

5. Regional, rural and remote learners from equity groups

Issues

- Many learners from regional, rural and remote (RRR) areas experience multiple types of inequity, which exacerbates the challenges of aspiring to, accessing and succeeding at tertiary education.
- Governments, tertiary institutions and not-for-profit organisations have implemented a range of initiatives that have been effective in supporting RRR learners from equity groups.
- There are opportunities to scale up successful outreach programs for learners from low socioeconomic (low SES) backgrounds.
- Further strategies to improve outcomes for Indigenous Australians is a priority to address the disparity in educational opportunities, especially for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander learners in remote and very remote areas.
- Better student support services could be made available for RRR learners with disability.
- Recognition and better support for RRR learners from rural, remote and very remote areas, especially during times of hardship, also requires attention.

Discussion

Many learners who live in RRR areas face multiple interacting and compounding challenges, which influence their tertiary education aspirations, access and success. Persistently under-represented groups include:

- **Learners from low SES backgrounds:** People from low SES backgrounds comprise 25 per cent¹ of all Australians yet remain under-represented in tertiary education (18 per cent of VET students² and 17.1 per cent of university students³). Over one quarter (28.4 per cent) of RRR learners are from low SES backgrounds⁴. The consultations identified that RRR learners from low SES backgrounds might not aspire to pursue tertiary education for many reasons, including a belief that it is simply out of reach due to financial issues and relative isolation despite their academic capability. As raised in several submissions, those RRR low SES learners who do go on to tertiary education face hurdles such as balancing study and work commitments⁵.
- **Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander learners:** Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples comprise 2.8 per cent (798,400) of the Australian population of which 62.6 per cent (499,798) live in RRR areas⁶. Indigenous learners are more likely to participate in VET (estimated at 3.4 per cent of all VET students⁷) than in higher education (1.8 per cent of all university students⁸). Submissions showcased many school-to-university pathways programs for RRR Indigenous students that have been effective (e.g. La Trobe's Aspire Early Admission Program). However, they also highlighted that for Indigenous learners in remote and very remote communities VET access and completion⁹ and the pathways from VET-to-university are

¹ National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE) <https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/practice/low-ses-students/>

² NCVET 2017 Total VET students by equity group

³ Koshy P. 2018 Equity student participation in Australian higher education: 2012-2017, NCSEHE, Perth: Curtin University.

⁴ Cassells, R., Dockery, M., Duncan, A., Gao, A., & Seymour, R. (2017). Educate Australia Fair? Education Inequality in Australia. Bankwest Curtin Economic Centre, Focus on the States Series, No. 5. Retrieved from <http://bcec.edu.au/publications/educate-australia-fair-education-inequality-australia/>

⁵ Burke, P., Bennett, A., Bunn, M., Stevenson, J., & Clegg, S. (2017). It's About Time: working towards more equitable understandings of the impact of time for students in higher education, NCSEHE, Curtin University. Perth.

⁶ ABS 2018 Estimates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, June 2016.

⁷ NCVET 2018 Australian Vocational Education and Training Statistics: Total VET students and courses 2017, NCVET Adelaide.

⁸ Koshy P. 2018 Equity student participation in Australian higher education: 2012-2017, NCSEHE, Perth: Curtin University.

⁹ Frawley, J., Larkin, S., & Smith, J. A. (2017). Indigenous pathways and transitions into Higher Education: An introduction. In *Indigenous Pathways, Transitions and Participation in Higher Education* (pp. 3-11). Springer, Singapore.

problematic¹⁰. Indigenous university students prefer to enrol in regionally-based universities, which have almost double the access rates by Indigenous students than the national average¹¹. Consultations highlighted the need for longer funding cycles for the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) funded outreach programs. They also raised the importance of work opportunities for relocated students returning to their communities during breaks and higher university dropout rates in later years of study¹².

- **Learners with disability:** In Australia, 18.3 per cent (4.3 million) of the national population report a disability¹³ of which approximately 22.3 per cent (535,600) of working age live in outer regional and remote areas¹⁴. In 2017, people reporting a disability comprised 4.2 per cent (estimated at 180,000)¹⁵ of VET students and 6.8 per cent (51,773) of higher education students¹⁶. Regional universities have higher proportions of students with disability¹⁷. Students with disability face a range of challenges including issues related to learning spaces (physical and digital), a need for more inclusive educational environments, access to suitable accommodation if the student has to move to a new location for study, and poor employment outcomes¹⁸.
- **Learners from rural, remote and very remote areas:** People living in remote (293,765, 1.21 per cent) and very remote (202,413, 0.84 per cent) areas comprise 2.05 per cent (496,178) of the Australian population¹⁹. Remote and very remote areas include rural communities which typically centre on agricultural industries. Consultations and submissions outlined many of the challenges faced by people in rural, remote and very remote areas. These included distance to urban areas and services, sub-optimal internet access and the far-reaching impact of hardships associated with extreme climatic events, such as drought, bushfire, floods and cyclones. These challenges influence tertiary education aspirations, access, participation and success.

