Project to help mature-aged students get to university

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Despite the push to boost higher education participation since 2012, universities still know little about the barriers facing mature-aged people, experts say.

But a new project aims to address that information gap while also developing new pathways to university for mature-aged, low-socioeconomic status students in regional and remote Australia.

The initiative by the University of Newcastle, University of Tasmania and Edith Cowan University is one of 23 projects that shared in $4.2 million under this year’s National Priorities Pool funding round, which was announced last Friday.

The NPP, a component of the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program, funds activities to promote opportunity and facilitate access to university for people from disadvantaged backgrounds including those from low socioeconomic and rural and remote areas.

However, this year’s round also favoured initiatives that focused on science, technology, engineering and maths, with STEM projects accounting for $751,554, or 18 per cent of the total funding.

Bronwyn Relf, an associate lecturer at the University of Newcastle, said her project focused on mature-aged students because there was little research on their experiences accessing higher education.

“Most previous projects on rural and remote areas have focused on school-aged children or students leaving high school and only a few programs have looked at increasing access for mature-aged students, despite the fact that 41 per cent of all university enrolments are mature-aged,” she said. “We also know mature-aged students are less likely to move in order to access higher education.”

While the growing offering of online courses might be attractive to older students, they potentially were less appealing to those in regional or rural areas who were often hindered by unreliable internet, Dr Relf said.

Prospective mature-aged students often had been out of education for several years and might need help developing the academic skills needed to succeed at university.

The project will examine the effectiveness of enabling or bridging programs, while also gathering new insights into the experiences of mature-aged students to help inform participation programs and policy.

Other projects funded under this year’s NPP round include a La Trobe University initiative to boost participation of new migrant groups in low SES and regional communities, and a University of NSW initiative to embed recent university graduates as outreach officers in regional schools.

Macquarie University was funded to deliver a program to develop the information and communications technology competencies of regional and remote low-SES students, while the University of Adelaide will develop resources to improve the engagement of low-SES students at regional universities.