

## **Facilitating the success of students from low SES backgrounds at regional universities: Findings from a national study**

Dr Jade McKay<sup>1</sup>

Professor Marcia Devlin

Federation University, Australia

### **Abstract**

This presentation will report on the findings from a national study which set out to explore how best to facilitate the success of students from low SES backgrounds at regional universities. The project entailed involvement from all universities involved in the Australian Regional Universities Network (RUN). Interviews with 69 ‘successful’ students from low SES backgrounds at regional universities, and 26 stakeholders experienced in supporting these students were carried out across the six RUN universities. The study identified eight major, high-level factors and approaches that contribute to the retention and completion of students from low SES backgrounds who are studying at regional universities. This presentation will focus on six of these factors, specifically: financial security and sustainability; reliable technology; understanding and responding to students’ particular circumstances and needs; facilitating students being and feeling connected to university; student preparedness for the realities of university study; an inclusive approach to learning and teaching.

### **The project**

#### ***The project brief***

In late 2015, Federation University Australia received funding through the Department of Education and Training National Priorities Pool (NPP) for this research project. The brief was to:

- determine the major, high-level factors that contribute to retention and completion for domestic students from low socioeconomic status (low SES) backgrounds who are studying at regional universities;
- determine successful approaches to increasing the success of these students;
- provide guidance about how to begin addressing gaps in current approaches to supporting these students; and
- provide policy advice around priorities for potential new approaches to fostering success for low SES students studying at regional universities.

---

<sup>1</sup> Presenting author.

The central questions driving the study were:

1. What helps low SES domestic students at regional universities to stay at and succeed in university, despite the challenges and obstacles they may face?; and
2. What programme and other improvements might universities make to better support and encourage low SES, domestic, regional university students to stay in and complete their studies?

### ***The project team***

The project entailed involvement from all universities involved in the Australian Regional Universities Network (RUN):

- Federation University Australia
- University of Southern Queensland
- University of the Sunshine Coast
- University of New England
- Southern Cross University
- Central Queensland University

With a current cohort of approximately 110,000 students, with proportions of students from low SES status backgrounds ranging between 17% and 50%, this regionally-based consortium provides a substantial population of students and stakeholders from whom appropriate samples have been drawn for interview for this project.

The core project team comprised seven researchers at the six RUN universities:

- Professor Marcia Devlin, Professor of Learning Enhancement and Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Learning and Quality), Federation University Australia, who led the project;
- Dr Jade McKay, Research Fellow, Federation University Australia, who led the data analysis;
- Professor Denise Wood, Engaged Research Chair and Professor of Learning, Equity, Access and Participation School of Education and the Arts, Central Queensland University;
- Professor Jill Lawrence, Associate Dean (Students) Faculty of Business, Education, Law and Arts, University of Southern Queensland;
- Professor Karen Nelson, Pro Vice-Chancellor (Students), University of the Sunshine Coast;
- Professor Andrew McAuley, Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic), Southern Cross University; and
- Mr Greg Balcombe, (formerly Professor Alison Sheridan), Acting Pro Vice Chancellor (Academic), University of New England.

The study was led by Professor Marcia Devlin and managed by Federation University Australia with guidance from an advisory group comprising the Deputy and Pro-Vice Chancellors (Learning and Teaching) group from the Regional Universities Network.

## ***Methodological approach***

The following informed the project team's findings in relation to this brief:

- A review of the peer reviewed and other significant literature on the experiences, retention, attrition and completion of low SES domestic students who are studying at regional universities;
- Interviews with successful low SES, domestic students studying at regional universities about their views on what has contributed to their success in higher education; and
- Interviews with key stakeholders in regional universities, including both academic and professional staff from a range of areas – for example, academic skills, health services, counselling, pastoral support, sport and culture, advocacy, as well as leading researchers in the area, about their understandings of what contributes to success in higher education for low SES students at regional universities.

## **Rationale**

Regional universities play a significant role in the higher education landscape in Australia, making significant social, cultural, environmental and economic developments and contributions to the regions in which they function (DIIS, 2016; RUN, 2013). A recent Regional Universities Network (RUN) Impact Study (2013) reported that regional universities in Australia work with regional and rural communities to build capacity and address regional issues and challenges. The report claims this is significant given that

Over 7.5 million Australians live outside Greater Capital City Statistical Areas, representing 34 per cent of the national population (ABS, 2013). In addition, the majority (68%) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians live in regional, remote or very remote parts of the country (Australian Government 2012). (RUN 2013, p. 1).

