

## Shining the spotlight on regional students' experiences

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*While factors affecting student retention are an ongoing concern across all higher education systems, in Australia the issue is particularly relevant for regional universities. Our national data indicates that students enrolled at regional universities have less positive outcomes than those who study in capital city universities. The reasons for this difference have not been comprehensively investigated. In response, the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching has funded a project being led by the University of the Sunshine Coast which is investigating the experience of undergraduate student populations at eight regional universities. The project aims to provide new knowledge and practical advice on how individual institutions can positively shape the learning experiences of 21<sup>st</sup> century students.*

The Australian higher education system operates in an environment increasingly influenced by complex socio-cultural, economic and political forces. As a demand-driven system, it offers choice and flexibility about what, where and how to study. At a national level the Australian system is approaching Trow's early '70's vision of a universal access system (Trow, 1973). Nevertheless, census data show that participation and attainment rates for bachelor degree qualifications for people in inner regional, outer regional and remote areas continue to lag behind metropolitan areas. Furthermore, national data (Commonwealth of Australia, Department of Education and Training, 2016) show that students enrolled in regional universities have higher attrition and lower completion rates than students who study in capital city universities, and these poorer outcomes are of particular concern. There are ostensible correlations between cohort characteristics and completion rates; but these do not explain the underlying factors that cause students to leave. The reasons underlying these discrepancies have not, to date, been comprehensively investigated.

The diversity of the student body attending regional universities reflects national aspirations for an inclusive, universal Higher Education system (Universities Australia, 2013). When compared to metropolitan universities, students enrolled in regionally headquartered universities<sup>1</sup> are more likely to be from poorer socio-economic backgrounds, the first in their family to undertake tertiary study, female, Indigenous, and entering university for the first time as a mature aged student (Regional Universities Network, 2013). Unsurprisingly, given these characteristics, students studying at regional universities are also more likely to be

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<sup>1</sup> Although increasingly represented in HE numbers, regional Australians with undergraduate tertiary education fall significantly behind the metropolitan population. ABS data state that 31% of metropolitan residents have a Bachelor qualification, 18% who live in inner regional, 15% for outer and 12% in remote communities (ABS 2011 in RUN [http://www.run.edu.au/cb\\_pages/regional\\_australia.php](http://www.run.edu.au/cb_pages/regional_australia.php).)

involved in longer hours of paid and unpaid work, and studying part-time (Richardson & Friedman, 2010).

In their longitudinal analysis of student completion rates, Edwards & McMillan (2015) found that students with some of these characteristics and modes of participation complete university at significantly lower rates than other groups. They also found that these characteristics have a compounding effect, which means that over a six year period, students with multiple ‘non-traditional’ indicators were even less likely to complete their studies than those student with a single indicator.

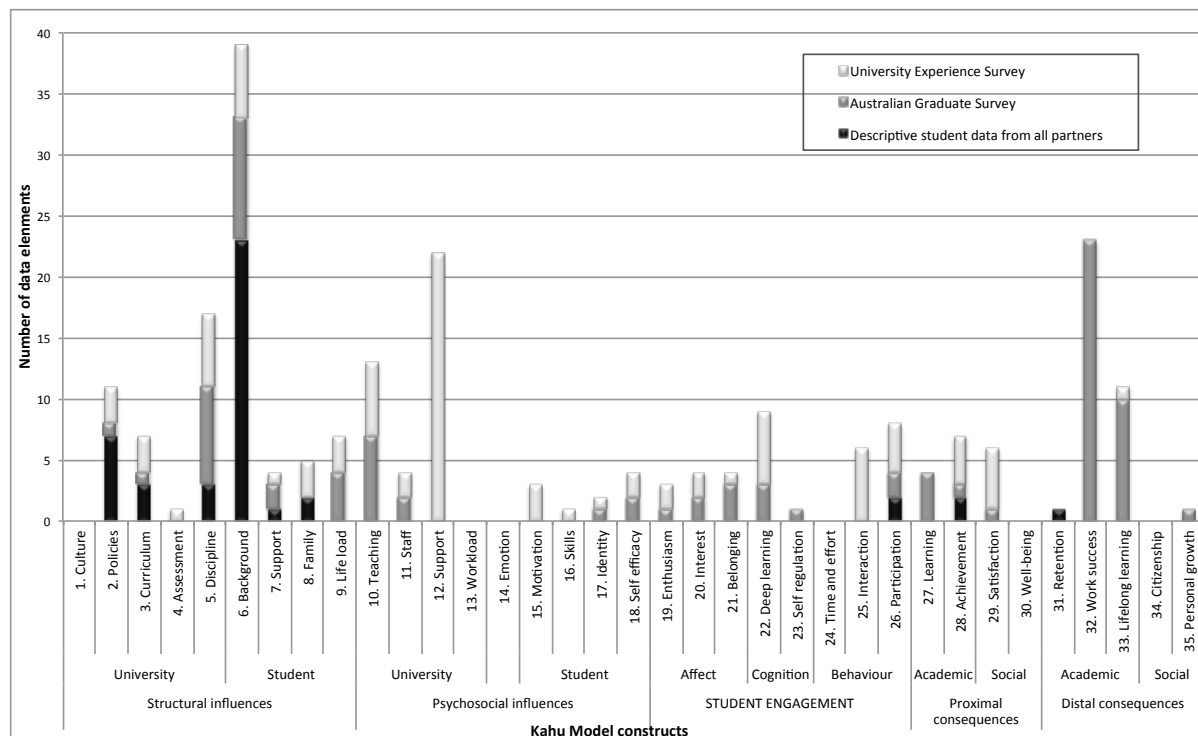
It would be convenient to assume that these types of outcomes and students’ characteristics are related, and therefore explain poorer institutional performance. However, these characteristics have not been shown to be causal. In fact, previous studies have shown that the correlation between demographic characteristics and attrition rates is, at best, weak (Coates & Ransom, 2011). For example, being from low socio-economic background or being the first in family to attend university are not the determinative reasons that students do not complete; these attributes are pre-existing characteristics that describe students’ geographical, family, social and educational backgrounds.

