

ICED 2020 proceedings:

“You going to uni?”: Imagining futures from the perspectives of regional students

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Abstract

In Australia, only 20 percent of regional people in the 25 to 34 age range have a degree qualification. This is less than half the rate of their metropolitan counterparts (Taylor, 2019). While the number of regional students in higher education has increased steadily (NCSEHE, 2020), they are far more likely to withdraw. To understand factors contributing to early departure, this project sought to explore aspects of “being regional” from the perspectives of regional students themselves. They rarely lack motivation towards their hoped-for futures, yet often contend with equity-related challenges. “Possible selves” theory (Markus & Nurius, 1986) enabled focus on students’ strengths and motivations, amidst the realities of educational disadvantage. Equitable educational achievement requires faculty development that responds to evidence-based understanding of the lived complexities of students.

1 Introduction

Early departure of regional students from university is concerning. There are wide-ranging ramifications, particularly for Australian regional communities, which make a formidable contribution to the national economy (Regional Australia Institute, 2017). This study focused on the complexities of university participation for regional students, to understand the phenomenon of early departure. Given the diversity and scope of regional areas in Australia, a one-size-fits all approach would not suffice, nor would “collective or mythic constructions of these environments” (O’Shea et al., 2019, p. 3). Thus, a national approach was needed to gain perspectives from a wide range of students from varying regional locations. This would provide more nuanced insights into student experience, which would then form the basis from which to develop targeted resources and retention strategies.

Given the broad diversity within the regional student body, it was important to take account of how students were working towards hoped-for futures, in the context of educational disadvantage. “Possible selves” theory was used, approached with an intersectionality lens on matters of equity.

2 Theoretical approach

“Possible selves” refers to how people conceive themselves in the future and take meaningful action towards their goals (Markus & Nurius, 1986). It focuses on the motivational effect of actions taken towards what is hoped for, as distinct from merely fantasy or dreams. A possible self may also include selves-to-avoid (e.g. me *not* in retail, me *not* as a labourer), which can exert strong influence on the actions taken to avoid particular futures (Delahunty & O’Shea, 2020).

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Intersectionality accounts for the multiple and compounding realities of disadvantage that reflect the circumstances of many regional students. Regional/remote location is one of six equity categories² in Australia as distance from major cities is recognised as a contributing factor to educational inequity. As well as regional/remote location, many regional people function within other equity groupings, so the influence of multiple disadvantage is not difficult to imagine. This often has a compounding effect that impacts upon educational opportunities and accomplishments. In addition, many students are the first in their families (and sometimes their communities) to attend university, so pursuing HE is often novel, even “alien”.

3 Method

3.1 Data collection

The regional student voice was critical to this study. Student perspectives were explored using qualitative methods to draw out some of the complexities of HE participation. Preliminary findings from thematically analysed survey and interview data collected in the first round of data collection are presented here. Open questioning, informed by possible selves, was designed to elicit detailed responses on students’ conceptions of their futures and aspects of their HE experience. The same questions were used for the survey and interview, with interviews enabling deeper exploration of ideas.

3.2 Participants

Students (n=55) from nine Australian universities participated, from across all discipline areas, age ranges (from 18 to over 51), stages of study and modes of delivery. 50 completed the survey and five were interviewed. From a list of ten demographic/equity indicators (HE equity categories plus others), and seven “other responsibilities”, students were asked to select all that reflected their circumstances, with the option to comment or clarify if desired (Figure 1). The majority (n=51) chose more than two equity categories as well as other responsibilities. Four cases in Figure 2 give a sense of these complex realities.

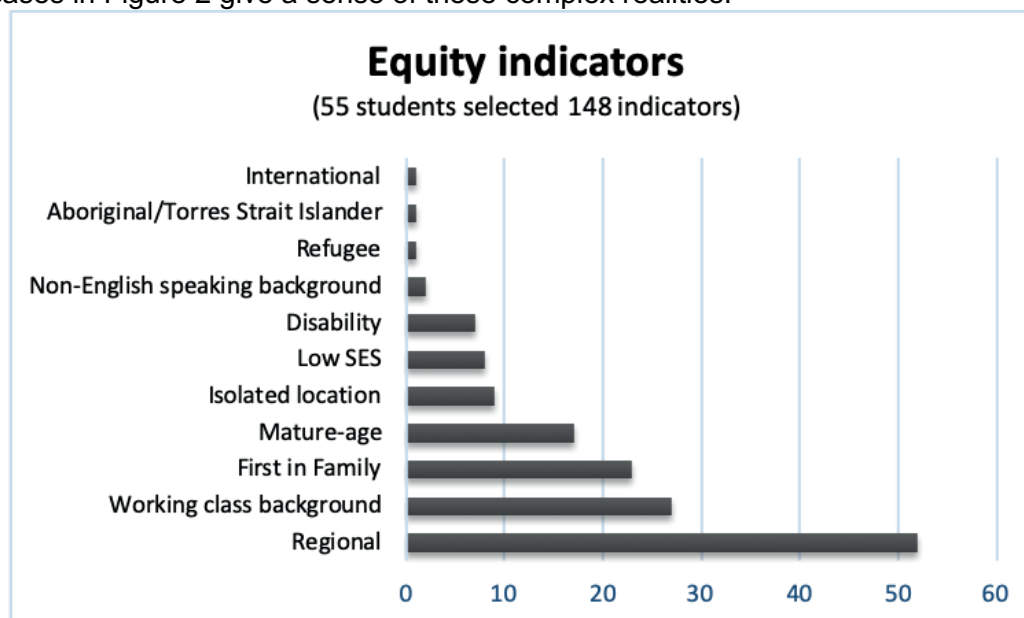


Figure 1: Self-selected equity indicators

² There are six HE equity categories in Australia: students from regional and remote locations; low socioeconomic locations; non-English speaking backgrounds; identifying as Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander; with a disability; women in non-traditional areas.

