

INQUIRY INTO THE FACTORS DRIVING EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

MAY 2026





ABOUT THE REGIONAL UNIVERSITIES NETWORK

The Regional Universities Network (RUN) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education's inquiry into the factors driving educational attainment.

RUN is a national collaborative group of six regional Australian universities:

- Charles Sturt University.
- CQUniversity Australia.
- Federation University Australia.
- Southern Cross University.
- University of New England.
- University of Southern Queensland.

This submission reflects the positions of RUN institutions, and in doing so, also aims to represent the views of the communities which RUN universities serve; the one-third of Australians who live outside of metropolitan centres in regional, rural, and remote locations. RUN believes that all Australians, regardless of background or geography, should have access to an equitable standard of university opportunities, tertiary facilities, and research services.

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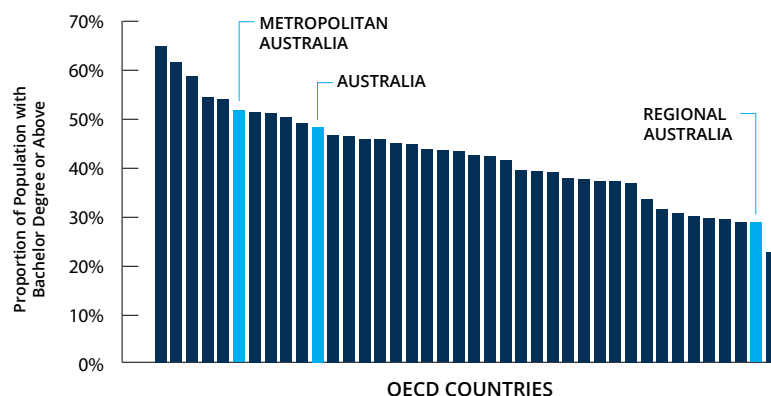
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OVERVIEW

RUN welcomes the inquiry's focus upon factors driving differential engagement, participation, and outcomes for Australians at all levels and transitions from school to tertiary education to the workforce. RUN commends the inquiry's explicit focus on differences in education/employment outcomes based on gender, cultural and linguistic diversity, and socio-economic status. However, RUN also notes the absence of geography from the inquiry's Terms of Reference, despite it being one of the most consequential drivers of differential outcomes in educational aspiration, participation, and attainment amongst Australians. RUN believes the lack of attention to matters of regionality upon educational outcomes within the inquiry's Terms of Reference is a major shortcoming.

In terms of higher education, the Australian Universities Accord Final Report (the Accord) found that participation is geographically uneven, with location being a widely recognised and significant barrier to higher education¹. Among Australians aged 25 to 34, the rate of attainment of a university degree is lower among those from regional, rural and remote areas (23.8 per cent) than major cities (44.6 per cent)². The 2018 Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education (Halsey Review) found that the proportion of young Australians with bachelor or higher degrees declines as geographical remoteness increases³. Indeed, if regional Australia was viewed as its own country, it would rank 39th amongst 40 OECD countries for bachelor degree attainment by age 35, while metropolitan Australia would rank 6th.

Figure 1. Bachelor Attainment or Above – 25-34 Year Olds^{4,5}



The effects of regionality upon education outcomes is not limited to higher education alone, as factors of geography in educational outcomes are also present within primary and secondary education, and Vocational Education and Training (VET).

This submission seeks to demonstrate why the issue of geography/regionality must be a clear focus of this inquiry's examination of the factors driving educational attainment in Australia. This submission supports this argument by providing an evidence base of matters relating to:

- The compounding impacts of regionality.
- Regionality being a major factor impacting educational attainment.
- Geography and school education outcomes.
- Structural Barriers to Educational Attainment in Regional Areas.
- Social Factors Influencing Tertiary Participation in Regional Australia.

