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## University enrolments: out of town means out of luck

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We now need to unlock human capacity rather than physical campuses. Illustration: Tom Jellett

After World War II, Winston Churchill lamented that the whole map of Europe had changed with the exception of Northern Ireland which remained in conflict.

In Australia, the higher education map has changed yet the regions remain marginal. Since 2008, university enrolments have risen 30 per cent but regional participation rates are unmoved.

Almost 30 per cent of Australians live in regional areas yet they comprise fewer than 20 per cent of university enrolments.

Simply increasing the supply of education across time has not worked. Many new campuses have arisen, with universities found on every doorstep and dam across the country. Online provision also has grown. We may not have fibre to the node but there is copper to every campus and campsite across the country.

Despite these advances, the pool of prospective applicants remains small. Growing the regional pool requires building awareness, achievement and aspiration.

Demystifying university may be the first challenge, and there is much to demystify. Application alone involves tertiary admissions centres, equity bonus points and early-offer schemes.

Most universities provide early-offer schemes for school students in the name of equity, often bypassing the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank process. Yet the plethora of schemes is confusing. Regional students are often unaware of early-offer schemes, unsure how to apply for them and unclear about how they are assessed. School careers advisers are overworked and parents confused.

Early-offer schemes could at least be centralised at state rather than university level, as is the practice in NSW.

Education about equity also is required. Every Year 12 student can apply for university bonus points to compensate for educational disadvantage. Not every student knows this, and regional students are the least likely to know. Those who most need compensation are often least likely to apply for it. Also, every institution calculates bonus points in their own mysterious way, so compensation varies dramatically.

This year South Australian universities agreed to provide consistent bonus points regardless of institution. Other states could follow this lead, along with greater promotion of bonus-point systems to regional students.

Mature-age students who apply directly to regional universities should be eligible for similar compensation. Older students often are deterred by the need to sit alternative aptitude tests, which can be stressful and opaque.

All students would benefit from greater transparency and equity in university admissions. Barriers to application become barriers to aspiration.

Aspirations themselves are also mediated by achievement, and low school achievement is endemic. Regional students are less likely to begin Year 12, less likely to finish Year 12 and less likely to receive an ATAR. Schools alone cannot address these issues.

Sadly, the federal government recently announced a cut of \$152 million to university equity funding. The Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program supports university outreach and has enabled thousands of secondary school students to get a taste of campus life.

At its best, outreach enables school teachers and academics to reform curriculum and challenge students together. This work is fundamental to raising student interest and achievement.

Whatever the size of the HEPPP pie, the regions need much of it. Recent evaluation of outreach funding in Britain found a London-centric bias, and local universities are usually operating in cities where there are large and proximate secondary schools.

Regional school students are often the most in need but least likely to receive a visit from a university. More targeted funding could help universities raise regional aspirations through their outreach. The government also has announced a round of equity research grants to support regional participation and achievement. This shift is important.

Universities receive a loading fund of about \$64m to support regional campuses. The funding is useful but it is focused on supply rather than demand.

New research can explore more effective models to raise regional educational achievement.

Regional participation has not moved since 2008 but our understanding should have. We have tried supply-driven policies in a demand-driven system. We now need to unlock human capacity rather than physical campuses.

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