



# Progress Bulletin

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2020 NCSEHE Equity Fellow

Supporting higher education students with disability: with a focus on regional, remote and rural students

## Overview of the project

My Equity Fellowship examines how universities can best support students with disability, especially those who come from regional, rural and remote Australia. These students not only study in regional universities, they also relocate to cities, or study online. Currently, there are approximately 75,000 higher education students who identify as having disability. Of these, around 17,000 are from regional, remote and rural Australia. In this project, I am excited to be working with students with disability, and the higher education staff who support them, to deepen our knowledge and understanding about what works, and what doesn't.

## Research activities to date

Notwithstanding the impact of COVID-19, the research project is progressing well. In late May, national, online surveys of staff and students were launched. The student survey targeted students with disability, whilst the staff survey targeted all higher education staff, regardless of whether or not they directly support students with disability. Both surveys asked respondents to identify and rate various types of institutional support students with disability receive.

The student survey closed at the end of July and the response from students was extraordinary. More than 1,700 students, from 35 universities across Australia, participated in the survey.

In my final report I will provide a detailed analysis of the findings. However, in this progress report I am delighted to share some of the preliminary, quantitative findings.





## Preliminary survey findings

### Types of disability reported

Generally, there is little difference between regional and non-regional students, in terms of the type, or types, of disability they identify as having (see Figure 1). The most common type of disability reported was a mental health condition, followed by a medical condition.

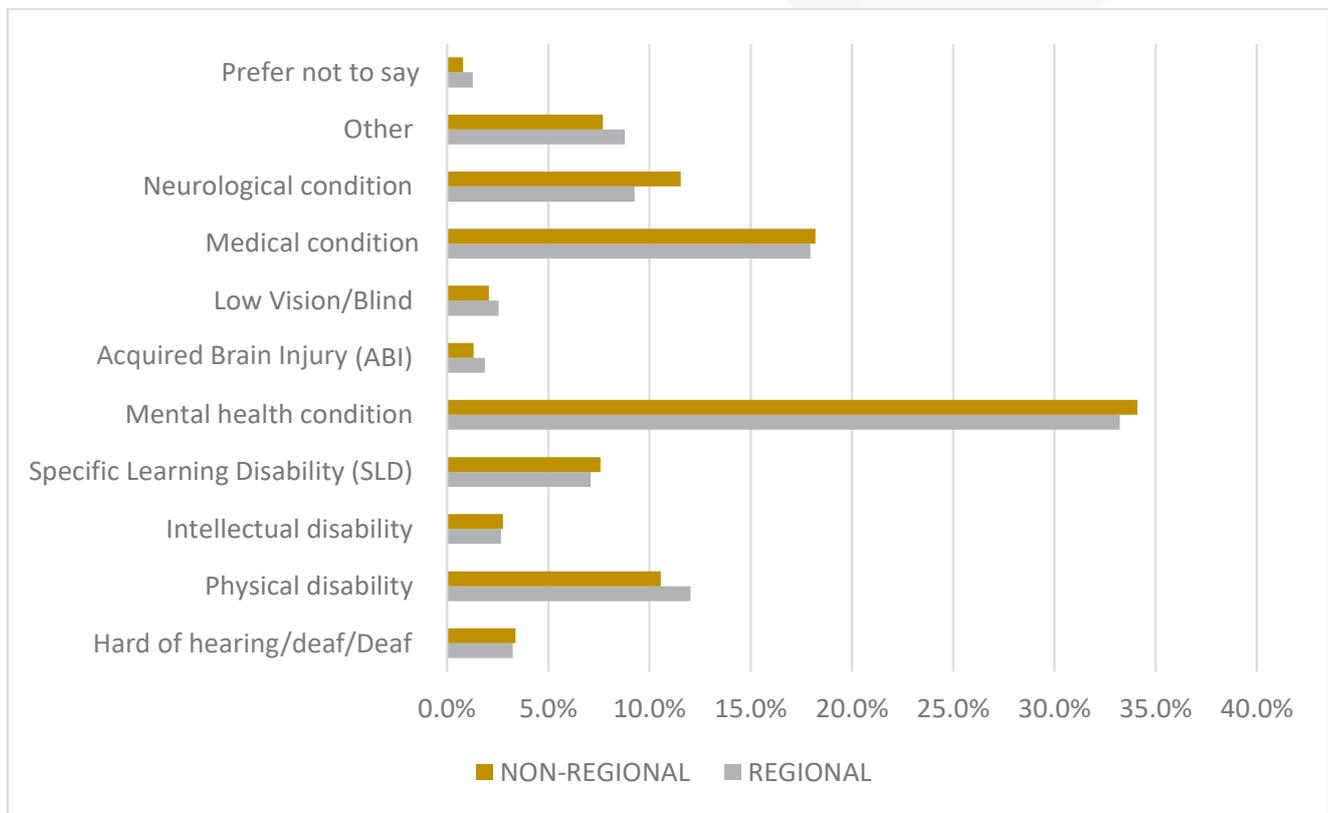


Figure 1: Types of disability reported (n=2764)



### Study mode

Regional students with disability are more likely to study online, compared to their non-regional peers (see Figure 2). However, this is likely to be more a result of regionality, rather than disability. That is, it is being located in regional Australia that makes them more likely to study online, than being a student with disability.

