REMOTE STUDENT UNIVERSITY SUCCESS

An Analysis of Policy and Practice

EQUITY FELLOWSHIP REPORT

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Remote Student University Success: An Analysis of Policy and Practice

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Acknowledgements

My 2017 Equity Fellowship project's focus is on the success of students from remote Australia. The National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE) Equity Fellowship program is a valuable initiative that brings practice, policy and research together for the benefit of a more equitable higher education system. I thank the NCSEHE and the Department of Education and Training (DET) for the opportunity to participate in the program, spending the year immersed in my project and celebrating this often invisible group of students. In particular, I thank staff from the DET for supporting my placements and for assisting with the data analysis; and the team from the NCSEHE, in particular, Professor Sue Trinidad, for their constant support over the year.

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Finally, on a personal note, thank you to my beloved network of friends and family for your never ending support over this incredible journey.

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Executive Summary

All students in Australia, regardless of where they live, should be encouraged to pursue their educational goals. However, a child born in remote Australia is only one third as likely to go to university as a child born in a major city (Cassells et al., 2017). Moreover, of those who attend university, the completion rates are lower (60.33 per cent) than their regional (69.37 per cent) and metropolitan (74.87 per cent) peers (Department of Education and Training, 2017a). This study explored the principles of good practice that support the success of university students who come from remote Australia.

60.33% of **remote** university students complete their degree

69.37% of **regional** university students complete their degree

74.87% of **metropolitan** university students complete their degree
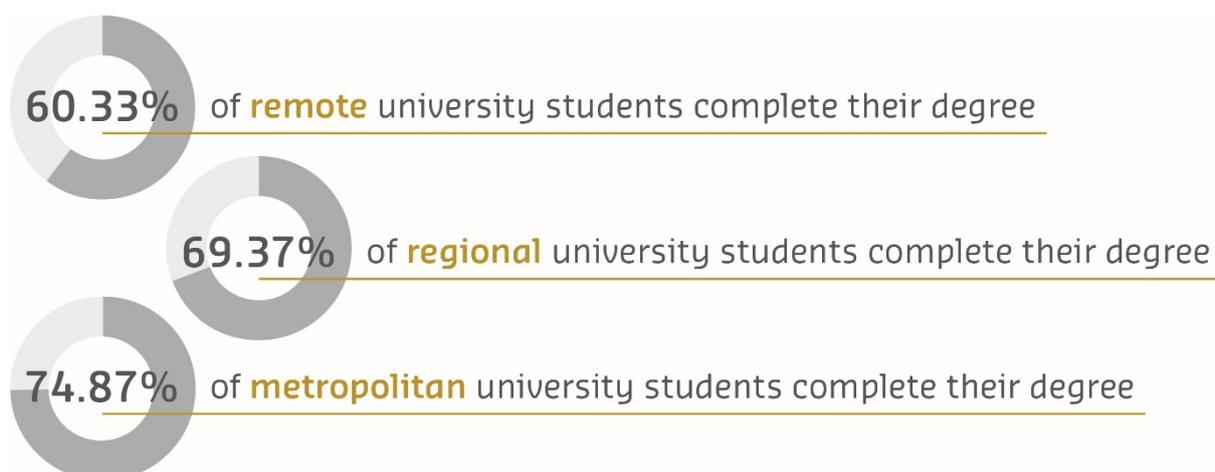
The research confirms that remote students are not just a component of a larger regional cohort, but are a distinct group in themselves. Moreover, remote students often have unique knowledge, capabilities and perspectives that are a valuable part of a wider Australian culture. There is a compelling case to explore the great potential that remote Australia, its cultures and people have to offer.

The research in this report was made possible by an Equity Fellowship in 2017 from the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE) and the Department of Education and Training (DET). It examined ways in which universities and public policy could support remote students' success. The research adopted a mixed-methods approach. Analysis of national datasets was undertaken to identify the unique characteristics of the 'remote' student cohort as a separate group, instead of it being subsumed within the broader 'regional and remote' equity category. Qualitative methods involved case studies of three universities, to identify ways in which the government and universities can better support remote student success. Interviews were conducted with 14 remote students and 13 staff members. Themes arising from these interviews, along with an examination of institutional strategies, a review of the existing literature, and a study tour of Canadian universities have led to the findings reported here.

Key Findings

Key findings emerging from this research have informed the recommendations for policy, practice and further research included below. They encourage effective strategies to enhance remote students' success.

Identifying the unique characteristics of the remote student cohort

This research identified an informative profile of the remote student cohort, highlighting the distinctive characteristics of the group and providing a more nuanced understanding of who they are. The profile of remote students varies considerably from regional and metropolitan

students, both in terms of enrolment characteristics and equity group membership, and this has implications for effective student support design and refinement of policy solutions. For example, 45.3 per cent of remote students study online, compared to 16.75 per cent of metropolitan students and 31.29 per cent of regional students. In addition, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students make up a significant proportion of the remote student population (9.59 per cent), yet this important information is concealed when regional and remote students are reported as one category (3.55 per cent).

There is also greater potential for remote students to belong to two or more equity groups (e.g. low SES, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students), and possess student characteristics that have higher risks of non-completion (online study, part-time enrolment). This can have a compounding impact on the challenges experienced by students within the cohort and universities need to respond accordingly, tailoring strategies to assist students achieve university success.

Two sub-groups were identified within the remote student profile based on whether they are studying online, or on campus. Each has their own distinct student characteristics, as illustrated below:

- **Students who relocate**
  Generally school leavers who study full time and on campus.
- **Students who study online**
  Predominantly part-time students who are mature age and continue to live in remote locations.

The profiles highlight the diversity that exists within the cohort and challenge a commonly held assumption that remote students are predominantly relocating school leavers.

Past policy and practice has primarily focused on assisting relocating students through relocation scholarships and income support. Whilst these students still need dedicated support, the online student profile represents a cohort that continues to grow. It is a cost-effective way for remote students to access higher education that does not require students to relocate. However, online students also need to be appropriately supported to achieve success while being geographically isolated. The case studies conducted revealed that there is scope for universities to adapt their support programs and teaching practices to enhance the university experiences of both groups of remote students.

Enhancing remote students university success

A key element in enhancing remote students' university success involves recognising the differences between the two sub-groups, to design effective learning and teaching strategies. While this would have a positive impact for remote students, there would be flow-on benefits for all students. A student-centred approach, designed with the complex needs of remote students as its focus, would meet support needs across the student population.

The case studies revealed that caring and committed staff members in Australian universities have implemented initiatives that support remote students. However, these initiatives tend to be piecemeal and ad hoc indicating that whole-of-institution approaches are needed to improve the long term and widespread participation of remote students. This was evident in the way individual staff provided assistance to students experiencing internet access issues whilst studying online from their home community. A whole-of-institution solution to addressing internet access would be a better strategy for all students.

Access to reliable internet is a key equity issue for education in Australia that is well recognised and was identified as an issue to address in the 2018 *Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education* (Halsey). While it is acknowledged that investment has been made to improve connectivity in regional and remote areas, the Australian Government needs to undertake urgent action to address this issue systematically, for the

benefit of remote communities across Australia. Universities also need to adopt policies that recognise the challenges facing students studying in remote communities.

Universities could also enhance remote students' sense of belonging to institutions by strengthening and celebrating their relationships with remote Australian communities and organisations. Actively promoting students from urban campuses to experience engagement in remote Australia would provide them with a rich learning experience, especially if remote students took a lead in mentoring their urban peers.

Principles to Effectively Support Remote Student Success

The key findings of the Fellowship have led to the development of the following principles that will guide universities and the government in enhancing remote students' university success:

1. **Know your students: recognise diversity across the student cohort.**
2. **Support for students across the student life cycle.**
3. **Collaborate: in the classroom, across institutions, and in the community.**
4. **Celebrate and value remote Australia: in the classroom, through co-curricular activities, and across institutions.**
5. **Recognise the challenges associated with geographical isolation through university and government policy.**
6. **Provide financial support to those who need it, when they need it.**

Good practice is present in universities across Australia, as detailed within this report, but improvements can be made. While the focus of these principles is on success of remote students, they would not be the only beneficiaries; the whole student population would also benefit. Enacting these principles requires action across practice, policy and research.

Fellowship Recommendations

Supporting remote student success requires a multi-faceted and nuanced response. To achieve this outcome, the following recommendations have been developed from the Fellowship findings and principles.

Practice

It is recommended that universities:

- Develop a better understanding of the diversity within the student cohort and communicate it effectively across the university.
- Be responsive in the design of learning and teaching strategies and student experience programs, recognising complexities within the remote student cohort.
- Enhance the presence of Indigenous knowledges and cultures across the student experience, drawing on Indigenous leadership, research and best practice program design when developing and implementing programs that support remote student success.
- Implement strategies to maintain engagement with remote students who defer an offer or take a break from study.
- Enhance the links between academic and co-curricular programs, embedding activities that are traditionally outside the classroom, into the curriculum.
- Cultivate partnerships with organisations in remote Australia to create valuable learning and enrichment opportunities for students.
- Explore the opportunity of working across institutions to create student learning activities that showcase the value of working and living in remote Australia through the curriculum and through co-curricular activities such as volunteering, work experience and practicums.

- Refine relevant university policy to recognise internet connectivity challenges facing students studying in remote Australia.
- Introduce bursaries for online students experiencing financial challenges (full-time and part-time), recognising the cost involved with attending compulsory intensive units on campus; and completing practicums.

Policy

It is recommended that:

- DET policy and programs recognise remote students as a distinct equity group (separate from regional students), acknowledging challenges associated with geographical isolation.
- DET and Department of Social Services (DSS) focus funding on supporting remote students, having a flexible approach that recognises the diversity that exists within the remote student cohort (online and relocating).
- Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) funding model be refined to prioritise outreach in remote areas and recognise the real cost of delivery.
- Reliable internet access is immediately recognised as an equity issue.
- A universal student indicator be developed and implemented enabling longitudinal analysis of remote students' experiences across all levels of education.

Research

It is recommended that:

- Longitudinal and cohort studies specifically designed to track the success of remote students over extended periods are undertaken.
- Research is conducted on the cumulative impact of remoteness with other equity groups and student characteristics such as part-time, online and mature age.
- Further research into the remote (and sub-groups within) student experience is undertaken, given the high first year attrition rates.
- Further research is undertaken into the reasons why remote students leave the sector, not to return.

1. Introduction

Education has the power to transform lives, and all students, regardless of where they live, should be supported to pursue their educational goals. This report presents outcomes of a 2017 Equity Fellowship from the NCSEHE that focused on remote students' participation in higher education, exploring issues relevant to these students and identifying ways in which they can be supported more effectively to succeed. For the purpose of this research, success is defined as students achieving (and exceeding) their educational goals.

Regional and remote students are one of the six equity groups that are prioritised in Australian education policy, research and practice. However, when 'regional and remote' are viewed as one, we tend to lose sight of the diversity within the group. It is important to recognise that the challenges facing remote students differ to those of regional students. Students in remote Australia are among the most educationally disadvantaged in the nation. This is illustrated by the Map of Educational Advantage in Australia (Figure 1) which highlights degrees of educational advantage across Australia. The extreme level of educational disadvantage facing remote communities is largely a result of geographical isolation, as they are further removed from many of the services and resources that many students take for granted.

Remote students studying at university in Australia complete their studies at a significantly lower rate than regional or metropolitan peers (60.33 per cent, compared to 69.37 per cent for regional and 74.87 per cent for metropolitan students) (Department of Education and Training, 2017a). This high rate of attrition is detrimental to the individual, their family and community and exacerbates negative attitudes towards higher education in home communities. Limited research exists that examines the challenges specifically facing remote students. A systemic review of the policy drivers and institutional initiatives that influence the success of students from remote regions has been neglected. Accordingly, the overarching purpose of this Fellowship was to make recommendations with regard to policy, practice and research to improve remote student university success.
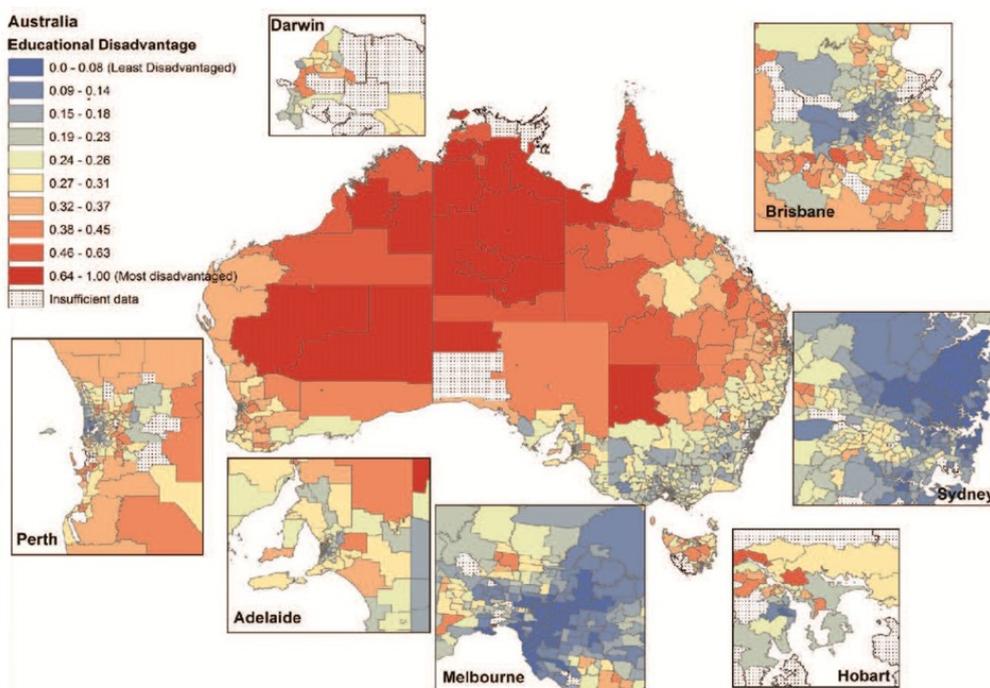
Figure 1: Map 1 — Educational advantage in Australia
Source: (Cassells et al., 2017)

2. Background

Extensive research exists into the student experience in Australia, including many studies that have had a focus on regional education. When exploring the various aspects associated with remote student success it is important to recognise the foundation that already exists. Of relevance to this research is how remoteness is defined and remote students are classified; and the key messages from existing literature that explore how the broader regional and remote cohort is supported to have a successful student experience.

