



# Progress Bulletin

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Dr Janine Delahunty  
2020 NCSEHE Equity Fellow

‘You going to uni?’: Exploring how regional people navigate into and through higher education

## Overview of the project

My **NCSEHE Equity Fellowship** focuses on the perspectives of regional students, who are either already studying at university or are nearing the end of secondary school and contemplating their future. Through interviews and surveys, the aim is to gather in-depth understandings of what is pertinent for regional students. These experiences and perspectives will be used to unpack some of the complexities that emerge, and will shed light on what it is like “being regional” in order to gain a deeper understanding into why regional students are more likely than their metropolitan counterparts to discontinue their studies. This will contribute to how regional students can be better supported in pursuing their goals and completing their studies.

In particular, I am interested in how higher education is experienced (or imagined); the multilayered nature of decision-making when considering university study and future possibilities; and the barriers and enablers that are influential in hindering or assisting students’ efforts towards achieving goals. Reflective, open questioning is intended to elicit nuanced responses from the study participants. This will assist in developing a deeper understanding of students’ motivations and the complexities of their decision-making — often against a backdrop of multiple and compounding educational and structural inequities.

At this point in time, research participation is open to **current undergraduate regional students enrolled in Australian higher education institutions** and **higher education staff** in various roles who provide support to regional students (support services, careers or counselling roles, mentoring, teaching, management, policymaking etc.).

## Research activities to date

While the COVID-19 situation has paused some of the planned research activities (planning to resume in June/July), some recruitment of university students and staff did proceed. A number have participated in phone interviews, and others have completed the surveys. For the school-focused phase of the project, recruitment of senior school students in two university outreach programs is underway, and I am waiting on ethics clearances from state jurisdictions to recruit senior students and staff in state secondary schools.

This update focuses on a selection of preliminary findings from the university student data.

## Preliminary findings

Data from five interviews and 52 complete surveys from university students across Australia form the basis for the preliminary findings reported here. While the participant number is small, the data is qualitatively rich and provides a glimpse of some of the characteristics and perspectives of these regional students. Briefly,

- Nine universities were represented across three states (NSW, QLD and VIC) and both territories (NT and ACT).
- Bachelor degrees being undertaken were across all discipline areas: sciences (n=27), social sciences (n=9), law, humanities, arts (LHA) (n=6), business (n=4), engineering and information services (n=4) and LHA/business double (n=2).

DISCIPLINE AREAS	SURVEY	INTERVIEW
Business	4	
Law, Humanities, Arts	6	
Engineering & Information Services	4	1
Social Sciences	9	1
Science	27	3
LHA/Business double	2	
<b>Total</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>5</b>

- The majority of students were in the first two years of study. This ranged from 17 in first year; 22 in second year; nine in third year; five in fourth year; and four in their fifth year or later.

### Summary of participant demographics

Participants were located across states and territories in inner, outer and remote regions of Australia.

SURVEY PARTICIPANT LOCATIONS	SURVEY	INTERVIEW
NSW inner regional	21	
NSW outer regional	1	
QLD inner regional	6	
QLD outer regional	12	2
QLD remote	2	1
VIC inner regional	1	
NT outer regional	5	2
WA inner regional	1	
WA outer regional	1	
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>5</b>

- The mode of study for most participants was online (n=21), followed by on campus (n=13), blended (n=12) and distance/block mode (n=11). However, six students indicated changes due to COVID-19 meant that their courses were now fully online (four had been on campus and two blended).
- The majority of participants were female (n=41), and six were male (10 skipped or preferred not to say).
- Most of the students were aged 26 or over: 26 to 30 (n=3), 31 to 40 (n=13), 41 to 50 (n=7) and 51 or over (n=3), while others were in the 18 to 20 years (n=14) range or 21 to 25 (n=6).
- Almost all survey participants chose to stay in their regional location (n=43), while seven moved but were not too far way, and two moved a long distance away.

