

3. Retention and attainment of regional, rural and remote learners in tertiary education

Issues

- Australians living in regional, rural and remote (RRR) areas have less opportunity to undertake post-secondary education and experience a range of access and financial barriers, explored in Issues Paper 2.
- Many students overcome these barriers, often through hard work and perseverance, with support from their families, communities and education providers. However, when they do go onto tertiary education, many struggle to stay in their course and successfully complete their studies.
- The current completion rate for domestic bachelor-level university students, six years after commencing in 2012, is around 66 per cent for metropolitan students, compared to 61 per cent for regional students and 53 per cent for remote students.¹ Similarly, in 2016, projected VET completion rates were lower for students in regional and remote areas – 41 per cent for regional, 38 per cent for remote and 32 per cent for very remote, compared to 48 per cent in major cities.²
- Lower retention and completion rates contribute to lower education attainment rates. Less than a third of all Australians in RRR areas have a university qualification or higher-level VET qualification, compared to more than half in metropolitan areas.³
- This disparity can be attributed to a number of factors. As well as financial difficulties, RRR students are more likely to have to relocate, experience social dislocation, and engage in off-campus and part time study.
- While some tertiary education providers have put in place a range of student support strategies, including accommodation support, social activities, mentoring and pastoral care, offerings vary between institutions, which can have a significant impact on a student's experience.
- Despite the additional challenges, when RRR students do complete tertiary education they often go on to achieve great professional success. For example, people from regional backgrounds are strongly represented in leadership positions in Australian businesses – 38 per cent of Australian Chief Executive Officers of ASX 100 companies grew up in regional Australia.⁴

Discussion

In 2017, 57 per cent of RRR university students relocated for study, compared to 27 per cent of metropolitan students.⁵ The financial, emotional and social costs of moving away from family and social support networks can place a significant burden on RRR students and their families.

Students from RRR backgrounds are almost twice as likely to report financial stress due to the associated costs of relocating (44 per cent compared to 24 per cent).⁶ This financial stress often means RRR students will study part-time to be able to earn an income to support themselves, which may lead to difficulties in engaging fully with their studies. Moreover, this stress can lead to RRR students withdrawing from their studies, with 31 per cent of RRR students citing financial difficulties as the reason for considering early departure, compared to 21 per cent of metropolitan students.⁷ Living away from home also separates students from their traditional social and support

¹Australian Government Department of Education and Training (2018). Higher Education Students Statistics Collection, Australian Government, Canberra.

²NCVER 2018. Australian vocational education and training statistics: VET program completion rates 2016 - data slicer, NCVER, Adelaide.

³Australian Government Department of Education and Training (2018). Internal Analysis based on the Australian Census of Population and Housing, 2016 (accessed through Census TableBuilder), Australian Government, Canberra.

⁴Australian Financial Review (2014). 'Country kids are born CEOs' *Boss Magazine ASX 100 CEOs*, Fairfax Media, Melbourne.

⁵Batik, C., Naylor, R. & Arkoudis, S. (2015). 'The first year experience in Australian universities: Findings from two decades. 1994-2014', *Centre for the Study of Higher Education*, The University of Melbourne, Melbourne, p.80.

⁶Batik et al. (2015), p.79.

⁷Department of Education and Training (2018). Higher Education Students Statistics Collection.

networks, leading to feelings of isolation and dislocation. 51 per cent of RRR students cite emotional health/stress as the reason for considering early departure, compared to 45 per cent of metropolitan students.⁸

The different demographic profile of RRR students also poses specific challenges. Students at regional universities are more likely to be mature age and studying part-time.⁹ This means they are often juggling competing priorities, including work and family commitments, which may inhibit their ability to finish their degree. RRR students are also more likely to study online (31 per cent compared to 18 per cent in metropolitan areas).¹⁰ While online learning is, in many ways, enhancing access in RRR areas, it has also created its own set of issues. For example, unreliable internet access and lack of face-to-face support can also have an impact on learning experience and chances of success.

