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Cinderella on the path at midnight: students on regional university campuses and equity

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ABSTRACT

Just as Cinderella's prospects for attending the ball seemed elusive, so does higher education for people living in rural, remote and regional locations in Australia. The concentration of university campuses in Australian capital cities systematically diminishes opportunities for people living in regional locations. Indeed, most regional communities in Australia do not have access to a local university campus. This article presents research that captures the voices and experiences of students studying on three small regional university campuses through semi-structured interviews. Acknowledging their intersectional diversity linked to gender, ethnicity, caring and cultural responsibilities, disability, and socio-economic status, a thematic analysis of the students' responses revealed four key themes. These themes illuminate the inequities faced by regional tertiary students using a strengths discourse that recognises the aspirational and experiential capital that informs what it takes to combat such adversity to succeed in higher education. This research contributes vital knowledge that recognises the cultural capital of regionally based higher education students, their commitment to place and contribution to place-based knowledge and learning.

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Introduction: the path at midnight

It is often assumed that students on regional university campuses have access to higher education equitable to that of their capital city counterparts. However, flaws in this assumption become apparent when centrally determined changes in higher education policy and funding expose regional students to adverse impacts and leave their campuses struggling to resource them equitably. The precarious conditions of regional university students are well illuminated by the metaphor of Cinderella, magically resourced to attend a prestigious ball and full of hope for a better future yet losing everything when the clock strikes midnight.

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Although higher education policies formally aim to address the multidimensional nature of educational disadvantage and diversity (Australian Government, 2024; Salmi & D'Addio, 2021; Zacharias & Brett, 2019), substantive challenges persist in recognising and ensuring equitable resource allocation in regional locations. The injustice of this is evident in lower enrolment and completion rates of university studies among those living outside metropolitan areas (Australian Institute of Health Welfare, 2024; Fray et al., 2020; Napthine et al., 2019; O'Shea, 2020; Universities Australia, 2022). Further, since 2016 Australian higher education participation rates of regional, rural and remote students have been declining and remain 'subdued' (Australian Government, 2024, p. 75). Rectifying such inequity requires gaining 'nuanced understandings of ... needs, challenges, and preferences' (Zacharias & Brett, 2019, p. 7) by actively listening to diverse students on regional university campuses and incorporating their voices into university governance and policy development (Dollinger, 2023).

This paper presents the findings of a study conducted in 2021 and 2022, on three small regional university campuses located in three different Australian states. It focuses on the experiences of regional university students undertaking their studies before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, exploring how they draw on their own experiential, practical, and cultural knowledges and ways-of-working (Eversole, 2016). The study's central research question was twofold. Firstly, 'What do the experiences of students on regional university campuses reveal about inequities in Australian higher education?' Secondly, 'What promising strategies can we identify to address these inequities in the current resource-constrained environment?' This paper presents a critical analysis of the voices of regional university students unearthed by this research and considers what is needed to fulfil their aspirations to achieve academic success.

Regional access and equity in Australian higher education

Opportunities for higher education participation and success are denied, or at best, stymied by geographic location. In Australia, the concentration of university campuses located in capital cities systematically diminishes higher education opportunities and aspirations for people living in regional, rural and remote areas (Bunn & Lumb, 2024; Chesters & Cuervo, 2022; Crawford, 2021; Eversole, 2022a; Schmidt et al., 2024). Further, the characteristic metrocentric perspectives in policy, practice and research tend to benefit more traditional, urban, middle and upper-middle class students (Chesters & Cuervo, 2022; Malatzky & Smith, 2022; Naylor & Mifsud, 2020; Ronan, 2020; Schmidt, 2017). When universities headquartered in capital cities build campuses in regional areas, the staff and students are often regarded as peripheral and the intersectional diversity of regional students is oversimplified (Eversole, 2016; Macqueen et al., 2023; Roberts et al., 2024; Schmidt et al., 2024; Shinnars, 2022). The backgrounds of non-traditional students include living in rural, regional or remote areas, combined with one or more categories such as first-in-families (FIF), First Nations, culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (CALD), low socio-economic status (LSES), students with a disability and students with caring responsibilities (Cook et al., 2022; Craft, 2019; Crawford & Emery, 2021; Delahunty, 2022; Devlin & McKay, 2018; Dollinger et al., 2021; Harpur et al., 2023; Heffernan, 2022; Power et al., 2022). Such complexity is poorly captured by data built on metrocentric assumptions and renders the impacts of

