Redirecting the male: strategies to raise male enrolments on regional<sup>1</sup> campuses

Dr Andrew Harvey
La Trobe University
Andrew.harvey@latrobe.edu.au

This paper outlines strategies to address the low participation and progression rates of men on Australian regional university campuses. The merit of focussing on men as an under-represented group in higher education remains contested. Nevertheless, the particular dearth of male university students in regional Australia presents a serious institutional challenge. The paucity of male representation impacts upon universities’ quest to grow their regional enrolment numbers, meet their equity targets, increase their research outputs, and enhance their reputations. Four potential institutional strategies are canvassed to raise male enrolments and improve male progression rates. The need for more tailored promotion of higher education is highlighted, as are potential areas of further research into the motivations and expectations of regional boys and men. Bridging the regional gender divide will require supply-side initiatives as well as policies which raise the low underlying demand for higher education among men.

This paper outlines strategies to address the low participation and progression rates of men on Australian regional university campuses. While some recent attention has been drawn to both low regional participation rates generally (Commonwealth 2010) and male participation rates (James et al 2004; Olsen 2011), the particular issues raised by highly gendered regional campuses have received less attention. The paucity of male representation impacts upon universities’ quest to grow their regional enrolment numbers, meet their equity targets, increase their research outputs, and enhance their institutional reputations. Bridging the regional gender divide will require supply-side initiatives as well as policies which raise the low underlying demand for higher education among men.

Four major institutional strategies are canvassed in this paper. First, targeted school-university partnerships are recommended to address the question of attitude and aspiration, where research suggests a significant difference between the sexes. Given the centrality of aspirations to achievement, partnerships need to involve local communities and, particularly, parents and families. Crucially, the curricula of universities and schools will need to be reformed and better coordinated to increase engagement and enthusiasm, and this requires a new depth of partnership. Lifting engagement and achievement is important not only in attracting male students, but in raising their relatively low progression rates once enrolled at university.

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise stated, ‘regional’ is used throughout this paper to encompass all students identified as regional, rural and remote/ isolated according to ABS and DEEWR definitions. ‘Regional’ campuses include the non-metropolitan campuses of metropolitan-based universities as well as stand-alone regional universities.
Second, the course profile and delivery modes of regional campuses are addressed. Some universities are already introducing or expanding courses to which men might be more attracted, flexible delivery is broadening the range of courses on offer, and these supply-side initiatives could be combined with measures to raise demand, such as programs to increase enthusiasm for science and mathematics within regional schools. Regional campuses will need to build their research profiles and reputations in order to gain preferences of local male students, and a greater focus on career pathways and work integrated learning is likely to attract the school leaver and mature-age male cohorts.

Third, it is argued that universities may facilitate a campus experience with which men can positively identify, in part by increasing sport and activities, targeted accommodation, and peer mentoring options on campus. Universities will likely redesign and rebrand their regional campuses, and promote a different kind of experience to increase their attraction to male students. Finally, institutions could develop alternative pathways by which more men can enter university. This is likely to involve closer collaboration with partner schools, regional TAFEs and industry.

**Context**

There remains ongoing debate over whether some men could or should constitute an equity group in their own right (see Alloway & Gilbert 2004; David 2011; Newman 2008; James et al 2004), despite the relatively high rates of school non-completion and unemployment faced by regional men, along with low university progression rates (Curtis & McMillan 2008; Robinson et al 2010; Olsen 2011). Debate also continues over the extent to which low male participation rates affect regional workforce demand and economic productivity, and might therefore demand a coordinated public policy response (Phillips KPA 2009: 96). While these are important and ongoing policy debates, this paper assumes that universities will seek to grow both their existing equity cohorts and their overall enrolments in line with the national targets, namely 40 per cent of 25-34 year olds to hold a Bachelor’s degree by 2025, and 20 per cent of the university cohort to be from a low socio-economic background by 2020 (see Bradley et al 2008). The current paucity of men on regional campuses is therefore viewed here as an institutional concern, beyond broader political and ethical considerations.