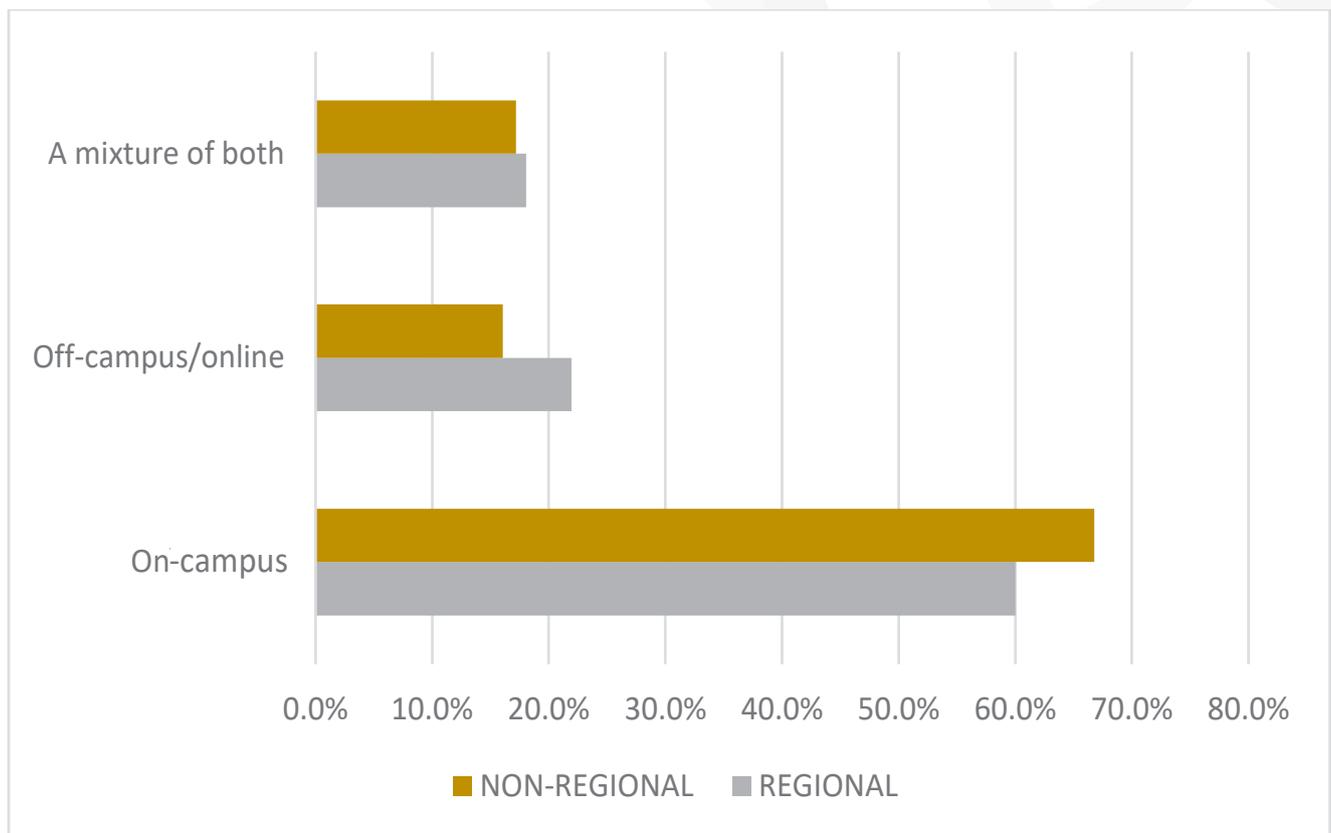


Figure 2: Study mode of students with disability



## Satisfaction with support

Now let's look at six types of support students with disability receive. Some, such as the built environment, or technology, are ones that people are more likely to think about when considering support for these students. Others, such as attitudes and social life, are perhaps less considered by people who do not have a lived experience of disability. Below, the six types of support are described, then the student ratings for each are provided, comparing the responses of regional, remote and rural students to non-regional, remote and rural students.

### 1. Attitudes

I asked students how people at their institution responded to them, as a student with disability. For example, were people comfortable engaging with them, not making their disability the focus of attention. Or did people think they were getting 'special attention', for example, when adjustments were made for their study?

Findings to date indicate that a majority of all students with disability rate this level of institutional support as being either above average or excellent.