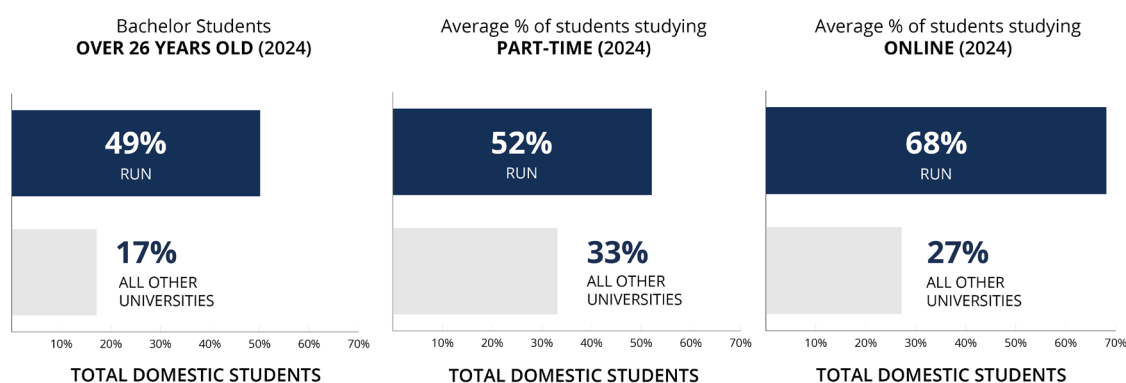
RUN RECOMMENDS

The inquiry extend the scope of its focus to include issues of regionality/geography to ensure a more meaningful consideration of the barriers to education affecting the one-third of Australians who live outside of metropolitan Australia.

THE COMPOUNDING IMPACTS OF REGIONALITY

The student cohorts hosted by RUN universities are distinct. When compared to metropolitan student cohorts, regional cohorts are far more likely to enter university as a mature age student, be studying part-time and/or online, and be already engaged in the workforce as a part- or full-time wage earner. This means students at regional universities are more likely to have dependants and care duties, a mortgage, and employment responsibilities. They are far more likely to be representative of equity group profiles, and more likely to cross multiple equity categories. As a result of these complex cohort pressures and characteristics, regional students are less likely to engage with higher education. If they do engage, these students require more support and are also less likely to successfully complete their studies.

Figure 2. Regional University Network Enrolment Statistics⁶



Higher educational attainment diminishes as distance from major cities increases; while 51.4 per cent of young adults, aged 25-34, in metropolitan areas hold at least a bachelor's degree, this drops to 28.6 per cent in regional and remote Australia⁷. Longitudinal analysis from the Australian Government shows that metropolitan bachelor students from the 2012 higher education cohort achieved a completion rate of 72.9 per cent by 2020, higher than their regional and remote counterparts which were 67.7 per cent and 61.5 per cent respectively. Perhaps most telling is the "secondary withdrawal" phenomenon, with nearly 18 per cent of regional and 19 per cent of remote students who attempt to re-engage with their studies ultimately drop out again⁸. These figures underscore that for non-metropolitan students, the obstacles to finishing a degree remain stubbornly persistent even after the initial hurdle of enrolment is cleared.

A dimension that is often overlooked when considering the drivers of educational disadvantage is the compounding challenges that students can face when they belong to multiple equity cohorts. Students at RUN universities, for instance, are 2.5 times more likely to be both First Nations and low SES, and nearly twice as likely to be Indigenous and living with disability, or living with disability and low SES, than the national average⁹. The students that sit at the intersection of multiple categories of underrepresentation face cumulative challenges to their participation, engagement, and completion^{10,11}.

RUN universities host the highest concentrations of equity students within Australia's university system. While RUN represented 12 per cent of all domestic undergraduate students in Australia in 2024, the network hosted:

- One in five of all low SES students.
- One in five of all Indigenous students.
- One in four of all regional/remote students¹².

REGIONALITY IMPACTS EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

RUN acknowledges that geography frequently determines how severely other disadvantages will compound. A student who is male, from a low socio-economic background, and linguistically diverse faces one configuration of barriers in regional, rural, or remote Australia that the same student in inner Sydney does not face. These barriers are evident in school retention, VET pathway access, transport, digital connectivity, and the visibility of tertiary education as a realistic aspiration. Regional location should therefore be viewed as shaping the entire ecology of educational opportunity.