intersectional diversity on student experience in higher education equity research largely invisible (Bunn & Lumb, 2024; Chesters & Cuervo, 2022; Eversole, 2022b; Macqueen et al., 2023; Malatzky & Smith, 2022; Nichols & Stahl, 2019). Understanding and enabling success in higher education needs to include the intersecting and cumulative diversity of regional students. The voices of students studying regionally support the proposition that current higher education practices in resourcing regional campuses are inequitable.

Utilising a strengths approach about regional student success

There is growing recognition that student voices need to be included as a key component in higher education approaches to equity and intersectional diversity for students attending regional university campuses. Utilising a strengths approach that draws on the assets and capacity of students to contribute to higher education (Hope & Quinlan, 2021), this paper aims to recast notions about disadvantage and inequity to diversity and opportunity (Bryant et al., 2021; Caiels et al., 2024). Studying in-place is known to better position higher education students to successfully navigate intersectional diversity and inequity (Coleman, 2022; Delahunty, 2022; Eversole, 2022b; Power et al., 2022). It enables them to draw on their cultural capital as a source of agency to counter structural barriers associated with accessing and succeeding in higher education (Hutchinson & Eversole, 2023; Larsen & Frost-Camilleri, 2023; Schmidt, 2017). Specifically, Schmidt and colleagues argue that young people who live in rural areas have a sense of place ‘shaped by their cultural knowledges and practices’ (2022, p. 4). Further, their decisions to leave home for education or to stay at home and take up employment is ‘based on how they come to experience, perceive and understand their surroundings, the world and their future’ (Schmidt et al., 2022, p. 4). As such, a university campus constitutes the vehicle that supports and critically enables regional students to access and succeed in higher education.

Research design and methods

This research took place during 2021 and 2022 on three small regional university campuses in three different Australian states where members of the research team lived locally and were or had been employed as academic staff. All three campuses are regional campuses of larger universities based in capital cities. We have elected to name the three campuses in this study to explicitly acknowledge the role of place in understanding the experiences of people studying higher education in regional areas. Thus, we think it is important to state the location of the regional campuses, while ensuring that student data is deidentified. They are La Trobe University Shepparton Campus located 190 km north of Melbourne, the Victorian capital; the University of Tasmania Cradle Coast Campus located in the township of Burnie, 325 km north of Hobart, the Tasmanian capital, and Edith Cowan University South West campus situated in Bunbury 173 km south of Perth, the West Australian capital. Swinburne University of Technology was awarded a grant for the project by the US-based philanthropic organisation, the Spencer Foundation, in 2021. Ethics approval was granted by Swinburne University of Technology Human Research Ethics Committee (Ethics ID: 20215696-6632). Further ethics approvals were granted by the human research ethics committee for each

participating university La Trobe University (Ethics ID: 20215696-6632), University of Tasmania (Ethics ID: 24915) and Edith Cowan University (Ethics ID: 2021-02549).

Purposive sampling was used to recruit the undergraduate student sample from a cross-section of programs and levels of study. Participating students needed to be currently enrolled and have undertaken a component of their studies in-person on one of the three campuses in the major courses available there, such as, Arts, Education, Nursing and Social Work. This resulted in the recruitment of a total of 35 student participants, consisting of 13 students from the Victorian site, 12 students from the Tasmanian site and 10 students from the Western Australian site. It also resulted in a sample strongly weighted towards female participants; 26 women and nine men, reflecting the predominately female enrolment in the major courses offered on the three campuses.

Data collection was undertaken through focus groups and interviews. Drawing on the themes identified from the five focus groups, the research team developed questions for individual, semi-structured interviews with students from intersecting equity groups. These interviews aimed to collect in-depth personal accounts from students and develop rich narratives about their experiences of studying on regional campuses.

