

The Impact of Regional Diversity on Higher Education Participation: A Comparison of Two Australian States

Sharron King
University of South Australia

Cathy Stone
The University of Newcastle, Australia

Abstract

Australian regional, rural, and remote (RRR) students are transitioning from school to university at lower rates than students in metropolitan areas. This paper examines the similarities and differences between the experiences of RRR secondary school students in South Australia (SA) and New South Wales (NSW) contemplating the transition to university study. Comparing findings from two studies, this paper investigates how the state in which a student lives and studies influences their attitudes and decisions about progressing to higher education (HE). In SA, the compounding effects of low incomes, considerable distances between regional and metropolitan centres, and a scarcity of HE infrastructure outside the capital city imposed more pressing challenges for RRR students than in NSW, where there are fewer remote and outer regional areas, yet more local campuses of large regional universities. This paper argues that a more nuanced national policy response to equity of access for RRR students is required—one that considers the various factors within each Australian state that impact upon the transition of RRR students from secondary school to HE.

Keywords

Higher education, Regional students, Student equity, University transitions

Introduction

This paper compares and contrasts findings from two research studies examining barriers to higher education (HE) participation in Australia for regional, rural, and remote (RRR) students completing their secondary school education. The term “regional” will be used instead of RRR, referring to all non-metropolitan areas of Australia. These two research studies were conducted in different states of Australia; the first in New South Wales (NSW) in 2015 (NSW Department of Education, 2017), and the second in South Australia (SA) in 2021 (King et al., 2022). Both studies explored why high-achieving secondary students in ATAR¹ streams at regional high schools were transitioning from school to university at lower rates than students in metropolitan areas. This paper is one of several that discusses findings from the two studies (see also Stone et al., 2022a, 2022b). It focuses particularly on data reflecting the extent to which differences in the states themselves—including their distinctive geography, demography, and educational infrastructure—influence the transition from school to HE for regional students. The full and more detailed findings from both studies are available in the final report from the SA study (King et al., 2022) and in the published summary report from the NSW study (NSW Department of Education, 2017). The specific aspects of these wider studies that are discussed here in this paper raise questions about how national HE policy,

¹ The Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) is a number between 0.00 and 99.95 that indicates a student’s position relative to all the students in their age group. Universities use the ATAR to help them select students for their courses and admission to most tertiary courses is based on a student’s ATAR plus any applicable adjustments (University Admissions Centre, n.d.). To be eligible for an ATAR, secondary school students must choose certain courses in Years 11 and 12, in which case they are considered to be on an ATAR stream or pathway.

including funding, is implemented within different regional areas, and the impact of this on the different states and the students within them.

Australian government statistics tell us that, compared with their metropolitan counterparts, students at Australian regional secondary schools are less likely to complete school or to apply to university. The final report of the Australian Government's *National Regional, Rural and Remote Education Strategy* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2019) also confirms that regional school-leavers are less likely to be offered a place at university, while those who do receive an offer are more likely to defer or decide against accepting it altogether. The recently published *Australian Universities Accord Final Report* (Australian Government Department of Education, 2023a) tells us that "the proportion of 25 to 34-year-olds with a bachelor degree or above decreases with increasing remoteness" (p. 148) and that "these disparities are long-term and stubborn" (p. 260).

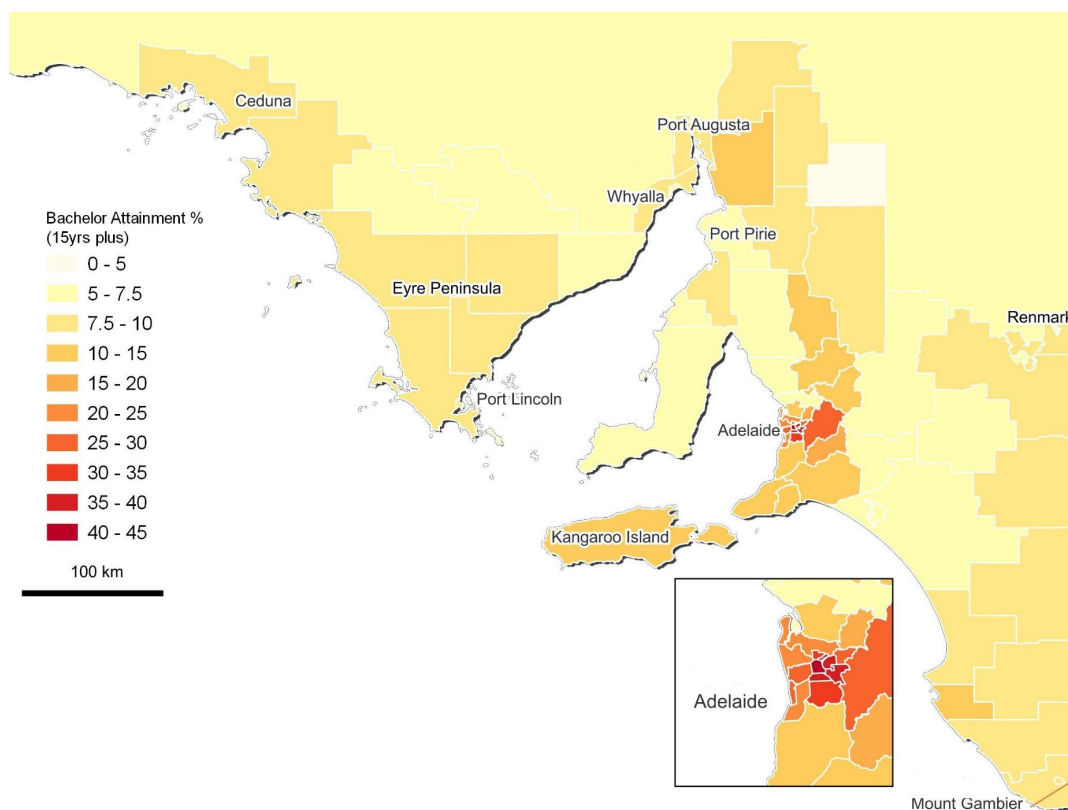
There are significant differences between NSW and SA in their HE contexts, in terms of geography, demography, and infrastructure. The next section examines these differences in more detail.

