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How to snare your local bloke

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MALE students form a clear minority on most regional campuses from the Victorian peninsula to Cairns. At the extreme end, men comprise just 8.5 per cent of the student cohort at the Horsham campus of Ballarat University and 15 per cent of the cohort at Central Queensland University's Pomona campus.

So, where are all the missing men? Some relocate to metropolitan campuses to study, but not enough to raise male participation rates. It costs about \$20,000 a year for a student to relocate. This explains research findings that students who move tend to have high numeracy and literacy levels, highly educated parents, and an early intention to attend university. Other men attend TAFE or work, but regional male youth unemployment rates remain high, school retention rates are low and educational disengagement is prevalent.

Increasing the participation rate of regional men requires a shift in focus from the supply of places to demand for them.

Thirty universities have at least one regional campus. This network is likely to grow further with the proposed increase in the Education Investment Fund and an increase in regional loading in the May federal budget. However, regional campuses are a necessary but insufficient condition for attracting regional men into higher education. As they expand, universities will need to work more closely with schools, industry and communities to increase the pool of applicants.

This will require institutional innovation. New selection pathways could be developed to reduce the dominance of Australian Tertiary Admission Rank, which is problematic in its close correlation with socioeconomic status.

Pathways likely to increase regional male enrolments include aptitude testing, TAFE articulation, school rankings and recommendations, and direct entry for mature-age students based on work experience.

But we need improvements in achievement as well as access. Deeper school-university partnerships could address aspiration and attitudes, with research pointing to a significant difference in both of these between male and female students and their parents.

Curriculum Bridges is a project involving La Trobe University, the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, and three partner schools. Educators from the schools and university are combining to develop a theme-based curriculum designed to increase student engagement with learning, and with science and mathematics in particular. Importantly, the Victorian government is supporting schools to work on this curriculum reform by providing teacher-release funding and professional-learning support. This partnership model moves beyond an access scheme to the reform of curriculum and pedagogy across both institutions.

Parents will also need to be closely involved in the project given the clear connection between parental expectations and post-school pathways. Engagement levels must be lifted to attract male students to university and to raise their relatively low progression rates once enrolled.

New course profiles and delivery modes could be considered. Local campuses will grow if they can offer more courses in high demand. Flexible provision and collaboration with TAFE may create economies of scale to enable regional provision of science, engineering, information technology and other courses to which male students are traditionally attracted. Some regional campuses provide specialised, high-profile courses such as architecture, marine science, dentistry and veterinary science. Along with increasing research output, such courses build the reputation and attractiveness of regional campuses.

The campus experience also could be enriched. Research by Richard James, from the University of Melbourne, and others indicates that male school students in the regions are not enthusiastic about the prospect of campus life. Universities may need to increase their focus on providing accommodation, clubs and outdoor activities, and on promoting campus life through their alumni and student ambassadors. New gymnasiums and sporting facilities could support cross-disciplinary course offerings such as outdoor education. Careers education and work options might also increase enthusiasm among prospective male students.

Supply alone does not create demand. Despite the large network of local campuses, too many regional men remain uninterested in and unengaged with higher education, and with education more broadly. Increasing access and achievement will require new pathways, deep partnerships, demand-driven courses and inclusive experiences.