Higher education & community benefits: the role of regional provision

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Introduction

This is the fifth research briefing in the Joining the Dots series for 2011. This briefing explores the role of higher education provision in regional areas and its impact on students and local communities.

It is timely given the release in May 2011 of a report from the Grattan Institute (Daley and Lancy, 2011) that suggested universities in regional areas of Australia neither encourage innovation nor enhance tertiary participation rates among regional populations, nor lead to the retention of skilled workers in regional areas. By analysing data from national collections derived from research with students, this briefing examines each of these conclusions in turn.

The Grattan Institute report suggested that, rather than providing additional financial support for regional universities, governments should support regional students to study at urban institutions or in large regional centres only. These conclusions were reached by considering economic factors alone – an approach that fails to take into account any social benefits that may accrue for regional areas when people are able to gain a higher education without moving away. Social benefits are less easily measurable than economic ones, but this does not diminish their importance and impact. Equally, the economic consequences that derive from social benefits, while often hidden, should not be underestimated.

This briefing brings together evidence from key data sources to investigate the ways in which regional provision of higher education in Australia benefits regional areas. In contrast to the Grattan Institute approach, the social impact of higher education on regional communities is investigated. The briefing synthesises data from a number of sources to consider the characteristics and outcomes of students, and their contributions to their local communities. The briefing looks at patterns of regional education – which students attend regional higher education...
Higher education and community benefits

institutions (HEIs), what they study, and what their employment outcomes are. It highlights several key findings:

- Students at regional HEIs are more likely to be female, older and to have caring responsibilities than those at urban HEIs;
- 72.1 per cent of those who attend regional HEIs also attended primary school in a regional area;
- 65.7 per cent of graduates from regional HEIs remain in regional areas for employment;
- Those most likely to remain in regional areas for employment are individuals with longstanding regional connections;
- 68.5 per cent of those who complete a course at a regional HEI and move on to further study do so at a regional HEI;
- Greater proportions of graduates from regional HEIs who remain in regional areas are employed in the education, health and community services sectors than all other graduates; and
- Regional HEIs provide both economic and social benefits to regional areas and play a key role in sustaining regional communities.
The call of the city

It cannot be denied that the cost of educating a student at a regional university is greater than educating the same student at an urban institution. This was acknowledged in the Bradley Review (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008) and also identified in the Review of Regional Loading (DEEWR, 2011a). Small campus sizes, low rates of secondary education achievement, geographical remoteness and the makeup of student bodies are well-known contributory factors to additional costs. It could be argued that this fact alone is enough to indicate that regional higher education provision is an unaffordable luxury.

The solution posited by the Grattan Institute is that regional students attend higher education institutions in urban areas, with funding redirected from supporting regional higher education provision into assisting regional students to study away from home. It is unlikely, however, that financial support would ever be able to fully compensate regional students for the expenses incurred in moving to an urban area. Not only do regional students who make this choice lose the support structures embedded in their networks of family and friends, but they also face the significant monetary outlays that high costs of living in Australian cities inevitably incur (Lewis et al., 2007). This turns many regional students away from acquiring a higher education at all (Edwards and Marks, 2008; James, 2001).

Moreover, those regional students who do manage to overcome the hurdles placed before them and complete their education at an urban institution are unlikely to return to a regional area after graduation. Indeed, Hillman and Rothman (2007) indicated that 74 per cent of regional students remain in cities after graduation, reflecting the social networks they build during their studies and perceived advantages in securing employment. If regional communities lose young people, the potential for problems caused by an imbalanced age structure are significant. This is particularly so because regional areas tend to experience in-migration from older populations (McKenzie, 2009).

In addition to overlooking the social consequences for regional communities if students are encouraged to move away for study, the Grattan Institute solution also makes an assumption that students are freely mobile. This is not necessarily the case. Indeed, data from the 2009 Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE) indicates that almost double the proportion of students at regional higher education institutions (HEIs) (30.7 per cent) spend at least 10 hours a week caring for dependents than do students at urban HEIs (17.3 per cent). A total of 14.9 per cent of students at regional HEIs report spending more than 30 hours a week caring for dependents in comparison to just 6.5 per cent of students at urban HEIs. The fact that such a large number of students at regional HEIs have caring roles is a clear indication that they are unable to simply move away from home in order to study.