Geographic, demographic, and HE infrastructure contexts of the two studies

SA has a unique geography that impacts HE provision in the state. SA's population of 1.78 million people is densely concentrated within the capital city, Adelaide, with 77% in Greater Adelaide (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2021a). In comparison, 64% of the total NSW population of just over 8 million lives in Greater Sydney. Regional SA communities are therefore very small in comparison. The two largest communities outside Adelaide are Mount Gambier and Whyalla, with respective populations of 26,878 and 21,244. There are also greater distances between towns when compared to NSW and other eastern Australian states. These factors present significant challenges for universities to create viable access to HE in regional SA, which has lower bachelor attainment rates than the national regional average.

Figure 1

Bachelor Attainment (15 Years Plus) per Local Government Area (LGA) — South Australia



Note. Generated from 2021 ABS Census data (ABS, 2021a).

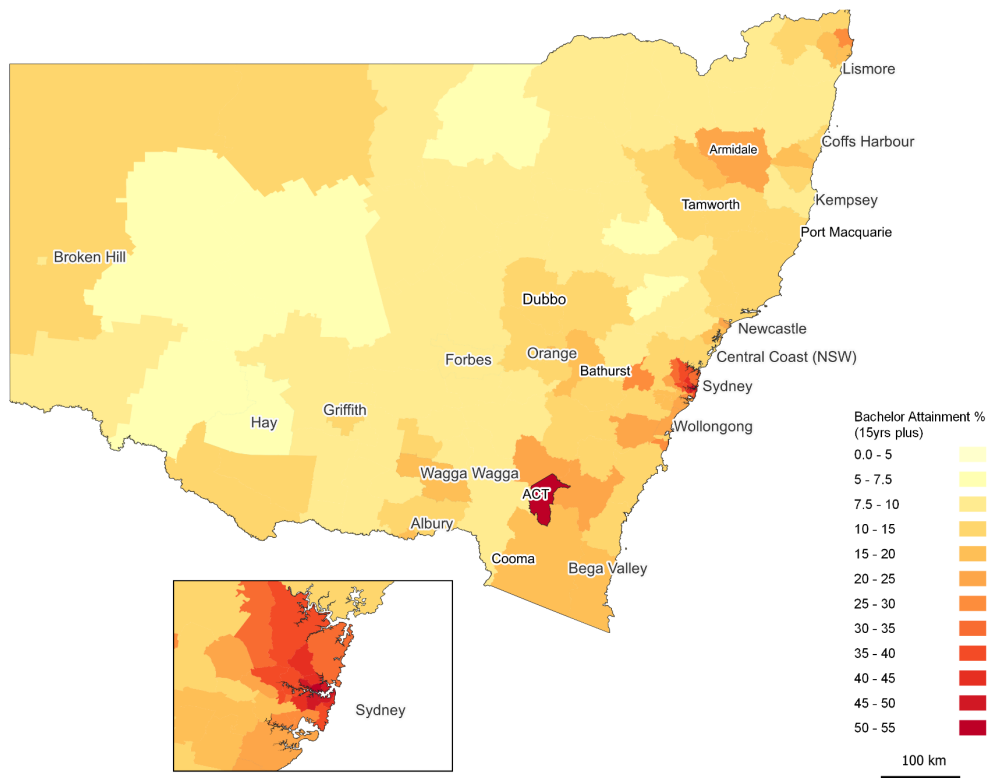
Figure 1 illustrates how much of regional SA has fewer than 10–15% of the population with a bachelor degree. This represents considerably less than the national average bachelor attainment rate of 18.5% in regional Australia and a quarter of the average metropolitan rate of 39.7% (Commonwealth of Australia, 2019).

The two largest SA regional communities both have a small campus: Mount Gambier has been operating since 2005 and Whyalla has had a university campus for several decades. However, even with this university presence, the bachelor attainment rates in these two communities are no greater than other areas of regional SA.

This is an interesting phenomenon, as NSW data indicate that proximity to a university campus within that state tends to increase bachelor attainment rates. Figure 2 shows bachelor attainment in NSW LGAs, where regional communities are larger and more densely populated, increasing the viability of HE infrastructure. Large regional university campuses are based in Wollongong, Newcastle, Wagga Wagga, Bathurst, Orange, Armidale, and Lismore, while there are smaller campuses in Dubbo, Port Macquarie, Coffs Harbour, and Bega. These regions all have higher bachelor attainment rates. Additionally, many south-eastern regional areas of NSW are located within reasonable travelling distance to Canberra, in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), where there are three major metropolitan universities.