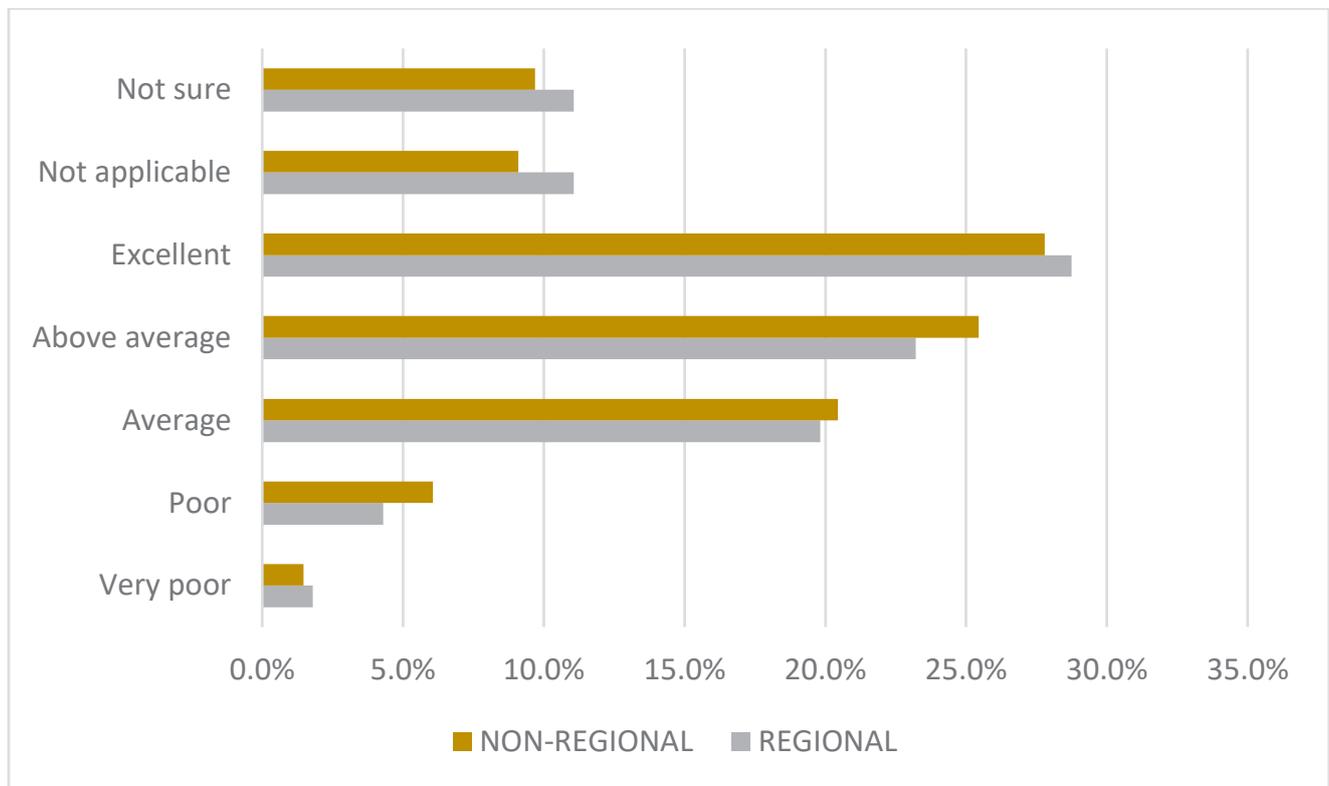


Figure 3: Satisfaction with support: Attitudes



## 2. Procedures, processes, rules

How things get done at the institution, to support your studies. For example, do students with disability find it easy to make alternative arrangements to class times, or get information that is important to them? Or do they find it hard to get important information, or know their rights, or make adjustments to their curriculum?

More than half of all students with disability rated this type of support as being either above average or excellent.

