

Subject: SBCN: Barriers to further study for regional young people

Youth Allowance a barrier to uni for regional young people New research has found that eligibility for Youth Allowance income support is one of the major barriers to regional access and participation in tertiary education.

The report, entitled Youth Allowance and Regional Young People: Access to Tertiary Education was released today by the Charles Sturt University's Centre for Rural Social Research and Monash University Department of Social Work. "The Youth Allowance policy violates Australia's human rights obligation to ensure that tertiary education is financially accessible for all young people. This is supported by figures which show that only 17 per cent of university students have a regional background," said researcher Naomi Godden.

The report's key findings include:

- * The annual living costs for a regional young person studying away from home are estimated between \$15 000 and \$20 000, plus relocation and start-up costs of \$3 000 to \$6 000. Most regional families cannot afford this. It forces regional young people to work very long hours while studying, or families must make significant financial sacrifices, including extreme debt. Financial difficulties are exacerbated by the drought and regional economic vulnerability.

- * Many regional young people are ineligible for Youth Allowance due to stringent eligibility criteria. The income and assets thresholds for Dependent Youth Allowance are much too low for regional families, who have higher living costs and additional tertiary study expenses than urban Australians. Further, Centrelink's definition of 'Independence', including the unrealistic age of 25, means that many regional young people are forced to defer their tertiary studies for one to two years to work and earn \$18 525 in 18 months, to be eligible as an Independent through Workforce Participation. Alternatively, some regional young people work very long hours while studying to financially support themselves and meet the criteria, significantly affecting their educational performance, health and well-being. The criteria considerably disadvantage regional young people.

- * Regional young people receiving Youth Allowance experience significant financial stress.

Current Youth Allowance rates are estimated at 20 per cent below the poverty line. Even with the maximum amount of income that students can earn before their payment decreases, \$236 a fortnight (an amount that has not been indexed since 1993), students with a regional background cannot afford rising living costs. Poor health due to malnutrition was commonly reported.

The researchers recommend that every regional young person who must leave home for tertiary education is automatically eligible for the full rate of Independent Youth Allowance, along with a Tertiary Access Allowance to cover their start-up costs, and that the income cap of \$236 a fortnight is increased. "To address the regional skills shortage and support a sustainable future for regional Australia, adequate financial support must be available to all regional young people who want to participate in tertiary education," said Ms. Godden. The research was supported by Charles Sturt University, Monash University, The Foundation for Young Australians and The University of Western Australia. The report is available online at:
www.csu.edu.au/research/ilws/Youth%20Allowance%20and%20regional%20young%20people.pdf