Figure 2

Bachelor Attainment (15 Years Plus) per LGA — NSW



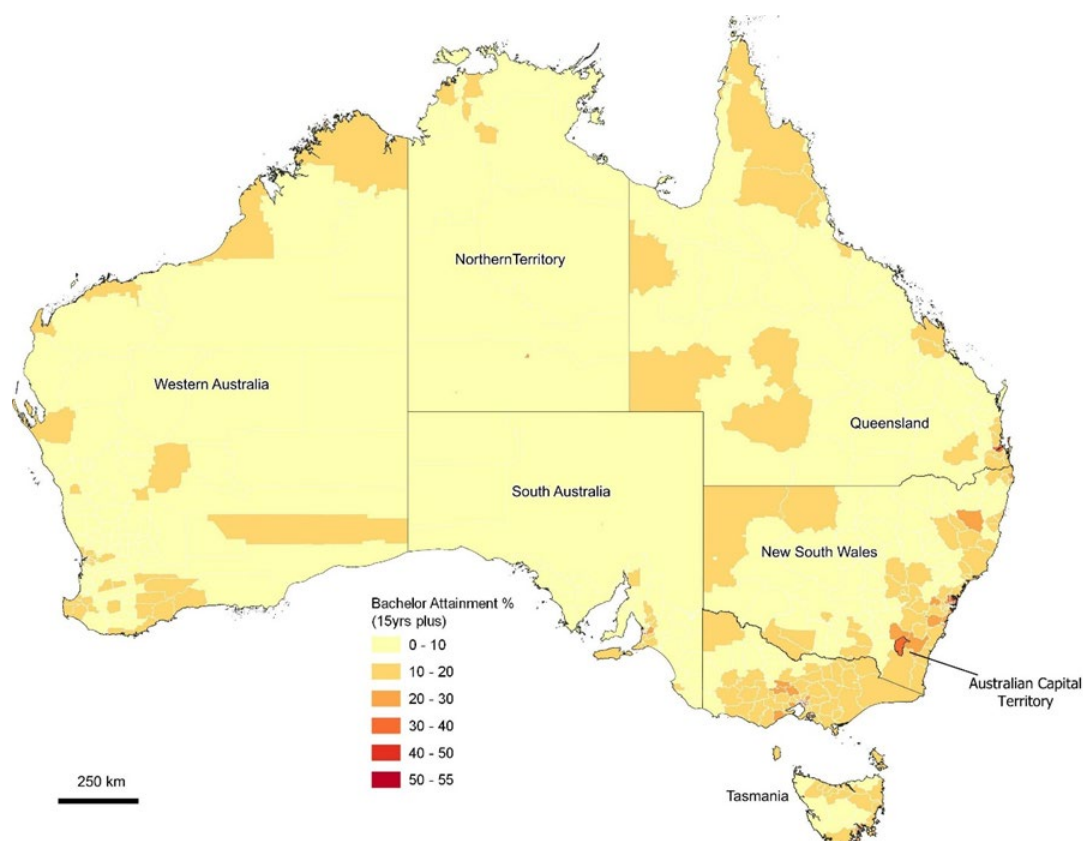
Note: Generated from 2021 ABS Census data (ABS, 2021b).

As seen in Figure 1, the Adelaide central business district (CBD) has a bachelor attainment rate of 30% and above. However, this rate quickly drops outside Greater Adelaide. Comparatively, Figure 2 shows that Sydney maintains higher bachelor attainment rates outside the CBD and into inner regional areas.

In the broader Australian context, the SA pattern is not unique. Western Australia (WA) and the Northern Territory (NT) have similarly low bachelor attainment rates. They also have similarly low populations across large distances from metropolitan areas, along with limited HE infrastructure outside the capital cities of Perth and Darwin, respectively.

Figure 3

Bachelor Attainment (15 Years Plus) per LGA — All Australian States



Note: Generated from 2021 ABS Census data (ABS, 2021c).

There has been considerable research in recent years into the disparity between HE participation and achievement of regional versus metropolitan students across Australia. This has revealed common barriers impacting the post-secondary school choices and decisions of regional students, including those on an ATAR pathway who were academically capable of achieving a place at university.

Review of the literature

Those living in regional areas of Australia are less than half as likely as those within metropolitan areas (18.5% vs 39.7%) to gain an undergraduate degree or above by the time they are 35 years old (Commonwealth of Australia, 2019; Halsey, 2018). Average incomes in regional areas are lower than those in metropolitan areas (ABS, 2021c), with higher proportions of regional populations falling into the HE equity categories of low-SES and Indigenous (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander) students. Additionally, those in regional areas of Australia who go to university are more likely than metropolitan students to be first in their families to do so (Cooper et al., 2017; James et al., 2008; McLachlan et al., 2013).