Prior research has explored the lower participation rates of people from regional, rural and remote areas (Coates & Edwards, 2008; Godden, 2007; James, 2000; James, Wyn, Baldwin, Hepworth, McInnes et al., 1999; Khoo & Ainley, 2005; Marks, Fleming, Long & McMillan, 2000). This body of research reveals a “complex variety of factors that lead to differing participation rates across regions” which include, “distance from a university campus; differences in aspirations and attitudes of regional students; Year 12 retention and completion, and the cost of university study” (DEEWR, 2010, p. 3) (also see Lim, 2015).

While rising populations are occurring in capital cities and within regional Australia, the same cannot be said about the rates of higher education attainment. The RUN Impact Study (2013, p. 13) reports: “There is a significant differential ... in higher education attainment between city and regional Australians, with the differential increasing with distance from a major city.” Indeed, despite efforts to improve the access and outcomes for higher education students in regional and remote areas, their overall participation and success rates continue to lag in contrast to their metropolitan peers (Department of Education and Training, 2017).

Not only are these rates a significant equity issue for the individuals concerned, they also have notable implications for the economic development of regional communities (RUN, 2016). It is promising to note that, “The gap has started to narrow in recent years, largely due to the

demand driven system of student funding, started in 2012, which allows universities to enrol as many eligible students as they wish in bachelor degrees” (RUN, 2016). Certainly, the uncapping of student places through the demand driven student system has assisted regional universities to increase the number and proportion of low SES and regional students at university. Data from the Department of Education (2017) shows:

- in 2013, 32% of RUN universities’ commencing, domestic, undergraduate students were from low SES backgrounds and their enrolments had increased by 26% between 2009 and 2013; and
- enrolments by students from regional and remote backgrounds at RUN universities grew by 18.5% between 2009 and 2013.

But there is clearly still work to do. To this end, the project set out to determine specific approaches and high-level factors that can assist students from low SES backgrounds at regional universities to succeed, as well as provide policy advice for decision makers in higher education.

### **Deliverables / outcomes**

The study has identified eight major, high-level factors and approaches that contribute to the retention and completion for students from low SES backgrounds who are studying at regional universities. The study has also identified five key areas in which future policy and research could usefully be focused to further contribute to the success of students from low SES backgrounds at regional universities. Drawn from the Devlin and McKay (2017) report, these are provided below:

### ***Major factors contributing to the success of students from low SES backgrounds at regional universities***

These eight factors are:

1. Student attitude, motivation, determination and resilience
2. Family support
3. Financial security and sustainability
4. Reliable technology
5. Understanding and responding to students’ particular circumstances and needs
6. Facilitating students being and feeling connected to university
7. Student preparedness for the realities of university study
8. An inclusive approach to learning and teaching

### ***Recommendations for policy***

1. Ensuring financial stability for students
2. Defining, measuring and monitoring ‘attrition’
3. Valuing staged and micro qualifications
4. Leveraging existing regional and rural infrastructure
5. Regional school investment

The proposed presentation will focus on six of the eight factors relating to good practice in facilitating the success of students from low SES backgrounds at regional universities. Drawn from the Devlin and McKay (2017) report, these six factors are detailed below:

*1. Financial security and sustainability*

Students from low SES backgrounds studying at regional universities are doing it tough financially. The findings show the critical importance of financial assistance, support and stability to these students' retention, success and completion at university.

*2. Reliable technology*

While often difficult to afford and/or access, some of the benefits of reliable technology to students include: being able to study online; flexibility in important aspects of learning and study; enabling interaction with and timely responses from staff; and fostering connections with staff and other students.

*3. Understanding and responding to students' particular circumstances and needs*

University staff, programmes, initiatives and approaches that take into account the realities of students' complex lives and competing priorities contribute to student retention and success. Existing practices in promoting the existing university support services, engaging in empathic support, respecting students and exercising flexibility, including through using technology, all have positive influences on students' outcomes.

*4. Facilitating students being and feeling connected to university*

A feeling of connectedness to the university, its staff and fellow students is critical in relation to helping low SES background regional students feel encouraged to continue with their studies. Early engagement with students and approachable staff are important to this connection and technology is an important tool for facilitating such connectedness, including by enabling interaction through social media.

*5. Student preparedness for the realities of university study*

While some regional low SES background students who were first in their family to attend university were prepared in some ways for study and university life, many had gaps in their understanding of what was expected of them as a university student. Building students' capacity for success and their confidence, including through making the implicit expectations of them explicit, were identified as key practices that assist students to succeed.

*6. An inclusive approach to learning and teaching*

An inclusive, engaged approach to learning and teaching helps students from low SES backgrounds at regional universities to succeed. Taking into account individual learning needs and the mode of study, thoughtfully and intelligently designed assessment, making sure expectations are understood, scaffolding learning and engaging students in interactive exchanges all assist students to successfully progress through their studies.

