# Transcript: NCSEHE Student Equity Snapshots Forum

## On footprints, the university experience and why we need to listen to regional students

SARAH O'SHEA: Before we begin, I would just like to acknowledge country that I'm currently on. Today I'm located in the Dharawal nation and acknowledge with respect the traditional custodians of this land. I pay my respects to Elders past, present and emerging and to the Aboriginal community that continue to care for country. I stand for a future that profoundly respects Aboriginal knowledge, language and history and continued effort to fight for Aboriginal justice and rights paving the way for a strong future.

Thank you for joining us today. My name is Sarah O'Shea, Director of the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, we call it NCSEHE for short. NCSEHE is housed at Curtin University and is funded by the Commonwealth Government. We have a mission to improve higher education outcomes, access, participation, retention, success and completion rates for marginalised and disadvantaged people. We do this through a variety of strategies including research, practice and policy. One of those strategies is the NCSEHE Equity Fellowships program and this week we are presenting our Fellows and highlighting the research that they have been undertaking.

Today I have the great pleasure of introducing Dr Janine Delahunty who was awarded a year-long Equity Fellowship to explore regional, rural and remote student experience. As you would be aware, this year has been particularly difficult and with our Fellows experiencing varying levels of lockdown. And as you can imagine, we're all broadcasting from various locations around the country. Unfortunately, Janine is experiencing some difficulties with her Wi-Fi which we hope will be resolved by the time we go to the Q&A.

If that's not the case, we will put other measures in place, I promise. So Janine's short video is entitled ‘On footprints, the university experience and why we need to listen to regional students’. We have taken a slightly different approach to the presentations and asked each of the Fellows to prepare a short TED-style talk to focus on specific elements of research, followed by a live Q&A session we hope which today will be facilitated by Dr Cathy Stone who is also a leading expert in online education and rural and regional students.

However, before we start I just have a few housekeeping details. The webinar is being live-captioned today by Bradley Reporting and will be recorded. The recording will be available on the NCSEHE website in coming days. To activate the closed captions, click the CC button that's in the tool bar located either at the top or bottom of your screen. We also have captions available via browser and Nina will add that to the chat pod. If you have any technology difficulties then please email NCSEHE@Curtin.edu.au.

Please start the session by going into the chat pod and introducing yourself. We have registrants from all over the country and beyond so it is really nice to virtually meet different people. Perhaps you could also acknowledge what country you are currently on. Please choose all panellists and attendees when you do your introduction and that way everyone will get to see you. But if you have a question which we hope you do, then please put that in the Q&A box. You can also vote on questions in the Q&A box.

We have also received some questions from participants already so we will start with those and then move on to the live questions. Without further ado, I'm going to hand over now to Nina who is going to put up Janine's video and I hope you enjoy it as much as we have.

(video plays)

First of all, I want to acknowledge I am on university country, in a beautiful part of southeast New South Wales where I am privileged to live and work. I am grateful for the knowledge embedded in country and to the Aboriginal custodians, Elders and knowledge-holders here.

Well, what a year we've had so far. So many changes and disruptions to just about every aspect of our lives. And while some of these have certainly been a struggle and without down playing the impact of this pandemic, I found that the experience has challenged me in a good way and helped me appreciate some of the things I have often taken for granted. I know I'm not alone in this if Twitter or Facebook are anything to go by.

So some things which may have caught my passing attention before have now captured my imagination. So I would like to take you to one of my favourite places where I have found myself much more often than usual and a place where I can walk and slow down a bit to think and reflect on lots of things.

So let's imagine that now, here we are at my local beach about 15, 20 minutes away. And here's one of the many photos I have taken. I'll call it 'Footprints in the Sand'. So under normal circumstances I might think of footprints as interesting but really quite unremarkable. But what started to capture my imagination was when I started to think about the people who made them.

Let's just indulge in this idea a little bit. So when we look at the footprints it is pretty easy to make some educated guesses. We can see by the footprints which way they were heading. We can see how big or small their feet were. We can see if they were barefoot or wearing shoes. Even by the length of their stride we could guess their height or if you happen to walk in each step you could see how your stride matches to theirs.

I won't go on because I think you get the picture. This is what got me thinking. There's quite a lot of information in those prints. When I reflected a bit more, I started to think the footprints are perhaps a little bit like statistics and by this I mean that there's only so much we can know from the footprints themselves but there's so much that we cannot know.