The past 20 years has generated a wealth of research aimed at identifying some of the factors behind this discrepancy, with earlier research pointing to differences in aspirations of regional high

school students compared with those in metropolitan areas. Such earlier findings indicated that regional students had lower aspirations regarding university (Alloway et al., 2004; Khoo & Ainley, 2005; Kilpatrick & Abbott-Chapman, 2002). However, other more recent research has thrown this into question, with findings indicating that young people from low-SES backgrounds, including regional and rural students, aspire to attend university following secondary school at a comparable rate to those in high-SES metropolitan regions (Gore et al., 2019; Vernon et al., 2018). Such findings suggest that aspirations are perhaps not so much the problem. Rather, the aforementioned discrepancies that present practical barriers—including lower incomes and a lack of family experience of university—deter regional high school students from going to university at a similar rate to those at metropolitan high schools. This is particularly true for those from low-SES backgrounds. Indeed, research has indicated that without opportunities to support and nurture regional students' aspirations, the transition to university is unlikely (O'Shea et al., 2019). Further, students who discuss university more frequently with others, including parents, peers, and teachers, are more likely to attend (Vernon & Drane, 2021).

Barriers, such as the financial cost of going to university and lack of access to a university campus locally, have emerged as strong deterrents in recent research (Katersky Barnes et al., 2019; O'Shea et al., 2019; Vernon & Drane, 2021). The multiple complexities involved for regional high school students in deciding whether to go to university—especially if that involves moving away from their home town, family, and friends—have also become more apparent (Gore et al., 2019; O'Shea et al., 2019; Ronan, 2020; Stone et al., 2022a). The influence of community expectations has been shown to be considerable (Kilpatrick et al., 2020; Patfield et al., 2021; Vernon & Drane, 2021), contributing to the mix of practical and emotional barriers that can prevent aspirations from being sufficiently internalised, let alone fulfilled (Vernon et al., 2018).

Regional students' understanding of, and ability to make decisions about, university can also be negatively impacted by insufficient access to career advice and accurate information. This can lead to uncertainty and confusion about what courses to apply for and whether to go to university at all (Austin et al., 2020; Gore et al., 2017; Stone et al., 2022b). This uncertainty and confusion may be related to regional secondary school students' stronger tendency to defer their university place, or defer applying by taking a "gap year", after which only a minority attend university (Commonwealth of Australia, 2019; King et al., 2022).

For low-SES students, the availability of effective career information and advice is particularly important. A study of 6,492 secondary school students in Years 3 to 12 (Gore et al., 2017, p. 1398) highlighted the need for "more detailed and meaningful information" and "tailored advice about what is needed for specific careers" as part of the "nurturing" required to encourage students from lower-SES backgrounds to enter university. Austin et al. (2020, p. 34) also emphasise that "quality career advice ... has the potential to lessen the gap in educational and employment outcomes of students from different socioeconomic backgrounds".

This combination of factors—distance from a university, the need to move away, extent of family/community experience and understanding of university, family finances, access to accurate and timely career advice, and information about university—has been shown through considerable research to be a potent mix influencing the decision-making of students at regional secondary schools about whether to make the transition to university.

The two research projects that are informing this paper will now be described and discussed.

The research projects

In 2015, the NSW Department of Education commissioned a report from the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE), now renamed ACSES (Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success) on high-achieving regional student transitions to university. The study explored why students from regional NSW who were achieving an ATAR of 60 or more (likely to receive a university offer) were transitioning to university at significantly lower rates than those from the state's capital city. The primary research question was: Why are significant numbers of high-achieving school students in identified areas of regional NSW choosing not to transition to university directly from school? The research also sought to identify what regional students saw as major barriers and influences for going to university and, for those with an ATAR above 60, what they were doing. Ethics approval for this research was sought and received from both Curtin University (for the NCSEHE) and the NSW Department of Education.

In 2021, a research team led by the University of South Australia conducted a similar study in SA, asking similar key research questions as the NSW study. However, given the greater remoteness of many regional areas of SA, the lack of regional universities, and the increase in online learning since the NSW study was conducted (further accelerated by Covid-19 restrictions), three additional questions were included:

- What impact do student housing and accommodation arrangements have on regional SA student transitions?
- What impact do online learning and regional information technology infrastructure have on regional student transitions?
- How does the unique geography of SA impact the transition of regional students to university?

Ethics approval for this research was sought and received from the University of South Australia. Each research team liaised with their state education department to identify key regional schools with cohorts of students achieving an ATAR greater than 60 but with lower rates of transition to university than metropolitan schools. While there were many methodological parallels, the number of schools and regions included in each study differed. The NSW study involved a total of 20 secondary schools across 10 local government areas (LGAs), while the SA study involved 14 secondary schools across 13 LGAs. Another key difference was that the NSW study was conducted prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, whereas school closures and remote learning affected the SA study during much of 2020 and some of 2021. Data collection for the SA project was initially planned for 2020 but was postponed until the following year.

Tables 1 and 2 provide a deidentified list of the schools included in both studies, with information on the distance of each school from the state capital and from the closest university campus. In Table 1, two columns illustrate this, the first being the distance to the closest main campus of either a regional or metropolitan university and the second to a subsidiary regional campus of a university. In Table 2, the one column for distance includes distance to a metropolitan university or to a small, satellite campus, whichever is the closest. As mentioned previously, within NSW, there is a relative prevalence of large regional universities, some of which have campuses in multiple areas. All SA universities are metropolitan based, with only one of these universities having two smaller regional campuses.

