



Proximity not sole participation factor

GAVIN Moodie's piece analysing data from a recent Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations report concludes that "locating higher education campuses in regional areas does not increase local participation much" ("Regional argument won't hold", *HES*, June 2).

He admits this is counter-intuitive and contradicts the rhetoric of many regional institutions.

Before we are too dismissive of the experience of regional universities on these matters, it would be wise to take heed of the key issues in the report on regional participation. The news is not encouraging: the gap between regional and metropolitan students' access to university continues to widen.

In other words, regional students' under-representation at Australian universities is increasing. The Bradley review made this patently clear.

However, what the DEEWR report was not able to examine from the 2006 census data was the presence and effect of regional universities on slowing the decline in participation rates in regional areas. Given the well-established relationship between lower socioeconomic status in regional areas with lower participation rates, it seems very plausible that the rhetoric of regional universities about making a real difference is, indeed, the case even though the participation rates continue to decline.

Overall, Moodie's general observations about the ongoing importance of regional universities to the nation cannot be dismissed given the federal government's intention to strengthen the sustainability of these institutions.

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HOW important are regional and outer-metropolitan campuses to university participation rates?

This is a critical question and, contrary to the Moodie's report, we still don't know the answer.

It seems common sense that access to a university campus would, at least in part, explain university participation.

Indeed, Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006 census data shows that a higher proportion of the population holds university qualifications in regions where a university campus is located compared with surrounding regions without a university campus.

Participation is higher, too, for obvious reasons.

But the *HES* article last week used the findings of a recent DEEWR report on regional participation to conclude that easy access to a campus is not a very important factor in someone's decisions to attend a university.

The trouble is that the DEEWR report does not and, in its present form, cannot demonstrate this.

The DEEWR study looks at a number of factors that could explain university participation rates of particular geographic regions, statistical local areas, in Australia. The factors include: measures of socioeconomic status and the economic resources of the SLA, a measure for access and a measure to capture state-territory location for each SLA.

There are two key problem areas for the study and the claims made about its findings.

First, the SES measure used — the ABS-generated Index of Education and Occupation — includes university participation for the SLA. It can be no surprise that this variable seems important to explaining university participation because it is, in part, measuring itself. This will tend to overestimate the importance of SES in explaining university participation and underestimate the importance of other factors, including access.

Second, the interpretation of the results about the importance of access on university participation and the way access is measured both need more work.

After taking into account SES,

economic resources and state-territory, the study finds that regional students remain 8.4 per cent less likely than inner-metro students to attend university. One per cent of this 8.4 per cent is attributed to access and the rest is left unexplained.

The authors seem to assume the unexplained 7.4 per cent in regional participation has nothing to do with regional location.

That seems highly implausible, particularly given that only 0.2 per cent is left unexplained in the outer-metro to inner-metro comparison.

On the face of it, these results could imply that access is indeed important in regional locations, perhaps more important than for inner and outer-metro locations.

And because it is likely that the effect of SES has been overestimated (because it is in part measuring itself), it is likely that access for regional (and outer-metro) participation is even more important than the above would suggest.

But there are even more problems with the way that access has been measured.

- It works to capture variation close to universities and minimises variation at distance.
- It assumes that the most important constraint on attendance is size of university discounted steeply at close distances.

For example, for a university with 10,000 equivalent full-time student load, access is attributed a value of 400 at 5km, 100 at 15km, 25 at 20km and one at 100km.

- It yields little variation in access across regional SLAs. The average score of 18 for regional SLAs implies that the average regional university student attends a campus 10km to 15km from home. For those of us in regional centres, these distances are minuscule and many of our students travel much greater distances to study.

In all, the way that access is measured seems deeply problematic. While the measure used is



consistent with Stevenson et al (2010), no other justification has been provided for it. There are other issues too.

What is the effect of including remote areas of Australia into what becomes a very large regional category? Are the results sensitive to the inclusion of state-territory? If it is the case that those living in rural and regional areas negotiate larger distances as a matter of course, is it worth thinking about a non-linear measure of distance to capture this? And what

about folk who have elected not to attend university? To what extent does access, properly measured, explain their non-attendance?

Of course, studies cannot answer every question and they often raise as many questions as they answer. I'm sure the authors are aware that there is a deal more work to do and that the study would benefit from expert peer review.

Without further work and review, the risk is that the report's findings could invite inappropriate

policy responses, in much the same way as it invited an inappropriate headline last week.

The simple fact is that, for now, based on these data, no one — especially those who hold the funding purse-strings — should conclude that access to a university campus is not very important to participation in higher education in Australia.

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The Mt Helen campus of the University of Ballarat, heart of the regional education debate