So some of the things footprints can't tell us is where were these people from or how long they stayed, who they were with, how they were feeling. Did they love it or not? Would they ever come back?

So it struck me that for all the evidence in front of me, I knew barely anything about the others who'd been there too. Then a similar way for my Fellowship which focuses on the issue of regional student attrition, the stats were not going to tell me enough on their own. I could certainly get the big picture issues, so for example did you know that regional enrolments have increased by 50% but that only 23% of regional people have a degree? This compares to almost 45% of people in major cities. So you can see that these stats are really important to know and, like footprints, they can be fascinating but they just don't go deep enough to really understand why is this so.

But before you can start to offer any solutions you need to find out what it is that gets in the way. The best way I could do this to fill in some of the details was to go to regional students themselves to find out from them about their experiences of being at university and that's my project in a nutshell.

Now I'm going to take you through some of the things that I have found so far, based on surveys and interviews with 80 regional students. These students were studying across 13 different universities or campuses. Most of them were over 21 but more than half of them were older than 30. Most were female and many were studying full time. Just over half were doing their degrees online. But at the time I collected this data, many more were adjusting to online because of COVID.

So this gives some useful information about their students themselves but actually I want to know more. This is where equity-related factors and other life responsibilities add more depth and this is also where it starts to get really interesting. So students could select any combination of categories that were reflective of their own circumstances.

Here, the choices are set out quite clearly. At a glance we can see that many come from working-class backgrounds, first in their family or are mature age. They also had many responsibilities on top of their study. But what's significant here is that most students selected more than one category so we’re starting to build up a better picture but to me this is still a bit "footprinty".

When you belong to multiple equity factors it can feel like you're on an unequal playing field so now I am going to show you how I visualise equity factors in a way that alludes to this. This chord diagram shows an element of messiness, whether ribbons intersect and the thickness of each ribbon makes the weighted relationships across and between the equity factors much more visible. To me, this gives a better sense of the complexity of being regional as well as belonging to multiple equity factors.

And it also allows us to imagine the compounding effect that intersecting equity factors may have over time. When I was going through the data one of the surprising things for me was that almost all of the students stayed in their regional area. The benefits of staying regional were often talked about in relational terms like the sense of community, the strong support networks, the willingness to help each other out and that everyone knows everyone else although sometimes this was not considered such a positive.

What was less surprising was that once they have their degree, many students intend to give back to the regional communities that have given them so much. Let's turn our attention now to what students have said.

Choosing to stay often meant choosing to study online. So while the flexibility aspects of online are a bonus, poor Internet connection can be really frustrating and time consuming. Only a regional person would understand that sometimes you have to sit up on a hill to get better Internet.

Here's what one of the students reflected. She is mature-age, she is studying her accounting degree online and is doing this part-time. As well as that, she has school-aged children, she works part-time and has community responsibilities. She says that you've got to understand that everything takes longer, that there's no instantaneous in the country and that even the simplest thing, like having the video on, can mean the difference of being able to attend or not.

Staying can also mean having to travel long distances with no public transport options. This is another reality that regional people are often resigned to. But a seven-hour round trip for a tutorial each week, when you work full-time and have three school-aged children makes life even more complex. Or when your mandatory placement is nine hours from home and you have no family close by to look after your children. On top of that, you have to bear all the costs of travel, accommodation as well as take recreational leave from work. These are big asks.

Even so, the advice these students would give to other regional people thinking about uni is to definitely go for it. But there are also a range of emotions that go hand in hand with the experience and this is what some of them said. "It's like a roller-coaster with moments of pride and elation and that special feeling of "wow, I've got this," mixed with high levels of stress." Or that it's difficult to juggle all the responsibilities without family support especially as a single mum. Sometimes it feels lonely being an online student. Or finally this one, "I wouldn't change it for the world. I have loved every moment although it's been positive but challenging."

So why do we need to listen to regional students? Because we need to know more than what 'footprints in the Sand' can tell us. And unless we ask, we cannot actually know what the realities are for regional students. The regional people are often noted for their resilience and determination and for being highly motivated but they can also be juggling many other things. Things that can be compounding and can interfere with achieving their educational goals. As universities, the best thing we can do is shut up and listen so that we can respond to what regional people themselves are telling us because when you thing about it, putting our time and resources into developing support that's based on knowing barely anything about students' lived realities benefits no-one. If we can simply shut up to listen and of course take heed, this will provide a more deliberate move towards making higher education more equitable than it currently is for regional students. Thank you for listening.

