Transcript – NCSEHE Building Legacy and Capacity Webinar Two: Higher education participation and completion of regional and remote students

NADINE: Welcome everybody. This is Nadine Zacharias representing the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education. I'm your host for today's webinar. I'd also like to introduce Dr Cathy Stone from Newcastle University and Professor Karen Nelson from the University of the Sunshine Coast who are the co-presenters for today's Webinar.

First of all, I would like to do an acknowledgment of country which is an interesting concept in a webinar situation because we are meeting all over the country. There are currently 23 of you in the session and counting. So I am acknowledging the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation because I am in Melbourne but I guess this is represented here for all of the traditional owners and all of the lands that we're touching on today in this Webinar.

This is the second webinar in the Building Legacy and Capacity series which is a new strategic initiative by the National Centre, which I'm going to introduce briefly a bit later. Before passing over to Cathy and Karen to talk to you about the discussion and the insights from the second workshop which was held in Perth in the middle of October, the topic of today's workshop is higher education participation and completion of students from regional and remote backgrounds. As you'll see Cathy and Karen will share some insights from the workshop but we very much want to continue this conversation because we can't exactly claim that all the questions were resolved on that day.

I'd like to do a little bit of housekeeping. You will see that we have a captioner, Sharon who is live captioning for us which should be coming up on your screens. There's also a question poll at the bottom of your control panel which is on either side of your screen. I'm encouraging you to have a bit of a play with that because there's various ways in which you can resize the screens and make some things bigger than others. There's also an opportunity for you to ask questions of us. There is a drop down menu towards the bottom of the control panel where you can leave your questions and they will come through to us during the session so we can deal with any questions from your end.

There's also the opportunity if the technology doesn't work for you, to get in touch with Jane who is supporting us in this webinar. The email address is ADCET.Admin@utas.edu.au in case you have any technical glitches. We are planning to present for 30 to 40 minutes and then open up for a bit of a discussion and last time the technology worked really well for us. So we are building on that and counting on that.

I'm going to launch into it and start with a bit of an introduction to the Building Legacy and Capacity workshop series. The logic behind the concept was an aspiration by the NCSEHE board to create a strategic project to really extend the reach and build legacy of the Centre beyond the current funding period, which is to the end of next year, and to leverage NCSEHE funded research. There are some great studies as many of you would be aware have been published including in this space supporting regional and remote areas, both at university and before they get there, and we were looking for ways to work with this research and also to deepen some of the insights that were generated in a NCSEHE Forum late last year and in a conversation session we called the 10 Conversations and there were some really useful recommendations that came out of that and we wanted to work a bit more with that. We developed a format which creates productive conversation about complex issues. The combination is one of expert workshops and various dissemination of which this webinar is a really important one.

The objectives of the workshops, this workshop took place on the 17th of October, was to define a collective knowledge base informed by research and practice; to engage in strategic and action planning to guide institutional practice and future research; and develop evidence-based policy advice.

The workshops, each of them are structured around six high-level questions that framed the group discussion. I won't step through those in great detail but it was really about definitions of success; coming close to the nature of the problem; learning from current practice and research; working towards principles of good practice; identifying policy recommendations and any gaps in knowledge.

As I said, the approach is to combine expert workshops with multi-modal dissemination. Each of the workshops, the first one had nine subject matter experts. This one had 12 which approached the topic from different perspectives. We have around the same table researchers, equity practitioners and policymakers and community partners and the challenge that we threw out to them is to advance national conversation at the intersection of equity research practice and policy for the benefit of the sector. We will share this really widely. So the dissemination includes today's webinar; we are working on a publication that extends the pre-reading document that you received as part of the package. Importantly a good practice guide and recommendations for policy and research. We are also working with a professional illustrator to graphically depict the findings and we will present during a workshop at the upcoming EPHEA conference. That is it for opening comments and I'll now pass over to Cathy to take us into the content and findings and insights from the workshop. Over to you, Cathy.

