

# **Regional transitions to university: developing a national understanding of regional students' post-school education intentions, opportunities and barriers**

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## **Abstract**

*This session discusses research conducted across two Australian States that addresses one of the key recommendations of the Halsey report (2018), i.e., developing a national understanding of factors inhibiting the transition of regional, rural and remote ATAR-streamed students to university. Two research projects investigating post-school intentions of Year 11 & 12 students on ATAR pathways at regional schools are presented and discussed: a 2017 NSW study and a current 2021 South Australian study. Discussion will focus on the issues impacting post-school education of regional high school students across these two States and what further research and action is needed to move towards a national understanding.*

## **Background**

There has been a significant focus on regional education in Australia since the Independent Review into Regional, Rural, and Remote Education was commissioned in 2016 (Halsey, 2018). This session aims to contribute to the national discussion by focusing on the key factors impacting regional student transitions to higher education. Discussing recent research in two states, NSW and South Australia, will enable a comparative analysis at the interstate level.

## **Key focus of the session**

This session aims to generate conversation around why regional students, in particular those in ATAR streams, are transitioning from high school to university at lower rates than students in metropolitan areas (Cardak et al., 2017; Katersky Barnes et al., 2019). This conversation will be generated by the presentation and discussion of a research project that aims to build an interstate comparison between previous NCSEHE research conducted in NSW (Quin, Stone, & Trinidad, 2017) and a South Australian study, being conducted in 2021, focusing on factors influencing the transitions of regional students from high school to university. This comparative research is helping to build a national profile of interstate similarities and/or differences in factors inhibiting regional student transitions to higher education. This interstate comparison is an important contributor towards a national understanding of regional student transitions to higher education, a key tenet of the Halsey Review (2018).

## **Overview of the research**

Qualitative data on factors affecting students' post-school choices was collected from schools identified by the respective State Departments for Education, across the public, Catholic and independent sectors, as having high numbers of students achieving above-median to high ATARs and not choosing to enter university. Data was gathered through focus group interviews and surveys with Year 11 and 12 students and with teachers identified by the schools, such as Year Advisors and Career Advisors. Where possible, parents and other involved members of local communities were surveyed.

## Key findings from the NSW research

- The ‘Don’t know factor’ (i.e., indecision about course/career) emerged as a significant barrier to regional higher education transitions in NSW, contributing to fewer students transitioning to university and instead taking a ‘gap’ year. Only 5-6% of students who take a gap year later transition to university study (Quin, Stone, & Trinidad, 2017).
- Counter to existing literature, students’ aspirations for further study and parental support was high within this subsection of the Rural/Regional student cohort.
- Finances and challenges associated with leaving home such as finding affordable and appropriate housing and university accommodation, are inextricably linked to the decision-making process for regional students.

## Preliminary findings from the SA research

This project is currently in its early stages, with data collection taking place in Term 1, 2021. By the time this session is presented, preliminary findings in relation to the key research question, “Why are significant numbers of high-achieving school students in identified areas of regional SA choosing not to transition to university directly from school?”, will be available for presentation.

## Further questions/issues for audience discussion

- What are the major influences on and perceived barriers to a students’ decision to transition or otherwise to university?
- What is the impact of student housing and accommodation arrangements/availability?
- What other post-school choices are being made by regional students with ATAR 60+?
- What is the impact of online learning and technology infrastructure?
- How do differences between Australian States impact on regional student transitions?

## References

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