

Submission to the Australian Universities Accord Consultation – Interim Report

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Executive Summary

This submission speaks to the theme of “Areas of substantive agreement or disagreement with the *Interim Report*” and is based upon the findings of *Studying Regionally*, a national research project funded by the US-based Spencer Foundation on the experiences of university students studying in regional Australia.

Our submission focuses on the higher education equity agenda. We highlight four points of agreement with the *Interim Report*. In particular, we agree there is an urgent need for increased investment in regional education to ensure a universal entitlement to high-quality higher education for all Australians. Our *Studying Regionally* research documents the challenges and struggles faced by regional Australian students from intersecting equity groups, the value they place on higher education, and the structural and systemic obstacles they face.

The submission also puts forward three points of disagreement with the *Interim Report*, where further work is required in order for the Accord to deliver this equity agenda for regional students in Australia.

1. First, the entrenched metropolitan bias of Australia’s higher education is not acknowledged in the *Report*, nor are alternative models considered. Our research highlights the “metronormative” bias of Australian higher education and how this bias undermines consistent access to quality education for non-metropolitan Australians, especially those from intersecting equity groups.
2. Next, while the *Report* engages with equity issues, it does not acknowledge the existence of intersecting categories of disadvantage. Our research identifies that regionally based students often belong to multiple other equity groups and are making a proactive effort to improve their circumstances despite significant structural barriers.
3. Finally, our research documents the vital role played by regional campuses in creating accessible pathways into university within local communities, and in helping equity students overcome barriers to study. The *Report* is disturbingly silent about the current or potential future roles of regional university campuses in Australia. Delivering an equity agenda requires recognising the need for place-based university institutions that allow Australians equitable access to quality higher education, wherever they live.

Introduction

We are a team of researchers who recently completed a national study, funded by the US-based Spencer Foundation, investigating the experiences of regional university students in Australia. We frame our response to the *Australian Universities Accord Interim Report* (July 2023) in light of our findings from this research which highlights the voices and experiences of Australian university students living and studying regionally.¹

In the recent Student Transition Achievement Retention and Success (STARS) July webinar², the speakers were positive about the report’s focus on equity but drew attention to the absence of a ‘student voice’ in it. We offer a summary of our research findings to foreground the voices of regional students from equity groups and what students need from higher education reform.


¹ Eversole, R., Aberdeen, L., Carlon, C and Schmidt, MS., 2022. ‘Cinderella on the path at midnight: regional campus students and equity’, paper presented to *Proceedings of the 2022 Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia Conference*, 27-30 June, Melbourne.

² EPHEA and STARS, 2023, Accord Insights Through an Equity Lens. YouTube video, July 20, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VB8N3YuAEdw&ab_channel=STARSConference

Points of Agreement with the *Interim Report*

We are strongly in agreement with the following points from the *Interim Report*:

- 1) That a high-quality and equitable higher education system is essential for Australia. Students in our study viewed education as a pathway to better futures for themselves and their communities.
- 2) That currently, the higher education system in Australia is unequal and requires significant change in favour of students from equity groups (including regional students). Students in our study were from multiple equity groups and faced significant challenges to surviving and thriving at university.
- 3) That there should be a universal entitlement for all Australians to access higher education (p.15), and for supports to be put in place to make this possible. We do not yet live in an Australia where people of any age can access quality higher education from wherever they live without significant sacrifice and compromise. Our study documents stories of this student sacrifice and compromise.
- 4) That Australia requires increased investment in regional education. However, our findings suggest that this must go well beyond the basic learning infrastructure offered by Regional University Centres and Tertiary Study Hubs. Our study highlights students' perspectives about the vital role played by regional university campuses in providing university infrastructure essential to their success.



Around communities around here, sometimes when you say you're "at Uni" and what you're doing, people say, "What would you want to do that for, go to Uni?"

