BUILDING LEGACY AND CAPACITY WORKSHOP TWO

Higher education participation and completion of regional and remote students

Summary of Outcomes and Good Practice Principles

Make tomorrow better.

Setting the Scene for the Building Legacy and Capacity Workshop Series

About the Building Legacy and Capacity Workshop Series

The Building Legacy and Capacity Workshop Series is a strategic initiative by the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE) to explore in depth four topics chosen from the '10 Conversations' conducted during the NCSEHE Forum in November 2016. This new strategy aims to further extend the NCSEHE's capacity in synthesising, codifying and disseminating learnings from research and practice and use them to inform future initiatives, studies and policy.

The objectives of the workshops are to:

- define a collective knowledge base informed by research and practice
- engage in strategic and action planning to guide institutional practice and future research
- develop evidence-informed policy advice.

Each workshop consists of a small group of 10-12 participants, including researchers, practitioners, policymakers and community partners, who contribute their insights as subject matter experts. The workshops are structured around high-level questions which frame the group discussion. Instead of reviewing the details of individual research reports and case studies included in this publication, workshop participants are encouraged to draw on these insights and experiences to advance a national conversation at the intersection of equity research, practice and policy. The outcomes of the discussions will be shared widely across the sector, including via webinars, written materials and professional illustrations.

Workshop Two:

Higher education participation and completion of regional and remote students

The second workshop in the series put a spotlight on the higher education participation and completion outcomes of regional and remote students. While strategic efforts to address the lower participation and completion rates of regional and remote students are hardly a greenfield site for Australian universities, there has been renewed interest by the Australian Government, namely an Interdepartmental Committee on Access to Higher Education for Regional and Remote Students, budget announcements of targeted scholarships and eight regional study hubs as well as the Government commissioned *Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education* led by Emeritus Professor John Halsey.

It is clear that regional and remote students, as well as regional higher education institutions, face structural challenges that impact participation and completion outcomes. The 2017 Higher Education Standards Panel discussion paper found that institutional and student characteristics associated with higher attrition rates reflect those of regional universities and their students. At the same time, regional institutions still do the heavy lifting in attracting students from regional and remote backgrounds to higher education and graduating them, notwithstanding an increasing flow of regional and remote students to metropolitan universities.

For equity practitioners, researchers and policymakers, there remain questions about the nature of the problem and the best ways to support people in regional and remote locations to access and succeed in higher education:

- How can universities successfully mitigate the structural challenges faced by their (potential) student cohort, especially regional institutions which themselves suffer from systemic disadvantage?
- How do universities create both flexibility and consistency in the student experience for an increasingly diverse cohort?
- Do these strategies work for Indigenous students who make up a significantly larger share of regional and remote cohorts than metropolitan ones?
- How do institutions manage critical first encounters, clarify expectations, address the diverse and often complex needs of students and create a sense of belonging in a massified system looking for further efficiencies?

- Should policy approaches focus on creating scale and critical mass or on delivering local support to smaller and more remote communities?
- Is it possible to move beyond geographical limitations to create supportive, technology-enabled third spaces?

In trying to resolve these questions and work towards evidence-based advice to policymakers and practitioners, this workshop brought together a group of subject matter experts to consider the topic from different and various perspectives. These included researchers who have explored migration and completion patterns of regional and remote students, provided a more finely grained picture of the cohort and highlighted the importance of effective online delivery to any successful strategy.

At the same time, we learned from equity practitioners, and senior managers, who have designed and implemented university-wide strategies or initiatives to support students from regional and remote backgrounds in accessing and succeeding in higher education. The featured case studies provided insights into both strategic approaches and tailored interventions to improve participation and completion outcomes for students from regional and remote backgrounds.

The workshop also included the voices and insights of policymakers who have the opportunity to set the framework and provide incentives for addressing the structural barriers to equitable outcomes for individuals in regional and remote locations and the universities they choose to attend.

The workshop was structured around high-level questions which framed the group discussion:

1. What are we trying to achieve? What does effective institutional support of regional and remote students look like?
2. What do we know about the nature of the problem? Why is it difficult to deliver effective support for these students, especially if they study online?
3. What do we know from current practice and research: What worked? What didn't work? And why?
4. What are the must have elements of successful approaches? What are the common challenges and potential pitfalls?
5. How could the Australian Government, and State Governments, better support effective institutional support for regional and remote students?
6. Is there a gap in knowledge which impacts on the quality of policy and practice? If so, what kind of research is required to fill it?

The insights generated during the workshop are summarised in the following section.

Summary of Workshop Two Outcomes

The outcomes of the workshop have informed this good practice guide for the sector which includes a set of recommendations for practitioners, policymakers and future research, captured in this visual illustration.