The feminised profile of many regional campuses is not surprising given the weakness of the regional male participation rate. According to ABS census data, regional Australians between 25 and 34 years old are around half as likely to hold a degree as their metropolitan counterparts (Phillips KPA 2009: 36). Within this already underrepresented cohort, men represent less than a third of university students from outer regional and remote areas of Victoria and NSW (ABS selected statistics).

Patterns of participation are reflected in the profiles of regional campuses, most of which are primarily comprised of regional students. Selected statistics from DEEWR (2011) reveal that just 36.6% of domestic undergraduates enrolled on Australian regional campuses in 2009 were male. At La Trobe’s Mildura campus, men comprise just 24 per cent of the domestic undergraduate student cohort. At Charles Sturt University’s Albury-Wodonga campus, the equivalent figure is 27 per cent, and at the Bundaberg campus of Central Queensland University it is 25 per cent. The gender disparity is stark and problematic. Regional campuses enrol the majority of regional students, including
relatively high proportions of low socio-economic and Indigenous students (Phillips KPA 2009). A majority of universities has at least one regional campus and institutional commitment to regional campuses is likely to strengthen in light of the increase to regional loading funds and promised regional commitments under the Education Investment Fund (Lovegrove 2010).

While there remains some debate over the extent to which regional campuses are linked to regional participation rates (Daley & Lancey 2011; Commonwealth 2010; Phillips KPA 2009), their growth remains likely given the extent of regional loading and investment funds, the exigencies of national enrolment targets, and the personal and political costs of student relocation. As Hillman & Rothman (2007: 27) note, relocation is primarily an option for regional students whose parents are relatively well educated, whose school achievement levels are high, and whose intention to attend university is clearly formed. This paper thus assumes a desire, and indeed need, for universities to grow their regional campuses to meet institutional and national targets in growth and equity. Given their overall numbers and level of underrepresentation, the most obvious group to target in a proposed expansion is men.

Possible Approaches

1) University-school partnerships

University-school partnerships provide an important avenue to raise male engagement levels. While increasingly common, these partnerships need to be inclusive, particularly of parents, and of sufficient depth to involve curricular and pedagogical reform in order to raise male participation and progression. Partnerships could be designed to enthuse and challenge all students, and particularly to address the relatively low educational expectations of regional male students and their parents.

The Bradley review highlighted the importance of boosting aspirations:

James et al. (2008) report that in Australia 42 per cent of low socio-economic status Year 10-12 students surveyed in 1999 had a clear intention to attend university compared with 70 per cent of high socio-economic status students. Similar results were found for rural students compared with their urban peers. It is, therefore, necessary for any access initiatives to include encouraging potential students early in their schooling to aspire to attend university and providing information in an accessible form to such students. (Bradley et al 2008: 40)

Negative learning experiences and a lack of motivation are central to low participation in higher education (as well as school non-completion). In a nationwide sample of 7,000 students, James (2002: xi) found that ‘Compared with the females in the sample, the males exhibit less commitment towards school and are less likely to see higher education as being relevant and attainable.’ Boys are more likely than girls to say they find it difficult to study, are unmotivated (as are their friends), do the minimum amount of work possible, and are not encouraged by their teachers to aspire to university (James 2002: 39).

In a study on regional students, Alloway and Gilbert (2004: 105) noted that:

This perception of university study as an extension of ‘school’ clearly dominated
students’ views. A ‘university’ was considered almost synonymous with a ‘school’: regimented, institutionalized, hard work, dull. We had not anticipated the strength of this perception, but it seems to us to be an indicator of the experiences that rural students may have of university life and university credentials.

Effective partnerships will need to address these negative perceptions of school and university. Programs will need to provide a challenging curriculum to increase the enthusiasm of students for learning; establish clear disciplinary links with university through genuine collaboration between school teachers and university educators; provide professional learning for school teachers; develop visible entry pathways to university; and involve and familiarise parents with university through campus activities and support networks.

