

The background of the cover features a silhouette of a large group of graduates in academic regalia, celebrating and throwing their caps into the air against a sunset sky. The scene is captured from a low angle, emphasizing the height of the graduates and the dispersal of their caps. The sky transitions from a deep orange near the horizon to a lighter, hazy blue at the top.

# FACILITATING SUCCESS FOR STUDENTS FROM LOW SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS BACKGROUNDS AT REGIONAL UNIVERSITIES

## RESEARCH REPORT

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Federation University Australia

# Facilitating Success for Students from Low Socioeconomic Status Backgrounds at Regional Universities

March 2017

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# Contents

<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>List of Tables</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>List of Figures</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>Executive Summary</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>Policy Implications</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<b>Acronyms</b> .....	<b>10</b>
<b>1. Introduction</b> .....	<b>11</b>
1.1 Project Brief.....	11
1.2 Project Team and Governance.....	11
<b>2. Background</b> .....	<b>15</b>
2.1 Regional Universities in Australia.....	15
2.2 Defining ‘Regional’ Universities .....	15
2.3 Regional University Participation Rates .....	16
2.4 Students from Low SES Backgrounds in Higher Education.....	19
2.5 Intersections of Rurality and Low Socioeconomic Status.....	20
2.6 Student Attrition from University .....	22
2.7 Defining Low Socioeconomic Status.....	24
2.8 Defining Success .....	24
<b>3. Study Approach and Method</b> .....	<b>26</b>
3.1 Approach.....	26
3.2 Method .....	26
3.2.1 Ethical Approval.....	27
3.2.2 Literature Review.....	27
3.2.3 Sampling.....	27
3.2.4 Student Demographic Survey.....	28
3.2.5 Interviews.....	28
3.2.6 Analysis.....	28
3.3 Methodological Limitations .....	29
<b>4. The Student Sample</b> .....	<b>30</b>
4.1 Demographic Information .....	30
4.2 Area of Study.....	30
4.3 Study Mode and Load.....	31
4.4 Place of Residence.....	32
4.5 Paid Employment .....	33
4.6 Basis of Entry to University .....	33
4.7 Tertiary Preparation Programme Completion .....	34
<b>5. Major Findings</b> .....	<b>35</b>
5.1 Contextual Influences .....	35
The Eight Factors that Help Students Succeed .....	37
FACTOR 1: Student Attitude, Motivation, Determination and Resilience .....	37
FACTOR 2: Family Support.....	39
FACTOR 3: Financial Security and Sustainability.....	42
FACTOR 4: Reliable Technology .....	48
FACTOR 5: Understanding and Responding to Students’ Particular Circumstances and Needs.....	54

FACTOR 6: Facilitating Students Being and Feeling Connected to University.....	62
FACTOR 7: Student Preparedness for the Realities of University Study.....	68
FACTOR 8: An Exclusive, Engaged Approach to Learning and Searching.....	75
<b>6. Policy Implications.....</b>	<b>81</b>
1. Ensuring Financial Stability for Students .....	81
2. Defining, Measuring and Monitoring 'Attrition' .....	82
3. Valuing Staged and Micro Qualifications.....	83
4. Leveraging Existing Regional and Rural Infrastructure .....	84
<b>7. Conclusion .....</b>	<b>87</b>
<b>8. References .....</b>	<b>89</b>
<b>Appendix A .....</b>	<b>102</b>
Student Demographic Survey .....	102
<b>Appendix B .....</b>	<b>105</b>
Student Interview Questions .....	105
<b>Appendix C .....</b>	<b>106</b>
Stakeholder Interview Questions.....	106

## List of Tables

Table 1: Universities in Australia that are regional, metropolitan (with and without regional campuses) .....	16
Table 2: Demographic information on student participants.....	30
Table 3: Comparison with findings on teachers and teaching from Devlin <i>et al.</i> (2012) .....	77

## List of Figures

Figure 1: The proportion of persons aged 25-34 years with Year 12 or above (2014).....	18
Figure 2: The proportion of 25-34 year olds with a bachelor degree or above (2014). .....	18
Figure 3: Area of study being undertaken by students.....	31
Figure 4: Study mode and load of student participants. ....	32
Figure 5: Place of residence of student participants. ....	32
Figure 6: Employment status of student participants. ....	33
Figure 7: Basis of entry to university.....	34
Figure 8: Tertiary preparation programme completion.....	34

# Executive Summary

The objectives of this research project were to:

- determine the major, high-level factors that contribute to retention and completion for domestic students from 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.

The evidence gathered through the present study includes:

- a thorough review of previous research and relevant literature;
- interviews with 69 successful students from low SES backgrounds approaching completion of their studies at six regional universities; and
- interviews with 26 staff from these six universities who are expert in how these students succeed.

This evidence has led to the identification of eight high-level factors that assist students to succeed and five policy areas where future research and policy reform should be focused. These are outlined below.

## Background and Context

Students from low SES backgrounds studying at regional universities often have complex lives and competing priorities. Many of these students are parents and many have other caring responsibilities. They must balance academic study with these caring and related responsibilities, which often include the need to engage in paid employment while studying.

Many are also the first in their family to attend university. This means there is a lack of familiarity with the peculiarities of university life and expectations of them as students, and an absence of particular, university-specific cultural and academic capital in their families on which they can draw. By choosing to attend university, in some cases they may also be seen as stepping outside accepted social norms within their families, friendship groups and communities.

Many experience significant financial pressure. The costs of study materials, travel to university and the like on top of the usual expenses of living, including sometimes supporting a family, often while on a reduced income, mean they may have to make difficult choices about their priorities that other more traditional students do not have to make.

## Factors that Contribute to Retention and Completion

All of this said, this study found that one key factor in the success of students from low SES backgrounds at regional universities is their possession of particular personal attributes. Specifically, the present study found that **students' own attitude, motivation, determination and resilience** helped them succeed at university despite the challenges and obstacles they faced. Another key factor was **family support**. Where such support was

available, whether through psychological or emotional encouragement, financial support or 'in-kind' assistance, this contributed to student success at university.

**Students' own attitudes and family support** were **two of eight high-level factors** that this study found contributed to the success of students from low SES backgrounds who were studying at regional universities. The other factors are outlined below.

3. **Financial security and sustainability:** The study found that 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.
4. **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.
5. **Understanding and responding to the particular circumstances and needs of students:** 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.
6. **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.
7. **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.
8. **An inclusive, engaged 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.

None of these eight factors is a 'magic bullet' for success for students from low SES backgrounds at regional universities. The impact of each on an individual student will be different, depending on that student's individual circumstances, priorities and needs. It is likely that the eight factors are inter-related and interdependent and it is an intersection of a number of these factors that combine in individual circumstances to increase students' likelihood of success.

## Policy Implications

The evidence gathered through the present study has led to the identification of five policy areas where future research and policy reform should be focused. These are the areas of:

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
- 
1. **Ensuring financial stability for students:** In addition to continuing the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP), adjustments to income support policy and improved arrangements for the provision of scholarships to students from low SES backgrounds who are studying at regional universities would provide a higher likelihood of financial stability for these students, which would, in turn, increase their likelihood of completing their qualification.
  2. **Defining, measuring and monitoring 'attrition' to align with realities of student trajectories:** The assumptions and mechanisms for the measurement and monitoring of attrition of students from low SES backgrounds who are studying at regional universities need to take into account the realities of these students' lives, experiences, responsibilities and the choices they have to make about study in the context of complex lives and competing priorities.
  3. **Valuing staged and micro qualifications:** Staged/multiple exit point qualifications and micro credentials could be further enabled, encouraged and valued within Australian higher education to facilitate success for those who cannot, or do not want to, commit to the equivalent of three years of full time study to gain a bachelor degree qualification.
  4. **Leveraging existing regional and rural infrastructure:** Existing technological, personnel and other infrastructure, including in regional libraries and schools, could be better leveraged, supported, coordinated and promoted to help facilitate the success of students from low SES backgrounds at regional universities.
  5. **Regional school investment:** Better investment in regional schools is likely to contribute positively to increased school completion, to greater aspiration for university level qualifications and to better preparedness for university study for students from low SES backgrounds.

Overall, the study found that the health and wellbeing of students from low SES backgrounds studying at regional universities can come under enormous strain from financial and other pressures on them. Far from the romantic stereotype of being a poor student somehow being fun, students interviewed for this study outlined the significant challenges inherent in living in poverty and concurrently managing the demands of being a university student while balancing priorities related to those of finances, paid work and in many cases, family and/or carer responsibilities. These themes were confirmed by staff interviewed, as well as by previous research.

The study successfully identified eight major, high-level factors and approaches that contribute to retention and completion for students from low SES backgrounds who are

studying at regional universities. The study 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.

## Acronyms

<b>ABS</b>	Australian Bureau of Statistics
<b>ATAR</b>	Australian Tertiary Admission Rank
<b>ASCED</b>	Australian Standard Classification of Education
<b>CQU</b>	Central Queensland University
<b>DEEWR</b>	Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations
<b>DIICSRTE</b>	Department of Industry, Innovation, Climate Change, Science, Research and Tertiary Education
<b>DIIS</b>	Department of Industry, Innovation and Science
<b>FedUni</b>	Federation University Australia
<b>HEPPP</b>	Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program
<b>IEO</b>	Index of Education and Occupation
<b>Low SES</b>	Low socioeconomic status
<b>NESB</b>	Non-English Speaking Background
<b>NPP</b>	National Priorities Pool
<b>RUN</b>	Regional Universities Network
<b>SCU</b>	Southern Cross University
<b>SEIFA</b>	Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas
<b>SES</b>	Socioeconomic status
<b>STK</b>	Stakeholder
<b>STU</b>	Student
<b>UNE</b>	University of New England
<b>USC</b>	University of the Sunshine Coast
<b>USQ</b>	University of Southern Queensland

### Acronym Note

Quotes from interviews from both students and stakeholders are marked throughout the report with a three-part code – the first three letters indicate the university at which the interview was enrolled or working (e.g. FED); the second part of the code indicates whether they were a student or stakeholder (i.e. STU or STK); and the third part of the code reflects the interview number used to de-identify the interviewee (e.g. 001). Thus, for example, the code 'FED\_STU\_003' would designate a quote from a student from Federation University Australia who was the third to be interviewed for the study.

### Terminology Note

The universities that were represented in this study use different terminology to refer to the various parts of, and all of, a degree. The terms 'programme' and 'course' are both used to describe a whole programme of study and the terms 'unit', 'subject' and 'course' are used to describe the discrete elements of that whole programme that are added together to make the programme. The word 'course' is therefore used for both a component of, and a whole, programme, depending on the university.

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 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.

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 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.

## 1.2 Project Team and Governance

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

**Federation University Australia (FedUni)** is Australia's newest university. FedUni was created by bringing together the University of Ballarat and the Monash University Gippsland Campus. FedUni is the third oldest site of higher learning in Australia and offers higher education, TAFE and secondary schooling. With campuses in Ballarat, the Wimmera and Gippsland in regional Victoria, and Berwick in Melbourne, the University also has partner providers in Melbourne, Sydney, Adelaide and South-East Asia. FedUni has approximately 22,000 students, including 15,500 domestic students. Of the higher education students, approximately 29% are from low SES backgrounds.

**The University of Southern Queensland (USQ)** is one of Australia's leading providers of online (distance) education programmes with more than 75% of its students studying via distance or online. Campuses include the Toowoomba, Springfield and Ipswich Campuses in Brisbane's western corridor and regional south east Queensland. The University's ties with local communities include partnering to establish the Queensland College of Wine Tourism in Stanthorpe with the Department of Education and Training and Southern Queensland Institute of TAFE and further expanding its international programmes including developing relationships with major off-shore centres and continuing its strong on-shore presence through the Sydney Education Centre. USQ has over 28,000 currently enrolled students, of whom 34% are from low SES backgrounds.

**The University of the Sunshine Coast (USC)** is a unique and successful regional institution, established on a greenfield site at Sippy Downs 20 years ago to support the development aspirations of the Sunshine Coast community. Its regional footprint now extends from Brisbane in the south to Fraser Coast in the north with campuses at SouthBank in Brisbane, Sunshine Coast, and at Gympie, Hervey Bay and with teaching locations throughout this its region. USC also has campuses in Melbourne and Sydney. Since the establishment of USC, the higher education participation rates in the Sunshine Coast council area have risen by 50%, well above those of the surrounding council areas, and are rising in areas such as Gympie, although currently these rates are still well below national and metropolitan participation rates. In 2017, the University will have approximately 15,000 students, of which 50% are first in family, 19% are from low SES backgrounds, 23% are from regional and remote locations, 2.2% are Indigenous people, and 64% are women.

**The University of New England (UNE)** is Australia's oldest regional university offering more than 200 courses at undergraduate, postgraduate coursework and higher degree research levels. Through its leading role in the provision of distance education, UNE has contributed to the nation's development over more than half a century, while enhancing the lives of thousands of people who would otherwise have been unable to pursue university studies. It currently has 23,000 students enrolled, of which 23% are low SES and 38% of commencing students are from rural and remote locations.

**Southern Cross University (SCU)** was formally established in 1994. It has campuses at the Gold Coast, Lismore and Coffs Harbour, and branch campuses in Sydney and Melbourne. The University also operates The Hotel School Sydney and The Hotel School in Melbourne in partnership with Mulpha Australia. SCU has graduated more than 55,000 people from all walks of life and a diversity of backgrounds; many, the first in their families to aspire to and realise a university education. In two decades SCU has achieved world-leading expertise in research fields that are regionally relevant and internationally significant. SCU enjoys broad connectivity with the regions it serves, enriching its communities through the excellence of

its scholarship and the achievements of its graduates. SCU currently has 15,000 students enrolled, of which 26% are low SES, 40% are first in family to attend a university and 58% are from regional and remote locations.

**Central Queensland University (CQU)** is a comprehensive regional-based university and Queensland's first dual sector university, providing a comprehensive approach to education, training, research and engagement in the central Queensland region and beyond. The University has 25 campuses and locations around the world and provides a diverse range of training and education programmes and courses to more than 30,000 students studying qualifications from certificate to post doctorate level. Of these students, 14,847 are enrolled in domestic undergraduate courses, 50% of whom are from low SES backgrounds and 62% from regional and remote locations.

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

According to the recent *Clever Regions, Clever Australia* report (RUN, 2016), RUN universities teach around 110,000 students or around 9% of the enrolments at Australian public universities (see Department of Education and Training, 2014). RUN universities educate approximately a quarter of Australia's regional higher education students, 29% of Australia's distance education students, around 15% of the country's low SES students, 16% of its Indigenous students and 32% of its students in enabling courses. Many RUN students are the first in their family to attend university and the majority of RUN students do not come straight to university from school - many have worked and/or undertaken post-school education prior to enrolling in undergraduate study. Many balance part-time university study with work and/or family commitments. Not surprisingly, then, many of RUN's universities are significant distance education providers.

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:

- **Dr Caroline Perkins**, Executive Director, RUN;
- **Professor Karen Nelson**, University of the Sunshine Coast;
- **Professor Joshua Pinnear**, (formerly Emeritus Professor Hilary Winchester), Central Queensland University;
- **Professor Andrew McAuley**, Southern Cross University;
- **Professor Helen Partridge**, University of Southern Queensland; and
- **Professor Marcia Devlin**, Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Learning and Quality), Federation University Australia.

Progress reports on the study were presented to this advisory group throughout 2016.

## 2. Background

### 2.1 Regional Universities in Australia

Regional universities play a significant part in the Australian higher education landscape, making significant social, cultural, environmental and economic developments and contributions to the regions in which they function (DIIS, 2016; RUN, 2013). As one government publication explains:

*The impact of universities with campuses in regional Australia to the community often extends far beyond traditional educational and research activities. They play a crucial role in regional economic growth and development and in the social and cultural life of their communities. They are often central to regional economic and labour force benefits, including retaining graduates and professionals in the regions, generating diverse employment opportunities, and promoting regional research and investment. (DEEWR, 2010, p. 2)*

According to a recent Regional Universities Network (RUN) Impact Study (2013), regional universities in Australia work with regional and rural communities to build capacity and address significant regional issues and challenges. The report claims this is of increasing importance 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).

Further, despite common misconceptions, the regional population is said to be rising and “it is projected that the Australian population will grow by 30 per cent between 2007 and 2026, with 32 per cent growth in capital cities and 26 per cent growth outside capital cities (ABS, 2008). Recent ABS figures indicate that, at a national level, major cities, inner regional, outer regional, remote and very remote regions of Australia all experienced population growth between 2011 and 2012 (ABS, 2013)” (RUN, 2013, p. 1).

### 2.2 Defining ‘Regional’ Universities

Within Australia, universities are either metropolitan with no regional campuses, metropolitan-based institutions with regional campuses, or are regionally headquartered (with or without metropolitan campuses). The findings from this present study are directly relevant to the universities listed under ‘Regionally headquartered’ in the first column of the table below and may also have some relevance to the metropolitan universities with regional campuses listed in column 2.

Canvassing all Australian universities, Eversole (2016) found 13 universities are headquartered in regional Australia, with close to 30 of Australia’s 40 universities having at least one regional campus.

**Table 1: Universities in Australia that are regional, metropolitan (with and without regional campuses)**

Source: Adapted from Eversole (2016)

REGIONALLY HEADQUARTERED	METROPOLITAN UNIVERSITIES WITH (ONE OR MORE) REGIONAL CAMPUSES	METROPOLITAN UNIVERSITIES WITH NO REGIONAL CAMPUSES
Charles Sturt University	Edith Cowan University	Australian National University
Southern Cross University	Sydney University	University of Technology Sydney
University of New England	Griffith University	University of New South Wales
Federation University Australia	University of Tasmania	Western Sydney University
Central Queensland University	La Trobe University	Macquarie University
James Cook University	Monash University	The University of Canberra
University of Southern Queensland	RMIT University	Swinburne University of Technology
University of Notre Dame	University of Melbourne	Victoria University
Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education	Queensland University of Technology	
University of the Sunshine Coast	University of Queensland	
University of Wollongong	Curtin University	
University of Newcastle	Murdoch University	
Bond University	University of Western Australia	
Deakin University	Flinders University	
	The University of Adelaide	
	University of South Australia	
	Australian Catholic University	
	Charles Carwin University	

### 2.3 Regional University Participation Rates

Previous 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). Across this body of research is a collective acknowledgement of “the 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 both capital cities and 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, however, in higher education attainment between city and regional Australians, with the differential increasing with distance from a major city. In 2006, 27% of people aged 25-64 who lived in major cities held a Bachelor degree or above. This figure declined to 15% for Australians*

*living in inner regional areas, to 13% for outer regional areas and down to only 10% for very remote areas (ABS, 2008). There is evidence that the gap between capital city and regional Australia in university qualification levels is growing. (DEEWR, 2010)*

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 comparison to students from metropolitan areas (Department of Education and Training, 2016).

Not only are these rates a significant equity issue for the communities and individuals concerned, they also have serious 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).

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 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.<sup>1</sup>

But there is still work to do. Pointing to the impact of school completion on university participation, the RUN report, *Clever Regions, Clever Australia*, notes:

*... the proportion of the working age population with Year 12 and bachelor degree or higher attainment levels still remains significantly lower in regional and remote areas when compared to major cities.<sup>2</sup> In 2014, the proportion of persons aged 25-34 years with Year 12 or above was above 80 per cent in major cities and between 56 and 60 per cent in regional Australia.<sup>3</sup> The proportion of 25-34 year olds with a bachelor degree or above in major cities was about 42 per cent compared to around 21 to 18 per cent in regional Australia (becoming lower further away from major cities). (RUN, 2016, pp. 9-10)*

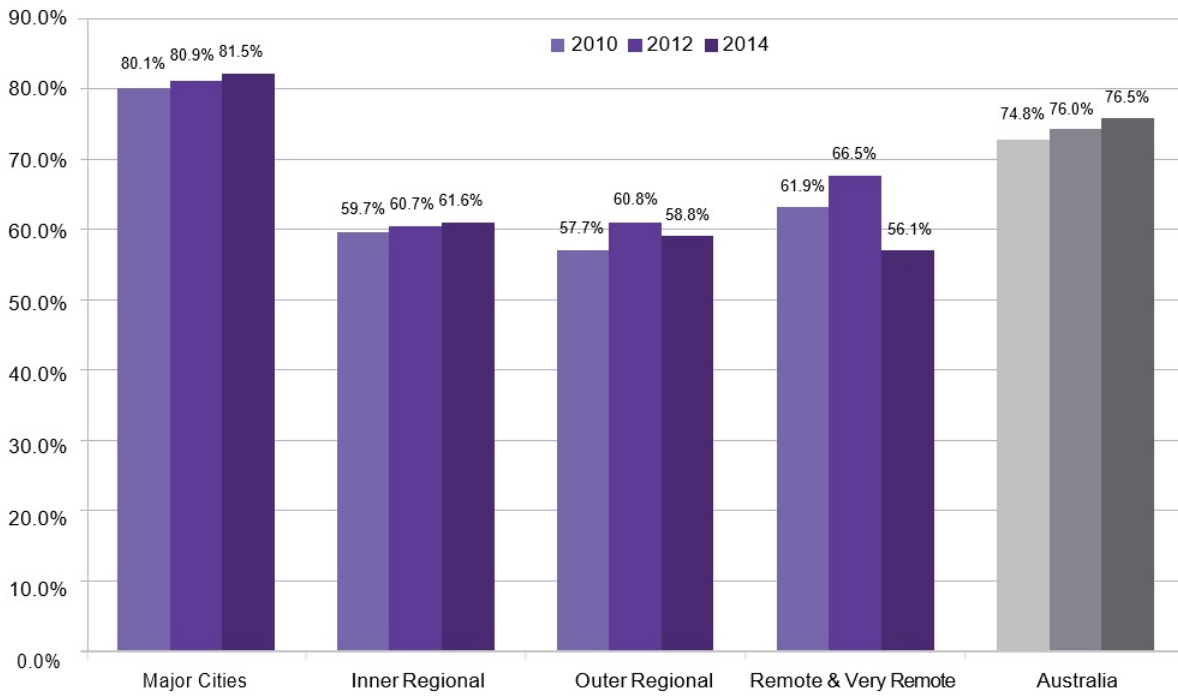
Figures 1 and 2 below show these comparisons.

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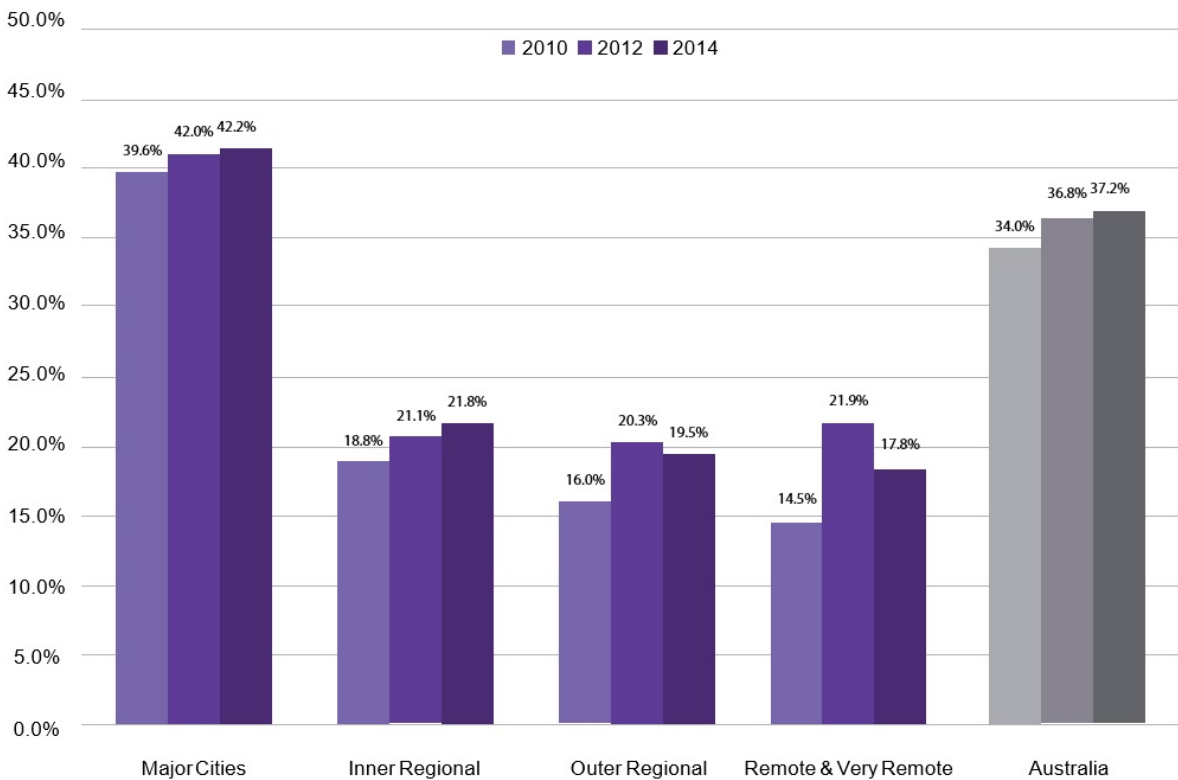
<sup>1</sup> RUN, 2014, unpublished, from Department of Education student data.