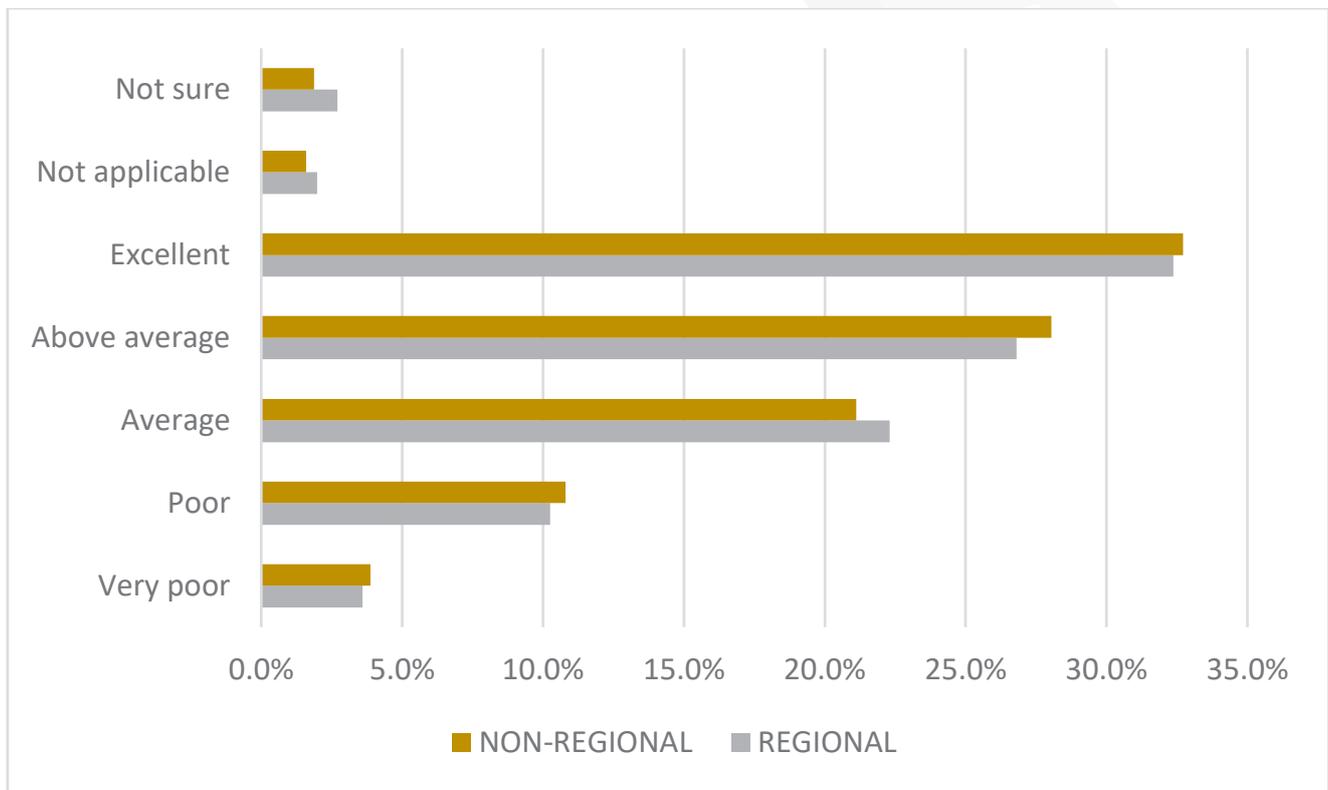


Figure 4: Satisfaction with support: Procedures



### 3. The physical or built environment

Things such as room configurations, lighting, paths, seating, etc. Positive examples include good access points or ramps. Negative examples include poor lighting in lecture halls, distracting or noisy study environments.

Around 40 per cent of all students with disability rated this type of support positively (i.e. above average or excellent). Notably, around one-in-four of all students considered this type of support to be not applicable to them. Possible reasons for this include some types of disability not requiring adjustments to the physical or built environment, or students studying online.

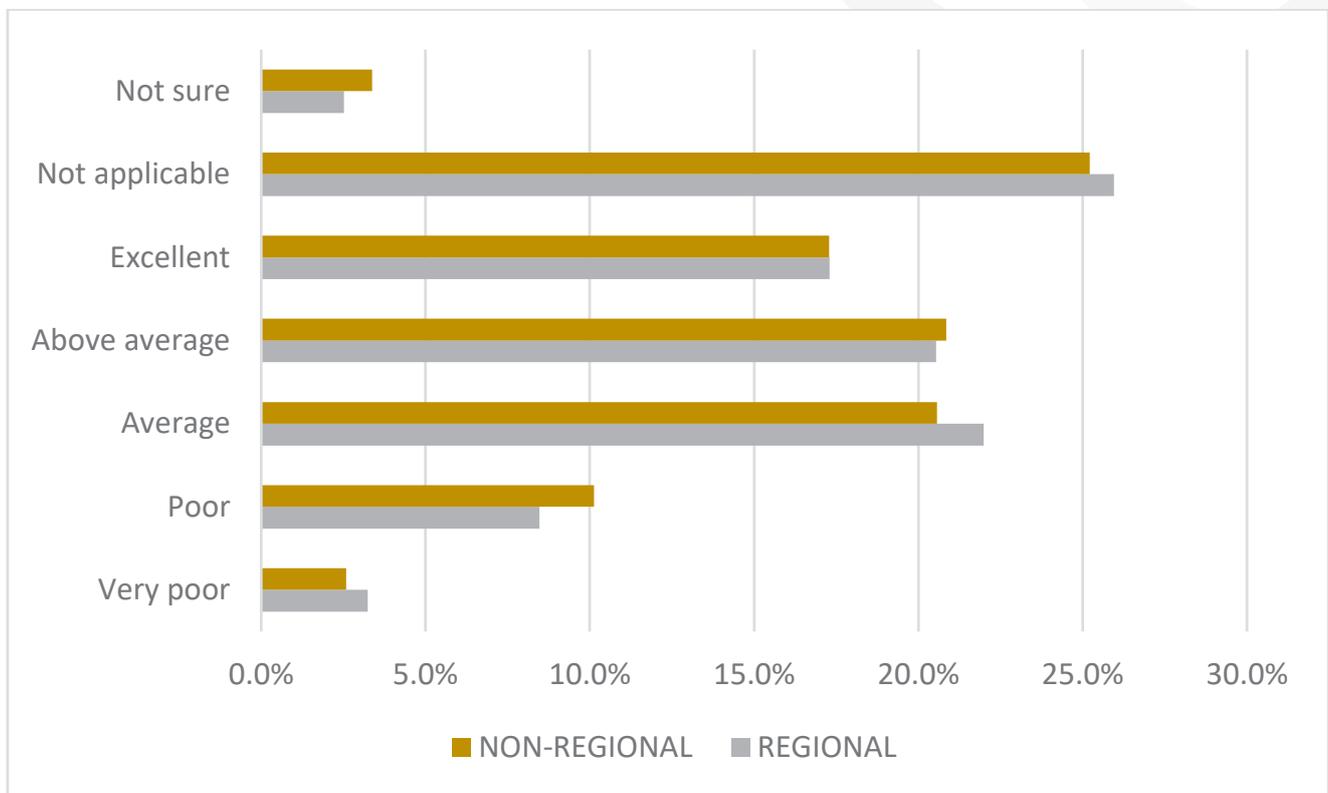


Figure 5: Satisfaction with support: Physical or built environment



#### 4. Communication enablers or barriers

This is about supporting students' sensory and learning needs. For example, lectures being delivered with closed captions. Negative examples include electronic documents not provided in an accessible format or lectures delivered in unclear language.