The latter activity is important because national and international evidence suggests that parents of male students hold lower educational expectations than parents of female students, and that parental expectations are critical to post-school pathways (Abraham 2010). In 2011, a nationwide Australian survey of 8-9 year old children and their parents found substantial differences in attitudes by gender and region. At the extreme ends, 78% of parents in major cities expected their daughter to obtain a university-level qualification, while in outer regional areas only 40% of parents expected their son to obtain a university-level qualification (Baxter et al 2011).

The importance of reaching parents is further underlined by the fact that many regional campuses enrol high proportions of students who are the first in their family to attend university. For example, the Deakin University submission to a recent Victorian Inquiry noted that, ‘Of the students studying at Deakin from rural and regional areas, a staggering 63% are the first in their family to study at university’ (Kilpatrick 2010). Greater familiarisation with university and campus life is helpful for many parents as well as their children.

Primary school partnerships will also become increasingly important in raising the participation rates of men and other underrepresented groups. Evidence suggests that opinions about university and other post-school pathways are formed from an early age (Parliament of Victoria 2009: 70; Dalley-Trim & Alloway 2010). Several models are already operating in this space, and some have even targeted pre-school children (e.g. Victoria University’s Kinda Kinder program). These partnerships are valuable and will ultimately require significant buy-in from governments and communities to achieve transformative attitudinal change. The causes of male disengagement are systemic and cannot be addressed by universities alone.
2) Course profile and delivery

The course profile of regional campuses is a clear reason for the gender divide in enrolments. Addressing the divide will require regional universities to analyse and support latent demand and create efficiencies and economies of scale in order to broaden their course offerings. Campuses will also aim to increase research which influences reputation and therefore undergraduate demand, particularly among the large relocating cohort of regional male students. Finally, successful institutions will work closely with schools and government departments to ensure that enthusiasm for sciences and other disciplines is engendered at school level, and that regional school students are afforded access to a broad range of subject options and post-secondary pathways.

Within the university curricula, the disciplines of education and health sciences (particularly nursing) are prominent on regional campuses, while offerings in science, technology, engineering, mathematics, IT, finance, architecture and other areas to which men are attracted, are likely to be offered in more limited form, or in some cases not at all (Phillips KPA 2009: 51). Some of this pattern is simply the result of market forces, with regional populations requiring increasing numbers of health and education professionals. To this end, institutional incentives could be considered to increase the proportion of men in courses such as nursing and education.

The course profile of regional campuses also reflects the costs of provision, the course profile of regional schools and, possibly in some cases, insufficient attention to demand forces. For example, a high proportion of regional students ‘leave’ their region to study courses such as architecture and building, engineering, and sciences in metropolitan areas (Phillips KPA 2009: 51). The costs of regional provision remain prohibitive though and where courses are offered regionally, their relatively low reputation appears to be a factor in men (and women) preferring metropolitan offerings. While most students prefer a local option if their course is available (Deakin University 2009), regional students with high tertiary admissions ranks are most likely to relocate to study, and students are influenced by very specific course and subject offerings beyond mere campus access (Hillman & Rothman 2007: 3).

James et al (1999: 3) found that, ‘If a student has a clear idea of what he or she wants, and feels that he or she will not necessarily gain that outcome at the nearby “regional” institution, then they are very likely to go elsewhere’. Reputation is important beyond mere provision. Moves to increase quality might involve greater collaboration between metropolitan and regional academic staff, and greater attention to the qualifications and research profile of staff. Indeed, reputation is also closely linked to research so the need for doctorate-level academic staff and a regionally based cohort of research students is arguably important to securing undergraduate numbers.

