This is a story of three generations of a rural family.

In my generation only 2 or 3 students, able to win scholarships, went to university from a high school enrolment of 600. Many students left at 15 to find work or apprenticeships, go to senior technical school then at 18 into the armed services. After a small rural primary school I traveled by bus each day to a large regional high school to year 12. After the war the universities and senior technical schools filled with returned servicemen making it difficult for school leavers to enroll in tertiary studies. My husband completed year 8 at a small rural primary school. He then traveled 50 miles a day by bus to a regional centre to attend a farmer's class at the technical school. We both worked on family farms until we married and he took over part of his father’s farm.

In the next generation all four children went to the small local primary school then by bus to the local high school. Because this was small and did not teach maths and science at senior level we paid the cost of a second farm to send our children to board at private schools in Melbourne for their final two years. One child won a scholarship and had 4 years boarding. All gained university entrance.

The oldest after wide rural and urban experience is now senior real estate valuations officer of a bank based in Melbourne. The next is a teacher librarian at a Melbourne Public Senior College. The third a specialist doctor who after 13 years at Mildura moved to Melbourne where he is on the staff of the Eye and Ear Hospital and in private practice. The children of these three all attend or attended leading Melbourne private schools.

The youngest, the brainiest, passed first year engineering at Melbourne University then left. After obtaining permanency in a public service position at Wodonga she left to Jilleroo at Jericho, west Queensland. Today she is the competent manager of the family farm.

Her children, the third generation, traveled by bus to the local primary school consolidated from three schools of their mother's time. They now travel by bus to the local secondary college their mother attended. Since that time the enrolment rose to over 400, it is now less than 200 and next year will become a P 12 College. Beside this public school, and started after it commenced, a Marion College funded by generous Commonwealth Government grants has grown to be larger than the public secondary college. In years 11 and 12 the two schools share maths and science classes. The maintenance of the secondary college has been severely neglected. The staff are to be respected and admired for what they achieve under difficult circumstances.
I believe my grandsons at this secondary college have an equal opportunity to do their best as my grandchildren at their large expensive Melbourne private schools. A special effort is made for the students at the small school to learn about career options. The eldest boy at secondary college is in year 12. Last year he received a Westpac Bank Maths certificate and is a member of the Lee Kway Dow Melbourne University Scholarship Program. His brother received a Westpac Bank Maths Certificate in year 9. Both boys have potential to obtain university entrance.

The previous generation was funded at University by Commonwealth Scholarships and living allowances, then university fees were abolished. State Government Teacher Scholarships and Nursing Bursaries were also available making it possible for the first time for children of many country families to commence tertiary education. Today students are faced with HEC debt and the prohibitive cost of living away from home. There are more universities from which to choose, TAFE Colleges are severely under funded, and Private Training Providers are undermining public education by competing for the most profitable courses. Internet facilities give access to distance education.

Repeatedly we hear of rural children with excellent VCE results obtaining a university place then needing to defer because of the financial cost, often they do not commence university. Some enter organizations like banks where they can progress internally but many never reach there full academic potential. At the end of this year I see my grandson and his parents facing a very difficult decision. Will he go onto university and build up a debt or if the local football club can find him a good apprenticeship stay home and keep playing. He has the potential to achieve in both areas. Also later as a qualified tradesman he can if he wishes proceed to further study. Many of his class mates have chosen VCAL or VET rather than VCE.

The simple response to why rural students do not proceed to tertiary study is financial limitation, understanding the various paths available and the conflict of rural community values with urban anonymity. Once a year at a university college or teachers college hostel helped over come culture shock and homesickness but this is no longer financially an option. If a student from a small rural secondary college can manage the transition to university or tertiary study they usually do well and many following graduation seek to return to rural communities. Family and community support is of great importance.

Today with gentrification of inner suburban housing reducing the amount of student housing available, escalating bonds and rents, travel costs and cost of living I estimate $15,000 per year would be required student income. This does not allow for the cost of a computer and books or allow many trips home for a student from Ouyen, Mt Beauty or Orbost. 18 years old students should be classed as independent students able to obtain income support without assessment of parental income or asset test. This is a government investment in the future of the nation to support students with the potential to achieve qualifications which contribute to the advancement of Australian communities.

I trust this story is of assistance to your consultation.

Alison G Walpole

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