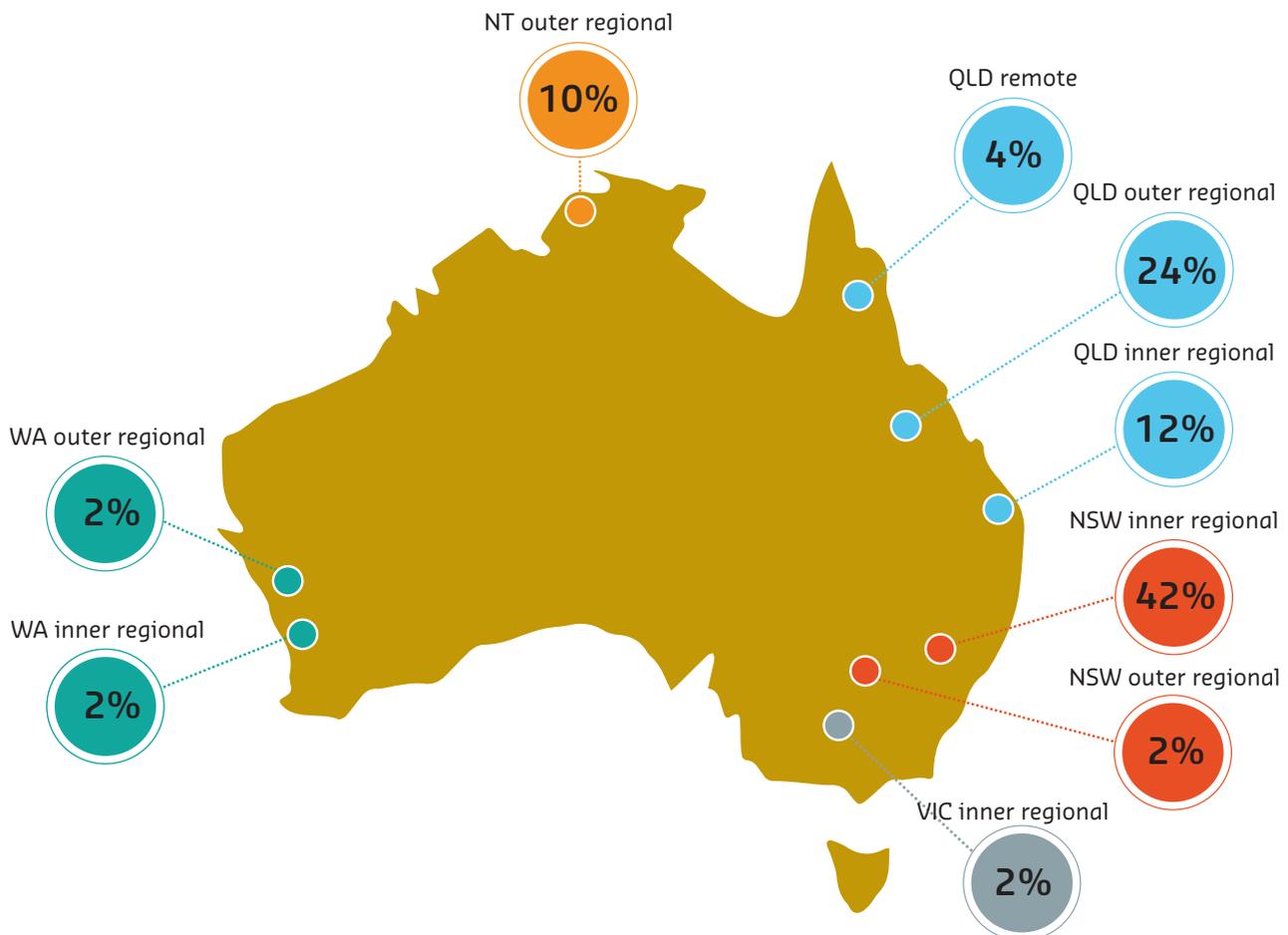
## Complexities of being regional

The location of respondents meant that the demographic category of *regional* was applied to all, with some also indicating that they were from an isolated or remote location. All but four survey respondents identified a combination of two or more equity/demographic groupings including being regional. As participants selected all categories that were reflective of their circumstances, a total of 144 different categories were chosen by the remaining 48 surveyed students and 14 by the five interviewees. This provides an insight into the complexity of equity-related challenges that characterise the situations of many regional students.

Almost half of the students are first in their family at university (n=27), just over half come from a working-class background (n=32) and 20 are mature age (21 years or over). Ten indicated their location as isolated, nine were from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds, and there were eight students with disability. Three were from non-English speaking backgrounds, one identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, and one as international.

In addition, almost all indicated they had other responsibilities in addition to university study, with some juggling multiple commitments. Similar to the equity categories, students could choose all that reflected their situation. Twenty-five had caring responsibilities: 18 were carers for children and seven cared for other family members; 16 had community commitments. Most students also worked, with 18 in regular part-time work, 12 in casual/irregular work and 12 working full-time. Five also indicated they were involved in extracurricular activities.

## SURVEY PARTICIPANT LOCATION (N=50)



## What students said: selected preliminary findings

Preliminary analysis of student comments indicated they were highly motivated, quite often passionate about their chosen pathway and future possibilities, and many had clearly articulated future-focused goals. These included career and completion goals, but were also expressed as a general desire to help others, be a good member of society or to contribute to communities and others in meaningful ways. As the following quotes indicate, they described the benefits of being regional which included the sense of community, living in beautiful, quiet environments and smaller campuses, also an appreciation that they could study and stay in these environments:

*The isolation of growing up in a regional environment makes me much more focussed on the relationships with those around me and my place in the community. This is because in an isolated area you often can't afford to burn bridges since there is less people around to build new relationships with. (#45)*

*The sense of community and how everyone is willing to jump in and help each other no matter their own situation. (#46)*

*The space and safety to grow and explore the area I live in. (#9)*

*I think it's awesome that you can do online studies nowadays. You can work around with your time so whenever you get the chance, you've got spare time, so it's very, very flexible ... so I guess that's a wonderful thing and so much easier than having to attend to university in person. (Hans, interview)*