The importance of further research focused on remote education is reaffirmed by the recent national focus on reviewing regional and remote education. In 2015, a joint departmental investigation led by Senator Bridget McKenzie examined the obstacles experienced by regional and remote students engaged in higher education (McKenzie, 2015). Following this, in 2017 an Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education was commissioned (Halsey, 2018). This was "*part of the Australian Government's commitment to improve the education of country students so they can reach their full potential and participate in Australia's economy*" (Department of Education and Training, 2017b). Submissions and discussions with experts and community representatives were held throughout 2017.

2.2   Defining Remoteness in Australia

Australia has been classified into regions by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), based on the level of geographical isolation faced by the community. This is represented visually by the map illustrating degrees of remoteness across Australia (Figure 2).
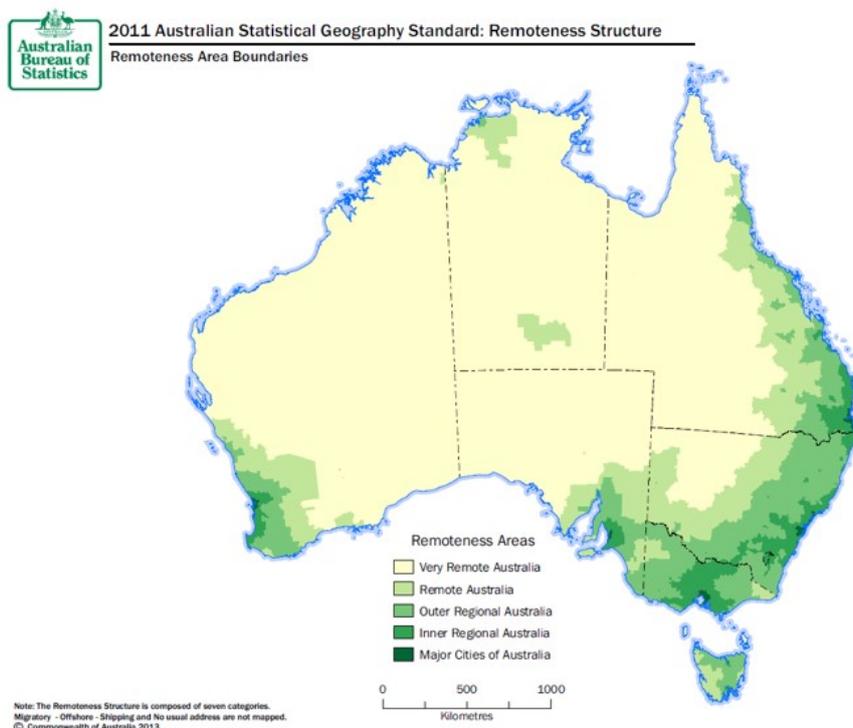
Figure 2: Map 2 — Remoteness areas across Australia

The DET uses the ABS 2011 Australian Statistical Geography Standard: Remoteness Structure to define remoteness. It is calculated using a broad range of ABS social and demographic statistics and divides each state/territory into regions on the basis of their access to services including health and education (Pink, 2011).

It is built using Statistical Area Level 1 (SA1) regions that are generally the smallest unit available to isolate census data and have an average population of 400 people per SA1 region (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016b).

While the ABS have categorised remoteness into five levels, for the purpose of this Fellowship, inner regional and outer regional have been combined, as have remote and very remote. This is largely due to how data is being extracted from the DET's Higher Education Information Management System (HEIMS).

In 2016, whilst the DET's definition of remoteness remained the same, a new measure for how students are identified and classified was introduced. Prior to 2015, students were classified as being remote, based on their permanent home address at the time of enrolment at the beginning of the academic year. In 2016, this measure was complemented with a new measure where students were classified as remote based on their permanent home address at the time they first commenced study.

Based on these measures, and together with regional students, remote students are classified as an equity group, recognising that they are underrepresented in Australian higher education.

2.3 Support for Remote Students in Australian Higher Education

A Fair Chance for All (Department of Employment Education and Training, 1990) stipulated six distinct groups of society that were underrepresented in higher education. One of the six identified groups was '*students from rural and isolated areas'*, now more commonly referred to as regional and remote students. The inclusion of remote students as an equity group since this time has resulted in the development of government funded initiatives designed to support their access and participation. Longitudinal data has also been collected to assess the effectiveness of this significant government investment.

Since the *Review of Australian Higher Education* (Bradley et al., 2008) and the introduction of the demand driven system in 2012, the Australian Government and universities have invested significant resources into addressing the low access and participation rates for low socioeconomic status (SES) students, some of whom are located in regional and remote communities. While there has been improvement in the access of students from low SES areas overall, there has been little to no improvement in access for students specifically from regional and remote Australia (Koshy, 2017) as illustrated in Figure 3.
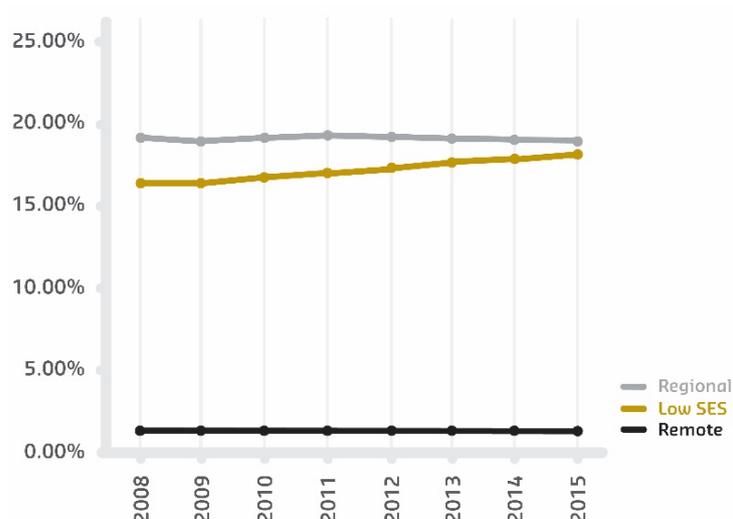
Figure 3: Student equity enrolment proportions, Table A providers (2008-2015)

In 2016, remote student participation in higher education remained at only 0.8 per cent, yet the remote and very remote share of the Australian population was 2.07 per cent. The cohort remains significantly underrepresented in higher education, despite its inclusion, along with regional, as one of the identified equity groups. Specific policy that recognises the distinctiveness of the cohort is required, despite the relatively small size of the cohort.

2.4   The Student Experience of Regional and Remote Students

As a consequence of regional and remote students' underrepresentation in higher education, significant research has been conducted in Australia on the university experience of regional and remote students across all stages of the student life cycle, recognising the complexities that exist in providing effective support.

Preparation for university

Recent research commissioned by the NCSEHE outlines the impact lower educational attainment and parental expectations in regional Australia has on university aspirations and expectations (Cardak et al., 2017, National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, 2017).

In addition, regional and remote students do not have the same access to resources or informed advice regarding admissions processes or options available to them post school graduation (Harvey et al., 2016). Recent research released by the Career Industry Council of Australia (2017) also shows that career practitioners are among the most significant influencers on student career planning. However, many regional and remote schools do not have dedicated and qualified career advisers or access to resources that support students to make informed decisions regarding their post-secondary education.

University transition

Students relocating for study face particular challenges associated with transition as a result of time pressures, logistical issues associated with relocation, homesickness and culture shock (Burke et al., 2017). During this initial transition students may experience higher rates of mental ill health and psychological distress (Orygen, 2017).

Experience at university

Regional and remote students, especially students who relocate, may experience significant financial pressure while attending university (Naylor, Baik & James, 2013; Freeman, Klatt & Polesel, 2014). The *Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education* found that the cost of university accommodation will range from $25,000 per annum for university accommodation to $6-7000 per annum for a private rental (Halsey, 2018). Students are more likely to work and have limited time to participate in co-curricular and social activities, which can add more pressure and strain on their studies (Richardson, Bennett & Roberts, 2016; Burke et al., 2017). Students are more likely to face challenges associated with academic preparation (Devlin & McKay, 2017), and may lack the resources and confidence required to access available support.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students also have additional cultural considerations which can impact their time at university (Frawley, Larkin & Smith, 2017). Relocating can involve challenges associated with moving off-country (Evans, 2017) and students may be required to return home more regularly in order to participate in important cultural activities (Behrendt et al., 2012). The role of family and friends is also paramount in supporting students during transition and in achieving university success (Frawley et al., 2017) as students are more likely to withdraw from study in their first year (Nelson et al., 2017).

Recognised factors that contribute to the success of students at regional universities have also been identified (Devlin & McKay, 2017). Factors not already discussed include access

to reliable technology, empathetic staff who understand the complex needs of students, and an inclusive approach to teaching and learning.

The research acknowledged here has helped provide valuable insight that has guided Australian universities in the implementation of programs and initiatives that enhance the university experience of regional and remote students. Significant research has also been conducted into effective principles to support the broader student community that needs to be considered when implementing effective support for remote students.

Student experience in higher education

While no Australian literature exists primarily focused on supporting remote students to thrive and succeed at university, an extensive body of research has focused on different aspects of the student experience in Australian universities.

Student transition can be challenging for many Australian university students, with many universities having implemented a suite of activities focused on the first year experience. *Articulating a Transition Pedagogy First Year Curriculum Principles* (Kift, 2009) outlines key principles of how the curriculum can be enhanced to support student success as '*it is within the first year curriculum that students must be inspired, supported, and realise their sense of belonging'.*

The importance of *belonging* is also identified as a being one of four critical psychological mechanisms that facilitate student engagement and success. The other three outlined in the *conceptual framework of student engagement* are *academic self-efficacy*, *emotion* and *wellbeing* (Kahu & Nelson, 2017). The framework also outlines the structure and psychological influences that impact the different aspects of student engagement. It also explains how the negative past experiences of '*non-traditional'* students can negatively impact their engagement and success but outlines the importance of activating the four key psychological mechanisms outlined above.

Through Dr Cathy Stone's 2016 Equity Fellowship *Opportunity through Online Learning*, the *National Guidelines for Improving Student Outcomes in Online Learning* were developed (Stone, 2016). They highlight the importance of a university-wide approach that recognises diversity within the student cohort. They also recommend that teaching and learning strategies be implemented specifically for the online classroom and encourage engagement across the whole student lifecyle.

The student lifecycle (pre-access to attainment) was also used in the Critical Interventions Framework (Bennett et al., 2015; Zacharias, 2017) to frame effective equity initiative strategies and common factors contributing to program impact. While the initiatives outlined in the Framework represent a comprehensive approach to support student equity success in higher education, further refinement could improve the support required for remote students as a distinct group.

2.5   University Completion

In recent times, the DET has begun a cohort analysis of university completion rates. When examining the completion rates of domestic undergraduate students based on their geographical location, it is clear that remote students are completing university at lower rates than regional and metropolitan (Department of Education and Training, 2017a). Table 1 illustrates the status of students based on their geographical classification after a nine year period.

Table 1: Cohort analysis over nine year period, by geographical classification
Source: (Department of Education and Training, 2017a)

	Completed (in any year)	Still enrolled at the end of the nine year cohort period	Re-enrolled, but dropped out	Didn't return after the first year
Metropolitan	74.87%	4.07%	13.80%	7.27%
Regional	69.37%	4.60%	16.03%	9.93%
Remote	60.33%	5.37%	19.80%	14.47%

Note: Figures averaged over three years — three separate cohort analyses have been conducted and the results have been averaged to provide summative data across the various completion stages.

This data analysis has now been completed for three different cohorts (2005-2013; 2006-2014; 2007-2015) and the results have attracted lively debate. Many in the sector have questioned the validity of using course completion within a nine year period (Devlin & McKay, 2017; Nelson et al., 2017; Universities Australia, 2017) as it does not recognise the complexities of the student cohort. Students who do not complete within the nine year period are more likely to be part-time, mature aged, and studying online. *"It is no surprise that the students who are more likely to be juggling work and family responsibilities are also most likely not to complete….. but many of these will return to complete their studies further down the track.*" (Universities Australia, Deputy Chief Executive Catriona Jackson). When considering the remote student cohort, there remains an average of 5.37 per cent of students in the system after nine years and analysis has not yet been conducted into completion patterns of this group beyond nine years.

Despite the significant work that has already been undertaken, a gap currently exists in the literature that focuses specifically on remote students as a distinct cohort. As a result, their needs are often hidden within broader groups of students and this Fellowship aims to shed a light on this often invisible group of students.

RECOMMENDATION FOR RESEARCH

Longitudinal and cohort studies specifically designed to track the success of remote students over extended periods are undertaken.

3. Research Method

This 2017 Equity Fellowship has been guided by a single overarching research question: *What are the principles of good practice that support the success of university students who come from remote Australia?* The Fellowship used a mixed-methods research design with both qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis employed to investigate the research question.

3.1 Quantitative Data Collection and Analysis

Regional and remote students are often presented as one cohort in both research and performance reporting documents. This practice obscures the features of remote students as a cohort. The quantitative data collection involved disaggregating remote students' data and analysing the identified quantitative data from existing and available datasets that included:

- Longitudinal analysis of institutional data, since 2011, for access, participation and completion rates for remote students.
- Generation of descriptive statistics about the demographics of remote students currently studying at Australian Universities.

Analysis of these data revealed variations from the regional student data which has contributed to the development of a profile of remote students.

3.2 Qualitative Research: Case Study Analysis

Throughout the Fellowship three case studies were conducted to capture the rich detail that qualitative research offers, to add depth to the profile developed through quantitative analysis. Case studies were chosen to include staff and student perspectives and institutional documents helped establish the context of each university. The three participating institutions represent different jurisdictions and university networks, and were selected based on their relatively high population of remote students. Their selection recognises that remote students are studying at universities across Australia (regional and metropolitan) (Department of Education and Training, 2016; Cardak et al., 2017). An overview of the three institutions is below. Due to requests to remain anonymous, pseudonyms are used for universities:

- **University of the Hinterlands**
  Majority of students are enrolled online, with residential accommodation available for students who relocate to study on campus.
- **University of the Coast**
  Relatively small student population including a significant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student population, with the majority of students enrolled online.
- **University of the Metropolis**
  Large student population where the majority of students study on campus with residential accommodation available for relocating students.

