



**Question on Notice
For 8th September 2009**

For the Minister for Education - Hon Jane Lomax-Smith MP

Is it Departmental policy for the closure of swimming pools in regional and small country schools in South Australia and what assurances are there that they will be maintained and remain open?

**EDUCATION, RURAL AND REGIONAL AREAS
15th July 2009**

Mrs PENFOLD (Flinders) (15:28): Today I bring the attention of the house to the grave concerns that many country students and their families have in accessing tertiary education and diminishing opportunities, particularly following the federal Labor government's changes to the youth allowance criteria. I ask this Labor government to lobby their federal counterparts and investigate and implement ways in which to assist South Australia's country tertiary students to fulfil their potential.

Families of rural and regional students are forced to pay for accommodation, food and general costs to run a second household. They have to find suitable accommodation—and the operative word is 'suitable'. Parents need to know that their children are safe. Students are expected to learn how to live away from home without support networks, transport themselves in unfamiliar territory, do their own food shopping, cooking, cleaning and laundry, attend university—an experience vastly different from schooling—and try to get some part-time work to supplement day-to-day living expenses—another added stress with some very demanding uni courses. It is no wonder that so many country students drop out of tertiary studies because the stress and pressure become too great.

By comparison, most young adults of city families do not face these problems having the advantage, comfort and security of their family home surroundings and usually already having a part-time job. Very little change happens for them when accessing further education.

Country people are proud of their local schools and tertiary facilities where they exist. However, choices are limited with a lack of appropriately qualified teachers and lecturers, smaller numbers of subject choices and a lack of mental and educational stimulation. Some subjects can be taught by distance education. However, this, too, is limited because of poor and slow internet access, poor or non-existent broadband services and the necessary hardware and software.

Where tertiary institutions exist in some larger rural towns most students still have to live away from home to attend them, so all the disadvantages outlined still apply. Young people in rural and regional areas are often overcome by the obstacles they have to face to gain a tertiary education, hence do not even consider this avenue for their future. The recent changes by the federal Labor government to the Independent Youth Allowance Scheme will strengthen this perception and negative outcome on tertiary education access by country students.

Until now students have been able to defer chosen university studies for a year while they work in order to qualify for youth allowance. However, uni courses can be deferred only for one year, and the proposed changes will not now enable students to defer studies to save enough money. Eventually, there will be a less educated substructure in rural and regional areas, with people less able to accept advances in technology and general knowledge. On the flipside, country students gaining tertiary degrees are more likely to return to country practice than students who have always lived in the city.

Without these students returning to regions fully qualified, eventually there will be an even greater shortage of health, education, environment and other professionals, adding to the downward spiral of the quality of life in rural

and regional Australia. Students are unlikely to enrol in tertiary courses where they do not see tertiary education as a positive future for them. When the obstacles become too great and/or parents are unable to support their children living away from home to access tertiary study, enrolments will drop with more negative broad-ranging effects.

Changes in the Independent Youth Allowance rules make it almost impossible for rural and regional students to fulfil their requirements to be classed as 'independent' and qualify for financial assistance. If someone has spent two years in a job (as proposed changes to the allowance would necessitate for the person to qualify for assistance) it is even more unlikely that he or she would then relocate to study. The momentum to again become a student is reduced when the person is faced with loss of income, dislocation from their community and breaking commitments to families and friends.

Country students also have fewer opportunities to socialise and to develop interactive social skills, and they have fewer prospects or exposure to gain interest in the wide variety of occupations and professions that are available. Not only are they destined to poorer education but also reduced health, higher suicides and a lower life expectancy—particularly for men—than their city-based counterparts. Rural and regional communities require qualified workers, professionals and tradespeople. A reduction in tertiary-qualified people able and willing to work in the country lowers the quality of life in rural and regional areas and affects the capacity of the whole state.

Australia needs people populating rural and regional areas, and those people and their children should not be disadvantaged because they do not live in metropolitan areas. I urge this Labor government to be proactive in its assistance to help our young people take advantage of the educational facilities predominantly located in Adelaide to fulfil their considerable potential.