(video end)

SARAH O'SHEA: Well, I'm sure you'll agree that is just a terrific overview of Janine's research and, as I mentioned at the beginning, we have had some difficulties getting Janine online but I'm hoping that we do have her on the phone. Are you there, Janine?

JANINE DELAHUNTY: I am here. I'm hoping that you can hear me too.

SARAH O'SHEA: We certainly can and we are very relieved.

JANINE DELAHUNTY: Believe me, so I am.

SARAH O'SHEA: I will not stay on too long. I just wanted to pass over now to Cathy and Janine who carry on with the Q&A. As I mentioned at the beginning, we do have a Q&A box and we would really welcome live questions but we do have some that came in before and so we will start with those questions. Over to you, Cathy and Janine.

CATHY STONE: Thank you, Janine, I'm relieved to hear you voice. I thought I would have to do a terrible song and dance act. Anyway, let's move on and it is a real pleasure to have been asked to facilitate this session because I really do love Janine's work is and what she's doing here I think it's just fascinating. I particularly love her footprints analogy for statistics and all the things it can tell us and all the things that we don't know from it and that we do need to shut up and listen instead. I am coming to you today from the traditional lands on the Central Coast of New South Wales.

So, Janine, first of all, tell us what brought you to this topic?

JANINE DELAHUNTY: OK. Well, I guess I've had a long-term interest in students who are less advantaged in some way but I think in order to get to that place I need to go back in time a little bit so I'm going to go back to my childhood where I came from a working-class background and for a while mum was a single mum with four young kids and I'll just say hi, mum, because I think she's tuned in to this webinar.

I know we struggle day to day and there were many extras that weren't possible to have and not saying these were unhappy times but as a child I was well aware some of the things were out of reach because that's the way it was.

In terms of the regional aspect, I spent a number of years living on a property with my grandparents so we moved in with them for a while so there's three adults and four kids in a two-bedroom home on the very outskirts of Western Sydney so not exactly regional but it was there I spent some time in a two-teacher school during my primary years and this was a very low socioeconomic area with lots of disadvantage and a place where I think a lot of people just escaped to so there were lots of little shanty-style dwellings.

Then mum remarried and my new dad came from a farming family in Cowra so we had many trips there because of his family and lots of happy times there. So I left school after year 10, went to TAFE — tech college I think it was called then — and worked in an office doing clerical work and had a break for about 14 years after I had children. So I guess that kind of lived experience I brought to my own higher education journey, so coming into higher education as a mature-age student where I had to juggle a family of three who were then teenagers and all of what goes with that as well as part-time work and part-time study and I also wasn't even sure if I'd like uni so I just dipped my toe in and the rest is history.

So when I started I was drawn to students who were struggling or just finding it difficult in some way and ended up becoming involved in mentoring and organising study groups and sort of being a proactive mature-aged student and kind of a mum figure for some students. So I had a personal experience of the transformative power of education and a key focus of my PhD studies of sense of belonging for online students and then I started doing some work for Sarah and mostly around family research and we continued working together on many of her projects, as you did too, Cathy.

CATHY STONE: Yes.

JANINE DELAHUNTY: And as you know and many people tuning in today know, first in family students often have backgrounds marked by multiple equity factors and during this time I felt really privileged to be invited in to hearing some of their stories.

One of the projects we did a few years ago was alongside the UNSW Aspire program which was then headed by Dr Ann Jardine and Sarah and I made the trip to Dubbo for a four-day workshop to capture the process of students telling their stories of hopes for the future through digital storytelling and that was just a really amazing experience and just kind of whet my appetite.

So when the opportunity came up for the Fellowship where there was a particular emphasis on improving outcomes and experience for regional students, it was just perfect timing in terms of melding together the passion and experience that I'd had in the past few years with my academic work, my lifetime's experience.

The focus for the project is regional students but as my research has confirmed, many regional students are also dealing with other forms of disadvantage that can be compounding and just make it harder to get over the finish line. I'll just finish with one little bit — back to my very personal interest in this project, living in regional and remote parts of Australia, some of the challenges have been regional and how that adds to accessing and managing lots of things including higher education study.