The case study data collection and analysis included the following:

- Interviews with remote students to explore the challenges they faced and strategies that have impacted on their university experience (Appendix 1).
- Interviews with university staff engaged in student experience programs, with a focus on how remote students are supported within their institution (Appendix 2).
- Examination of institutional documents.

The students were identified and invited to participate by the institutions based on their permanent home address, and were deemed 'successful' because they were well advanced in their studies (Devlin & McKay, 2017).

The input of the students was important because the experiences of remote students are often missing or conflated with regional students in previous research (Li & Carroll, 2017). A total of 14 students were interviewed. Five of the students were studying postgraduate qualifications (one of whom was admitted into study based on recognition of prior experience) and nine were completing their bachelor degree (see Appendix 1 for details).

Staff perspectives were also sought with 13 members of staff (11 professional and two academic) sharing a wealth of expertise and experience, that complemented the narrative provided by remote students. These interviews focused on strategies to support remote students and staff perceptions of any limitations in delivering services to students or improvements that they could identify (see Appendix 2 for details). A limitation of all qualitative data collection is that it is a consideration of a small number of perspectives and this must be taken into account when reading the Fellowship findings and discussion.

A framework analysis (Smith & Firth, 2011) using the student lifecycle stages identified in the *Equity Initiatives Map* (Bennett et al., 2015; Zacharias, 2017), was adopted. The primary focus was on the participation stage of the student life cycle. However, students also spoke of their journey to university and where appropriate, themes regarding university aspirations and access were included.

3.3   Fellowship Approach

The need to understand the complexities within remote cohort has gained momentum throughout the year. The Fellowship has been a useful vehicle through which remote students, an often invisible group, have been illuminated.

Key activities to facilitate this have included:

- Formation of an Expert Advisory Group with expertise from policy, research and practice from across Australia (Appendix 3).
- Fellowship Symposium that brought together 110 practitioners, policymakers and researchers to discuss 'The Clever Country: the importance of investing in regional and remote students'. The event included a brief overview of the preliminary Fellowship findings and a panel discussion with expert panel members representing a range of perspectives and sectors.
- The recruitment of Associate Fellows (Appendix 4) that allowed for two practitioners from two different states and professional contexts to participate in the Canadian study tour (see Appendix 5 and 6 for Associate Fellow study tour reports and biographies).
- Study tour to visit Canadian universities in Vancouver and Alberta; and participation in the Canadian Association of College and University Student Services (CACUSS) conference; and meetings with 24 staff across all aspects of student experience with a specific focus on the support of remote students.
- Meetings with 25 Australian Government representatives (including three DSS representatives) to discuss how regional and remote students are supported by the Australian Government to access and succeed in higher education.
- Submission to the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education and a meeting with Professor John Halsey, the Independent Reviewer.
- Presentation of preliminary findings at the Students, Transitions, Achievement, Retention and Success (STARS) Conference; Society for the Provision of Education in Rural Australia (SPERA) Conference; Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE) Conference; Equity Practitioners in Higher Education Australasia

(EPHEA) Conference; and participation in the NCSEHE *Legacy Building Workshop: Higher education participation and completion of regional/remote students*.

The recruitment of Associate Fellows for the duration of the year was a unique feature of this Fellowship. Their insights added value in the development and dissemination of the Fellowship findings. Remote student success is complex and the Associate Fellows brought valuable perspectives that have helped to shape the outcomes of this Fellowship.

4. Quantitative Analysis: Shining a Light on an Invisible Cohort

The distinctive story of remote Australia is often lost when it is discussed collectively with regional Australia. This Fellowship explored characteristics of the domestic higher education student cohort, breaking the cohort down into regional and remote to determine whether the characteristics of the students remain consistent. A significant finding of the Fellowship is that they do not. The remote cohort is distinct and the findings aim to highlight this often invisible group of students.

4.1 Characteristics of the Remote Student Cohort

The analysis of national data completed as part of the Fellowship revealed a unique profile of the remote student cohort. The distinctiveness of this cohort is largely hidden when the data is presented together with regional students because remote students consist of less than five per cent of the combined student population. This is illustrated in the Figures 4 and 5, which examine different characteristics of the 2016 remote student cohort broken down into metropolitan, regional and remote, to demonstrate the differences between groups (University Statistics Team, 2017):

|	METRO	REGIONAL	REMOTE	REGIONAL & REMOTE
Total number of students enrolled (domestic students)	812,277	217,253	9,945	227,197
Portion of students studying externally/online	16.75%	31.29%	45.30%	31.90%
Portion of cohort enrolled part time	33.02%	36.47%	44.62%	36.83%
Gender: Female	56.76%	62.93%	67.85%	63.15%
Gender: Male	43.24%	37.07%	32.15%	36.85%
Portion Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students	1.18%	3.27%	9.59%	3.55%
High Socioeconomic Status backgrounds	40.90%	9.94%	6.15%	9.78%
Low Socioeconomic Status backgrounds	12.46%	30.23%	32.89%	30.35%

Figure 4: Student cohort summary (domestic students categorised by geographical region in 2016)
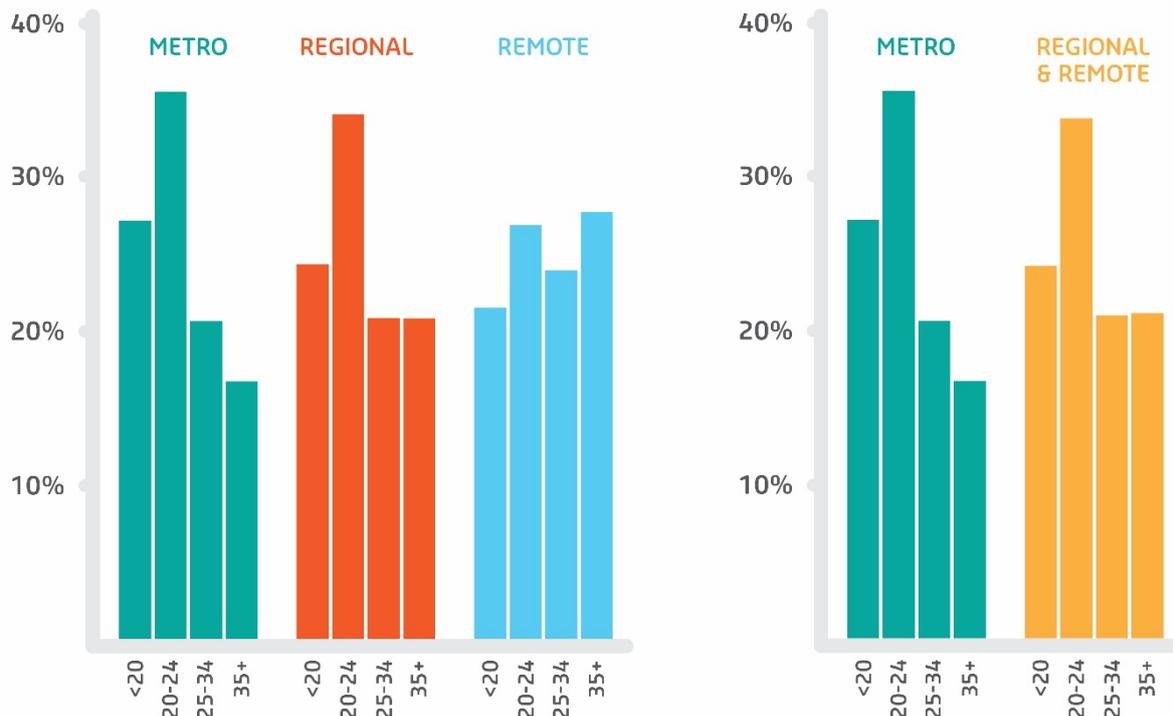
Figure 5: Age (domestic students categorised by geographical region in 2016)

The remote cohort differs to the broader regional cohort. Almost half of the remote cohort study online or part-time; two thirds of the students are women; and one third are from low SES backgrounds. Of note, 9.59 per cent of the cohort also identifies as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, but this is hidden when remote is reported collectively with regional (3.55 per cent) and is pronounced when contrasted with metropolitan Indigenous participation (1.18 per cent). The cohort has a distinct identity that needs to be acknowledged in practice, policy and research, for the benefit of the students.

The national data that was used to formulate this summary of remote student characteristics was vital in the development of the Fellowship findings. However, access to nationally comparable longitudinal data similar to that provided by the DET Higher Education Information Management System is not necessarily replicated internationally. This was evident during the study tour to Canada where data, across all levels of education, is collected on a provincial basis and they do not have access to national data or analysis that is available in Australia. Therefore a strong appreciation of the data available and the analysis provided by DET has been gained, recognising that strategies for improvement need baseline data to be able to monitor future trends.

4.2   Student Profiles within the Remote Cohort

From the analysis of enrolment characteristics and equity group membership, two distinct profiles of students have emerged when examining their cohort based on their mode of study (see Table 2, or for a complete summary see Appendix 7).

Online students and campus-based students make up 86 per cent of the remote cohort. In addition, 14 per cent of remote students study mixed-modal, and some students within the remote student cohort relocate, yet opt to study online. Neither group is represented by the two profiles presented. The two profiles represented (online students studying remotely and campus-based students who relocate) represent the majority of remote students and it is important to recognise that significant differences exist in the two profiles presented.

Table 2: Two profiles of remote students in 2016

ONLINE STUDENT (45.3% of the cohort) Studying remotely	CAMPUS-BASED STUDENT (40.7% of the cohort) Relocate for study
Part-time (73%), full-time (27%)	Full-time (79%), part-time (21%)
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student population (9%)	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student population (10%)
Age (35 and over — 45% of group)	Age (19 and under — 39% of the group)
Female (73%)	Female (60%)
Low SES (33%)	Low SES (31%)
Undergraduate enrolments (57%); Postgraduate enrolments (35%)	Undergraduate enrolments (80%); Postgraduate enrolments (16%)

Note: 14 per cent of remote students study mixed-modal and are not reflected in the two dominant profiles represented here.

An assumption is often made that remote students are predominantly relocating school leavers. However, the dominant group of remote students is online students studying remotely and this is a group of students that continues to grow (see Figure 6). Yet, when examining the recent reviews into regional and remote education, mature age students studying online were not recognised nor considered (McKenzie, 2015; Halsey, 2017). The focus was instead on schools and young people transitioning to university. It would be advisable for the Australian Government and universities to recognise this growing group of students studying online and living remotely, and develop strategies to appropriately support their university success.

Students are classified as being remote, based on their permanent home address at the time of enrolment at the beginning of the academic year. In 2016, this definition was complemented with a measure where students were classified as remote based on their permanent home address at the time they first commenced study. This is the reason for the 2016 'sudden' increase (Figure 6) in students who relocated and enrolled internally, and the small decrease in online enrolments. However, the long term upward trend for online study remains. This is a trend that is repeated for the general domestic student population, and is an indication that Australian universities need to adapt their approach to teaching and learning in response (Stone, 2016).
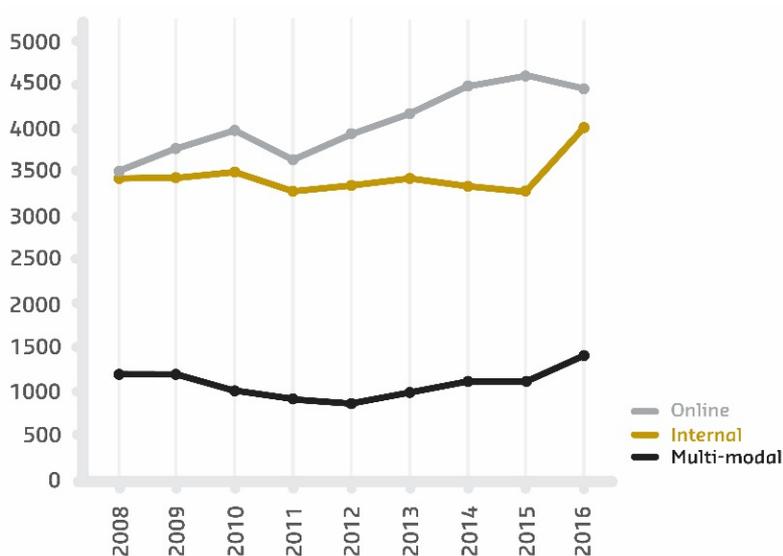

Figure 6: Remote student cohort: mode of enrolment (2008 – 2015)

A similar trend exists for regional students however regional students studying online do not experience the same degree of geographical isolation as their remote peers. This isolation, the defining feature of the remote student cohort, often impacts their access and participation in higher education to a far greater extent than students from non-remote areas, and the inevitable interplay between these challenges has a compounding effect.

In addition, the two distinct profiles of remote students require a nuanced response that deals with the complexities faced by the cohort. Many students within the cohort, belonging to additional equity groups (e.g. low SES, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students) also possess student characteristics that have higher risks of non-completion (online, mature age, part-time) (Edwards 2015; Department of Education and Training, 2017a). There is a cumulative impact of belonging to two or more 'at risk' groups that can compound the disadvantages faced by students with the following implications for equity in higher education:

- Complex and multi-faceted disadvantages are likely to militate against making substantial gains in equity with limited resources — the issues and solutions are more challenging.
- A systemic approach is needed to address all of the issues that feed into the compounding disadvantage challenge — but this requires greater engagement with all stakeholders in a process fraught with complexity.

The implication of a systemic approach is that the higher education sector cannot solve all equity issues. The education sector, including schools, the VET sector and universities, can play a prominent role, but responsibility for bigger and wider issues of development and initiatives to collectively address them are outside the role and scope of the education sector alone.

This report is mindful of the wider economic and social challenges, which do need to be fed into the higher education policy making process, but does not seek to engage in these wider issues. Instead, this report focuses on addressing some of the more immediate challenges that can be more readily addressed and recommends that further research is undertaken on effective strategies to address complex and multi-faceted disadvantage.

However, limited research has been conducted into the cumulative impact of remoteness with other equity group membership and student characteristics, and understanding the dynamics and potential stress points would help when tailoring strategies to assist students in these circumstances.