<sup>2</sup> ABS, 2014, Education and Work 2014 Cat no. 6227 – analysis based on data downloads.

<sup>3</sup> ABS, 2014, Education and Work 2014 Cat no. 6227 – analysis based on data downloads.



**Figure 1: The proportion of persons aged 25-34 years with Year 12 or above (2014).**



**Figure 2: The proportion of 25-34 year olds with a bachelor degree or above (2014).**

## 2.4 Students from Low SES Backgrounds in Higher Education

Since the 1980s, research has identified students from low SES backgrounds as disadvantaged in their access to higher education (Anderson & Vervoorn, 1983; Clarke, Zimmer & Main, 1999; Connell, Ashenden, Kessler & Dowsett, 1982; James *et al.*, 1999; Ramsay, Tranter, Charlten & Summer, 1998). Tranter (2003) claims,

*...there is a huge complexity of reasons why students from low socio-economic backgrounds are less likely to enter university. These range from family and community expectations, financial hardship, attitudes to education, short-term rather than long-term goals, limited aspirations and role models/mentors, low self-esteem, poor literacy skills and study skills, inadequate academic preparation, the distraction of a critical mass of disengaged students in the classroom and an unstable, often inexperienced and uncommitted teaching staff.*  
(p. 3)

More recent studies have found similar barriers to their participation, access, retention and overall success (Berger, 2000; Collier & Morgan, 2008; Devlin & McKay, 2011, 2014; Fitzgibbon & Prior, 2006; Greenbank, 2006; Murphy, 2009; Northedge, 2003; Devlin, Kift, Nelson, Smith & McKay, 2012; Kirk, 2008; Titus, 2006). These barriers are extensive, as documented by Devlin and McKay (2011), who have summarized them as broadly related to:

- **Expectations.** The expectations that students from low SES backgrounds can be disjunctive with the realities of higher education (Brooks, 2004; Roberts, 2011). Collier and Morgan (2008) posit that this is compounded with non-traditional students who are first-in-family students (also see Engle, 2007; Luzeckyj, King, Scutter & Brinkworth, 2011).
- **Aspirations.** Their aspirations can sometimes be lower than those of traditional students (Bowden & Doughney, 2010; Hahs-Vaughn, 2004; Shallcross & Hartley, 2009; Tett, 2004; Walpole, 2008).
- **Confidence.** Studies show that students from low SES backgrounds can lack confidence and self-esteem, which can impact their overall sense of 'belonging' in higher education (Christie, Tett, Cree, Hounsell & McCune, 2008; Gleiman, 2015). This can result in a reluctance to seek support from academic staff (Benson *et al.*, 2009; Christie *et al.*, 2008; David, Crozier, Hayward, Ertl, Williams *et al.*, 2010; Lawrence, 2005; Murphy, 2009).
- **Levels of preparedness.** Levels of academic preparedness of students from low SES backgrounds can differ to those of traditional students (Mulvey, 2009; Murphy, 2009; Northedge, 2003; Berger, 2000). In the US context, theorists writing about those who are first in their families to attend university, refer to this as the "college readiness" of students (Byrd & MacDonald, 2005; Conley, 2007).
- **Cultural capital.** There can also often be a mismatch between their cultural capital and the middle class culture they encounter in higher education (Greenbank, 2006), particularly when students are first-in-family (Luzeckyj *et al.*, 2011).
- **Skills.** Students from low SES backgrounds may not be equipped with the skill-set of traditional students in terms of their academic, research, digital literacy, writing and language skills (Kirk, 2008; Fitzgibbon & Prior, 2006).

- **Time.** Students from low SES backgrounds can be under greater time constraints than those of their traditional student counterparts. This may be the result of balancing financial pressures, family responsibilities, employment with study (David *et al.*, 2010; Murphy, 2009; Henderson, Noble & De George-Walker, 2009; Benson, Hewitt, Devos, Crosling & Heagney, 2009; Hayden & Long, 2006; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006; White, 2006; Northedge, 2003; Winn, 2002; Douglass, Roebken & Thomson, 2007).
- **Family Support.** Students from SES backgrounds, particularly those who are in the first generation of their family to attend university, often do not have significant levels of support from family or friends (Brooks, 2004; Hahs-Vaughn, 2004; Murphy, 2009; Perna & Titus, 2005).
- **Priorities.** Some suggest that education can be lower on the list of priorities for some students from low SES backgrounds. For example, Crozier, Reay, Clayton and Grinstead (2008) posit that a university degree is often a “means to an end” and that these students are “pragmatic in their course and university choices” as more often than not, these students “don’t have a choice at all” (p. 175).
- **Finances.** Students from low SES backgrounds often contend with financial issues that can impact significantly on their higher education choices, mode of study and overall experience (David, Crozier, Hayward *et al.*, 2010; Hayden & Long, 2006; Perna, 2000; Simister, 2011). There is a greater chance that students from low SES backgrounds will find themselves under economic pressure to prioritise work over their education (Greenbank, 2006).
- **Paid employment.** Students from low SES backgrounds are often under greater pressures to undertake more hours of paid employment than their high SES counterparts. Whether part-time or full-time, the implications and challenges associated with balancing work and study are well documented (Barron & Anastasiadou, 2009).
- **Institutional cultures of elitism.** According to Simister (2011) and Tett (2004) issues of elitism work to impede non-traditional student access and participation in higher education.

The literature on the aspirations (Bowden & Doughney, 2010), access (James, Wyn, Baldwin, Hepworth, McInnes *et al.*, 2008), participation (Gale & Parker, 2013), retention (Tinto, 2006; Walpole, Simmermon, Mack, Mills, Scales *et al.*, 2003), academic achievement (Kirk, 2008; Sirin, 2005) and attrition (Christie, Munro & Fisher, 2004; Walpole *et al.*, 2003) of low SES background students in higher education is prolific. Much of the research concentrates on the barriers and challenges experienced by students from low SES backgrounds and fewer studies focus on the success factors of their participation and experiences in higher education (see Devlin, 2013; Devlin & McKay, 2014; Devlin *et al.*, 2012; Yorke & Longden, 2004).

## 2.5 Intersections of Rurality and Low Socioeconomic Status

Whilst distance to campus is recognised as a key barrier to study, research suggests that it is not the critical factor in a student’s decision to participate in higher education (James *et al.*, 1999; Khoo & Ainley, 2005; Marks *et al.*, 2000; Stevenson *et al.*, 2000). Indeed, James *et al.* (1999) found that regional imbalances in participation are affected less by distance from a university campus than by SES background and differences in attitudes and aspirations

towards higher education. These claims echo the findings of Stevenson *et al.* (2000) who suggest that it is over-simplifying the issue to assume that imbalances in the higher education participation rates of rural students are primarily due to distance from a university and the costs associated with relocation, although these are important influences to consider.

Socioeconomic status is a key factor affecting the higher education participation of regional students (James *et al.*, 1999; Stanley *et al.*, 2008; Stevenson *et al.*, 2000). James *et al.* (1999) identified a high correlation between a person's location and their SES, reporting that people from metropolitan areas tend, on average, to have higher SES than those from non-metropolitan areas. They further claim that socioeconomic effects are generally far more pronounced and pervasive than location effects. However, James *et al.* (1999) do caution that there is a snowballing effect in that students most likely to experience discouraging influences for study are those from low SES backgrounds who live in rural areas and who live far from a university campus.

According to Curtis, Drummond, Halsey and Lawson (2012), "The Bradley review of higher education in Australia (Bradley *et al.*, 2008) indicated that rural and low SES high school graduates did not pursue university education at the same rates as their metropolitan counterparts." As Tranter (2003, p. 1) explains, "...in Australia today we see a large disparity in higher education participation, very much determined by where one lives and where one goes to school." Despite continued efforts to increase the participation, access and retention of these students, James (2001, p. 456) claims "people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and people who live in rural or isolated areas" remain under-represented (also see Nelson, 2002). Tranter goes so far as to suggest: "Despite ... a wide range of policy initiatives across the higher education system ... this group of students has remained the most under-represented of all the targeted equity groups in higher education" (2003, p. 2). This situation is also mirrored in other countries (International Association of Universities, 2008).

With few exceptions ((Behrens, O'Grady, Hodgson, Hoult & Hughes, 1978; James, 2001), there is limited research exploring the issue of participation, access, and retention for those higher education students affected by both rurality and low SES. Parker (2016), among others (Black, 2015; Glenday, 2014; Koshy, 2014), posits that students from low SES backgrounds are:

*...distributed unevenly among different types of institutions, a situation that is well- documented... In Australia, the Group of Eight universities have the lowest percentage of low-SES students, followed by the Australian Technology Network universities. The distributions of low-SES students according to university type have not changed much since at least 2007. Of the change that there has been, it is the rural and regional universities that have done most of the heavy lifting, followed by the outer urban universities. (Parker, 2016).*

As the RUN (2013) report notes:

*Regional universities are said to be national leaders in enrolling and supporting students from low SES backgrounds: in 2011, 29 per cent of their domestic students were from low SES backgrounds. The comparable figure for the national*

*higher education system as a whole was 16 per cent (DIICCSRTE, 2012). (RUN, 2013, p. 14)*

Wilks and Wilson (2012) carried out a study that examined the educational aspirations of primary and secondary school students about higher education, and the pathways and the barriers, facing young Australians living in low SES regional and rural settings in New South Wales (NSW) Australia. They found that there are clear intersections between demographics, financial factors, geographic location, and cultural and social capital in relation to the formation of students' perceptions, choices and decisions about participation in higher education. They conclude, "In remote, rural, and regional settings *financial factors* strongly influence decisions around pre-Year 12 termination and going on to university" (Wilks & Wilson, 2012, p. 80, emphasis added).

## **2.6 Student Attrition from University**

The headline attrition data for regional students and for students from low SES backgrounds appear to be higher than that for those from metropolitan areas and higher SES backgrounds. The *Department of Education's Completion Rates of Domestic Bachelor Students – a cohort analysis, 2005-2013*, shows that for bachelor students commencing in 2005, 75% of metro students had completed by 2013, but only 69.8% and 59.5% of regional and remote students, respectively, had done so by this date. Further, for the same period, only 68.9% of low SES students had completed, compared to 72.6% and 77.7%, respectively, for medium and high SES students. However, as discussed later in the report, the way in which attrition is currently measured through an examination of completion rates may be flawed and this is highlighted as an area for further examination and policy reform.

The most recent government data compared these results with nine year outcomes for the 2006 cohort (outcomes by 2014) and found the overall completion rates to be similar (Department of Education and Training, 2017). Lower completion rates were found for those students who, "study externally; are part-time; are older; are admitted to higher education on a basis other than secondary education; have lower Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) scores; are indigenous; have a lower socio-economic status or come from a regional area of Australia" (Department of Education and Training, 2017, p. 6). The recent data shows that for bachelor students commencing in 2006, 74.7% of metro students had completed by 2014, but only 69% and 60.1% of regional and remote students, respectively, had done so by this date. In relation to low SES students, only 67.9% had completed compared to 72.3% and 77.8% for their medium and high SES peers.

Previous research points to a raft of obstacles that regional students face, including smaller campuses and less choice; higher costs of living; higher transport costs; poor investment in regional schools (Brett *et al.*, 2015). In their national study of the Australian regional student experience, Nelson, Readman and Stoodley (2016, p. 1) report, "When compared with their metropolitan peers, regional students are ... more likely to be from a lower socio-economic background, ... the first in family to go to university, spend longer in paid and unpaid work, and have lower entry scores". As one government report notes, "Many of these factors are also interrelated" (DEEWR, 2010, p. 3).

Previous research shows that there are many factors that contribute to the attrition from university of low SES and regional students and that students drop out for a range of reasons (see for example, Bean & Eaton, 2001; Devlin, 2010, 2012(a), 2012(b); Edwards and

McMillan, 2015; Krause, 2005; Krause & Coates, 2008; Lobo, 2012; Nelson, Duncan & Clarke, 2009). Summarising this previous research, some of the major reasons for attrition include:

- Demographic reasons, over which students have no control which create circumstances that increase the likelihood of drop out, such as being: part-time; mature-age; online; first year; first in family to attend tertiary study; from low SES background; postgraduate; Indigenous; and/or a person with a disability.
- Academic challenges, including those related to: lack of proficiency in discipline skills relevant to the discipline or programme of study; underdeveloped academic skills (such as communication, numeracy and time management); a lack of preparedness for tertiary study; weak English language skills and/or dissatisfaction with the quality of the teaching/university.
- Personal challenges, often interrelated and including those related to: finances; employment commitments; family responsibilities; relationship issues; misadventure; and/or health.
- Dissonance between student expectations and the reality of university study.
- Barriers to successful navigation of institutional processes and systems.

O'Shea, Chandler and Harwood (2015) report: "Since 2007, student numbers from designated equity groups have significantly increased" (n.p.).

*While increased access and participation are cause for celebration, getting students into university is only the beginning of this journey. The successful retention of learners remains elusive. Student dropout rates in Australian universities consistently hover around 18%, with some institutions indicating that an average of 25% of students leave before gaining a degree. Rates of early departure from university remain particularly high among students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, rural and remote areas, and Indigenous students. Obviously for students who fall into multiple equity groups, the possibility of leaving university without a degree increases dramatically (O'Shea, Chandler & Harwood, 2015, n.p.).*

Attrition of students from regional universities is a particular issue given the need to increase higher education participation and completion in regional Australia. Data about these students indicates that students enrolled at regional universities include large numbers and proportions of low SES, mature age, distance/online and part-time students. Many regional university students also exhibit characteristics such as longer working hours and more family and carer responsibilities than the cohorts who typically study at metropolitan universities (Department of Education and Training, 2016). Despite their additional responsibilities and challenges, the majority of students who study at regional universities are successful.

Given all of the above, there remains a strong need to increase higher education retention and completion in regional Australia. A 'one-size-fits-all' set of policies and practices for Australian higher education is no longer valid, if it ever was. It is timely to determine 'what works' for low SES domestic students studying at regional universities in terms of policy and practice so that greater attention may be paid to evidence-based decisions for these students.

There is currently a gap in the evidence base for governments and regional universities seeking to improve student retention, attainment and success. This research aims to address the current gap in knowledge around how to facilitate success for these students and to assist in the formation of evidence-based policy and practice. Rather than simply add to the large body of existing evidence on obstacles, barriers, challenges and reasons for attrition, the present study deliberately focuses on adding to the currently smaller evidence base of what assists students from low SES backgrounds at regional universities to stay in and complete their studies.

## **2.7 Defining Low Socioeconomic Status**

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) draws on the Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) criteria to metrically measure SES across geographical areas (Ross, 2011). Each SEIFA index represent an average of the people living in a particular area and the ABS itself concedes that it does not represent the individual situation of each person and that many areas are likely to have greater diversity of people and households (ABS, 2008). To determine disadvantage, the SEIFA Index of Education and Occupation (IEO) measures of the employment and educational attainment of individuals are averaged within postcodes, which are then rated from highest to lowest. Those postcodes in the bottom quartile, the bottom 25%, and, by association, those people living in them, are deemed to be of low SES. As Devlin and O'Shea (2011) note, there are widespread concerns about the effectiveness of the postcode metric in identifying low SES status and individual factors have begun to be combined with geographical factors.

The present study adopted both the postcode of the student's home address against the IEO, selecting students that fell within the bottom 25% of the IEO to invite to participate in the project and added a second individual circumstance measure, the educational attainment of their parents. Students from a bottom 25% of the IEO postcode for their home address but who had a parent with university level education were excluded from the sample. This combined measure of being both from a low SES postcode and in the first generation of family to attend university provided greater confidence that interviewees were from low SES backgrounds.

## **2.8 Defining Success**

The methodology for the study was deliberately 'success-focused' (Devlin, 2009). This meant a focus on articulating success-oriented policy and practice that universities might adopt in relation to low SES students studying at regional universities. Noting that much understanding of the issues facing low SES students has come from research and investigation focused on the barriers to success and the problems low SES students face, this study purposefully adopted a methodological approach focused on success.

As Devlin (2009) argues in relation to another equity student group, Indigenous students, "Giving prominence to a research-led focus on 'what works' in terms of ... student equity in higher education will provide evidence-based guidance for policy and practice" (pp.1–2). She argues further that, "Through investigating the efficacy of existing programs designed to facilitate ... student recruitment and retention; and leveraging the experience of ... successful... [people], it may be possible to articulate some of the ways in which higher education success has been, and can be, achieved..." (p. 2). For the purposes of the present

study, the research team took a similar view in relation to low SES background students studying at regional universities.

The study therefore purposefully recruited 'successful' low SES students. For the purposes of the study, 'successful' was defined as having completed most of a programme of study, as indicated by being enrolled in at least one final year subject/unit. It was assumed that if students had reached the final year of their programme, it was probable that they would complete and this would give them sufficient success to speak from experience about what helped them to succeed. The aim in interviewing these students was to uncover aspects of these students' experiences that helped them choose to, or be able to, stay at university through to the final year(s) of study, despite the challenges and obstacles they may have faced.

It should be noted that taking a 'success-focused' approach does not suggest that a parallel focus on policy and other systemic challenges to low SES higher education student success should not continue. A focus on articulating success-oriented policy and practice should be developed alongside the continued investigation and management of systemic issue (Devlin *et al.*, 2012). In the meantime, the present research will add significantly to understanding 'what works' to keep students from low SES backgrounds who are studying at regional universities in study, and to maximise their chances of retention, success and completion.

## 3. Study Approach and Method

### 3.1 Approach

This study analysed the major contributing factors to the retention of low SES domestic students studying at regional universities.

The major contributing factors were determined through:

- a. 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;
- b. 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
- c. 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.

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 study?

First, a review of recent peer-reviewed and other significant literature was undertaken and added to existing reviews to determine whether there are identified or potential guiding principles for or evidence of programmes that enable effective support of low SES students in Australian regional higher education.

Second, interviews with current, successful, regional university domestic students from low SES backgrounds and with stakeholders, who are university staff who understand what helps these particular students to succeed, were undertaken at six regional university sites.

Third, the audio of the interviews undertaken at each of the six universities were transcribed and analysed using NVivo qualitative software software to identify recurring and strong themes related to what has ‘worked’ for the majority of students interviewed in terms of facilitating their success. Factors and principles derived from this analysis were articulated into advice for those responsible for the development and implementation of programmes and initiatives designed to help students studying at regional universities succeed and for those responsible for policy development.

### 3.2 Method

A valid method for exploring the factors that assist students to succeed is to ask those who have succeeded, and those who have directly helped them succeed, to reflect on and articulate what has assisted students (see McKeown, Macdonell, & Bowman, 1993; Morda,

Sonn, Ali & Ohtsuka, 2007). While there will be individual circumstances that are unique, the findings that emerge from the present study focus on the themes that emerged across the interviews about the types of interventions, programmes, practices, initiatives and policies that successful students, and university staff who work with these students, view as having contributed to their success.

### **3.2.1 Ethical Approval**

The methodology received ethical approval from the Federation University Australia Human Research Ethics Committee [B16-014] and subsequently from the partner universities. Key ethical considerations related for the most part to data collection techniques and process. Specifically, the team were careful to adopt a research methodology that was sensitive to participants and the issues being discussed; use an approach that protected the anonymity of respondents throughout the study; and use an approach that maximized consistency given the involvement of multiple institutions and research assistant staff.

### **3.2.2 Literature Review**

An extensive canvassing of the literature was undertaken in 2016. Internet searches of peer reviewed and other significant literature were conducted using all possible combinations of key terms relating to 'low SES background students at regional universities'. These searches located a significant number of papers from Australia, however, for the most part, this literature related to either low SES students in higher education or regional universities and fewer studies discussed both.

Needless to say, students who are underrepresented in higher education are identified in many different ways: as non-traditional, of low SES status, from ethnic minorities, the working class, or simply as 'underrepresented'. Terms were thus modified accordingly to ensure the international research was sourced and included. As an example, 'low SES background students' was changed to 'working class students' to encompass research undertaken in the UK, and then again changed to 'nontraditional' and 'minority' students to source and incorporate the literature from the US.

For each document that was located, the abstract was read to determine its applicability to our study. Once the item was identified as relevant to the study and worthy of further exploration, the full article was accessed, read and relevant findings incorporated into this report.

The review focused on the experiences of low SES students in regional universities from around the world. While 'success' is the focus of this study, the literature relating to this was sparse. The review included articles about both the theory and the practical aspects of these students' experiences. These peer-reviewed articles include reports on research studies, conceptual papers, and commentaries. Additionally, relevant government reports and policy papers have been included as well as a selection of key conference papers, books and book chapters.

### **3.2.3 Sampling**

A simple random sampling method was used to determine which students would participate in the study. To be eligible, participants needed to: (i) have a home address with a low SES postcode, (ii) be sufficiently progressed through a programme that enrolment in at least one

final year subject/unit was possible and (iii) be the first in their generation of their immediate family to attend university.

Universities determined initial eligibility from student records. Students were contacted by email and invited to participate in the study, as per the recruitment method approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee. In that initial communication, students were asked about their parental level of education. If either parent had attended university, that student was thanked for their interest but not included in the study. Eligible respondents were invited to arrange an interview time with a researcher.

### **3.2.4 Student Demographic Survey**

At the commencement of each interview, students were asked to complete a short demographic survey (see Appendix A). The results of these were used to compile a demographic overview of the total sample of students across all universities.

### **3.2.5 Interviews**

A combined total of 96 interviews were undertaken with students and stakeholders, 95 of which were used for this study.

#### *3.2.5.1 Student Interviews*

The study recruited 70 'successful' low SES background, domestic, regional university students. A total of 70 interviews were carried out with students from the six institutions, however one respondent had to be eliminated from the study, resulting in a total of 69 student interviews used for analysis. Students were asked a series of semi-structured questions (see Appendix B). With an overarching focus of what had helped them to succeed, questions centred around: major success factors, financial circumstances, mode of study, teaching and learning, technology, support services, support people, resources, health and wellbeing, assessment, sense of connection, and student's own motivation and resilience.

#### *3.2.5.2 Stakeholder Interviews*

A total of 26 interviews were carried out with staff from the six institutions. The inclusion criteria specified that key stakeholders were in and connected with regional universities and had experience of what may contribute to the success in higher education for low SES students at regional universities. Staff at the regional universities involved in the study were identified by members of the project team. They were recognised and known as occupying key roles in the support, teaching and/or research of/around of university students from low SES backgrounds.

Staff were asked a schedule of semi-structured questions (see Appendix C), which broadly concentrated on major, high level success factors, strategies to facilitate success, how to assist students to overcome barriers, student expectations and preparedness, and the importance of technology.

### **3.2.6 Analysis**

All interviews were recorded and then transcribed by an external transcription agency, and the data was subsequently analysed using NVivo 10 by an experienced researcher on the team. Using a detailed reading of the raw data, a thematic analysis of the data was undertaken to derive recurring categories and themes; an inductive approach delineated by

Thomas (2006). The thematic analysis of the data addressed both the central questions of the study as well as additional themes that were uncovered. This approach was seen to elicit a deeper and richer understanding of the factors that contribute to low SES, domestic regional university student success.