CATHY: Thanks, Nadine. Hello everybody. I'm Cathy Stone. If the next slide moves on, then I can start to talk. Okay. So in terms of the workshops, one of the things we did at this particular workshop was very much look at what is the problem, what's the nature of the problem? Really the discussion is centred around the structural, institutional and policy challenges that do impact on participation and completion outcomes of students from regional and remote areas. One of the things we talked about was the fact that institutional and student characteristics that are associated with high attrition rates, in fact, reflect the characteristics and demographic profile of regional universities and that came out in the Higher Education Standards Panel discussion paper.

What that means is at regional universities there are higher proportions of equity, at risk students. Students such as regional and remote, Indigenous, low SES, online, part-time, mature age. All of whom where there are associations with lower retention rates and completion rates and the bulk of those students - or there's a higher proportion of those students at regional universities than metropolitan ones. Karen Nelson and colleagues' study brought that out clearly. We could say and Karen does say, regional institutions are in fact doing the heavy lifting in attracting students from regional and remote backgrounds and graduating them.

There is also evidence that there's an increasing flow of regional or remote students to metropolitan universities and Buly Cardak and colleagues' study showed that. There are a couple of things involved in that, that we discussed. It tends to be the relatively more privileged students from regional and remote areas who can get to metropolitan universities. Their families need to have money for them to live away from home or perhaps they're more academically able and they've got scholarships. It's only a proportion of regional or remote students that have that opportunity. As I say, it's often the more privileged.

The other issue is that if there's an increasing flow of students from regional and remote areas to metropolitan areas to study, we then are looking at a depletion of that human capital from the regions. That's an issue we need to think about that as well.

Next slide. There we go. We talked quite a bit at the workshop about the capacity of regional universities to do some really crucial things, which is managing those critical first encounters and expectations of students, addressing the very diverse and complex needs of students and building that sense of belonging that's so important. This is, as I said before, falling on regional universities more strongly than metropolitan ones. They need to have the capacity to be able to do this. Of course, they're trying to do this within a massified system and with often very tight budgets. This is quite challenging.

My study, in terms of looking at outcomes for online students and support services for online students and so on, showed that technology provides that opportunity to overcome the geographical limitations and to create supportive online spaces but there are real constraints with online study of isolation, connectivity, digital literacy and, of course, learning design is an all important factor in online learning. So students from regional and remote areas are increasingly studying online but they are facing challenges within that and unless it's done really, really well then it can just create more problems.

So we have a bit of a policy dilemma, I guess, in terms of how do we offer choice for students, so we can maximise the number of students who are able to take up the opportunity of higher education, but at the same time how do we meet the diversity of student needs? So do we focus on encouraging and supporting students to go away to study, to go away from home, to move to either larger regional areas where there's a university or to metropolitan areas, or do we focus on delivering education locally, whether we do that online, on campuses which - at campuses which are usually quite small and don't offer much choice or study hubs or do we need to look at a blended or hybrid model where a small campus can offer a broader range of courses by using more online. There's all those issues to take into account that we were talking about.

If we have the next slide, please. The other issue is around just the basic challenges within regionality. We know these are well established and structural in the way in which these challenges occur. So the obvious ones are distance and isolation. Of course, the complexity of regional and remote communities. They're not all the same. There's a lot of complexity within that space. Often the benchmark for the cost of delivery of services is urban. So not taking into account that in regional and remote areas it's much more costly to deliver services and in many regional areas, especially outer regional and, of course, remote areas, there is that scarcity of supporting infrastructure and that includes poor internet access, despite the NBN, lower capacity to offer childcare and, of course, public transport, which in many, many areas is just non-existent.

Labour markets. There's fewer employment opportunities very often in regional and remote, particularly remote areas, and then we're looking at increased pressure on families, in terms of finances, transport costs and so on. Often there's that lack of role models for higher education participation because of that intersection with the school system where there's lower Year 12 completion rates, lower rates then of students going on to university. So overall more students in regional areas are coming from families where they're first in family to go to university. Also schools can also struggle with the capacity to run the sort of co-curricular activities that metropolitan schools can more easily run. Excursions, particularly to university campuses, can be quite difficult, quite expensive. They may have to spend some days away from the school to go and visit the nearest university and that's all expensive as well as logistically quite difficult.

