a Rural Renaissance - a national mentoring program to bridge the gap between city and country - to include students, professions & business people and support for rural student exchange and buddy programmes;

8. Funded Rural work Experience Programs - for rural students and urban students in rural placements;
9. Waive HECS-HELP debts for rural practitioners - incentives for skilled rural people to return and urban skilled to choose a country placement;
10. Indigenous education - support strategies developed in the Indigenous Australians stream - giving real choices and opportunity; and
11. Other issues - increased funding for rural universities; special needs of students with disabilities, remote students, migrant & refugee students; expanding Assistance for Isolated Children's Students eligibility; women's education.

Appendix 1 explains each of these ideas in greater detail.

A Peak Body for Rural Education

The foundation of a rural education revolution is funding a National Voice for rural education – a peak body, similar to the successful National Rural Health Alliance, who will ensure a national voice on the extensive education issues in rural Australia. In 2007, a working party was formed through the Rural Education Forum Australia to develop the national voice, involving a diverse group of rural education leaders and organisations. However, in early 2008, the Minister for Education, Hon. Julia Gillard, rejected the request for funding. Rural Australia still does not have a peak body representing their educational needs.

Recommendation: *That the federal Government fund a peak body for rural education.*

6. CONCLUSION

As a barrier to access, the current Youth Allowance system denies rural young people their human right to education. Urgent changes are required to ensure rural young people have their right to education, and to support a sustainable Rural Australia. Amendments to Youth Allowance policy are necessary to increase eligibility and ensure adequate financial support for rural students; and ease the burden on rural young people and their families. Eligibility for Youth Allowance must be extended to all rural young people who must leave home for higher education. A Tertiary Access Allowance needs to be introduced to financially support rural young people in the expensive relocation away from home to study. Youth Allowance rates, and restrictions regarding personal income and assets, must be revised (and indexed annually) to reflect real living costs for students.

Appendix 2 shares the Messages to the Minister of Education (then Hon. Julie Bishop), voiced by participants of Godden's 2007 study. The tone of the messages reflects the anger and frustration of rural young people and families about government policies regarding Youth Allowance and higher education.

*Thanks for making it f***ing hard* (Student, cited in Godden 2007).

It is clear, from the messages, that rural Australians need change. The continued and extensive activism, lobbying and research that rural Australians have engaged in since the introduction of Youth Allowance exemplify the inequity of 'one-size-fits-all' income support policies.

Educated rural young people are the strongest hope for addressing the rural skills shortage. Youth Allowance, or some form of income support, is vital to support rural young people studying higher education away from home. Access to adequate financial support for rural students is necessary for the sustainable future for rural Australia. Recognising the educational disadvantage, the denial of human rights, and the financial

stress experienced by rural Australians, this submission strongly urges the Commonwealth government to address the inequities created by the Youth Allowance system, to ensure all rural young people have the opportunity to access and successfully complete tertiary education.

I'm not asking for handouts, just asking for a fair go. (Parent, cited in Godden 2007)

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APPENDIX 1

Rural Access – Equity - Excellence in the Education Revolution A 'Big Idea' from the 2020 Summit

Preamble:

Remote, rural and regional Australians experience many human rights concerns accessing quality education. Rural participation, retention and achievement on education are far below urban Australia. Yet education is the pathway to opportunity and productivity for disadvantaged people and communities. Remote, rural and regional communities experience significant difficulties attracting and retaining skilled and professional staff, in areas as diverse as education, health, mining, agricultural science, business etc. Action is required to breakdown the image of rural Australia, and value rural professional experience in recruitment and promotion.

This collaborative proposal was developed following the 2020 Summit by ten members of the Rural Industries and Rural Communities stream. It collates ideas presented at the summit, and demands that education is prioritised for rural revitalisation, sustainability and productivity. It ensures that all rural Australians can access their human right to education, and promotes rural social inclusion. This initiative embraces a long-term, 2020 vision.

Ambition:

By 2020, all rural Australians will have equitable access to quality education and training opportunities. These opportunities will encompass: community-based early childhood learning; primary and secondary education; vocational education and training; higher education; online learning; professional development; and lifelong learning.

