



# REGIONAL TRANSITIONS TO UNIVERSITY

REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

Prepared by the National Centre for Student Equity in  
Higher Education for the NSW Department of Education

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**In 2017 the NSW Department of Education commissioned the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE) to find out why high achieving students in regional NSW are transitioning to university at lower rates than students in metropolitan areas.**

Internal data shows that around 40% of students in regional NSW with an ATAR of 75 or more are not directly transitioning from school to university, compared with 26% in metropolitan areas.

To investigate how these students are making decisions about their post-school options, researchers collected qualitative data through surveys, interviews and focus groups with 632 current and former students, teachers and Careers Advisers from the government and non-government sector.

### Intention is high

The research found that students have high aspirations for their futures, with around 80% intending to complete a university degree. Traditional barriers to higher education, like low aspiration and lack of parental support, were not present.

### So why aren't these students going to university?

Proximity to university had some impact on students, with 30% saying they wanted to attend their local campus. However, the three main barriers identified by the research were:

- Cost
- Indecision about the future and what/where they want to study
- Anxiety over leaving family and friends to relocate for university.

### The 'gap year' effect

These barriers can have a cumulative effect, which, when combined, are contributing to students taking a gap year. Half of the Year 11 and 12 students interviewed intend to take a gap year. Reasons given for this range from

needing a break to wanting to earn money to support their university study.

While these students may intend to go to university after a gap year, their intention may not be matched by action. The Department's internal data shows that even five years after finishing school, many qualified students had not transitioned to university, with around only five to six per cent of students taking a gap year making the transition to university. Australian and international literature also shows that students who delay enrolment were less likely to be enrolled after four or five years.

Students with firm views on the careers they wished to pursue, the courses they needed to take and the financial means to go to university are more likely to transition directly from school than students who are undecided about their future plans, or who need/want to earn money immediately after finishing school.

### Students are not getting enough information

While students showed a reasonable understanding of the costs associated with living away from home, they were less informed about other critical aspects of going to university such as course offerings and career options, sources of financial support and requirements, and other university support options and pathways. The career and post-school study advice students get appears to vary in accuracy, reliability and detail, and this may contribute to not knowing what they want to study after school.

Stemming from the report's findings, a series of future directions have been included that could inform work to improve high achieving regional students' chances of attending university. These span the responsibilities of schools, universities and governments. A key direction is that schools and universities become more proactive in providing more accurate and easily accessible information to parents and teachers.

# The problem.

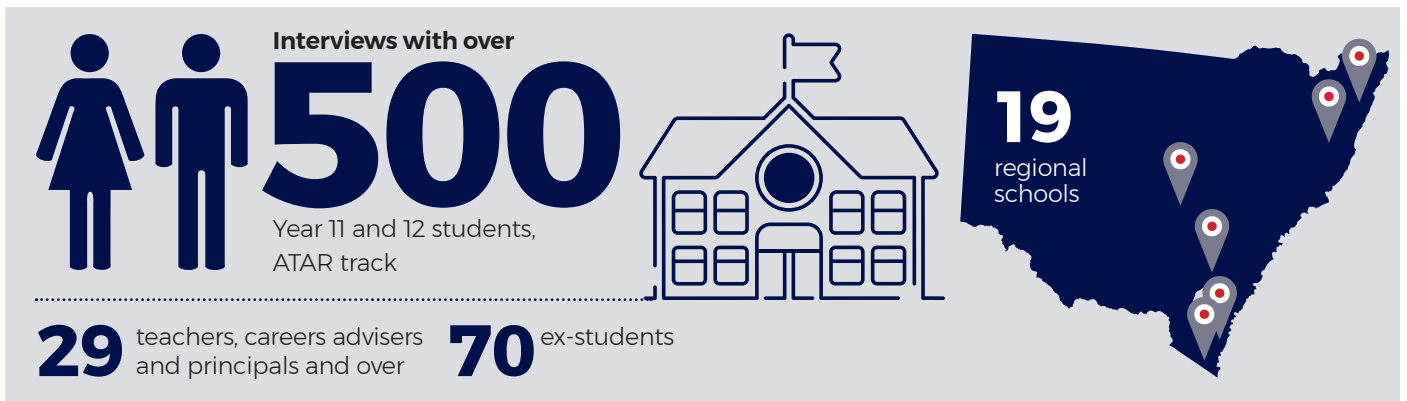
# Over 40%

of regional students with an **ATAR over 75 aren't going to university from school.** Research shows that the longer they take to go to uni from school, the less likely it is that they'll go at all.



