Considering Regional Students in the Proposed Higher Education Reforms

Professor Sue Trinidad, NCSEHE Director 2/02/2015
I would like to show my respect and acknowledge the traditional custodians, the elders past and present of the land on which we meet.
Thank you for this opportunity to talk about my passion. I flew to Armidale, NSW late last year to present a keynote at the Society for the Provision of Education Rural Australia (SPERA). Charles Sturt University has been a supporter of SPERA over the last 30 years. SPERA is concerned with the effect the ‘disadvantaged’ label has on rural communities and was formed in order advance the positive aspects of regional education and life. By the time SPERA was incorporated in 1984, the Country Area Program and the Disadvantaged School Program had been operating some ten years and rural communities were becoming conditioned to accepting the label ‘disadvantaged’ in order to attract funds.

Access to Higher Education starts very early in a child’s educational journey. Addressing educational disadvantage has been at the heart of much of the research undertaken by me and many of my colleagues, including Professor John Pegg from UNE and his staff at the SiMERR National Research Centre. Over the years a number of significant pieces of research have referred to the educational inequalities in Australia between regional areas and the cities.

I am so pleased we have this wonderful opportunity today to network and reflect on the positives of regional education and health care provision and how they go hand in hand.
To give you a little about my background I was born and educated in Kalgoorlie, Western Australia. Both my parents had limited education with Mum not finishing the equivalent of Year 10 today and Dad not finishing Year 7. I did not realise then that in today’s terms I would be classified as an ‘equity student’ as I came from a family classified as LSES, we lived in a town that is considered remote and I was the first in my family to attend university.

In Western Australia we do not have regional universities as you have here in the east so you move to city to study but of course now you can study online. I left Kalgoorlie to study in Perth and after completing my university degree I returned to the regions (Leonora) and taught Aboriginal students during 1980’s. In the early 1990’s I completed my Doctorate and by that time I was really was starting to understand the differences between having a city education compared to a regional education and how important it is to provide all students no matter where they live equal opportunities.

We know from research that student progression is via a multiple pathways and concerns many factors. It is understood that many causes of disadvantage in accessing higher education occur much earlier in life.

Australian universities have long demonstrated a strong commitment to student equity and to increasing the participation of people from disadvantaged backgrounds including regional and remote students. This commitment was a key recommendation from the Bradley Review (2008).

Over the years Equity initiatives in Australia have had bi-partisan support. The Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) was set up to fund a range of university participation and partnership initiatives. Through HEPPP funding, Australian universities have been able to provide opportunities to students from under-represented backgrounds who have the ability to study at university, to actually do so. Australian universities’ commitment to improving the access, participation and success in higher education of students from equity groups is evident in the current practice used by universities to reach prospective university students (outreach), help get them into university (access), and provide the support once the students commence, improving the retention and completion rates of those students. Such initiatives have been targeted at low SES and regional and remote students, in order to inform and expose school students and other prospective university students to the opportunities that higher education can offer.
The Kemp/Norton review discussed alternative entry pathways. A variety of entry pathways enables those equity students who desire to participate to have the capacity to apply for and successfully enter undergraduate study at university. A range of support services, such as mentoring and tutoring programs, ensure all students have the best chance of succeeding in their studies.
At the moment with the support of HEPP funding universities engage in significant outreach, access and support activities.

Our case study publication Access-and-Participation-in-Higher-Education-2013 was distributed to all universities, government and industry stakeholders, and brought together a sample of the current practice of the 37 public universities across Australia. The universities’ self-selected case studies spanned activities used to reach prospective university students (outreach), helping students progress into university (access) and providing support once students commence, improving the retention and completion rates of those students.

We are proudly showcasing these cases studies on the NCSEHE website (ncsehe.edu.au).

If you would like a hard copy of our publication, please feel free to contact us. Alternatively, you can download a soft copy version here: NCSEHE-Access-and-Participation-in-Higher-Education-2013 (28Mb)
We have just released our latest publication, **Partnerships in Higher Education** which looks at the important partnerships that universities have with community and other institutions to assist and support students from disadvantaged backgrounds. These partnerships have been the result of HEPPP funding and enable universities to enhance equity students’ awareness, educational aspirations, access to and success in higher education across Australia. This is particularly important for regional students who often do not have the same opportunities as city students.