Regional university student,
Studying Regionally research (2022)

Points of Disagreement with the *Interim Report*

We identify several aspects of the *Interim Report* that do not go far enough in framing the nature of existing problems within the higher education system and in articulating potential solutions. Our findings from student interviews suggest:

- 1) To achieve real reform, the Accord must explicitly recognise and address the metropolitan bias within our higher education sector. Regional equity groups are not only "rural, remote, and outer suburban communities" (p.7) but also residents of regional towns and cities – indeed, everyone who lives outside a handful of capital cities. Many access and equity issues, including cost of living pressures (p.16), are directly related to the extreme geographic, city-centred concentration of Australia's higher education institutions. Metropolitan bias not only means geographic distance from study opportunities, but also entrenched metronormative attitudes that systemically discriminate against regionally based students and regional higher education institutions.
 - This bias is clearly apparent in *the Interim Report* document, which emphasises *study centres* for regional areas (Priority Activity 1). While study centres can provide an important value add for local students, *they are not a substitute for access to university campuses, courses, and post-graduate research pathways.*

- Students in the *Studying Regionally* research lived in rural areas, regional towns and small cities. Many were not in a position for financial and cultural reasons to uproot and relocate to a capital city. Regional campuses provided the only point of access to university education for many students, including mature-age workers, mothers re-entering the workforce, Indigenous students, and students of refugee background.
 - While we have inherited a higher education system that is deeply biased, this is neither natural nor inevitable. Other countries with small and dispersed populations are far more successful in making higher education accessible. Scotland and Canada provide some interesting exemplar models. In the USA, rural areas such as central Pennsylvania host multiple university campuses within a short distance of each other.
- 2) To seriously address equity issues, it is vital to recognise that students often belong to intersecting equity groups. The regional students in our study were not only geographically disadvantaged, many also belonged to one or several equity groups such as low SES, first in family to attend university, single parents, Indigenous students, refugee backgrounds, some had disabilities, and many had caring responsibilities. It is equally vital to recognise the proactive agency and commitment of these students who actively seek to make positive differences to their own lives, their families and their communities through higher education.
- The *Interim Report* does not acknowledge the role of intersectional disadvantage. Yet its impact must be recognised in any serious effort to make our higher education system more equitable.
 - The *Report* also needs to recognise the sacrifices that students from intersecting equity groups are making in order to access a university education, and to seek ways to lower the structural barriers faced by these students.
 - Regional university campuses and their academic and professional staff play vital roles in creating a more equitable higher education landscape in Australia. Students in our research emphasised how having such staff on the ground at local university campuses supported their aspirations and was central to improving their futures and those of their local communities.

I think in the first two weeks, I was about actually freaked out and went to drop out. So I went, "No, I can't do this" and I went and had a chat to one of the lecturers. They sat down with me, had a one on one chat for about an hour and pretty much turned everything around.

Regional university student,
Studying Regionally research (2022)

- 3) To create lasting solutions, the Accord must work to create stronger, place-based university institutions rather than treating systemic issues as individual problems.
- While equity group targets (p.15) can help to measure what matters, it is most necessary to lower the structural barriers to higher education participation for equity groups. This requires more than individual income support (p.17). The problem here is not an individual problem, it is a systemic one. Even where financial support is

sufficient, many regional students prefer to study in place and are unwilling to relocate to a large city to study.

- Some of the reasons the students in our study gave for choosing to study at a regional campus included that they were close to home, locally employed, enjoying social support at home and on campus as well as living in a close-knit community, all of which enable a healthy work/life balance. Many would not have studied if the campus had not been there.

... everything's becoming online, it's so disconnected and when you live in the country you already feel disconnected. On top of that, it's just making that that gap wider and it's really quite lonely. I'm sick of sitting in the corner in my depressing dark corner. You know, I want to be back in the classroom with humans and interacting that way.

Regional university student,
Studying Regionally Research (2022)

- The *Interim Report* disappointingly, is silent about place-based approaches to higher education; it is unclear, for example, how a 'National Regional University' would work and whether it could actually be place-based. A glaring omission is that the *Interim Report* fails to acknowledge the vital role already played by regional university campuses (whether main or satellite campuses) in many Australian communities.
- Students in the *Studying Regionally* research highlighted the important role that regional university campuses played for them, particularly in creating accessible pathways into university in the local area, providing personalised, face-to-face support in overcoming barriers to study, and providing quiet study space.
- However, students also cited many examples of support and resources disappearing from regional campuses. They highlighted educational practices that reproduce and exacerbate the intersectional disadvantage of regionally located students who are of low-SES, first-in-family, carers and of refugee backgrounds. These students' experiences illustrate how withdrawal of support from regional campuses and the movement of courses online deepen existing inequalities.

The *Studying Regionally* research thus demonstrates the value of place-based education to students and their communities, and the key role played by regional campuses in making higher education accessible. Our findings support the argument that regional campuses play an important role supporting educational access for students, especially for students from intersecting equity groups who face multiple obstacles to higher education. At the same time, resources are rapidly disappearing from these place-based regional campuses, leaving students without options for the future.