Note: This visual is accessible in high resolution on the NCSEHE website: https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/workshop2-illo-FINAL.jpg
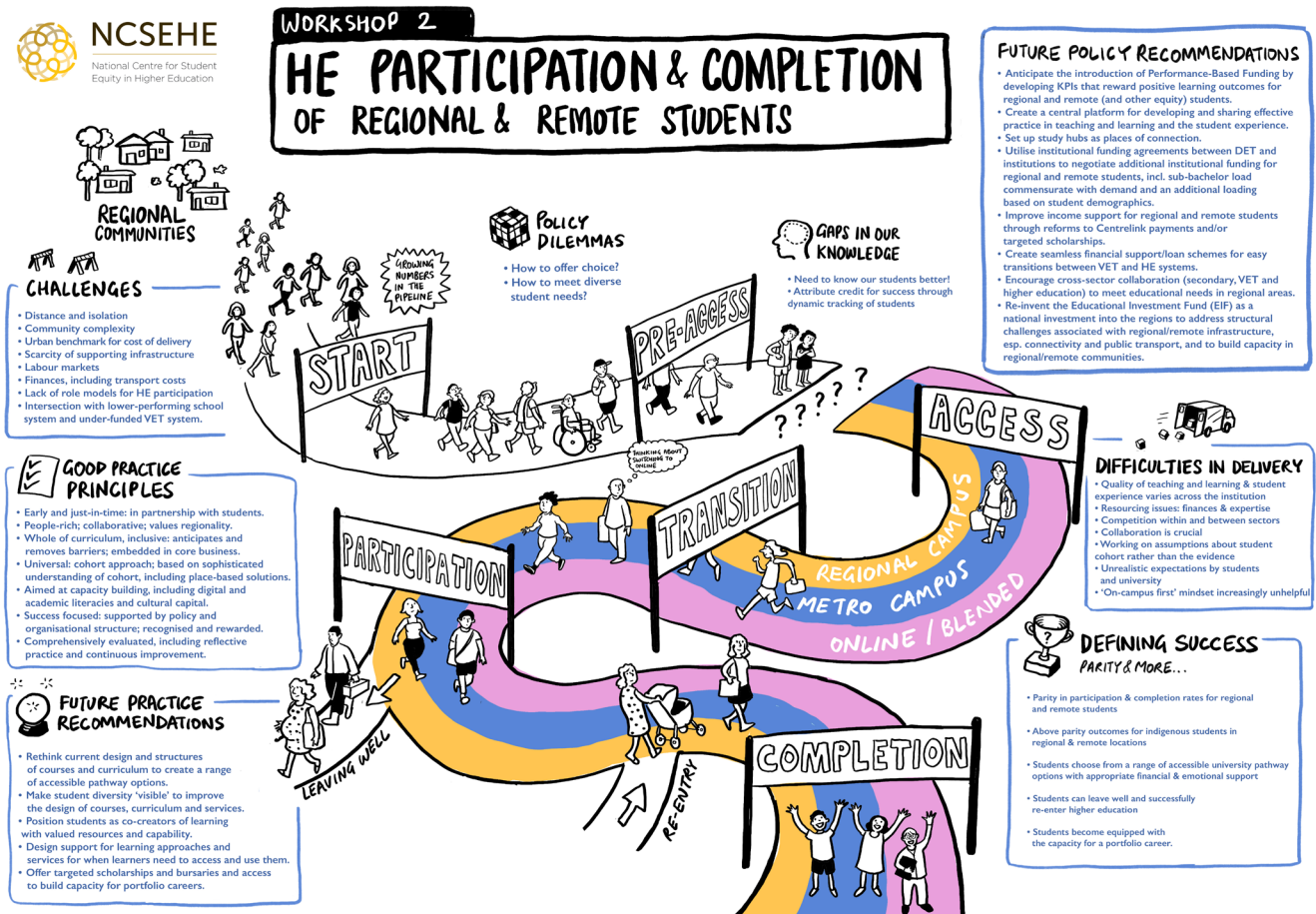
Defining Success: Parity and More

The workshop sought to articulate a definition of success with regard to higher education participation and completion of regional and remote students.

The complexity of the issues explored during the session, required multi-faceted concepts of success.

The group proposed that we will have achieved success when:

- there is parity in participation and completion rates for regional and remote students in higher education
- above parity is achieved for Indigenous students ('closing the gap' agenda) with higher representation of this cohort in regional and remote areas
- students can choose from a range of accessible university pathway options: in the community, including on-campus, online, or hybrid model of both; or moving away from home to university, with appropriate financial and emotional support
- students become equipped with the capacity for a portfolio career; i.e. equipped for a multitude of jobs—often simultaneously—over their working life.