RECOMMENDATION FOR RESEARCH

Research is conducted on the cumulative impact of remoteness with other equity groups and student characteristics such as part-time, online and mature age.

5. Qualitative Analysis: Exploring the University Experience of Remote Students

Key themes emerged from the qualitative data that support the concept of the two profiles of students that were identified from the quantitative data analysis:

- **Students who relocate**
  Generally school leavers who study full time and on campus.
- **Students who study online**
  Predominantly part-time students who are mature age and continue to live in remote locations.

The two distinct student profiles mean that each group may have quite different university experiences across the student life cycle: a theory that was explored during the case studies. Remote students were interviewed about their university experience, and professional and academic staff were interviewed about the support provided to the cohort.

The qualitative research adopted a framework analysis approach (Smith & Firth, 2011) using the student lifecycle identified in the Equity Initiatives Framework (Bennett et al., 2015) to structure the themes that emerged from the case studies. Although the key research question focused on remote students' participation, students talked about their journey to university and definitions of success. Where appropriate themes regarding university aspirations and access, and success and attainment were included (see Figure 7).

Pre-Access   Access   Participation   Attainment

Figure 7: Student Life Cycle

5.1   Students Who Relocate for Study

University aspirations and access

During the case study interviews, students were asked about key influencers regarding their university aspirations. All of the school leavers indicated teachers, families and friends as key supporters:

> *I did not have much idea before then, I was probably going to do a trade. The teachers at my school encouraged me to go to <university> as they completed their teacher education at <university>.*
> (School leaver, relocating to University of Hinterland)

> *I was fortunate with the teachers and friends as they were always encouraging. My mother had attended <university> so this influenced my decision. Some of my teachers had changed careers to become teachers so were able to provide significant insight into careers, employment and study. I have been very lucky with [my] life experiences and the advice I have been given about careers, university study and life in general.*
> (School leaver, relocating to University of Hinterland)

The majority of school leavers interviewed also identified university outreach programs as influencing their post-school aspirations and university transition. The value of universities helping students to make informed decisions about their future was also confirmed by a staff member at one of the case study institutions:

> *We have had students enrol in a course in first semester and decide that 'it is not really for me', they need to change, to change you need to do at least four units and then you can do a course transfer, or come back and reapply, but if someone had caught them at the post and asked questions and made them think they probably would have taken the right direction in the first place.*
> (Staff member, University of the Coast)

Participation

Transitioning from a geographically isolated community to a larger regional or metropolitan centre can be particularly challenging for many relocating school leaver students. They enter a very different environment and have to establish a new way of life in a very short time frame, often without the continued presence of, and connection to family:

> *It was so traumatic starting uni, I am such a homebody, even now, I cried the whole first day. Mum held it together and then on the highway she said to dad 'have we done the right thing?' They had done the right thing I had a ball, I was told the first three months were the hardest. I rang home every night; I would not have time to do that now.*
> (Student, University of Hinterlands)

> *Transitioning was harder than I thought. Culture shock from a small town… It was tough settling in at first, a shock to the system. I really love my family and being with my family so the first months were hard, you have to do everything on your own.*
> (Student, University of Metropolis)

Consequently, all of the students interviewed outlined resilience strategies that they had implemented to develop new social networks and a sense of belonging. Students spoke of engaging in university organised social activities:

> *Four and a half hours drive here and the college was very welcoming. They really wanted you to settle in well… I really jumped into the social activities; the*

biggest obstacle was having friends. I did not have them in my country town and now I have friends here. I went to every party in 'O' week.
(Student, University of Hinterlands)

Students also highlighted the role of student mentors in developing social networks:

My mentor was really important. I did not meet my mentor at Orientation, as I did not fly down in time, however, we did talk on the phone/Skype.… I was thinking of taking a break and getting centred in <city> to get my head around it. My mentor helped me and so it was fine.
(Student, University of Metropolis)

Recognising the importance of students developing a strong social network, many universities have incorporated such activities into the orientation program or into the pedagogy of first year courses:

Coming here knowing no one, perhaps living in a remote area, making friends and joining a group is important.
(Staff member, University of Metropolis)

Students are placed in groups of 25s and these students do everything together — workshops, laboratories, lectures. That solves the problem of the social aspect, they become friends, they do site visits, and presentations together and they form teams. We 'force' them to be together. Socialising is a very important part of the group activities, particularly if relocating from the country or overseas.
(Course coordinator, University of Metropolis)

Staff also acknowledged the importance of developing social networking programs to specifically support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (Priestly et al., 2015):

It was inappropriate for the mentoring program <broader university mentoring program> to mentor <mixed-mode program> students. This is an Indigenous specific program. The hardest part of the job was matching appropriately.
(Staff member, University of Metropolis)

The value of student-led tutoring programs was also highlighted by students as a vital tool in helping the students adjust to university study:

PASS – Peer Assisted Study Sessions – they are the best things ever. They are the only reason I passed chemistry and maths, one of the best things at uni.
(Student, University of Hinterlands)

Students spoke of the significant financial cost associated with relocating for study for peers from their home community:

There are students in my town who could not go to university as they could not afford the living costs. Also there are students in college who drop out because of financial stress.
(Online student who relocated for study, school leaver, University of Hinterlands)

However, it is important to note that all of the relocating students were in the latter years of their study, on the way to successfully graduating. They were all receiving financial support of some kind, including scholarships, government income support and/or family allowances.

Success

When asked for their definition of success at university, responses included long term, aspiration focused definitions:

*Finding happiness first and foremost, finding enjoyment in what you are doing
and not worry so much about the financial things, your studies and career.*
(Student, University of Metropolis)

Other students were more focused on the immediate future, focusing on unit completion as a step towards graduation with the role of family raised as a factor driving university success:

*Getting that piece of paper; Success … is a feeling and I feel in some units I am
happy to pass. I want my parents to be proud of me.*
(Student, University of Hinterlands)

5.2 Students Who Study Online in Remote Locations

University aspirations and access

Mature age students did not have access to the same resources or expert advice about university admissions or career paths as students who transition directly from secondary school:

*It would have been helpful if someone had talked about majors, as I did not fully
understand majors when I enrolled. I would have done a few different subjects if I
had understood the process better. I would have done things differently.*
(Online student studying part-time, University of Hinterlands)

Participation

For students living in remote areas, transition to an online course can be particularly challenging. Yet the onus of navigating university transition was largely placed on the students, who may not necessarily have an understanding of the broader expectations of students and teaching staff:

*In hindsight I should have looked more on their website but I did not know that at
the time…. An online starter pack would have been useful – What the tutor's role
is? What the lecturer's role is? What is expected of you as a student?*
(Online student, living remotely, University of Metropolis)

*The relationship with the unit coordinator was not really clearly explained so I
was fumbling around a bit to find out what they wanted.*
(Online student studying remotely, University of Metropolis)

Academic preparation in particular, is a recognised challenge facing many remote students during their initial time at university. Of the all students interviewed, it was predominantly online students studying remotely who commented about the challenges associated with being academically prepared for university study:

*It was pretty daunting at first to be honest, as I had never done any real study
before. At school and TAFE you did your assignments but I never had to go
home and do intense study. I had never studied and there are things that I know
now that I wished I had of known at the start …. I did not ask for help, there were
things I know now that I should have asked. I did not want to seem stupid...*
(Mature age student, studying online, University of Hinterlands)

While relocating students could access university programs and initiatives to help establish new social networks and create a sense of belonging, online students spoke of the challenges associated with creating a sense of community. The onus of developing a network was placed on the student:

*I just recently did a short course [in Sydney] and I really benefitted from those
two days…. I am not a person who makes friends online. I really benefitted from*

meeting these people face to face. Some of these people I have done five or six subjects with and did not realise, so benefitted from those connections and I am disappointed I did not do that more. That is one benefit of doing an on campus course.
(Student, University of Hinterlands)

Conversely, university lecturers/course coordinators were identified as being pivotal in the development of a sense of belonging:

I can call or email my lecturers at any time, they are supportive. <University> lecturers understand your life and they try and explain your queries by phone or through references, there are extensions if necessary.
(Student, University of the Coast)

Students also spoke of other strategies that they had developed to help create a sense of community and belonging while being geographically isolated from their peers:

There is lots of information on the website and the unit coordinators are very helpful. The discussion board is very useful for assistance. The online information is clear; probably the only difficulty is the group assignments but there are ways to organise this.*
* [Online forums are used plus Facebook, messenger and emails].
(Student, University of Metropolis)

I talk every week to the lecturers so there is a link, a bit of a bond. The tutorials are awesome. We do have to talk and talk to the other students and we swap phone numbers and chat.
(Student, University of the Coast)

Developing a sense of community can be challenging for all online students, but this is acutely felt when the students live in isolated communities. The remote online student is often mature age and studying part-time, so they do not necessarily have the time to access activities being organised outside of the classroom. The importance of embedding social networking activities into the curriculum is amplified:

Some of the guys that studied in <regional town> talk about how they contacted each other. Oh my god I would so love that but I do not have time.
(Student, University of the Coast)

One third of online remote students are classified as living in a low SES area, and financial pressure can compound the degree of disadvantage experienced by students. In particular, students spoke of the challenges associated with funding intensive courses and practicums when you live in a remote location:

I have to set up the pracs and I get no support at all. I need to be in a town where there is accommodation. My family is in <state> and I go down there but it is difficult dealing with another state. I am in <town> for this placement. If I did not have this there is no way that I could do it. There is no financial support for the prac.
(Online student studying full time, University of the Coast)

Access to income support from the Australian Government continues to be an important source of income for many remote students; this point was identified by two of the relocating students. However students are only able to access support if they study full time. One of the students, receiving income support while studying online from their home community, outlined the challenges faced when completing the application process when living in remote Australia:

'I tried to get Centrelink and the office was three hours away. I did the work with Centrelink myself… For the first two years it was difficult…. It almost cost me more money in phone calls. It did get it cleared up and it has [since] been pretty good.
(Online student studying full time, University of the Coast)

The students often raised their issues around connectivity, and having reliable access to the internet:

Living remote had its challenges and impacted on what I was trying to do. We only have mobile phone reception in the house yard and the phone connection was dodgy so that meant that our internet was unreliable. In and out and for me to do my work, I had to get up by 3.00 and 4.00am, as by 8.00am the Internet would not work.
(Online student, living remotely and studying full-time, University of the Coast)

Lecturers need to realise how the students are accessing the lectures — one student was using her phone and was not able to access the materials — she did not ask for assistance and the lecturers did not offer.
(Online student, studying remotely, University of the Coast)

It is now a bit harder studying online, a bit restrictive, just takes more time.
(Online student who relocated to remote Australia during degree, University of Metropolis)

Issues regarding reliable and high-speed internet access for remote communities and its impact on students, were also highlighted in a report funded by the NCSEHE and Regional University Network (Nelson et al., 2017) and in the *Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People: Final Report* (Behrendt et al., 2012).

Access to reliable internet is a key equity issue for higher education in Australia that was recognised as an issue in the 2018 *Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education* (Halsey) and is well recognised by the Broadband for the Bush alliance (broadbandforthebush.com.au). It is acknowledged that investment has been made to improve connectivity in regional and remote areas, and that the investment required to address the issue is significant. However, the Australian Government needs to undertake urgent action to address this issue systematically, for the benefit of remote communities across Australia; and universities need to adopt policies that recognise the challenges facing students studying in remote communities.

Success

For the majority of students interviewed, the definition of success was vocationally and community focused:

To apply what I have learnt to <area of expertise>, to help the community at the end of the day.
(Student, University of Metropolis)

A hard question. I did it for knowledge and to be better at my job. When I decide to leave <regional city> where I go from there will determine whether I am successful or not. I know I can do senior management and continue to grow.
(Student, University of Hinterlands)

Initially returning to study it was 'survival'. The end goal is to return to <area of expertise>.
(Student, University of Hinterlands)

Consistently providing best practice in my work.
(Student, University of Metropolis)

However, some students were very focused on the concept of survival, with perseverance central in their approach to their studies:

Getting from A to B but being supported and giving you the confidence that you can do it. B is the ultimate goal I just look at it one semester to the next. Have a break and then tackle the next one. I do not bother so much about the big picture as that is too daunting. I just take small steps…
(Student, University of Hinterlands)

Success is basically survival and getting through it and having the piece of paper at the end. Obviously learning things that you can apply and build your practice.
(Student, University of the Coast)

5.3 The Voice Missing from the Case Studies

All of the participating students were in the latter years of their study, and thus were deemed successful, or likely to succeed in their university journey. An area requiring further research is regarding the student voice not reflected in the student interviews; that is students who were in their first year of study. The percentage of remote students who enrol in first year but do not return in the following eight years is 14.47 per cent, which is significantly higher than for their regional (9.93 per cent) and metropolitan (7.27 per cent) peers (Department of Education and Training, 2017a). This is a group not represented in the data collected through the case studies.

Another source of data that disaggregated first year remote students' data from other first year cohorts was the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE). Amongst other questions, Australian university students in their first year of study were asked whether they had considered leaving. This survey is no longer conducted, having been replaced by the DET's Quality Indicators of Learning and Teaching Student Experience Survey. However, the Student Experience Survey does not disaggregate the data in terms of remoteness, hence AUSSE results from 2010 have been used to provide valuable information about first year student departure reasons (ACER, 2011).

As illustrated in Figure 8 (see next page), the most common reasons provided by remote were starkly different to the reasons provided by metropolitan and regional (provincial) students. The most common reason for remote students was 'difficulties with workload' (40 per cent of students) and the second was 'needing a break'.