Work experience was something else that was raised that in regional and remote areas, getting meaningful work experience for the Year 10 and 11 students can be quite hard. The thing of 'you can't be what you can't see' if students have not been able to get that kind of experience then their aspirations cannot be fully developed, in terms of career choices and another intersection is with the VET system, particularly the underfunding of TAFE and the way in which TAFE has been allowed to really deteriorate, in terms of availability, where TAFEs are, how much they offer and in some regional areas students are looking at travelling long distances just to get to the nearest TAFE that offers a particular trade or even Diploma course that they want to do. So we've lost, or certainly we're losing, much of that pathway system too where students will go into - if they weren't thinking of going to university they'd go to TAFE and maybe they'd go to university later but there's less of that available.

Next slide, please. Okay. So how do these challenges play out in the higher education context? For both students and institutions. So we're looking at students having to relocate or commute long distances, if they're going to go away to a university and, of course, the financial and emotional costs that are associated with that. So there are student and family debt implications. I guess there's the student fee debt but on top of that families are often looking at taking out more or getting into more debt to be able to afford for a child of theirs to go away, to live on campus or wherever. Of course, young people leaving home and community, that a challenge for many, many young people. That loss of sense of place or belonging. Not necessarily wanting to go too far away from home. Being a bit anxious about going to a city when they've always lived in a rural area and that sense of isolation of being too far away from where they're studying can really quite severely impact on student's identity.

We know that there are higher rates of online, part-time and mature age students studying from regional and remote areas and that, of course, has implications for the funding needs of regional institutions because these students tend to need more and different forms of support because they have other challenges happening in their lives. I mentioned that sector before, we're looking at a lack of pathways into higher ed., especially for early school leavers and adults. Are universities then being required to bridge the gap left by the defunded VET sector? Another challenge.

Next slide, please. On top of all these challenges, we'll get to the good stuff in a minute, is the difficulty in delivery. We know that a lot of regional and remote students are studying online, or at least partially online, so that's an added difficulty but there are general difficulties anyway, in terms of ensuring that there are effective support strategies. So we have the quality of teaching and learning and the student experience which varies across different institutional levels and players. There are clear resourcing issues, in terms of both finance and staff expertise. So we need to consider the capacity and capability of institutions to effectively address the needs of their cohort and how to maintain that long-term commitment in the face of restructure which we're all familiar with.

In terms of competition with and between sectors for funding and so on. So every university is marketing its own university and while there are reasons for that and we understand the reasons, this competition can impact on the ability to deliver effective support structures across the tertiary education landscape. So perhaps we need to have a bit more collaboration because if we have that collaboration within and between institutions then maybe in regional and remote areas it becomes a bit more manageable to deliver effective support. So we need senior managers involved in that. We

need academics, professional staff working together to say, well, how do we deliver the right kinds of support to students in regional and remote areas.

Of course, in order to do that we also need a sophisticated understanding of the cohort. Evidence about who is the cohort, who makes up the cohort. We need to disaggregate our data about on campus and online students. Often it's lumped together. Many regional universities are not yet looking at the on campus cohort separately from the online cohort in terms of its demographics and needs and so on.

Lining expectations with reality of students. We're all familiar with the difficulty of so many students coming in with unrealistic or just inaccurate expectations about university and what it involves but we also need to look at the expectations of universities about the students, especially in terms of their academic and digital literacies. I think all too often universities are making assumptions that school leavers are digitally literate. Students in remote areas with poor access may not be digitally literate at all. We all know that many new students need a lot more academic preparation than they bring with them from school.

In terms of the growing numbers of online students studying, both at regional universities and metropolitan universities and living in regional and remote areas, the on-campus first mindset is increasingly unhelpful and it seems to be in the research I did indicated even when some regional universities who may have as many or more online students as on campus students, it still seems to be the case that the on-campus experience is thought about first and then oh, yes, we need to think about the online students. So that's something that we really need to look at, how can that be changed so that there's not that online campus first mindset so much?