We argue that a right to access higher education where you live must be central to any university learning entitlement – especially for Indigenous Australians to have the right to study on Country. To this end, the Accord needs to engage more explicitly with the role and contribution of regional campuses and other place-based university models in enabling all Australians to live, work and study in the places and communities that they value.

Appendix

Executive summary: 'Studying regionally: Experiences of University Students on Regional Campuses'

About the Study

Australia's access and equality agenda aims to make higher education available to all Australians, and whilst most Universities are located in capital cities research indicates that smaller regional campuses are important in supporting students who do not live in metropolitan areas. Residents of Regional Australia enter and complete university at lower rates than metropolitan students and are half as likely to hold a university qualification. This points to a clear inequity in the distribution of higher education despite the recognition that students from non-metropolitan regions are a recognised equity group in national and international higher education policy. More research is needed to recognise regional university students as 'legitimate participants' (Patfield et al. 2020, p.610) and support their access and participation in higher education.

Our study, 'Studying Regionally', is a qualitative, interdisciplinary and multi-campus study with team members located on three separate campuses in regional Australia. The team consists of our project lead Professor Robyn Eversole, and three CIs: Colleen Carlon (Edith Cowan University Bunbury Campus), Lucinda Aberdeen (La Trobe University Shepparton Campus) and Merete Schmidt (University of Tasmania Burnie Campus).

Participants in the project were predominantly female and studied mainly full time. Very few (3) had a traditional ATAR pathway into university. Many studied via blended mode/ some combination of online and on-campus and most lived within a 30-minute commute from campus. Many of our participants also belonged to one or several equity groups such as low SES, first in family to attend university, single parents, Indigenous students, refugee background students and some had disabilities.

Our research project was funded by the US-based Spencer Foundation and aimed to understand the experiences of students on Australian regional campuses and what they reveal about equity and inequity in Australian higher education. In late 2021, we conducted focus groups with undergraduate students in Arts, Business, Education, Health and Social work based on regional campuses in Western Australia (Bunbury), Victoria (Shepparton) and Tasmania (Burnie).

Findings

1. Regional University campuses provide access to tertiary education for equity students

Our findings show that many students based on regional campuses face intersecting structural disadvantages linked to rurality, gender, caring and kinship responsibilities, disability, and low socio-economic status. Nevertheless, they remain proactive in choosing to improve their futures and to make a positive difference in their communities through higher education.

Some of the reasons the students gave for choosing to study at a regional campus included being close to home, having social support at home and on campus, enjoyment of living in a small community in which they felt able to achieve a better work/life balance here. Being able to attend a regional campus was a great opportunity to fulfil career aspirations and an opportunity to give back to community. What is especially important about these points made by our participants is that there is no lack of

aspiration for tertiary study, or passion for community issues and giving back to community. This highlights that regional campuses have great potential to support educational access for students in regional areas.

The high potential of regional campuses to support the aspirations of regional students is reflected in a number of key themes. The first theme related to the **creation of accessible pathways to university** through countering negative stereotypes about university, starting conversations about tertiary study and collaborating with communities to develop pathways into tertiary education. One student pointed out that,

Around communities around here, sometimes when you say you're at Uni and what you're doing, people say, "What would you want to do that for, go to Uni?" (UTAS9)

While such experiences illustrate how negative perceptions of education are often a part of life in regional communities, many of the participants in this study expressed the view that if they had not had access to a regional campus, then they would still be 'stuck' in low paying occupations that prevented them and their families from getting in front in life, or they would not have the opportunity to fulfill their aspirations and contribute to society. In this way, regional University campuses help to normalise engagement with higher education and offer many different pathways into it. Equally even though student numbers are often small on regional campuses, their impact in the community is powerful. We know that regional students often chose to stay in their local communities where they undertake employment locally thereby strengthening the diversity and sustainability of regional Australia.

The next theme was related to **on campus learning and support**:

I think in the first two weeks, I was about actually freaked out and went to drop out. So I went, "No, I can't do this. I've never written an essay. I've got an idea" and I went and had a chat to one of the lecturers. They sat down with me, had a one on one chat for about an hour and pretty much turned everything around. I then had another freakout, probably the next week. So, I got someone who helped me to draw up a timetable, they sat down with me for half an hour, worked out a study plan and showed me how to organize all my assignments. And I never had that before. (LTU3)

What this student highlights is how face to face support on regional University campuses such as lecturers, student advisors, librarians, IT, admin staff and so on, is key to the success of students studying regionally. The student describes the deeper level of social interaction as unique to regional campuses ("I never had that before") and nominates those interactions as the reason she successfully completed her university education. The extent to which staff attempt to help this student is also significant as is the impact of regionally based staff on campus knowing and caring deeply about students, which our study found to be central to educational achievement and success. In contrast, another student remarked on the value of engaging with staff with local knowledge, "If I was to call some random person in Perth I didn't know and try to explain all this background information, I don't think it would have worked".