RECOMMENDATION FOR RESEARCH

Further research into remote student (and sub-groups within) experience is undertaken, given the high first year attrition rates.
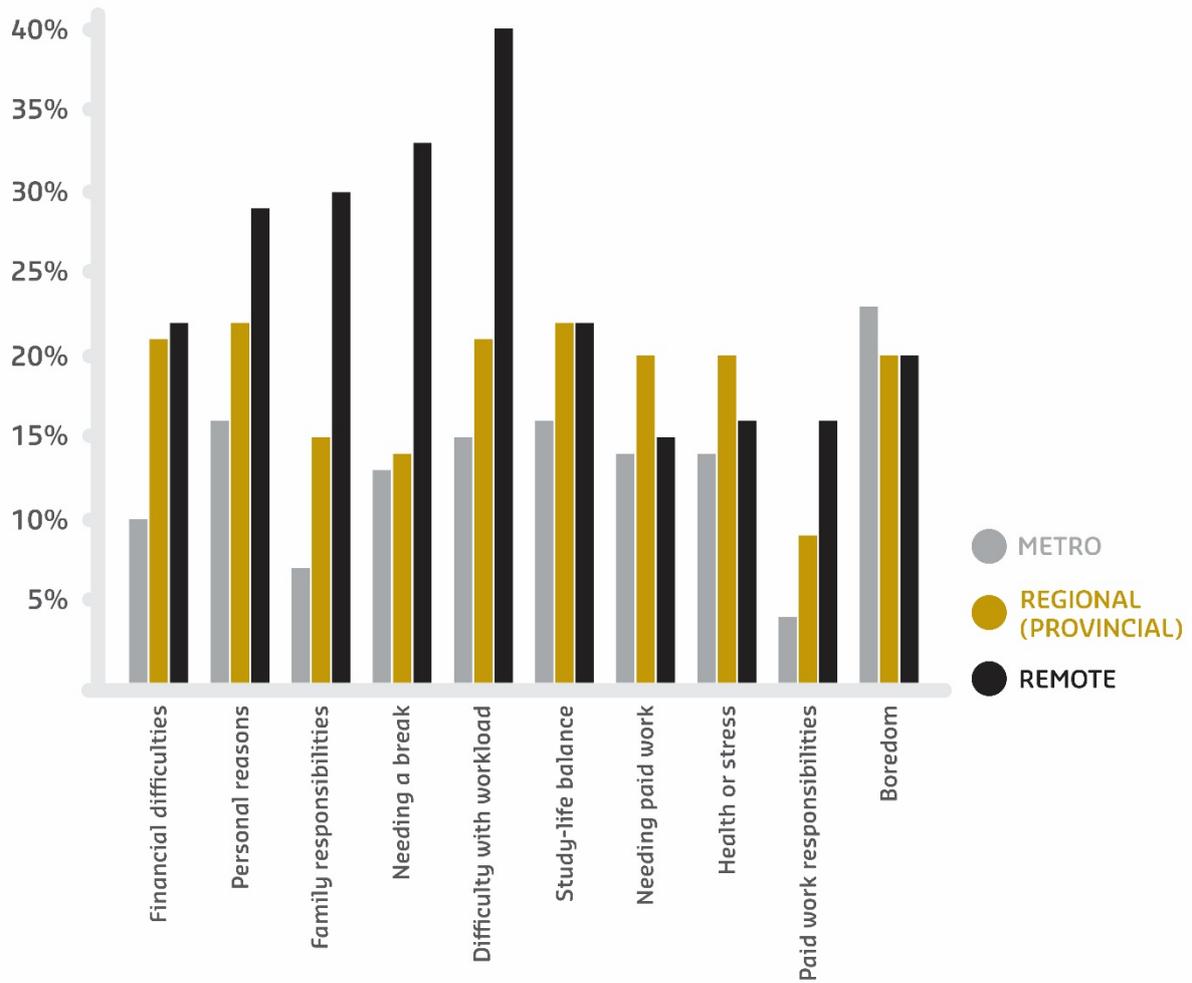

Figure 8: 2010 first year bachelor degree student departure reasons: geographical comparison

6. Discussion: Effective Support of Remote Students

The understanding of who remote students in higher education are, has evolved during this Fellowship. With a greater understanding of the differences across the two profiles, effective support can be implemented in Australian universities to enhance students' experience and promote their success.

Principles for universities to consider in the provision of effective support for remote students were developed during the Fellowship. These principles were developed using the data collected from the case studies (student and staff interviews) and through the study tour reflections and were refined during facilitated discussions with colleagues during various Fellowship engagement activities.

6.1 Principles to Effectively Support Remote Students

From the data analysis and findings, the following principles have been developed to assist universities and the government with providing effective support for remote students.

1. **Know your students: recognising diversity across the student cohort.**
2. **Support for students across the student life cycle.**
3. **Collaborate: in the classroom, across institutions, and in the community**
4. **Celebrate and value remote Australia: in the classroom and through co-curricular activities.**
5. **Recognise the challenges associated with geographical isolation through university and government policy.**
6. **Provide financial support to those who need it, when they need it.**

Good practice is present in universities across Australia, but the support provided to remote students is not systemic, nor consistent. While the focus of these principles is on success of remote students, if implemented, there would be benefits for the whole student population.

1. Know your students: recognise diversity across the student cohort

To improve outcomes for remote students, Australian universities need to consider the diversity that exists in the student population, and ensure that it is recognised and valued when designing strategies to support student success. For example, domestic student diversity has long been defined in terms of designated equity groups (Department of Employment Education and Training, 1990) but the diversity within groups such as remote students should also be taken into consideration, as should student characteristics like mode of study. When considering the diversity within remote student cohort, key subgroups that would benefit from tailored teaching and learning strategies include:

Online students

Developing tailored teaching and learning strategies specifically to recognise and engage online students is important (Stone, 2016). This is paramount across the student life cycle, but especially so during the initial transition period where remote students have a higher first year attrition rate than their regional and metropolitan peers. Through the case studies, it was clear that online students received a different level of support than relocating school leavers with the onus of navigating transition placed on the student (Stone, 2016). Students would benefit from tailored orientation and transition support that facilitated the development of social networks and assisted with understanding the academic expectations of university study.

Online students interviewed made the following comments about the value of being recognised within their institution:

The welcome pack is stationery and <university> labelled. It said to me 'we are trying to include you'.
(Online student studying remotely, University of Hinterlands)

I quite like it, I think it is relaxed and they do understand that many of their students are online and that people have lives. Seventy per cent online learners. At other unis it seems a bit stricter and <university> seems to accommodate you.
(Online student studying remotely, University of the Coast)

Teaching pedagogy for the virtual classroom also requires investment; from the university (in terms of teaching platforms and teacher training) and teachers (in terms of engagement strategies and teaching resources):

Lecturers need to understand that they are engaging digitally, some lecturers were good with online content, short and to the point and you could move ahead if you wanted however some lectures are not user friendly.
(Online student, studying remotely, University of Hinterlands)

In addition, attention needs to focus on enhancing the learning experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who study online. Western style teaching pedagogy often embraced in the virtual classroom needs to be more culturally appropriate (Wilks, Wilson & Kinnane, 2017), embracing and respecting Indigenous culture and a range of learning styles.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students

A whole-of-institution approach is required to effectively support and enrich the university experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, many of whom relocate from remote Australia. This needs to work alongside specific support and enrichment programs provided by university Indigenous Education Units (Behrendt et al., 2012). '*Culturally safe spaces'* for students are also important, helping create a sense of belonging for students (Frawley et al., 2017). The value of this multi-faceted approach was reinforced during the Canadian study tour through learning about the 2015 Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), which included in it's recommendations the aim to preserve and elevate Indigenous knowledges in post-secondary institutions. As Associate Fellow Melinda Mann reflected (see Appendix 6 for the full study tour report):

TRC has set the tone by which Canada as a nation used educational institutions to devastate First Nations people which are now a key part of the reconciliation process. Australian universities could learn from the national spotlight the TRC shone across the sector on the important role educational institutions, especially universities, have in preserving and elevating Indigenous peoples' experiences and knowledges. Whilst Indigenous experiences and knowledges are valued across Indigenous and equity spaces in Australian universities more could be done to understand these factors and how they intersect with Indigenous access and participation across university student support and service areas.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE

- Develop a better understanding of the diversity within the student cohort and communicate it effectively across the university.
- Be responsive in the design of learning and teaching strategies and student experience programs, recognising the complexities within the student cohort.
- Enhance the presence of Indigenous knowledges and cultures across the Student Experience, drawing on Indigenous leadership, research and best practice program design when developing and implementing programs that support remote student success.

2. Support for students across the student lifecycle

Supporting a successful university experience is everyone's business. A whole-of-institution, student-centred approach is required, that is embraced by the whole university community.

> *Every school at the university now has to have a school retention plan, emphasis is now on the schools. They will be held accountable and measured.*
> (Staff, University of Metropolis)

To improve outcomes for remote students, Australian universities should develop activities that focus on supporting remote students throughout their time at university. The Equity Initiatives Map (Figure 9) was developed by Nadine Zacharias based on the Equity Initiative Framework developed by Anna Bennett and colleagues (Bennett et al., 2015; Zacharias, 2017). The Map identifies and classifies existing student equity initiatives across the four main stages of the student lifecycle (from pre-access through to attainment), funded through the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program. As an analytical resource, it offers a valuable framework against which to check that initiatives across the student life-cycle have been considered in strategic and operational planning processes.

For the purpose of this research project, the Map has been adapted to focus specifically on one equity group, remote students. This version of the Map (Figure 10) highlights additional activities that could be implemented that would specifically enhance the university success of remote students. These activities are explained below and throughout the chapter.

STUDENT LIFE CYCLE	PRE-ACCESS: Outreach to Schools and Communities		ACCESS: Pathways and Admissions (Including Enabling Pathways)		PARTICIPATION: Transition, Engagement and Progression (Undergraduate)		ATTAINMENT AND TRANSITION OUT (Undergraduate)	
	Pre-Access		Access		Participation		Attainment	Transition Out
STAGE	Outreach to Schools and Communities		Pathways and Admission		Transition and Engagement	Engagement and Progression During Studies	Completion	Graduate Destinations
TARGET GROUPS	Infants and primary and school students, teachers and parents	Primary and secondary school students, teachers and parents	Secondary school students and leavers		Commencing/first year students	Continuing later year students	Completing students	Graduates
			Mature age students					
	Community members		VET students					Employer groups and professional associations
MAJOR AIMS	• Increase awareness of higher education pathways, opportunities and associated careers by supporting, developing and/or maintaining aspirations, expectations and attainment		• Provide opportunities for people to access and achieve at university, taking into account the degree of selectivity and distance to target communities		• Engagement and belonging • Academic literacies • Competencies in discipline area/relevant knowledges developed through inclusive pedagogies		• Employability • Postgraduate study	
	• Address issues of affordability of higher education study: provide information, strategies and financial support to fund student life							
HEPPP-FUNDED EQUITY INITIATIVES (Year)	• Outreach to early years of schooling (Years K–4) • Community outreach	• Outreach to primary and middle years schooling (Years 5–9) • Outreach to senior secondary schooling (Years 10–12) • Pre-university experience programs • School curriculum enhancement and support and foster skills and capabilities • Professional development for careers advisors and teachers	• Pathways programs: a qualification that provides entry into university upon successful completion often from enabling, VET or private providers • Foundation programs: programs that provide extra academic development to build skills; may be a separate qualification or part of a degree • Alternative selection criteria and tools in entry requirements • Outreach to VET/adults		• Orientation programs • First year inclusive transition programs	• Academic service provision • Non-academic service provision (childcare, financial aid, student counselling and health) • Social activities • Diversity of strategies, including extra-curricular learning development and other programs	• Alternative exit qualifications	• Careers and employment support post completion
			• Bridging programs					
			• Engaging and inclusive curriculum/course design • Inclusive pedagogies • Reflexive practice • Embedded literacies and skills development • Contextual learning • Continuing professional development for staff or students (to build capacity and awareness of changing needs)					
			• Careers and employment support pre-course completion (including work integrated learning, part-time employment, leadership programs and professional mentoring).					
		• Careers advice regarding educational pathways • Mentoring and role models						• Support to continue to postgraduate study
	• Scholarships and prizes for potential students currently at school or in the community		• Scholarship provision and grants for commencing students • Scholarship provision and grants for students in enabling, foundation, bridging or other access programs		• Scholarship provision and grants for continuing and completing students			N/A Scholarship provision and grants for postgraduate study
SECTOR & INSTITUTION-WIDE PRINCIPLES AND PROCEDURES	• Development and review of federal policies, sector-wide policies and procedures with an equity lens • Review of university policies, procedures and plans with an equity lens provided by equity practitioners and inclusive learning scholars, drawing on insights gained from both practice and research (praxis-approach) • Continuing professional development for promoting inclusive practices and pedagogies • Cultural engagement • Inclusive, non-stigmatising, non-deficit language • Data collection to facilitate provision of support and evaluation • Institution-wide research/evaluation projects • Monitoring at each stage (access, performance, outcomes) utilising inclusive approach and language							

Figure 9: Equity Initiatives Map of HEPPP program at XYZ University

STUDENT LIFE CYCLE	Pre-Access		Access	Participation		Undergraduate	
						Attainment	Transition Out
STAGE	Outreach to Schools and Communities		Pathways and Admission	Transition and Engagement	Engagement and Progression	Completion	Graduate Destinations
KEY PROGRAM ACTIVITIES (targeted and specific)	• Community outreach (INCLUDING PROSPECTIVE MATURE AGE STUDENTS)	• OUTREACH TO DEFERRING UNIVERSITY STUDENTS		TAILOR PROGRAMS: • Orientation programs • First year transition programs	• RE-ENGAGEMENT / EARLY ALERT PROGRAMS		• VOLUNTEER PROGRAMS FOR ALUMNI TO ENGAGE WITH CURRENT UNIVERSITY STUDENTS (ACADEMIC SUPPORT / CAREER MENTORING)
			• Inclusive pedagogies (CELEBRATING REMOTE AUSTRALIA AND ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER CULTURE) • SPACE AND PLACE FOR ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER STUDENTS ON CAMPUS • IT SUPPORT FOR ONLINE STUDENTS • SOCIAL ACTIVITIES (promote connection to broader community – ONLINE AND CAMPUS STUDENTS)				
		• Mentoring and role models (TARGETED: CONNECT REMOTE STUDENTS WITH REMOTE STUDENTS)					
			Scholarship provision and grants for continuing and completing students RECOGNISING THE DIVSERSE COHORT AND GRANTS FOR INTENSIVE, CAMPUS BASED STUDY FOR ONLINE STUDENTS)				
INSTITUTION-WIDE PRINCIPLES AND PROCEDURES	• IT POLICY FOR REMOTE STUDENTS STUDYING ONLINE PROVIDING ALLOWANCE FOR CONNECTIVITY ISSUES • UNIVERSITY WIDE SYSTEM THAT PROVIDES UNIT COORDINATORS WITH A SUMMARY OF STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS WITHIN THEIR CLASSROOM (PHYSICAL AND VIRTUAL) • EXPLICIT STUDENT RETENTION AND SUCCESS STRATEGY (across the whole university – academic and professional staff; recognising diversity within the student cohort)						

Figure 10: Equity Initiatives Map through a remote lens

As outlined on the Map (Figure 10) additional activities and strategies that would benefit of remote students include:

Pre-Access

Of the students who entered university directly from high school, the majority had participated in university outreach programs and cited these as influencing their decision to attend university. Conversely, mature age students mainly referenced university websites and friends and family as resources and support that they accessed when making decisions about university courses and future careers. It would be beneficial for universities to tailor resources regarding course and scholarship information for mature age students living in remote areas of Australia and to share with prospective mature age students through a range of community networks and organisations.