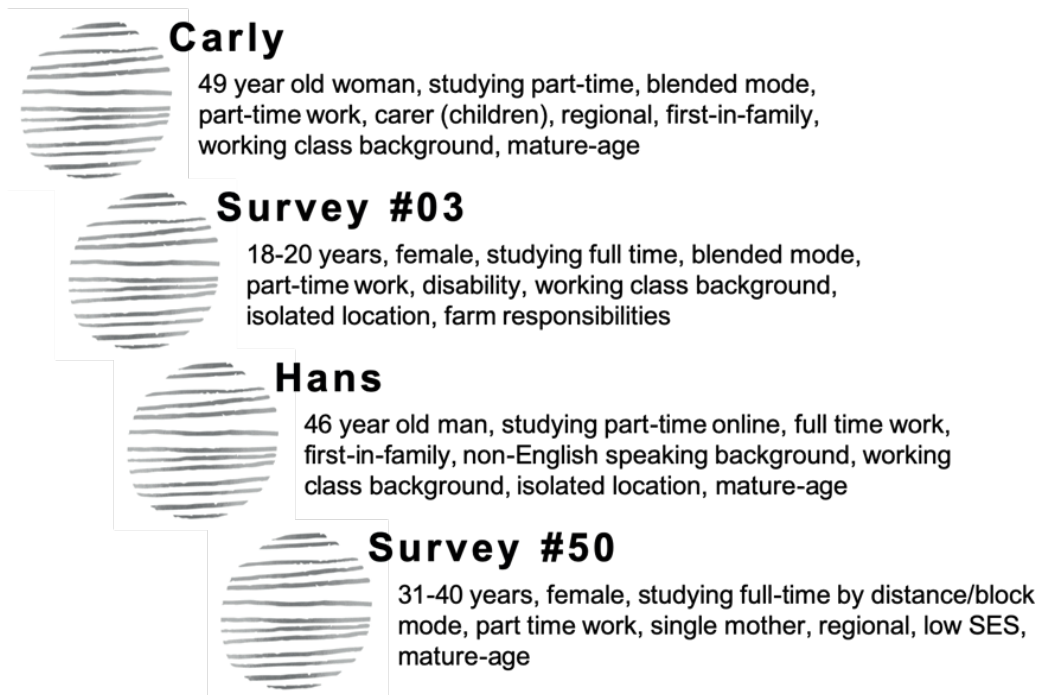


Figure 2: Four regional students: examples of complex realities

4 Complexities of university participation

Preliminary findings show that decision-making is multifaceted, and far from a simple yes/no response to “You going to uni?”. Main themes included pragmatic decision-making (related to financial concerns, moving away, transport etc) as well as emotional concerns (such as social costs, sadness, excitement, as well as potential for new friendships/opportunities/experiences). Imagined futures often involved decisions to uproot, reimagine and readjust to unfamiliar life trajectories (Delahunty & O’Shea, 2020). Some decided to remain in their communities; for others moving away was not an option. Decisions to study often involved choosing online courses or travelling long distances to campuses:

Travelling distance is a requirement...not everything is at your doorstep. (#21)

The future selves that students were working towards ranged from broad conceptions in terms of contributing to their communities or society as a whole, to very specific goals:

I want to do something meaningful, help others, provide for family and leave them in a better position than I was. (#12)

I want to become a psychologist to help people. I went through dark times myself and I know how much my psychologist helped me. (#20)

Multiple complexities were revealed as students described their experience of university study alongside “everyday” normalities:

To be honest, it has been a bit difficult juggling the life of being a mum, income earner for my family, my community work + running around after a teenager, but I make it work. I no longer have a social life, and that is fine. In 2026, I get my life back. (#15)

Feelings of guilt also peppered responses, particularly as students balanced commitment to study with other, often non-negotiable, responsibilities including sustaining relationships:

I feel some guilt about taking time out from my caring role in order to study. I also feel stressed sometimes trying to balance study and work and not spending enough time with my husband. (#19)

The pressure that I put on myself of whether I'm being a good mum and good wife – that was probably my biggest concern. ("Chloe")

These regional students clearly do not lack aspiration or goals for their future, thus non-completion needs to be understood around the complexity and emotionality of what going to university actually means.

5 Conclusions

This glimpse into the complexities of being a regional student is a brief, but compelling, testament to these students' tenacity and motivation. As students worked towards educational goals, this was often accompanied by other responsibilities and multiple challenges that could not be cast aside simply because they were at university. While institutional investment is essential, so also is faculty development. All must work together towards developing effective and equitable ways to support students from diverse backgrounds and help reduce the risk of early departure.

The effect of compounding disadvantage can only be *really* understood through asking students themselves about their experience and the kinds of support that have been most beneficial. Together with staff well-versed in best practices and relevant literature, this kind of first-hand understanding places faculty development in a far better position to (re)contextualise support and influence policy. Adapting, or adopting, strategies and best practice in teaching is more likely to be effective when authentically informed by those it is designed to support. Students' insights can be gathered in a number of ways and modes, limited only by the imagination. Other approaches which draw powerfully on the student voice, such as students-as-partners (Matthews, 2017), should also be considered.

While regional students bring qualities of determination and resilience, developed through life experience and work ethic, this is often an untapped resource in faculty development. Support which has had input from its beneficiaries will not only be relevant, but also give kudos to the value that such diversity brings.

Acknowledgements

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