



## Shining the light on regional students' experiences

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The Australian higher education system operates in an environment increasingly influenced by complex socio-cultural, economic and political forces. As a demand-driven system, it offers choice and flexibility about what, where and how to study; the resulting massified national system is approaching Trow's vision of universality of access (Trow, 1973). However, this macro-level perspective hides a more nuanced picture, which includes inequitable outcomes for some cohorts of students, and a tendency to problematize the very students that have the most to benefit from a progressive contemporary higher education system. In this short paper we discuss some of the available data and explore some alternative ways that the complex relationships between students, institutions and our expectations of the higher education system can be understood.

Higher education participation rates and the attainment of bachelor degree qualifications for people in regional and remote areas continue to lag behind metropolitan areas (Commonwealth of Australia, Department of Education and Training, 2016). Furthermore, national data show that students who are enrolled in regionally located universities have higher attrition and lower completion rates than students who are studying in universities located in capital cities. When compared with their metropolitan peers, regional students are (for example) more likely to be from a lower socio-economic background, an Indigenous person, the first in their family to go to university, spend longer in paid and unpaid work, and have lower entry scores. The impact of these characteristics is additive so for students with multiple characteristics the effect compounds, further diminishing their completion rates (Edwards & McMillan, 2015). Simple explanations of these outcomes conveniently rely on correlations between students' characteristics (e.g. socio-economic status or entry score) and their rates of completion, and posit that these characteristics are the reasons students leave. The problem with these assumptions is that these pre-existing characteristics do not answer the question, why do these students have higher rates of attrition and leave before completion? These characteristics do not indicate that regional students are less capable of succeeding in higher education. Applying a systems thinking lens means that we need to accept that the real explanations lie somewhere in the complex process of transformation that is the student experience, rather than only in the inputs to the system.

The real reasons that students with the types of characteristics that dominate in regionally located universities leave before completion have not, to date, been comprehensively investigated because, quite simply, the right data does not exist. We contend that a narrative which focuses on the characteristics of regional university students and their outcomes not only blames students and their backgrounds but masks a much more complex and nuanced set of conditions influencing the student experience. These conditions include interactions between students and their peers, teachers and

institutions; how well the institution is attuned to students' needs for learning flexibility; financial and other forms of support; individual characteristics such as emotion, motivation, identity and proficiency as a student; and interest in the discipline of study. Understanding the interactions among these factors, their influence on student engagement and the pre-existing demographic characteristics, we believe will provide a richer appreciation of the varied and situationally contingent reasons for student success or otherwise not only at regional universities, but for all students in the Australian higher education system and beyond.

We are not alone in our interest in the student experience. Our work is one of five projects commissioned by the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching, all of which are aimed at enhancing the twenty-first century student experience. The eight regionally headquartered institutions involved in our project<sup>1</sup> are investigating how we shape the twenty-first century experience of the diverse undergraduate student populations at regional universities. Our research asks, how can we design a higher education experience where geographical location, or previous social or educational conditions do not predict students' futures? To guide our research we have adopted a comprehensive model of student engagement as a conceptual and analytical foundation (Kahu, 2014). Ella Kahu's framework situates the three student engagement constructs of affect, cognition and behaviour as an engine of transformation, which mediates structural and psychosocial, student and institutional inputs, and proximal (e.g. grades and achievement) and distal (e.g. retention and citizenship) consequences. Using this model, we have already revealed that key data about the complex process of student engagement is not part of any existing national data set. We believe that this missing data may provide new insights critical to understanding the reasons students persist with—or leave—university, and in doing so we will be able to debunk the causality myth.

To address the issue of missing data, we are conducting a series of appreciative qualitative case studies to reveal these insights. Each case will investigate and chronicle a key institutional initiative that is designed to enable and empower students, who have the most to benefit, to stay and complete their studies. We are particularly interested in exploring the relationships between psychosocial influences and proximal consequences, and the eight cases are designed to provide these insights by filling in gaps in the existing data sets.

Acknowledging the importance of regional universities and the need for increased levels of student participation and success in these environments, and the apparent absence of a real understanding about the experience of 21<sup>st</sup> century students at regional universities, our project will provide new knowledge and practical advice on how institutions can positively shape future learning experiences in four key ways:

First, we are in the process of identifying the unique features of the twenty-first century experiences of regional university students to reveal key practices and new information about the student experience. The case studies being conducted by our colleagues at each of the participating partner institutions (Central Queensland University, Charles Sturt University, Federation University Australia, James Cook University, Southern Cross University, the University of New England, the University of Southern Queensland and the University of the Sunshine Coast) are aligned with different aspects of Kahu's (2014) model of student engagement. This case data will augment and be informed by the existing national data sets.

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<sup>1</sup> OLT Project SP14-4602 Shaping the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Experience at Regional Universities

Second, through a thematic cross-case analysis we are in the process of identifying and exploring the student experience across these institutions, to identify unique insights into the student experience and to highlight practices shown to improve the student experience. We also expect to foreshadow emerging innovations and trends essential for strengthening the twenty-first century student experience.

Third, beyond the participating institutions, the project will focus attention on the national contributions of regional universities and provide a rich evidence base, sources of information, and a collection of examples of good practice for broad adoption in the sector.

Finally, we strongly anticipate that our project will provide recommendations to the sector about practices that lead to enhanced outcomes for all students and importantly the types of data that need to be collected in order to provide a true and unbiased understanding of the complex nature of students' learning experiences.

*Professor Karen Nelson (Pro Vice-Chancellor, Students), Ms Kylie Readman (Director, Centre for the Support and Advancement of Learning and Teaching) and Dr Ian Stoodley of the University of the Sunshine Coast are leading the Shaping the Regional Student Experience project, which is funded by the Australian Government's Office for Learning and Teaching.*

## References

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This paper is the short version of a longer submission that is currently under consideration for the 2016 STARS Conference.