Throughout the data analysis process, inter-coder review and recursive examination of analysed data ensured both coding and coder reliability. Following the initial thematic analysis, a secondary step entailed audit checks of the coding and analysis by the lead researcher. In addition, the practice of 'memoing' was maintained by the research fellow and the lead researcher. Memoing is a written record of the interpretations, decision-making, thought processes and reflections of the researchers. Each made recordings, and exchanged these with each other, as the data was analysed and themes determined.

A set of contextual influences and a final set of factors that assist students to succeed emerged from this process, along with areas for future policy development.

### **3.3 Methodological Limitations**

Although the research achieved its set objectives, there were some limitations to the study. The main limitation related to the study's broad inter-institutional data collection process entailing the use of multiple research assistants and interviewers. Despite efforts made to ensure consistency of interview approach, there were some issues with senior staff changes at a number of the participating institutions which may have contributed to research assistants not always clearly understanding the success focus of the project. In a small number of cases, the follow up questions to prompt further reflection on the interview questions did not always focus primarily on how students had succeeded. This meant that, in a small number of cases, the primary focus strayed into exploring students' challenges and problems without an equivalent focus on how success had been achieved despite these challenges and problems. While not the primary intent of the interviews and study, this did serve to underscore the significant, complex and multi-faceted problems that students from low SES backgrounds who are studying in regional universities face. The majority of interviews were appropriately success-focused and overall, the high-level factors that contribute to student success, and the policy and research areas where a focus would be beneficial were clearly identified and articulated.

Students self-selected for the study. This means that the sample is unlikely to be representative of all students and may have been biased toward, for example, students who had fewer external responsibilities and more time to participate in the study. Stakeholders were identified and approached by members of the project team. While the latter are experts in their fields and know their colleagues well, it is possible that other stakeholders not known to the researchers were overlooked for inclusion in the study.

The study also included only RUN universities. While these universities provided a valid and sizeable sample of both students and staff, it is still to some extent a limitation in that the findings are not necessarily applicable to regional universities, or universities with regional campuses outside the RUN group. There may be different success factors at other universities who have low SES students studying on their regional campuses. Further research might include a wider sample of universities and perhaps a comparative analysis of findings from RUN universities and other universities could be considered.

## 4. The Student Sample

### 4.1 Demographic Information

Sixty-nine students from low SES backgrounds who were undertaking units from their final year of study at a regional university were interviewed for this study.

Fifty-eight of the sample were female, 10 were male and one identified as 'other'. Five of the sample were females studying in STEM areas. Most of the sample, 59 students, were mature age, that is, over 21 years of age, with the remaining 10 students aged 21 years or under.

Two of the sample were from Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background. Sixty-four students indicated they did not have a disability, four indicated they did have a disability and one student responded 'yes and no' to the question about disability.

Table 2 summarises some of the demographic information about the study's student sample.

**Table 2: Demographic information on student participants**

CHARACTERISTIC	VARIABLES	FREQUENCY
Gender	Male	10
	Female	58
	Other	1
Age	Aged > 21	59
	Aged < = 21	10
Aboriginal/TSI	Yes	2
	No	67
NESB	Yes	3
	No	66
Female studying STEM	Yes	5
	No	64
Person with disability	Yes	4
	No	64
	Yes and No	1

### 4.2 Area of Study

Respondent's disciplines of study were categorised using the Australian Standard Classification of Education (ASCED) (ABS, 2001). Where respondents indicated a joint degree, these were allocated separate ASCED codes. Where respondents indicated a generic undergraduate degree, for example, Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of Science, these were allocated an ASCED category on the basis of the major subject the respondent specified. Where more than one major was indicated, the first major was used. Where no major was indicated, these were designated 'n/a'.

As Figure 3 shows, 19 students interviewed were undertaking degrees in Education; 17 were studying Society and Culture; 13 were in Health; nine in Management and Commerce; seven were in Natural and Physical Sciences; four were in the Creative Arts; two were in Engineering and Related Technologies; one student was studying Information Technology.; and one was classified as 'n/a'. There were no students from Architecture and Building, Agriculture, Environmental and Related Studies; Food, Hospitality and Personal Services or Mixed Field Programmes.

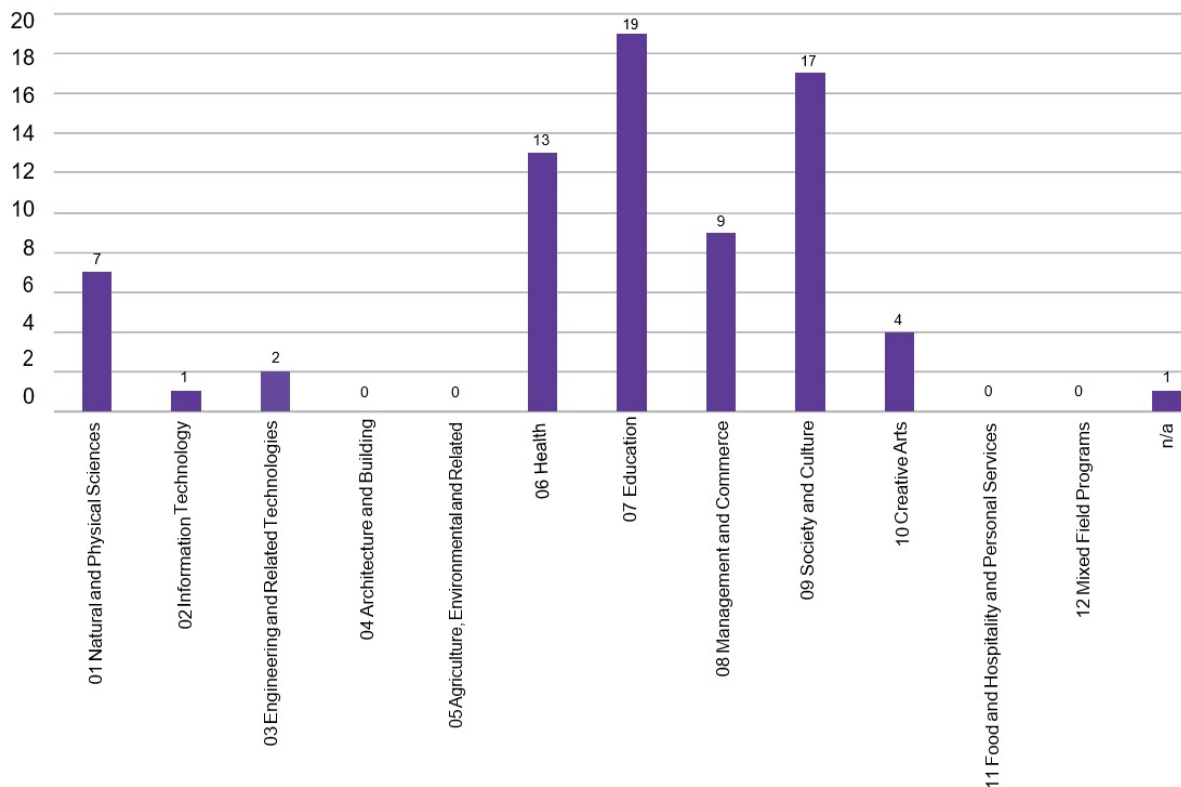


Figure 3: Area of study being undertaken by students.

### 4.3 Study Mode and Load

As Figure 4 shows, the majority of the sample – 38 – were studying on campus, with 19 studying off campus/online and a further 12 studying through a combination of on and off campus modes. Forty-seven students interviewed were studying full-time, 10 part-time and 12 indicated they had undertaken a combination of both loads.

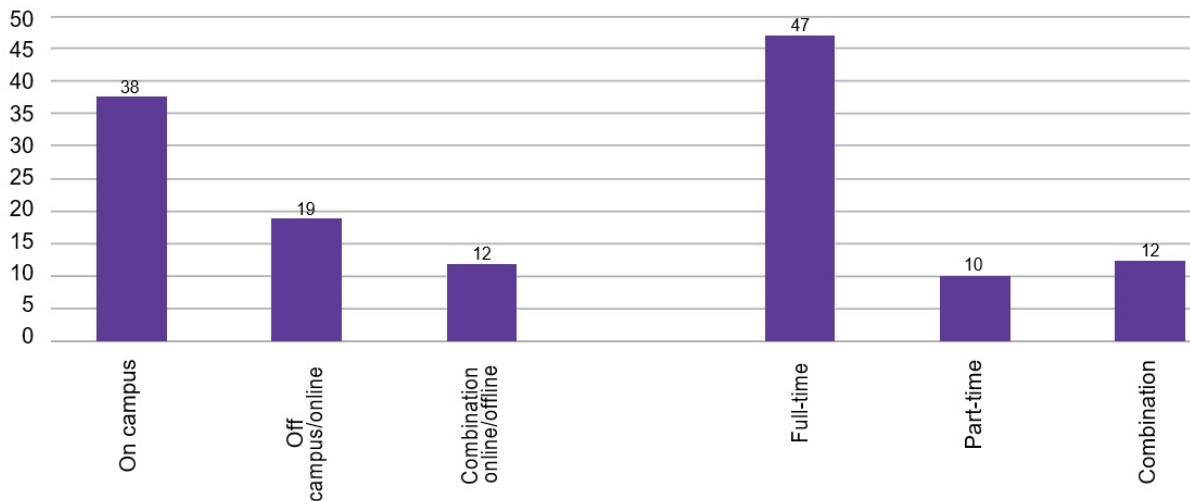


Figure 4: Study mode and load of student participants.

#### 4.4 Place of Residence

Students were asked whether they were predominantly living in a rural/regional area at the time of the survey. As Figure 5 shows, 55 of the 69 indicated they were living in a rural/regional area; 13 indicated they were not and one said 'yes and no'. Students were also asked to indicate approximately how far their campus was from where they lived. As Figure 5 shows, their responses indicated a range of distances from 0-5km through to more than 500km between home and campus. Five students gave ambiguous answers citing distances from more than one campus or from more than one place of residence. One student did not answer.

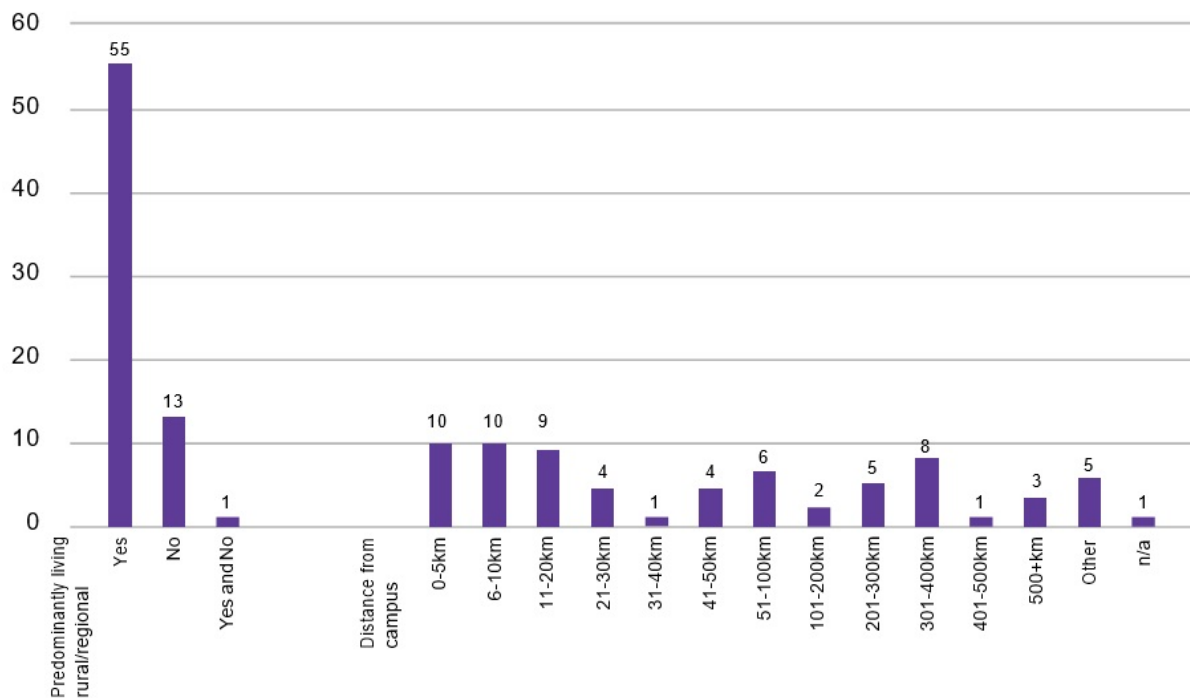


Figure 5: Place of residence of student participants.

## 4.5 Paid Employment

Students were asked whether they were predominantly employed while studying, to provide a broad picture of this aspect of their lives. The results are summarised in Figure 6. Forty-two of the 69 students indicated they were predominantly employed while studying, while 26 indicated they were not and one was unclear in their response about their employment status. Students who were predominantly employed were asked the number of hours worked per week on average in the past twelve months. Responses ranged from 1-5 hours to more than 50 hours, with the largest groups of responses at 11-15 hours (eight students); 16-20 hours (eight students) and 26-30 hours (nine students). Five students did not specify the number of hours they had worked, cited unpaid family caring responsibilities or voluntary work, or cited a combination of paid and voluntary work.

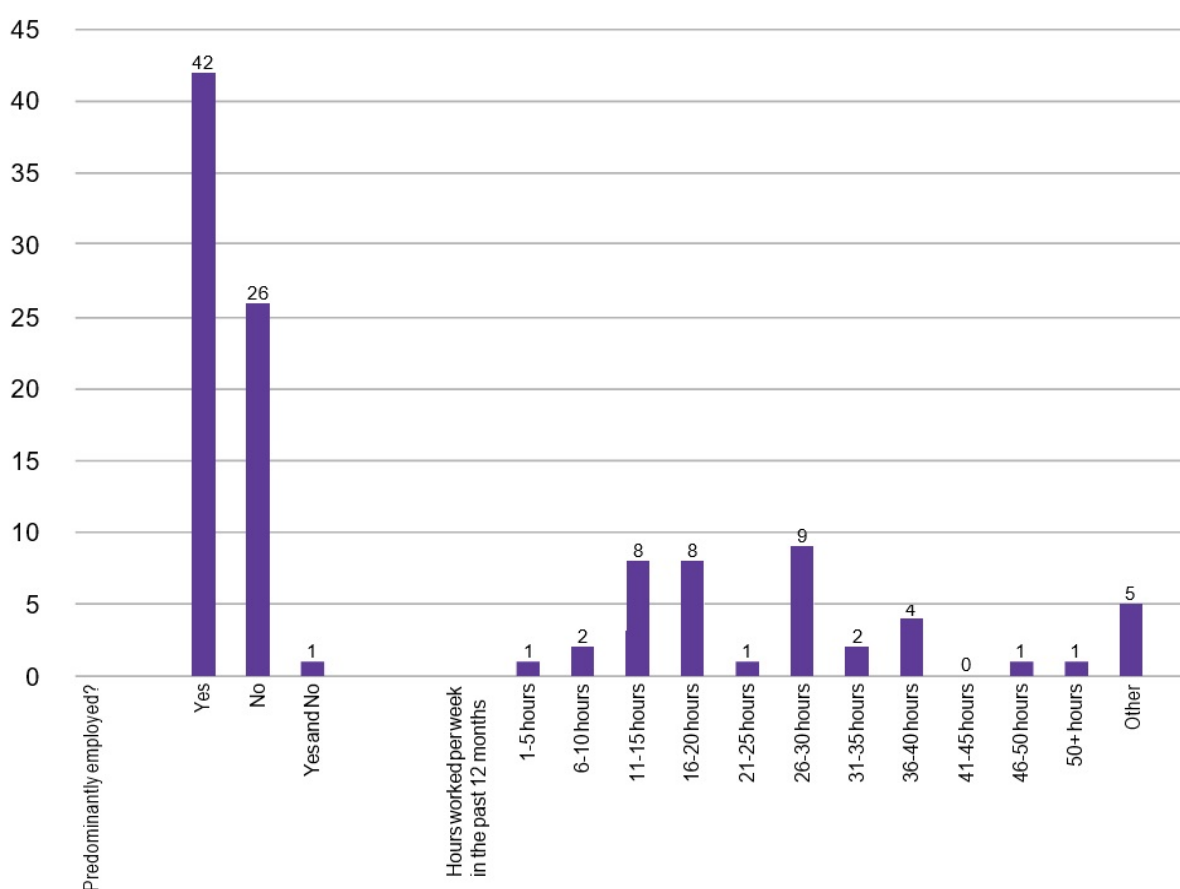


Figure 6: Employment status of student participants.

## 4.6 Basis of Entry to University

Students were asked whether or not they entered university with a Tertiary Entrance Rank (TER) or equivalent and if so, what their ranking was. As Figure 7 shows, only 28 of the 69 participants (40%) entered university on the basis of a ranking. Of these students, their ranks ranged from between 41-50 to between 81-90 and OP 6-10 to 11-15 in Queensland. These rankings were received between 1981 and 2014. The majority of the sample – 37 students (54%) – did not enter university on the basis of a TER (four students were unsure or did not answer).

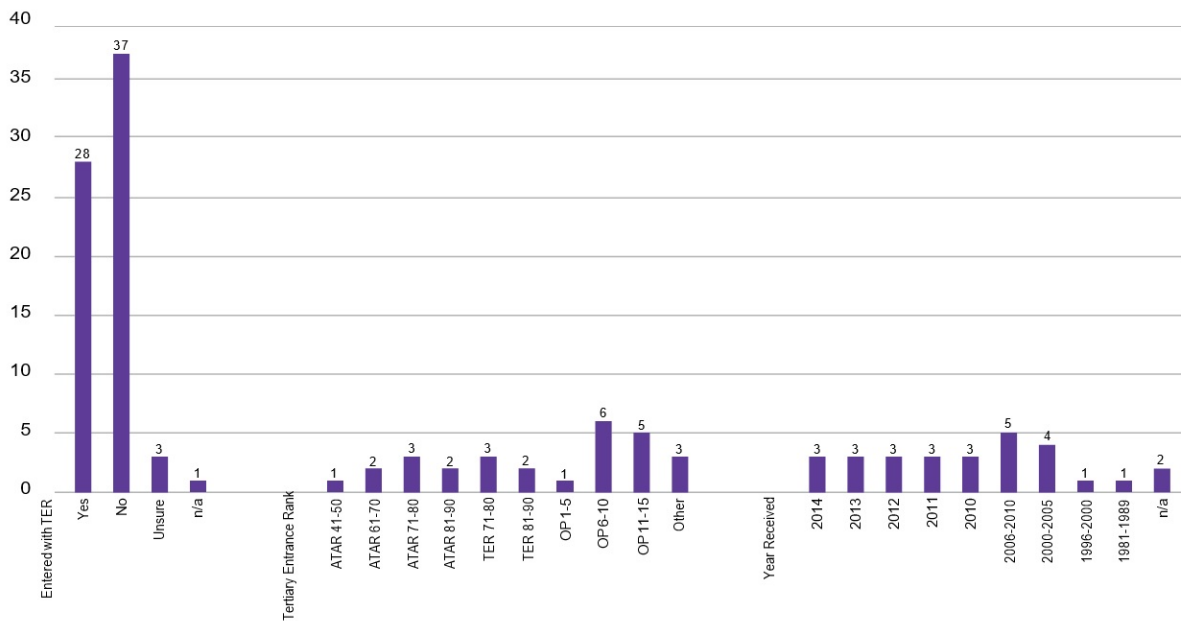


Figure 7: Basis of entry to university.

#### 4.7 Tertiary Preparation Programme Completion

Students were asked about whether or not they had completed a tertiary preparatory programme before commencing their degree study. The majority – 54 students – had not. Eleven had completed such a programme, one had partly completed such a programme and three students did not answer the question. The results are shown in Figure 8

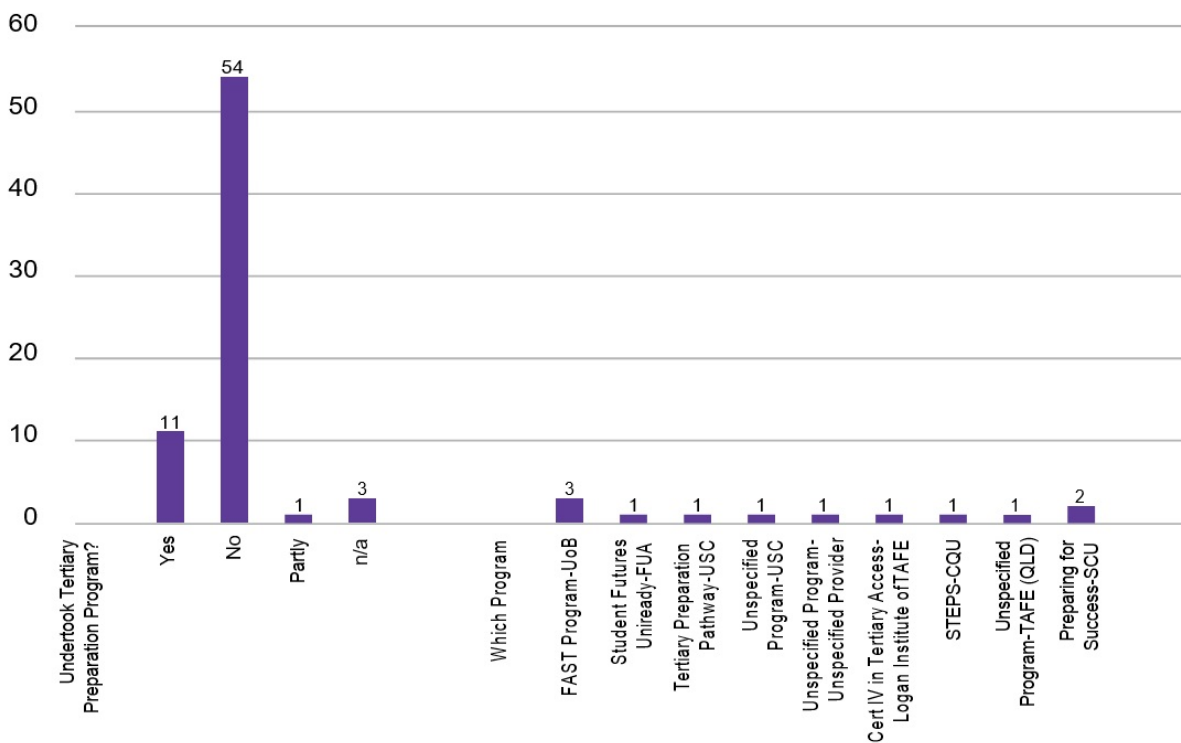


Figure 8: Tertiary preparation programme completion.

## 5. Major Findings

This study found that there were eight major factors that help students from low SES backgrounds studying at regional universities to succeed. Following a brief overview of contextual influences on the success of students from low SES backgrounds studying at regional universities, each of these eight factors are detailed in turn.

### 5.1 Contextual Influences

In addition to those outlined in the 'Background' section earlier in the report, there are a number of additional contextual factors relevant to students from low SES backgrounds studying at regional universities that were underscored in the present study that are worth noting as contextual influences that impact on student success. These include the prevalence of students from low SES backgrounds at regional universities with family responsibilities and the impacts of being the first in family to attend university. Family responsibilities and first in family influences are discussed immediately below. A detailed outline of each of the eight high-level factors then follows in eight sections. The conclusion sums up some of the impacts on student health and wellbeing of all of the contextual influences and high-level factors outlined in this report.

#### 5.1.1 Family Responsibilities

Many students from low SES backgrounds studying at regional universities are parents and many have other caring responsibilities. Previous studies have documented the struggle many students face – and particularly those from low SES backgrounds – in trying to balance academic study with family responsibilities (Devlin *et al.*, 2012; Dumbridge, Moxley & Najor-Durack, 2013; Terenzi & Pascarella, 1998; Quinn, 2004).