Eleven students who had participated in the focus groups agreed to take part in individual interviews. An additional 12 students were recruited from each campus resulting in an overall total of 23 students being individually interviewed. Eight of these students were based on the Tasmanian study site, eight were based on the Victorian study site and seven on the West Australian study site. The characteristics of the 23 student participants intersected across at least two categories pertaining to non-traditional students. In addition to rural and regional, these included First in Family, First Nations, migrant and refugee background, low socio-economic status, students with a disability, mature-age, non-ATAR entry pathway and/or caring and cultural responsibilities. Participant information was provided and informed consent confirmed by each person for focus groups and interviews. Each interview was digitally recorded and transcribed for analysis.

The research team reviewed the interview transcripts from their own campus groups, immersing themselves in the data and identifying the key themes through manually performed inductive thematic analysis. Through this process, each researcher utilised their close familiarity with their local campus and its culture to ensure that the voices of participating students in their local contexts were captured as fully as possible. Campus-specific themes were then shared across the research team and discussed in an online analysis workshop. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Naeem et al., 2023) was applied in the workshop to develop a conceptual framework for analysing the interview transcripts. Once agreed upon, this enabled the team to explore similarities and differences in student experiences within and across the three campuses and identify common themes across all three sites. Below we present our findings.

Findings: regional campuses as Cinderella's coach

The four themes identified from the analysis of the student interview data were: (1) Students' motivation and agency for fulfilling their aspirations, (2) Regional campuses as accessible, (3) Regional campuses as unequal and (4) Regional campuses as supportive.

Students' motivation and agency for fulfilling their aspirations

Students' motivation and agency for fulfilling their aspirations to achieve academic success in higher education were many and varied. Some wanted to pursue personal growth and development, for example one said, 'mainly [I] am doing that [studying] for me, to prove that I can do it' (UTAS2), for another, it was to follow their 'passion' (UTAS9). For others it was the desire to obtain better employment. One mature-aged participant who self-described herself as a 'stay-at-home Mum' explained, 'I'd only really had ... factory work before, and I didn't really want to go back to shift work' (UTAS7).

Unlike living in capital cities, access to a university campus is not a given in rural, regional and remote locations, nor was its importance to regional communities well understood. As one student stated, 'There's this ... assumption that people in regional areas are uneducated and just – you know, Bogans' (LTU10). Another recalled that many people living in regional Australia 'grew up in the time where there wasn't one [regional university campus]' (UTAS6). Regardless of their abilities, acquiring university qualifications was not achievable for most participants without a locally built and resourced university campus. One student recalled, 'I was quite a bright kid, and I got to Grade 10, and that was it, I was done, and I left school' (UTAS6). For many, the amount of 'money to go to Melbourne, rent there' (LTU12), put university study on a metropolitan campus well beyond their reach. As another student explained, 'I'm not one of these rich 18-year-olds who's never had to work, and their Mum and Dad will pay for their accommodation' (ECU10). Nevertheless, the students interviewed had continued to aspire to study at university and seized the opportunity to do so when it arose through the local regional campus.

Amongst motivating reasons for studying regionally at university, three common factors emerged. These were the desire to attain professional employment, the need to make pragmatic decisions and wanting to return to study. For students from all three campuses, attaining professional employment was a key motivation to attending university, 'to actually get a career ... instead of having to just rely on casual work all the time' (UTAS9). The presence of a regional campus was critical as, 'Having a regional campus was really helpful' (LTU12) and made it possible. For this student, it meant they could aim 'to do better in their life, not to just be working at SPC [Shepparton Processing Company] or in a shed' (LTU12). It gave another student 'better work hours, more secure work' (UTAS2), rather than feeling like they would 'work forever in a kitchen' (UTAS2). Yet another student described a very welcome change of employment during her studies from being a support worker and then an aged care worker to 'working in the office, so my experience in study ... helped me to fulfil that' (LTU12). These students were motivated to improve their opportunities and social mobility, and highly valued what a regionally built and resourced university campus offered them.