These tables also show that the LGAs in which the NSW schools were located had higher populations than the LGAs of the SA schools. Additionally, under the Australian Statistical

Geography Standard² (ASGS) classification for remoteness (ABS, 2021d), there were more LGAs in SA classed as “outer regional” and “remote” than those in NSW.

Table 1

Distance from each NSW School to Sydney, Nearest Main University Campus and Regional Campus, ASGS Classification, and LGA Populations

School	Distance from capital city (km)	Distance to closest main campus of a regional or metro university (km)	Distance to a regional campus of a university (km)	ASGS Classification	LGA population (2021 Census Data)
A	430	233	2	Outer Regional	35942
B	480	273	52	Outer Regional	35942
C	465	257	36	Outer Regional	35942
D	520	232	33	Outer Regional	13253
E	763	46	2.5	Inner Regional	36116
F	528	199	5.2	Inner Regional	78759
G	524	203	0.5	Inner Regional	78759
H	531	204	1.8	Inner Regional	78759
I	388	145	0.5	Inner Regional	54922
J	391	148	1.5	Inner Regional	54922
K	205	95	95	Inner Regional	32053
L	210	91	91	Inner Regional	32053
M	303	155	105	Inner Regional	33311
N	122	42	42	Inner Regional	23074
O	355	217	30	Inner Regional	86762
P	388	239	7	Inner Regional	86762
Q	386	238	5	Inner Regional	86762
R	383	234	1.5	Inner Regional	86762
S	384	230	6	Inner Regional	86762
T	225	146	146	Inner Regional	108531

² The Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS), as used by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), has five classes of remoteness based on relative access to services, i.e., major cities, inner regional, outer regional, remote, and very remote (ABS, 2021d).

Table 2

Distance from each SA School to Adelaide, Nearest Regional Campus, ASGS Classification, and LGA Populations

School	Distance from capital city (km)	Distance to nearest university campus (km)	ASGS Classification	LGA population (2021 ABS Census data)
A	249	206	Outer Regional	1638
B	182	182	Outer Regional	11666
C	435	3	Inner Regional	26878
D	294	156	Remote	2326
E	382	52	Outer Regional	11888
F	430	7	Inner Regional	26878
G	271	183	Remote	6891
H	651	267	Remote	14404
I	532	148	Remote	1742
J	387	5	Outer Regional	21244
K	384	182	Outer Regional	1646
L	55	55	Outer Regional	28730
M	259	259	Outer Regional	9783
N	537	337	Outer Regional	3006

Method

Similar mixed-methods methodological approaches, in terms of research questions, data collection, and data analysis were used in both studies. A mixed-methods approach uses a mix of quantitative and qualitative data to address research questions (Mark, 2015). Data are gathered from different sources using both quantitative and qualitative analysis to achieve greater depth of understanding of the thoughts and experiences of different people from different perspectives (Creswell, 2014) and allow for cross-checking of results (Winchester & Rofe, 2010).

For both studies, data were collected through the following means:

1. Quantitative data were gathered on ATAR scores, offers, refusals, and enrolments collected by the relevant state education department.
2. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected from surveys (anonymously completed) of currently enrolled Year 11 and Year 12 students at each of the participating schools.
3. Further and richer qualitative data were collected in semi-structured interviews with school staff, as well as focus group discussions with participating students.

Survey data were analysed quantitatively for the most part, with some limited qualitative analysis used for responses to open questions. Data from interviews and focus group discussions were analysed using an interpretive qualitative approach (Cohen et al., 2011) and, specifically, a process of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). In the NSW study, themes were identified through

manual analysis and coded accordingly, while in the SA study, data underwent manual analysis in the first instance, aided by NVivo12 for coding. These combined methods of analysis were well suited to capturing the varied and complex nature of participants' thoughts and experiences (Creswell, 2014).

Survey: Currently enrolled Year 11 and Year 12 students

Surveys were distributed to each of the participating schools in both states to collect demographic data and to explore potential enablers and barriers to university participation. In the NSW study, 531 Year 11 and 12 students completed the survey, compared with 198 Year 11 and 12 students in the SA study. In both studies, other than yes/no questions regarding demographics, students chose answers from multiple choice lists with the importance of each determined by a five-point Likert scale. While there were opportunities to provide additional open-ended comments in several places throughout the survey, very few students chose to do so.

Students were asked about their demographic circumstances (age, gender, year of school, Indigeneity, living circumstances, languages spoken at home, parents' levels of education, other family members who have been to university); their intentions and aspirations for university; and their understanding of some of the practicalities of going to university, such as costs, pathways, scholarships, and other supports. Further questions explored influences on their decision-making about post-school intentions, including who/what their main sources of information were. If university was their intention, they were asked where they would be most interested in going, with choices being a regional campus (or regional university in the case of the NSW survey), a university in their state's capital city, an interstate university or, in the case of the SA survey, studying online as a distance student. The NSW study asked specifically about perceived barriers to post-school education, with possible choices based on what was known from the literature, such as finances, lack of encouragement/support from family/friends, having to leave home, concerns about ATAR, not knowing what they want to do, and so on. The SA survey did not ask this directly, the researchers choosing instead to see what emerged from the data without direct prompting.