The third theme captured the **importance of dedicated study space on campus**:

When I'm kid free, I'm not at work and finding a quiet study corner to hide away from the world because if people see my car at home, I will inevitably get somebody on the doorstep. (LTU5)

I'm very much - this is the place where I study. I can't study. I procrastinate. (ECU3)

...when you step into this building, it's like stepping into your workplace. You are expected to perform a certain way, be a certain appearance or whatever as you walk into that door, because that's your expectations or that's your own personal ethics or how you want it to structure. (UTAS3)

Regional University campuses provide private study space. Many students reported not having a private space to study at home, or if they did, they were often interrupted. This is also partly a gendered issue with some female students reporting that studying at home increased their responsibilities for domestic work, washing, cooking, doing the dishes and providing childcare. Having a dedicated study space on campus was also linked to the feeling of belonging to a culture that valued education, where support was available and where conversations about various study related issues could take place. This environment provides a strong contrast to the culture described previously where the student commented that people would often ask her why on earth she would want to go to university.

2. Students on Regional campuses face disappearing support and resources, exacerbating existing inequalities

Whilst our study clearly highlights the powerful role regional universities can play in supporting regional students, another theme evolved around issues of disappearing support and resources. The participants in our study were all juggling various commitments, mainly work, part-time, full time, casual hours and care – childcare, care for partners, care for elderly parents, for grandchildren:

The participant here highlights really well what a typical day might look like in the life of a regional student:

....beg borrow and steal every moment I can get, it takes a lot of planning. Involved daycare is a big part of it. And yeah, it's always a Russian roulette at the beginning of the semester, whether the daycare days line up with the on campus days, it generally has, but it's yeah, there's always a lot of juggling to do around that. So that's a very, very important aspect, particularly for the on campus, mandatory classes, and then obviously getting in at the right time because they have different classes available. (ECU8)

This participant points to the constant demands of childcare, the difficulties of getting childcare which can be harder in regional areas and the difficulties in getting to important mandatory classes offered at only one day and time on campus. The participants' stories reveal a high level of intersecting structural disadvantages, and they confirm that regional campuses play a key role in supporting their educational aspirations and journeys.

Other findings reveal that there are some university practices are reinforcing inequities. Online study was a key theme in the narratives on equity and inequality. Many participants liked the flexibility of some online study but felt the balance was shifting towards more and more online study which they found difficult.

.... everything's becoming online, it's so disconnected and when you live in the country you already feel disconnected. On top of that, it's just making that that gap wider and it's really quite lonely. I'm sick of sitting in the corner in my depressing dark corner. You know I want to be back in the classroom with humans and interacting that way. (ECU8)

Like I watched a lecture the other day, my little grandson, “Nana, nana, nana”, and I stopped the lecture, turned around and sorted out his problem. Then three minutes later, “Nana, nana”. Headphones off, stop the lecture again. (UTAS2)

In the first quote the participant reflects on how living in the country can make it more difficult to connect with like-minded people, and studying online can make that disconnect even bigger. She describes the experience as lonely and depressing and she wants to interact with university staff and students in the way described earlier in the presentation. In the second quote, the student describes how difficult it is for her to study at home because when she is there, she often becomes the carer for her grandchildren. This comment also links to the comment made earlier that studying from home increase caring responsibilities for some students.

Policy Implications

Our study illustrates the central role played by regional campuses in making higher education accessible for these students. They enable regional visions for a better future for people living and working regionally in the places they value. However, these visions were found to be clouded by diminishing course options and support services on regional campuses as the higher education sector centralises resources in response to the impacts of COVID. In this way, university practices can themselves reinforce and exacerbate inequities, undermining the potential of regional campuses to address intersectional disadvantage in regional Australia and leaving regional students with resources disappearing around them mid-journey.

Regional campuses can be supported to offer the flexibility and accessibility which is so crucial to the success of regional students who often face multiple obstacles to study.

References

Patfield, S., Gore, J. and Fray, L., 2020. Reframing first-generation entry: How the familial habitus shapes aspirations for higher education among prospective first-generation students. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 40(3), pp.599-612.