We talked quite a bit in the workshop about how to define success. I guess we came up with a fairly pragmatic definition really. We feel that we will have achieved success in terms of equity for regional and remote students when there's parity in participation and completion rates for regional and remote students in higher education. Until there's parity, we don't have that equity.

The rider to that is because there's a higher representation of Indigenous students in regional and remote areas, we need to be achieving above parity for this particular equity group and that's part of the closing the gap agenda. An area that needs particular focus.

We will have achieved success when we have a situation where students can choose from a range of accessible university pathway options that might be in the community, including on campus, online, perhaps some sort of hybrid model of both, as I mentioned before, or they may choose to move away from home to university and in order to do that they have appropriate financial and emotional support and, I guess, part of success is that students then become equipped with the capacity for a portfolio career. So the capacity to look at undertaking over the lifetime a multitude of jobs. Some of these might be simultaneous but not just preparing them for one narrow career. So that was our definition of success that we came up with in this subject area.

Next slide, please. So if we then split that up, defining success across the student life cycle. We looked at what different points in the student life cycle can we say okay, this would be a measure of success. So we look at the pre-access stage. So before students start at university, regional and remote students. We would have achieved success when prospective students perceive higher education as an option to which they can aspire and we all know, I think, that it's the case that many, many students don't see that as an option. I mean, if they don't want to do it that's fine but it won't be success until students perceive it as an option to which they can aspire and in which they can

succeed. So it is a real option for them. If they choose not to do it, that's fine but it needs to be a real option for them.

At the access point, when students are actually entering university we will have success when students are able to make informed course choices and to have access to their course. Somehow or another. Online can help with that but that's not the total answer. At the transition stage, when they're entering and getting used to university and through those early months and year or so. School leavers can successfully make the transition to independent learning and life. So those early months is that transition really to be much more independent and moving away from a more structured system where they're basically told what to do, when to do it but to make those adult decisions.

For mature age students, this transition is successful if there are career and personal transformations for these students. We're all familiar with mature age students who initially decide to study simply for a career reason and then they find in the process that there's an enormous personal transformation that they didn't expect. In terms of ongoing participation, success means course progression. If they leave, they leave well in the sense of this is their decision to leave or what they feel are good reasons. It's not entirely negative experience for them. There are positives in that and they know they can re-engage and when they do re-engage they are supported with opportunities for them to re-engage.

Of course, completion. That means graduation, completing their course of study. Realising their vocational destinations and continuing further study as desired students are increasingly doing. That was how we broke up that defining success across the student life cycle. When there's time for questions, I will be interested to hear what your thoughts are for that. I think I've got one more slide.

One more slide. How are we going with the slides? Here we go. Measuring the success. These are just some questions really that we threw around. Do we need to look at the metrics we're using? Are the current metrics fit for purpose? What other data needs to be collected? What are we benchmarking against? One university over time? One university against others or institutions generally versus the sector? And do we measure enrolment progression of different cohorts across different status institutions and courses, the same or differently? What sort of cost benefit analyses do we need to be conducting or the wider benefits of higher education, the short and long-term outcomes? There may be benefits for a student who doesn't even complete, are we looking at those at all? What about first year out graduated compared to five, 10 years graduated, what are those outcomes? Do we need different signals of success beyond the GPA measure? These are questions that we threw around and we'd be interested in talking a bit more with you. The next slide, please.

Okay. We talked about good practice principles. What is good practice, in terms of effective institutional support? Well, it needs to be early and just in time. I think we all know that. That if it's not just in time, just sitting there waiting then students don't access it. We need to get them early and make sure that support is there at the time they need it. People rich, in that sense lots of connection. It's about connecting with people. With different members of staff, not just the teaching staff but other staff as well. It's collaborative. One thing that's really important, we felt that whatever support is offered, it's support that explicitly values regionality. So these students are feeling in any way they're less than or different from. It needs to be wholly curriculum, inclusive, embedded support so it can anticipate and remove barriers. So the support is there within the curriculum, embedded in the curriculum.