CATHY STONE: That's a wonderful story that you've told us, Janine, in terms of your own personal experiences and how your passion for this sort of work has developed and your own journey and thank you so much for that. We've got a lot of questions popping up on the Q&A and there were also a couple of questions that came in when people registered and one of the questions that came in when people registered aligns very much with a very popular question which is about the types of support that regional and remote students most request and the question that came in in the registration was: What do you think are the most proactive interventions that universities can do to build a sense of belonging for regional and rural students? So it is sort of a two-part question. What is it that regional and remote students are looking for when they're requesting support, if they're requesting support? And what are the most proactive interventions that universities can do to create that sense of belonging for them?

JANINE DELAHUNTY: OK, well, I think the thing that comes out most clearly from the research I've done is that students want that connection, they want that human interaction and they want that relationship so opportunities to meet other students in similar situations or similar backgrounds or interests has been talked about as really helpful, that their academic and professional staff at the university and on the campuses know who they are, they don't want to be a number even though they understand that that's not always possible in big institutions but they want that human connection.

So I think any kind of interaction that facilitates those connections. I also - I want to emphasise that it's really - probably the best place to start is to ask your regional and rural students, so find out from them what it is they need, what's going to work for them, because it is to a large extent - and I think I can almost guarantee that they will tell you what they need and that they will be grateful that someone has asked them.

CATHY STONE: Comes back to your "shut up and listen" point really, doesn't it?

JANINE DELAHUNTY: Yes, probably about the only time and place that I can actually say that. Every student who's identified that they were engaged in the Regional University Centres, they just can't speak highly enough of the services so whatever they're doing to meet students' needs, it works. I would suggest that's another model when thinking about developing proactive interventions, to have a good look at.

CATHY STONE: I'm glad you mentioned that because that's come up as a very popular question, whether the regional students studying online are utilising the Regional University Centres as well. I know that from reading your June bulletin there were a number of students who talked about the Country University Centres in New South Wales so it's interesting to hear how supportive those are for regional students.

JANINE DELAHUNTY: Yes. Also I think some of the smaller regional campuses, students really value the services that are provided there. You know, they can just pop in and talk to someone and, you know, it's a safe space for them, I think.

CATHY STONE: Yes, so the small regional campuses, having a physical place where people can go. Yes, OK. Right, thank you.

JANINE DELAHUNTY: I do have some examples. I don't know whether — from staff participants. I've got three examples. I'll share those, will I?

CATHY STONE: Yes, please do.

JANINE DELAHUNTY: OK. The first two are activities that lecturers and tutors could easily implement and the third one is institutional and I know the question was about what can institutions do at the institutional level but I think as Nicole Crawford's research shows, that students' wellbeing is closely connected to what happens in the classroom so I think this is another place where we need to start with the lecturers and tutors that students are in contact with.

It's the lecturer who knows that some of her students commute so she wants to find out how far each student has travelled to uni and I think in the first tutorial she gets them to form a continuum which goes from those who are only five minutes away to those who travel for hours and then she gets students to talk to each other about what that means for their studies, for their energy levels, for their other life commitments and she says that out of something simple there is some really interesting conversations that build in empathy and human care amongst the students. I think something like this is very simple and could easily be done online with perhaps different kinds of questions or with a poll or something like that.

CATHY STONE: So ways of building relationships, really, and letting people know that there are people there who are interested in them and listening to them.

JANINE DELAHUNTY: Some people get up at 5 am to travel to uni whereas some get up at 8:00 for an 8:30 class. It's not something that I suppose students or lecturers often think about.

CATHY STONE: Yes. Yes, indeed. Was there another you wanted to share?

JANINE DELAHUNTY: Yes, the second example is as a result of COVID, the lecturer set up in the online discussion forum a place called Care Corner and this was right at the beginning of the pandemic and this was a space where students could share about how they were feeling as well as identify things that they needed and, from this, she was really surprised to discover that some of her students didn't have a computer, which we've found out through media and all that sort of thing but this was one of the factors affecting many students once campus was closed off. So she organised some loan laptops for them. She also found that some students didn't have enough food and didn't have money to get groceries so she asked them what they needed and found herself in shops she'd never been in and buying food she'd never heard of before and organising food drops, so something really simple but so crucial for student wellbeing.