Compared to other types of support, such as attitudes and procedures, satisfaction with communication support was significantly lower in both the regional and non-regional student cohorts.

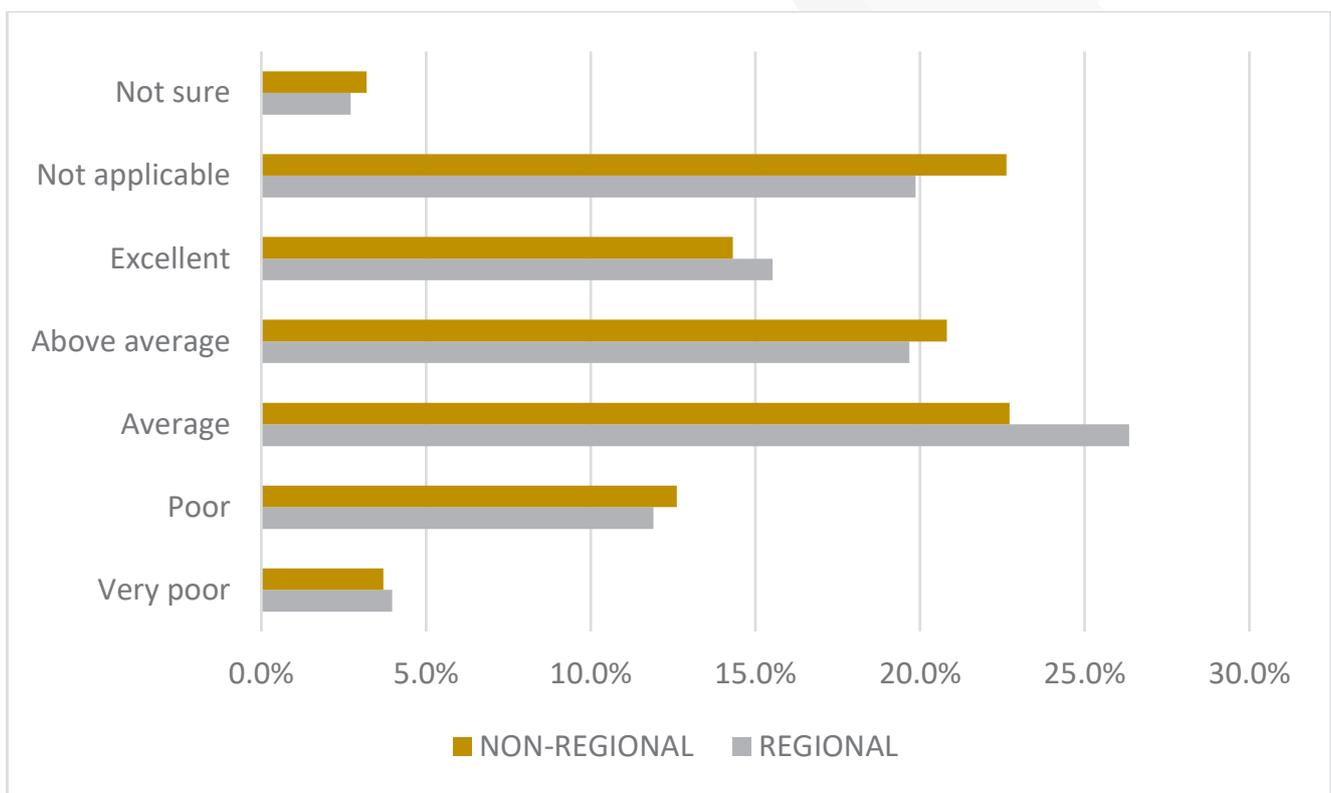


Figure 6: Satisfaction with support: Communication



## 5. Technology devices, software or platforms

Positive example: common use of alternative text in presentations. Negative example: university websites not accessible.

Initial findings suggest that overall, regional students with disability report higher levels of satisfaction in this regard, compared to non-regional students.