Consultations and submissions received identified a number of provider-led initiatives aimed at promoting a sense of belonging for RRR students, including:

- student mentor programs that match experienced, successful students with commencing RRR students
- priority accommodation for RRR students
- 'rural clubs' which connect students who have relocated
- learning advisors and peer assisted learning groups
- college support officers who support students struggling to adjust, including those living off-campus through a "virtual college"
- specific education and socio-emotional support services for Indigenous students, including cultural camps
- specific orientation sessions for RRR students and their families
- transition support, including via digital modules
- academic concierge and support desks for students
- delivery of programs in community settings
- intensive course and career guidance
- assistance and advice in living independently, often for the first time, in matters such as rental legal issues, proper nutrition on a limited budget, drug use and sexual and mental health.

In 2018, ACER, on behalf of the Department of Education and Training, assessed current university support services for RRR students. The report, ['Assessment of university support services for regional and remote students on transition to university'](#), found that when a university's core business is RRR students (e.g. regional universities) they are more likely to cater to their needs as a matter of course. Similarly, students who relocate to undertake study at VET and private higher education providers can face the same issues and support needs as those relocating for university.

The Australian Government is supporting a range of initiatives that contribute to improving attainment and retention rates for RRR learners. For example, Regional Study Hubs play a dual role in providing further access to study options in RRR areas, as well as supporting improved retention and attainment through provision of face-to-face support and infrastructure. Another example is the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP), which supports public universities to implement strategies to improve attainment and retention outcomes, for students from low SES backgrounds, including those from RRR areas. While the benefits of the HEPPP are widely recognised, there is an ongoing need to target funding to the most cost effective initiatives, while continuing to evaluate outcomes and making some funds available for pilots to test new and innovative approaches. Concerns have also been raised about the annual cycle of funding for this program and associated uncertainty.

⁸ Department of Education and Training (2018). Higher Education Students Statistics Collection.

⁹ Department of Education and Training (2018). Higher Education Students Statistics Collection.

¹⁰ Department of Education and Training (2018). Higher Education Students Statistics Collection.

The Government also provides income support for RRR students and has recently made a number of improvements in this area, including increasing the parental income cut-off from \$150,000 to \$160,000 for Youth Allowance workforce independence criteria for regional students, benefiting over 2,300 students from RRR Australia.

Further performance incentives for tertiary providers, based on attainment and retention rates for RRR students, is another approach which could be considered. However, there is a range of risks and issues that need to be managed, including the need to avoid creating disincentives to enrol disadvantaged students who are considered less likely to successfully complete their courses, and negative impacts on providers who cater for these populations.

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:

- **Enhanced student support:** Implement strategies to improve the quality and range of support VET and higher education institutions provide RRR students, particularly those relocating to metropolitan areas, including by:
 - identifying and disseminating information on a core suite of best practice intervention and offerings universities should provide to support RRR students, including the following services:
 - pastoral care
 - specific RRR student orientation
 - mentoring/buddy programs
 - priority accommodation for RRR students
 - academic support, including academic concierge
 - regular contact with all RRR students via email, phone and SMS, especially those identified as ‘at risk’
 - childcare support
 - employment assistance
 - requiring transparent reporting by institutions, to enable students to see the support services a particular tertiary institution has available
 - leveraging existing online platforms aimed at prospective and current tertiary students, such as [Study Assist](#) or [Course Seeker](#), to provide comprehensive information to students on adulthood basics, including budgeting advice, time management tips and easy recipe ideas.
- **Enhance Regional Study Hubs:** As canvassed in Issues Paper 2, monitor the outcomes of the Regional Study Hubs program and consider enhancement strategies including dissemination of best practice and the potential for further expansion of the program.
- **Financial support:** As canvassed in Issues Paper 2, consider further changes to improve financial support for RRR students.
- **HEPPP:** As canvassed in Issues Paper 5, consider changes to the HEPPP to enhance the program’s focus on RRR students.
- **Performance-based funding:** Governments could explore enhanced performance funding arrangements for university, TAFE and private VET providers to reward success in supporting participation and completions for RRR students, drawing on existing models across jurisdictions.
- **Transport in RRR areas:** Ask state and territory governments to consider allowing RRR students travelling to local VET programs and study hubs to access school bus services.