We contend, that the narrative which focuses on the characteristics of regional university students and their outcomes is masking a more complex and nuanced set of conditions that are influencing the experiences of regional university students. These conditions include interactions between students and their teachers and institutions, how well the institution is attuned to students’ needs and individual characteristics such as emotion, motivation, proficiency as a student and interest. Understanding the role of these factors, alongside the currently documented demographic data, could provide a richer appreciation of the varied and situationally contingent reasons for student success or otherwise at regional and at all universities.

Our project is one of five projects commissioned by the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching all of which are aimed at enhancing the 21<sup>st</sup> century student experience. The eight regionally-headquartered institutions involved in our project are investigating the twenty-first century experience of diverse undergraduate student populations at regional universities. Our research asks, how can we design an education system where geographical location, or previous social or educational conditions do not determine students’ futures? We aim to identify what strategies can be put in place to encourage these students, who have most to benefit, to stay and complete their studies. Our project will provide new knowledge and advice on how institutions can positively shape future learning experiences.

Our project is investigating many of the complex elements that influence the student experience and we have adopted a comprehensive model of student engagement as its theoretical and conceptual foundation (Kahu, 2014). Kahu’s framework situates student engagement (affect, cognition and behaviour) as being influenced by structural and psychosocial factors from the student and university perspectives. The outcomes and consequences of student engagement, both proximal and distal, are also considered, as is the direct relationship between proximal consequences and psychosocial influences (see the X axis of Figure 1). Using this model, we have already determined that key data that describe student experiences are not part of any existing national data set. We think these missing data may be critical to understanding the reasons students persist with—or leave—university.

Kahu’s model points to the importance of students’ emotions and wellbeing in contributing to a positive university experience. However, when we mapped existing data elements (of descriptive student data from the eight participating institutions, the Australian Graduate Survey and the University Experience Survey) to constructs of the Kahu model, we found a paucity of data about these key influences on student engagement (Figure 1).



**Figure 1. Current available data elements mapped to the Kahu model of student engagement constructs**

*[Point for discussion: In what ways does this mapping align with your experience? In what ways does it surprise you?]*

Acknowledging the importance of regional universities, the criticality of increased levels of student success in these environments and the apparent lack of understanding about how various factors influence the experience of 21<sup>st</sup> century students at regional universities, the project delivers value to the sector in four key ways:

First, it is in the process of identifying the unique features of the 21<sup>st</sup> century experiences of regional university students to reveal practices and insights not previously discovered, for further investigation and immediate action. Our colleagues at each of the participating partner institutions: Central Queensland University, Charles Sturt University, Federation University Australia, James Cook University, Southern Cross University, the University of New England, the University of Southern Queensland and the University of the Sunshine Coast, are conducting a suite of case studies that are organised with reference to Kahu’s (2014) model of student engagement. These case studies are gathering data on initiatives and activities at each site that positively impact on student engagement. Each case study will provide evidence that describes how these examples of good practice, including those that influence wellbeing and engender positive emotions about learning, contribute to student experience at the regional university.

*[Point for discussion: How do STARS initiatives in your institution map to the Kahu model? Initiatives in which aspects of the Kahu model could enhance the student experience at your institution?]*

Second, the project is exploring these unique aspects, trends and insights to highlight robust transferrable practices shown to improve the student experience for take-up, as well as foreshadow emerging innovations and trends essential for strengthening the 21<sup>st</sup> century student experience. The case studies and the cross-case analysis will open up discussions about the adequacy of current methods of measuring the unique nature of the student experience at regional universities.

Third, beyond the participating institutions, the project will focus attention on the national contributions of regional universities and provide a rich evidence base, sources of information, and a collection of examples of good practice for broad adoption in the sector.

Finally, the project will provide a platform for further investigation about the various roles of universities located in regional Australia. This project will help ensure that the regional student experience is more fully understood, that meaningful data are gathered and analysed to inform university decision making, and that institutions are better able to meet the needs of regional students.

*Professor Karen Nelson (Pro Vice-Chancellor, Students), Ms Kylie Readman (Director, Centre for the Support and Advancement of Learning and Teaching) and Dr Ian Stoodley of the University of the Sunshine Coast are leading the Shaping the Regional Student Experience project, which is funded by the Australian Government's Office for Learning and Teaching. Further information and updates are available from the project website at <http://shapingtheregionalstudentexperience.com.au/>.*

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