Hard copies of this latest publication are available on request. Alternatively, you can download a soft copy version here: [Partnerships in Higher Education](8.12Mb)
The National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education has been a part of some key research looking at the importance of support programs by universities across Australia to raise the aspirations and increase the participation of LSES students in HE. This includes work undertaken by Dr Ryan Naylor and colleagues at the University of Melbourne.

The Australian Government Department of Education has engaged the NCSEHE to develop an Equity Performance Framework for Australian Higher Education’ (“the Framework”). The primary purpose of the Framework is to provide a mechanism, to identify relevant data and statistics for analysis, by which student equity in the higher education system can be monitored in Australia.

This project will:
Identify a set of tested indicators within domains and tiers of which the Framework will comprise, that will allow the measurement of achievement against the Government’s commitments, targets and goals in relation to equity.

Engage with stakeholders:
To test the policy relevance, technical validity and reliability, and flexibility of the Framework and its components;
Regarding the implementation of the Framework; and
Regarding how the analyses and findings should be reported on/published.

Provide the following set of products:
Framework Publication;
Analysis and Reporting Guide;
Implementation Plan; and
A Forward Plan for data and statistics identification and enhancement.

What does the data tell us?

I am happy to report that these university led initiatives supported by Government funding have already resulted in increases in access and participation for LSES students. Using the data released by the Australian Government for the 38 'Table A providers' in Australian higher education 2007-2013 we have been able to provide recent trends in student enrolment in Australian higher education.

For Domestic UG Enrolments in Higher Education in Australia there has been a 26.4% growth in headcount since 2007
With most growth post 2009 in the lead up to and eventual introduction of the demand driven system (DDS)
This level of growth is unprecedented in Australian HE.

Overall, faster rates of growth in enrolments for all key equity groups can be seen in this period. Koshy and Seymour (2014, 4) report LSES student numbers increased 37.4% in this period, and Indigenous student numbers by 45.6%. There was comparatively slower growth of 26% for regional student numbers, and 11.8% for remote student numbers.

For more information go to Briefing Paper on our website
Enrolment, as measured by the number of students, in Table A providers increased from 528,844 in 2007 to 668,665 in 2013. This represents an increase of 139,821 undergraduate students, or around 26.4% growth in this six year period.

Growth was unevenly distributed across the sector, with the ‘Unaligned Group’ of generally newer universities witnessing a 41.9% expansion in places, raising their share of undergraduates from 28.5% in 2007 to 31.9% in 2013, with the Group of Eight seeing a reduced share from 27.9% to 25.2%. Regionally based universities grew less quickly than those based in metropolitan areas (Koshy and Seymour 2014, 3).

Around 82.5% of growth in enrolment took place after 2009, in the lead up to and eventual introduction of the demand driven system (DDS) in higher education and the removal of caps on undergraduate student places.

The Federal Government’s Review of the Demand Driven System report (released 13 April 2014), has strongly endorsed the current demand-driven funding system that enables students from diverse and low socio-economic backgrounds to access higher education, a result welcomed by the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE).

There has been growth within all the reporting groups, but notable is that undergraduate participation by LSES students is consistently higher where universities have a regional presence, although regional growth is lower than in metropolitan institutions.

Examining the trends in enrolment by institutional location shows that regionally headquartered universities saw growth of 23.5% which is somewhat below the national average. This includes the Regional Universities Network which saw growth between 2007 and 2013 of 26.3%.

Metropolitan institutions saw greater degrees of expansion. Metro institutions with regional campuses, saw growth of 24.3% over this period and counted for 381,355 students out of 668,665 in 2013.

Institutions without regional campuses saw the fastest growth, with their numbers increasing by 33.3%, admittedly off a low base.