As one stakeholder interviewed in the present study explained:

*...a large percentage of our mature-age are single parents with kids, we have a lot of women who will do everything they can to get an education to make life better for them and their families. I think there's certain types of support that they need that we're not necessarily catering for. (FED\_STK\_003)*

A total of 72.5% of the students interviewed discussed the pressures and challenges around their family responsibilities and the impact this had on their studies. In addition to typical types of family care obligations such as caring for one's own children, students often discussed dealing with death, divorce, and having to look after elderly parents and physically or mentally ill family members.

Comments included:

*I kind of take on the caretaker role in my family. My mother works full-time and she's doing her Masters as well, so she's pretty flat out. And I have a younger sister, so for the past however many years, I've kind of fulfilled the kind of homemaker role and that takes up a lot of time and a lot of energy. So that's been my primary responsibility is like keeping the house functioning. (SCU\_STU\_068)*

*With my Mum and Dad, in the holidays I'd go home and then I'd help around the house with them, do things like that. So over my holidays I helped out a lot, but to go down, just through term, that's sort of hard for me to drive four hours back home, to go home with everything I have going on. (UNE\_STU\_025)*

*When I was in third year, or second year, I went part time and took time off because my mum got really sick, so I had to move back there. Not so much to take care of her but just to be there and support her emotionally. (USC\_STU\_043)*

*My kids both have autism and you find generally with most families where there's kids with a disability, they don't have a lot of social interaction. They tend to be isolated families. (USQ\_STU\_139)*

The impacts of family responsibilities on study success were clearly articulated:

*I've got a disabled father and a little brother... It's made it hard. It's made it real hard. Yeah, it adds to the stress level and again, I come back to it, when you're really stressed you don't want to study. You press on, you try to study, you're not going to do as well as you would when you're calm. So it has been a problem and yeah, I don't really know how we can get a great deal of help with that. (FED\_STU\_010)*

*It's determined what times of the day I can commit to study, how many hours a week I can commit to it. It's really changed how much time is spent on an assignment or - at the moment I'm doing my internship, which is eight weeks of full-time work, which has meant that I've got to pay childcare and basically rely on my parents to come and stay. They don't live nearby, but they come and stay to look after the kids and everything. That impacts the way I feel about study as well. So, if I'm draining other people's energy for my study then I have a bit of a guilt trip on it. I should be doing other things. It can change the way you feel emotionally towards it. (SCU\_STU\_066)*

### **5.1.2 First in Family Influences**

Many students from low SES backgrounds studying at regional universities are the first in their family to attend university (Gofen, 2009). In the present study, all students selected for interview were the first in their immediate family to attend university, that is, neither of their parents had attended university. Forty-two percent of stakeholders raised the matter of students being first in family, touching on a range of issues being in this position brought for students:

*Low SES are often first-in-family, so their parents may just not be supportive of university at all, or their family. They may be supportive, but they just don't get it. They've got no concept of what university is, how it works, what the students have to do, so that can cause a big problem. (UNE\_STK\_012)*

*If they're first in family, that can be very tough as well because they're stepping outside the norm. (USC\_STK\_024)*

*The first in the family, so not having the cultural capital for them. So that works in a few different ways ... there can be exclusion from friendship groups, but there can also be a lot of pride around, "You're going to university, you're the*

*first in our family to do that” and then there’s that added pressure of succeeding in that environment or stepping out - they’ve become a role model in the family or whatever it is, a friendship group or whatever, and then there can be the pressure of, “Can you hack it?”, “How are your grades going?”. (USC\_STK\_025)*

Eleven of 69 students interviewed (16%) raised first in family matters. Typical comments included:

*I was encouraged to go to uni by my high school but I wasn’t so much encouraged by my family because they didn’t go to uni. So it’s been definitely personal drive that got me there and that got me through it. I haven’t received – like every time I do well my family goes, “Oh yeah. Great job,” but then every time I’m stressing out about uni then they’ll say, “Oh, why don’t you just leave?” And they just don’t really understand that it is hard, but you can get through it and just me complaining about it doesn’t mean I want to quit. (FED\_STU\_004)*

*...when I left my job as a manager of a jewellery store to start university he [dad] was actually disappointed in me, he was like, “Why would you give up a great job?” (USQ\_STU\_159).*

## **The Eight Factors that Help Students Succeed**

With these contextual influences as a backdrop, and based on existing research and the focused interviews with successful students from low SES backgrounds and with the staff who work with them that were undertaken for the present study, eight factors that help students from these backgrounds studying at regional universities to succeed have been articulated.

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

Each is outlined in turn below in each of the eight sections that follow.

### **FACTOR 1: Student Attitude, Motivation, Determination and Resilience**

Students’ attributes, including their attitude to study, their motivation and determination to succeed and their resilience when faced with inevitable challenges made up the first factor that the present study found contributed to student success.

For students, their own attitude, motivation, determination and/or resilience were perceived to be the most important factor in their success. Echoing the findings of previous research (Devlin & McKay, 2014; McKavanagh & Purnell, 2002; Winn, 2002), both students (97%) and stakeholders (42%) identified these attributes as critical factors in student success. Comments from stakeholders included:

*It's my opinion, that the ones who succeed are the ones who are motivated and who are resilient. So they may initially not do well, but they keep on going because they've got a higher goal in mind. Whatever is put in front of them, they plough through it somehow. (USQ\_STK\_122)*

*I just think that they're able to have just magically higher levels of personal resilience, higher levels of adaption, higher levels of acquisition without having to go over things two, three or four or five or six or ten times. So, in other words at the tertiary level they just inherently manage to come good and land on their feet, because they happen to have some attributes that probably they didn't know they had, but they had them, and they come to the fore, and that's what gets them through. And, I don't really think that anyone can pick that prior to enrolment, do you know what I mean? I just think it's very random, and probably those students are as surprised as anybody else that they became a roaring success (CQU\_STK\_042)*

Student comments illustrated clearly their motivation, determination, and resilience and their commitment to success:

*I just do what needs to be done. (FED\_STU\_005)*

*You're dealt your cards and you've got to play them to your advantage. Don't just sit there and complain about it, get the job done. (USC\_STU\_046)*

*If you don't have any motivation or resilience, I think you crumble and you won't succeed. (USC\_STU\_055)*

*I don't think anyone who wasn't determined to finish the course would be able to, especially studying distance. So it's fairly self-motivated, you have to get yourself going because there's no one else really pushing you to do it. (CQU\_STU\_082)*

*I think generally work ethic. I mean, I would never consider handing an assignment in late unless I was hospitalised or something. All those - I guess working to deadlines, working to as high a standard as possible, and just really caring about my studies. (UNE\_STU\_021)*

*That's been really one of my main attributes is I don't like failure. I haven't thought about dropping out during that time, but at the same time I've invested a lot of my personal time to get this far. So basically my strong-will...has helped me to succeed. (FED\_STU\_007).*

Thirty-nine percent of students referred to goals of self-improvement through their study. In many cases, they were driven by a variety of catalysing factors:

*I had to keep motivated to keep doing it or I knew that I'd just be another drop out like so many people. (FED\_STU\_003)*

*I have a lot more riding on it. I'm recently separated so now a single mum, so I really need to get a good job and finish it. (USC\_STU\_045)*

*I want to go to Honours and then do Masters ... I've considered it as not something I want to do, it's something I have to do now after having*

*getting...this far. It's sort of not an option in my mind anymore. It's something that I am doing. (FED\_STU\_004)*

## **Resilience**

Bradley and Ingram (2013) found that students from low SES backgrounds often show great resilience in overcoming the educational and other barriers facing them (also see Devlin, 2013; Devlin *et al.*, 2012; Devlin & McKay, 2014; Stephens, Hamedani & Destin, 2014). Eight out of 26 stakeholders (31%) interviewed in the present study touched specifically on the resilience of the students. They discussed students having “higher levels of personal resilience, higher levels of adaption” (CQU\_STK\_042) and for those who lacked resilience, the need to build the students’ “own personal resources, things like resilience, their coping strategies” (USC\_STK\_025).

Twelve out of 69 students (17%) attributed their success at least in part to their own resilience. Typical comments included:

*...definitely in the degree that I'm studying, which is nursing, resilience is a massive thing so we're even taught it from the get-go, that it's a difficult profession to be in and if you're not resilient within the workplace and your study, it's a key to success within nursing. (CQU\_STU\_082)*

*For the resilience factor as well, you do need that for when you're coming up against the challenges when it all just becomes a bit too much, you need to be able to pick yourself up and keep going and grow from that. (CQU\_STU\_083)*

*I guess you've got to be pretty tenacious. I think why people drop off, particularly in regional areas, is there's a lot of support available but if you don't understand how to access it, or you're not the type of person that will pick up the phone and ask a question, it's really just to go, "It's all too hard, I'm not doing it." (UNE\_STU\_024)*

*I have done it on my own, I did do it on my own for a couple of years and I did manage but that was only with... pure willpower to be honest. (USQ\_STU\_133)*

## **Section Summary**

A key factor in the success of students from low SES backgrounds at regional universities is their own attributes. Specifically, the present study found that students’ own attitude, motivation, determination and resilience helped them succeed at university despite the challenges and obstacles they faced.

## **FACTOR 2: Family Support**

Support from their family was the second factor found to contribute to the success of students from low SES backgrounds studying at regional universities.

Research suggests that students from low SES backgrounds, particularly those who are the first in their family to attend university, often do not have significant levels of support from either family or friends (Brooks, 2004; Devlin & McKay, 2011; Hahs-Vaughn, 2004; Morrison, 2016; Murphy, 2009; Stone, O'Shea, Delahunty & Partington, 2016). This lack of support has also been documented in studies relating to regional students (Brett *et al.*, 2015).

Echoing the findings of previous studies, the present study identified family support as a pivotal factor in student success. Thirty-five percent of stakeholders (9 out of 26) and thirty-one percent of students (21 out of 69) pointed to family support as a major factor influencing student progression and success.

For students, this support included being encouraged by family members, being reminded of the end goal and their overall investment, the provision of financial support from family members, help with managing stress, help with housework and the provision of childcare:

*My parents have been a massive motivation for me. They've always pushed us kids towards bettering ourselves and wanting us to be able to provide for ourselves financially in life, so I'd say that they have been a main contributor. (CQU\_STU\_082)*

*Mainly my parents kept motivating me, you're paying to be there, you need to keep going, why waste all this money to do half a course and that's it. (FED\_STU\_003)*

*...they told me that they don't want me having to pay for anything, they just want to see me finish my degree. So it's pretty amazing of them. (USQ\_STU\_148)*

*I can talk to my dad about my assignments and whatever. Like, not in super detail, but I can just sort of talk to him about things being stressful. (FED\_STU\_001)*

*My mum reads my assignments when I've finished them and fixes the spelling and the grammar. (USC\_STU\_047)*

*My parents both dropped out of school so I guess they're really supporting me knowing that it's been something that I really wanted to do. And I guess they have always wanted a better chance for myself as well in the outside world rather than coming just straight out of school. A lot of my family actually have never finished VCE. I'm the only one that has. So they've been really supportive in me actually wanting to further myself and complete something. (FED\_STU\_006)*

*I work a lot of nights at the moment, so I've been eating a lot at work, but when I wasn't, you know, just coming home to a cooked meal and knowing that you've got food, and then you can study afterwards without having to worry about going to the supermarket and doing all of that. That is a help. (USQ\_STU\_141)*

*I would say a big part of that would be having a supportive family; I don't think I would've been able to manage either with other commitments or financially without a supportive family. (CQU\_STU\_083)*

*I've got children, so should I need the kids babysat or something to do a massive study session or something on a weekend or something like that, they'll have the kids for me. (USQ\_STU\_135)*

For stakeholders, family support was seen as a major, high level factor affecting the success of students. They saw a family support system as essential:

*And students that come in and have all sorts of issues that might have family backup or there's some other backup, then it's much, much easier.*  
(SCU\_STK\_033)

*I would consider for low SES students, the influence of their ... parents are a key factor for their completion and success.* (USC\_STK\_021)

*I think having a support system outside. I think people who don't have one might find it more challenging, unless they're particularly strong, resilient individuals.*  
(USC\_STK\_024)

*...many of those students that I come into contact with are the first members of their families ever to go to university. So primarily, it's the support networks that they have at their disposal; either a partner, or family...* (CQU\_STK\_043)

One anecdote from a staff member gave an indication of the sorts of challenges facing a student when their family were not supportive of their education:

*...we were talking in the classroom generally about the ability to access education now and ... one student was saying, "My family was so poor that they put all their money into education for my older sister", because the older sister in the family was the one who was going to succeed and she was the child that wasn't meant for education and was meant for labouring work or whatever it was... She was a mature age student and she said, "...it's just years and years, all these years I've believed that I couldn't learn".* (USC\_STK\_025)

Families were perceived as a critical source of financial support and specifically, the financial support offered by parents and/or partners was noted as a factor that contributed to students' success:

*But my parents always ensured that if I was feeling stressed and needed to take time off, that I was able and that they would support me. So they haven't continually provided financial support...* (CQU\_STU\_082)

*Just being a fall or a backup, like a financial safety net kind of thing. I've paid my way for uni by myself, they haven't helped me. But they're always there if I need it.* (FED\_STU\_002)

*If my husband wasn't making the good money that he is - it's already - it's a lot of pressure for him but, if we were trying to survive on hospitality incomes, which we were on before, I think I would have had to have cut my load down to part-time by now. We couldn't have survived.* (SCU\_STU\_065)

The importance of family support has been highlighted in previous studies. In their interviews with 89 students from low SES backgrounds, Devlin *et al.* (2012) found that all 89 students identified familial support as a key factor in their success. In the present study, a powerful sense of isolation emerged in interviews with students who had moved from their homes and families to study. As well as the geographic distance, they often felt isolated and emotionally distanced from family and friends. This was seen to have an enormous psychosocial impact on many students.

The implications of regionality and distance are touched on by one student who changed universities to be closer to the actual campus. “Yes, I did live about an hour away from the first university. I live about 20ks, so 15 minutes driving, from this one.” This student made the choice to move to alleviate stress and make life “easier” (USC\_STU\_058). This student added:

*Yeah, it's not so much of a stressful all day thing where you have to commit to planning your day in advance ... as opposed to having it 15 minutes away means if I need to go in for the afternoon I can...*

Many of the students interviewed for this study either lived local to the university campus and far from their families – or close to their families but far from the campus. For regional students, the choices are often significant. Regionality encompasses more than just geographic distance from a campus. It can also mean social and psychological distance from the family and/or university.

The provision of information for students’ partners and families to familiarise them with university expectations and knowledge and to promote their role in assisting students to succeed is a widely- used strategy in regional universities. Consideration might be given to increasing such efforts and to additional strategies such as designing first year curriculum so that students are required to reflect on and develop their own support networks.

### **Section Summary**

The absence of family support creates a significant challenge for some students from low SES backgrounds at regional universities. Where such support is available, whether through psychological or emotional support and encouragement, financial support or ‘in-kind’ assistance, this contributed to student success at university.

### **FACTOR 3: Financial Security and Sustainability**

The third factor that the present study found contributed to the success of students from low SES backgrounds studying at regional universities was financial stability.

Previous research also shows that students from low SES backgrounds are often challenged by financial issues that can impact on their higher education choices, success and overall experience (Simister, 2011; David *et al.*, 2010; Hayden & Long, 2006; Perna, 2000). The ability to manage significant financial challenges was evident for successful students interviewed in the present study. Typical comments included:

*I don't get enough quite to cover rent and food... (FED\_STU\_008)*

*There's some days - sometimes I can't even get to uni because I have no money on my myki card. (FED\_STU\_013)*

*Towards the end of the year I was like oh my god I can't pay my rent, what am I going to do. So I sold every piece of clothing that I had and didn't wear, scraped a few funds together. (FED\_STU\_002)*

A wide range of financial issues were touched on in both staff and student interviews. Twenty-three percent of staff interviewed referred to the financial hardship of students and

their complex financial situations which can prove a hindrance to success. Comments included:

*...they're living in poverty, poverty is another word that's splashed around, they're having housing difficulties and the university experience can be make or break for them in many ways and so their needs are often very different to those kids who are just starting out. (FED\_STK\_004)*

*...they are so stressed and they put themselves under so much pressure to succeed. In particular, for science students, because they have to come to intensives, and they can spend you know \$1500 per intensive school on top of their HECS and that's a big investment for them. They never really complain about having to spend the money, because they're committed to their education, but it is a financial burden. (UNE\_STK\_012)*

*...just a couple of weeks ago just before the break a student apologised for not being in a lecture because they couldn't afford the bus fare to get to university. Every semester I have students who talk to me about the fact that accommodation is very difficult for them, either finding accommodation, affording accommodation, and invariably there's students living in their cars and those stories often come out because they're explaining their difficulties of getting to university and being able to stay here. (USC\_STK\_025)*

### **Costs of Study / Living**

Cost has been identified as a key barrier to participation in higher education (Brett, Sheridan, Harvey & Cardek, 2015; DEEWR, 2010; Godden, 2007; James et. al., 1999). For regional students, cost is often correlated with the need to relocate to move closer to a university, adding to their overall costs. In relation to costs of study, Brett *et al.* (2015) claim, "Even when a campus is nearby, many students will need to relocate, commute long distances, or undertake distance education to access their course of choice". The need to relocate or commute lengthy distances was a frequent theme in the interviews in the present study. One student reported:

*And in my case I was travelling quite a distance to do prac so I wasn't getting home until 7:30 most nights and that in itself then leaves me evenings to plan for prac and then you're coming home on the weekend and having to overload with assignments. (USQ\_STU\_121)*

And from a stakeholder:

*...we certainly don't want to disengage students from their home communities. We also need to think about how we enable similar experiences, or at least the ability to access those experiences without the students having to drive these vast distances and put themselves at risk, and essentially reduce their opportunity for study time, if you like, by being behind the wheel. (FED\_STK\_004)*

Another issue related to finances was the cost of fuel involved in travel for regional students. On-campus students discussed having to miss classes as they could not afford the fuel to drive to university, while distance education students pointed to the expense of

having to travel from their remote, rural area to participate in a practicum at the campus or elsewhere. One student referred to the impact of the cost of fuel:

*...it's a shame when you go, "I just can't do the drive in today". (CQU\_STU\_083)*

In exploring the financial barriers to higher education for regional students, ten years ago Godden (2007) found that the annual cost for regional students to study away from home was estimated to be \$15,000 - 20,000 per year. This is likely to be significantly higher in 2017. At that time, Godden (2007) also claimed that many regional students could not access government assistance (for example, Youth Allowance) due to tight eligibility criteria. Even among those able to access Youth Allowance and other government support, the amount provided was generally considered inadequate to cover the living, study and travel costs of regional students (Godden, 2007) (see also James *et al.*, 1999). A study by Alloway *et al.* (2004) concluded that regional students recognised that university study would necessitate substantial financial resources which often translated to students being reliant on parents if they wished to pursue university study. Alloway *et al.* (2004) identified a notable reluctance from students to being over-dependent on their parents and, therefore, cost considerations impacted their overall decision to participate in higher education. DEEWR (2010, p. 6) comment that, "...cost considerations are also highly related to the socioeconomic background of potential students."

In their interviews, most students and stakeholders highlighted the need for understanding from academic and other university staff about the financial issues they might be experiencing. One stakeholder shared a telling anecdote:

*I'll give you another example of an implicit barrier to participation. We became aware of an incident at one of our campuses where tutorial times were regularly changed, with a day or two's notice by the lecturer. In one of those instances ... and we had a single mother of three children from Warracknabeal who arranged occasional care for that day at a cost of several hundred dollars, drove X hundred kilometres from Warracknabeal to the campus, to arrive on campus and to find that the tutorial had in fact been cancelled. (FED\_STK\_004)*

### **Balancing Paid Work and Study**

The issue of modern students balancing paid work and study has been the subject of much investigation, including a number of national investigations undertaken for Universities Australia and predecessor bodies (see for example James *et al.*, 2008). Previous research shows that undertaking paid work is a critical factor that can affect student wellbeing, progress and success (Hart, 2012; Holmes, 2002; James *et al.*, 2008; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006). In the present study, the most frequently cited issue/factor affecting student success, and identified by 65% of student interviewed, was the need for them to balance work and study, whether a young school leaver, or a mature age student with family responsibilities. Students reported:

*I do need to work so much in order to pay rent, to be able to pay for my books, to go to uni. It can impact the amount of classes. I do, for example, I couldn't go on Wednesday because I had to take a shift which would pay for things that I otherwise wouldn't be able to like petrol. It's a bit ironic to get petrol to get there. I have to go to work. (FED\_STU\_009)*

*I actually currently work two jobs now and study. (FED\_STU\_006)*

*There were times when I was working 40 hours a week and still doing full time uni. And I was just constantly either working or at uni or trying to fit in studying and writing assignments. And I was still able to manage some distinctions, but if I wasn't working I probably could have got some HDs, and that's one thing I do regret. But there's nothing I can do about it, because you need money to live, and that's all it is. (USC\_STU\_046)*

Greenbank (2006) and Devlin *et al.* (2012) found that students from low SES backgrounds often find themselves under economic pressure to prioritise work over their education. The present study similarly found that working was not a choice for many of these students – it was essential in order to afford the necessities of life, as well as to create the appropriate intellectual, psychological and social conditions for undertaking high quality study:

*You just have to... - there's no option. There's no other option, I think. I've had a lot of people over the [years say] - "Just don't work as much." It's like, it's all right for the outside people to say that, but you don't have to pay my bills ... - I've got to keep a roof over my head and be able to feed myself, so money is important, just as important as getting uni done. (USC\_STU\_055)*

*...for me working is important to be financially stable while I'm studying... Because I get stressed if... I can't pay the rent and things. I think it's difficult to focus on study and things if you have a lot of ... financial stress. (SCU\_STU\_067)*

*An extra \$200 would make a difference, so that's \$50 for the next four weeks, that I know I can get food from. If I take a shift off work, I'm not going to be disadvantaged. (FED\_STU\_002)*

*I'm in the position where I've got no money, if anything happens to me I'm stuffed, I've got nobody. (SCU\_STU\_062)*

One student astutely explained the sacrifice required when balancing work and study and dealing with financial distress:

*Some people can juggle it very, very well and I don't know how they do it, but I can definitely see that it jeopardises a lot of people's grades. Even just their - the level of seriousness ... for their education and their studies. Because if you start having to focus more so on financial side of things and working, then you're obviously not going to be able to focus on having your head in - focusing on university. Because it's not just about assignments and classes; it's about networking and being in the community. (USC\_STU\_050)*

### **The Impact of Poverty on Education Choices**

One of the impacts of poverty touched on by students was the choices they were forced to make in relation to higher education:

*I think you have to make that choice, you have to definitely make a very distinct choice. I know of one of the ladies whom I speak to who's also a regional student she doesn't buy textbooks she relies on the fact that she'll be able to get through each subject without them and so far, she has, I don't know how but so far she*

*has. But it's definitely a choice people make. We choose not to go away or drive far so that I can save money on fuel so that I can afford my textbooks because that was the decision we made and I was pretty determined to do well, not just do uni but to do well at uni. And in order to do that I felt like I needed all the materials that I could possibly get. So I think it's a personal decision and I think that comes down to your organisation, your priorities I guess. (USQ\_STU\_121)*

*I was going to enrol in a unit in the next term, and I looked it up and found out that you've got to buy five textbooks and there's no way in the world I can buy five textbooks, so I didn't do it. (UNE\_STU\_029)*

### **Education as a Financial Investment in the Future**

Some students viewed their education as an investment in the future and a way to get themselves out of poverty, and reported that they drew on this goal to persist with their study:

*...the fact that I've given up a full-time job to go to university is also a really good driving force, the fact that I've gone from basically heaps of money to almost no money. So if I quit now it'd defeat the purpose of the last three years. (FED\_STU\_007)*

*But I want to get to the point where I can pay for things. I want to get to where I can take mum out for dinner and pay for her instead of her paying for me. She's getting close to retirement and she still pays for my dinner, like it's - yeah, and so I just want a better life. (FED\_STU\_013)*

*You know obviously, the prospects of having a well-paid job at the end of it is a good incentive substantially... (UNE\_STU\_027)*

*I think that wanting to actually have a career and not have to struggle too much in life financially has been a big factor. (FED\_STU\_004)*

However, to meet this goal, students needed financial stability while they were studying.