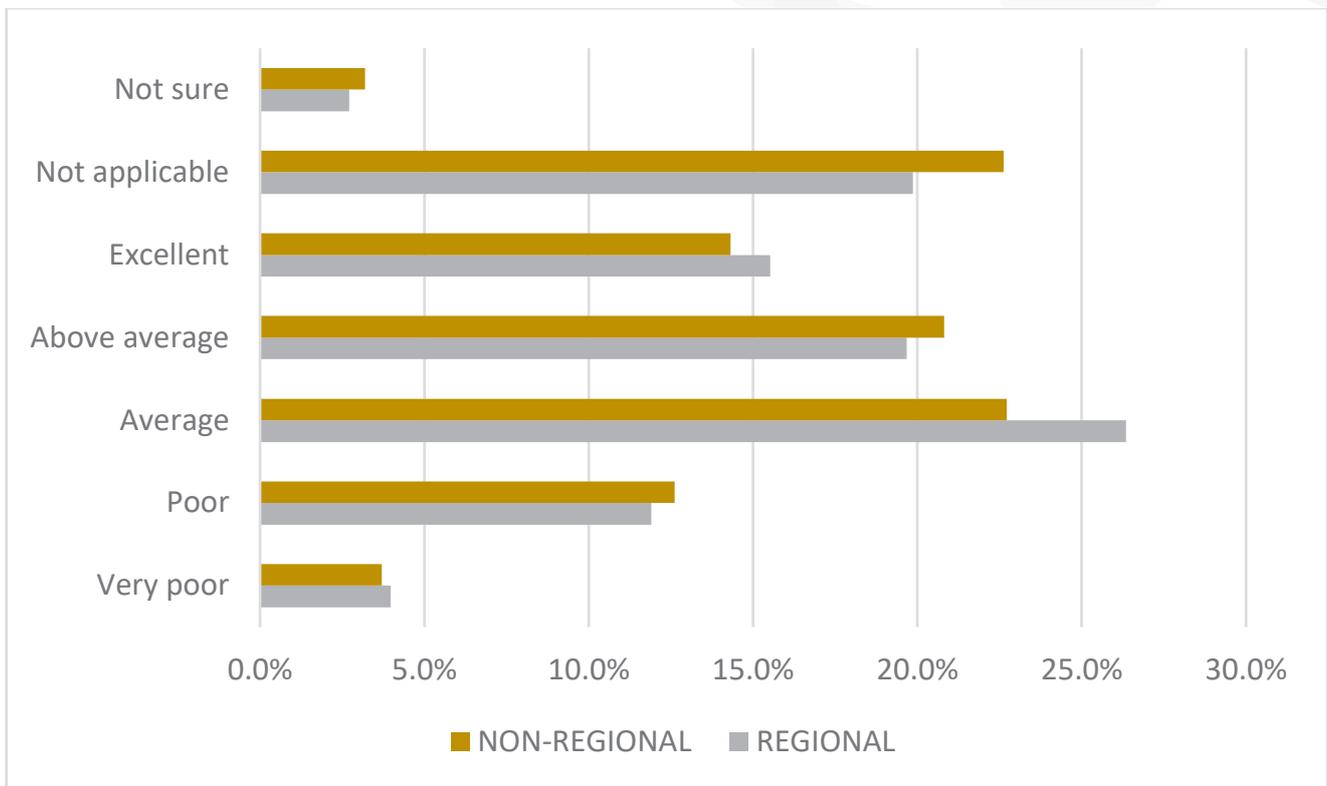


Figure 7: Satisfaction with support: Technology



## 6. Social inclusion

This relates to extra-curricular activities; feeling part of what is going on. A positive example might be accessible student lounges. A negative example could be social activities that don't consider the needs of students with disability.

Regional students reported higher levels of satisfaction in this regard than non-regional students.