Beyond the type and status of course, the mode of delivery may influence male enrolment numbers and engagement levels. Flexible course delivery, including block mode and online, is likely to attract men returning to study and/or seeking a career change. Innovative delivery could also improve pedagogical outcomes for men, a group for whom higher education is often perceived as a continuation of school, namely regimented and dull (Alloway & Gilbert 2004). Analysis of differences in participation and engagement levels according to course delivery mode could help to inform institutional practice.
Universities could address broader demand factors. In the case of science and mathematics, there are clear problems in regional provision at school level which inhibit the ability of universities to address participation by their physical presence alone. Lyons et al (2006, ch. 2, p.24) note that there is a significant geographical disparity in student achievement in science and mathematics. One reason for this disparity is the paucity of discipline-qualified regional teachers. In 2002, the Australian Secondary Principals’ Association found that 67% of Australian schools in their study sample had experienced difficulty in finding sufficiently trained mathematics teachers (cited in Lyons et al 2006: ch.2, p.13). A vicious circle is created whereby most new teachers, who are women, are unlikely to specialise in the science, mathematics and ICT areas (Lyons et al 2006: ch. 2, p.14). In the short term, these trends suggest a need to continue the focus on attracting female teaching students (and others) into the STEM areas, as well as a need to increase the number of male teachers, particularly on regional campuses. More broadly, student choices at university level may reflect the consequences of gender stereotypes held from an early age (Dalley-Trim & Alloway 2010: 110).

Beyond addressing reputation and improving the school provision of subjects in the sciences and mathematics areas (as well as accounting, foreign languages and other subjects offered less in regional than metropolitan areas), further research could be conducted into the type of course offerings likely to attract men. Nationwide, a survey of 7,000 students conducted by James (2002) revealed that only 57 per cent of lower socio-economic (SES) males reported an interest in the subjects they could study at university, compared with 65 per cent of lower SES females and 83 per cent of higher SES females. This figure implies a need not only to expand existing offerings, but to consider the development of new courses more attractive to prospective male students.

Finally, initiatives around work could include collaboration with schools and better integrated university courses. Rothman & Hillman (2008) highlight the importance of careers advice and subject selection at school. The authors note that career advice programs are particularly valued by young people who are more vulnerable when making the transition from school (Rothman & Hillman 2008: vi). Again, a focus on careers will be most helpful if linked to curriculum reform and alignment. Within universities, stronger industry partnerships, placements, and work integrated learning could be valuable in light of regional male perceptions about the importance of work and earning an income (Alloway & Gilbert 2004; James 2002: 44). Lee Dow et al (2009: 56-7) argue the need for a rural skills cadetship program, following the earlier call for a national internship scheme by Universities Australia. Irrespective of policy responses, institutions which focus on career paths and work opportunities both within and beyond schools are likely to attract more male students.
3) Campus experience/ branding and marketing

Relatively little attention has been paid to the effect of the campus experience and profile on enrolments by gender. Research indicates, however, that regional men are not enthusiastic about the prospects of spending time on campus, and are also bypassing regional campuses for more prestigious metropolitan campuses, even where their preferred course is offered locally.

The nationwide survey conducted by James (2002: 41) revealed that, while male and female school students have similar views on the instrumental value of university, ‘Females are more strongly interested in campus life, showing considerably higher levels of agreement with “life at university sounds exciting” and “going to university offers the chance to meet interesting people”— differences of the order of eight to nine percentage points in all cases.’ Similarly, Alloway and Gilbert found that regional male students indicated a strong preference for hands-on, practical, and physical activities, which were not perceived to be available on a university campus (2004: 106).

Strategies to address male perceptions could include greater education and promotion of campus life, for example by using male alumni more within schools and communities to explain their positive university experiences, and by creating more male ambassadors for the university. More substantive changes could be made by expanding clubs and societies, and particularly by focussing on sport, outdoor education and campus activities.