RUN notes the inquiry's Terms of Reference focus on measurable outcomes such as attendance rates, NAPLAN scores, retention rates, and completion data. This focus risks underweighting the formative processes through which educational aspiration itself is built during the school years. Post-compulsory participation in university or TAFE does not emerge fully formed at the end of Year 12. Educational aspiration is the downstream expression of an identity and a set of expectations that have been cultivated, or quietly extinguished, across the entirety of a student's school experience. The compounding effect of this is crucial because it only becomes apparent after school is finished in the form of non-participation or deferred enrolment, or the simple absence of any application to tertiary study. RUN encourages the inquiry to reckon with this lag effect if it is to avoid designing policy solutions that address the symptom rather than the cause. To that end, this inquiry would benefit from including an investigation of regional participation rates.

This connects directly to the importance of outreach and aspiration building. The factors that shape a young person's sense of whether university or TAFE is for 'someone like them' are deeply cultural, but they are not confined to ethnicity or language background. These factors include:

- Community narratives about the value and relevance of higher education.
- Peer and family expectations.
- The extent to which local industry and employment structures make degree-level study appear purposeful.
- The degree to which schools themselves (through curriculum, careers advice, visible role models, and institutional culture) either affirm or quietly undermine the idea of tertiary participation as a normal and achievable horizon.



GEOGRAPHY AND SCHOOL EDUCATION OUTCOMES

As noted previously in this submission, geography is a key determinant of educational outcomes globally, including in Australia, with disparities evident from early schooling and widening over time.

Global Trend in Geographic Disparities of Student Performance

International evidence from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) shows a clear relationship between student performance and school location. Schools are classified by population size, from “village” (least populated) to “large city” (most populated). Across OECD countries, student performance in mathematics, reading, and science increases consistently with population size. Students in the least-populated areas perform below the OECD average, while those in large cities perform above it. These differences are educationally significant, with gaps equivalent to approximately one year of schooling between students in the least- and most-populated locations¹³.

Evidence from Regional Australia

Australian evidence reflects a similar pattern. A South Australian public school case study under the Science, Information and Communication Technology and Mathematics Education for Rural and Regional Australia (SiMERR-SA) project followed a cohort of Year 3 to Year 7 students over four years and found that metropolitan students performed at a higher level in both numeracy and literacy, equivalent to almost one semester of school learning. While very remote students showed the weakest literacy results, there were no performance differences between other non-metropolitan groups. These findings suggest that regional disadvantage extends beyond remote Australia, with students across many regional communities performing below their metropolitan peers¹⁴.

National data further reinforces geographic disparities in early literacy outcomes. 2025 NAPLAN results for Year 3 reading, for instance, show a clear gradient in performance by location, with average scores declining as remoteness increases¹⁵. Students in major cities achieve the highest average score (410.9), followed by those in inner regional areas (388.4) and outer regional areas (371.5). Performance declines further in remote areas (349.0) and is lowest in very remote areas (279.8)¹⁶.

This represents a gap of over 130 score points—equivalent to more than three years of learning differences between students in major cities and those in very remote areas, indicating a substantial difference in learning outcomes at an early stage of schooling. In addition to lower average scores, students in more remote areas are significantly more likely to require additional support. NAPLAN data also shows that in very remote areas, 56.5 per cent of students are classified as needing additional support, compared with 8.5 per cent in major cities. The proportion is also elevated in inner regional areas (13.5 per cent) and rises further in outer regional areas (18.2 per cent), indicating that learning support needs increase progressively with remoteness. Conversely, the share of high-performing students declines outside metropolitan areas. In major cities, approximately 69 per cent of students are in the “strong” or “exceeding” categories, compared with 60 per cent in inner regional areas, 53 per cent in outer regional areas, and only 22 per cent in very remote areas. This demonstrates that educational disadvantage is evident not only in remote Australia, but across the broader regional continuum¹⁷.

These findings demonstrate that disparities in core school-based skills are strongly linked to geography. As these skills underpin progression through the education system, early gaps reduce the likelihood of school completion, or progression into post-schooling education and training.