Access

Many school leavers from remote areas defer university upon receipt of an offer. This can be for a variety of reasons and is often done with the intention of transitioning to university the following year. However, many of these deferring students decide not to go to university after the extended break from formal education. It would be of benefit for universities to explore ways to maintain engagement with these students throughout this period of leave, providing support, guidance and encouragement as required.

Participation

Given the comparably high non-completion rates for remote students, it is important that the sector considers how to re-engage students leaving university before completion. Dr Nicole Crawford (Pre-degree Programs Campus Coordinator, Associate Fellow) reflected on different university re-engagement programs that are in place in institutions across Canada that would be worth considering for the benefit of remote students and the broader student community here in Australia:

> *In many cases, in the Australian context, I suspect that enabling programs could and do fill the role of Simon Fraser University's Back on Track and University of Alberta's Fresh Start Program, but these programs are certainly worth exploring because they are tailored for this particular cohort, which has different needs to the enabling student cohort.*
> (Dr Nicole Crawford)

More information on Canadian university re-engagement strategies can be found in the Associate Fellows' reports (Appendices 5 and 6).

It would be more efficient to identify students who are at risk of failure, before they reach crisis point:

> *Not all students read the emails sadly and we only hear from them when they reach crisis point. We have been doing this for a couple of years, so we have streamlined our service to not be ad hoc and in silos. It seems to be working.*
> (Staff member, University of the Coast)

The need for early alert strategies is well recognised in Australia. However, it would be valuable to specifically focus on the identification of online students at risk (Stone, 2016); it is an area that requires further development:

> *I would like to engage with students before it gets bad, providing time management and pressure management strategies.*
> (Staff member, University of the Coast)

The use of data analytics is also an important feature of early alert programs where existing data sources are used to highlight online students who are potentially at academic risk:

> *We looked at all the data sources across the university, basically anything that had a data field we mapped them so we would look at classroom behaviour e.g. time on task or class attendance, basically logging into <Learning Management System>. So we could see student engagement.*
> (Staff, University of Hinterlands)

Mentoring programs are also regularly used by universities to support students, especially during their transition to university. It is important that these programs "*match(ing) appropriately*" (Staff member University of Metropolis) to ensure that the mentees are being supported by students who have an understanding of potential challenges that they face.

Attainment

University graduates are living in remote communities across Australia, and it would be of benefit for universities to consider how they can be engaged as 'Agents of Change' to support current university students with their study; and encourage prospective students to consider undertaking future study.

RECOMMENDATION FOR PRACTICE

Universities implement strategies to maintain engagement with remote students who defer an offer or take a break from study.

RECOMMENDATION FOR RESEARCH

Further research is undertaken into the reasons why remote students leave the sector, not to return.

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3. Collaborate: in the classroom, across institutions and in the local community

The collaborate principle encourages people to work together to enhance student success in the classroom, across the institutions, and in local communities.

In the classroom

Remote students, both relocating and online, may experience time pressures associated with university study. Many relocating students may prioritise developing social networks and setting up a new life as an independent student, skills which are integral to their successful transition but may have a negative impact on their academic studies. Conversely, many online students studying remotely are juggling work, study and family responsibilities and do not have the time to engage in activities outside of the classroom. Other students are not aware of the support available. Academic and professional staff can work together to bring important skills, concepts and networking activities (academic, life skills and social) that traditionally sit in co-curricular activities, into the classroom. This form of collaboration is a key principle that is embedded throughout the *Articulating a Transition Pedagogy: First Year Curriculum Principles* (Kift, 2009). Where it is implemented effectively, it will benefit remote students, and the whole student community.

Across the institution

The value of a whole-of-institution approach was made evident during this Fellowship's Canadian study tour when examining the implementation of the *Okanagan Charter for Health Promoting Universities and Colleges* in institutions across Canada. This is an

important charter and approach that could be applied to the Australian context. As explained by Associate Fellow Dr Nicole Crawford (see Appendix 5):

> *The theme of mental health and wellbeing was predominant on our Canada study tour. What appears to be a new is the more holistic, institution-wide, settings approach to health and wellbeing. This is where The Okanagan Charter is playing a significant role as a blueprint for [higher education] institutions. It is a symbolic document and its principles seem to be driving action. Student wellbeing and mental health are being viewed as a whole of university issue, not as the sole responsibility of individual students or specialised counselling units. We noticed that numerous initiatives are being embedded across the whole university, in a collaborative way, and based on research. This model considers the uni culture and environment, and the teaching and learning; it allows for more proactive approaches to student and staff wellbeing. It requires the "right conditions", which include genuine will and serious commitment at all levels of the institution.*

As articulated by the AUSSE student survey results (Figure 8 – page 30), many of the challenges facing remote students during first year relate to wellbeing. While wellbeing was not an explicit focus of this research, further investigation into the possible adoption of a national approach by Australian universities would have merit.

With the community

Partnerships with local organisations can be developed to create a sense of community for online students continuing their study in remote areas of Australia. This is especially paramount for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, where having a foundation of community engagement to highly valued (Frawley et al., 2017). Students interviewed spoke of the value of having a local, physical presence of either a resource centre or university:

> *Funding has been cut to our local resource centre and that is where I have done all my study and my friend has done all her examinations there. Having a centre available is a huge asset, it is like being able to go to a uni library.*
> (Online student living remotely, University of Metropolis)

One example that could be considered involves the DET working with remote organisations to create study hubs where students in the community can go to access resources and support. Local schools could be utilised for this purpose and teachers could be employed after school hours to provide support and help prospective and current university students to access resources and advice regarding courses and careers.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE

- Enhance the links between academic and co-curricular programs, embedding activities that are traditionally outside the classroom, into the curriculum.
- Cultivate partnerships with organisations in remote Australia to create valuable learning and enrichment opportunities for students.

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4. Celebrate and value remote Australia: in the classroom, through co-curricular activities and across institutions

Universities across Australia have relationships with communities, industries and cultural groups in remote Australia and they could celebrate and strengthen these connections for the benefit of all students.

In the classroom

Practical application of the curriculum that highlights real world examples in remote Australia through contextual learning; and inclusive pedagogies that 'draw on Indigenous knowledges and practices' (Bennett et al., 2015) would be valuable for both campus-based and online students.

Co-curricular activities

Activities such as work integrated learning and student leadership programs should include opportunities located in remote Australia. All students throughout the university community should be provided with the opportunity to live and learn in a remote location. Where feasible, students from remote Australia should be included in the process, recognising how their knowledge and experience can enrich the overall learning experience for participating students. This would help lessen the divide that often exists between our cities and country areas.

It is also important to recognise and value the life experience of students from remote areas including their skills associated with resilience, problem-solving and innovation. Online students living in remote Australia do not necessarily have access to traditional activities or resources that are often available to students living in urban areas. The University of Hinterlands has developed a university-wide program that formally recognises the development of desirable skills and attributes through involvement in social and community activities. Students living in remote areas are encouraged to participate as the program recognises activities that can be applied to a vast array of contexts:

> *A 35 year old woman in a remote area does not necessarily want to do a CV workshop but will have other skills that relate to her community and stage of life.*
> (Professional staff, University of Hinterlands)

Across institutions

There are examples across Australia, where universities work together to deliver learning opportunities based in remote areas. Given the significant cost involved in travelling to and in maintaining an ongoing presence in these areas, this would be a cost efficient way to maintain long term engagement with remote Australia. The Department of Health, through its

Regional Health Strategy fund rural clinical schools through universities across Australia (https://secure.utas.edu.au/rural-clinical-school). The Rural Clinical School of WA (http://www.rcs.uwa.edu.au) involves medical students from the University of Western Australia and Notre Dame University spending a year of their studies living and working in a rural community. Research demonstrates that the students who participate in the program are almost four times more likely to return to work in rural Australia compared to others (The Rural Clinical School of WA, 2016).

RECOMMENDATION FOR PRACTICE

Explore the opportunity of working across institutions to create student learning activities that showcase the value of working and living in remote Australia. Through in-the-curriculum and through co-curricular activities such as volunteering, work experience and practicums.

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5. Recognise the challenges associated with geographical isolation through university and government policy

There are a number of examples of how university and government policies can be refined to better recognise the challenges associated with geographical isolation.

Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP)

Many school leavers interviewed identified university outreach programs as influencing their university aspirations and transition. The Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program currently funds outreach across Australia through allocations provided to universities that are based on participation of low SES students. This formula does not take into account the real cost of delivering outreach programs to low SES communities located far from urban centres. While a significant portion of students in remote Australia are classified as being low SES, the cost to engage many remote communities is significant and also time consuming, especially in northern Western Australia and the Northern Territory.

It is proposed that the HEPPP funding model be refined to prioritise outreach in remote areas and recognise the real cost of delivery.

Technology connectivity

It is recommended that universities consider implementing policies that better accommodate students who experience significant internet challenges associated with living in remote Australia. Currently, students experiencing issues with internet connectivity are relying on understanding and empathic staff to provide accommodations as required:

> *A student contacted us last week because she had lost her internet connection. She could access email so I sent her the documents she wanted. I think she was working out at <community>.*
> (Professional staff member, University of the Coast)

> *One student was without internet for a long period so we bought <the student> a mobile 3G broadband – [they] self-identified.*
> (Course Coordinator, University of Hinterlands)

However, not all of the students interviewed received a positive response from their university:

> *I made sure there never was an issue with technology. I would complete my assignments a week earlier. I just had to work around it as it was my problem not*

theirs. I remember trying to get help with an assignment in that first year and I was told that any assistance given to me would be an unfair advantage for the other students, so they could not help me so I have never gone back to the uni for assistance again.
(Online student studying remotely, University of Coast)

Addressing issues of connectivity is an important challenge for the Australian Government to address for the benefit of current and potential university students, and remote communities more broadly. Nelson and colleagues highlighted this particular challenge for remote students studying online, citing Census data (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016a) which indicated that "*only 79% of people living in remote areas have internet access, compared to 88% living in metropolitan areas*" (Nelson et al., 2017). This issue is amplified in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander households located in remote Australia (Wilks, Wilson & Kinnane, 2017).

RECOMMENDATION FOR PRACTICE

Refine relevant university policy to recognise internet connectivity challenges facing students studying in remote Australia.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY

- DET policy and programs need to recognise remote students as a distinct group (separate from regional), acknowledging challenges associated with geographical isolation.
- DET and DSS focus funding on supporting remote students, having a flexible approach that recognises the diversity that exists within the remote student cohort (online and relocating).
- HEPPP funding model be refined to prioritise outreach in remote areas and recognise the real cost of delivery.
- Reliable internet access is immediately recognised as an equity issue.

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6. Provide financial support for students, for those who need it, when they need it

As commonly acknowledged in the literature and through the case studies, financial pressure is a significant issue for many remote students: online and part-time; full time and relocating. Some practical ways in which universities and the government can provide targeted support to students are outlined in more detail below.

Government

Over the course of this Fellowship, an attempt was made to analyse student payments provided based on students' permanent home address. Unfortunately, the datasets used by the DET and the DSS have limited data-linkage capacity which limits potential cross analysis of datasets. It would be of value to create greater cohesion of policies and databases to allow for improved analysis of students receiving income support.

Recent changes have been made to criteria for Independence Allowance recognising that financial need remains a significant barrier for many students. These changes will hopefully have a positive impact for many students (Department of Human Services, 2017). However, it is important to examine the impact criterion changes have on the broader student community, which requires ongoing monitoring to assess whether change is delivering the intended outcome of improving support for regional and remote students. This will require

the introduction of an overarching policy between Australian Government departments to facilitate the analysis of the different datasets.

The introduction of a Universal Student Indicator would also help improve data analysis, allowing for more longitudinal studies that will help to determine gaps and opportunities for policy refinement in terms of support for students in need by both DSS and DET.

Universities

Online students interviewed spoke of the significant costs involved in participating in intensive units and practicum units for their course. Access to grants to cover costs of transport and living expenses while students complete these compulsory units would remove some of the potential barriers they face in successfully completing their study.

RECOMMENDATION FOR PRACTICE

Introduce bursaries for online students experiencing financial challenges (full-time and part-time), recognising the cost involved with attending compulsory intensive units on campus; and completing practicums.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY

- A Universal Student Indicator be developed and implemented enabling longitudinal analysis of remote students experiences across all levels of education.
- DET and DSS focus funding on attracting and retaining remote students, having a flexible approach that recognises the diversity that exists within the remote student cohort (online and relocating).

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7. Conclusion

This Fellowship has been an invaluable opportunity to explore how policy, practice and research can more effectively support successful outcomes for remote students in Australian higher education

The research illustrates the complexities and compounding challenges that remote students face in completing a successful higher education journey. These challenges are even more daunting if government policy settings and institutional support are not finely tuned to optimising support for them.

Remote students are not just a component of a larger regional student cohort, but are a distinct group in themselves with specific characteristics and, as a consequence, need to be clearly seen and recognised as such. The corollary is that public policy and institutional responses must be directly relevant to the needs of remote students if both are to be effective in supporting them.

Importantly, this is not about correcting a 'negative narrative discourse' for a disadvantaged equity group. As the report illustrates, many remote students have strong personal attributes such as perseverance and resilience that have helped them win through. The journey to higher education should not be so fraught for those who succeed, nor should it be made to seem so distant a goal for the aspirational. To this end, this report includes recommendations for universities and for the Australian Government that if implemented, would improve outcomes for remote students. It also identifies some gaps in research that could further inform our understanding of the remote student experience.