Objectives:

- To increase the skills, knowledge, opportunities, capacity and productivity of rural Australians;
- To ensure parity of educational opportunities between rural and urban Australians from 'the cradle to the grave';
- To increase participation, retention and achievement of rural Australians in secondary and tertiary education; and
- To address the rural skills shortage and support rural population growth.

Key Strategies:

The Rural Education Revolution can involve the following strategies developed at the Summit:

- 1) A 'National Voice' for Rural Education;
- 2) National Rural Education Strategy;

- 3) Flexible and online learning opportunities;
- 4) Satellite Education Centres with high tech, high speed communications;
- 5) Non-means tested Youth Allowance and Tertiary Access Allowance for all rural tertiary students;
- 6) Commonwealth Scholarships for TAFE and other post-secondary students;
- 7) Mentoring a Rural Renaissance;
- 8) Funded rural work experience programs;
- 9) Waive HECS-HELP debts for rural practitioners;
- 10) Indigenous education strategies; and
- 11) Other issues for consideration.

Conclusion:

Improving rural access to quality education will improve rural socio-economic status, health and wellbeing, industries and economy, self esteem and the capacity of rural communities to thrive.

EXPLANATION OF STRATEGIES

- 1. A 'National Voice' for Rural Education:** Remote, rural and regional Australia needs a funded 'National Voice' for rural education. This may involve funding and expanding the Rural Education Forum Australia. A funded peak body will ensure rural education is equitably represented in education policy development and decision-making. The peak body will include education providers, education recipients, and associated groups, building upon the current model of the Rural Education Forum Australia. The success of the National Rural Health Alliance is an example of this strategy in action.
- 2. National Rural Education Strategy:** A national rural education strategy will provide a collaborative policy framework that embraces early childhood through to adult learning for all remote, rural and regional Australians. It will ensure that no rural Australian is left behind, including those from remote communities, remote properties and those with disabilities. The strategy will integrate research such as that recently completed by the National Centre of Science, Information and Communication Technology, and Mathematics Education for Rural and Regional Australia (SiMMER), and build upon the MCEETYA framework for rural and remote education.
- 3. Flexible and online learning opportunities:** Many rural students cannot access educational courses because they are not available (for example, many rural students are disadvantaged through lack of language courses). For increased rural education opportunities, funding and support is required to develop and expand primary, secondary, TAFE and higher education online courses. This strategy will also encourage rural young people to remain in rural communities to complete their education.
- 4. Satellite Education Centres with high tech, high speed communications:** The current shortage of teachers impact highest on remote, rural and regional education. Sending students to cities and regional centres for quality education can disrupt families, deplete communities of whole generations and add unnecessary financial burden (however, it must be acknowledged that relocation is, and will continue to be, necessary for some students to reach their potential and aspirations). This strategy

proposes 'state of the art' education centres as the hub of towns, with the highest quality teachers zoomed in online. Communities will be empowered and enabled to seize opportunities. In these centres, teaching would be interactive, innovative, exciting and of the highest quality, while also maintaining the presence of face-to-face teaching. These centres will also encourage those from a metropolitan background to relocate to rural and regional Australia for their studies. Rural Clinical Schools for medicine students in rural and remote communities are an example of successful satellite learning, and could be expanded to include other disciplines within the existing infrastructure. This strategy will also provide additional opportunities within Australia's educational export trade.