The caring roles of regional students are likely to be pronounced due to their other characteristics. Data from the 2006 Australian Census and Higher Education Student Collection (HESC) indicate that students at regional HEIs are likely to be older than their urban peers and are more likely to be female, Indigenous and from a low socioeconomic background. The greater family responsibilities that individuals with these characteristics are likely to experience are clearly not conducive to mobility for the purposes of study. Consequently, the provision of a higher education institution in relatively close proximity to their place of residence is likely to be an essential factor in enabling them to gain a higher education.

Overall, these factors point to the important role that regional provision of higher education plays in providing equitable opportunities for skills advancement to those who would otherwise find it very difficult to access tertiary studies, and for whom moving away from home in order to study is not an option. By enabling students to remain in their communities while studying, regional HEIs are making a significant social contribution to regional communities.
Regional ties

The importance of regional provision in offering the opportunity to gain a higher education to regional residents is emphasised when their places of origin are considered. Data from the 2008 HESC indicates that the majority of students at regional HEIs report their permanent home address in a regional area. It is important to note, however, that ‘home postcode’ is not a particularly accurate determinant of regional location, due to the movement of students during the academic year. When adopting a long-term view, however, these patterns remain true.

Two surveys provide useful data to consider the study outcomes of students who attend regional HEIs. The first is the Graduate Destinations Survey (GDS). Conducted by Graduate Careers Australia, this is an annual census of all university course completers. The GDS is administered approximately four to six months after course completion and seeks information about the course experiences of students who complete coursework degrees and their post-graduation pathways. In the 2009 data collection, used for this briefing, there were 119,286 responses, 22,859 of which were from students who had been enrolled at HEIs in regional areas. The Graduate Pathways Survey (GPS) was designed and conducted for DEEWR by ACER in 2008 (Coates & Edwards, 2009). The GPS questionnaire was administered to individuals five years after graduating from bachelor degrees and sought responses about subsequent employment and further studies undertaken at one, three and five years after graduation. The data include responses from 9,238 individuals, 2,213 of whom had attended regional HEIs.

While the GDS provides extremely valuable information, the timing of its deployment means that many graduates are in transition between study and their next activities. In contrast, the GPS enables individual pathways to be tracked over a much longer term. Moreover, the GPS asks respondents to note the location in which they had attended primary school. This provides a greater understanding of the long-term origins of higher education students.

GPS data shows that the majority of students who attended regional HEIs also attended primary school in a regional area. As Table 1 indicates, only 27.9 per cent of students attending a regional HEI attended primary school in a capital city, in contrast to 68.1 per cent of students attending an urban HEI. This pattern is very similar in New South Wales and Queensland, the two states in which the majority of regional respondents to the GPS had attended a regional HEI.

The majority of students who are enrolled at regional HEIs are from regional areas themselves. This is an important factor in any consideration of higher education provision. While it is impossible to predict the percentage of students in regional areas who would participate in higher education if they did not have access to an HEI in their area, as Harding (2010) acknowledges, it is likely that this would be substantial.

Table 1: Primary school location by location of university attended, GPS respondents, 2008 (n=8,468)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location of Primary School</th>
<th>Regional HEI</th>
<th></th>
<th>Urban HEI</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>All</td>
<td>NSW</td>
<td>QLD</td>
<td>All</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isolated or remote area (%)</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural or country area (%)</td>
<td>28.6</td>
<td>27.3</td>
<td>29.3</td>
<td>13.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional or provincial town (%)</td>
<td>42.3</td>
<td>45.4</td>
<td>42.7</td>
<td>17.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capital city (%)</td>
<td>27.9</td>
<td>26.6</td>
<td>26.8</td>
<td>68.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (%)</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (n)</td>
<td>1840</td>
<td>904</td>
<td>614</td>
<td>6099</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: DEEWR, 2008
Do they stay or do they go?

If regional economies are to fully benefit from the provision of higher education in their local communities, it is important that significant proportions of students remain after they complete their courses, either to engage in further study or to enter employment. This transition is inevitably premised upon the interplay of supply and demand factors. On the one hand, students need to have qualifications that are directly beneficial to their local communities. At the same time, course completers need to have access to appropriate employment opportunities in which to apply their skills, or to further education in which to enhance them. Ideally, higher education studies will equip students with skills and expertise that enable them to directly contribute to sustaining and enhancing their surrounding communities in both the short and long term.

