



Changes To Remote and Regional Student Participation In Higher Education Since The Bradley Review

**NUS Submission To The
Department of Education and Training
Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education**

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NUS welcomes this opportunity to present our views to the Departmental Review into Regional, Rural and Education.

As the body that represents tertiary rather than secondary students we will confine our comments to the access and participation of regional, rural and remote higher education students.

Major Changes To Australian Higher Education Since Bradley Review

It is useful to consider the 2008 Bradley Review of Higher Education¹ and the major subsequent changes that may have had an impact on the access and participation rates of regional/rural and remote higher education students.

- **Student Finance Support.** The Bradley Review led to a major restructuring of Commonwealth student financial support arrangements (Youth Allowance, AUSTUDY). This was the first major overhaul of student financial arrangements since 1992. While the base rates remained the same (taking into account indexation) the changes reflected better targeting of those who received the benefits (redirecting financial support that was going to high income families through loopholes) to students from low income and low-middle income families. The review implemented a wide range of policies to reform student income support that NUS had developed alongside the ALP, Democrat, Independent and Greens MPs for a number of years. The application of this to regional, rural and remote students was contentious and will be discussed more fully below.
- **Demand Driven System.** The Bradley Review recommended that the shift to a demand driven system where universities were free to admit as many qualified applicants as they wished (and the Commonwealth would fund) rather than a system where universities and the Commonwealth negotiated enrolment targets. The change to the demand driven system was subject to a review by David Kemp (former Howard Government Education Minister) and Andrew Norton (Melbourne University's Grattan Institute) and has led to an initial rapid expansion in overall student enrolments that has slowed in recent years. Domestic undergraduate enrolments at Table A Providers (below) increased from 532, 527 to 717, 195, a 34.7% increase in student numbers over 2008-2015. This increase was not fully matched by regional and remote students who had a respective 33.1% and 21.5% growth in numbers over 2008-15.
- **HEPPP.** The Commonwealth Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program arising from the Bradley Review has funded a suite of on-campus and off-campus programs to improve access and participation of low SES students, including outreach programs to secondary students to raise the aspiration to participate in higher education in more disadvantaged communities. The HEPPP program will remain in a slightly modified form in the higher education reform legislation currently before the Senate.

¹ Bradley D, Noonan P, Nugent H and Scales B, *Review of Australian higher education: final report*, Canberra, DEEWR, 2008

- Tuition Fees. The Bradley Review did not recommend a general increase in student contribution rates. This came later with the Abbott Government in 2015 and 2016 attempting to pass legislation to remove the caps on HECS-HELP student contribution rates (fee deregulation) so that universities could set their own fee rates. The Senate repeatedly blocked this due to widespread student and community opposition. This led to the replacement of Chris Pyne with Simon Birmingham as Education Minister. The current higher education reforms before the Senate are for a staggered 7.5% HECS increase over 4 years and a decrease in the repayment threshold from the current 54K to 42K. Regional, rural and remote groups have been identified as one of the equity groups most likely be deterred by high fees. Any negative impact of high fees (Australia has the sixth highest in the OECD) on access and participation has been overlain in recent years by the rapid increase in numbers due to the demand driven system, HEPPP and student income support reforms, however there is a need for continued monitoring.

Remote and Regional Student Participation In Higher Education

The participation rates for remote and regional students in higher education are significantly below overall national rates of participation. Despite the significant increase in overall numbers since the time of Bradley Review of Higher Education the proportion of remote and regional students has fallen.

The national population reference point for remote students based on 2011 ABS Census data is 2.25%.² The 2015 student enrolment proportion was 0.9%, reflecting a substantial underrepresentation of around 60%.

Participation rates for remote students fell in the period following the Bradley Review. The 21.5% increase of students from remote backgrounds (5,240 in 2008 to 6,345 in 2015) did not match the overall 34.7% increase in student numbers over that period. The proportion of remote students has been falling consistently since at least 2001. In 2009 the Bradley Review speculated that it was tied to the regional loading grants that were part of the CSP funding arrangements (Commonwealth grants to university for teaching) at the time. Essentially their concern was that not enough of the teaching funding for remote satellite campuses was coming out of the funding set aside for regional student loading. This led to a change in the regional loading criteria in 2012 to increase the funding for teaching remote students.³ While most remote students are enrolled at regionally headquartered universities there does not appear to be an obvious trend for remote enrolment shifts between types of universities. The small numbers of this equity group make generalisations difficult.