## **Impact / potential impact in terms of STARS (Students, Transitions, Achievement, Retention, Success) topics**

The proposed presentation has significant impact relating to three of the STARS key topics. Namely, **Students**, **Retention** and **Success**.

In terms of **Success**, the project to be discussed was premised on a unique ‘success-focus’—one that stands out amidst much of the work in the field concentrating on the barriers and challenges students from low SES backgrounds at regional universities experience. Seeking the perspectives of ‘successful’ students, the project offers insight into specific approaches that work to facilitate success. It proposes six major, high-level success factors contributing to the retention and completion of these students.

These ‘success’ strategies and approaches speak to the specific needs of a particular cohort of non-traditional **Students** – students from low SES backgrounds at regional universities. In line with the STARS foci, it offers insight into who they are, what are their needs, and what ‘works’ for this cohort. By garnering these insights, it proposes good practice and approaches to improve the overall **Retention** and **Success** of this cohort of equity **Students**. These approaches are pertinent at both programme and discipline levels, and ideally will be part of a whole of institution approach designed to improve the retention of student from low SES backgrounds at regional universities.

## **How the outcomes could be applied more broadly or in used in other contexts**

The key outcomes to emerge from this study are twofold:

1. the identification of eight high-level factors contributing to the success of students from low SES backgrounds in regional universities; and
2. five key recommended policy areas for institutional policy makers and leaders.

The outcomes related to the eight factors offer valuable guidance for all universities in Australia with regional headquarters and campuses in terms of how to best maximise the chances of success for students from low SES backgrounds.

The policy outcomes provide useful guidance for state and federal government in terms of where efforts would be best directed to assist regional students to succeed at university and what sorts of policy renewals are needed.

## References

Coates, H., & Edwards, D. (2008). The 2008 graduate pathways survey: graduates' education and employment outcomes five years after completion of a bachelor degree at an Australian university. Higher Education Research, 12.

Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) (2010), Regional Participation: The Role of Socioeconomic Status and Access, Canberra: AGPS. Available at: [http://apo.org.au/files/Resource/regionalparticipation\\_report.pdf](http://apo.org.au/files/Resource/regionalparticipation_report.pdf).

Department of Education and Training (2017). Completion Rates of Higher Education Students-Cohort Analysis, 2005-2014, Australian Government, New South Wales. Available at: <https://docs.education.gov.au/node/41841>.

Devlin, M., & McKay, J. (2017). Facilitating success for students from low SES backgrounds at regional Universities: Research Report. Department of Education and Training, Australian Government.

Department of Industry, Innovation and Science (DIIS) (2016). How regional universities drive innovation, DIIS, Australian Government, Canberra, ACT.

Godden, N. (2007). Regional young people and youth allowance: Access to tertiary education. Wagga Wagga: Centre for Rural Social Research.

James, R. (2000). Socioeconomic background and higher education participation: An analysis of school students' aspirations and expectations. Higher Education Division, DEST, Canberra.

James, R., Wyn, J., Baldwin, G., Hepworth, G., McInnes, C. & Stephanson, A. (1999). Rural and Isolated School Students and their Higher Education Choices, NBEET, AGPS, Canberra.

Khoo, S. T., & Ainley, J. (2005). Attitudes, intentions and participation. Research Report, Australian Council for Educational Research, no. 41.

Lim, P. (2015). Do individual background characteristics influence tertiary completion rates? A 2014 Student Equity in Higher Education Research Grants Project. National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, Perth: Curtin University. Available at: <https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/publications/do-individual-background-characteristicsinfluence-tertiary-completion-rates>.

Marks, G., Fleming, N., Long, M., & McMillan, J. (2000), Patterns of Participation in Year 12 and Higher Education in Australia: Trends and Issues, LSAY Research Report No.17, Australian Council for Educational Research Camberwell, Victoria.

Regional Universities Network (RUN) (2013), Regional Universities Network: Engaging with regions, building a stronger nation. Regional Universities Network, Vol. 1 Report, June, Canberra, ACT. Available at: [http://www.run.edu.au/resources/RUN\\_regional\\_impact\\_study\\_vol\\_1.pdf](http://www.run.edu.au/resources/RUN_regional_impact_study_vol_1.pdf).

Regional Universities Network (2016). Clever Regions, Clever Australia: Policy Advice for an Incoming Government. Report. Available at: [http://www.run.edu.au/resources/RUN\\_PolicyAdvice%20booklet%20final.pdf](http://www.run.edu.au/resources/RUN_PolicyAdvice%20booklet%20final.pdf).