Although the Grattan Institute report suggests that many regional areas lack sufficient employment opportunities for people with higher education qualifications, this is not necessarily the case. Instead, the very existence of regional communities generates employment opportunities. Unless regional communities were to disappear altogether, their need for a skilled workforce to supply the welfare, health, education, service and business sectors will continue. Rather than attempting to attract skilled workers to move from cities to regional areas, efforts which often achieve only limited success, it makes sense to provide opportunities for regional residents to gain skills, benefiting individuals and communities alike.

Data from the GPS, illustrated in Figure 1, indicates that five years after completing their courses, 65.7 per cent of those who had been enrolled at regional HEIs and were in employment were still living in regional areas. In contrast, 84.4 per cent of those who had studied at urban HEIs and were in employment were living in urban areas. This evidence suggests that not only do the majority of graduates from regional HEIs use their skills to contribute to regional areas, but also that they are able to find employment in regional areas. As Figure 2 indicates, the proportion of graduates from regional HEIs who have remained in regional areas (‘regional to regional’) and who are not working (10.3 per cent) is very similar to the proportion of graduates from regional HEIs who have moved to urban areas (‘regional to urban’) (7.2 per cent), and to the proportion of graduates from urban HEIs (‘urban to urban’) (9.2 per cent). While a considerably greater proportion of graduates from regional HEIs who have remained in regional areas are working part-time (23.9 per cent), in contrast to those who have moved from regional to urban areas (13.8 per cent) or graduated from urban HEIs (16.3 per cent), the fact that the

![Figure 1](image1.png)  
**Figure 1:** Home address five years after completion of course, students who had attended regional and urban HEIs, GPS respondents, 2008 (n=7,325)  
Source: DEEWR, 2008

![Figure 2](image2.png)  
**Figure 2:** Working status five years after completion of course, GPS respondents, by location of HEI and location of residence, 2008 (n=6,959)  
Source: DEEWR, 2008
former group have a higher average age, are more likely to be female and spend more time as carers, helps to explain this outcome.

It is likely that the tendency to remain in regional areas after graduation from regional HEIs is particularly pronounced among certain groups. This assumption is supported by data from the GPS indicating that those most likely to remain in regional areas when they graduate from a regional institution are those who also attended a primary school in a regional area. As Figure 3 indicates, 81.3 per cent of those who had attended primary school in a regional area and went on to study at a regional HEI remained in a regional area for employment five years after finishing their course. In contrast, just 43.3 per cent of those who attended a primary school in a capital city and then studied at a regional HEI have remained in a regional area for employment. Clearly, regional ties that run deep are those most likely to ensure that skills are retained in regional areas.

Similar patterns can be found for those who choose to undertake further study (Figure 4). GDS data show that 68.5 per cent of those who complete a course at a regional HEI and move on to further study within the first six months undertake their further studies at a regional HEI, with just 14.5 per cent moving to an urban HEI. In contrast, just 2.7 per cent of those who complete a course at an urban HEI and move on to further study do so at a regional institution. It is clear that when individuals study at a regional HEI, they are highly likely to remain in a regional area if they decide to undertake further education.

Taken together, these findings indicate that individuals who study at regional HEIs are likely to remain in regional areas after they complete their courses, regardless of whether they decide to engage in further study or to move directly into employment. Moreover, this pattern holds true five years after course completion and is particularly the case for those who also attended a primary school in a regional area. This finding suggests that regional provision of higher education is very important in the retention of skilled workers in regional areas. Students who move from regional areas to urban areas in order to undertake a higher education are unlikely to return, while those who are able to remain in regional areas while they are studying are likely to stay. This is a powerful testament to the fundamental role that regional HEIs play in the skilling of regional communities. In illustration, recent evidence from Charles Sturt University (2010) shows that a very high proportion of professionals in western NSW have graduated from that institution, including 43 per cent of all teachers.