The third example is an institutional one. So this is an online tool that was developed which was based on the student experience survey — there was some additional questions on reasons for considering leaving and this included follow-up interviews with students and then using that combined data, the tools developed where there are three responses to each question as well as links to various supports and activities and depending on students selection, this prompts them to actually do something specific like contact student support services by a certain date and then at the end of the questions it generates an individual action plan which is then emailed to the students as well as alerting some services if the student has selected that. So I think there's three really good examples of good practice.

CATHY STONE: That's great. Thanks, Janine. In fact, we've had a number of people really wanting to know — we're looking for more ideas, is what the question says. Lots of people have ticked that box. So what you've done there is talk about some ideas that can be relatively simply implemented so that's fantastic.

We have a question too about your wonderful chord diagram about the complexity of equity groups. I wonder if you could just talk a little bit more — perhaps comment a bit more on the equity complexity that you depict in that chord diagram and how you sort of came up with that and what's the most common combination of those complex factors?

JANINE DELAHUNTY: So the complexity, as you know when students select more than one equity category — and I think in my presentation the table kind of shows that it doesn't look that complex but the cord diagram is a way of connecting the students. On the left-hand side of the diagram are all the students and they're grouped into whether or not they chose one, two, three or up to seven other categories apart from regional. Then on the other side are the categories they chose so those ribbons link across from student to category.

I'm not quite sure if there's a better way to visualise it but having that relationship between students and equity factors was much more meaningful than having it in a table.

CATHY STONE: It certainly shows the multiplicity of the equity categories and the way they combine.

JANINE DELAHUNTY: Yeah. I can't remember offhand what all of the category combinations would be and there might be — I'm thinking about how to refine it so that it's a bit more understandable but say for example a regional plus three might be a student who is regional, of course, with disability plus low SES circumstances plus mature-age. That's, in effect, four equity factors.

CATHY STONE: OK.

JANINE DELAHUNTY: I suppose the purpose is really just to show the complexity.

CATHY STONE: Yeah, OK. And one of the other questions that came from the registrations was just generally speaking, were there significant differences between male and female students and between mature age and younger students in terms of their experiences of university and their needs and so on?

JANINE DELAHUNTY: I have looked at the data and at this stage I can say that, yes, there are differences. I can't delve into that too deeply at the moment but since I recorded the snapshots, my participant numbers have almost doubled so I was having a look at the data yesterday and the differences between male and female students, with the bigger number of 156 there was still far fewer males, 17 in fact, from all of that. Although in the survey there was about 19 respondents who skipped the question so there could be more males. I can only say with certainty there is 17.

The differences that I looked at yesterday were that the subjects that the males were studying was mainly engineering and sciences. There was three in arts and education but there was none in health related.

CATHY STONE: Right.

JANINE DELAHUNTY: Between the mature-age and younger students, the new data has changed those percentages slightly so I can say that the over 25 tended to stay in their regional locations while the under 25s were more likely to move away, move far away, so that was sitting at around 57% said they moved far away whereas over 25s, 93% said that they stayed in their area.

With the under 25s moving away, this could reflect the context of the state and location that many of the latest participants were studying and coming from. I think there is going to some contextual details that I'll need to tease out there as well.

CATHY STONE: OK, thank you. We've got a question here that a number of people have wanted answered about whether you have any thoughts on the role of place and country in higher education that has arisen from your research. The question here is: Can one really belong with infrequent campus attendance? And presumably that refers to perhaps people studying online, not coming physically on to campus space. And can higher education truly serve the country if its place and campus-bound. I guess really your thoughts on the role of place and country in higher education and belonging when people are not able to physically access those spaces. Any thoughts on that?

JANINE DELAHUNTY: Well, I think they're both really critical, that sense of belonging and sometimes I think perhaps we need to be a bit more creative and thinking about how we do foster those - the sense of being in a safe space so online - you know it's the interrelationships, whether that's online, on a big campus, on regional campus.

CATHY STONE: So it's about the sense of belonging and sense of connectedness, yep.

JANINE DELAHUNTY: Yeah, I think that's a big part of it and feeling that you can — this came out in Nicole's talk yesterday, where you can just be yourself, so wherever that is virtually in reality, I think they're the kinds of things that need to be thought about in creative ways to do that.

In terms of country, a few students mentioned the importance of if they were learning off country to make sure that they were able to return home regularly because that was just so important to their sense of wellbeing and rejuvenating, getting back together with family. So, yeah, two very important things especially for regional and remote students.

CATHY STONE: OK.

JANINE DELAHUNTY: More of that might come out in the data, the more that I delve into that.