There is both a regional and a gender angle to sport and outdoor activities. A large national study of Australian children (8-9 year olds) across urban, regional and rural areas conducted for the Australian Institute of Family Studies found that, ‘In all areas, boys are more likely to prefer active pastimes than girls. A higher proportion of children in more geographically remote areas prefer active pastimes than children in less geographically remote areas’ (Baxter, Hayes & Gray 2011). Boys are more likely to spend time outdoors than girls and, at a young age, regional boys are much more likely to be involved in team sports than regional girls. In outer regional areas, 69% of boys were involved in team sports compared with 39% of girls (Baxter, Hayes & Gray 2011). These predilections are confirmed by Alloway’s qualitative study of regional students in Queensland, and underline the importance of physical activity to male motivations and lifestyles in the regions. Funding for amenities and services will also remain important to the sustainability of campus clubs and activities.

4) Alternative pathways

Alternative recruitment pathways could be central to attracting more male students to regional campuses. While the dominant university selection process through the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) has reflected the higher academic achievement of girls in schools, alternative university pathways have the potential to recruit more male students and, more importantly, to reshape school curricula in ways which might increase the enthusiasm and engagement of boys.

Many universities already have alternative entry pathways based on school-level recommendations for identified cohorts of students. For example, the Schools Access La
Trobe (SALT) scheme, RMIT’s Schools Network Access Program (SNAP) and Deakin University’s Regional Educational Access Program (REAP), all devolve some of the selection responsibility by requesting school-level recommendations of students perceived as likely to succeed at university.

By broadening selection criteria beyond ATAR, these pathways create potential to reward other skills and capabilities which may assist regional men and other underrepresented groups. Some approaches may even adopt principles of affirmative action, as have been adopted overseas (Abraham and Hammer 2010). Importantly though, by unshackling school curricula from the (university-driven) ATAR process, alternative pathways can facilitate structural reform of curricula and assessment within schools. While portfolios, interviews, diplomas, regional bonuses, direct entry, bridging and enabling programs could all increase the participation of underrepresented groups, structural reform is required to raise engagement and enthusiasm for learning.

The recent Australian assessment of aptitude testing highlights the potential of alternative pathways to attract more male students, but also their limitations. In an initial assessment of uniTEST, a Commonwealth trial of aptitude testing, Coates, Edwards & Freeman (2010: 33) found that ‘a greater proportion of males gained entry to university using uniTEST scores than females’, despite female students representing a larger proportion of the total university entrant group. As the authors note,

This finding might be read as suggesting that uniTEST favours males. It could also be a result of the overall lower year 12 performance of males when compared with females (Edwards, Birrell, & Smith, 2005) and hence a product of the fact that a larger number of males are in the position where uniTEST becomes a factor needed in order to gain access to university. (Coates, Edwards & Freeman 2010: 33)

Alternative pathways may help to broaden access, but they will ultimately need to be connected to systemic curricular and pedagogical reform to address male disengagement and underachievement.

Clearly, another important alternative pathway for men is TAFE articulation. Within schools, regional boys appear to value TAFE pathways highly (James 2002: 43), and regional men are more highly represented within TAFE than higher education. Improvement in the rates of articulation from TAFE to university would likely lead to increased male representation in higher education. As with school partnerships, improving the level of articulation involves genuine collaboration between TAFEs and universities in the design of curricula and the considered creation of pathways, rather than simply attempting to establish formal connections between pre-existing courses which are often not complementary. Joint delivery of courses, such as those developed by Charles Sturt University with Riverina TAFE in the areas of business, IT and fine arts, offers potential to increase participation of men on regional higher education campuses. TAFE enrolments can also provide evidence of the interests of regional male students in areas such as sport, upon which universities could potentially capitalise.