The breakdown of universities by location and infrastructure used by the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education analysis is as follows:

² Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Towards A Performance Measurement Framework For Higher Education*, Canberra, 2014, pg 18

³ See for example Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, *Review of regional loading: Final Report*, Australia, 2011

- **Regionally Headquartered:** Central Queensland, Charles Darwin, Federation, James Cook, Southern Cross, University of New England, University of Sunshine Coast, University of Southern Queensland, University of Tasmania
- **Metropolitan Institutions With Regional Campuses:** Australian Catholic University, Curtin University, Charles Sturt University, Edith Cowan University, Deakin University, Flinders University, La Trobe University, Murdoch University, Newcastle University, Queensland University of Technology, University of Adelaide, University of Queensland, University of Melbourne, University of SA, University of Sydney, University of WA, University of Wollongong
- **No Regional Campuses:** Australian National University, Griffith University, Macquarie University, Monash University, RMIT, Swinburne University, University of Canberra, University of NSW, Victoria University

Remote Student Enrolment Proportion, Table A Providers, 2008-15⁴

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
National	1.0	1.0	1.0	0.9	0.9	0.9	0.9	0.9
Regionally Headquartered	2.9	2.8	2.7	2.7	2.6	2.5	2.6	2.5
Metro with Regional Campuses	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.8
No Regional Campuses	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2

The national population reference point for regional students using 2011 ABS Census data is 29.06%.⁵ The 2015 regional student proportion was 18.8%, reflecting an underrepresentation of around 35%.

Since 2008 the overall trend for regional students has been roughly static, albeit with a small decline since 2012. There has been a decline in enrolments at regionally headquartered universities (from 50.7 to 46.6%) which has been largely made up by increased enrolments at metropolitan universities (both with satellite regional campuses and those without).

The longer term overall trend (back to at least 2001) has been for the proportion of regional student enrolments to gradually fall from 20.2% in 2001.⁶ The research literature around the time of the Bradley Review focussed on the lower aspirations and expectations of young people and their parents and also other factors such as the increased likelihood of being

⁴Koshy P, *Student Equity Performance In Australian Higher Education: 2008-2015*, National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, Curtin University, 2016

⁵ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Towards A Performance Measurement Framework For Higher Education*, Canberra, 2014, pg 17

⁶ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Towards A Performance Measurement Framework For Higher Education*, Canberra, 2014, pg 15

from a low SES background, travelling great distances to attend university, or moving away from home to another city.⁷

Regional Student Enrolment Proportion, Table A Providers, 2008-15⁸

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
National	19.0	18.8	19.1	19.2	19.1	19.0	18.9	18.8
Regionally Headquartered	50.7	50.3	49.5	49.2	48.6	47.9	47.6	46.6
Metro with Regional Campuses	14.9	14.9	15.3	15.6	15.6	15.5	16.2	16.2
No Regional Campuses	7.6	7.2	7.7	8.0	8.0	8.5	9.0	8.9

Student Financial Support

In terms of government policy decisions that may have had an impact of student participation in higher education there have been two major changes over the last decade; the gap year battle and increased relocation scholarships.

The Bradley Review partially implemented a number of important reforms to student income financial arrangements that NUS had been campaigning around. These changes include lowering the age of independence from 25 to 22 so that a student would be assessed on their own income rather than parents, and significantly increasing the income eligibility threshold (amount parents could earn) for dependent students to qualify. However the Rudd Government instructed the review panel that the impact of changes to student financial support had to be budget neutral, that any positive changes had to be funded by cuts elsewhere in student financial support.

The review panel targeted workforce criteria in achieving independent status under Youth Allowance as a way of funding the other reforms. The criteria at the time were:

- a) Students work at least 15 hours per week for at least three years since leaving school;
- b) Students have been out of school for least 18 months and have earned at least 75% of the minimum rate of pay under Wage Level A of the Australian Pay and Classification Scale in an 18 month period;
- c) Students have worked an average of 30 hours per week for 18 months out of two years.