Other student participants took a more pragmatic approach to their studies, basing their course selection on what was locally available rather than what they would have preferred to study. In some cases, their choices were decided by regional workforce demand, namely 'what employers in the region want' (ECU5), such as social workers. For others, their choices were determined by the university courses offered on a regional campus. As one explained, 'people are either having to pack up their lives and leave to do what they

want, or they got to do something close to it, like I am, or just not do it at all' (UTAS10). The pragmatic nature of these decisions illustrates how being able to study locally on a regional university campus to improve their chances of securing a locally based professional career was a key motivation.

Some participants had attempted to study at university previously and were keen to return to it. Typically circumstances and choices made earlier in life had impacted adversely on their capacity to undertake and complete study. For one student chronic illness had resulted in her temporarily abandoning her studies for factory work until she had sufficient resources to return to study which 'was about two years later because I didn't have much money' (UTAS7). Another student with a refugee background described how he had 'studied a long time ago in very bad circumstances in a refugee camp in a very hostile environment' (LTU12). His settlement in regional Australia, where there was a university campus, provided him with a unique opportunity to study in a safe environment. While motivation to attend university and aspiration to achieve an academic qualification may be a factor common among university students, there remains a critical disparity between regional students and their metropolitan counterparts. This is that for people living in rural and regional Australia, the ongoing physical presence of a locally accessible and adequately resourced university campus cannot be taken for granted, despite their aspirations and motivation to achieve academically. Nevertheless, as the discussion of the findings will demonstrate, it is this aspiration and motivation to achieve that positions student participants well to combat the challenges they face in studying regionally.

Regional campuses as accessible

For many of the student participants living in regional areas, moving to a capital city university was 'out of the question' (ECU3). One student viewed cities negatively as 'too crowded ... and ... too overwhelming' (LTU7), while for another the responsibilities of being a single mother who had to work, meant they 'couldn't travel' (LTU12) to attend a city-based university. A third student explained that having access to a locally built regional campus made attending university 'achievable' (ECU10) with its presence providing the cultural and educational capital to 'actually see myself studying here' (ECU10). Another remarked that 'if there were to be no campus in Burnie, nobody would go to Uni at all. There would be even less than what there is now' (UTAS9). Access to regional campus also meant reduced travel expenses. One student noted that, 'you don't have to travel that far and it's cheaper, it's less expensive, [and] you don't have to spend a lot of money to go to Melbourne' (LTU12). For another student, their reason for studying was that they 'wanted to study on campus and ... lived in the area' (UTAS12). In this way, it becomes evident that an appropriately resourced local university campus acts as a vehicle that ensures higher education is accessible and enabling for people living in regional areas.

Consideration of travel distances to attend university formed part of the rationale as to whether or not student participants could attend university. For one student, the presence of a local campus made university study possible because it meant they no longer had 'to worry about going to Melbourne or travel that far, it's just [a] 15 minutes' drive' (LTU11). Of note here, is that the nearest capital city for the students interviewed

ranged between 173 and 325 km from where they lived. Like the abovementioned students who made pragmatic decisions about course selection based on the range of undergraduate courses offered locally, student decisions about which university to attend were based on which university had built a regional campus within their proximity. Unlike their metro-based counterparts, people living in regional areas do not have a choice of which university to attend. As one student stated, ‘it was this campus or not at all’ because she had ‘a young child ... my family is here [and] all of my child support is here’ (UTAS6). Juggling family commitments resonated with other students, including supporting parents who ‘don’t speak English, [and] need someone to assist them with everything that they do’ (LTU7) or being ‘the oldest of 12 siblings ... so me staying here was another good thing because I’m closer to uni, I’m close to work and I’m still living with mum and dad and helping out a lot with the siblings’ (LTU11). One First Nations, mature-age student for whom being culturally embedded in their community was essential, commented that without a local university campus they ‘probably would have dropped out of uni altogether ... and just [gone] straight into the workforce’ (LTU13). The role of family and familial responsibilities weighed heavily on the minds of other students who ‘had to really try and work out how I was going to manage it without compromising my family, which is terribly important’ (ECU10). Another student with learning disabilities spoke of the ‘real battle, me wanting to get through my studies but then getting the balance right at home’ (ECU8). For this student studying ‘part-time is the only way that I’d be able to maintain that on top of my learning disabilities’ (ECU8). Another student with disabilities explained they were ‘... very dependent on my family and my network, so going out and doing my own thing was a bit difficult. So, I wanted to be as close to home as possible’ (LTU10). Clearly, the presence of a regional university campus makes higher education accessible and enables students to study locally while managing their responsibilities and connections with their family and community.