- 5. Non-means tested Youth Allowance and Tertiary Access Allowance for all rural tertiary students:** Many remote, rural and regional young people must relocate to an urban or regional centre for tertiary education, and encounter considerable costs (a recent study estimated expenses of \$15,000-\$20,000 per year, plus up to \$6000 for start-up costs). The current eligibility criteria for Youth Allowance marginalizes rural Australians, is a financial barrier to tertiary education for rural young people, and results in loss of services when whole families move to urban centres to access education. This strategy removes that financial barrier. All rural young people will be eligible for Youth Allowance if they need to leave home for tertiary education. Rural students will also be eligible for a non-means tested Tertiary Access Allowance for their start-up and relocation costs. Tertiary education will then be seen as a viable option for all rural young people, and families can remain in rural communities while their children study away from home.
- 6. Commonwealth Scholarships for TAFE and other post-secondary students:** Currently, Commonwealth Scholarships are only provided for higher education students. However, rural young people who leave home for TAFE and other post-secondary courses encounter the same costs (TAFE students must also pay up-front fees). Extending Commonwealth Scholarships for vocation post-secondary students will ensure they can equitably access financial support.
- 7. Mentoring a Rural Renaissance:** A national mentoring program will bridge urban and rural Australia. Rural young people will be linked to rural and/or urban mentors to learn life skills such as entrepreneurship and community development, emotional intelligence and environmental stewardship. Rural tertiary students and trainees will have a rural and/or urban mentor to guide career pathways. Rural professionals and business-people will have urban mentors to share information and ideas, and for professional development (this program will include rural teachers). The strategy will also include a school buddy system that connects rural and urban schools, including opportunities for rural student exchange. The initiative will reconnect rural and urban Australia, promote rural communities, and empower rural young people to develop relationships with their peers outside their immediate community.
- 8. Funded rural work experience programs:** This strategy was developed within the 'Strengthening Rural Skills' proposal at the 2020 Youth Summit. Rural student placements are expensive and therefore inaccessible for many students. This strategy will involve funded work experience and placements for secondary and tertiary students to have on-the-job training in rural communities. Both urban and rural students will be financially supported to access extensive rural placements, and will have the opportunity to understand their career in a rural context. This strategy also encourages tertiary education courses to include compulsory rural placements. This strategy aims to address the rural skills shortage through educating students about the career opportunities in rural communities.
- 9. Waive HECS-HELP debts for rural practitioners:** The strategy provides incentives for rural and urban young people to participate in tertiary education, and then to bring their skills to a regional, rural or remote community. Rural practitioners will be rewarded for working in the bush. A scaled model will consider level of remoteness

with appropriate years of service, and rewards professionals who remain in rural communities for longer periods. This strategy will recruit and retain a rural population and a sustainable workforce. It will also ensure that rural Australians have equal access to education, health, social care and other services.

10. Indigenous education: We refer to the Indigenous education ideas presented within the Indigenous stream at the 2020 summit, and propose recognition that since many Indigenous children live in rural areas, that their issues are similarly rural education issues and not necessarily isolated to Indigenous students only. These ideas include: developing a new education framework to give real choice for Indigenous children to get high quality education, including to attend boarding schools or hostels, enabled by a combination of ABSTUDY, private school scholarships and government funding; encouraging high-performing young professionals to work as teachers alongside Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators; and other unreported ideas.

11. Other issues for consideration: Due to time constraints, some important rural education issues were not discussed at the 2020 Summit. These include: increased funding for regional universities; expanding Assistance for Isolated Children eligibility to facilitate choice in education for remote children; educating rural students with a disability, rural migrant and refugee peoples, and rural women.

AUTHORS

This proposal was developed by the following Australia 2020 Summit delegates:

Naomi Godden: Social worker and social researcher;

Dr. James Fitzpatrick: Paediatrician;

Professor Margaret Alston: Professor of Social Work;

Mary Nenke: Broadacre farmer and aquaculturalist;

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Ken Boundy: Remote small business owner;

Jacque Stutt: Youth Development; and

Professor Fiona McKenzie: Director of Housing and Urban Research Institute, Curtin University.

APPENDIX 2

MESSAGES TO THE MINISTER OF EDUCATION

In Godden's research study *Youth Allowance and Regional Young People: Access to Tertiary Education* (2007), every participant (including regional young people, university students, parents and community members) provided a Message to the Minister for Education about Youth Allowance. The Minister at the time of the study was the Hon. Julie Bishop. Below are all the messages.