### **Financial Assistance/Support**

A total of 38% of stakeholders interviewed for the present study saw financial assistance and support as critical to student success. Typical comments from stakeholders included:

*Then there are other people for whom their life circumstances are just so controlled by perverse poverty that however well-prepared they are just doesn't make any difference because their needs are just not being met in terms of housing, secure income, support, that sort of thing. (FED\_STK\_002)*

*...the financial support of students is just so fundamentally important. (UNE\_STK\_014)*

*...giving out free food to students and you definitely see some very regular students that are hungry, that's no exaggeration. (UNE\_STK\_014)*

*I'm going to say financial hardship and having some sort of equity bursary available for students at the start is definitely - probably the most important factor for them. (USC\_STK\_021)*

*Many universities have their hands tied when it comes to money especially the regional universities, so I think that's always going to be a barrier for some, but I do think that if there's always that thought process of 'how can we keep building on our equity bursaries? How can we keep supporting our students with some things?' (USC\_STK\_023)*

*...finance is a big issue for low SES students. I think if we can be offering more scholarships .... (UNE\_STK\_013)*

Some staff were keen to emphasise that while money helps, it may not resolve all of the challenges facing these students:

*I also think - and it's not a panacea on its own, but as part of that, is lots of opportunities for scholarships and financial assistance... (SCU\_STK\_031)*

*And sometimes financial help. Sometimes accommodation. We've been involved with emergency accommodation for people. People living in their cars. Helping them out. (SCU\_STK\_033)*

Students made numerous suggestions about how they could be supported financially including through the provision of scholarships and free or affordable food and costly textbooks being put online, book bursaries, fuel bursaries, as well as other suggestions:

*I definitely think that education could do with some more scholarships. (UNE\_STU\_028)*

*My course weren't doing books anymore, like they were just doing online books, no physical books, and my books were costing up to \$200, so that was huge savings, like that was nearly \$1000 a year that I had to spend just on books, so between that six months it had totally changed so that had benefited me in a good way. (FED\_STU\_012)*

*But the problem is students can't go to the shops anyway because they can't afford it. So it would be nice to have some sort of canteen with ... affordable food. (SCU\_STU\_062)*

*...a couple of other unis don't charge the students online the students' amenity fees. Because we don't get to use any of the amenities, really ... Why increase people's financial burdens? (USQ\_STU\_139)*

Students noted their appreciation of 'freebies' offered by their institutions including free breakfast, coffee, barbecues, photocopying and parking, textbooks available for loan, wifi access, and computer loan programmes.

### **The Importance of Financial Assistance and Stability**

The importance of financial scholarships, ad hoc financial assistance when needed and government funding is highlighted in previous research, which attributes the persistence of some students to such assistance (Nora, Barlow & Crisp, 2006; Paulsen & St John, 2002).

When asked about financial factors affecting their success, students interviewed in the present study indicated that government support (e.g. Centrelink, Austudy) and institutional scholarships directly impacted on their ability to succeed:

*So once I did get Centrelink it definitely took a lot of pressure off trying to work and study at the same time. I definitely don't think I would have got as far if I'd kept working. Yeah, it has helped me a lot to take that pressure off.*  
(FED\_STU\_003)

*I've been relying on my Centrelink payments. So that's really good that, that option is there it really supports you when you're studying because otherwise I would probably of had to sort of defer university.* (USC\_STU\_044)

*The equity scholarship is for students of low income to help cover the costs of enrolment, so things like books and travel costs and accommodation costs associated with study in general. As I don't have a job and I'm in a regional area, I've been able to apply for that. So it was very helpful. It's about \$500 a semester.* (CQU\_STU\_083)

One student put a common theme very succinctly:

*...if I didn't have the Centrelink so I wouldn't have probably finished I would say.*  
(UNE\_STU\_023)

## **Section Summary**

In line with the findings of numerous previous studies, students interviewed for the present study were doing it tough financially, and this was confirmed by staff who worked with them. The costs of study materials while on low incomes and of fuel for traveling long distances to campus, on top of the usual living costs of accommodation, food and other necessities for themselves, and sometimes others, are significant. Not only do these costs put pressure on students to undertake paid work, there is often accompanying psychological and emotional pressure as they worry about having enough money to survive and meet their study costs. The findings show the critical importance of financial assistance, support and stability to students' retention and success.

## **FACTOR 4: Reliable Technology**

The fourth factor that the present study found contributed to the success of students from low SES backgrounds studying at regional universities was reliable technology. As universities move more and more of their offerings into blended and wholly online modes, the availability of reliable technology becomes an increasingly important factor in student success.

### **The Value of Online Learning and Teaching**

Research suggests that online education is critical for higher education in the twenty-first century – particularly for regional universities with diverse student populations (Taylor & Newton, 2013). Ellis and Goodyear (2013) report that students now have increasingly diversified needs, expectations and demands and online learning is an effective way to address this.

According to Wood and Willems (2012, p. 460), the ubiquity and pervasiveness of digital technologies has “opened up new possibilities for engaging students from diverse backgrounds.” As Elliott (2010) suggests, in devising strategies to accommodate a diverse student population, there is a need to overcome a range of barriers to regular on-campus study, such as geographic isolation for students living in remote regions, high mobility of students, economic barriers, family issues, and disability-related factors. Flexible learning methods using digital technologies play a key role in expanding the options available for such students, and hold “the potential to include and engage students with multiple and complex needs that typically prevent access to traditional university programs” (Elliott, 2010, ‘Concluding comments’, para. 4).

### **Technology Enabling Opportunity and Choice**

Technology was seen as valuable for many students from low SES backgrounds at regional universities interviewed for the present study because of the opportunities and choices it granted them. Without online learning options, many of them would have been excluded from higher education. The perceived high value of online learning to regional students at geographical distance from a campus and/or with family responsibilities was clear. Typical comments included:

*...years ago I wanted to university study but I didn't live close enough to a university to be able to do it, and I had kids and family and - you know, you just couldn't pack and leave. Whereas this way, even if I had been further north or out west or whatever, I could have still done this study.” (USQ\_STU\_122)*

*“Well studying externally has been the only way I'd be able to make university work for me. I tried two different degrees on purpose with two universities before this and I couldn't make it. And I had to just go like I need to do this externally.” (SCU\_STU\_068)*

*I wouldn't have been able to study on campus at this stage in my life, so it would've been a near impossibility for me to get a law degree had I not had the option of studying externally and having, I guess, access to the online services and delivery methods that UNE does offer. (UNE\_STU\_021)*

*With an external offering you can work around work, family, that sort of thing. So it's the flexibility that it gives you. So I think that would be the number one thing. (USQ\_STU\_133)*

Students often referred to the significance of their degrees being offered online. It was a “game changer” (USQ\_STU\_141) for many of them living in very remote, rural areas. Students stated that it meant they would not have to settle for the limited options available in their area – they could aspire to do and be more.

Stakeholders concurred, including by lauding their institutional leaders for efforts to transform the way teaching is undertaken in the age of diversity and increasing numbers of non-traditional students:

*...leading the organisation in moving our academic programme away from a traditional, ‘You must come to university at this time. You must sit in a lecture theatre. You must do this prescribed set of things’ to ‘You're now able to access*

*your educational programme at a time and place of your choosing and, in some instances, a pace of your choosing. And as you move through that, you're aware, then, of this support network that is around you that you're able to rely upon to assist you when required, and effectively then enable your ability to continue to participate'. (FED\_STK\_004)*

One stakeholder commented that she instructs her staff to 'think non-traditional first' (that is, think about the experience of online and low SES students first) and then to think about traditional students in designing learning and teaching approaches.

One stakeholder referred to the need to use technology effectively and appropriately:

*I think we've got a long way to grow as universities, where if we're talking about information communication technology, this computer, this laptop in front of me which is connected to the ... world. It's 'not a book but better', it's a completely different thing. The concept of information communication technology, as a tool for delivering education, educational philosophy, structures, processes and procedures. If we're just thinking it's like a book but better, just available on the internet, well it's like taking a Boeing 747, ripping its wings off and calling it a bus. There's so much more that can be done with it. A good use of a chat room, like a discussion board, a good use of a discussion board, good use of Collaborate or Media Site, everything can be used well or badly. To be responsive to the needs of the students. (SCU\_STK\_032)*

### **Technology Allowing Flexibility and Life Management**

Fifty-nine percent of students interviewed for the study identified access to education online as pivotal in their success. The value of online options was particularly high for those with disabilities or health issues which limited their ability to travel to and attend on-campus classes.

One aspect that students identified as particularly helpful was having materials uploaded and accessible to them anytime/anywhere. This enabled the flexibility they needed to manage their multiple responsibilities, balance work and study, and not necessarily have to travel great distances:

*I've been lucky, every single class that I've done has lectures online, so if I ever miss a lecture, which has happened due to work reasons, or health reasons, they've been online, so I've definitely used those online resources constantly. (USC\_STU\_046)*

*...we'd have a tutorial about the assessment and then they'd post an online video along with the rubric and general instructions. I found the online videos very helpful to go over multiple times for each assessment. (USC\_STU\_042)*

*And even if I wasn't ... well ... during exam periods it's just invaluable having it online because you get to go over and play it back slowly and rewind and all those things, which is great. (USC\_STU\_053)*

*...because I'm not able to get Centrelink, I've had to work a lot, and sometimes I just need an extra shift and it will fall on a lecture so I'm able to use the online tools to not have any disadvantage going forward (USC\_STU\_046)*

*I do find that having your own entire course available online, I can take it anywhere with me, so I can listen to and watch a lecture while I'm at a child's swimming lessons, it's just convenience in that respect. (USQ\_STU\_153)*

Another important aspect of online learning identified by both staff and students was the timeliness and relevance of online resources and responses:

*...having those support staff, you know, on the phone, by email, but I think face-to-face is crucially important. I think our university could offer that more. I think there's a huge emphasis on, "Oh, send your question to us online." We've seen so many of those questions go unanswered, just get sort of lost, in that they get directed one way and then perhaps directed another way. So I'm not meaning to criticise any individuals, but that as a system sometimes falls down. So, same with when they are on the phone, sometimes they get transferred half a dozen times, and then give up. And, it's like, straightforward question's fine, there're usually answered straight away, but anything a bit more complex - so certainly from campus students to have face-to-face support often get much better outcomes quicker. (UNE\_STK\_014)*

*I'd say definitely the online format and the release of all information for the semester at the beginning of each term has been really helpful for me in planning my life around what we're going to do, when we're going to do it and scheduling. So it's less disruptive, especially when they have clinical placements on top of the theoretical side of things. I have done courses where it's been a week to week, so the material's not released until the week of the particular week that we're studying, and I that's just lot more difficult to manage as an online distance student who's trying to get casual work and work things around and have other commitments and things. (CQU\_STU\_083)*

Forty-one of the 69 students interviewed identified online teaching and learning as central to their success in university.

### **Challenges Related to Technology**

However, alongside all of the benefits of technology, there are also some challenges, particularly for students who are studying wholly online and who are, therefore, at higher risk of isolation than those physically on campus. One student in the present study proposed the university 'bring the campus' to students:

*I know face-to-face is invaluable, and the number of times I've heard it on the lectures, 'If you're on campus you probably get a grade higher than if you're doing it externally'. Well, that's not very helpful. It's not helpful if you're not on campus, perhaps you should be looking at ways that you can bring the campus to us. (USQ\_STU\_122)*

### **Limited Access to the Internet**

More and more universities are offering online learning, which has increased access and flexibility for students from regional areas and those unable to attend a campus for classes (see Bryant, Kahle & Schafer, 2005; Evans *et al.*, 2008; James *et al.*, 2010; Norton, Sonneman

& McGannon, 2013; Perreault, Waldman, Alexander & Zhao, 2008; Millson & Wilemon, 2008). According to Martin (2016, n.p.):

*For many of us, access to the Internet through a variety of means is a given. I can access the Internet through two laptops, a tablet, a smartphone and even both of my game systems, from the comfort of my living room. However, this access is unequally distributed. Although nine out of 10 low-income families have Internet access at home, most are underconnected: that is, they have “mobile-only” access – they are able to connect to the Internet only through a smart device, such as a tablet or a smartphone. A recent report, Opportunity for all? Technology and learning in low income families, shows that one-quarter of those earning below the median income and one-third of those living below poverty level accessed the Internet only through their mobile devices.*

This access to the internet ‘given’ is often not so for regional students. Having access to technology, the internet, wifi and/or computers was identified by 96% of stakeholders as a critical factor in the success of low SES, regional students.

Eighty-one percent of students stressed the importance of access, with many comments such as: “Internet is absolutely crucial to study” (FED\_STU\_010). However, financial issues often played a significant role in determining whether or not students could afford to have the internet:

*But, then it is quite costly having to have really good internet at home, when you’re in a position, like me, that can’t work as much because of having kids. (SCU\_STU\_066)*

*Because of my financial circumstances, I suppose if I had more resources in that regards, I probably could have watched more online, definitely. (USC\_STU\_057)*

*Like I said, I didn’t have a computer or internet at home, so that negatively – well, it kind of worked both ways. Like, in some ways it negatively impacted on it because if I wanted to study late at night or something, the only option I had was to drive to the university and use the computers available there. (USQ\_STU\_156)*

The impact of not having access to the internet at home was an experience for many students who often had to attend their local libraries (20%), shopping centres or McDonalds to source free wifi and download their learning materials and participate in online discussion forums or assessments. The importance of university provided free internet (13%) as well as computer labs (12%) was also raised by students.

In their research in the US, Selwyn, Gorard and Williams (2001) identified a polarised scenario related to those who have access to technology and those who do not. They claim this situation is “confirmed and reinforced by a host of other research into technological wealth-poverty, with socioeconomic status, income, level of education, race and ethnicity, gender, age, and geography” (p. 261). They conclude:

*... broadly, the same social groups are facing exclusion from both educational opportunities and overall access to technology. For example, income is a highly significant factor in whether or not individuals have access to IT, with high-income households (i.e., \$75,000 or higher) being 9 times more likely to have*

*access to a computer and 20 times more likely to have access to the Internet than those at lowest income levels. Similar disparities exist in terms of levels of education, urban as opposed to rural areas (Selwyn, Gorard & Williams, 2001, p. 261).*

While this research relates specifically to the US, the present study's findings confirm the importance of access to technology for students from low SES backgrounds at regional Australian universities. Stakeholders in the present study referred to the efforts their institutions were going to in order to ensure access for disadvantaged students:

*We have a system at the university where we focus particularly around for those students who don't have not only access to the internet, but also don't have computers. Where we have a specific scheme for students to be able to be given computers and in some cases these are computers that we're just turning over and where in terms of the university that's a matter of making them available free of charge to students so they can take them home and use them.*  
(FED\_STK\_001)

Stakeholders highlighted the need for teaching staff and support staff to be aware of issues of access to technology:

*I do think there are things that the university could assist to overcome some of those barriers. In these days when we're so dependent upon online delivery of programmes universities need to be a bit more responsive to the needs of students who might not have good internet access or good digital literacy skills. So I think there could be more done in that space.* (USQ\_STK\_121)

### **The Enduring Value of Face to Face Learning**

All of the above said, previous research identifies face-to-face learning as important to learning and the overall student experience (Fink, 2013; Ginns & Ellis, 2007; Jaggars, 2014) and this was reinforced by participants in the present study. Thirty-nine percent of students and nineteen percent of stakeholders in the present study stressed the importance of the face to face experience, sometimes pointing to the intersection of face-to-face and digital experiences. Even those students studying wholly online stated that they appreciated staff who attempted to create 'face-to-face' experiences, whether through practicums where students had opportunity to meet staff and students in person, using technology. Academic staff were lauded for their efforts to foster better face-to-face connections using various technological forms.

These included one on one Skype sessions / discussions with students (instead of impersonal emails), videos created by staff introducing themselves to students and discussing the unit, recorded lectures that were not just audio recordings – where students could “see” the lecturer and feel part of the class.

### **Section Summary**

Reliable technology was seen as being an effective way to support students and facilitate their success whether it be through: granting access to university study through online courses; allowing flexibility in learning and study; enabling timely responses from staff; or as discussed later in the report under section 4, fostering connections between staff and

students. However, financial issues often played a significant role in determining whether or not students could afford to be connected to the internet.

## **FACTOR 5: Understanding and Responding to Students' Particular Circumstances and Needs**

The fifth factor that the present study found contributed to the success of students from low SES backgrounds studying in regional settings was the university and staff of the university really understanding and responding to the particular circumstances and needs of these students.

The particular circumstances include:

- being time poor (Devlin *et al.*, 2012)
- balancing competing priorities
- the interplay of sociocultural and geographical factors on students' lives and
- regional communities' views on the value of higher education.

Responses that the present study found helped with these contextual influences include:

- promoting existing support services within universities
- empathic support
- respect for students and
- flexibility, including through the use of technology.

Each aspect of student's particular circumstances and preferred responses to them are explored in this section.

### **Balancing Competing Priorities**

In previous research on the success of students from low SES backgrounds in higher education, Devlin *et al.* (2012) found that university staff understanding the circumstances of, and respecting, low SES students was key to the students' success. In particular, staff understanding of how 'time poor' students were compared to traditional students due to "balancing financial pressures, family responsibilities and/or significant hours of employment with study" (Devlin *et al.*, 2012, p. 4) was found to be important. Staff being flexible in their approaches to teaching and assessment, while maintaining high academic standards, was also found to facilitate low SES student success by Devlin *et al.* (2012).

In the present study, it was clear that staff understanding the impacts on low SES students of competing priorities was key to student success. Students gave numerous examples of how their life circumstances affected their ability to engage with university study. One typical comment:

*I'm limited on how much time I can actually spend at the university too, with being a carer, I'm only allowed to be at university for a certain amount of hours a week while I'm caring for the others. So I structure my degree around how many hours I can actually spend on campus. That really is eaten up with tutorials and lectures. I'd like to go to the library a lot more and spend a lot more time there, but I just really can't. (USC\_STU\_053)*

Thirty-five percent of stakeholders (9 of 26) stressed the importance of understanding on the part of staff, and the accommodation of students' life circumstances. Typical comments included:

*... you get students who, for all sorts of reasons, start off with good intentions and then life gets in the way, life pressures, time pressure, money pressure, family pressure, work pressure. (SCU\_STK\_032)*

*I also have a little understanding with my students that particularly on school holidays, if you've got a problem with the kids and it means I either miss out on one of [X's] tutes or I bring my kids along, bring them. It's normal. Stick them on their iPads or whatever at the back of the room, or let me know and I'll get some Lego, technical Lego out of the maths storeroom, or we'll set them up on a computer. I'd much rather you were here with the kids than not here at all. (CQU\_STK\_043)*

*...you expect these quite simple things, it can be like, why are these things not done? You know, why is this assignment two weeks late? Or whatever. Why are they asking for an extension again on the day the assignment's due or whatever it is, but to have an understanding that for a lot of these people, they're struggling and a lot of the time they're not telling the full story about their circumstances, which are really hard. So, look it's hard because it's a balancing act between I guess being kind and compassionate. (UNE\_STK\_014)*

Stakeholders urged fellow staff to be sympathetic to the interplay of socioeconomic and geographic factors affecting these students:

*But for the single mum who's got three kids who has a – children down consecutively with chicken pox or measles or whatever, they might miss two assessment tasks and then they're gone. And, again, some of that speaks to the compressed term that we have, trimester that we have. So they're the realities that these people are facing ... and again those realities don't sit comfortably with the expectations of academic life. We often talk about... [the fact that] our students don't see themselves first and foremost as students, ... and we want them to but, in fact, you know, a lot of them aren't. (UNE\_STK\_015)*

*I remember one particular student who was academically, we'd say between colleagues, very sound, she was a very sound academic student, but was a carer for her mother dealing with mental health issues, and those sorts of barriers kept drawing her out and kept making it difficult to complete assignments, even to get to class. (USC\_STK\_025)*

*Well, something we see with our resident population is that many of them return to their home communities on weekends, and that could be up to 50 per cent of our population of around about 600 in Ballarat. And that often means those students would be driving 300-400 kilometres each way each weekend. Why do they go home? Some of them go home because Mum does the washing for them, or provides them with some frozen meals to bring back later in the week. Some of them go home because they are still connected with their local sporting team and they want to maintain that connectivity. Some of them go home because*

*they don't want to give up the part-time or casual employment they have in their home communities. (FED\_STK\_004)*

*I think they're probably the main ways that the university can help by being much more responsive to the needs of the students and recognising that they have unique needs when they come from low SES backgrounds particularly from regional areas where they might feel fairly isolated. (USQ\_STK\_121)*

### **Regional Community Views on Higher Education**

Previous research has highlighted the role that individuals' aspirations play in influencing participation rates in higher education. These studies suggest that students in rural and isolated areas are less likely to aspire to university education than their metropolitan counterparts (Alloway, Dalley, Patterson, Walker & Lenoy, 2004; James, 2000; James *et al.*, 1999; Khoo & Ainley, 2005; Kilpatrick & Abbott-Chapman, 2002), and these lower aspirations result in lower participation in regional areas (Marks *et al.*, 2000). The debate as to the factors that most influence aspirations continues. To date, these include familial and wider attitudes towards further study for those from regional and rural areas (James, 2002; Kilpatrick & Abbott-Chapman, 2002).

The present study found some evidence of an absence of support for university study in regional communities. As well as alluding to some negative prior educational experiences, some interviewees touched on a negative attitude towards tertiary education in regional communities. One student commented that regional communities are generally not supportive of education (USQ\_STU\_159).