Regional campuses as unequal

Metropolitan based universities rarely seem to recognise how their decisions affect the capacity for regional students to study, particularly how these impact adversely on students already contending with intersectional diversity. Some students saw themselves as being invisible or having second-class status vis-à-vis the metropolitan campuses. Their comments included feeling like they were ‘at the back of their agenda’ (LTU10), ‘forgotten a lot of the time’ (LTU8), and ‘ignored or left behind’ (ECU9). Others observed they felt like ‘poor cousins’ (ECU5) as they had to bear heavy economic, social and emotional costs engaging with a metrocentric higher education system. One student argued,

... we pay for the same fees as the other campuses but have access to probably a third of what they do. So, there shouldn’t be any difference ... It should be about giving us a quality education. And these online forums, I’m sorry, but the quality of the education compared to being face-to-face, it doesn’t compare. (ECU8)

Another student who did not feel well suited to studying online recounted how she chose to enrol in a social work course because its advertised delivery was in-person on her campus. When the course changed unexpectedly to online delivery, she found that

attempts by students to redress this with the university were dismissed. It ‘was just something that my cohort felt really strongly about that; that was not advertised when we had signed up for the degree, when we had accepted the offer’ (UTAS12). This situation left her feeling powerless: ‘I’m half-way through the degree now, and there’s kind of not much I can do about it, and they kind of know that’ (UTAS12).

Course changes of these kinds presented students on a regional university campus with the unexpected demands of long distance travel to meet course requirements. One social work student explained how when they enrolled, ‘we weren’t told about the travel to Launceston [148kms east], but I still have had about two or three classes where I’ve had to travel to Launceston’ (UTAS9). In another course, the lecturer initially delivered a monthly class in-person bringing ‘a van load of equipment’ (ECU4), but this unexpectedly ‘switched’ (ECU4) to students being video linked to other campuses. For this student it meant they ‘had to make trips to Joondalup [195kms north] for a day to use equipment. Nobody comes here’ (ECU4).

In the absence of adequate public transport in regional areas, student travel typically required the use of private vehicles exacting additional physical and financial costs. One student, for example, described a trip involving over 300 kms a day,

... in third year, we had to do two [whole] days in Launceston [148kms east] ... but with fatigue issues, it’s very hard to drive two hours there, do a whole day and then two hours back and then come back again. And then also because I don’t have a hell of a lot of money, it was also a strain to go there and stay the night and then go back the next day. (UTAS7)

Other changes raised were the legacy from the withdrawal of academics and in-place teaching from regional campuses to online delivery during the pandemic. One commented about ‘the risk that the university sees that as a money-saving opportunity ... and that more [classes] go online. That would be quite challenging’ (ECU6). Another student spoke of the impact on educational experience through ‘the slow stripping of services’ (ECU3). They recognised that while regional campuses ‘can’t have the twenty cafes and the hair salons ... and everything that all the other campuses have in the city ... perhaps we could do a little more – even a book shop or something to get your textbooks’ (ECU3).

These student experiences clearly articulate the adverse impacts that occur when metropolitan-based universities change the way subjects and courses are delivered. They emphasised the critical importance of place-based, equitable access to academic staff, equipment, face-to-face classes and services through adequate resourcing to ensure the rights of regional students, living with intersectional diversity, to achieve academic success.