Messages from pre-university students

- *...the fact that we're pigeonholed into having to defer if we don't have enough money to pay for our university is really annoying. It stops us from being able to take our education to that further level without working much harder than is necessary... (Year 12 Student, Loxton)*
- *...rethink Youth Allowance, especially for people that are moving far away from their families and their parents and stuff that they know, and having to live independently...surely there has to be some way of, you know, working this out so that it benefits all people. (Year 12 student, Loxton)*
- *...the equality thing. Like with the Youth Allowance, it should be like across the board, it shouldn't be allowed just for some. (Year 12 student, Kununurra)*
- *...there needs to be a different criteria for especially rural students that they should be declared independent earlier than the age of 25 based on what they're doing rather than their age. (Secondary school student, Springvale Hostel, Hobart)*
- *...more scholarships for students in rural areas, and the youth allowance is a really good idea for the lower socio-economic students (Year 12 student, Kununurra)*
- *For her to go through it herself, if she hasn't, and if she has then she should know. She should really, really be helping a lot of people. For sure. Like yes, you're young as well so you don't want to be stressing at a young age because you'll be stressing about your studies. That's why you're going away so you should be helped. If people want more people in careers and working, then yes, they should be helping... (Young person, Kununurra)*
- *There needs to be more consideration put into finding places for people to live...when they want to do further education (Secondary school student, Springvale Hostel, Hobart)*
- *Just take the pressure off Year 12. Please take the pressure off. (Year 12 student, Kununurra)*

Messages from university students

- *Why does that situation exist? Why is it that going to uni is something that it seems as though you're doing something difficult, like trying to skirt around or doing something that's not the norm? Surely finishing uni in the time that's set down to finish should be something that's quite doable if you're intelligent and work ... and why can't you appeal against things that are unfair in the rules rather than having to break the rules, get caught, get rejected and then appeal the rule? Why can't you do it right the first time? (University student, Charles Sturt University [CSU])*
- *Definitely consider the Independence rate. It's huge. It's just massive. Think about if your daughter or son had gone to university and you didn't give them any support,*

they wanted to be independent, they're really trying to do well for themselves, get themselves a degree and everything, and the government don't give them any support. There's no rent assistance or nothing. You have to pay for it all your own way. That comes out of the study time. It comes out of all the things that you're working towards just to prove a point to the government that says, "Oh I've earned 18 grand". So it's not fair. (University student, University of Western Australia [UWA])

- *...the issue's fundamentally one of, urban student largely have the option of being able to get a tertiary education, and they've got somewhere to live. Whereas regional students do not have somewhere to live. So it's a barrier in the way of tertiary education...it may be a bit grandeur to call it human rights but it is a situation where there is inequity based on some sort of characteristic which shouldn't occur, because people should have equal opportunities. (University student, UWA)*
- *...it's probably not in Australia's best interests, longer term, to have people locked or alienated from a system which is going to train people to hopefully be more beneficial to society. Probably need to take a bit more of a longer term view of the situation. And maybe a separate criteria for rural students, so that they don't necessarily have to go through the income test, you have to be destitute to qualify for that, or Independence that delays people's entry into education. (University student, UWA)*
- *...the system, in the state that it's currently in, kind of provokes a generalisation that there are people in urban areas who are able to go to university, but people in regional areas, are, not they don't deserve to, but aren't capable of going to university. And I think you are missing out and skimming over a lot of really talented people who have the potential to go on and do great things...There are a lot of people who comes from regional centres who have the ability to make big things of themselves, and not giving regional students the same opportunities to attend university just because of their situation is really short-sighted. (University student, UWA)*
- *...if you can prove that you're struggling and you, just because you're parents have a lot of money doesn't mean that you're not going to struggle. (University student, UWA focus group)*
- *...does she realise that there's people who aren't eligible for youth allowance who are considering leaving uni for that reason. Like it's something that's real, it's not just a few people having a whinge around the edge (University student, CSU)*
- *...why can't we appeal against unfair rules? (University student, CSU)*
- *I think the system works the way that it is. That it would be very hard to do anything else than what we've got. A few changes that could be made, small. (University student, CSU focus group)*
- *I think here's lots of problems, but I think that they govern pretty well, considering. (University student, CSU focus group)*
- *I would have heaps of complaints, but overall I'm very happy with everything the government has done for me. Fares home and things like that. But yeah, I do think that it should be more equal. I'm luckily in a good position, my parents will pay my accommodation, you know, they're in a position to do so. (University student, CSU focus group)*
- *...you seriously need to review, one way or the other. I think, yeah, in particularly in respect to regional student, the inconvenience they face need to be looked at. And I think also taking into account inflation at the moment, there needs to be some serious adjustments made. (University student, UWA)*