The SA survey asked additional questions related to the study's extra research questions, including: the extent to which housing/accommodation/leaving home expenses could be barriers; how the more remote geography of SA, and the centralisation of universities within Adelaide, impacted students' post-school options and choices; and how often they had visited Adelaide in the past five years (excluding on any school excursions). Lastly, to explore the impact of online learning and the development of online learning technology infrastructure, the SA survey included questions about whether they would consider studying online and whether they were familiar with Regional University Study Hubs³ (Australian Government Department of Education, 2023b). A number of these Hubs, previously known as Regional University Centres (RUCs), have been established in Australian regional areas since 2015 to support online regional students. Additional funding has been allocated to expand this program into more regional areas of Australia following recommendations from the Australian Universities Accord (Australian Government Department of Education, 2023a).

³Regional University Study Hubs, formerly known as Regional University Centres (RUCs) are an emerging initiative across Australia that create more options for students to study in their home town. These centres support students who are studying online or by distance and provide high-speed internet, computer facilities, study spaces, face-to-face academic support, and wellbeing support (Australian Government Department of Education, 2023b).

Focus groups

Both studies also conducted focus group interviews with Year 11 and Year 12 students along with one-to-one or small group interviews with staff in each respective state. In the NSW study, almost 400 students from 17 of the 20 schools participated in focus groups, whereas in the SA study, 124 students from eight of the 14 schools took part.

The aim of the focus groups was to gather more detail on students' thoughts about the possibilities of, and obstacles to, making the transition from school to university. While the researcher had a set of prompt questions, conversations were allowed to go in the direction students took them. Each focus group lasted between 45 and 60 minutes, with discussion about: students' immediate intentions post-Year 12, their aspirations for the future, the people who influenced them the most in these decisions, their sources of information about university courses and requirements, their knowledge about financial support options and pathways to university, and what may get in the way of achieving their goals. The researchers took extensive notes for later analysis.

Interviews with teachers, career advisers, and senior staff

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with Year 12 coordinators/year leaders, principals, deputy principals, career advisors, and Year 12 teachers, referred to as "school educators" hereon. The NSW study interviewed 29 school educators and the SA study 23. The aim of these interviews was to seek educators' views regarding how and why their students were making decisions about university study. Again, extensive notes were taken for later analysis.

Key findings

Comparing the findings from the two research studies revealed both similarities and differences. However, the authors are aware that caution must be used in interpreting these similarities and differences at a state level as there may be other contributing factors. These may include individual school differences, such as previous HE access rates, which were not focused on as part of either study. Keeping this caution in mind, the key similarities and differences are outlined below.

Similarities

Survey and focus group data similarly revealed that cost and financial considerations played a significant role for the majority of students in decisions about whether to go to university, with particular concerns about relocation and accommodation/living costs. Survey data showed 61% of NSW students agreeing or strongly agreeing with "I won't have enough money to pay for further education", while in the SA survey, the question about "if money were no object" elicited comments such as, "money, is a big impact for where I would study. If it wasn't such a big thing, then my preference may be easier". In both studies, the cost of going to university was raised by students in every focus group, many indicating that their parents would not be able to afford the costs involved:

It's not just me. I have two younger brothers and a sister. There is no way my parents can send me away to university. (NSW focus group)

I would just have to come up with the money myself, but I just don't know how long it would take. (SA focus group)

The students in both studies were concerned about leaving their local area—their family, friends, and local employment—to attend university. While there were some students in both studies who expressed confidence and an eagerness to move away from home, the majority in each focus group raised concerns. These ranged from fears about adjusting to city life, “I wouldn’t even know how to live in a city” (SA focus group), to loneliness, “Sydney is impersonal and scary” (NSW focus group), to finding their way around, “Until I went to Sydney, I had never caught a public bus in my life. Two buses went straight past me. I didn’t know you had to wave down a bus in Sydney” (NSW focus group). Hence, deciding whether to leave or stay was a complex and difficult decision. Another similarity was the popularity of taking a gap year (in both studies, 48% were planning this). Focus group discussions provided information about their reasons, with saving money most frequently mentioned. Taking time to decide what they really wanted to do was also commonly discussed, e.g., “I need to save enough money to be able to leave home and go to university in Newcastle” (NSW focus group) and “I don’t necessarily want to go straight into jumping into something and regret it and leave straightaway” (SA focus group).

Findings also indicated a similar scarcity of access to adequate advice and information about university, including information about financial support. This was evident in both the survey results and the focus group discussions. The NSW survey revealed that most students knew “little to nothing” about Youth Allowance, Austudy, and HECS-HELP. Furthermore, SA focus group discussions revealed students’ frustration when university visits to their school did not provide the practical information they wanted: “I know I need to save money, but I don’t know how much or what I will have to pay for when I get to uni. Why can’t they tell us that?” There was also a similar lack of knowledge amongst the student and school educator cohorts about financial support options, such as scholarships and government benefits:

Accommodation scholarships would help a great deal. Don’t get much information on these scholarships and often they are only for very high ATAR students. (NSW school educator)

Do we just google university grants and scholarships? Where do we find that? I am sick of looking. (SA school educator)

The importance of teachers and parents being well informed is highlighted by the fact that parents, followed by teachers, were named by students in both studies as their main sources of information and advice. Despite the barriers discussed in focus groups, both studies revealed high aspirations for university amongst these ATAR stream students, as well as high levels of parental support for these aspirations. Again, this confirms the need for students, teachers, and parents to all be well informed.