Another said:

*Very, very few people know I'm doing this because they generally think I'm pretty weird. 'What on earth do you want to do that for?' And so I actually don't tell people. I found it a lot easier. (UNE\_STU\_029)*

Commenting on this matter, one stakeholder said:

*If you went to a school and you were a girl and you were told, "Well why do you want to go to uni? Aren't you just going to get married and be on the farm anyway." (UNE\_STK\_012)*

Another suggested:

*I think we could maybe sell the idea of higher education better in our community. (USC\_STK\_026)*

### **Promoting Existing Support Services to Students**

Devlin *et al.* (2012), among others (Dumbridge, Moxley & Najor-Durack, 2013; Gale & Parker, 2014; Thomas, 2012) highlight the need for existing support services within universities to be made explicit to students. When asked about how the success of students from low SES backgrounds could be improved by regional institutions, 26% of students interviewed in the present study referred to promoting available support services students and the value of doing so:

*Probably just more educated on where the places are to go, who to see. Because I know the uni has them, but if I was to say to you know I need to go get this support, I wouldn't have a clue where to go. (FED\_STU\_003)*

*I really struggled for a while because I just wasn't aware of the support that was available. (SCU\_STU\_064)*

*...knowing who to talk to or who to ask for help is the biggest thing... (FED\_STU\_011)*

*The only thing I can really suggest is making the facilities, I want to say, a little more 'in your face' but just more open to students. Like there are things I've - this is my third year, there are still things about the uni and facilities I'm only just learning about like I didn't know some of the computer labs were open 24/7. (UNE\_STU\_022)*

*I'm in my last year, as you said, and I'm still only finding out about some things. I didn't know maybe until last year that there was counselling services. (USQ\_STU\_133)*

Stakeholders were also asked about improvements institutions could implement to better facilitate the success of low SES students at regional universities. The most frequently suggested improvement from staff (42%) related to support services being made explicit and publicised to students:

*...we have to be very aware, very agile, and very active in raising student awareness of what's available, rather than being passive and assuming the students will discover these things. (FED\_STK\_004)*

*I think students having clear and accessible information about what they're signing up for and what sort of support is offered and not offered. It's also important as part of their decision making in terms of coming to university in the first place. (UNE\_STK\_013)*

*...support should extend beyond academic support to let students know out there in regional settings that the university does have services to support them through counselling and the sorts of student services and medical and all those types of things that student services departments provide. (USQ\_STK\_121)*

## **Empathic Support**

Many stakeholders highlighted the necessity of what the authors of this report have termed 'empathic support', that is, support that takes into consideration the unique circumstances and needs of students from low SES backgrounds located in regional areas. Empathic support, as described by stakeholders interviewed in the present study:

- *takes into consideration the distinct needs of low SES regional students for flexibility;*
- *is support that empowers students to be enabled and self-supportive;*
- *stems from an inclusive approach that helps students feel they are part of an institutional / tertiary "family" (USC\_STK\_023);*
- *entails personal welfare checks where students know someone "cares" (CQU\_STK\_043); and*

- *as far as possible is personalised and ongoing throughout a student's academic journey.*

These characteristics are touched on in the following illustrative quotes from stakeholders when asked what they thought helped these students to succeed:

*I think again it comes down to that empathetic support. It's a fine balance because you need to support people without doing everything for them. So supporting people to enable them to become independent and effective and confident, that's really a hard thing to do, but I think our support needs to be in, you know, we have academic support in, you know, how do you write an essay, get your maths skills up, dah dah dah, but without the other side, which is just that empathetic, building people's confidence in themselves and the sense of belonging, helps that, because they feel like they're part of something.*  
(UNE\_STK\_012)

*...just developing a really collegial facilitative rapport with every student. And he monitors how they're going, and it's not a bossy approach at all or even an approach that is one that's where your assignment or why haven't you submitted this or anything like that at all. In fact quite the opposite, it's really supportive from beginning to end and understanding, listening and a kind of listening role and a responsive understanding role and a searching for solutions role and making suggestions along that way. He's done some fabulous work in that area. And a lot of the work he's done we've taken on board in other programmes here because it's been so successful.* (USQ\_STK\_121)

*In terms of supporting them, I think a lot of it comes down to empathy and encouragement and willing to support them on that journey.* (USC\_STK\_024)

One student outlined the impact of an empathic response by a staff member to a change made by the university:

*The mid-semester break was two weeks, and then they changed it to be in line with other universities, and we have one week; it was 'argh'. And that meant that my kids were then on holidays when I was at uni, and so I brought [my daughter] along to a lot of lectures and tutes, and the tutors, I would always approach them first and 'mind if I bring my daughter?' 'No, no, that's fine, how old is she?' That was fine, yeah. And they were great, really...accommodating...*  
(USC\_STU\_045)

## **Respect for Students**

For 42% of stakeholders, respecting students was viewed as critical to enabling their success:

*Respecting them. Definitely, respecting them. I think a lot of them are conscious of their backgrounds, and if you ignore that and still chat to them, still talk to them, still have a laugh with them, and walk with them. As I'm walking to class I say, "Come on, walk with me." And things like that. They feel, 'Gee, I actually fit in here,' because they are very self-conscious of their low socio-economic backgrounds.* (CQU\_STK\_041)

*I think it's about understanding the students on a holistic level, treating them in a respectful manner as engaged human beings who want to be part of a university environment, and looking for ways to do that... (FED\_STK\_004)*

*I'm not an academic, but it's actually just about respect, diversity, again, not 'these people are disadvantaged, they're from a low SES background.'*

(SCU\_STK\_031)

## **Flexibility**

Flexibility has previously been identified as a positively influencing factor in the academic experiences of non-traditional students (Bamber & Tett, 2001; Devlin *et al.*, 2012; Kehoe, Tennent & Becker, 2004; Roberts, 2011). The research points to the importance of open and flexible access (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002), flexibility in relation to the curriculum (Miller & Lu, 2003), adaptability / flexibility on behalf of teachers themselves (Devlin *et al.*, 2012) and flexibility relating to timeframes, timetables and deadlines (Devlin *et al.*, 2012; El Mansour & Mupinga, 2007; Thomas, 2002).

The issue of flexibility was a prominent theme in both staff and student interviews. A total of 38 percent of students (26 out of 69) and 46% of stakeholders (12 out of 26) stressed the importance of flexibility as a critical factor in the success of students. This flexibility related to:

- assessment dates, deadlines;
- study load (part-time/full-time);
- access to teaching staff;
- ability to defer;
- online learning allowing students to access materials in their own time, ability to study at one's own pace, the option to study from home and save on travel costs;
- generous open times for the campus and computer labs;
- special consideration, extensions.

Flexibility was viewed as critical for those balancing work and study (65% of students), or dealing with study and having children and/or other family responsibilities (72.5% of students). Comments included:

*And they're more than happy to work to my schedule as well. I've had a very busy schedule and I had lecturers emailing me very late at night. So that has been a great help, not just only for learning but for just motivation of knowing there was someone there to help. (FED\_STU\_010)*

*I had some special consideration for a couple of subjects due to issues with the family and just stress and everything kind of got on top of me and I just needed a bit of breathing room which was really good that the university allowed me that flexibility. (FED\_STU\_011)*

Staff valued institutional efforts being made to ensure greater flexibility for non-traditional students. They urged fellow academic staff to be sensitive to the complex issues experienced by these students and understand that flexibility can be the difference for many of them continuing with their studies and ultimately succeeding:

*We probably need to be more flexible in the way that we deal with these students. I think we're notoriously bad for being inflexible as institutions. A lot of it has got to do with the scale of student numbers, enrolments. It tends to make us think that we can't bend the rules or we can't be very flexible without completely letting the whole place down. But I do think we need to be more responsive to individual needs and circumstances in a whole range of different ways. (USQ\_STK\_121)*

*...one of the common things is they haven't been able to have money for petrol to get to a library, or something like that. So I'll give them extensions or whatever it is, and in extreme cases, I've deferred their assessment till the following semester. To give them a break in a sense. Because some of them are going through traumatic events. The SES status is only one part of the whole picture. They're going through a lot in their lives. (USQ\_STK\_122)*

### **Technology Offering Flexibility**

Students and stakeholders commented on the flexibility that technology offered students in terms of anywhere, anytime access. Students variously referred to flexibility facilitating them: being able to undertake their studies while being in hospital; getting an essay done on a 4 hour car trip; and undertaking assessment tasks while waiting for appointments. This flexibility was particularly critical for students balancing work, family responsibilities, and/or disabilities:

*Online is very flexible. I can't commit to going to a class. I mean, even trying to get a time to do an interview with you today was really interesting. But yeah, that's probably the critical factor, is it's portable, I can do it on my iPad, I can access it wherever I go. I've sat in doctors' waiting rooms when I was unwell with the Moodle on - the app on my phone, and done readings on my phone. That's the critical thing, definitely. (UNE\_STU\_024)*

*Online format and that sort of thing for me has been good because it works flexible with your lifestyle and you're not spending hours driving to and from lectures and things like that, so that to me was a bonus. (USQ\_STU\_130)*

*I wouldn't be able to do it if it was on campus ... I get up at 4:30 and go and do some work, come home, do a couple of hours' study, get the kids to school, go to work, come back, study, pick the kids up, do all the afternoon stuff, and then go back and study again. So it's quite - if you're on campus, I don't think you can do that sort of thing. (USQ\_STU\_139)*

One stakeholder that illustrated the impact of the flexibility offered through the use of technology and online learning:

*I can use an example of a student whom I know at the moment, who is a female, late twenties, a single mother of two, engaged in a nursing programme. She is only able to participate in that programme because of the availability of fast Internet at home, where that student can exercise their carer responsibilities for young children more or less at the same time while engaging with the academic material, and across a range of times during the day, not at a fixed tutorial time or a fixed lecture time. (FED\_STK\_004)*

Efforts to demonstrate understanding and respect for students' unique circumstances and needs were appreciated by successful students, who reported that this respect had helped them succeed:

*Yeah, and it's just, they're good people, they're people you look up to. There's nothing that I've ever done or said that they've gone, 'ewwww'. They're just nice.*

(USC\_STU\_043)

*I just think a major motivator is just encouragement and really having positive educators I think is one of the most important things. That's really, really what has helped me through the last couple of years, is just knowing that there is support there. And yeah, everything is kind of seen in a positive light, like no one's there to I guess fail you or make you feel like you can't do something and I think that's probably the biggest factor in my study, yeah.*

(FED\_STU\_006)

*I've got a tutor this semester, that I'm really happy with, and she's really understanding that we have life outside of uni. Even though we've agreed to study fulltime, she understands that people like me can have four jobs...*

(FED\_STU\_002)

### **Staff Professional Development**

The present study found evidence that regional universities have further work to do in terms of educating their staff about the circumstances and needs of students from low SES backgrounds. Twenty-three percent (6 out of 26) of stakeholders pointed to the need for great training for staff in relation to the issues and factors affecting students from low SES backgrounds.

*And, I think over the years, from time to time, universities jump up and down about trying to help students, but many of the people behind the desk or behind the phone, they actually don't care. They get cranky very quickly, or they don't care if they give bum advice or academic advice or whatever, or there's they don't put themselves in a low socioeconomic student's shoes. They can't relate or connect.*

(CQU\_STK\_042)

*...that's really what it comes down to, is that the staff need significant professional development, and a performance review against the sorts of really delivering the role, but really delivering the role with the right template of inherent requirements and capacities that actually is going to connect, and actually do their job. Because, there's too many people in the universities, particularly in an alleged support role, who in my opinion are just going through the motions of doing their job, and they do a shit of a job.*

(CQU\_STK\_042)

*I think academic staff actually need better training around what it means, this term low SES. I know a lot of my colleagues honestly have got no idea and they have fixed ideas about what successful experiences of university are; they're fixated on things like literacy and numeracy as kind of you fix that problem and everything else is fixed whereas for low SES students that problem could actually be what I've talked about earlier, first and foremost housing, secure housing and safe housing, other issues that are around poverty, poverty is poorly understood and regional poverty is highly problematic. There's plenty of studies out there*

*about this, but I'm just going to go on and say the same thing. Poverty is not well understood by most academic staff but I think the support systems need to be able to address that and I don't know how well resourced they are in order to do that but again it comes back to the good teaching. (FED\_STK\_002)*

*I think educating staff about the complexity of the lives that students have and bring with them to ... universities is important. (UNE\_STK\_013)*

*I think educate the educators, that's a big one for me. That really came out strong, and this comes from a number of areas. (USC\_STK\_025)*

*Yeah, we could probably provide more professional development to some staff who perhaps haven't recognised the importance of the value of supporting students on an individual basis. (USQ\_STK\_121)*

## **Section Summary**

The importance of understanding and responding to the particular circumstances and needs of students from low SES backgrounds at regional universities was highlighted in the present study. Staff, programmes, initiatives, approaches and accommodations that took into account the realities of students' complex lives and competing priorities were highly valued by students and contributed to their success. While more could be done and there was a need for ongoing professional development for staff, existing practice in promoting the existing support services to encourage students to use them, engaging in empathic support, respecting students and exercising flexibility, including through using technology, were all found to have a positive influence on student success.

## **FACTOR 6: Facilitating Students Being and Feeling Connected to University**

The sixth factor that the present study found contributed to the success of students from low SES backgrounds at regional universities was facilitating them being, and really feeling, connected to the university in some way.

In 2012, Devlin *et al.* undertook a national study of the factors that helped students from low SES backgrounds to succeed with the objective of determining practical advice for institutional leaders. One of their key findings was that institutions should promote engagement with and support from others. Specifically, Devlin *et al.* (2012) advised that institutions should "Create a sense of belonging for LSES students...and provide opportunities for families and communities to engage with the institution" (p. 46).

Similarly, this study found that having a sense of connectedness to their university study experience assisted many students to succeed. Given the prevalence of distance/online learning offered by regional universities and undertaken by students studying at these universities, a significant issue was the lack of perceived connectedness experienced by students who were undertaking study in these modes in particular. Students referred to feeling "fairly disconnected" (CQU\_STU\_082) and one explained, "Being a distance student you don't get that camaraderie that comes with being on campus" (CQU\_STU\_083). Feeling connected to the university, peers and community, whatever the mode of study, was recognised by both students and stakeholders as essential in the success of students from low SES backgrounds at regional universities. In total, 53 students (77%) and 16 stakeholders (61.5%) identified it as major, high level factor in facilitating success.

Prior research indicates that a range of powerful social and emotional factors that are said to affect student learning (Becker & Luthar, 2002; Osher, Sprague, Weissburg, Axelord, Keenan, 2008; Stuart, 2006). One of these factors is termed 'connectedness'. According to Osher, Kendziera, Spier and Garibaldi (2014, p. 1), this includes "... how the student experiences his or her relationships with the teachers and other students as well as how students experience the care and support provided to teachers and other staff." They add that 'connectedness' refers to the experiences of a student and their perceptions and feelings about their university. Adapting their explanation of connectedness to the university environment, this would include students feeling that:

- they are a part of the university;
- people at the university care about them personally;
- their learning matters;
- they are close to people at university and have supportive relationships with them; and that
- teachers and staff consistently treat them with respect. (Osher *et al.*, 2014, p. 1-2)

### **Factors Affecting Connectedness**

Factors affecting the sense of connectedness identified by both students and stakeholders in interviews in the present study include:

- easily accessible information;
- teaching staff availability;
- the quality of students' relationships with teaching staff;
- contact time / face-to-face opportunities (for example, Skyping with lecturers for distance education students);
- social events such as orientation; and
- the timeliness of responses to student queries.

### **The Importance of Feeling Connected**

Students from low SES backgrounds studying at regional universities reported that connectedness was critical in relation to helping them feel encouraged to continue with their studies. In reference to not being connected, one student explained: "I think it's a big factor that can make you feel...a bit isolated and alone, and if I was beginning I probably would have given up" (SCU\_STU\_062). Stakeholders similarly highlighted the criticality of connectedness:

*You've got to get that connection because my experience is, is that if there's no connection with the institution, people will just leave. You just don't hear from them. They just don't have the confidence or whatever to contact someone and say, "This is how I'm feeling," because they don't have any connection. (SCU\_STK\_031)*

*I'd say connectivity; if they can develop a sense of connection, with both the university and the university community and their student community and their academic community. If they can connect somehow what they are learning, that it is valuable in their lives. If those two are well met, I think they have a much greater chance of surviving. (SCU\_STK\_032)*

## Fostering Connectedness

Students appreciated timely responses to their queries, including in interactive online forums, which helped foster a sense of connection. As one student stated, "...just having that forum, the more informal forum, to talk to your peers. I guess it's made me feel less disconnected and less isolated as an external student" (UNE\_STU\_021).

As was the case in the findings of the recent study of the experiences of regional students by Nelson, Readman and Stoodley (2016), students also valued early contact from the university when they first commenced their studies. The receipt of welcome packs and emails were found to have a strong positive impact on students' feelings of connection and belonging:

*I think it was from the initial emails that I had from Student Central. So, I was really impressed by the timing. I didn't feel like [the university] was this big, unfamiliar entity that I was coming into. (USC\_STU\_048)*

*...[receiving] my welcome pack. I felt so part of something exciting when I got my little pencil case and my notebook and my little [university] badge. That was a really nice gesture too. That made me feel part of the Uni, even though I was online. (UNE\_STU\_024)*

Stakeholders similarly recognised the benefits of these early efforts to foster connection: "It's that connection with people really early, as soon as they've made a decision, accepted an offer, and then taking that through to orientation and to what's offered to students" (SCU\_STK\_031).

Continued support and interest from staff, which extended beyond the first year was also seen as critical: "I feel like I have a greater connection with them and they in a way have been a really positive guiding influence because they're always checking in, how's my study going, this and that" (USC\_STU\_048).

Stakeholders viewed connectedness as ultimately helping "students feel at home" (CQU\_STK\_042), and to feel valued and welcome (SCU\_STK\_031). One staff member explained:

*...the connection that students really need to have and must have essentially is academics and professional staff who they can connect with ... That's the key to it in my opinion. So, the connection has got to be around a person, it's a face, it's a voice, it's a phone number, it might be Skype interaction. It doesn't matter what the interaction is, but at the end of the day, that person, the student can connect with the key people that they need to connect to ... Whether that's student support services, other professional staff or services, there's got to be a small team of key people that those students can really connect with, who have got fantastic communication and interpersonal skills, they're not judgmental and they've got this wonderful set of just people skills and values and empathy, and the students simply connect with them. And, when they do that, that is to me in my experience, is the significant factor with success around connection, because sadly far too many academics and people who work in universities have got their head shoved in a research space or a publication space or some other space, but their rapport with students is zero. (CQU\_STK\_042)*

Another pointed out that for students to feel connected, they need to be able to feel convinced that “This university is for me. This university is for people like me. I can see myself reflected in this university. So, I can see myself in the materials that the university publish, in what’s on the website, and in the campus.’ So, people feel comfortable and connected with that” (SCU\_STK\_031).

Stakeholders saw the value in having a dedicated team of staff or staff member that was a continuing point of contact for a student throughout their academic journey. Thirty-five percent of stakeholders did, however, recognise resourcing (both funding and time) as a key challenge.

Stakeholders also stressed the importance of understanding and awareness around the factors impacting on these students’ overall connection to the university. They underscore the difficulty in “providing opportunities for students, who are time-poor, to get involved, but to get involved in a meaningful way” (SCU\_STK\_031). The fact that these students have competing multiple priorities in the form of family and both paid and unpaid work means that their sense of connection to the university can be affected. One stakeholder pondered, “I realised that at this uni a lot people just come on, go to their lecture, and go. They’ve either got a job, or they’ve got a family commitment. How do you build a sense of feeling connected, on campus?” (SCU\_STK\_031).

### **Technology Fostering Connection**

Technology was seen by the majority of respondents as having the capability to foster the connections for students with others students and with staff. The importance of facilitating these connections for remote and online students was a recurring and prominent theme throughout the interviews. Typical comments included:

*I’ve made use of Facebook as far as connecting with other students goes. Being able to just connect with them sometimes and say oh my goodness that was an incredibly challenging unit, did anyone else have trouble with this particular thing just because we don’t have that face-to-face connection that on-campus students have. It is good sometimes to be able to say to someone did you get that, what, did I miss something, can you find this. So I’ve made use of that and that’s made a difference to my ability to push forward sometimes.*  
(USQ\_STU\_121)

*Unfortunately not all subjects have the option but the ones that are offered online at night-time allow me to actually go to them for starters which means I get to talk with people as opposed to just being completely on my own.*  
(USQ\_STU\_121)

Stakeholders appreciated how technology enabled relationship building: “...making sure that there is a relationship built which is decidedly much much harder if it’s a distance education student you’ve never seen. Technology can help with that, really it can” (SCU\_STK\_032).

Others similarly stated:

*I think that in this world of technology that we now live in, it’s much easier to be able to personalise your connection with students. It used to be a lot harder when, you know, you couldn’t have an online group... (USQ\_STK\_120)*

One stakeholder referred to the benefits of social media to foster that connection: “I use Facebook, because they’re all on Facebook and they all know how to use Facebook and I’m responsive. So they’ve got my instant messenger” (SCU\_STK\_032). Social media, including Facebook, was seen as having an important role to play in the connectedness students felt to their peers and the university:

*Within my cohort from my degree, we still stay connected via social media which is really good because you can debrief if you had a bad day or whatever or bounce ideas off each other, talk about assessments, understanding content and all that sort of stuff. (UNE\_STU\_023)*

*I’ve had a few subjects where people have taken it upon themselves to create sort of Facebook groups ... [which] I guess allows sharing of information and that’s always good, and it allows you to sort of ... not feel quite so alone while studying as an external student. (UNE\_STU\_027)*

*...there’s Facebook pages. And so I was able to then find them. And it made a difference just to be able to connect because up until then you do feel very, very isolated. (USQ\_STU\_121)*

Stakeholders noted that fostering connection through social media and Web 2.0 technologies actually relies on students engaging with the opportunities made available to them: “You really have the opportunities, and some people don’t avail themselves of this, to communicate through the collaborate sessions, through the forums on Moodle, and just generally through social media, to build up those relationships” (CQU\_STK\_043). Others reported that having staff who were engaged was also a key factor in fostering connection:

*I think the off campus and online students they definitely value the connection that they have with other students via Moodle and often that’s demonstrated by very timely posts and feedback from their unit coordinator. Sometimes it’s seeing the post from other students. But if the unit coordinator doesn’t have a presence in there as well many of them start to feel a bit resentful and think, ‘Hang on a minute...I actually want to hear from the expert’. So they do value hearing back from the coordinator. (UNE\_STK\_013)*

One staff member shared a view that distance education students should be encouraged to have face-to-face opportunities with staff at least once in order to enable connectedness: “I think for external students those intensive schools or other opportunities to actually come here, I think feeling like they’re part of, a lot of them feel, regardless of how sophisticated the online environment becomes, that they’re sort of on outer, they’re remote and that the main game and the main community is on campus” (UNE\_STK\_014).

One staff member said the current trend around fostering connection is to ask: ‘How do we do that with distance students, and how do we get that connection so a student does feel a sense of belonging, and a sense of being valued and a sense of being connected to the institution?’ (SCU\_STK\_031).

Of course, a significant aspect of the successful use of technology is that students actually have access to the internet and that technology. As outlined in section 2, this access was seen by 96% of stakeholders as a major factor in the success of these students, with

suggestions that access to reliable technology can determine their overall connection to and experience of studying at university.

### **Early Engagement with Students**

Again in line with the findings of Nelson *et al.* (2016) on early intervention for regional students, students in the present study pointed to communication and engagement from the moment they are first accepted into university. Welcome phone calls, contact before the start of the semester, and early efforts to connect with fellow students made them feel welcome, comfortable and connected:

*I think maybe some phone contact with the first year, just to make sure they can get on to Moodle, they're okay. If they - I don't know whether your Moodle you can pull reports to see if the students access their course or anything like that, but sometimes it just takes a little bit of contact. Someone who might have issues but is too scared to raise them, if they get a check-in phone call, might say, "Actually, yeah, I can't get onto Moodle. I don't know what I'm doing," or something like that. (UNE\_STU\_024)*

*The email the Student Support Services send out just to see how your studies are going, remind you about some important dates, phone numbers to call if you have any questions or need any help. All those sort of things, yeah, I think it just made me feel like people cared. That probably helps - well, helps in reassuring, just knowing that I wasn't completely alone. (UNE\_STU\_021)*

### **Approachable Staff**

Previous research documents a raft of factors affecting general student health and wellbeing. These include staff-student relationships, especially staff receptiveness and approachability (Levett-Jones, Lathlean, Higgings & McMillan, 2009). Devlin *et al.* (2012) found the perceived approachability of staff a key factor in the success of students from low SES backgrounds. In the present study, students having access to staff who were perceived as approachable was a consistent theme in stakeholder interviews. Nine of 26 stakeholders interviewed for the present study (35%) thought the approachability of staff was essential to facilitating student success.

Typical comments included:

*I think a third key factor is that they have to engage with academic and professional staff who really do care. And, the student need to know that they can approach a variety of people with a variety of questions, issues and problems, and know that that person really is trying to connect with them, to understand them, and to as simply and as positively as possible provide them with the information or the skills to what they're looking for. (CQU\_STK\_042)*

*...people will come and knock on my door and say to me 'I need a food voucher'; 'I need this, I need that' or 'I don't like that lecturer, I don't like this course, can you help me, I've got this essay to do, I don't know what I'm doing'. Someone they can go to who they can trust, again it doesn't need to be an academic staff member but I think it's better if it is. (FED\_STK\_002)*

*I think students having supportive and approachable academics, actual academic staff, I mean support staff like myself are crucial, but I think perhaps most crucial, even more crucial, is academic staff who they feel they can talk to and they can actually get to know, not necessarily personally, but have a relationship, a respectful relationship. (UNE\_STK\_014)*

*That rapport, the connection, the human aspect of the learning experience, that we weren't these people that stood at the front with our black gowns on talking about hypothesizing things. Actually, we seemed like we were really approachable and I think that broke down all those barriers. (USC\_STK\_026)*

Teaching staff being accessible and approachable played a large part in students studying online feeling as though they were not disconnected from the university experience:

*I have been able to get in contact with the teaching staff in order to just do a quick ten minute Skype, just to put things in perspective and have that one on one chat as opposed to doing it via email. But I've also found the emails are really good. I've never waited any more than a two-day turnaround for a response to an email about questions, so that's really helped as well, instead of kind of hanging out. (UNE\_STU\_026)*

*The way they always have the lectures up and the way the lecturers are always so acceptable like, not even just on forums and things like that but really through email and just being really, yeah like, really easy to reach even though I'm not on campus. That's been one of the biggest things. (UNE\_STU\_030)*

## **Section Summary**

Facilitating students feeling connected to university impacted positively on their experience and persistence. Technology was an important tool for facilitating connectedness including by enabling interaction through social media. Early engagement was perceived as valuable in connecting students to the university and others, as were staff who were approachable.