- *I think that students go straight from school to uni need to be rewarded more. Because like, you have to take a year off to get independence. (University student, CSU focus group)*
- *I think they need to make it actually a bit easier. Less stressful. (University student, CSU focus group)*
- *Put the accommodation on HECS. (University student, CSU focus group)*
- *Thanks for making it really fucking hard for me (University student, UWA)*
- *...what are you talking about? I'd like to hear where she's coming from? Why 18 months exists, where did this number come from, how does she doubt all this research? (University student, UWA focus group)*
- *...everything about her seems to contradict itself in some way. (University student, UWA focus group)*
- *She absolutely no idea. I just want to understand, what goes through a person's head like that. Is she actually retarded? Or is that just a perception? (University student, UWA focus group)*
- *...is she actually an ignorant person? (University student, UWA focus group)*
- *...has she talked to uni students before? (University student, UWA focus group)*
- *Shut up Julie Bishop. Piss off. (University student, UWA focus group)*

Messages from parents and community members

- *...why is it more important for some and not for others?...give country students the rights that they deserve (Parent, Loxton)*
- *...education, primary and secondary education is compulsory and the government support us quite well like that with the AIC boarding allowance. But I guess you can say, "Look, you've done that for your primary and secondary years. Well okay, out you go". But at the end of the day they do have to look after the youth (Parent, ICPA)*
- *Encourage university attendance. Keep it within reach of the regular guy / gal. My brother had free uni 30 years ago, I chose not to go then, but am now paying for my son to attend. He still starts his working life with a debt of \$20,000 (Parent, Wagga Wagga)*
- *...she needs to look at equity in access very carefully, and accommodate country, rural and remote students (Parent, ICPA)*
- *...once they're out there working in the workforce they're contributing back, it's a circle. (Parent, ICPA)*
- *Stop young people having to stay back and earn money. Young people who are bright should be going on with their studies, not taking twelve months off, not losing your skills. You know, I teach maths, in twelve months you lose a lot of skills in twelve months. And you come back in... at rock bottom (Teacher, Loxton)*
- *I believe that a student, once they decide to move away, go on to further study, that the minute that decision is made and they're enrolled in a course, they be declared as Independent...that doesn't suddenly change 18 months down the track so the financial need is immediate, not 18 months away (Parent, Loxton)*
- *...really, really encourage people who are swaying to take up the option of tertiary study...it would be such a great boost to the rural areas... [A]t least it'll take that extra burden away. (Teacher, Loxton)*