Differences

There were also some significant differences between the findings. Unlike the findings in the NSW study, proximity to a regional university campus did not appear to necessarily impact SA regional students’ intentions about university study. Further, there was a perception amongst both SA students and school educators that “local” was not as good as “city” regarding the quality of the university experience and ultimate qualification. Survey results for the question, “If university is in your future plans, where are you most interested in attending?” showed that only 21% of the SA students were interested in going to a regional campus in SA, while 60% wanted to go to a metropolitan university. However, as Table 2 shows, only five (C,E,F,J,L) of the 14 SA schools had

a university campus within reasonable travelling distance, so this was a moot point for most. In focus group discussions, comments by students who lived near a local campus but did not want to go there included, “not enough courses”, “quality is not as good”, and “only courses for girls”. This last comment is mentioned again later in the paper.

In contrast, most of the NSW students were within reasonable travelling distance to either a main campus of an NSW regional or ACT metropolitan university with a full range of courses, or a smaller NSW regional campus offering a more limited range of courses. The NSW focus group discussions indicated that proximity to a university campus was a key influence in their choice of university, with many intending to go to a local regional university, or a smaller campus where that was closer. The NSW survey results showed that almost 30% of students intended to go to an NSW regional university or campus, and 25% to a metropolitan university. A further 17% wanted to go to a university in another state while the remainder were either unsure (19%) or did not intend to go to university (9%). Interestingly, a smaller proportion of the SA students were unsure or did not intend to go (9% in total) while they also appeared to be less inclined to attend a university in another state (3%). However, 7% of the SA students indicated they were interested in taking an online university course. As mentioned earlier, online was not given as an option in the NSW survey.

Another difference was that university outreach visits were, in general, viewed less positively amongst the SA students and school educators than by those in the NSW study (see Stone et al., 2022b for more detail). One factor that may have contributed to this was that the greater geographical isolation of many of the SA regional schools meant university outreach visits were occurring irregularly and not at all schools. The universities had possibly not had the same opportunity to build relationships with these schools and gain an understanding of what they were wanting from the visits. In contrast, there were comprehensive outreach programs by NSW regional universities into each of the NSW schools that participated in the research, resulting in the students having a higher degree of familiarity with these regional universities and local campuses.

Additionally, in contrast to the NSW findings, boys at the SA schools appeared to be under more pressure than girls to “stay local”—through undertaking a trade, finding local employment, or working on a family farm—rather than going to university. Again, this may reflect in part the lack of access to main campuses of universities. The courses and subjects (often nursing and teaching) offered at local campuses were perceived—in our highly gendered society—as being more for girls than for boys, as indicated by the student comment presented earlier. Another contributing factor could also be that only 9% of the SA students reported that their father had completed a university degree, compared with 28% in the NSW survey. The proportion of mothers with university degrees was higher, at 25% (SA) and 38% (NSW). Possibly the relatively low levels of university education amongst fathers in the SA study may have contributed to the pressure experienced by boys to work locally rather than go to university.

Discussion

These findings mostly reflect and support the recent research outlined in the literature review, as well as revealing some very interesting differences between the two states. Of particular note is the impact of proximity to a campus. For the SA students, the absence of regional universities within the state, and the limited course offerings at the very few local campuses available, meant that students perceived little choice but to leave their local area if they wished to go to university. As mentioned in the literature review, lack of access locally to a university or campus has been shown through multiple research studies to be a significant deterrent for regional students’ university participation. Students’ practical and emotional concerns include family finances and anxiety about leaving home and community, especially when first in the family to do so (Gore et al., 2019;

Katersky Barnes et al., 2019; O’Shea et al., 2019; Ronan, 2020; Stone et al., 2022a; Vernon & Drane, 2021).

The lower density of the population of SA across its extensive regional areas has largely confined HE infrastructure to the capital city. The presence of small satellite campuses with limited course offerings seems to be less successful in boosting HE participation when compared to the presence of a university itself, with its associated comprehensive degree offerings and infrastructure. The SA student participants were not impressed with the limited course offerings at small local campuses (where available), holding the view that the local campus was not as good as “real” universities based in the metropolitan area. In contrast, the NSW students mostly had the choice to stay relatively close to home for university if they wished. Fewer of them needed to contemplate leaving home as a prerequisite for going to university, making the decision a less complex one. With both the survey and focus groups indicating that cost was a determining factor for many, the lack of access to a university near their home exacerbated the challenges for the SA students and their families, financially, emotionally, and psychologically. This was the case even though these ATAR stream students had generally high aspirations and parental support for the idea of university. This finding is consistent with those of Vernon et al. (2018), who found that high aspirations for university are not necessarily enough, when such practical and emotional barriers can prevent them from being realised.

While there are lower bachelor attainment rates across regional Australia when compared with metropolitan areas (Commonwealth of Australia, 2019; Halsey, 2018), it would nevertheless be a mistake to assume that all states experience the same regional challenges. The differences in the findings between these two studies reflect the differential access to higher education between states. In SA, challenges include the compounding effects of low incomes, large distances between regional and metropolitan centres, and a scarcity of HE infrastructure outside the capital city. More populous states, such as NSW, benefit from having fewer remote and outer regional areas as well as large regional universities with additional local campuses. This is an inequitable situation that national HE policy needs to address.