## **FACTOR 7: Student Preparedness for the Realities of University Study**

The seventh factor that contributes to the success of the students of interest in the present study is their preparedness for the realities of university study.

### **Sociocultural Considerations**

There was evidence of 'sociocultural incongruity' between students from low SES backgrounds and the higher SES of the institutions at which they were studying (Devlin, 2013) in both student and staff interviews. Stakeholders raised the matters of students' cultural capital, feelings of belonging and academic know-how in their interviews. Typical stakeholder comments included:

*It crosses onto the first gen family, as well, that students don't come with that backpack of 'already understanding' to the uni. I think that for students, particularly where a regional uni from low SES backgrounds and regional and rural areas, they mightn't have had the same opportunities and experiences that someone in a metro or in a really high, wealthy school. (SCU\_STK\_031)*

*...a lot of the regional students come from small towns - tiny, tiny towns - they come from farms...They need to see that we city people are not scary, and that we can still embrace what they do and feel. So I feel that that's where things lack a little bit. We often find students are out on a limb. (CQU\_STK\_041)*

*If they're like, "Oh, I'm just some person who doesn't go to uni because I grew up in this small town in this crappy school, and my parents didn't go to uni or didn't even finish school," then it needs to be that whole package, financial, empathetic support, getting them to believe in themselves. (UNE\_STK\_012)*

## **Student Expectations**

Stakeholders were asked whether they thought students from low SES backgrounds at regional universities had realistic expectations of university study. Seventy-three percent of stakeholders saw expectations as critical to student success and many suggested that these students sometimes enter higher education with unrealistic expectations. A number explained why their expectations were sometimes unrealistic:

*... you'll have the students who are absolutely stunned that there isn't a teacher standing there every day, saying, "Have you done your homework? Do you need help with this, and what's going on with that?" (FED\_STK\_004)*

*It's hard to have an expectation when you're unfamiliar. It's hard to have an expectation when you have no role model. It's hard to have an expectation when we don't clearly articulate what that expectation is or we articulate in such a way that it's not meaningful to these students who don't have the cultural capital. (UNE\_STK\_015)*

*... if they are first in family, then they're probably less likely to have a realistic expectation of what university's all about... (USC\_STK\_021)*

Kalsbeek (2013) points out that dissonance can be due to a mismatch between what universities promise and what students experience. Thirty-five percent of stakeholders interviewed were vocal in stressing the need for institutions to make expectations clear to students from the outset:

*...if they'd understood at the very beginning what the heck they were getting themselves in for, maybe they would've chosen a more realistic...path. (CQU\_STK\_043)*

*I think what's crucial is that universities have very good early, really early, information about expectations, what expectations around study and what study looks like, but also they need to be framed in a really encouraging way, rather than just scare the poops out of students. (SCU\_STK\_031)*

Successful students interviewed reported having appreciated expectations of them being made explicit from the outset, and also reported appreciating staff who had high expectations of them. These findings reiterate those of Devlin *et al.* (2012) who found that academic staff need to ensure students understand the expectations of them in higher education and ultimately what is required to be a successful student.

## Student Preparedness

Being prepared for the realities and challenges of university study is widely understood to be a factor in student persistence and success. As well as asking general and open questions about their views on what helps low SES students studying at regional universities to succeed, the present study specifically asked stakeholders the following questions about preparedness for university:

- How well prepared do you think the successful low SES students are for their university studies initially?
- Are students who are successful better prepared for their studies?

Eighty-one percent of stakeholders viewed being prepared for university studies as a key factor in student success. Many viewed students from low SES backgrounds as more prepared than their middle-class peers:

*I would say that they do come well prepared. We often find they arrive here with a backpack that's brand new - not that we want them to do that - but, they have gone and spent a bit of extra money on themselves, and got a new backpack, they've got a pen and pencil, and the moment they sit down at the desk, and open their new pencil box, or whatever they've got there, ready to roll. Bring it on. Whereas, those who aren't [prepared] will be rocking on the chair and not looking at you, and turning to their phone and trying to send SMSs while you're speaking and such. They're not focussed. They don't focus. Then, when we dig deeper we find out they're here because mummy and daddy...said so.*

(CQU\_STK\_041)

*I don't know that they're better prepared in terms of content, but they're probably better mentally prepared in terms of their expectations. How much work they're going to have to do, and that's what I've noticed with all students, low SES or not, it's that appropriate expectation of what they're going to have to do, what they're going to have to sacrifice, how hard they're going to have to work, is I think one of the key factors for success and with low SES...*

(UNE\_STK\_012)

However, other staff members viewed students from low SES backgrounds as less prepared than some higher SES peers because of their prior educational experiences, background and/ or first in family status:

*...the further distance you are from, in my experience, from being at high school, the less likely you are probably aware of just what's this behind those doors that we call the university. (FED\_STK\_001)*

*I think some students from low SES backgrounds come to the university without possibly the backpack of competencies or experiences that other students may have - they may be the first in their family to come to university - so they don't always have that whole toolkit and understanding about university: who does what, who to talk to, what it looks like, what the hierarchy's like. (SCU\_STK\_031)*

*...on the low socioeconomic and first in family. I do think they've got further to go. Certainly in terms of - I think in some cases in terms of literacy, information*

*literacy. Being comfortable with critical thinking and learning, which if you're a kid who's grown up in a family and every body's going to university, they're kind of okay with that. But I think to a certain extent, if you're a young person, who's first in family to go to university, you don't have that cushiony background to fall back on. (SCU\_STK\_032)*

Echoing the findings of Pitman *et al.* (2016), thirty-five percent of stakeholders saw enabling programmes and preparatory courses as critical in adequately preparing students from low SES backgrounds for university study. One stakeholder said:

*I think the 'Connect and Prepare' programme that's being developed is actually going to be quite good for supporting that preparation. There are some good things in there about are you psychologically ready, have you got family supports in place or how's your living situation? Have you got a desk or whatever? How many hours a week you're expected to - but they're just some - it's about getting that mindset happening really early with students. (SCU\_STK\_033)*

### **Building Capacity to Succeed**

Students from low SES backgrounds entering higher education are often required to shift from being unfamiliar to being familiar with university-specific culture and practices. Much research in this area touches on the need for students to become more competent and confident in the specific knowledge and skills necessary for university and to have the requisite self-efficacy and 'grit' necessary to succeed (see Chemers, Lu & Garcia, 2001; Sandler, 2000; Zayacova, Lynch & Espenshade, 2005). Several stakeholders interviewed for the present study framed these shifts as 'adaptation':

*I think it's the ability to adapt quickly, that's the single most important factor, because the environment that they're coming into is so different to what they would have come from. So, adaptability and coping strategies would be important, most important. (USQ\_STK\_120)*

Other stakeholders saw a key component of successful adaptation as helping students work through their identity issues and becoming 'learners':

*...it's very difficult for these students to think of themselves first and foremost as students. (UNE\_STK\_015)*

*Well I think what we're doing in the programme is that to deal with kind of identity issues and identify them as a learner and what kind of barriers have you had in the past and how you can maybe rewrite those stories of your own identity. So I think a lot of it has to do with that kind of sense of self, of what you bring to the learning environment. (USC\_STK\_026)*

A significant aspect of student adaptation – particularly in relation to students from low SES backgrounds at regional universities – are socio-psychological factors like fear of failure (Archer & Hutchings, 2000; Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003) and 'imposter syndrome' or 'imposter phenomenon' (Gardner & Holley, 2011; Gravois, 2007; Sonnak & Towell, 2001). Stakeholders discussed the implications of these factors:

*...they're just afraid of failing, afraid of looking bad. We notice it especially with the younger students, they're afraid to put anything down, they won't even*

*submit drafts, they won't come for help. Instead of writing the 200-word paragraph that they have to submit as a draft, they'll think of everything they can to get around that or they keep asking to clarify "What do I need to do?", "How do I do it?", "What exactly?" and that sort of thing, rather than actually just writing something and getting feedback, because they might get negative feedback. Now we're certainly not in the process of giving negative feedback, we're very encouraging, but it seems to be something that they don't want to put it out there. (CQU\_STK\_044)*

*I think there needs to be acknowledgement of how difficult it is if you're a first in family or coming from a background where you didn't necessarily expect to be at uni but here you are and that that's normal. I think that needs to be consciously and clearly articulated and normalised. Not just, "Oh hello. All the students here today, welcome to the university," like not really engaging with the fact that they're sitting there in that head space. That could be engaged really. You can do a three-minute presentation on imposter syndrome and just make fun of it and you can kind of crack that a little bit. Just, "If you experience this, don't back out. This is normal. You'll grow through it. You can adapt." And they go, "Oh." ... All of it needs to be said. (SCU\_STU\_133)*

*I've noticed just in my unit, particularly in my first-year unit, which is the big tough one, often just saying, "It's okay you can do it, if you fail it's alright." It just helps to remove that pressure they put on themselves. (UNE\_STK\_012)*

*Also the better student will try to learn from, if they failed something, they'll try to learn from it and go on from there. Rather than be completely devastated, turn it all on to themselves and say basically I'm worthless. (USQ\_STK\_122)*

### **Building Student Confidence**

Thirty-five percent of stakeholders spoke about the need to build student confidence. Typical comments included:

*You have to remember that a lot of these students have never had any kind of previous experience with a tertiary environment, they might initially be pretty tense and nervous about being enrolled in a university programme, they probably feel under-confident. And so that sense of belonging or connection is I think very important to building their confidence and reassuring them that they can succeed in this if they persist and get engaged (USQ\_STK\_121)*

*The only problem is a lot of students who come from low socio-economic backgrounds actually may be the first in the family, or they may not have that confidence to come and approach course examiners. So what's really important is to make that emphasis in the learning environment, saying "Look, if you need some help, then please ask" (USQ\_STK\_123)*

*...if we can't teach them to rise up, or raise up their self-confidence and their belief in themselves, then we will lose out on keeping that student at the university. (CQU\_STK\_041)*

*So then it's just that building their confidence, building their confidence in themselves and their abilities and that they can do it. (UNE\_STK\_012)*

*...it's the confidence that they build in their own abilities. I think a lot of students tend to come into this programme with low expectations of their own learning abilities and low expectations from previous experiences of learning. I think it's mainly, it's not necessarily the skills, but the confidence that they have to go on to develop their learning. (USC\_STK\_026)*

### **Digital Literacy**

Thirty-one percent of stakeholders were vocal about the need to build students' digital literacy and the importance of not making assumptions about the digital literacy and digital competence of students. Comments included:

*Digital literacy is very important to teach students I think. We assume that staff are somehow a bit more distant, older and more distant, than the digital natives. The kids coming up know everything about it. That's not borne out by experience, you know, they still need to know what makes a good source, what makes a bad source. So digital literacy is an important thing to still get through to our students. (UNE\_STK\_001)*

*And just being able to use the technology as well and know where to get help. That's a really big one. Never, never assume. (USC\_STK\_024)*

Certainly, one of the key challenges identified by mature aged students was technology and not being au fait with computers:

*Being a more mature student, the internet and computers aren't the easiest things to deal with. (USQ\_STU\_122)*

However, millennials also experienced difficulties associated with technology:

*And also you'd think for my age that I'd be really good with technology, but I'm really not very good ... So things like the Blackboard thing ... I tried to do that once and I couldn't figure it out... (USQ\_STU\_126)*

### **Making Expectations Explicit**

The importance of making explicit the implicit was clear in student interviews. Students spoke of coming in 'blind' and having to 'read between the lines' to determine what was required. Reiterating the key finding from the Devlin *et al.* (2012) research on student success, student comments included:

*After the first few semesters, it got quite easy to read between the lines when it came to assignments and figuring out what you actually did need to know and what you didn't ... So I came in blind essentially to uni. (USC\_STU\_056)*

*...sometimes I look at an assessment question that just doesn't make sense and it seems really poorly thought out and I can't feel the relation between the assessment and the material that has been given. So I think, you know, just having a lot of clarity and making sure that students understand what it is expected of them. (SCU\_STU\_068)*

*Maybe if they just put up a bit of a thing to say this is available, the tutorial on how to use the library. If you're not particularly ICT competent even something like the study desk can be a big deal. I know when I first started I was very computer illiterate, very, and navigating it was such a big deal for me to just learning how to figure out where this was and where that was. And that may be why I missed some of those orientation things because frankly I was pretty overwhelmed. (USQ\_STU\_121)*

Students made specific reference to making key academic skills and amenities such as library services explicit, along with university-specific information such as course structure when asked about specific improvements universities could make. Thirteen percent of students in the present study proposed this as a way for institutions to better help students. Common areas included referencing, course structure, orientation, library services, postgraduate opportunities and career services.

*I just think maybe like, the first week of uni, I know they have the orientation day but I think they need to do a full week of going through everything. Like what is referencing, why we're doing it... You're just bombarded with assignments in two or three weeks and you sort of have no idea what you're doing. (FED\_STU\_003)*

*I didn't know that you had, until last year, that you would have a student account, like you get a little fee put on your print accounts where you could get I think up to \$50 worth of printing a semester that rolled over at the print shop. I had no idea about that til last year. So I was doing all that myself when it would have been cheaper to send it to them, I mean obviously because they give you a \$50 credit, but still better than putting it through my little printer here at home. (USQ\_STU\_133)*

And for those approaching graduation:

*...maybe a little bit more information for students who want to go further with their studies. If you want to go on to honours, masters, PhD, something like that, just a little bit more general information about what it is, how it works, and what it involves. (USQ\_STU\_122)*

*I've had no-one approach me going, "You're about to graduate. Here's some internship opportunities." It's okay to have that career hub but I didn't even know that career hub existed until I did some researching one day... (USQ\_STU\_158)*

Thirty-five percent of stakeholders stressed the need for expectations of students by the university to be clarified and made explicit to students. A typical comment:

*I think clear information at the outset about what study at university involves because again I think we're seeing students who enrol and haven't got a clue what they've signed up for. Informative open days, informative web pages for perspective students, information that's realistic and honest and isn't sugar coated and isn't underplaying what tertiary study involves. I think there's actually something to be said for being upfront about the commitment and I think they value it more. (UNE\_STK\_013)*

One staff member commented:

*I think that universities can do a lot more to shape the expectations of students...*  
(USQ\_STK\_120)

Staff were keen to emphasise the role of students in their own success and to point out their own role as staff as facilitators of student agency:

*With all students we deal with but especially low SES have got to become agents themselves of their own transformation.* (FED\_STK\_001)

*This is very much about building the whole student just as well as building the academic side of the student.* (FED\_STK\_004)

One staff member cautioned about assuming that student preparation for success could all be done 'up front' and to the importance of understanding their education as a process:

*I'm struggling a little bit with the kind of inclusive cause or relation between success and preparation. Probably there is a direct relationship there. But equally if you go back to that conflict I've talked about before and that is if you're low SES the acquisition of social and cultural capital that you need to gain success in our definition through first, second and third and sometimes fourth year is it is not so much a pattern of preparation for studies. But it's about a whole set of other social processes that contribute to the success issue, if I can put it that way.*  
(FED\_STK\_001)

## Section Summary

Students being adequately prepared for the realities of university study was a key factor in their success. While some students were prepared in some ways for study and university life, many had gaps in their knowledge of what was expected of them as a university student. Building students' capacity for success and their confidence, including through making the expectations of them explicit were identified as practices that would assist students to be prepared to succeed.

## **FACTOR 8: An Exclusive, Engaged Approach to Learning and Searching**

The eighth and final factor that the present study found contributed to the success of students from low SES backgrounds at regional universities was an inclusive, engaged approach to learning, teaching and assessment that took account of the realities of the lives and preparedness for study of these students.

Somewhat unsurprisingly, teachers have been shown to play an important role in helping university students to persevere and succeed (Lawrence, 2003). According to Devlin and O'Shea (2012), the diversifying higher education population requires evolution in university teaching and teaching and learning approaches (also see Hockings, 2010). Devlin and O'Shea (2012) draw on the findings of their 2009 study to report on the effective teaching practices that best enable the success of students from low SES backgrounds. These include: teacher availability to help, teacher enthusiasm and dedication, and effective communication with students.

A widely accepted approach to facilitating the success of so-called 'non-traditional' students, such as those of interest in the present study, that has been used with success is 'inclusive teaching' (Devlin & McKay, 2011), or teaching that embraces and caters to diversity (see Griffiths, 2010; Devlin *et al.*, 2012). While this term has become more popular in Australian higher education in recent years, it is not well understood outside small pockets of specialist expertise in the sector. Research undertaken in the UK by Griffiths (2010) provides a working definition, which has been adapted here to fit the Australian context, to focus on students from low SES backgrounds and to focus on specific aspects of teaching. Teaching for inclusion includes teaching technique and also:

*...extends beyond technique, respecting students as individuals who have diverse backgrounds, different learning needs, and a variety of valuable prior experiences. By facilitating learning for inclusion, individual strengths and differences are acknowledged, fostered and maximised to enrich the student's own potential, knowledge, skills and understanding as well as that of others within the learning community. Such an approach is intentionally and thoroughly integrated into every part of an institution and implemented rigorously, vigorously and thoughtfully. (Adapted from Griffiths, 2010)*

David *et al.* (2010) and Roberts (2010) purport that part of effective teaching is the adoption of pedagogical approaches that better cater to diversity, and 27% of stakeholders interviewed in the present study agreed. The present student found that teaching that was, and teachers who were, inclusive of the 'real-world' of students from low SES backgrounds studying at regional universities were able to facilitate success for these students.

### **Inclusive Pedagogical Approach**

Stakeholders in the present study suggested that adopting more inclusive pedagogical approaches could help students from low SES backgrounds to succeed. Typical comments included:

*Have a pedagogy that recognises inclusion as a primary point. (FED\_STK\_004)*

*I think having strategies within pedagogy within curriculum that identifies the diversity of the students in the programmes right down to the course level, and is adaptive to that demographic of students. (USQ\_STK\_120)*

*I think you need to be innovative in your pedagogical approach. The days when a lecturer can sit around with a group of students who are sitting at their feet adoring them are long and well gone, and I think ... we need to be very mindful and respectful of the student cohort, that they have different learning needs. (FED\_STK\_002)*

In relation to being inclusive of online students, one student explained:

*I think some lecturers seem to be more conscious of external students than others. I think in lecturing style particularly, sometimes lecturers might forget that they are recording and that people external like myself will be listening online. I think that's - yeah, hasn't been particularly hindrance but I do find sometimes the lecturers might be referring to material that they have in the*

*classroom or in the lecture theatre, but we as external students obviously can't see on the recording. (UNE\_STU\_021)*

*I think if there is that element of consistency and if you as a regional student feel like you have the same chance as the people on campus have you're a lot more willing to keep pushing through. (USQ\_STU\_121)*

### Teaching that Facilitates Student Success

In the Devlin *et al.* (2012) national study of the success of Australian university students from low SES backgrounds studying at a range of universities, a number of key elements of teaching that helped facilitate the success of students from low SES backgrounds were identified. These findings were confirmed in this study. The table below details the key teaching elements from the Devlin *et al.* (2012) study along with the percentage of respondents in the present study who identified these same elements as contributing to student success.

As Table 3 shows, between 13% and 46% of students interviewed confirmed the findings of Devlin *et al.* (2012) related to teaching elements that facilitated student success. These include: knowing and respecting students; offering students flexibility, variety and choice; making expectations clear to students; scaffolded learning; and staff being available and approachable. Between 12% and 46% of staff confirmed these relevant previous findings. When the findings of students and staff were combined, between 19% and 43% of interviewee responses in the present study related to teaching approaches confirmed those of Devlin *et al.* (2012).

**Table 3: Comparison with findings on teachers and teaching from Devlin *et al.* (2012)**

DEVLIN <i>ET AL</i> (2012) KEY FINDING ABOUT 'WHAT WORKS' IN TEACHING STUDENTS FROM LOW SES BACKGROUNDS	NO. & % OF STUDENTS INTERVIEWED IN THE PRESENT STUDY WHO IDENTIFIED THIS AS A KEY SUCCESS FACTOR ACROSS INTERVIEW RESPONSES	NO. & % OF STAKEHOLDERS WHO IDENTIFIED THIS AS A KEY SUCCESS FACTOR ACROSS INTERVIEW RESPONSES	TOTAL NO. & % OF RESPONDENTS (BOTH STUDENTS AND STAKEHOLDERS) WHO IDENTIFIED THIS AS A KEY SUCCESS FACTOR
Knowing and respecting students	14/69 (20%)	11/26 (42%)	25/95 (26%)
Offering flexibility, variety and choice	26/69 (38%)	12/26 (46%)	38/95 (40%)
Making expectations clear	9/69 (13%)	9/26 (35%)	18/95 (19%)
Scaffolded learning	17/69 (25%)	3/26 (11.5%)	20/95 (21%)
Being available and approachable	32/69 (46%)	9/26 (35%)	41/95 (43%)

In terms of resourcing inclusive teaching, the findings of the present study confirmed the Devlin *et al.* (2012) finding that putting in the requisite time and effort to maximise the chances of success for students impacts on staff workload and priorities. Typical comments from staff included:

*It's just that we're seeing students who are quite time consuming in terms of the level of support that they require and we're trying to maintain that balance of seeing the other 20,000 students that we are meant to be here for, not just a handful. So that's our challenge. (UNE\_STK\_013)*

*...you often end up sacrificing your own research time or whatever to support the students, because I feel like well, they've enrolled, we've said we're going to take you, we've got all the issues with student knowledge and everything, which we're all trying to fix up, and for my external cohort for first year, most of them study at night, because they've got families and jobs. (UNE\_STK\_012)*

The matter of resourcing such intensive support was flagged:

*The problem is funding. The problem is always the funding to support those programmes, resources to support those programmes. I do not know what's the balance, you know, what's the magical rule of thumb - you know, for this number of students, this must be the amount of dollars and the number of staff to help. All I know is that currently it's not balanced, because from where we're sitting we're always fighting for funding for any programme. (USQ\_STK\_124)*

*How long is a piece of string in terms of how we resource that. I think we're working at capacity at the moment... (UNE\_STK\_001)*

However, as one stakeholder astutely commented, "I guess in conclusion, there's no easy answers, there's no magic bullets and all this stuff costs money, but it's money well spent" (UNE\_STK\_014).

### **Engagement through Active and Interactive Learning**

Throughout both staff and stakeholder interviews, a range of teaching and learning factors were identified as important to student success. One was engagement of students through active and interactive learning. Sixty-five percent of stakeholders shared the view that engagement in learning and teaching was critical to student success. Thirty-six percent of students referred to the importance of engagement in their learning, and saw active, interactive teaching approaches as critical to facilitate this. As students put it:

*...all of them were very approachable and hands-on, so definitely hands-on teaching. Visual teaching helped me because I'm that kind of learner. And yeah, got you actively involved, like got you up and done group things or asked your opinion or got you up to have a play with something to understand the concept with science or maths or something like that, that you could do with the kids. So, not just sitting there receiving information at a desk, we were often moving around and standing around the room or sitting on the floor in a group and that sort of stuff. (USQ\_STU\_135)*

*The more interaction the better. So online tutorials, so not just recordings but interactive. Every time we've had them like in Blackboard Collaborate sessions and things like that, I've done a lot better. Especially if they're structured where they give you activities to do rather than just going in to ask questions. (USQ\_STU\_133)*

*Yeah more the same sort of just go to your lecture, have them talk at you for a while and then in the tute, I found that you'll learn more when you sort of literally interact with the teachers, and actually talk to the teachers whereas sometimes they just talk at you and you sort of tune out. It's really good when they actually interact with you and actually makes you respond to their questions. (FED\_STU\_004)*

## **Assessment**

Assessment of student learning was a particularly strong theme within the area of learning and teaching. Sixty-eight percent of (47 of 69) students commented on assessment as a factor in their success. Comments included:

*I think definitely having been given background knowledge on that assessment task I think is probably the most important thing that I've noticed, that all the tutors – they don't expect you to learn something from scratch... (FED\_STU\_006)*

*Probably the memorable assignments are those ones that you struggle with but they're very applicable to the real world and you struggle because you can't quite make that leap but, once you get there, they are the most helpful things. Like, you learn the most about what you're going to need when you're out there. (SCU\_STU\_065)*

*Well-written assessment tasks for starters. Like I mentioned the ones that make the effort to have discussions about them as opposed to just posting a list of things you need to do. If there's even just a video that they've bothered to record to explain things a bit further than just an A4 piece of paper with what you need to do on there, that makes a huge difference to the success in achieving tasks. (USQ\_STU\_121)*

*I think the more feedback you get as a student... the better it is. (SCU\_STU\_067)*

Stakeholders stated that 'being able to have a diverse way of assessing students' (SCU\_STK\_031) helped them to help students succeed. Devlin *et al.* (2012) also found that variety and flexibility in assessment, while upholding academic standards, assisted low SES students to succeed.