STRUCTURAL BARRIERS TO EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT IN REGIONAL AREAS

Lower educational attainment in regional Australia reflects structural barriers associated with geography. These barriers affect access to higher education, the quality of schooling, and the resources available to students.

Attracting and Retaining Qualified Teachers

Regional and remote primary and/or secondary schools also face ongoing difficulties in attracting and retaining qualified teachers and school leaders. The Review of Regional Schooling Resource Standards Loadings in 2023 found that the smaller size of these communities and their geographic isolation increased the complexity of staffing, making it harder to maintain a stable and experienced workforce¹⁸. Teacher shortages are more acute in non-metropolitan school contexts, particularly those serving socio-economically disadvantaged populations.

The Review found that access to teacher professional development within non-metropolitan settings is also more constrained, as teachers face higher travel costs, limited availability of physical training opportunities, and challenges in securing replacement staff while attending training¹⁹. Findings from the Review also show that these factors can affect regional teaching delivery, workforce stability, and limit opportunities for ongoing skills development, which in turn affects student learning outcomes and reinforces existing performance gaps between regional and metropolitan students²⁰.

Higher Cost Coupled with Resource Constraints

Schools in regional and remote areas operate under higher cost pressures and face greater challenges in accessing essential resources. Geographic distance and smaller scale increase the cost of delivering education and limit the efficiency of resource allocation.

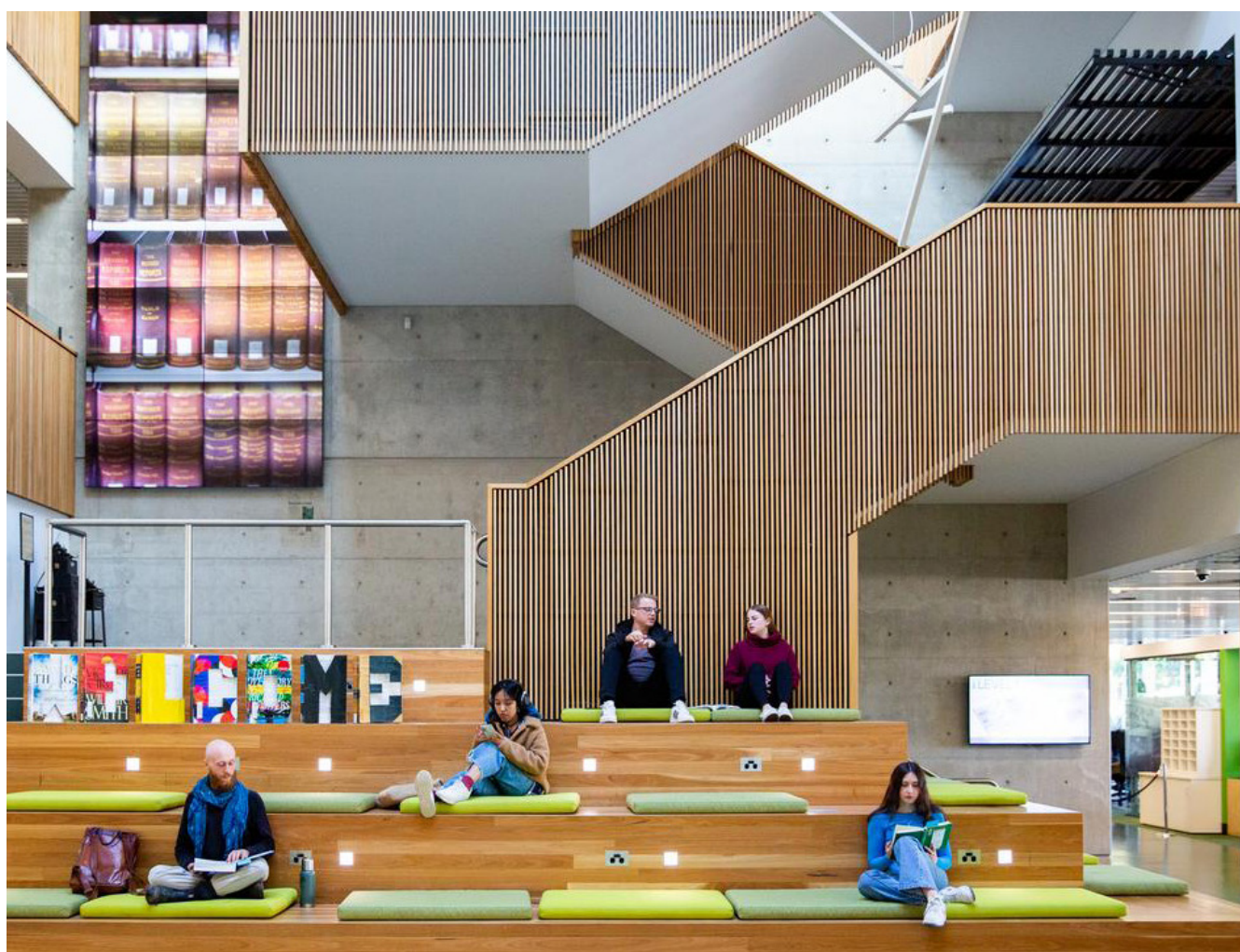
Regional schools often encounter difficulties in sourcing classroom materials, particularly in subjects such as science, technology, and the arts at competitive prices²¹. Furthermore, regional schools incur higher transport and logistical costs to access cultural institutions and extracurricular activities. These constraints restrict the range of subjects and learning experiences that can be offered at schools in non-metropolitan contexts, reducing the overall quality of education and limiting a student's exposure to potential education pathways.