Many mentioned some of the limitations of being regional, including the long distances to travel, and lack of regular reliable public transport. Some lamented the challenge of placements, especially if having to travel out of the region, particularly in relation to the associated and uncompensated financial/economic burden (of accommodation, fuel, time off work, using holiday leave etc.). Some felt restricted by small campuses with limited resources and opportunities, and poor internet which is critical for those studying online or unable to attend campus:

*How difficult online learning can be if you can't get to campus especially in areas with unstable internet. (#46)*

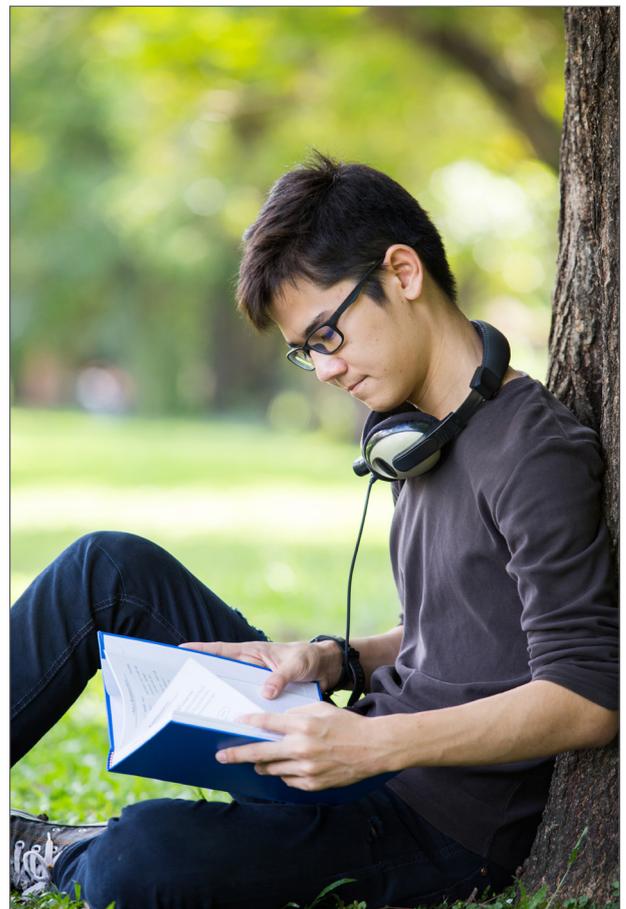
However, there was a sense that these were things they just had to accept:

*No I don't think twice about having to drive long distances, because it's just the way it is. It sucks but complaining about it is not going to change it. (Chloe, interview)*

*I like it here and don't want to leave but the job market is terrible. (#47)*

When asked about the strengths or qualities that regional people have, the most frequently mentioned were: determination, motivation, resilience, abilities, confidence, and commitment, as this comment exemplifies:

*We know that to have this opportunity is very lucky. We don't take it for granted so we want to give it a red hot crack. (#37)*



The support of immediate and extended family, friends and community is also very important to regional students. These are some of the responses when asked who or what keeps them going:

*Know[ing] that I have the support of my family and that one day all the stress of uni will be worth it once I am qualified and can help people. (#20)*

*Having a loving family also that just make me smile and pick me up saying it's gonna be ok. (#2)*

*I rely very heavily on a small group of people to help me with the care of my kids when I'm not available to do that. Like for a three-week placement [nine hours' drive away] ... I rely very heavily on a small group of friends to take our kids to school in the morning and whatnot, or you pay for before and after-school care. (Carly, interview)*

A number of participants also were fortunate enough to have access to support and resources such as those provided by **Country Universities Centres**. Without exception, these students were high in their praise of this kind of support as the selection of comments shows:

*[what keeps you going] Personal achievement, having support from family and friends, support from my local Country University Centre. Striving for excellence. (#32)*

*Use the Country University Centre if you have one, it's a godsend. (#32)*

*I really do feel like I couldn't have done it without their support and also that knowing that they're there, that if I am stuck with something, that I can make an appointment or I can just turn up, have a chat to somebody and they can help me work through whatever it is that I need, help working through it ... without the Country University Centre I would have been lost. (Wendy, interview)*

Emotion around the university experience is also emerging as a strong theme, with most students articulating a range, as illustrated in these comments:

*Hard, difficult, regret sometimes, jealous of other people without these commitments. (#15)*

*Uplifting but draining! Never ending. Worth it. (#35)*

*Overwhelming, exciting, proud, GREAT PRIDE!, motivating, fulfilling, exhausting, draining. While it is hard work, the rewards fill my soul with pride and such propels me forward towards the career I desire. (#55)*

*Challenging, enjoyable, eye-opening, empowering, interesting. (#45)*

If you would like to find out more about the **project** please contact me at [janined@uow.edu.au](mailto:janined@uow.edu.au).

**Dr Janine Delahunty**  
2020 NCSEHE Equity Fellow  
University of Wollongong  
[janined@uow.edu.au](mailto:janined@uow.edu.au)