![Figure 3: Residential location of graduates from regional HEIs, five years after course completion, by location of primary school, GPS respondents, 2008 (n=1,766)](source: DEEWR, 2008)

![Figure 4: Location of institutions for further study, by prior study at a regional or urban HEI, GDS respondents, 2009 (n=29,003)](source: Graduate Careers Australia, 2009)
Regional skills

What kinds of skills do students who graduate from regional HEIs have? Are the courses they study a good fit with the needs of their communities and is it possible for them to find employment in those fields without moving away from home? Data from the GPS indicates that five years after completing their courses the majority of students who study at regional HEIs and remain in regional areas (‘regional to regional’) are employed in two key industry areas: education, and health and community services (Figure 5).

This is not surprising – these two sectors employ the largest proportions of graduates overall, including those who graduate from regional HEIs and move to urban areas for employment (‘regional to urban’) and those who graduate from urban HEIs and remain in urban areas (‘urban to urban’). What is noteworthy, however, is the dominance of education as a sector of employment in regional areas, where it accounts for 34.2 per cent of all graduates from regional HEIs who are working, compared to just 22.4 per cent of those who both study and remain in urban areas.

Another interesting finding is that those industry areas which might be associated with regional economies – agriculture, forestry and fishing, mining – actually employ very few regional graduates. Indeed, regional graduates who move to urban areas for employment are more likely to work in mining than those who remain in regional areas.

![Figure 5: Industry sectors in which HEI graduates are employed, five years after course completion, by location of HEI and location of employment, GPS respondents, 2008 (n=6,230)](source: DEEWR, 2008)
When regional graduates move on to further study, similar patterns can be found. Unsurprisingly, the majority of graduates – 68.0 per cent – who decide to undertake further study do so in the same broad field of education. This is not the case, however, for those students who study in the field of agriculture and environment at regional HEIs and then move on to further study. Data from the Graduate Destinations Survey (GDS) indicates that only 36.4 per cent of students who graduate in the field of agriculture and environment at regional HEIs and move on to further study do so in the broad field of education (Figure 6).

This is in contrast to 51.3 per cent of those who graduate in the same field at urban HEIs.

This is an interesting finding, suggesting that students who study subjects that are arguably most closely aligned with the needs of regional Australia are less likely to continue to study these subjects at the graduate level if they have been enrolled at a regional HEI. The finding may partly reflect degree classifications, and the fact that graduate studies in certain science subjects are more likely to be available in metropolitan areas, but it is also likely to indicate the perceived availability of employment opportunities.

Figure 6: Graduates who move into further study and who do so in the same broad field of education as their first course of study, by location of first HEI. GDS respondents, 2009 (n=31,624)

Source: Graduate Careers Australia 2009
Regional contribution

As this briefing has indicated, regional HEIs in Australia play a crucial role in ensuring the sustainability of regional areas. They enable regional populations to gain a higher education without having to leave their communities. This is of fundamental importance for two reasons: first, many of those who move away to study do not return, destabilising the demographic balance of regional areas; and second, those who study in regional areas tend to remain in regional areas, providing their skills to critical areas of employment.

The Grattan Institute report concludes that the additional cost of providing higher education in regional areas may not be economically worthwhile. At the same time, the authors acknowledge they do not take into account the social and cultural benefits. This briefing takes another approach, using data from a number of sources that highlight the social importance of regional higher education provision. Not only does regional provision of higher education enable students to balance study and caring responsibilities, it further ensures a ready supply of professionals to fill critical roles in education, health and community sectors. Without these skills among regional residents, regional areas either have to rely on attracting professionals from metropolitan areas or on travelling outside regional areas in order to access services. Given the risks inherent in both approaches, their potential to undermine the viability of regional communities is great.

While this briefing has focused on the social benefits of the regional provision of higher education, it is important to remember that there are also economic benefits, through provision of employment opportunities and support for local economic initiatives (see Charles Sturt University, 2010, for examples). There are inevitably many ways in which regional higher education institutions can be regarded as tools to achieve regional development (Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills, 2008; OECD, 2007).

However, framing regional HEIs purely as drivers of regional innovation, and measuring their return on investment in purely economic terms, overlooks much of their value. The role of regional HEIs in providing regional residents with the opportunity to gain a higher education without breaking community ties is of vital importance to Australia. If regional communities are to remain sustainable into the future, the role of regional HEIs will continue to be of great importance.
References


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