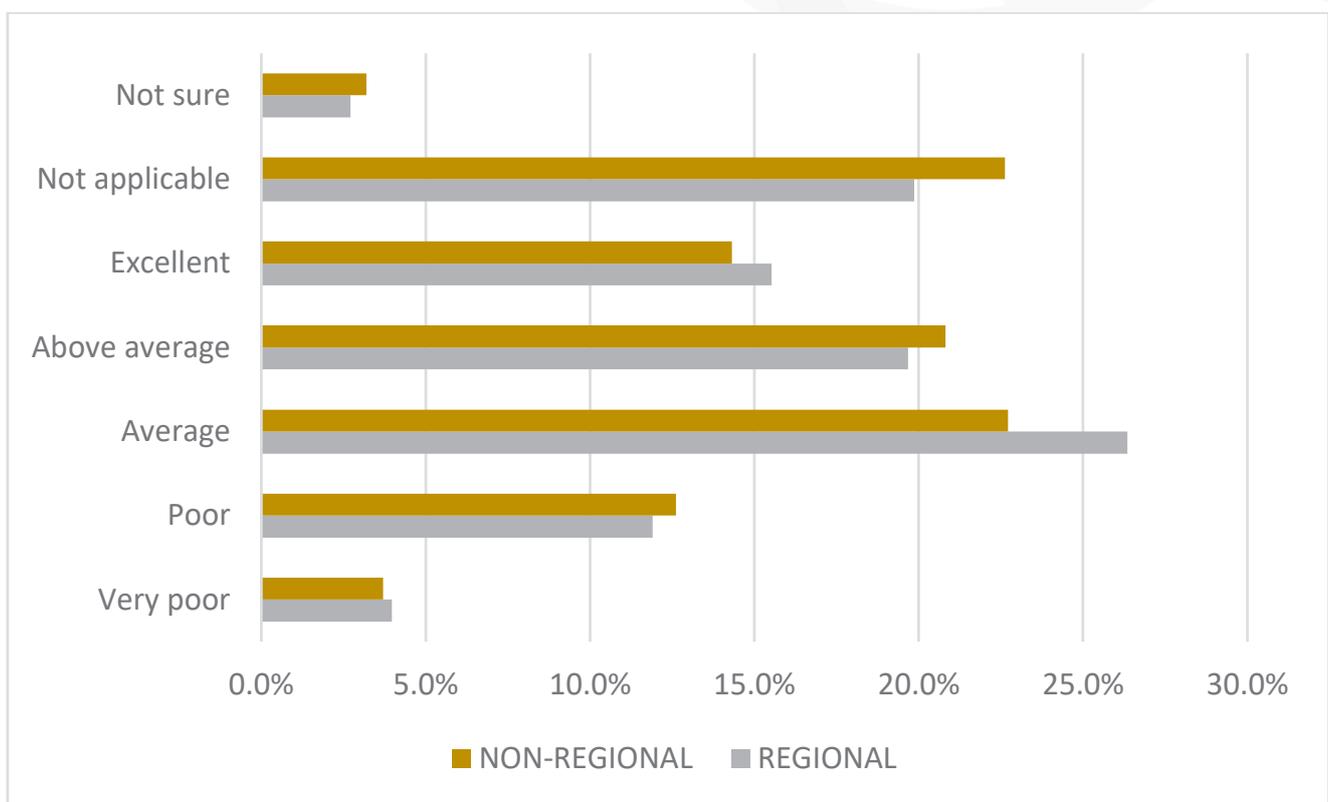


Figure 8: Satisfaction with support: Social inclusion



## The impact of COVID-19

Given the survey is being conducted in 2020, it would be remiss to ignore the possible impact of COVID-19 on student support. Students were asked to rank the overall level of support both pre- and post-COVID-19.

The regional and non-regional participants reported an overall decrease in the level of support they received.

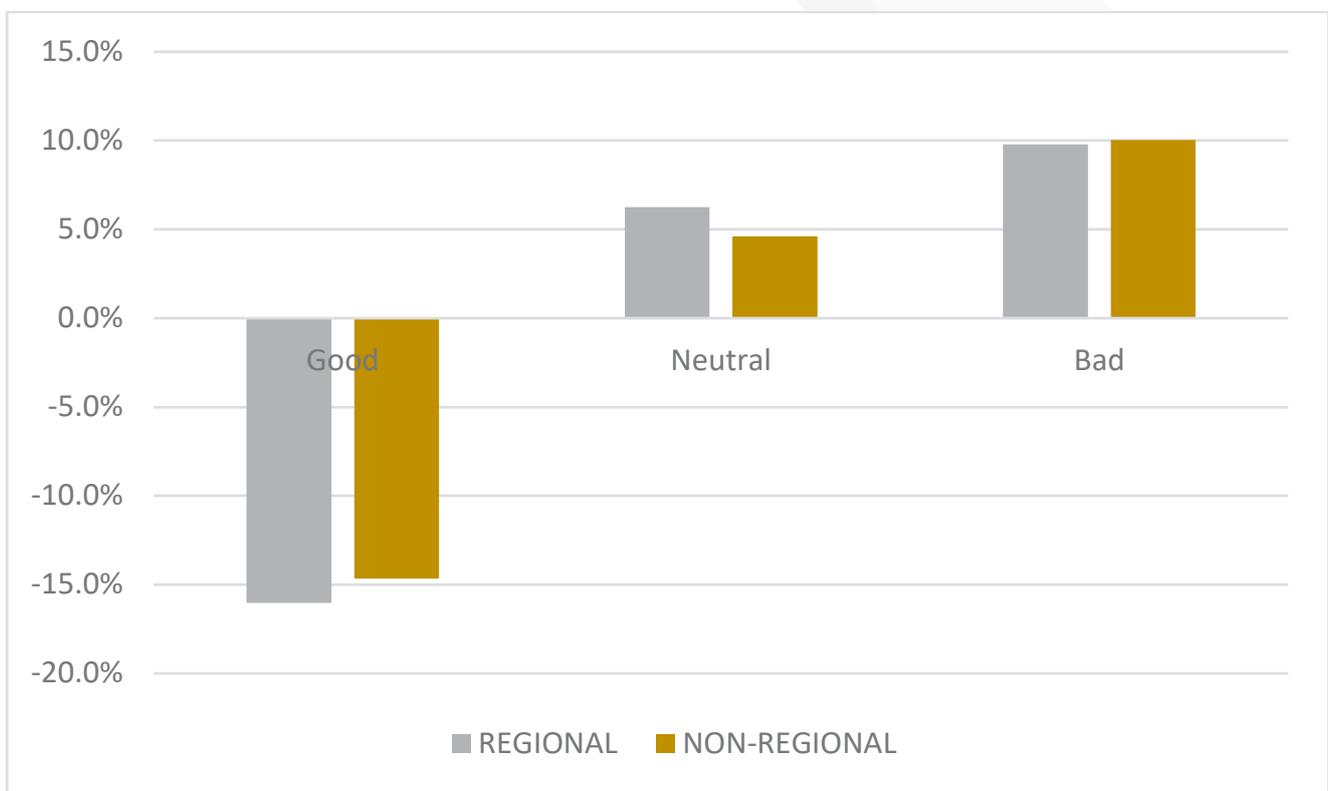


Figure 9: Satisfaction with support: The impact of COVID-19



## Is there a difference in the type of disability and satisfaction with support?

There is evidence that higher education institutions provide better support for some types of disability than others. Overall, students who identified as being in the low vision/Blind category rated the support they received from their institution the highest. Students identifying as having an intellectual disability rated it the lowest.