Of particular note was the repeated references by stakeholders to the necessity of relevance of assessment to students. One staff member summed up a common thread in a number of comments:

*It has to be relevant to them. A lot of the students, what is relevant, unfortunately is the assessment. They're not interested in content, because what they're being measured on is the assessment. Sadly sometimes we get students who only look at their assessment item, or read about their assessment item, three days before the assessment item is due. So by then, they've kind of lost interest and done other things along the way. Which makes sense, this is the world we've built for ourselves as academics. If we make it all focus on assessment, then they're going to focus on assessment and it's all going to be assessment driven. It's not going to be - if we can create fabulous content, but if we're not - if we make it an assessment driven unit, then the students are going*

*to focus on assessment. So if we - in our content delivery, help them with the assessment far more, I find it's helpful. (SCU\_STK\_032)*

*That is relevant and timely, linked to assessments that are intelligently designed and compassionately designed, not to terrify the crap out of the poor things. But to motivate them, awake their curiosity and give them a sense of achievement when they've finished it. So rather than making it this mind numbing, let's learn everything by heart and then you know, pour it all out again on paper in an exam. (SCU\_STK\_032)*

*But most of all I think intelligent design of assessments. That move away from just writing a bloody essay, that are relevant to them. But that then would benefit everybody, not just the low SES. (SCU\_STK\_032)*

Finally, when asked about the ways success could be better facilitated through assessment, as well as a variety of assessment tasks (UNE-STU-027), students and staff highlighted the following factors: the importance of making the criteria explicit (numerous); and reasonable amounts of reading material given many work full time as well as studying (UNE\_STU\_027).

### **Section Summary**

The adoption of an inclusive, engaged approach to learning and teaching helps students from low SES backgrounds at regional universities to succeed. Taking into account the learning needs and the mode of study of students, offering flexibility, variety in assessment and choices where possible, making expectations of students clear, scaffolding learning, engaging students in interactive exchanges and staff being approachable all assist students to learn and to progress through their studies. In particular, thoughtfully and intelligently designed assessment that is perceived as relevant to students can also assist student success.

## 6. Policy Implications

The evidence gathered through the present study includes:

- a thorough review of previous research and relevant literature;
- interviews with 69 successful students from low SES backgrounds approaching completion of their studies at regional universities; and
- interviews with 26 staff who are expert in how these students succeed.

In addition to forming the basis of the eight high-level factors that contribute to the success of students from low SES backgrounds at regional universities, this evidence has led to the identification of five policy areas where future research and policy reform should be focused.

These are the areas of:

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

Policies provide a set of guiding principles that assist with decision making, including around priorities and funding.

### 1. Ensuring Financial Stability for Students

Adjustments to income support policy and improved arrangements for the provision of scholarships to students from low SES backgrounds who are studying at regional universities would provide a higher likelihood of financial stability for these students, which would, in turn, increase their likelihood of completing their degree.

As one stakeholder explained:

*Then there are other people for whom their life circumstances are just so controlled by perverse poverty that however well-prepared [for university] they are just doesn't make any difference because their needs are just not being met in terms of housing, secure income, support, that sort of thing. (FED\_STK\_002)*

The evidence gathered for this study suggests that addressing financial stability for these students will have a significant and positive impact on university retention and completion.

The support of successful governments from both sides of politics for the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) has been a boon for all students from low SES backgrounds, but in particular those studying at regional universities where resources are scarce and difficult decisions are continuously made about how and where to invest in initiatives and programmes to maximise success for a diverse, complex student population. While the results of the formal review of HEPPP undertaken in 2016 have not yet been released, it is obvious to those working in regional universities that, in many ways, this programme has provided some of the financial stability that low SES background students need to increase their chances of retention and success. At the very least, this programme should be retained. Ideally, the funding allocation previously would be restored and HEPPP

would be supplemented by more generous provision of income support to individual low SES regional students while they are undertaking their programme of study.

## 2. Defining, Measuring and Monitoring ‘Attrition’

The assumptions and mechanisms for the measurement and monitoring of attrition of students from low SES backgrounds who are studying at regional universities need to take into account the realities of these students’ lives, experiences, responsibilities and the choices they have to make about study in the context of complex lives and competing priorities.

The present study found significant evidence of a phenomenon that is familiar to those who lead and work in regional universities, and that is now increasingly evident in federal government statistics collections – that regional students dip in and out of study and on average take longer than metropolitan and higher SES students to complete programmes of study.

Common reports from stakeholders interviewed for the present study included:

*We have students, particularly at the entry level, who leave simply because they’ve got a job and that meets short-term needs. And they may come back later to study. We see that quite a bit. But, at that point in time, keeping the roof over your head and putting food on the table is imperative. (USC\_STK\_024)*

*...because people have got through the first session of university that other things in their life won’t come up that are complex. And, that happens in everybody’s life, but particularly for some people, their lives are very complex and they might be looking after family, or [being] carers. So, being flexible and mindful, the way we teach, the way our campuses are, and knowing that people sometimes, will have to come in and out of study. (SCU\_STK\_031)*

Students interviewed for this study reported that they had had to dip in and out of study because of financial pressures and strain and competing priorities related to their complex lives. Typical comments included:

*...there was a year in my studies that I basically had to drop out because my husband’s wage wasn’t covering everything, so I had to take on a full-time job to pay for it, and basically I couldn’t meet the deadlines of assignments. I had to defer for - and maybe do one unit per semester, instead of two or three that I’d to have. There’s been quite a few semesters throughout that I’ve had to just do one unit because that’s all I can manage with everything else. They’re just the choices we had to make to keep other choices, like having a house, having a car, putting kids into little athletics and dance classes or whatever. (SCU\_STU\_066)*

*I had to take a six-month sabbatical, because I was struggling financially... (FED\_STU\_012)*

The experiences and trajectories of students from low SES backgrounds at regional universities are often very different to those of so-called ‘traditional’ students, that is, those who are young, unencumbered, school leavers, living at home or on campus at parents’ expense, and likely to complete their programme of study in one time period in the minimum time. As outlined in this report, students from low SES backgrounds at regional

universities also often have complex lives and multiple, competing priorities, responsibilities and challenges. It is often not possible, nor desirable from a personal point of view, for them to study full time, nor to complete their undergraduate programme in a single time period or within the minimum completion time.

However, despite the growing number and proportion of students in the Australian higher education sector who do not meet the definition of 'traditional' and who are unlikely to follow the typical traditional programme completion trajectory, some of the assumptions behind the way attrition is currently calculated are only relevant to traditional students. For example, the current methodology of annually counting commencing students at census date in sequential years while subtracting those who have completed their programme ignores those students who may have formally or informally withdrawn but who may later return to study, as many regional low SES students do.

Similarly, the current practice of doubling the length of a traditional degree and measuring completion in that six-year time period, as numerous media reports did recently when federal government statistics on completion were released in January 2017, seems to assume: (i) that part-time study equates to a half-time load (and, therefore, that a typical three-year degree would be completed in six years if the student were part-time) and (ii) that all part-time students have a consistent half-time study load over those six years. These assumptions do not apply to all low SES background students at regional universities who may take only a single unit of study at a time, who may have periods where no study is undertaken at all, and who may take the maximum time to complete their qualification.

Further careful consideration of what attrition really means for non-traditional students is now required in Australian higher education, alongside a consideration of how this phenomenon might be measured and monitored while taking into account the realities low SES background regional students' lives and likely study trajectories.

### **3. Valuing Staged and Micro Qualifications**

Staged/multiple exit point qualifications and micro credentials could be further enabled, encouraged and valued within Australian higher education to facilitate success for those who cannot, or do not want to, commit to the equivalent of three years of full time study to gain a bachelor degree qualification.

Related to the basis of the previous policy principle, that is, that regional students from low SES backgrounds dip in and out of study, and to the fact that the financial pressure these students experience has a significant impact on retention, there is a need to facilitate multiple exit points and qualifications for those who are not able to, or do not want to, commit to the equivalent of three years of full-time study to gain a bachelor degree qualification.

Brett *et al.* (2015) and others have promoted the notion of opening up sub-bachelor places such as associate degrees to assist regional students to manage the challenges facing them. The findings of this study support this idea. As well as numerous accounts from students about dipping in and out of the three-year qualification, and the data on attrition indicating that a proportion students will never make it to the end of such a qualification, stakeholders in the present study were also cognisant of the need for options for regional low SES students. As one staff member explained:

*My strong inclination is that there ought to be lots of exit points along the way. So you can do four courses and exit with a certificate. You can do eight courses and exit with a diploma. You can do 16 courses and exit with an associate degree. You can do 24 courses and exit with a degree. So all along the way you are getting a piece of paper that gives you a qualification and demonstrates that you've at least got that far. And all of these things need to articulate together so that there's full credit when you come back in and want to pick up from where you left off. (USQ\_STK\_021)*

Major international firms such as Ernst and Young and Penguin Random House have dropped degree requirements for job applicants (Coughlin, 2016; Sheriff, 2015), and some companies, especially but not only in the Informational Technology field, have begun to value micro credentials as evidence of required technical and other skills. However, while slowly growing in popularity and increasingly accepted as evidence of learning across the world, micro credentials have not yet reached the point of widely being taken seriously in Australia as indicators of post-secondary achievement. There appears to be an underlying, unquestioned current assumption that a three-year bachelor degree is the gold, or only acceptable, standard for university education. It is probably time for reconsideration of this assumption, and not only for regional university education. Care must be taken to avoid setting up a two-tiered value system where shorter qualifications are 'good enough' for regional and/or low SES background students but metropolitan and/or higher SES background students are still expected to complete the 'full', more highly prized and valued, qualification.

#### **4. Leveraging Existing Regional and Rural Infrastructure**

Existing technological, personnel and other infrastructure, including in regional libraries and schools, could be better leveraged, supported, coordinated and promoted to help facilitate the success of students from low SES backgrounds at regional universities.

The study pointed to the importance of regional infrastructure, and particularly, local libraries to regional students. Twenty percent of students interviewed in the present study indicated that they used the internet at their local library. As well as valuing having access there to free wifi, students reported that the opening hours of local libraries and access to a study space within the local library were positive influences on their study success:

Maybe the community library, where I can go and have some quiet space and study. (SCU\_STU\_066)

*...the fact that I could get books from my local library too. Like, one of the subjects I had to have quite a number of kid's books that had to be read and things like that, so I was able to go down there and pick out that sort of thing and have the librarians in there say, "Yes, we've got this one and that one." Or, "That's where you'll find this and that." So, I guess, the local library was good. And, I guess, if my internet had been down I could have gone there too, but I was fortunate it hasn't been a problem. (USQ\_STU\_130)*

*I can actually get the resources ...[at] the local library in Geelong. And I think being able to touch base back with maybe the material that you've been – you've seen in a lecture is really important... (FED\_STU\_006)*

*There were short periods where I didn't have the internet at home but the local library has been helpful as well with internet access and needing to look up anything or print something. (FED\_STU\_011)*

*There was a point actually where our internet was down for actually quite a long time, so just the local library and ... that was really helpful. (UNE\_STU\_028)*

*...the local library has been helpful as well. (FED\_STU\_011)*

A current NPP project funded in late 2015 led by the University of Southern Queensland and involving a number of regional universities, Australian universities and public libraries working together to facilitate success for low socio-economic students living in regional and remote communities, will provide timely and relevant advice.

The sector, and regional, low SES students background in particular, would also benefit from further consideration of other initiatives designed to improve participation, success and completion that are currently underway in regional settings. One example is the 'BSocSci@' Program which is a uniquely designed and delivered Bachelor of Social Science Program running at Federation University Australia. Through this innovation, students are offered the opportunity to complete the first year of a degree programme in the high school at which they have just completed year 12. These students are typically, but not exclusively, from low SES backgrounds and the first in their family to attend university. Small groups, facilitated by experienced, empathic and highly skilled university teachers, supported by dedicated school staff committed to student success, operate in school classrooms provided free of charge by the schools. On successful completion of the units of the first year of the degree, students are then supported to transition onto campus to complete their degree, including through being allocated a later year student mentor.

Another example is the Clemente Program where university education is offered in community centres, libraries and other locations in communities and with which significantly disadvantaged students are familiar and comfortable. Small classes and strong support are again features. Again, students can transfer into on-campus studies once they have developed skills and capital in university study, as well as confidence about their ability to do so. These programmes typically operate on shoestring and insecure budgets. More financial and other support for such existing initiatives and better coordination between them and universities would likely contribute further to regional low SES student success.

## 5. Regional School Investment

Better investment in regional schools is likely to contribute positively to increased school completion, to greater aspiration for university level qualifications and to better preparedness for university study for students from low SES backgrounds.

According to DEEWR (2013, p. 3), "Much of the research literature cites lower Year 12 retention rates as a contributing factor to lower post-school participation in education in regional areas. Often, lower Year 12 retention is attributed to poor quality schooling and lack of schooling choice in regional areas." The difference in Year 12 retention rates across regions can also be explained by access to quality school resources (Creswell & Underwood, 2004; Lamb, Walstab, Teese, Vickers & Rumberger, 2004; Shulruf, Hattie & Tumen, 2008; Welch, Helme & Lamb, 2007). Schools in regional and remote areas tend to be significantly smaller than those in metropolitan areas, which can contribute to resourcing problems and

limitations in terms of programmes offered (Welch *et al.*, 2007). Creswell and Underwood (2004) and Lamb *et al.* (2004) further suggest that rural and remote schools are more difficult to staff and students are thus limited not only in terms of the number of teachers they have, but the lack of teaching styles available to them. But even if students in regional areas complete year 12, they may be disadvantaged by their regional school experience compared to their metropolitan counterparts.

Students and stakeholders in the present study made reference to both the positive and negative impacts of school experience. When asked about what had helped them succeed, student responses included those related to positive school experiences:

*A lot of it is from my high school because we had affiliations with [a university]. So from when I was 12 years old I was put into classes where I had high expectations put on me. (USC\_STU\_043)*

*I was really well set up from high school to come across into uni...I also think my schooling from Grade 1 to Grade 4 was so important. I think my high school was amazing in how they got kids to want to achieve more... (USC\_STU\_043)*

In terms of negative impacts or limitations of some students' experiences in regional schools, one stakeholder summed it up:

*For me the important thing there is to realise that for a lot of these students particularly and obviously those who have come from regional communities, there are structural issues that they might have been oblivious to right through the process. Not the least of which particularly in secondary school is for instance things like if the availability of subjects which they were able to study. I suppose the calibre of the teacher which they had and that's not in any way an indictment on the teaching profession. But we know structurally that in regional Australia particularly, subject choice is much more limited for regional secondary school students than those in metropolitan areas and likewise, partly because of that the exposure to a wide range of teachers is much limited as well. So there are kind of these structural impediments over which students have had no control whatsoever that I think can be major influences on their lives. (FED\_STK\_001)*

Greater investment in regional schools is likely to assist in subject and specialist teacher availability, the provision of a high-quality school experience that both contributes to school completion and preparedness for university, the necessary resourcing for schools to be able to form long-term and valuable partnerships with universities and more widespread university aspiration raising among students at regional schools.

## 7. Conclusion

The health and wellbeing of tertiary students is a well-researched field, with a range of foci including: the experiences of international students (Rosenthal, Russell & Thomson, 2008), first year students (Stallman, 2010; Trockel, Barnes & Egget, 2000), students with positive help-seeking behaviours (Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010), students adjusting to university (Baker, 2003), alongside others. The literature also explores the stigma attached to seeking help and support (Martin, 2010), and the differences that exist across different cultural groups (Chang, 1996).

Not surprisingly, financial difficulty has been found to have a significant impact on the wellbeing of university students (Lange & Byrd, 1998), and a significant cause of psychological distress (Cvetkovski, Reavley & Jorm, 2012). In relation to paid employment, Cvetkovski, Reavley & Jorm

(2012) found that students who work 1-39 hours per week in paid employment are at greater risk of high psychological distress. The impact of financial difficulty and paid employment on students from low SES backgrounds who are studying at regional universities have been outlined in this report.

Other influences on health and wellbeing include social belonging (which has been identified as a key to the health outcomes of minority students) (Walton & Cohen, 2011), and regionality. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2012) posits that the further people live from major cities, the less healthy they are expected to be. Along with geographical factors, a range of factors have been found to affect the mental health and wellbeing of non-traditional students as they manage and navigate the challenges and often unfamiliar terrain of higher education. Students in the present study reported a number of challenges they were facing relating to their overall health and wellbeing. This included depression, anxiety, weight management issues, sleep deprivation and exhaustion.

However, when asked directly about their health and wellbeing, most students interviewed for the study made reference to their coping mechanisms and personal resilience. Fifty-two percent (36 out of 69) of students reported their self-care habits including eating well and exercising to proactively mitigate potential issues with health and wellbeing. Sixteen percent of students (11 out of 69) said they employed mindfulness and focus to avoid health and wellbeing problems, 13% (9 out of 69) simply said they were resilient, and 12% (8 out of 69) said they accessed the student counselling services offered by the university. A typical comment was:

*I tend not to want to be the person that's like, "Woe is me. Feel sorry for me." I'll ask for help if I need it, if I sense that it's going to be like - when I knew that I was going to go in for surgery I made sure that all of my lecturers knew that semester that I would be missing class and that I would struggle to get my assessments done in time. So they were all aware then. (FED\_STU\_005)*

Students did however detail the challenges of balancing work and study and in many cases, family/carer responsibilities. They spoke about being "rundown" (CQU\_STU\_082), "tired and worn out" (FED\_STU\_002) and many experienced the "exhaustion" of having children and balancing that responsibility with paid employment and study (FED\_STU\_011). Some felt "pressure" due to their determination to "succeed" (FED\_STU\_007).

Some were studying while experiencing significant challenges, including studying while undergoing chemotherapy for cancer, dealing with the challenges of their disability, managing depression or social anxiety, losing a loved one. Comments from students highlight some of the experiences:

*It's kind of hard because we usually get split up into groups... There's going to be talking, so I think most people know I'm a little bit deaf, but ... it's not something that you broadcast out. Because I want to be seen as capable and like everyone else, rather than disabled and poor at the work, so I try to limit the knowledge of it. But the fact is that being deaf has limited mobility, but I'm still pretty good at what I do... (FED\_STU\_012)*

*The actual day I broke my ankle, I'm waiting for the ambulance, and I was breathing through the pain, it was extremely painful, but then my mind swapped to uni and I went, oh, my God, what am I going to do about uni? And then I just started crying, so from there it was quite an emotional time just going, how am I going to finish what I need to finish with this, it's just completely wrecked everything. But, I've been able to get through it and that's the main thing. (USC\_STU\_046)*

*I had some counselling because I had a partner who passed away, that was to get through the grief and ... that was helpful. (USQ\_STU\_143)*

Overall, the study found that the health and wellbeing of students from low SES backgrounds studying at regional universities can come under enormous strain from the financial and other pressures on them. Far from the romantic stereotype of being a poor student somehow being fun, students interviewed for this study outlined the significant challenges inherent in living in poverty and concurrently managing the demands of being a university student while balancing priorities related to those of finances, paid work and in many cases, family and/or carer responsibilities. These themes were confirmed by staff interviewed, as well as by previous research.

The study successfully identified eight major, high-level factors and approaches that contribute to retention and completion for students from low SES backgrounds who are studying at regional universities. The study also identified five key areas in which future policy and research could usefully be focused to further contribute to regional, low SES background student success.

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# Appendix A

## Student Demographic Survey

1. What is your gender?

- Female
- Male
- Other

2. What year were you born?

.....

3. Are you an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander?

- Yes
- No

4. Are you from a Non-English speaking background?

- Yes
- No

5. Are you a woman studying in a non-traditional area (e.g. science, maths, engineering, technology)?

- Yes
- No

6. Do you identify as a person with a disability?

- Yes
- No

7. What degree are you currently undertaking? Major(s)?

.....

.....

8. What has been your predominant study mode:

- On-campus
- Off-campus (online)
- Combination of both on-campus and off-campus (online)

9. Have you predominantly studied:

- Full-time
- Part-time
- Combination of full-time and part-time

10. Have you predominantly lived in a rural or regional area while studying?

- Yes
- No

11. Approximately how far is your university campus from where you live (kms)?

.....

12. Have you predominantly been employed while studying?

- Yes
- No

If yes, approximately how many hours per week on average have you worked in the past 12 months?

.....

13. Did you enter university with tertiary entrance rank or equivalent?

- Yes
- No

If so, what was your tertiary entrance rank?

.....

And in what year did you receive it?

.....

14. Have you undertaken a tertiary preparation program?

- Yes
- No

If yes, which one? And at which institution?

.....

# Appendix B

## Student Interview Questions

1. What do you think have been the major factors that have contributed to your ability to reach the final year of study? How have they helped you succeed?
2. Have there been any particular learning or other support services or resources offered by the university that have assisted you to succeed?
3. Are there particular teaching approaches that have been more helpful than others to your success?
4. What has helped you do well in learning and assessment tasks?
5. Are there people in your life (outside of university) who have been particularly helpful to your success? Who are they? How have they helped you to succeed?
6. Are there particular services (outside of university) that have been particularly helpful to your success? How have these services helped you to succeed?
7. Are there other resources you drew on (for example, assistance with notes from other students etc.) that were of assistance?
8. To what extent did your mode of study (online/f2f) make a difference to your success?
9. Were you able to access the internet and your course materials from home or local community? Did that help your studies?
10. How connected did you feel to your peers and the community life of the university?
11. How important do you think your own motivation, resilience and/or determination has or have been to your success? Could you tell me about that?
12. How have your family responsibilities impacted on your success at university (family responsibilities may include children and/or family members for whom you provide care)? Please tell me about that.
13. How have your financial circumstances impacted upon your success? Please tell me about them.
14. How has your physical and mental health and wellbeing impacted on your success at university?
15. What else do you think has helped you succeed at university?
16. What has been the single most influential factor on your success at university – the thing that has made the most positive difference to your success?
17. Do you have any ideas or recommendations for how students at regional universities could be better supported to succeed?

# Appendix C

## Stakeholder Interview Questions

In what capacity do you work with or in relation to students from low SES backgrounds?  
Teaching? Research? Support section or services? Other?

1. What do you see as the major high-level factors that contribute to the completion and success of low SES background students at regional universities?
2. How do you think we can best help students from low SES backgrounds to overcome the barriers they face in regional settings?
3. How well prepared do you think the successful low SES students are for their university studies initially? Do they have realistic expectations? Are students who are successful better prepared for their studies?
4. How important to their success is being able to facilitate students' sense of belonging or connection? How can universities best facilitate that level of engagement for regional students?
5. How much impact does access to learning technologies (including internet from home) have on student success?
6. What do you think are the most successful approaches to facilitating the success of students from low SES backgrounds at regional universities?
7. What particular strategies do you employ in your role to contribute to the success of students from low SES backgrounds at regional universities?
8. What advice would you provide for colleagues about how they could enhance their practice in teaching and/or supporting students from low SES backgrounds in regional universities?
9. How do you think universities could better support students from low SES backgrounds at regional universities to contribute to their overall completion and success?
10. What do you think is the single most important factor that contributes to low SES student success at regional universities?