Regional campuses as supportive

Students on all three campuses described concrete ways in which they experienced regional campus environments as supportive. The physical presence of academic and support staff and peers, along with quiet study spaces, provided them with opportunities to achieve their aspirations and move out of disadvantage. For one student ‘... it was those conversations in class, that on-campus experience, that being able to talk to different people from different walks of life ... and people that were already working in the field ... it’s just mind-blowing’. (ECU6). For another, ‘the staff just tend to be more

friendly [and] that gives students confidence ... and I think it's that encouraging environment' (ECU3). Another student commented 'supporting to be a successful student ... comes down to the lecturers and the tutors to be honest. And I've found that every face to face lecturer, tutor that I've had, has been incredibly supportive' (UTAS6). For one First Nations student,

The Indigenous support worker was always there, someone who I could go and talk to if I was having difficulties with my study, and even the lecturers, they were so open and always giving advice and willing to give advice, and I guess that is the benefit too of such a small campus. (LTU13)

Overall, the students highlighted the advantages for them of a smaller, 'more comfortable' (LTU13) regional campus in heightening their chances of success through enabling connection and interaction with others. One typical comment was,

It's a close-knit family feeling. It's a community. You don't feel like you're in a large city. You don't get lost, like being in a large city... So the regional campus can [give] a feeling of belonging and connectedness. (UTAS8)

The benefits of this sense of belonging were also evident for students managing mental health challenges. One first in family student found that although they were not 'very experienced [and] struggled a lot with mental health ... from early on ... support ... was always in front of me. It wasn't like I had to dig deep to find support. It was always there' (LTU10).

Several students portrayed their educational experiences as going well beyond preparation for employment; it was also personally transformative. One reflected that they were '... loving the sensation of my mind growing. And I'm learning things ... with the support of wonderful staff here, and my student colleagues are wonderful too. So the whole experience is great' (ECU3). Another student described how she valued face-to-face classes being led by women,

... [I] found all the face to face classes ... the lectures, and the tutorials brilliant. It was the first time that I had been in a situation where those that were leading, and teaching, and mentoring were female as well... It was just such an eye-opener to see these strong women in these leadership roles. (UTAS6)

The students clearly voiced how much they enjoyed and valued the support of their fellow students, academics and other staff on campus. They emphasised the value of learning in-person offered on regional campuses, and how their sense of connection and interaction with staff and peers on-campus helped to overcome the impacts of inter-sectional diversity.

Discussion

The Cinderella metaphor evokes an image of hope and abundant resources faced with imminent risk of disappearing and resonates powerfully with the narratives of the students on regional university campuses in this study.

Structural inequities

Listening to and analysing these narratives invites one to hear the aspirations of regional students for academic learning and their motivations to hold onto and realise their

ambitions. They speak to how the location of a university campus, close to home, is integral to fulfilling student ambitions and demonstrate how city-based decisions impact markedly on their capacity to study (Chesters & Cuervo, 2022; Eversole, 2022b; Fray et al., 2020). Such decisions can make the academic journey of regional students harder and more tenuous than that of their city counterparts and can feel as if the clock has struck midnight, turning their coach back into a pumpkin. Yet as demonstrated in the findings, it is their strong connection with the regional campus, populated by fellow students, academics and other staff that provides them with the necessary support to transform their lives and to accomplish what they set out to achieve for themselves, their families and their local communities.

The strengths and capacities of regional students to succeed in higher education are often overlooked. At a theoretical level, our findings show how their cultural capital counters the structural inequities of regionality and intersectional diversity (Hope & Quinlan, 2021; Schmidt et al., 2022). The findings reveal ambitions and motivations for creative and energetic approaches that maximise opportunities on regional university campuses. Further, they illustrate how regional students understand the impact of metrocentric assumptions and decisions on their aspirations and their capacity to access and succeed in higher education (Bunn & Lumb, 2024; Chesters & Cuervo, 2022). As such, the research demonstrates student voices contesting the barriers to participatory parity in higher education for people living and studying in rural, regional and remote Australia.