The low reported rate of fathers with bachelor degrees in the SA study and the potential impact of this on male students’ post-school intentions is another interesting finding. Gender norms change slowly. Around the world, including Australia, men are still more commonly the main “breadwinners” (Craig, 2020; Stone & O’Shea, 2019; Wilkins et al., 2021), even more so in regional areas. As such, the challenge of taking on university study may be seen as less possible or desirable for males. Not only are time and expense incurred but, more significantly, relocation away from the local farms and trades which are so vital to the regional economy. The limited course offerings at the few small regional campuses in SA appear to exacerbate the problem. This bears implications not only for male students who perceive the available courses as being “for girls” but also for female students who are then similarly limited in what they can choose to study locally.

Across the globe, caring for others is still traditionally seen as the domain of women, both in the home and the workplace. Within the home and family contexts in Australia, 68% of primary carers, 70% of primary unpaid carers of children, and 58% of carers of the elderly and people with disability or long-term health conditions are women (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2018). In the employment context, women are significantly overrepresented in the caring professions, such as healthcare, social assistance, and education (ABS, 2024). Given these statistics, it is important that a vicious cycle does not continue to develop, with females in regional areas pigeonholed into traditional “female” careers and males opting out of HE altogether, simply through lack of local options. Institutions, therefore, need to look closely at whether the courses they offer at regional campuses are sufficiently diverse to attract a wide range of students. They must also ensure there is

no gender stereotyping in how such courses are promoted. Rather, gender stereotyping needs to be actively challenged in order to provide a wider choice for all students.

The findings from comparing these two studies have implications for other Australian states with similar geography and demography to that of SA, such as WA and the NT. While more research is required to investigate the extent of similarity, it is reasonable to assume that these states, with their large areas of remoteness, vast distances between communities (refer to Figure 3), smaller populations concentrated in capital cities, and a lack of infrastructure in remote and outer regional locations, may experience similar challenges in the transitioning of RRR students to HE.

Conclusion

Comparing these two studies highlights the geographic, cultural, and infrastructure differences between SA and NSW in terms of HE opportunities and barriers faced by regional students. It begs the question as to why such striking differences should exist in different parts of Australia, despite the fact that HE policy and funding are managed at the national level, rather than by individual states. It indicates insufficient tailoring of national policy and funding decisions to the different needs of the varying regions across each of the states. Instead of a “one-size-fits-all” approach, a more nuanced approach to HE policy decisions is needed, one that includes a deeper understanding of opportunities and barriers across states and regions of Australia. State and federal governments need to work together to develop targeted, state-focused approaches to widening regional HE access and participation, including ensuring the availability of necessary infrastructure.

Regional universities and local campuses clearly have the potential to increase HE participation, as indicated by previous research as well as the NSW study discussed here. However, findings from the SA study indicate that this is not necessarily enough. The limited course offerings available locally deterred many of the SA students from seriously considering university. Further research would be valuable in exploring whether, and to what extent, these factors are significant in other regions of Australia and, if so, why. It would be important to determine what makes the difference—what does a university need to offer at a regional campus to meet the HE needs of young people in regional communities? What viable alternative models can be implemented to provide regional students with access to greater diversity in course offerings?

One potential example is the option of online study with the support of appropriate local infrastructure that provides the necessary technology as well as the social and emotional support of staff and other students. Universities could utilise and perhaps expand their smaller regional university campuses and study centres, and/or collaborate with Regional University Study Hubs (Australian Government Department of Education, 2023b), to offer regional students a wider range of online courses where there is also a physical space for a socially connected learning environment (Stone et al., 2022a). With the recent government focus on further growth of Regional University Study Hubs, following the *Australian Universities Accord Final Report* recommendations (Australian Government Department of Education, 2023a), this looks likely to become a more readily available option for an increasing number of regional students.

The additional funding recently announced to expand the number of these Study Hubs around the country is but one example of how changes in government policy could benefit students in a more equitable fashion across the different states and regions. With the strong emphasis in the *Australian Universities Accord Final Report* (Australian Government Department of Education, 2023a) on improving access and participation for regional students across the nation, there seems to be a very real possibility that a more nuanced national HE policy may be emerging—one that begins to redress some of the issues raised by the students and educators in this research.

Certainly, it is important that when national HE policy considers measures to improve regional HE participation, it takes into account that not all states are the same. There is no single approach that will work effectively across the whole country, given the significant differences in geography, demography, and infrastructure between states. The vast distances that separate regional communities from each other and from the metropolitan areas are considerably more a feature of states such as SA, WA, and the NT. This is in contrast to the more populous and geographically smaller eastern states of Australia, particularly NSW, which is fortunate in having access to a range of universities and local campuses in many different areas of the state.

This paper has highlighted the compounding effects in regional SA of lack of physical access to universities and historically lower rates of university participation than the national average, and the broader implications of state differences. Given the different circumstances of each state, governments and universities need to look at “doing things differently” in each—in both policy and practice—when considering ways to enhance the transition rates of regional secondary school students to university and, indeed, HE participation in general.

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The authors may be contacted via:

Dr Cathy Stone — cathy.stone@newcastle.edu.au

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