

Originally published in The Conversation: <https://theconversation.com/four-barriers-to-higher-education-regional-students-face-and-how-to-overcome-them-49138>

# Four barriers to higher education regional students face – and how to overcome them

October 28, 2015 6.18am AEDT

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Regional students won't necessarily be able to access the course they want to study.  
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## Disclosure statement

Matt Brett works for La Trobe University which has campuses based in regional Victoria. Matt is also involved in Department of Education and Training Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Programme (HEPPP) National Priorities Pool Projects that included consideration of regional higher education issues, including: Critical Interventions Framework II; The Adaptation of Tertiary Admissions Equity Practices to Growth and Diversity; and, Enabling courses for SES student groups.

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## Partners

[The University of New England](#) and [La Trobe University](#) provide funding as members of The Conversation AU.

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Regional students face major challenges studying in higher education. While over the past five years overall [numbers have increased](#), regional students remain underrepresented in Australian universities.

So why is it so tough for regional students? What are the main obstacles and how can we tackle these issues?

Here's what the research tells us:

## Smaller campuses and less choice

Regional universities have been established to bring higher education to regional Australia, recognising the importance of local delivery.

While regional universities maintain high levels of student [satisfaction and strong employment outcomes](#), regional campuses servicing smaller population catchments cannot offer the breadth of courses that are available in major cities.

Getting those regional school leavers with high grades to stay in regional areas is also a challenge. These students tend to [move to the city](#) to pursue courses with entry cut-offs that match their ATAR grade. Greater competition for courses in major cities generally results in higher thresholds for entry.

## Cost of living

Even when a campus is nearby, many students will need to relocate, commute long distances, or undertake distance education to access their course of choice.

Distance education has always played a role in regional higher education, but recent work highlights that students who study online are [less likely to complete their degrees](#).

For those who relocate, [cost-of-living expenses are a major barrier](#) and are shouldered by communities where wages are on average lower and capacity to pay is constrained.

As a guide to what these living costs are, the Australian government requires [international students to demonstrate funds of around \\$18,600 per year](#) to meet costs of living.

For Australian students over the age of 18 who live away from home, the full rate of Youth Allowance paid [is around \\$426 per fortnight](#), equating to \$11,000 per year. This amount begins to taper when annual parental income exceeds around \$51,000.

Clearly there is a significant gap between what is considered a minimum cost of living for international students and the full rate of student income support.

For regional students transitioning to residential colleges or the accommodation rental market, living on \$11,000 is a serious challenge. The challenges are markedly different to city counterparts who can continue to live at home.

Adjustments to student income support policy to provide more viable financial support would assist many students, as would improved access to affordable accommodation.

## Higher transport costs

Many regional students will commute to undertake study and face considerably higher transport costs.

In recognising this, a recent National Centre for Vocational Education [report](#) recommends replacing public transport subsidies with fuel subsidies for regional students where there are no public transport options. This would provide more equitable support for transport.

## Poor investment in regional schools

[Australian Bureau of Statistics data](#) shows that fewer students complete year 12 in regional communities when compared with students nationally.

As with most forms of educational disadvantage, the major long-term solution to regional university participation lies with improving earlier levels of education – this is the key to helping more students [be in a position to apply to university](#).

As the 2011 [Gonksi report](#) revealed, we do not invest nearly enough funds in regional schools to drive higher levels of school achievement.

The preliminary findings of our research into the [adaptation of tertiary admissions practices](#) highlight that regional school students are often unsure of how to navigate the complex admissions process.

## What are the solutions?

Early childhood and school-based interventions may improve school achievement and higher education participation. Universities can work closely with these lower levels of education to raise student awareness, aspiration and achievement.

[Opening up sub-bachelor places](#) (such as associate degrees) for regional students could provide more flexible and supportive pathways into higher education.

Where local study, commuting or relocation are not possible, blended and online learning must also be part of the solution. However, we need to improve support for students who undertake blended and online education if we are to improve retention and completion rates.

The Coalition [consulted extensively on online education when in opposition](#). More online provision would expand the breadth of course offerings and assist some regional students who cannot afford to travel.

Increasing the supply of education will only work, however, if the demand is there.