Studying regionally

A consistent revelation in the research, across all three locations, is the significance of the regional university campuses making higher education participation and success possible. Much like Cinderella's golden coach, the regional campus provides students with their carriage out of disadvantage. Student narratives reveal the importance of studying in-place and demonstrate what is possible when viable options for on-campus study are provided outside capital cities. The three small university campuses in this study are located near where students live and provide in-person education in a safe and welcoming environment. Reflecting the wonders of Cinderella's coach, such campuses provide the vehicles by which these students travel to a better future. Students fulfil their ambitions through access to a regional campus as their vehicle to higher education. They succeed because of the high levels of support they receive from regional campus academics and other staff, and the social interactions and connections that enable them to overcome disadvantage, build their confidence, and achieve their aspirations (Eversole, 2022b; Power et al., 2022). Our findings align with earlier research about the importance of studying in-place to maintain social and communal supports for both enabling higher education and fulfilling familial, community and cultural responsibilities (Coleman, 2022; Delahunty, 2022).

Nevertheless, our findings also highlight the precarious nature of studying regionally, with disappearing resources that reproduce inequitable access to education placing the academic journey of regional university students at risk (Naphthine et al., 2019; Ronan, 2020; Zacharias & Brett, 2019). Students hope the educational vehicle they have chosen to transport them to academic success does not disappear mid-journey, like Cinderella's coach reverting to a pumpkin at midnight. Their narratives reveal how failure by

institutional decision-makers to plan inclusively for regional students increases their financial burden, such as additional expenses for travel. Regional students appear to be bearing the brunt of higher education funding shortfalls exacerbated by the effects and legacy of the pandemic, all of which increase their sense of uncertainty, and the sacrifices required of them. Disappearing resources further stretch the strengths and agency of people living and studying higher education in peripheral regions. As Nichols and Stahl argue, ‘individual actors cannot achieve complex social change without actions also taking place on institutional and social levels’ (2019, p.1264). Yet, despite the many barriers and intersecting challenges faced by students living in regional, rural and remote areas, students from regional university campuses continue to achieve academic success.

Conclusion

Through the voices of students, this research provides a detailed and grounded understanding of higher education inequity in Regional Australia. The findings articulate regional students’ experiences of structural inequities and intersecting diversity and galvanises their perspectives about the barriers to parity in higher education participation. The themes identified in our findings make visible a framework of factors that need to be researched further, if such parity is to be achieved for regional, rural and remote students.

Studying in place remains a critical component for equitable access to higher educational achievement. While reports like *Regionalisation Ambition 2032* propose actions for ‘investing in localised tertiary education models that allow residents to study further qualifications in place’ (Regional Australian Institute, 2023, p. 17), alternatives to directly resourcing regional university campuses, such as Regional Study Hubs, are being advanced (Australian Government, 2024; Bunn & Lumb, 2024). To ensure that such initiatives do not further marginalise regional, rural and remote students within a metrocentric higher education system, they need to build in provision for academic staff on the ground, which regional university students in our study endorsed as being critical for their academic success.

Regional campuses play a vital role in making higher education accessible to regional students. Nevertheless, the capacity of these campuses to enhance student success is often under threat with diminishing courses, and changes in course requirements and their delivery. This reinforces and exacerbates the inequities experienced by regional students and undermines the potential of regional campuses to address intersectional disadvantage in regional Australia.

Our findings highlight that resourcing decisions for regional campuses must not be made without an understanding of the vital role these campuses play in higher education equity. Cuts to courses and services on regional campuses impact some of our most marginalised students and undermine the efforts of these campuses and their staff to provide quality study opportunities in place. When, however, such campuses are appropriately resourced, they provide vital opportunities for regional, rural and remote communities to reimagine and create a better future for all.

In light of this, the key recommendation arising from our study is for strategies enabling adequate and sustainable resourcing for regional university campuses to be central to the higher education equity agenda in Australia. In contrast to the

longstanding metrocentric view of higher education as belonging to capital cities, we advocate for critical consideration of the distribution of educational infrastructure across Australia. Our work also highlights the need to provide mechanisms for student voices to inform policy understandings of equity, as students directly experience inequities embedded in the current system. Students themselves are working hard to overcome educational inequity in Australia; it is the role of educators, policy makers and researchers to support them on their journeys.

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