The Bradley Review (and ultimately the Rudd-Gillard Government) argued that only C should be kept. The estimated savings at the time from scrapping criteria a and b were quite

⁷ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Towards A Performance Measurement Framework For Higher Education*, Canberra, 2014, pg 18

⁸ Koshy P, *Student Equity Performance In Australian Higher Education: 2008-2015*, National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, Curtin University, 2016

significant and funded all the rest of the student income support reforms. However, the impact of this savings measure was fiercely opposed by the National Party, particularly its perceived impact on regional students with families above the family income test who had been using a gap year to qualify for independent status.

Between 2009 and 2010 they moved a series of Bills to amend the higher education legislation to exclude regional students from the tightening of the workplace criteria (parliamentary numbers meant the ALP government was forced to deal at the time). Initially students from remote and outer regional areas were excluded. After some of the absurdities of using the Australian Statistic Geography Standards system (such as borders running through the middle of country towns) as a criterion for income support eligibility, the final compromise was that all regional students were excluded from the narrowed workforce criteria for Youth Allowance.

A second factor has been the relocation scholarships. Relocation scholarships are aimed at students who need to move to a new region in order to pursue a particular course of study. Prior to the Bradley Review there were a limited number of scholarships, known as Commonwealth Accommodation Scholarships, but were administered by universities. The Rudd-Gillard government implemented the Bradley Review recommendation that the relocation scholarships become more widely available (to Youth Allowance recipients) and be administered by Centrelink. It is paid annually as a lump sum.

In 2017 the rate is \$4,376 in the first year the students moves, \$2,189 in the second and third year after the move and \$1,094 in subsequent years. Normally the scholarships are for those who start a course at 22 years and under.

Until 2015 the relocation scholarships may have been a significant factor in the shift of regional students away from regionally headquarter universities to metropolitan headquartered universities. In late 2014 the Abbott Government amended the scholarship program into a loans scheme so that students moving from regional or remote areas to study at a metropolitan campus accumulated the loan as part of their HECS debt. The available data (up to 2015) is too early to indicate the impact of this cut although it would be reasonable to expect that it would impact on the transfer of students from regions to metropolitan universities.

Overall regional student enrolments have been relatively static since 2008 following a period of slow decline. NUS speculates that better targeting of income support following the Bradley review, the generous outcome of the workforce criteria saga, and the wider availability of the relocation scholarships have contributed to halting the long term trend for regional student participation to decline as a proportion of the national student body.

Other Major Factors Behind Regional Disadvantage

Regional student disadvantage overlaps with other forms of disadvantage. We will also make some brief comments on three other equity groups where regional student enrolments are higher than metropolitan enrolments, namely; Indigenous, Low SES and Students With Disability.

Indigenous

The target reference point for Indigenous peoples as a proportion of the national population is 2.6% (self identifying 15-64 year olds from the 2011 ABS Census). The under-representation of Indigenous students in 2015 is around 38%.

Barriers to participation in higher education include cultural issues, social exclusion, lower levels of education attainment at school, less financial resources to attend university, lower success and completion rates at university (Bradley et al 2008⁹, Behrendt et al 2012¹⁰). Educational disadvantage increases with remoteness of location with school completion rates over 30% lower than non-Indigenous students in very remote areas.¹¹

Students from Indigenous backgrounds make up about triple the proportion of students from regionally headquartered universities (3.3%) compared to universities with no regional campuses (1.1%). The higher rates at regional universities substantially reflect the greater Indigenous population in these areas and the impact of selective admissions policies by Go8 universities. A background paper¹² for the 2012 Behrendt Review of Indigenous higher education found that the enrolment of Indigenous students was low at Go8 universities (no Go8 was in the top 10 for admissions) but they had higher completion rates. In contrast regional universities generally had higher admission rates but lower completion rates. This trend continues in the 2015 student data from the Department of Education.