The universal cohort approach. We need to then have that understanding of the cohort, as I talked about before. Place based solutions. It's about building student's capacity, digital, academic literacies, cultural capital and, of course, to keep it success focused where the organisational structure recognises and rewards, not just the success of the individual students but the success of programs being run within its institutions that are, in fact, making a difference. In order to do that, any sorts of programs, strategies like this need to be comprehensively evaluated so we can then - so the staff running them can then have the opportunity to reflect on them and improve the practice and get into that continuous improvement cycle.

Next slide, please. Okay. This is my last one. These are the good practice case studies that we talked about that were presented for the workshop. You have copies of them in your reading material. So just a couple of examples of strategic approaches where a whole of institution approach has been taken to not only attracting but supporting regional and remote students. So the University of Wollongong with its multi-campus approach and its outreach support. James Cook, the same very much. Multi-campus university in some very remote areas and providing embedded support in many different ways for its students. University of Newcastle, same kind of thing of reaching out to regional schools and so on and all these universities have in-school programs, visiting schools and so on. University of Wollongong with its early entry program which is hugely successful with regional schools as well.

Enabling programs are terribly important and to have open access enabling programs is a significant way of equipping students with a capacity to then be successful students at an undergraduate level. So in terms of open access enabling programs, a couple of examples are UTAS's program and the University of Newcastle's open foundation program. Both of these are offered in a multi-campus way and also online so that again their reach can be more significant. Southern Cross University has been doing a lot of work with transitioning online students, in particular, with their connect and prepare program so that online students, the isolation for these online students can be diminished to a certain extent and the university of New England with its very comprehensive learning analytics program, learning analytics strategy is providing services for students by predictive modelling and targeting students who appear to be at risk through that and many different ways of reaching out to students so that they can capture them before there are problems.

Then the National Priorities Pool funding where there are five projects worth more than $750,000 in that participation completion of regional and remote students area. That is some substantial funding going into that. We know there are many, many more examples of good practice and you might be able to tell us some of these from your universities when we throw it open to questions but I'm going to hand over now to Karen Nelson who is going to talk about recommendations and move on to policy. Thanks, Karen.

KAREN: Thanks very much, Cathy. Hello everyone. I'm Karen Nelson for those I haven't had the opportunity to meet before. I'm going to bring the workshop to a close, in terms of our discussion in this webinar by focusing on the recommendations that we've identified for future practice and also recommendations for policy. It's probably fair to say that we have a lot of opportunity within our control, within our practice control, within our functional areas of our institutions and they're part of our day-to-day responsibilities.

So I'm first going to focus on those areas of practice. So certainly rethinking curriculum design. So the way that we design curriculum, are we designing it for a highly diverse student population, particularly given what we know about our students and their complex lives with multiple responsibilities? Is our traditional academic calendar of 12 to 13 weeks of two major semesters a

year, is that the best possible way for not only offering undergraduate programs but opportunities for students to engage in studies at times when it suits them and for the duration that suits them? And that certainly relates to our next point there around the duration of courses.

Is it reasonable to expect that part-time students can remain engaged over a six-year period to complete a degree or should we be offering smaller chunks of study that are transferable and setting up, deliberately setting up, those opportunities for students to transfer between institutions, in particular, when those institutions perhaps offer more local opportunities or opportunities for engaging in programs that may not be available locally to those students?

So I think when we're thinking about curriculum design, when we're thinking about our administrative structures for offering those programs and the duration of those courses or programs then I think that is something that we can be more deliberate about. I think fundamental to the way we design and offer learning opportunities is not starting with an assumption that regional and remote students are always or can be on campus. So if we start with an assumption that, if you like, attendance and particularly physical attendance in a synchronous mode is an essential for learning then we're automatically disadvantaging many, many of our students from attending and participating in that learning and having the same quality of learning experience.

So some of these recommendations really challenge the way we think and the way we approach the design and construction of our learning environment. How do we extend then that concept to some of the co-curricular services? What does peer mentoring or peer learning advising look like, if we were to transfer that to an online environment, how does that compare to synchronous or asynchronous? What does that look like, if we were to transfer that to an online or out of hours, shall we say, learning context, PASS?