It is important to recognise and celebrate the significant contribution remote students make to Australian higher education and to their communities. Many remain in remote locations while completing their studies and others return: both groups are building capacity and contributing new skills and knowledge to their communities. An equitable higher education system is no longer just good for the marginalised and disadvantaged. It is also good for the future of society and the economy because it makes economic and strategic sense to be a socially mobile, engaged and inclusive society in which all individuals and localities can participate and thrive.

In conclusion, this research has focused on how remote student success can be enhanced by universities and the Australian Government. Education has the power to transform lives, and it is our collective responsibility to make sure all students are given equal opportunity to achieve higher education success, regardless of where they live.
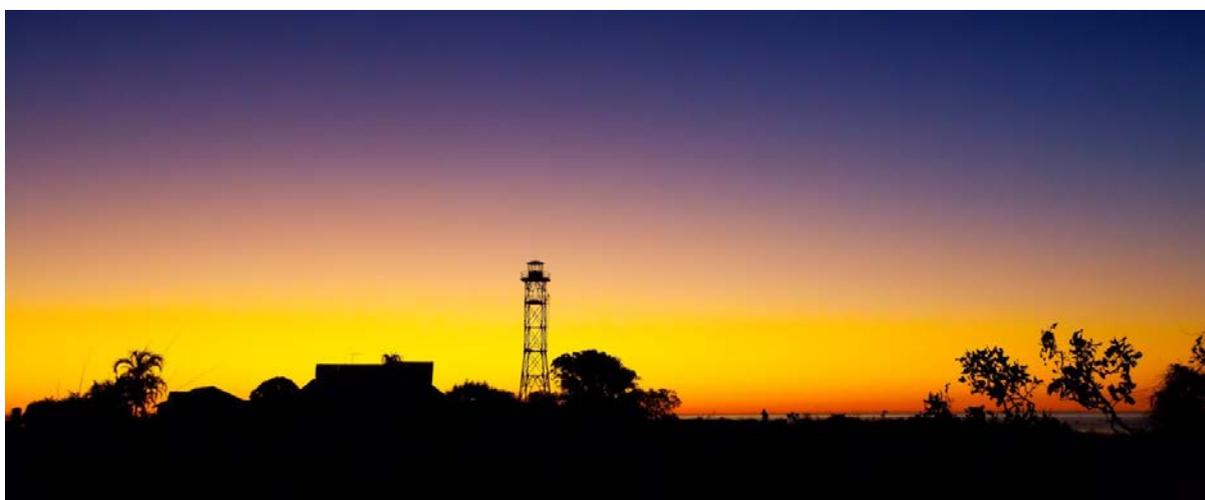
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Appendix 1: Student Interview Details

	Online	Internal
Remote	11 students*	
Relocated for study	1 student	3 students*

* One student currently studying postgraduate qualification online and remotely also provided comment based on their undergraduate course that was studied internally and involved the student relocating. This student is therefore counted twice (online and remote; internal and relocated)

Interview Protocol

Institution:	
Interviewee:	
Interviewer:	

Part A: Demographic Information

Gender:*

- Male
- Female
- Non-specified

Age:*

- 18-21
- 22-25
- 26-30
- 31-40
- 41-50
- 51-60
- > 61

Are you of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent?*

- Yes
- No

*(please circle)

Part B: Education

Mode of study:*

- Face-to-face
- Fully online
- Mixed-mode

Current fraction of study:*

- Full-time

- Part-time

Study level:*

- Diploma
- Bridging course
- Mature aged bridging course
- Bachelor
- Postgraduate study (by course work)
- Postgraduate study (by research)

Course of study:

Did you take a break between high school and university?*

- Yes
- No

If so, why?

Where did you go to high school?

University pathway:*

- Direct entry
- Enabling program
- Other:

*(please circle)

Part C: University Experience

Accommodation:*

- On-campus
- Private
- Other:

Are you currently accessing any scholarships?*

- Yes
- No

If so, please provide details:

Are you in paid employment?

Part D: Open-ended Questions

<u>YOU AND THE UNIVERSITY</u>

1. Tell us about your hometown:

   a. *Why did you decide to go to university? Why <university>? Why the course?*
   b. *Did you receive any support/advice to help with this decision?*
   c. *How do your family/friends feel about you going to university?*

2. What have been the main issues/challenges you faced as a student from remote Australia, coming to the university?

   a. *When you first started university how did you find settling in? How prepared did you feel for the start of uni?*
   b. *What did the uni do to help you settle in?*
   c. *Is there anything else you can think of that universities in Australia could do to help students with the initial transition to university?*

3. What do you think are the main programs/initiatives/other things that have supported you during your time at university?

   a. *How did you find out about the programs of support?*
   b. *Who were they organised by: students; university; community; accommodation?*

4. Why do you think these programs/initiatives/other things have helped?

5. What are the main university programs/initiatives/other things that have enriched your university experience? Why?

6. This research project is exploring strategies that help students to succeed. What does success at university look like to you?

   a. *What do you want to do after university?*
   b. *When do you hope/expect to finish?*

AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT

7. Please outline any support you have received from the Australian Government to help you with your study.

8. Please provide some examples of what else the Australian Government can do to help you (and other students from remote Australia) to succeed at university.

   a. *Dream list?*

9. Do you have anything else to tell me that might be relevant to my research?

10. Do you have any questions?

Appendix 2: University Staff Interview Details

	University of Hinterlands	University of the Coast	University of Metropolis
Professional	2	5	4
Academic	1		1

Interview Protocol

Institution:	
Interviewee:	
Interviewer:	

Part A: Demographic Information

Gender:*

- Male
- Female
- Non-specified

Age:*

- 20-30
- 31-40
- 41-50
- 51-60
- 60+

Are you of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent?*

- Yes
- No

How long have you been involved in this (or associated) initiatives?*

- < 1 year
- 1-2 years
- 2-5 years
- 5-10 years
- > 10 years

*(please circle)

Part B: Relevant experience and training (about you)

1. What training and education have you undertaken? (background)

2. What experience do you have in relation to remote Australia? And the student experience?

a. What is your role at the university and how do you support remote students?
b. Can you please tell us about your program/work?
c. How and why did the program get established? How long has it been going for?
d. Where does your program sit within the university structure?

Part C: Open-ended questions (broader questions about the university, remoteness, students experience and Departments role)

1. How would you define 'remote' Australia?

2. This research project is examining what helps remote students to succeed at university. How would you define university success for students from remote Australia?

3. What main challenges do you think remote students face when studying at university?

4. What strategies does this university have in place to support remote students when they are at university?

   a. How are students targeted/engaged? How do you engage students most at risk?

5. Can you tell me some examples of where these strategies have had a positive impact for students and where they have not had such a positive impact?

   a. How do you measure impact?

6. Can you tell me why you think these strategies have been successful and/or not successful?

   a. Every university needs to develop strategies that work in their context but what do you think are some common themes that can be applied to a range of contexts? Lessons to be learnt by what you are doing here.

7. What support is received from the Australian Government to help the university implement strategies to support remote students?

8. Are there any suggestions that you have on how the Australian Government should refine strategies to support remote students to succeed?

9. Do you have anything else to tell me that might be relevant to my research?

10. Do you have any questions?

Appendix 3: Advisory Group Membership

An Advisory Group was formed to provide expert advice and guidance for the duration of this one year intensive Fellowship:

- Professor Grady Venville (Chair), Dean of Coursework Studies, The University of Western Australia and Fellowship supervisor.
- Department of Education and Training representatives: Dr Paul Corcoran, Director, Equity Policy, Department of Education and Training; Vicki Ratliff, Director Equity Policy and Programs.
- Professor Sally Kift PFHEA, President, Australian Learning and Teaching Fellows, Former DVC (Academic), James Cook University.
- Professor Steven Larkin, Pro Vice-Chancellor (Indigenous Education and Research), University of Newcastle.
- Tim Shanahan, Principal Adviser, Vice-Chancellery, The University of Western Australia, Former Chair Western Australian Regional Development Trust.
- Dr Judy Skene, former Associate Director, The University of Western Australia Student Support Services and Fellowship mentor.
- Professor Sue Trinidad, Director, National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education.
- Louise Pollard, 2017 Equity Fellow (National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education), hosted by The University of Western Australia.
- Sarah Imtiaz (Executive Officer), Equity Outreach Officer, University of Western Australia.

Appendix 4: Request for Expression of Interest (Associate Fellows)

2017 EQUITY FELLOW (ASSOCIATE) EXPRESSION OF INTEREST

An important element of Louise Pollard's 2017 Equity Fellowship is the recruitment of a practitioner from an Australian university to participate in elements of the Fellowship; in particular, the study tour to Canadian universities and participation in the 2017 Canadian Association of College and University Student Services (CACUSS) Conference (www.cacuss.ca). The Associate Fellow will also take an active role in reviewing and disseminating the findings of the project.

Overview of the Fellowship

This Fellowship will engage policymakers and practitioners to investigate how the higher education sector and Department of Education and Training (the Department) can effectively support remote students overcome the barriers impeding university success. It will examine teaching and learning practices; accommodation options; scholarship offerings; transition programs; academic skill development; and specialised support for Indigenous students, to define principles of good practice for practitioners. It will also explore how policy and the associated departmental programs can be informed to support remote students to succeed at university.

Expectations of the Associate Fellow

1. Participation in the Study Tour to Canada including the CACUSS Conference (11 – 14 June, Ottawa) and visits to two universities (15 – 23 June).
2. Contribution to the Fellow's 2017 Findings through timely feedback.
3. Written report submitted highlighting observations made during the Study Tour (submitted within 4 weeks of completing the Study Tour).
4. Promotion of Fellowship Findings to equity practitioners in a format of the Associates choice (outlined in *Expression of Interest*).
5. Where possible, participation in Fellowship associated presentations (in Canada or Australia).
6. Attendance at the 2017 EPHEA Conference (20 – 23 November, Brisbane).

Associate Fellow provisions

1. The successful candidate will have all travel related expenditure related to the Canadian Study Tour organised and covered. Additional personal travel will need to be paid for, and organised, by the individual.
2. This is inclusive of 'reasonable' living and travel expenses (in line with UWA travel policy).

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THE UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

2017 Equity Fellowship
National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education

REMOTE STUDENT UNIVERSITY SUCCESS
An analysis of Policy and Practice

Expected contribution by the institution

1. Salary costs (including on costs) while the Associate is participating in the Study Tour.
2. Costs associated with participation in the 2017 EPHEA Conference.

Associate Fellow Selection Process

All interested practitioners are invited to submit an *Expression of Interest* to Louise Pollard (see contact details below). Please consider the following selection criteria when writing the *Expression of Interest*:

1. Acknowledgement of availability to participate in the study tour (9 – 25 June 2017) and confirmation of support from your institution to cover associated costs (outlined above) and approve the travel participation.
2. Outline how these Associate Fellowship activities outlined above will positively contribute to your professional development.
3. Demonstrate how your experience and expertise will allow you to successfully meet the expectations of the Associate Fellow including an outline of how you will share your reflections from the tour and help to disseminate findings of the Fellowship.
4. Explain how your expertise and experience will help you to contribute to the findings of the Fellowship.

Please submit your *Expression of Interest*, CV and details of two referees to Louise Pollard by email. Please note that this process will close on **Wednesday 8 March at 5pm (AWST).**

LOUISE POLLARD
2017 Equity Fellow
(National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education)
The University of Western Australia
Email: louise.pollard@uwa.edu.au
Phone: (08) 6488 1221

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2017 Equity Fellowship
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Appendix 5: Canadian Study Tour Report (Dr Nicole Crawford)

Nicole has more than ten years' experience teaching and researching in higher education. She has worked in Pre-degree Programs at the University of Tasmania (UTAS) since 2011. She was a co-chief investigator in a research project that explored the longer-term benefits of UTAS's University Preparation Program (UPP) in north-west Tasmania. She is a recipient of a 2016 Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT) Seed Grant, 'Lighting the path(way): articulating curriculum design principles for open access enabling programs', and a 2017 HEPPP National Priorities Pool (NPP) Grant 'Improving the "beaten track": investigating alternative pathways to increase higher education participation for mature aged, low socioeconomic status students in regional and remote Australia'. In Pre-degree Programs, she is involved in unit coordination, teaching and support. She initiated and facilitates UTAS's Social Inclusion Community of Practice, and she leads the National Association of Enabling Educators of Australia (NAEEA) Special Interest Group on Mental Health. Nicole's research interests include enabling education; student and staff wellbeing; and equity and inclusion in higher education.

Acronyms

AU: Athabasca University
CACUSS: Canadian Association of College and University Student Services
RU: Ryerson University
SFU: Simon Fraser University
UBC: University of British Columbia
UoA: University of Alberta
UoC: University of Calgary

Focus Area 1: Wellbeing and Mental Health

1.1   Overview

Taking a holistic, institution-wide, settings approach to wellbeing and mental health was a striking theme at the CACUSS conference, and at most of our university visits. Influenced by the UK "Healthy Universities" Framework, *The Okanagan Charter for Health Promoting Universities and Colleges* was developed in Canada in 2015; it called for higher education institutions to 'incorporate health promotion values and principles into their mission, vision and strategic plans'. Two years later, the impact of this Charter was evident in the number of university-wide initiatives committed to developing cultures and environments that promote student and staff health and wellbeing.

1.2   Initiatives

At the CACUSS conference, a joint presentation by senior staff from four universities (a President, a Vice President, and two Provosts) shared the impact of *The Okanagan Charter* on their institutions. At the UoC, a 'whole of student' approach is now considered critical, and their Provost declared that "all new policies [at their University] need to be developed through a mental health lens". The mission at SFU is to create a healthy campus community. One aspect of their multi-faceted approach is to assist teaching staff in creating the conditions for positive student wellbeing in learning environments. UBC follow a collaborative care model, which is embedded across the university, with an emphasis on building capacity in staff and students; of importance is that the training and resources for staff are based on research. At RU, mental health is viewed as 'everyone's responsibility'. Driven by their Scholar in Residence, a clinical psychologist, they have initiated ThriveRU (a program based

on positive psychology principles, specifically the PERMA-V theory of cultivating wellbeing), in order to 'create student excellence by nurturing the whole person'.