Indigenous Student Enrolment Proportion, Table A Providers, 2008-15¹³

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
National	1.3	1.3	1.4	1.4	1.4	1.5	1.6	1.6
Regionally Headquartered	2.4	2.6	2.8	2.8	2.8	2.9	3.1	3.3
Metro with Regional Campuses	1.1	1.1	1.1	1.2	1.2	1.2	1.4	1.5
No Regional Campuses	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.1	1.1	1.2	1.0	1.1

Low SES

The target reference point for low SES persons as a proportion of the national population is 25%. The underrepresentation of low SES students in 2015 is around 27%. Most university models for defining SES status are based on post-code of family home, or for independent

⁹ Bradley D, Noonan P, Nugent H and Scales B, *Review of Australian higher education: final report*, Canberra, DEEWR, 2008

¹⁰ Behrendt L, Larkin S, Griew R & Kelly P, *Review of higher education access and outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People: final report*, Canberra, DIISRTE, 2012

¹¹ Helme S and Lamb S, *Closing the school completion gap for Indigenous students: resource sheet no.6 for Closing the Gap Clearinghouse: Canberra AIHW and Melbourne AIFS*, 2011

¹² Pechenkina E and Anderson I, *Background Paper in Indigenous Higher Education Trends: Trends, Initiatives and Policy Implications*, Commissioned Paper, Australian Government, 2011

¹³ Koshy P, *Student Equity Performance In Australian Higher Education: 2008-2015*, National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, Curtin University, 2016

students the students postcode. The worst performers for low SES enrolments are Go8 universities and high status faculties such as law, architecture and medicine.

Regional populations tend to have significantly higher levels of low SES people that in part explains the higher level of SES enrolments at regionally headquartered universities.

Until the 2008 Bradley Review the participation rate for low SES students has stubbornly hovered around the 16.1%- 16.4% for a couple of decades. Three initiatives arising from the review seem to have led to a modest increase in low SES participation over the ensuing years:

- Better targeting of student financial support;
- Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Programs;
- Demand Driven System of Enrolments.

This improvement has been across the spectrum of universities.

Low SES Student Enrolment Proportion, Table A Providers, 2008-15¹⁴

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
National	16.3	16.3	16.7	17.0	17.3	17.6	17.9	18.2
Regionally Headquartered	27.3	27.6	27.9	28.1	28.4	28.4	28.6	28.6
Metro with Regional Campuses	14.6	14.6	14.8	15.2	15.6	15.9	16.5	16.8
No Regional Campuses	12.9	12.9	13.5	13.9	14.0	14.7	14.7	14.9

Students With Disabilities

The target reference point has been subject to considerable contention in recent years but the comparable population reference point is 8% (self identifying 15-64 year olds from the 2006 ABS Census). The underrepresentation of Students With Disabilities in 2015 is around 22% (notwithstanding the issues around a more up to date target reference point) .

The participation rates for Students With Disabilities plateaued between 2004 and 2008. However, this has been an area of marked improvement since 2008 with the proportion of disabled students increasing by nearly a third. Increased awareness by institutions to create pathways for disabled students seems to be a major contributing factor. Improved funding for university disability support services may also have been a contributing factor (for instance the Higher Education Disability Support Program which is currently under review). Higher rates of reported disability in regional areas seem to be the main reason behind the higher participation rates in regionally headquartered universities. The National Centre for Student Equity in the Higher Education review paper *Issues and Trends for Student with*

¹⁴ Koshy P, Student Equity Performance In Australian Higher Education: 2008-2015, National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, Curtin University, 2016

*Disability*¹⁵ provides a useful overview of contemporary policy issues facing Students With Disability.

Students With Disabilities Enrolment Proportion, Table A Providers, 2008-15¹⁶

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
National	4.4	4.5	4.8	5.0	5.2	5.5	5.8	6.2
Regionally Headquartered	5.2	5.4	5.5	5.7	5.9	6.5	6.7	7.0
Metro with Regional Campuses	4.5	4.6	5.1	5.3	5.5	5.6	6.1	6.6
No Regional Campuses	3.7	3.7	3.8	4.0	4.3	4.4	4.8	5.2

Issues that affect Indigenous, low SES and Student With Disability participation rates are all issues that disproportionately affect remote and regional student participation.

NUS in the past has worked closely with the Bradley Review, Universities Australia Student Finances Surveys and government task forces to improve regional student participation. NUS looks forward to future opportunities to work with government and university bodies to address the significant access and participation issues faced by regional and remote students.

¹⁵ Cunninghame, Costello D and Trinidad S, *Issues and Trends For Students With Disability: Review of NCSEHE-Funded Research*, National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, Curtin University, 2016

¹⁶ Koshy P, *Student Equity Performance In Australian Higher Education: 2008-2015*, National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, Curtin University, 2016