REGIONAL STUDENTS WITH AN ATAR OVER 75

# The research cohort.



# What we learned.

## 56%

I don't want to go into debt

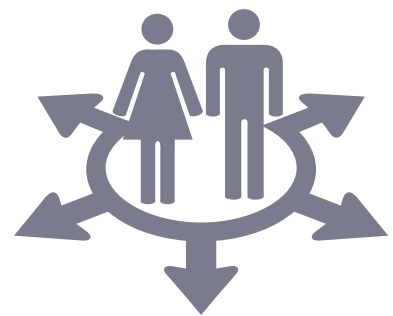


## 60%

I won't have enough money to pay for further education

## 43%

said not knowing what to do was an obstacle.



**The barriers are cost, not knowing what to study and insecurity about leaving family and friends.** These factors can have a cumulative effect, and can lead students to take a gap year- then they don't return.

## 41%

Said leaving family and friends was an obstacle

I like living in a regional area. I'd miss the lifestyle and the place.

**Students.**



## KEY FINDINGS FROM THE REPORT

“My parents are just over the threshold [for Centrelink support] but can’t afford to pay for me to move away.”

STUDENT

### Researchers found that aspirations were high among students and their parents

- Over 77% of students intend to complete a university degree.
- 75% believe that their parents expect them to go to university, showing a close match between student and parent aspirations.

### Cost was seen as the key obstacle to continuing on to further education

- 60% of current students said that they were concerned that they would not have enough money to pay for further education.
- 56% said that they did not want to go into debt.
- Around 44% of the students had a fairly accurate idea of the costs of living away from home to go to university (approx. \$20,000).

### Students also revealed some uncertainties about moving away

- 41% said leaving family and friends was an obstacle.
- In the focus groups, rather than saying that they did not want to move away from parents and friends, students framed uncertainties about leaving home in terms of:
  - their dislike of big cities
  - unwillingness to lose the part-time job they had in their regional town
  - costs of relocation and the impost on their families.

- Although not a single operating barrier to students enrolling in university, it is likely that the social impact of moving away may compound with other factors when it comes to accepting an offer.

“We have a great lifestyle here. Why would I want to leave?”

STUDENT

### Proximity to university had some impact on student choice, however interest in regional university campuses differed by location

- 30% of students said they were interested in attending their local university. Many students in the Port Macquarie area wanted to go to the University of Newcastle or Charles Sturt University and in the south of NSW students expressed a preference for attending the University of Wollongong or Canberra.
- A much lower number (17.5%) wanted to study in Sydney.

“I like living in a regional area. I’d miss the lifestyle and the place.”

STUDENT

- Focus groups also showed a small number of students and teachers had a perception about regional universities and their quality. Students could not offer evidence for their comments and views seem to be based on hearsay.
- Teachers suggested that, above all, students’ choice of university was largely pragmatic, driven by wanting to keep their part-time jobs, cost, and where their desired courses were offered.
- Over 19% of students were unsure about where they wanted to go, despite the fact university applications were already open.

### The ‘don’t know’ factor surprised researchers by featuring as the highest ranked obstacle after cost

- 43% of current students said not knowing what to do was an obstacle to going to university after school.
- For the students who graduated in 2015 and responded to surveys, this was the highest ranked obstacle. 60% said that “at the time I didn’t know what I wanted to do” was one of the biggest obstacles to transitioning to further education.
- Despite having intentions to go to university, students in focus groups shared their fears about wasting money, not having enough information about courses and careers, and being unsure about what to study.

“I need time off and time to think. There’s no point in going unless 100% certain”

STUDENT

- Concerns about cost and relocation, combined with the ‘don’t know’ factor, is a major driver of the widespread responses about taking a gap year.

### A ‘gap year’ was the most popular post-school choice

- Almost 50% of the current students surveyed plan to take a gap year and 51% of the graduated students said they took a gap year after high school.
- In every group of students interviewed there were definite plans to take a gap year. Some had made arrangements already to work overseas, some had firm intentions to join the Australian Defence Force gap year program and others were able to articulate their plans to work and travel.
- The gap year is a key feature of the post-school transition arrangements in these regions. The few parents spoken to in the study confirmed its popularity and some considered it essential to the students’ maturation.
- Year 12 students thought a gap year was essential to earn money, mature and have time to think about the future.

- For Year 11 students it was the number one response, though many did not have a clear reason why.