CATHY STONE: Yep, great. And another popular question is - this is an interesting one. You were talking before about the important role of the Regional University Centres and small regional campuses in giving students a physical place to go. This is a question about whether or not you think there might be a place for metropolitan universities to work more closely with regional universities and I guess collaborate a bit more is what this is really about, so that regional online students could be provided with places and spaces on a metropolitan campus that might be close to where they live and the person asking this question is saying, "Having studied online with a metro university I never knew at the time I could use spaces in my town." For instance, the student might be studying at a metro university and might live close to a regional campus. Is there an opportunity there that we're missing?

JANINE DELAHUNTY: I think there obviously is. A couple of participants (indistinct)

CATHY STONE: You're cutting out a bit, Janine.

JANINE DELAHUNTY: They were not allowed to access it because they were — I think they were enrolled as an on-campus students. This was just for online students so they fought hard to be able to get access to those facilities and finally they got access. I think some of the sentiments around those kinds of things is that the metro centres don't really understand the nature of the travel and the distances that some students have to travel to get to their — if they're on campus, to get to their on-campus classes. You know, on campus to the library to study, and if they had access to something that was closer they could certainly make use of it. I think there's definitely scope for some kind of cross-pollination there between metro and regional.

CATHY STONE: Certainly a nice idea, isn't it. OK. Given that you've been undertaking the research this year, of all years, I really feel I have to ask you: To what extent have regional students talked about how the pandemic has affected them?

JANINE DELAHUNTY: OK, that's a really big thing which obviously I didn't think would — you know at the beginning of the Fellowship didn't realise how big it would be. So, it really did affect regional students and mostly in a negative way so that's probably not surprising although there were some who found it was quite positive for their experience.

So in terms of the study experience, the uncertainty and rapid shift to remote learning really unsettled a lot of students. They were having to change their study plans and they'd also — they were worried it was going to have an effect on their progression. Some even withdrew from their studies during the semester just until things settled down and they had some certainty.

The cutting off of access was also really concerning, to campus services but also to community facilities that they might have used as they were also closed to the public.

For some, the move to online improved their study experience. One person said that the lecturers were more accessible and the live lecture was more interactive so they really benefitted from that.

CATHY STONE: That's interesting — more interactive?

JANINE DELAHUNTY: More interactive, yes. Another said support was suddenly more equitable across modes of delivery and others had kind of been asking for online options and told it wasn't possible and suddenly COVID made it all possible so they were really pleased that they could now do some of their courses online.

So the experience has — from the students' perspective, that was the study experience. From the students' perspective, the biggest thing was uncertainty about the future. Some were concerned if they were absolutely in the right degree course while others were finding hard to see how what they were doing was going to be relevant for the future. Others were also concerned about whether to pack up and return home before borders closed and to pick up their studies there and others who decided to stay were really terrified and lonely because it was virtually a ghost town where they were living on campus. There's emotion and anxiety-related uncertainty and also added stress to parents and mostly mothers who then had to home-school their children as well as manage their own study and work and all that goes with this. We also can't forget that some of these students have coped with the drought then the bushfires then the floods and then COVID on top of all of that.

CATHY STONE: Been a massive year, hasn't it.

JANINE DELAHUNTY: It has. It has, yeah. For staff, some felt that their students were being Guinea pigs with online ways of doing things because it was rushed and there was no time to prepare properly but despite all of this they used creative ways to keep in touch with their students and just tried to maintain a virtual open-door policy. It has been tough for them too.

CATHY STONE: Absolutely and it sounds as if your research brings out some of the innovation that's happened. Some of the care for students that lot of staff have definitely been taking.

JANINE DELAHUNTY: Yeah, yeah.

CATHY STONE: There's a lovely comment on the Q&A which is just congratulating you on a beautiful presentation, "So calm and just what it would needed this year, thank you." I think that is a reflection of the stressful year we've had and this is how powerful your quotes are.

Again, the question is really about how can we serve our students better? It's been such a hard year for them to keep going and what else can we do as staff to help them keep going? So I suppose I'm curious to know what are some of the other key things students have talked about that perhaps might provide some answers to that question?

JANINE DELAHUNTY: One of the things I asked students was, "What are the qualities of regional people?" And the overwhelming quality was that they are resilient, that they're used to coping with things that come up. They're used to problem solving and working their way around things so in that sense I think that they are well equipped and I've forgotten the question now, sorry.