- *...you have to stop rural students falling behind the rest of Australia. We are one country and unless you want all these rural students to take no more part in Australia...in a professional sense, equal to the rest of Australia...these rules are putting a divide between city and country...Put a system in place where...more rural students, get the retention rate going through universities equal to where it is in the city. (Parent, ICPA)*
- *I'd seriously look at an allowance for children, to allow children to go to tertiary education, to make it easier for their parents to allow for tertiary education. Just because the expenses of the whole lot are just far too much for what everyone can do. Everyone else has either other children or other circumstances and all that. They just need to definitely look at an allowance for our country kids to go to a city to study. (Parent, ICPA)*
- *Realistically look at their expenses (Parent, ICPA)*
- *To bring the Independent back to when they leave school, so that they can get themselves to uni as an independent, and so that they're coming out at 20-21 or something, and into the workforce (Parent, ICPA)*
- *They have to work for 12 months just to get themselves there anyway, and it's just that gap where they're draining all of their savings...just to pay that first six months. It's really hard, and mentally on them, they're meant to be studying and they're worried about where they're money's going and you know it's gone (Parent, ICPA)*
- *Get Centrelink to redesign the form. Maybe get some people to work for Centrelink in the call centres who know what they're talking about or have better training (Parent, ICPA)*
- *I think the Independent youth allowance thing is the critical issue for most kids who go to uni and maybe do something with the amount that they have to earn. It's a very difficult thing because you cover such a huge range of situations. (Parent, ICPA)*
- *I think the drought's just made the whole thing come to a head really because it's affected such a huge number of people, and I think it's really, you can see it in the number of kids who are not going to uni who might have gone; like, if they could get that independent rate straight off they might have gone (Parent, ICPA)*
- *...we don't want rich university kids. Struggling kids of the salt, they have to be able to survive comfortably not in their physical needs but in their emotional. They don't need to be stressed out or trying to. The university degree does that for them. So the financial pressure needs to be taken off them to the point where they can survive comfortably. (Parent, ICPA)*
- *I do think they need that increase in the Living Away From Home allowance for tertiary education. I think that, at the moment, they get the AIC, but once it gets to Youth Allowance, it seems to be different...either the families take the AIC or they go over to Youth Allowance, when they leave high school. But also, once they start tertiary education, it's not enough to cover what needs to happen for those kids who are setting homes, or setting up a new environment for them to actually study comfortably...they need more than two airfares a year to come home. A lot of the kids can't access those two airfares if they're working as well. That's where the difficulty is, so maybe they haven't used them. That's because they're locked into jobs to support their living, so they can't get home as much as what they would. Even the kids that could drive home, they can't do it because they're locked into actually part time work, and if they give up that work to go home for a weekend, they lose the job. It's not as easy to get part time jobs now, for a university student. So that's a reason they don't access, because they can't take holidays when they need to, because they're supporting themselves, so increase the allowance. (Parent, ICPA)*

- *...take away the means testing for geographically isolated children and let our kids have the opportunity to attend university without stress and without that overhanging money thing on a young child. I think the overhanging money stress causes a lot of pain. (Parent, ICPA)*
- *More support for parents who want to put their children into uni. (Parent, Kununurra focus group)*
- *More information about what to do beforehand. (Parent, Kununurra focus group)*
- *...getting rid of these ridiculous limits. (Parent, Kununurra focus group)*
- *...could consider different regions or different experiences differently and not just have a rural, this term 'rural blanket' that just covers everyone as if we're in the same boat. When were definitely not in the same boat as say Narrogin, Geraldton. (Parent, Kununurra focus group)*
- *I know it's hard to think across the board of what is fair to pay for people or to support kids with (Parent, Wagga Wagga)*
- *I know that things have become more expensive and you have to pay for things, and we have to make sure that...there are students going through to university and things don't hold them up...I'm now paying for an education that I never had myself, I've given it to my son, which wasn't that cost anything if it had happened in my day...it's fair enough to have overseas student to come to Australia, but not at the expense of Australian students too. (Parent, Wagga Wagga)*
- *...bit more assistance (Parent, Oatlands)*
- *...it really is costly to get your kids out there and I just don't think they know what it really does cost to put your kids through. When they finish or if they get this degree they've got a bill at the end of it as well and it's really difficult. (Parent, Oatlands)*
- *It's not gin and tonics on the veranda. (Parent, Oatlands focus group)*
- *Why won't you do this? (Parent, Loxton)*
- *You do not understand the depth of feeling to this issue in rural Australia (Parent, Loxton)*
- *...listen to us. Try and understand...I mean we don't want a lot, we just need some kind of help...Parent, ICPA)*
- *Come and walk a mile in these kids shoes (Parent. ICPA)*
- *...is she the lady we've got on our dart board at school? (Parent, Oatlands focus group)*
- *...get a new job (Parent, Oatlands focus group)*
- *...come and talk to people in our rural communities, talk to us. Find out what the real situation is. (Parent, Oatlands focus group)*
- *...things they make up that are things that don't suit. (Parent, Oatlands focus group)*
- *She just needs to get out in the real world and talk to people. (Parent, Oatlands focus group)*