“Many of our students are afraid of picking the wrong course. They know it will cost a lot if they choose a course and then find they don’t like it. The gap year gives them more time to consider their choices.”

TEACHER

### **Intention is high but the department’s data shows that many students who take a gap year are not returning**

- There is no doubt that the gap year results in some able students not transitioning to university but the extent of the impact is unknown. Departmental data from previous regional cohorts shows that five years after finishing school, only 5-6% of students who take a gap year transition to university.
- In interviews with teachers and careers advisers, many had concerns about students not enrolling in

university after their gap year.

- Teachers gave anecdotal responses about students taking a gap year then ending up in full-time jobs or being ‘head-hunted’ by companies. In focus groups, some students discussed the experience of older siblings who had taken a gap year and then decided against going to university.
- From the focus group discussions, it emerged that taking a gap year was a short-term solution to the problem of not knowing what to do.
- Taking a gap year when unsure about what or where to study, coupled with the removal of caps on university places means that students may be rejecting university offers. Students no longer need to accept and defer a place since they became uncapped in 2012.

“I always say a gap year, it keeps Mum off my back.”

STUDENT

## MESSAGES FOR TEACHERS & SCHOOLS, POLICY MAKERS AND UNIVERSITIES

### Regional students want more information

- Students expressed a desire to hear more:
  - from students from regional areas currently studying at university
  - about alternative entry pathways
  - about regional student incentive schemes e.g. bonus points
  - about financial aid options.

### Students need better information about financial assistance

- Although many students saw a gap year as a chance to earn money and meet the criteria of Centrelink for ‘independent’ status, they were not well informed of the rules to qualify.
- Most students did not know the qualifying period, the minimum amount to be earned, whether the money earned had to be taxable or how to apply for Youth Allowance.
- Researchers were surprised to hear that a number of students believed they could qualify for independent status with Centrelink by working for a relative who would pay cash in hand.

- Students also showed very little understanding about HECS-HELP loans.
- Interviews with teachers and Careers Advisers showed different levels of knowledge about these requirements.
- Students learned the most about costs and funding support through university websites (40%) and university staff school visits (33%).

### Parents are the biggest influencers on post-school decision-making

- Parents/guardians have a “high or very strong” impact (57%) on student decision-making. In the focus groups, students made frequent mentions of their parents’ expectations, encouragement and support.
- Teachers also had a significant impact (21%), comparable to sibling impact (21%).
- Friends (15%) and Career Advisers (11%) had significantly less impact.

### Universities need to coordinate their outreach efforts

- Not all the outreach efforts of universities are valued by schools and some felt they were being “inundated by the universities.”
- In focus groups students

expressed some strong opinions about the value of various university outreach activities. They spoke positively of interactions with:

- university teaching staff - especially those teaching the courses in which they were interested (but not so positively of interactions with marketing and recruiting staff)
- current university students studying courses they were interested in pursuing.

- Students appreciated the opportunity to visit a university campus, and for some it was their first trip to a big city like Sydney. Overall “university open days” (26.5%) were seen as having more impact on students than “university staff/students visiting the school” (14.6%).
- School visits to larger university campuses, which may help to build students’ confidence about leaving their home area, can be considerably restricted due to the financial costs of hiring a bus and organising accommodation and meals for what may be a two to three day visit from more isolated areas.
- Teachers indicated in interviews that they would welcome more financial assistance to be able to plan university visits. ➡



## FUTURE DIRECTIONS

### Schools

- students, especially those identified as on an ATAR track, are supported to fully participate in university outreach activities, such as campus visits and open days
- Careers Advisers are professionally supported to keep up-to-date with information that can affect students' transitions to university, such as financial support options
- more individualised approaches are adopted to provide careers advice to senior students based on their needs and concerns. This could include utilising teachers' expertise and relationships with students and their families

### Universities

- support schools in their effort to inform students of university courses and pathways by offering transport for school students to university open days
- ensure that parents (the major influencers of student decision-making) are well-informed about career options, entry pathways, courses and costs
- keep Careers Advisers fully informed of career pathways, courses on offer, course requirements and alternative entry pathways
- coordinate their regional activities in order to reduce stress on schools and duplication of effort

### Governments

- recognise the value of regional campuses and hubs, including increasing the range of courses available in regional areas (possibly utilising online technology in combination with an on-campus experience)
- explore how income support mechanisms could better assist regional/remote students to attend university, including through relocation scholarships