I'm also very interested in the opportunities to provide learning support for our students or support for learning, as I prefer to call it, when, if you like, outside normal business hours. So most of you would be aware that teaching in most of our institutions, whether that be online or face-to-face, it does cover a very broad range of hours but the same sorts of support services aren't necessarily available. So if we were to be in a much more dynamic and student-learning centred environment the ability to provide academic skills, careers development, learning opportunities in that same sort of mode that we're providing learning is something we can talk about.

Financial concerns are an ongoing challenge for regional and remote students and I think, in particular, one of those challenges comes when students have to go on placement that extends the learning time block, if you like, over and above what they would have to do in directed learning activities. That time block when it extends, extends into those other realms of student's lives. The realms where they're having to work to live, where they have caring responsibilities, the time that it takes to travel, if they're travelling physically on to campus or between work placements and home. So thinking about how we can relieve that financial burden through perhaps offering intensive opportunities for our students and also ensuring that regional and remote students have the opportunity to be outwardly mobile and take up opportunities for overseas study.

Often those constraints, those structural constraints, of distance, time and affordability that Cathy raised earlier about the challenges that face regional and remote students hamper our students who are in these regional areas taking up those opportunities. That perhaps metropolitan students are more able to take up just because of the context. So I'll move on to the second set of recommendations for future practice now.

The first one of those, access to co-curricular opportunities. The university of New England does have a very wonderful program where students are able to learn in their local community but, in particular, augment their formal learning through opportunities for credit that are available in the local community. I think that's one of our really beautiful good practice examples. We really need ways of making our regional and remote cohort visible. So most dominant in the sector is the view of students who are young, full-time, living at home and within easy access, so public transport facilities, have access to high speed bandwidth internet and almost all of those students having really close distance relationship to their university. So we need a way of making the alternate students and those personas of our regional students visible in a way that starts to break down those assumptions about what a university student looks like.

I think the more we can engage our students as co-creators it gives our students in regional and remote students, in particular, the opportunity to bring their strengths, their expertise, their views, their challenges into the creation of our learning opportunities and into curriculum design into how learning supporters or support for learning is offered in alternate time spaces.

One of the big opportunities, I think we have for future practice, is to think about how we can use existing infrastructure. Infrastructure that exists in regional and remote areas and often there isn't much but what there is often are schools and public libraries and how can we harness those facilities in ways of increasing the access through internet provision, increasing the social opportunities for our students to come together and learn at times and in places that are close to where they are.

So I'm going to move now to recommendations for policy and there will be three slides. The first two slides really focus on if the current reform bill is passed by the Senate, and most of you will be aware that a couple of weeks ago the Senate declined to pass this bill, I've heard recently from EPHEA, the equity practitioners group, there's some possibility that the Government is looking at alternative ways of getting pieces of the reform bill through and also looking at which pieces they don't need to legislate. So there is a possibility that we'll be seeing bits of this bill back again in various forms. So it's worthwhile just, I think, pausing for a moment to look at those possible scenarios.

So in terms of the current reform bill, one of the challenges around the reform bill is the prospect of performance-based funding. The idea there was there would be an extraction of 7.5 per cent of institutional income that would go into a centralised bill that would be redistributed into institutions based on their performance, most likely around retention rates/attrition rates. So the best case scenario there is that we are able to look at rewarding positive learning and teaching outcomes for remote and regional students but this, of course, requires benchmarking within each institution to ensure that we're tracking outcomes for those students and particularly focus on initiatives to ensure the outcomes of those students at parity, as Cathy already said, with all other students.

So we're suggesting that institutions would be looking at KPIs for retention rates for equity students and improvements over time should be part of that reporting. I imagine most of the institutions that are involved in the webinar today have some sort of KPI reporting along that line. Some of the challenges around that is the time lag with the national data. It doesn't become such a big problem if institutions are reporting and benchmarking on their own improvements and I think that's certainly something we should be aspiring to.