Success also looks different across the various stages of the student lifecycle which, in an era of lifelong learning, are not necessarily linear:

Pre-Access
- Prospective students perceive higher education as an option to which they can aspire, and in which they can succeed.

Access
- Students are able to make informed course choices and can gain access to their course of choice.

Transition
- School-leavers successfully make the transition to independent learning and life.
- Mature age students achieve career and personal transformations.

Participation
- Students progress in their courses.
- If study is no longer the best path for them, students leave well and are supported to re-engage with higher education if and when they choose to return.

Completion
- Graduation, realising vocational destinations, continuing to further study as desired.
- These definitions of success drove the development of Good Practice Principles and Recommendations for Future Practice and Policy.

Good Practice Principles

These Good Practice Principles for effective institutional support of regional and remote students emerged from the discussion of existing leading practice examples:

- Early and just-in-time; in partnership with students.
- People-rich; collaborative; values regionality.
- Whole of curriculum; inclusive: anticipates and removes barriers; embedded in core business.
- Universal: cohort approach; based on sophisticated understanding of cohort; including place-based solutions.
- Aimed at capacity building, including digital and academic literacies and cultural capital.
- Success focused: supported by policy and organisational structure; recognised and rewarded.
- Comprehensively evaluated, including reflective practice and continuous improvement.

Recommendations for Future Practice and Policy

To achieve effective institutional support of regional and remote students, a set of recommendations was developed to inform future practice and policy.

Recommendations for Future Practice

1. Rethink curriculum design, academic calendars, duration of courses, possibility of hybrid approaches to studying locally (regional campuses delivering mix of online/on-campus programs) to create a range of accessible pathway options.
2. Make student diversity 'visible' to improve the design of courses, curriculum and services.
3. Position students as co-creators of learning with valued resources and capability.
4. Design support for learning approaches and services for when learners need to access and use them. Examples include:
   a. online peer mentoring, including PASS
   b. out of hours or extended support provision, especially IT and academic skills.
5. Offer targeted scholarships and bursaries, including for Work Integrated Learning (WIL) placements, intensives and international mobility, and access to co-curricular opportunities in students' local communities to build capacity for portfolio careers.

Recommendations for Institutional and Government Policy

1. Anticipate the introduction of Performance-Based Funding by developing Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) that reward positive learning outcomes for regional and remote (and other equity) students.
    a. These might consist of existing metrics, for example, success rates and ratios for equity students, as well as new metrics.
    b. New metrics should account for institutional characteristics and improvements across a range of measures at the institutional level. They could include the adjusted and 'modified for student distribution' institutional attrition rates which were calculated by the Higher Education Standards Panel as well as similar approaches in relation to performance against the Higher Education Standards Framework and QILT.
    c. Furthermore, new indicators of admission transparency and/or a new measure of value add/ distance travelled could be developed by the sector in partnership with the Department of Education and Training.
2. Create a central platform for developing and sharing effective practice in teaching and learning and the student experience.
3. Set up study hubs as places of connection:
    - Use existing spaces, for example, small regional campuses, libraries, schools
    - Provide great connectivity: fast internet, no quota limits.
    - Deliver student services on site, for example, orientation, peer support.
    - Generate engagement opportunities with parents, adult prospective students and the wider community.
4. Utilise institutional funding agreements between the Australian Government Department of Education and Training (DET) and institutions to negotiate additional institutional funding for regional and remote students, including sub-bachelor load commensurate with demand and an additional loading based on student demographics.
5. Improve income support for regional and remote students through reforms to Centrelink payments and/or targeted scholarships.
6. Create seamless financial support/loan schemes for easy transitions between Vocational Education and Training (VET) and higher education systems.
7. Encourage cross-sector collaboration (secondary, VET and higher education) to meet educational needs in regional areas.
8. Re-invent the Educational Investment Fund (EIF) as a national investment into the regions to address structural challenges associated with regional/remote infrastructure, especially connectivity and public transport, and to build capacity in regional/remote communities.

Gaps in Knowledge

The workshop also identified gaps in knowledge which should be addressed by future research to enable evidence-informed practice and policy:

1. Need to know our students better!
    - Illustrate the diversity of student sub-groups following the lead of Louise Pollard for the regional and remote cohorts.
    - Explore the production of student personas as a tool to visualise the diversity of the student cohort.
    - Link HEIMS data to relevant Centrelink data to enable the better tracking and support of students who experience financial and personal hardship.
2. Attribute credit for success:
    - Develop processes and systems to enable the dynamic tracking of students at course level, over time and across sectors and institutions to make visible all the actors contributing to student completion.

Read the final report here.

View the accompanying webinar here.

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