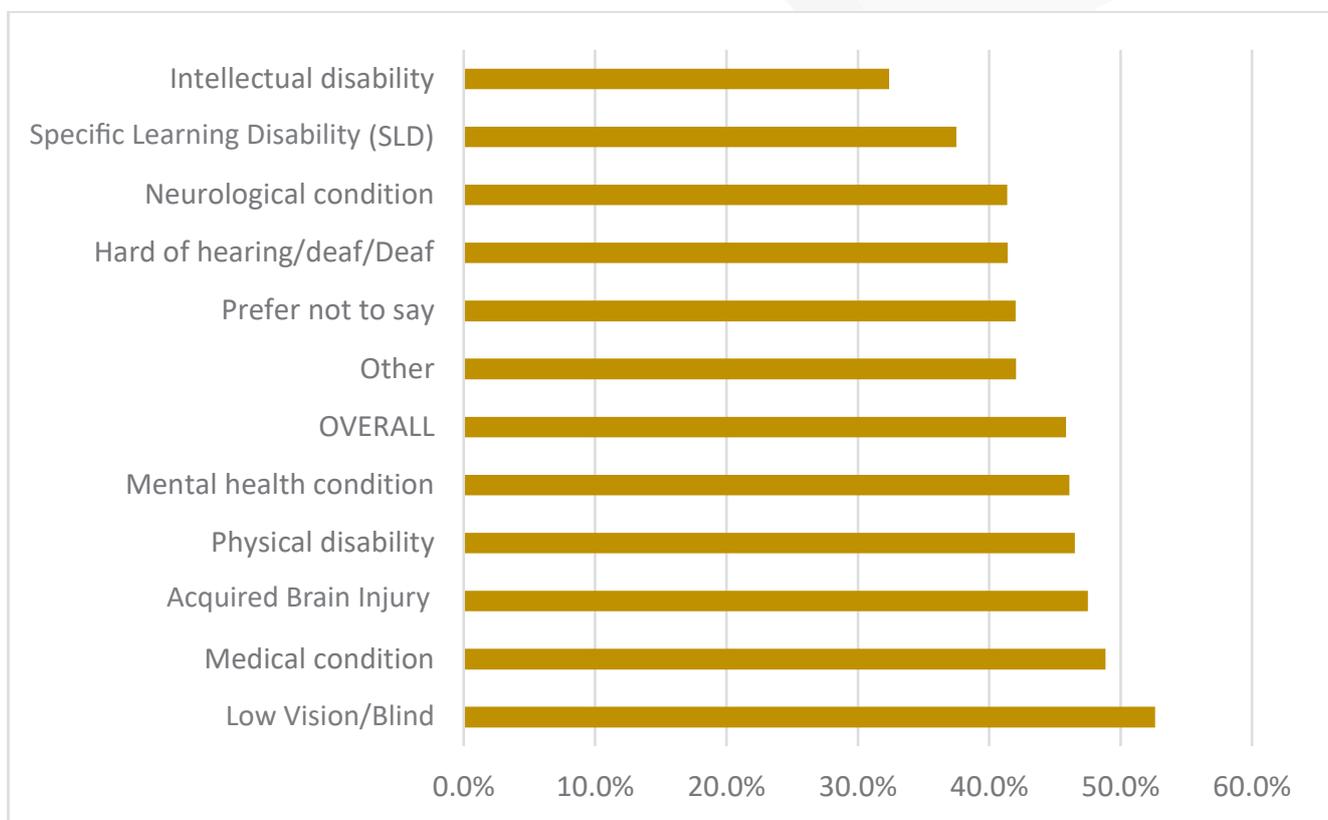


Figure 10: Satisfaction with support: By category of disability



## What do higher education institutions get right, and where do they need to do better?

Although overall levels of satisfaction varied by category of disability, there was almost universal agreement regarding what universities did best and worst at, in all categories of disability.

Attitudes, followed by procedures, were the two areas rated the highest by all groups of students. Furthermore, both were in the top two for each group i.e. if attitudes was rated the best, then procedures was rated the second best, and vice versa.

At the other end, students were most critical of communication support, followed by social inclusion. The exception was for students identifying as having an Acquired Brain Injury. However, this group had relatively low survey numbers and so this result should be treated with some caution.

Category	Highest rating for	Lowest rating for
Other	Attitudes	Communication
Hard of hearing/deaf/Deaf	Procedures	Communication
Physical disability	Procedures	Social Inclusion
Intellectual disability	Procedures	Communication
Specific Learning Disability	Attitudes	Communication
Mental health condition	Attitudes	Social Inclusion
Acquired Brain Injury	Attitudes	Built Environment
Low Vision/Blind	Attitudes	Social Inclusion
Medical condition	Attitudes	Social Inclusion
Neurological condition	Attitudes	Communication

Figure 11: Best and worst support: By category of disability

If you would like to find out more about the [project](#) please contact me at [tim.pitman@curtin.edu.au](mailto:tim.pitman@curtin.edu.au).

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