We're suggesting that some other KPIs may be useful, looking at the success rates and ratios for equity students and suggesting that maybe institutions would like to look at three KPIs there. I think Nadine is moving us on so we'll quickly move on to this next scenario. Moving on, Nadine, to the next slide, please. Thank you.

NADINE: There's such a lag with the slides. My apologies.

KAREN: That's okay. One of the things I've mentioned on the previous slides is around using infrastructure and so this slide really just sums up some of those recommendations for policy and there's certainly a little bit of work going on in the sector at the moment there by USQ under an MPP project to look at the use of public libraries in small communities as a way of providing that very close to learner support and both in people rich support but also high speed Internet bandwidth, so I think we can move on from that to the next slide, which looks at a second scenario and that would be if the current reform bill isn't passed and I think at the time when we were putting these slides together it wasn't quite clear whether the bill would go through at all or not and certainly this idea of chopping it up into component parts has been on the cards for quite a while, and I think some of these recommendations here, sort of fit within that more segmented view of perhaps response.

So we certainly think that there's an opportunity for those within our institutions who negotiate institutional funding agreements to negotiate additional funding support for regional and remote students, in particular, that can play out in the sub-bachelor load areas. It's still currently capped. We think the opportunity to offer smaller chunks of learning, both as entry pathways and as exit pathways are absolutely critical to provide regional and remote students with complex lives the opportunity to leave with a transferable qualification, rather than leave with a debt and an incomplete qualification. It's not to say that we aspire only to have regional and remote students leaving with sub-degree qualifications but certainly a recognition that some qualification does have an employment advantage and if it's transferable then those students are better off with something in their bag.

Certainly income support is a problem. Finance is one of those challenges. If there's any influence that we can provide, the income support for regional and remote students is critical. We certainly would like to see a different sort of arrangement happening between VET and higher education and the ability for students to move seamlessly between those two sectors, I think, is certainly - would be an advantage, both from VET to higher education and higher education to VET. We think it would be useful instead of taking some savings the 7.5 per cent to look at a positive approach and that is reinstate the learning and teaching performance fund, perhaps to the quilt outcomes. A lot of you will know that regional universities as a whole do differently but also particularly well in providing high quality student learning and high quality student experience outcomes and we'd like to see that - we think that recognising that would have a positive outcome.

I think one of the benefits of a webinar like this and the workshops that led up to it is that it does provide a platform for sharing effective practice and I think some attention in the policy sector around how we would continue with that platform for sharing practice is incredibly important and the National Centre, of course, in providing that role in the absence of a national learning and teaching body.

We really would like to see the educational investment fund repurposed, I suppose, rather than to the disability insurance scheme but to invest in connectivity and bandwidth. It's really a utility for regional areas and some investment in that utility would be beneficial, not only to learning and teaching in universities but to those regional economies. Cross sector collaboration, I think I've mentioned that already in terms of VET but not the least of our challenges is certainly around infrastructure. So I said at the beginning of these segment of slides that there are some things within our control and there are certainly a whole lot of public policy and structural issues that impair the ability of our students to fully engage in and optimise their opportunity within higher education and

to be really effective the response, I think at this policy level, shouldn't only just be focused on what institutions can do but what we need to do in the broadest sphere and the public policy sector.

So there's just a little in closing that we recognise on the next slide that there are still some gaps in our knowledge and there are some gaps in the information sharing ability. So we certainly think it's useful for subgroups to illustrate their diversity and Louise Pollard has certainly done a wonderful job in extrapolating the richness, I guess, of the regional and remote cohort in her project work. We think it would be useful to link student data to relevant Centrelink data and this is because those markers of equity sometimes, are not always, easily accessible and better access and better knowledge about who our equity students are and the multiple levels of disadvantage that they face would enable targeted much better targeting of support to those students.

