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The three community themes that underpin university engagement

Positive community attitudes and employer support for higher education are central to regional and remote student university success, new research has shown.

The study, led by Dr Robin Katersky Barnes from the University of Tasmania and funded by the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE), defined student influencers and community characteristics that supported positive higher education outcomes.

“Higher education access, retention, success and attainment indicators for regional and remote students remain persistently below those of their metropolitan counterparts,” Dr Katersky Barnes said.

“However, there are many regional and remote communities that stand out on the basis of higher education performance. Our research took a strengths-based approach to identify key contributors to these positive outcomes.”

Over 3,000 students were surveyed for the research and five communities identified for in-depth case studies. These were selected from 50 communities performing well across equity groups including regional; remote; low socioeconomic status; disability; non-English speaking background; and Indigenous.

The case studies identified three community themes for student encouragement and support in higher education. These included the valuing of education at all levels; a strong sense of connectedness and belonging; and a narrative of success including involvement in higher education.

“These communities not only encouraged and supported young people to continue with their education and, if necessary, to leave for university, they also welcomed their return,” Dr Katersky Barnes said.

“In order to retain graduate skills in these communities, it is critical that higher education meets the local workforce needs of regional industries and that local employers are supportive.”

Co-author Professor Sue Kilpatrick said there were a significant proportion of mature students within the regional and remote cohort—with unique engagement and support requirements—who tended to be poorly represented in policy and university outreach settings.

“The lack of ‘visibility’ of mature age students suggests regional and remote communities, universities and government must find better ways to recognise, support and celebrate the achievements of this group,” Professor Kilpatrick said.

“With this in mind, university-community partnerships must also be designed to engage individuals at different life stages; students taking unconventional university pathways; and those studying online. Effective programs would be people-rich and draw on social capital and assets such as employers, teachers, libraries, study centres and community organisations.”

Proximity to a university campus also promoted access and participation—particularly for younger students—but many communities with high numbers of Indigenous students did not benefit from this. The report recommended improved outreach and engagement strategies for Indigenous students not living near a campus.

The full report, *Regional communities’ influences on equity participation in higher education*, is available on the NCSEHE website:
ncsehe.edu.au/publications/regional-communities-influences-on-equity-participation-higher-education/

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Notes to Editor: The National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education aims to inform public policy design and implementation and institutional practice to improve the higher education participation and success for marginalised and disadvantaged people. The Centre is based at Curtin University in Perth.

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