The marked variation in State and Territory aggregate outcomes reflects the nature of the low SES measure which in large part (two-thirds weighting) is determined by the SES of the postcode of student home addresses and relies on a national ranking of postcodes using ABS household census data to determine an area’s SES (the Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas or SEIFA measure).

Under this ranking, states such as Victoria and Western Australia have smaller low SES populations from which students can be drawn simply because they have fewer low SES postcodes in the national ranking.

Lim and Gemici (2011, 3) have reported that SEIFA misclassifies around 40% of individuals with regards to SES. In contrast, it performs reasonably well in reporting aggregate participation in Higher Education for low SES students, but it has likely led to an under-estimate of the impact of SES on participation.

Two of the most populous states, New South Wales and Queensland, recorded growth under the national average. Western Australia (31.4%), the Northern Territory (37.3%), and Tasmania (40.5%) saw much faster expansions off relatively smaller initial bases.

Considering Regional Students in the HE reforms - we all here understand the importance of regional universities, the need to enable students to be able to study locally, as many students have limited mobility due to a number of reasons.

We need a mechanism to support equity students to attend Higher Education. Currently HEPP funded activities has worked in this space of raising aspirations, providing access and support for such students.

Current research we have undertaken “Regional Secondary School Students Study Choices: Planning Future Directions” shows:

Out of 698 students 249 had University Aspirations in the Goldfields region – 249 or one third planning to go to university and do ATAR to get there – 240 student responses to answer this question: Do you have some idea about the courses you might like to do at university make at least ?? Selections from the list. Highest was chosen by Year 9 Science (55); Health (48) and other (38) and Year 10 Science (57); Health (52) and other (46). With totals Science 112 and Health 100 and other 84 for Year 9 and Year 10 students. Unsure = low degree of uncertainty in preferences (5 students in Year 9) and (22 students in Year 10) = 27.

Regional areas compared to city areas have a lower participation rate in Higher Education, and what we have found, many from the regions are taking the GAP year to prove they are independent and then these students do not go on to study.

Here is a view of the same Year 9 and Year 10 students Post Year 12 destination predictions (page 7 of paper).

We know there are many factors affecting regional participation in higher education, including issues related to “rurality and rural culture; secondary school education; family [expectations]; distance; accommodation; finances; transition and emotional support; pathway choice.

Scholarship packages have to be a combination of support for students to enable them to be supported where ever they choose to study.

The student needs to be a the ‘centre’. Support needs to be at the beginning but also along the educational journey.

We need a scholarships scheme that it is not only the cost of study itself, you need to take care of travel, books, food, living expenses so we are so pleased to hear the Government is proposing a “nationally administrated, targeted and delivered’ scholarship scheme.

On the 11\textsuperscript{th} Feb at the University of Canberra we will be presenting the forum on \textit{Equity Scholarship Provision in Australian Universities: Insights and Directions}, which is an open discussion forum about equity scholarships.

In conclusion, the current funding system is delivering high quality education to more students from diverse backgrounds. It is important to ensure that access to higher education is not artificially limited and that there is a place for every person with the desire and ability to participate.

We need to provide alternative pathways for students with the required skills but who are under-prepared, due to circumstances beyond their control. We need to maintain the already high quality of our higher education system, by further improving the student attrition and success rates. For some students, these pathway programs provide the best preparation for university study and extending access to these places will help increase their chances of success, rather than enrolling directly into a bachelor degree.

There is important work still to be done from a student equity perspective, and the need for all universities to be held accountable to their social contracts.

There are still certain groups of students experiencing barriers to participation despite efforts taken by universities to remove these barriers.

**Students must be at the centre of whatever we do.**

**We need to offer a mechanism for support of equity students to attend higher**
We strongly support a scholarships scheme that is “nationally administered, targeted and delivered’.

The National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE) is a Centre working in the equity policy, research and practice space and we will continue to promote the great work that is happening in our universities currently but also what needs to happen. We welcome you to come and explore our website and join our subscriber list.
Thank you for this opportunity to discuss the achievements, challenges and future directions and I look forward to sharing in the outcomes of today’s forum.

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