Governments, tertiary institutions, not-for-profit and other organisations have implemented a range of initiatives to support RRR learners from equity groups, many of which have proven effective in boosting aspirations, access and success in tertiary education^{20 21 22}. The HEPPP has helped to elevate and enable aspirations, improve access to undergraduate courses for low SES students and improve the retention, success and completion rates of those students. In addition, not-for-profit organisations make an important contribution. For example, the Smith Family delivers a range of mentoring initiatives for RRR learners and CareerTrackers creates pathways and support systems for Indigenous young adults to attend and graduate from university. Other organisations, such as the Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience (AIME) and the Equity Practitioners in Higher Education Australasia (EPHEA) network, are valuable resources. Further examples of existing initiatives are provided at <https://docs.education.gov.au/node/52531>.

¹⁰ Smith, J.A., Frawley, J., Pechenkina, E. et al. (2017). Identifying strategies for promoting VET to higher education transitions for Indigenous learners. NCSEHE. Curtin University: Perth.

¹¹ Koshy P. 2018 Equity student participation in Australian higher education: 2012-2017, NCSEHE, Perth: Curtin University.

¹² Li, I. W., & Carroll, D. (2017). Factors Influencing University Student Satisfaction, Dropout and Academic Performance: An Australian Higher Education Equity Perspective. NCSEHE, Perth: Curtin University.

¹³ Australian Bureau of Statistics <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/PrimaryMainFeatures/4430.0?OpenDocument>

¹⁴ Australian Bureau of Statistics 2016 Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia: Summary of Findings, 2015

¹⁵ NCVER 2018 Australian Vocational Education and Training Statistics: Total VET students and courses 2017, NCVER Adelaide.

¹⁶ Koshy P. 2018 Equity student participation in Australian higher education: 2012-2017, NCSEHE, Perth: Curtin University.

¹⁷ Koshy P. 2018 Equity student participation in Australian higher education: 2012-2017, NCSEHE, Perth: Curtin University.

¹⁸ NCSEHE Focus 2017, Successful outcomes for students with disability in Australian higher education, National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, Curtin University: Perth.

¹⁹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016 Census QuickStats

²⁰ Department of Education and Training, ACIL Allen Consulting (2017) *Evaluation of the HEPPP: Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program*

²¹ Department of Education and Training, KPMG (2015) *Evaluation of the Disability Support Program*

²² Department of Education and Training, ACIL Allen Consulting (2017) *National Disability Coordination Officer Program Evaluation*

Possible further actions

Drawing on the range of suggestions canvassed in consultation and submissions, and its consideration of these issues, the Expert Advisory Group is seeking feedback on the following ideas for further action:

- **Improved targeting of HEPPP funding to RRR learners from low SES backgrounds:** For example, consider quarantining a component of HEPPP for RRR initiatives, focused on providing longer-term funding for successful evidence-based programs, including delivery of outreach services to school students and adult learners through regionally based collaborative, multi-university, cross-sectoral partnerships.
- **Better support for RRR Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander learners:** For example, by exploring opportunities to use the new RRR HEPPP component canvassed above to direct increased funding to successful outreach programs, and provide tailored academic support and mentoring to students in their later years of study and distance learners.
- **Better support for RRR learners with disability:** As part of the student support measures canvassed in Issues Paper 3, require universities to provide comprehensive information on support available for learners with disability such as accommodation, inclusive learning environments, facilities and specialised assistance to help students secure part-time employment while studying and full-time employment post-graduation.
- **Better support for learners from rural, remote and very remote areas:** For example, through exploring options to improve income support canvassed in Issues Paper 2; investigating current access to reliable, high speed and affordable internet services for students and providers, also canvassed in Issues Paper 2; and university programs to retain students facing hardship due to drought and other climatic events by supporting them to take a break from their studies, similar to support available for elite athletes and defence reserves.
- **Performance incentives:** Incentives could be considered to support providers who increase access, participation and retention of RRR learners from these equity groups.