We think this idea of personas would help the sector as a whole, visualise the diversity of the student cohort. We would like to see, if possible, different ways of actually attributing credit for success. So if a student starts - say at my university, the University of the Sunshine Coast, but they moved to a different university to complete their degree, then that is actually a good thing for that student. However, in terms of my university, it looks like attrition. So we would like to see better dynamic tracking of students over time and across sectors to show that different institutions are contributing to the overall success of those students over time and the CHESSN is certainly the tool for enabling that tracking and much good work has already been done with the CHESSN but getting the actual data of that tracking at a student level is very difficult. So we would like to, we think, useful to have that information more at the fingertips of institutions.

So with that I'll hand back to Nadine to facilitate questions and comments from the participants. Thank you.

NADINE: Thank you so much, Karen and Cathy, for this terrific and engaging presentation. We have five minutes left for questions. I'll start us off, Gabrielle O'Brian submitted a question that can kick off a conversation and other people might want to put in their questions into the question pod. I think in the light of time we stick with that rather than trying to generate discussion. The question is what might be the potential of virtual reality as a method to bring the campus and occupations to students in rural areas. She's referring to Erica Southgate' Fellowship project that looked into the opportunity for that. Cathy or Karen, do one of you want to respond to that?

CATHY: I can start off with e are response. I think there is great potential for that. In fact, the University of Wollongong has been doing some work in that as part of the AIME program where they developed some software where they could go out to regional and remote areas where they had external students take them through this very engaging, sort of, on campus orientation remotely and then they worked - students can log on to it from all different areas. I think that it does have potential. I know Erica has done a lot of work in this area, virtual reality. I think anything that does help to reduce that sense of isolation and increase the sense of belonging to university campus is great.

Of course, the drawback is the need, the digital needs, the bandwidth required and the good internet and those sorts of things. I suppose I'm a great believer in having a multiple approach to encouraging a sense of belonging to distance or online students. That certainly is one way and I think we need to look at lots of tools to help students feel that sense of belonging.

KAREN: I might add to that, I agree with Cathy wholeheartedly that we need a range of tools in our kit bag. One of the disadvantages of VR is it's a highly individual and personal experience. I think it has a place and I'd like to think of that as a place as somewhere on a spectrum of all sorts of visualisation and simulation activities from what might be proxies for real world experiences through to individual and group based simulation activities which may or may not be technology mediated.

NADINE: Yep. Terrific. I got another question and we'll make that the final one. TAFE NSW - this is from N Bardon. TAFE NSW are investing in mobile units or MTUs to provide real learning environments for regional or remote students. In my experience it has been very useful to break down a learning program into practical learning tasks and other learning tasks which may not need practical products for learning. So it's a comment more than a question. Does either one, Cathy or Karen, want to respond to this comment? Are you aware of some mobile training units?

CATHY: I'm not aware of those but it sounds great. I'm not aware of it so I can't really comment.

NADINE: Karen?

KAREN: I'm not aware of it either. I think it's similar to the idea we were talking about making the learning opportunity available and accessible - close to where the learners are, whether the training unit could have a form that is suitable for higher education is interesting. I certainly know Charles Darwin University uses a similar sort of approach but I think mostly with their VET programs but it's all part of the spectrum, I think, of the opportunities we should explore if we're serious about having a higher education system and participants in it that are from our regional and remote areas at the same rates as from our metropolitan areas

NADINE: Thank you. This is terrific. I'm very conscious of time. One final comment I'm going to make is that today's slides and also the transcript and the recording of the session today will be made available on the NCSEHE website post-webinar so you can download it and recap or share it with colleagues and help us disseminate the insights that came from the workshop beyond this immediate webinar audience. In closing, I would like to thank Cathy and Karen again. This is a service those two really undertook for the sector and for this community and on behalf of NCSEHE, I'd like to thank them wholeheartedly for that. We were privileged to draw on the experience and knowledge and insight, not only of Cathy and Karen but of 10 other people which was a terrific day in Perth and we will spread the word at the EPHEA Conference as well. If you want to hear about career development for students from low SES and regional and remote backgrounds, come to that session and we'll share some of the insights there.

There will also be two more workshops and webinars in 2018 and we will keep you posted on those on the NCSEHE website. For today, I'm saying goodbye and thank you all for tuning into this Webinar and have a really great afternoon. Bye for now.