Australian Universities Accord Panel Submission

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Dear Members of the Accord panel

This submission provides a short summary of the findings of research relevant to the barriers regional and rural students encounter as they endeavour to engage with higher education. This submission responds to the following questions:

Q30 How can governments institutions and employers assist students, widen opportunities and remove barriers to higher education?

Q31 How can the costs of participation, including living expenses, be most effectively alleviated?

Removing the barriers to engagement in higher education experienced by Australians requires the recognition that each barrier is the cumulation of many factors and therefore attenuating these barriers is a complex process. To highlight the complexity of this issue, we focus on the case of low socio-economic status (SES) students living in regional and rural Australia who have aspirations for engaging in higher education. Unlike their low SES peers living in urban locations, the majority of potential low SES students in regional/ rural locations do not have access to higher education institutions in their local area. For example, across Victoria, university campuses are located in just 8 regional centres. The number of undergraduate courses available at each campus ranges from 1 at the Horsham Campus of Federation University to 29 at the Ballarat Campus of Federation University (Chesters et al. 2020). Thus, not all potential students can access the course related to their aspirations. Without access to local opportunities to engage in higher education, regional and rural students may be unable to fulfil their aspirations for further studies after completing secondary school. A related issue is the range of subjects offered by secondary schools in regional and rural Australia. As Cuervo (2016) found, preparation for university during senior secondary school can be hampered by the availability of subjects in regional, rural and remote schools. For example, students in non-metropolitan areas were less likely to have access to specialist science or mathematics subjects. Regional/rural students hoping to relocate to an urban campus need to have financial and emotional resources to facilitate a successful transition. The Productivity Commission (2019) estimated that rental costs for university students accounted for almost all of the government welfare payment available for students living away from the family home. Therefore, without financial support from their families, relocation to attend university at a metropolitan campus is beyond the reach of regional/ rural students. This highlights another cumulative disadvantage. Regional/ rural students from high SES families are more likely than their low SES peers to have the financial resources to relocate to urban areas for university. There is also the emotional cost of having to construct new social networks and develop a sense of belonging in an unfamiliar setting (Cuervo 2016; Cuervo & Wyn 2017). Regional/ rural students with university-educated parents have access to information about university life including options for study and the selection of the most appropriate university campus, programs and subjects for their career aspirations (Cuervo 2016). They also have access to social networks populated by highly educated people therefore, graduation from university is the norm and access to appropriate information is readily available. The lack of defined pathways and support networks for low SES students relocating to metropolitan areas is yet another disadvantage. Without the social and cultural capital of their high SES peers, low SES regional/ remote students struggle to navigate the complexity of the higher education system, living in densely-populated cities, and developing a sense of belonging in these unfamiliar circumstances. In contrast, low SES urban students can access university without moving away from their family home, their communities, and in many cases, their part-time jobs. To examine the barriers experienced by young people from regional and rural Australia, we conducted analysis of data from the nationally representative Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) research program. LSAY tracks nationally representative samples of 15 year old Australians for a period of 10 years. Although the research program has surveyed multiple cohorts, we focus on the 2009 (LSAY09) cohort and utilize five waves of data collected between 2009 and 2013 (Chesters & Cuervo 2021). Our analysis indicates that students living in capital cities were 1.7 times more likely than their peers living in regional/ rural areas with similar PISA scores and levels of SES to engage in higher education. Furthermore, students from the highest SES quartile were 2.8 times more likely than those from the lowest SES quartile to enrol in a Bachelor degree program even if they had similar PISA scores. Urban students achieving at the highest levels of PISA at age 15 were 1.9 times more likely than their peers living in regional and rural areas to enrol at university within three years of completing secondary school. Even after controlling for ATAR, urban students were 1.3 times more likely than non-urban students to enrol at university. In other words, for students in the top 25% of the ATAR distribution, attending a school in a non-urban area was associated with a lower likelihood of attending university. Urban students located at the top of the ATAR distribution were 3.3 times more likely than their regional/ rural peers to attend university. Thus, it would seem that the cumulative disadvantage related to geographic location and being from a low SES family conspires to keep regional and rural youth from achieving their aspirations. Given the disparity between government welfare payments for regional and rural students who need to relocate to metropolitan areas for university study and the costs of living in metropolitan areas, it is not surprising that many young people do not go on to achieve their aspirations. Government payments available for regional and rural students who relocate to urban areas to attend university need to be re-assessed and adjusted to take into consideration the disadvantages that non-urban students face. For example, a one-off relocation payment to cover the cost of the bond for rental accommodation would mean that students would not need to rely on financial support from their families. An arrangement between local employers and universities to provide part-time employment for students to supplement government allowances that does not impinge on their ability to complete their studies. There needs to be some recognition that students need an income but cannot work full-time as well as take on a full-time study load. Investment by governments and universities in affordable student accommodation that prioritised low SES regional/ rural students would also alleviate the financial costs. Chesters, J., & Cuervo, H. 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