

The invisible cohort? Investigating strategies for remote students' success

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Abstract

2017 Equity Fellow Louise Pollard is investigating how universities and the Australian Government Department of Education and Training can more effectively support remote students to thrive and succeed at university. In this interactive workshop, Louise will share never before extracted data to formulate a comprehensive summary of remote students engaged in university. The data summary shared will challenge our assumptions about remote students and will lead to a robust discussion about the cohort and the common challenges faced by students. Louise will share lessons learnt from a recent study tour to visit Canadian universities, and highlight Canadian good practice examples in the support of remote students' university success. In the workshop participants will discuss broad principles of good practice in support of remote student success; and will consider how new and existing strategies and programs can be refined to enhance outcomes for remote students.

Workshop overview

The issue of regional students' access to, and successful participation in, higher education in Australia has been the subject of several reviews over recent years (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2010; Joyce, Birmingham, & McKenzie, 2016; McKenzie, 2015). However there has been a lack of focus on remote students as a distinct cohort despite completion data revealing a higher rate of attrition than for regional or metropolitan students (Department of Education and Training, 2017). This 2017 Equity Fellowship is focusing on remote students' participation in higher education, exploring issues relevant to these students and identifying ways in which they can be supported more effectively by the higher education sector and Australian Government.

In this 90 minute interactive workshop, preliminary findings of the Fellowship will be shared. This includes an innovative analysis of national datasets that will focus attention on the cohort of remote students in higher education in a way that has never previously happened in Australia. This comprehensive summary of data, focused on remote students engaged in Australian universities, will inform the workshop discussion and lead to the sector forming a better understanding of the defining features of this unique cohort. This knowledge will help inform how we refine and target strategies for student success.

A snapshot of data to be presented includes:

	Students categorised by geographical region at the beginning of the 2015			
	Metro	Inner regional	Outer regional	Remote & Very remote
Total number of students enrolled (domestic students)	823,855	141,172	57,854	9007
Portion of students studying externally:	15.9%	30.22%	35.71%	51.54%
Portion of cohort enrolled part time:	32.86%	36.20%	38.22%	49.38%
<u>Gender</u> : Female	56.61%	62.66%	64.52%	67.83%
Male	43.39%	37.34%	35.48%	32.17%

Source: University Statistics Team and the Higher Education Information Management System (HEIMS), Australian Government Department of Education and Training

Table 1: 2015 Remote students engaged in Australian universities

Fresh perspectives from the Canadian context will add a valuable dimension to the learning outcomes for the workshop. Lessons learnt from a recent study tour to Canada will be outlined and effective strategies in how Canadian universities support regional and remote students will be shared. During the workshop, participants will be encouraged to consider whether these examples are applicable to the Australian context.

While the Fellowship is specifically focused on the needs of remote students, the workshop will have broad applicability to practitioners and academics across the tertiary sector. The strategies discussed and the principles developed will be broad with the aim that they can be applied to a variety of contexts.

Aims of the workshop

The aim of this workshop is to explore the issues faced by remote students; discuss effective strategies employed across the sector; and identify principles of good practice that support university participation and success.

Objectives and outcomes of the workshop

The specific workshop objectives are to:

- Share preliminary findings of the Fellowship, including outcomes from the secondment to the Australian Government Department of Education and Training;
- Reflect on lessons learnt from the study exchange to Canadian universities and participation in the Canadian Association of College and University Student Services (CACUSS) Conference;
- Outline the data summary of remote students studying at Australian universities; and
- Discuss related government policy and implications;

The expected learning outcomes of the workshop for participants are:

- Understand the defining features of the remote students' cohort enrolled in Australian universities;
- Have an understanding of the issues faced at university, specifically by students from remote Australia;
- Gain insight into the strategies and programs being employed by universities (Australian and international) and the Australian Government, to support student success; and
- Explore overarching principles of good practice for universities to consider for the benefit of remote students.

Workshop outline

Introduction (5 minutes) Introduce the Equity Fellowship aims and key activities and report on progress to date. Provide an overview of the workshop, outlining the objectives and learning outcomes.

Challenges faced by remote students (5 minutes): Australian students living in remote communities face a myriad of challenges in accessing and succeeding at university. Identified barriers include distance from education facilities (for example, in excess of 1500km); lower secondary school retention, completion and university participation rates; high living costs associated with university study; and lower family and community expectations (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2010). In addition, during their time at university, students from regional (and remote) areas experience significant financial pressure (Devlin & McKay, 2017) and are more likely to work (Richardson, Bennett, & Roberts, 2016), which can add more pressure and strain on their study.

The Commonwealth's response (5 minutes): Since the Bradley Report in 2008, the Australian Government and universities have invested significant resources into addressing the low access and participation rates for regional and remote students but there has been little to no improvement (Koshy, 2016). Since then in the lead up to the 2016 Federal election, the Coalition announced a \$152 million package to 'improve access to education opportunities for regional students.' This included changes to youth allowance criteria demonstrating independence; the establishment of scholarships for regional students to undertake STEM studies; and a comprehensive review of regional education (Joyce et al., 2016).

Preliminary Fellowship findings revealed (20 minutes): Louise Pollard will share the outcomes from her secondment to the Australian Government Department of Education and Training where she worked with representatives to formulate a comprehensive summary of Australian remote students at university. When unveiling this never before seen data, Louise will lead a robust discussion with participants, challenging commonly held assumptions about this cohort of students.

Reflections from the Canadian study tour (10 minutes): Lessons learnt from a recent study exchange to Canada will be shared and examples of good practice will be showcased. Participants will be asked to consider whether these strategies and programs are applicable to the Australian context.

Looking to the future (25 minutes): Breaking into small self-selected groups, participants will identify key strategies that can be implemented to improve the support of remote students at Australian universities. Participants will be prompted to consider strategies

regarding the following: teaching and learning practices; scholarships; transition support; and academic skill development. Based on information generated, each group will then be asked to identify three key broad principles of practice for universities to consider when implementing strategies to support remote students.

Summary (10 minutes): The nominated speaker for each group will be asked to share three strategies/ideas along with the three identified principles of practice with the larger group.

Conclusion (10 minutes): Louise Pollard will conclude by thanking the participants for their valuable contribution to the session and her Fellowship. All of the information shared will be collated and participants will be invited to leave their contact details to enable the findings to be summarised and shared at the end of the conference.

References:

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