CATHY STONE: It was just really around some of the key things that students talked about that perhaps might give some clues to those of us working with regional students as to what else can we do to help them keep going when times are tough?

JANINE DELAHUNTY: Yeah, I think it's that human connection again and just knowing someone is there. Could be a phone called some people said, "We don't use the uni email, we use WhatsApp or Slack or we text because that's the easiest way to get to students." So I think it's just focussing on, you know, that care and connection that they know and, you know, this might be just a once-off thing but sometimes I think students just knowing that someone's there is really, really comforting for them and then perhaps finding out, like my example with the Care Corner, finding out what are you needing? Is there anything that you're lacking that we can perhaps help you with or connect you with some kind of support? That was one of the things that some students said, you know it's so hard to navigate some of these services. We just wish there was a one-stop shop where you could just click on something and everything - you know all the possibilities were there. So that's probably another thing that would be really helpful for students.

CATHY STONE: Yes, sure, because it can be very difficult, can't it, to sort of navigate all the things on the website to find exactly what they're looking for so I understand that point, yep. The findings of your research keep coming back to the sense of connection, the sense someone is interested in them, caring about them.

JANINE DELAHUNTY: Yes.

CATHY STONE: A question about Caring Corner, was that done online? Was that an online intervention, the Caring Corner?

JANINE DELAHUNTY: Sorry, you're breaking up a little bit.

CATHY STONE: I was just curious about the Caring Corner, whether that was an online intervention?

JANINE DELAHUNTY: Yes, it was. She set it up as part of the — in the discussion forum space. That was just its own little discussion forum, yeah.

CATHY STONE: Lovely idea.

JANINE DELAHUNTY: It is. Yeah, yeah, it was very effective.

CATHY STONE: And a purely practical question, Janine, there are a few people want to know how on earth did you manage to contact and interview so many students? Did you use Zoom? Did you phone them? And how did you do it?

JANINE DELAHUNTY: I think I did 27 interviews and that was by phone and 129 surveys so that's 156 students. In saying that, the survey data was amazingly rich. I was gob-smacked at the answers some of the students provided. They were not just one-liners, they were really niched responses. It felt like I was having this conversation with them anyway but then the students who were interviewed were just also amazing, the kinds of things that they shared and, you know, this was their story and their experience. Yeah, so, how I recruited was I started off with the universities in the Regional University Network and the Innovative Research Universities. I started off with those two organisations and got interested universities who came on board that way and then COVID hit so some of them said, "Look, we can't bombard our students," so they delayed recruiting for four to six months so some of those came on board but others just didn't and I totally understand why but, you know, regardless, I'm really happy with the 156 student participants and I've also got 40 staff and I've also got 30 Year 12 students.

CATHY STONE: Look, it's impressive given the year that we've had that you managed to, you know, gather such an amount of rich data, it's just wonderful. Just my very final question is: What's next from this research? Where's this going now?

JANINE DELAHUNTY: OK. So I'm just going to look to the immediate future and the immediate future is I need to put together the final report so I'm working on that and I'm also developing a website so this is going to be called Regional Student Futures so that's going to contain some of the resources that are developed from the data and a reflective tool and, yeah, that sort the basis for the website at the moment. It will be openly available.

CATHY STONE: Wonderful. Something for us all to look forward to. Thank you, Janine. Sarah's joined us. I know we're running outs of time. Thanks so much for answering these questions. I'm going to hand over to Sarah now.

SARAH O'SHEA: Thank you so much, Janine. Thank you, Cathy. We've had huge engagement on the Q&A and in the chat pod and I have to say I think quite a few family members in there as well, Janine, all cheering you on.

JANINE DELAHUNTY: Are there? Yay!

SARAH O'SHEA: Yeah, so I'm going to finish up there and just remind everyone that if you would like to engage with the Centre and hear more about the work that we're doing then please do come and check out our webpage, sign up for our newsletter. We send it out every six to eight weeks. We basically cover everything that's happening that we know about within the equity sector and we are there as a resource for everyone. Without further ado I'm going to stop there and thank Cathy and Janine and thank you, Janine, for putting up with extra — it was very, I think, a regional and remote experience in terms of your Internet so thank you for persevering and joining us by phone and good-bye to everyone.

CATHY STONE: Bye

JANINE DELAHUNTY: Thank you. Bye.

(webinar concluded)