In terms of regional university services, the Australian Universities Accord Final Report highlights that regional universities face up to 20 per cent higher operational costs due to smaller subject size while facing a stark financial disadvantage, receiving only 7 per cent of Australia's competitive research funding compared to the 93 per cent received by metropolitan institutions²². These "diseconomies of scale" are compounded by the high cost of maintaining geographically dispersed campuses and supporting a student body where the majority rely on online or multi-modal delivery. Operating in thinner markets with higher proportions of low-SES and First Nations students, regional universities must absorb greater regulatory and infrastructure costs while lacking the diverse revenue streams and philanthropic support found in cities, often forcing them to establish metropolitan campuses just to remain financially sustainable²³.

SOCIAL FACTORS INFLUENCING TERTIARY PARTICIPATION IN REGIONAL AUSTRALIA

While aspirations such as securing future employment and achieving personal goals are equally high for both regional youth and their city counterparts²⁴, local contexts including school and community expectations also strongly influence educational decisions, particularly for younger students.

Results from a survey of 3,189 Australian undergraduate students from regional, rural, and remote communities show that enrolment decisions are strongly shaped by local social influences, varying by age²⁵. Interconnected barriers such as social, cultural, financial, and geographic constraints affect access to and perception of higher education. Regional, rural, and remote students are more likely to pursue VET studies, which contributes to their underrepresentation in higher education. As outlined above, local access and exposures to higher education also play a critical role in aspiration building. The presence of local university campuses and active outreach from universities can significantly improve participation by reducing physical, social and information barriers. These connections help build familiarity with higher education pathways, strengthen aspirations, and provide more accessible entry points²⁶. The survey highlights that a coordinated, multi-stakeholder approach is required to increase higher education participation across all age groups²⁷. This should involve partnership between regional, rural, and remote communities, schools, employers, industries, and universities to raise awareness of university pathways and provide tailored support²⁸.



CONCLUSION

RUN welcomes the intent of this inquiry, insofar as it seeks to better understand the factors driving differential engagement, participation, and outcomes for Australians at all levels and transitions from school to tertiary education and into the workforce. However, the apparent lack of attention to matters of regionality/geography upon educational outcomes within the inquiry's Terms of Reference is a major shortcoming of this consultation exercise. RUN believes that any serious examination of the factors influencing educational attainment in Australia must include an explicit focus upon the role played by geography/regionality.

I RUN RECOMMENDS

The inquiry to extend the scope of its focus to include issues of regionality / geography so as to ensure a more meaningful consideration of the barriers to education affecting the one-third of Australians who live outside of metropolitan Australia.



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