5) Other options
There are of course many other strategies which could be employed to attract more men to regional campuses. In the short term, greater education about the benefits of higher education may be helpful. One of the reasons for low male participation rates on regional campuses is the perception that higher education is not worth pursuing. In a major national study, Richard James notes that ‘a picture emerges of males who are less impressed [than females] with both the short-and long-term benefits of what attending university might offer’ (James 2002: 44). This picture formed by regional male students may be reinforced by parental perceptions where there is no history of direct exposure to the benefits of higher education. As section three outlined, parents are more likely to expect their daughters to be in higher education than their sons.

In the same survey, James (2002: 44) notes that 40 per cent of lower SES males wanted to start earning a proper income as soon as they leave school, compared with 32 per cent of lower SES females. The desire (and in some cases need) for instant rather than delayed financial gratification is underlined by the study of Alloway and Gilbert (2004: 105) and confirmed by deferral data. As the Polesel study into regional deferrers in Victoria found, in 2007 the Victorian regional deferral rate was 15.7% compared to 6.4% for students from metropolitan Melbourne, and 82% of non-metropolitan deferrers were in the lowest two SES bands (Polesel et al 2011: 8). Financial stress is frequently cited as a reason for deferral, and significant numbers of deferring regional students do not return to university (Polesel et al 2011: 3).

Given the number of students whose families have never attended university, who do not believe in the value of higher education, and who defer university for financial reasons (often not returning), a broad education campaign may be influential among the male cohort in particular. The financial benefits of higher education are well known to those within the sector, but arguably less known to many rural and low SES communities. Similarly, the health benefits, the propensity of graduates to volunteer and be politically engaged, and the other documented non-financial benefits of higher education to the individual are not widely advertised (Wilberforce 1999). Many regional boys (and men) view higher education as a waste of time or at best a pathway unlikely to increase their material and non-material wealth (Alloway & Gilbert 2004: 106). Given these attitudes, regional campuses could focus on presenting greater evidence of the benefits of higher education in their community engagement activities. The provision of adequate accommodation and financial support is obviously also important to improving the campus experience.

In the longer term, there is clearly a need for further research into the low participation of regional men in higher education. Evidence suggests that the problem of male disengagement with education is both deep and complex, in many cases stemming from early conceptions about gender and education. One of the more fundamental differences in educational participation between the sexes in regional Australia relates to perceptions of masculinity and femininity. In a specific study of regional boys, Alloway and Gilbert found that, ‘The dominant story across all the open-ended survey responses we collected from this study was that a university pathway after school was a nonmasculine pathway. Real men did not study’ (2004: 104).

The authors also noted that, ‘For anyone interested in interrogating enrolment trends in higher education, the importance of working through social and economic implications
of gender constructions for young people’s lives was underscored’ (2004: 110). While this paper has suggested some potential avenues to increase male participation, long-term improvement will require structural and attitudinal change. Universities can contribute to the research agenda by analysing the causes of disengagement and investigating deeply held gender stereotypes. An understandable reluctance to consider men as an equity group has perhaps led to an underestimation of the extent of regional male disengagement. Nevertheless, this paper has argued that the regional gender divide is a genuine and growing equity concern. Moreover given its centrality to national growth and equity goals and to economic productivity, the underrepresentation of regional men is a subject worthy of greater research.

Conclusion

The low participation rate of men on regional campuses is an impediment to institutional and national growth and equity targets, workforce productivity and research capacity. It affects the viability and reputation of regional campuses, the sustainability of regional workforces, and the social cohesion of regional communities. For all of these reasons, this paper has argued the need for a renewed focus on the plight of male students on regional campuses. Potential reforms outlined to improve male participation in regional higher education include: university-school partnerships involving curriculum and assessment redevelopment; targeted research to understand male attitudes and aspirations; course redevelopment and improvements to the regional campus experience; a focus on careers and industry learning opportunities; the creation of alternative university pathways; and the greater promotion of the financial and non-financial benefits of higher education to individuals. Lasting change will require systemic reform across schools, universities, industry and communities. Importantly, both demand and supply factors will need to be tackled. Supply-side initiatives will simultaneously need to address the causes of low demand for higher education among regional men.

References