Links to information, initiatives & resources:

- The Okanagan Charter:
  https://wellbeing.ubc.ca/okanagan-charter
- SFU Healthy Campus Community:
  https://www.sfu.ca/healthycampuscommunity/abouthcc.html
- SFU Wellbeing in learning environments:
  https://www.sfu.ca/healthycampuscommunity/learningenvironments/WLE.html
- The Story of UBC Wellbeing:
  https://wellbeing.ubc.ca/story-ubc-wellbeing
- UBC's T&L Resources for staff:
  https://wellbeing.ubc.ca/teaching-learning-resources
- RU's commitment to mental health:
  http://www.ryerson.ca/mentalhealth/
- RU's ThriveRU:
  http://www.ryerson.ca/thriveru and http://studentlife.ryerson.ca/category/thriveru/

1.3   Reflection

The theme of mental health and wellbeing was predominant on our Canada study tour. Student wellbeing and mental health is being viewed as a teaching and learning issue,[1] and as a whole of university issue — not as the sole responsibility of individual students or specialised counselling, or health and safety units. The initiatives mentioned above tend to be embedded across the whole university, or are joint or cross-institutional collaborations, such as the resources for staff at SFU being developed by the Health Promotion unit in conjunction with the Teaching and Learning Centre. It was reiterated that the initiatives, training (to build capacity), and resources were based on research.

From conference presentations and our university meetings, it is evident that good practice has been occurring in pockets for many years. What appears to be a new is the more holistic, institution-wide, settings approach to health and wellbeing. This is where *The Okanagan Charter* is playing a significant role as a blueprint for higher education (HE) institutions. It is a symbolic document *and* its principles seem to be driving action. I kept thinking: strategies and policies abound in universities; what makes this Charter have an impact? How is it that numerous Canadian universities are not only signing up to this Charter, but are actually endeavouring to enact it?

Perhaps the fact that the Charter is a document external to each university is of importance; multiple institutions being signatories may create a form of institutional peer pressure. Also, I suspect (from observations on our Canada tour) that for ideas to be enacted the *right conditions* are essential. With 'mental health' making the headlines within and beyond universities, the issue is certainly part of the zeitgeist. Furthermore, there is genuine will and commitment from senior levels — it was palpable![2] And, there is funding to support the commitment![3]

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[1] In the Australian context, the recent OLT project *Enhancing Student Wellbeing* provides resources for staff to assist them with approaching student wellbeing as a teaching and learning issue. http://unistudentwellbeing.edu.au

[2] However, the four senior staff (from the aforementioned conference presentation) agreed that mental health and wellbeing can be a hard sell. They advised, though, that pointing out the link between student mental health and academic performance, and, therefore, to retention and attrition rates, usually triggers an understanding of the importance (even if only from an economic perspective) of mental wellbeing for academic success. Furthermore, the UBC Vice President went on to state that being a health-promoting university can be seen as a strategic advantage.

[3] Communication with staff at one university disclosed that 1 million dollars of extra money per year is being dedicated to wellness initiatives.

Focus Area 2: Students "At-Risk" — Early Interventions

2.1 Overview

Related to the mental health theme above are early intervention initiatives. It is often the case that if a teacher notices a change in a student's behaviour they do not know exactly what to do/who to contact. Meanwhile, a student's situation may worsen. Early intervention is desirable, so that students can be connected to resources to prevent their situation reaching a more complex and critical level.

2.2 Initiatives

Two early intervention initiatives of note are UBC's *Early Alert Program* and UoA's *Helping Individuals at Risk (HIAR) Program*. Both enable staff to submit their concern via an online form. A case management team assesses the reports (there may, for example, be several reports from different staff members about the one student), and organise for an appropriate response, which is usually contact with the student offering them relevant resources and assistance. The aim is to make contact with the student as early as possible, so actions can be taken to prevent the issue escalating.

Links to the initiatives:

- UBC's *Early Alert*:
  - https://facultystaff.students.ubc.ca/systems-tools/early-alert
  - https://facultystaff.students.ubc.ca/systems-tools/early-alert/how-does-early-alert-work
- UoA's *HIAR*:
  https://www.ualberta.ca/vice-president-finance/audit-and-analysis/about-audit-and-analysis/helping-individuals-at-risk-program

2.3 Reflection

A benefit of these early alert initiatives is that it is straightforward for staff to submit an online form. It is a central system, which means a small group of case managers are aware of the reported concerns and can provide a coordinated and appropriate intervention, by arranging communication from the most relevant staff member to the student. Often students do not know where to seek help or may feel stigmatised; this initiative enables an appropriate 'reach-out' from a staff member (often an academic advisor, in the UBC example) to a student in need. In addition to the student being given the appropriate information and resources to assist with their issue, the communication also shows the student that someone in the large institution cares. These are excellent initiatives that would be suitable in the Australian context.

Focus Area 3: Transition and Academic Preparation Initiatives

3.1 Overview

Unsurprisingly, most universities we visited have dedicated First Year in Higher Education (FYHE), Orientation, and Transition programs to familiarise students with university. In regard to enabling programs (pre-university preparation programs), the nation-wide situation in Australia where most universities have an enabling program was not the case in Canada. This could be due to HE in Canada being under provincial direction rather than federal, so where university preparation programs are located differs across the country. For example, such programs do exist outside of universities, such as in colleges, which is the case with the CEGEPs[4] in Quebec.

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[4] CEGEPs are pre-university colleges in the Quebec education system.

3.2   Initiatives

AU, an open online university, acknowledges the challenges of online learning. They provide readiness assessments for students to self assess their general readiness for being an online student, their English language, as well as for maths and some other discipline areas. Their preparation initiatives include a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) for students about how to learn online,[5] and academic preparation courses, such as 'English Language and Writing Skills'.

Of note is the UoA's Transition Year Program (TYP) – "a one year program exclusively for First Nations, Métis and Inuit students who would benefit from extra support transitioning to the university environment". A warm, welcoming environment is the base for TYP students, where they have access to academic support, the space to study, and form a community of learners.

SFU offers SFU101 for new students, and they are currently piloting a transition program, The Summit, for first-year commuter students. UBC have orientation programs such as Imagine Day and Jump Start. UBC also have a program for commuter students, The Collegia Program. Spaces are provided as a "home away from home" for students who do not live on campus.

Links to the initiatives:

- AU What you need to know:
  http://counselling.athabascau.ca/getting_started.php
- AU Self assessments:
  http://counselling.athabascau.ca/getting_started.php#assess
- AU MOOC Learning to Learn online:
  http://www.ltlo.ca
- AU Academic Preparation:
  http://www.athabascau.ca/syllabi/engl/engl177.php
- SFU101:
  https://www.sfu.ca/students/newundergrads/sfu-101.html
- SFU's Summit First Year Transition Program:
  https://www.sfu.ca/students/summit.html
- UBC Orientation - Imagine Day:
  https://students.ubc.ca/new-to-ubc/orientations/imagine-ubc
- UBC Orientation - Jump Start:
  https://students.ubc.ca/new-to-ubc/orientations/jump-start
- UBC's Collegia Program:
  https://students.ubc.ca/new-to-ubc/first-year-commuter
- UoA's Transition Year Program (TYP):
  http://www.aboriginalservices.ualberta.ca/TransitionYearProgramTYP/Program Details.aspx

3.3   Reflection

Many Australian universities are probably providing similar Orientation and Transition programs. What is new, and of interest for the Australian context, are the specific programs for commuter students — that is, students who do not live in the residences. Regional and remote students who relocate to study do not always live in university residences. They find accommodation off campus, which can be another level of isolation, which the commuter programs could offset.

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[5] AU also provides a MOOC for staff about how to teach online.

Providing self-assessments for students, so they can assess their general readiness for university study (or even more specifically for being an online student), and the readiness of their English language are excellent proactive initiatives.

Focus Area 4: Academic Support

4.1 Overview

Most academic support units we heard about mirrored the type of support provided in Australian universities, such as one-on-one support, and workshops for on-campus students, and resources provided online for distance students. Of particular interest, though, are two new programs at SFU and UoA for students who have performed poorly in their undergraduate study and have been asked to withdraw.

4.2 Initiatives

AU's Write Site is a comprehensive online site for distance students. In addition to the standard resources provided, students can seek feedback on their writing assignments before submission, and also coaching for their writing. AU also provide useful webinars and videos via their library website to assist distance students with research and information skills.

SFU's Back on Track Program and UoA's Fresh Start Program are for students who have a 'Required To Withdraw' (RTW) standing, due to poor performance in their course. These programs run over several terms, and are an opportunity for RTW students to develop the skills and mindset required for successful university study. Completing these courses allows the students to gain readmission to their course.

Links to the initiatives:

- AU's Write Site:
  http://write-site.athabascau.ca
- AU videos on research skills:
  http://library.athabascau.ca/AULibOrient.html
- SFU's Back on Track:
  https://www.sfu.ca/students/bot/program-overview.html
- UoA's Fresh Start Program:
  http://www.studentsuccess.ualberta.ca/FreshStartProgram.aspx

4.3 Reflection

In many cases, in the Australian context, I suspect that enabling programs could and do fill the role of SFU's *Back on Track* and UoA's *Fresh Start Program*, but these programs are certainly worth exploring because they are tailored for this particular cohort, which has different needs to the enabling student cohort.

Overall Key Themes

- The importance of the *right conditions* for change:
  o Serious commitment and comprehensive support from all levels is required.
  o Staff responsible for implementing changes/building capacity/training need to be highly regarded, and it is essential that they base their work on research.
- The potential impact of a Charter (and also of strategies and policies) as a driver for change.
- 'Up-streaming' (i.e. proactive approaches) were being initiated or were certainly a goal.

- The importance of research — there was a noticeable research culture in Student Affairs in general (and certainly underpinning the wellbeing and mental health initiatives).
- The benefits of the Associate Fellowship and undertaking a study tour in a trio!
    - Being involved in Louise's Fellowship and study tour has shifted my thinking from the local to the national and international, and broadened my attention from teaching and research in enabling education to policies and strategies at institution and government levels. It has also given me an opportunity to be an advocate for enabling education.
    - The Canadian study tour was a brilliant opportunity, and undertaking it in a trio meant that we benefited from reflecting together at the end of each full day. Such reflection assisted in digesting the learning from our own and each other's perspectives. Not only did we learn from the conference presentations and the university meetings, but, also, from each other!

Appendix 6: Canadian Study Tour Report (Melinda Mann)

Melinda Mann is the Deputy Director, Student Life and Wellbeing at CQUniversity. Prior to taking on this role Melinda was involved in the widening participation school outreach programs at CQUniversity initially as the Indigenous Widening Participation Officer and then as the Coordinator of the School Outreach Team. Melinda has worked in education and training programs in the public sector since the late 1990s. She draws on both her undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications in human resources and education as well as 20+ years of experience working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities. Melinda's interests are in outreach, access and participation support across from early childhood to postgraduate levels of education.

Focus Area 1: Indigenous Student Support

Overview

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) specifically called for increased funding to improve access to post-secondary education for First Nations students and more resourcing and training of educators to integrate Indigenous knowledges into course content, as well as the creation of courses in Aboriginal languages and the establishment of a national Indigenous research program. The institutions visited as part of the study tour had differing expectations of how the recommendations would be implemented at their institutions. Whilst there were concerns about how such work would be funded and who, within institutions, would be responsible for leading the implementation there was consensus that the TRC recommendations were important to improving the university outcomes for First Nations people.

Initiatives

A noteworthy strategy was found at University of Alberta (UoA) whereby the institution had reflected on ineffective Indigenous workforce strategies. The UoA recognised that the recruitment of First Nations people into teaching faculties necessitated a cluster recruitment approach to ensure the longevity of these staff. The strategy used was to recruit two to three First Nations people to a faculty. These staff could then support each other and foster a culturally safe work environment. This strategy recognises that whilst there exists goodwill to recruit First Nations people into teaching staff the reality is that often cultural isolation and cultural vulnerability exposes First Nations people to experiences that require steadfast resilience.

Accommodation support was particularly important and was highlighted as such in presentations at CACUSS by Royal Roads University. This particular institution highlighted the challenges to access housing for First Nations students relocating from communities. Accessing on-campus and off-campus accommodation in large cities was often a stressful experience for First Nations' students and university support programs were designed to assist students with this basic need which also attributed to attrition.

Student and staff access to ceremonial protocols were evident at University of Alberta and through the information presented by Royal Roads University at CACUSS. Other Canadian universities also indicated they had similar services for students. Such rich cultural protocols were embedded into university events such as welcomes and orientation and pastoral care. Aboriginal languages were readily observed in Indigenous programs and support units. The incorporation of community elders into the leadership and mentorship of First Nations student support demonstrated the richness of culture and the centrality of Indigenous knowledges.

Reflection

Upon reflection the study tour took place 18 months after the handing down of the TRC. There appeared to be general awareness of the TRC recommendations across CACUSS and the institutions which had particular Indigenous portfolios. However, it was evident that institutions were concerned primarily with navigating the complexities of funding from both university and First Nations perspectives. Regardless of the funding issues, the TRC has set the tone by which Canada as a nation used educational institutions to devastate First Nations people which are now a key part of the reconciliation process. Australian universities could learn from the national spotlight the TRC shone across the sector on the important role educational institutions, especially universities, have in preserving and elevating Indigenous peoples experiences and knowledges. Whilst Indigenous experiences and knowledges are valued across Indigenous and equity spaces in Australian universities more could be done to understand these factors and how they intersect with Indigenous access and participation across university student support and service areas.

Appendix 7: Remote Student Profiles (2016)

	Online study (45.3%)	Campus-based (internal) (40.7%)	Mixed-mode (14%)
Socioeconomic status			
High SES	4.6%	7.7%	7%
Medium SES	61.7%	60.3%	55%
Low SES	33.2%	30.8%	38%
Unknown	0.5%	1.2%	1%
Gender			
Female	73%	60%	75%
Male	37%	40%	34%
Age			
19 and under	5%	39%	27%
20 to 24	14%	37%	38%
25 to 34	36%	13%	17%
35 and over	45%	11%	19%
Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander			
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student population	9%	10%	11%
Study mode			
Full-time	27%	79%	77%
Part-time	73%	21%	23%
Degree type (Australian Qualifications Framework) (%)			
Enabling courses	7%	4%	2%
Non-award course	1%	0%	0%
Undergraduate courses	57%	80%	84%
Postgraduate courses	35%	16%	14%