A new study urges more focus on vocational education and training in the bush because it would create more alignment between education and job prospects for students outside of the big cities.

The report, from the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, says VET providers in country areas need to create closer ties to universities in the form of articulated courses and clearer transition pathways.

Students are then likely to have education outcomes more in line with the nature of jobs available in their region, according to the centre’s paper on improving higher education outcomes for regional and remote students.

“A critical consideration is the relationship between qualifications and jobs. There is a misalignment between what universities have to offer and what regional jobs are available,” the paper says.
“While many businesses and industries in regional Australia require university education, many regional jobs are focused on practical and hands-on skills, which a well-funded forward-looking VET course may be better placed to provide.”

The “competitive tension” between university and VET would be lessened if nested courses of study, offered sequentially by different institutions and recognised by all, allowed for easier transition between the sectors, the centre says.

Other experts have previously advocated for nested courses — where students can receive a formal qualification for part completion of their bachelor’s degree — given the growth in enrolments, particularly among equity students who are at greater risk of attrition.

In an analysis last year, Andrew Harvey and Giovanna Szalkowicz of La Trobe University said this would turn “college dropouts” into “partial completers” who were more attractive to employers, and would make re-enrolment easier for those seeking to complete their course.

The NCSEHE says an integrated system of post-secondary education options for young people, as well as those seeking retraining to meet local job needs, is needed.

“Currently there’s somewhat of a disconnect between the role of education in preparing people for work and the nature and number of jobs that are available, particularly in regional and remote Australia,” centre director Sue Trinidad told the HES.

“This disconnect will be exacerbated by the impact of technology, globalisation and longer working lives.”

While most of the recent higher education debate had been around funding, a “reconceptualising” of education across all levels is needed so the system meets modern industry and societal needs, Professor Trinidad said.

The paper comes as a government-commissioned review by Flinders University professor John Halsey examines ways to boost the educational attainment of regional students.

Submissions to the review have called on government to increase commonwealth financial support for bush students and to introduce incentives to encourage enrolments at regional universities.

The Grattan Institute says an analysis of attrition rates suggests that to maximise their chances of success, country students should be encouraged to attend university soon after school and to study full time on campus.

Experts say that while university enrolments have ballooned in recent years, city students have dominated this growth.

The number of metropolitan students grew by 60 per cent from 2005 to 2015, compared with 40 per cent for inner regional students and 17 per cent for outer regional.

There was no growth in the number of remote students.

Professor Halsey is due to report to government by the end of the year.