Equity participation targets and sector growth: How are we tracking between 2021 and 2024?

ACSES Data Insights Series

ACSES Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success

Curtin University

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This report examines changes in the enrolment headcount of domestic undergraduate students between 2021 and 2024, with a focus on progress towards 2050 equity parity targets. For further information on retention, participation, success, six- and nine-year cohort completion, please refer to the ACSES student equity data Interactive Tool: https://www.acses.edu.au/data/interactive-tool/

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The Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success Data Insights Series

The Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success (ACSES) is an evidence-based research and public policy centre based at Curtin University and funded by the Australian Government Department of Education. ACSES is committed to providing the higher education sector with tangible proof of what works to improve the quality and impact of student equity practices in higher education.

The ACSES Data Insights Series reports on equity student participation and outcomes in Australian higher education. It focuses on trends among identified equity groups in domestic undergraduate enrolments in Australia, including, but not limited to:

- low socio-economic status (SES) students
- students with disability
- First Nations (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander) Australian students
- regional students
- remote students.

For further information on ACSES, please visit www.acses.edu.au.

Data explanatory notes

All student data reported in this document are sourced from a customised request to the Australian Government Department of Education[1].

For this report:

- Analysis was restricted to domestic, onshore, undergraduate students from Table A institutions (as defined under the Higher Education Support Act 2003).
- The identification of students from low SES, regional, and remote backgrounds is based on their first address.
- "Non-equity students" refers to students who do not belong to any of the key equity groups presented in this report, namely, students with disability, First Nations Australian students, and students from low SES, regional, and remote areas.
- Parity targets for 2050 were drawn from the ACSES report *Equity Policy Options: Parity Targets, Final Report*[2]. Since the release of that report, updates to Department data and reporting, alongside the *Australian Universities Accord Final Report*[3], have informed the approach to parity targets for students with disability. In the Accord, the objective for students with disability was to maintain current levels of participation. Accordingly, in this report, the 2050 target for students with disability is set at the 2024 participation share.

[1] Australian Government Department of Education. (2025). *Equity Group Statistics, Private Request (November 2025)*. Canberra: Department of Education.

[2] Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success. (2024). *Equity Policy Options: Parity Targets, Final Report.* https://www.acses.edu.au/publication/equity-policy-options-parity-targets-final-report/

[3] Department of Education. (2024). *Australian Universities Accord Final Report*. https://www.education.gov.au/australian-universities-accord

Equity parity targets and enrolment growth

Since the release of the *Australian Universities Accord Final Report* in February 2024, a key question for the higher education sector has been how progress towards its two central ambitions is tracking: the expansion of around one million additional students by 2050 and the achievement of equity parity by 2050. Importantly, these objectives are not necessarily dependent on one another—growth in overall enrolments does not automatically translate into equitable representation across equity groups.

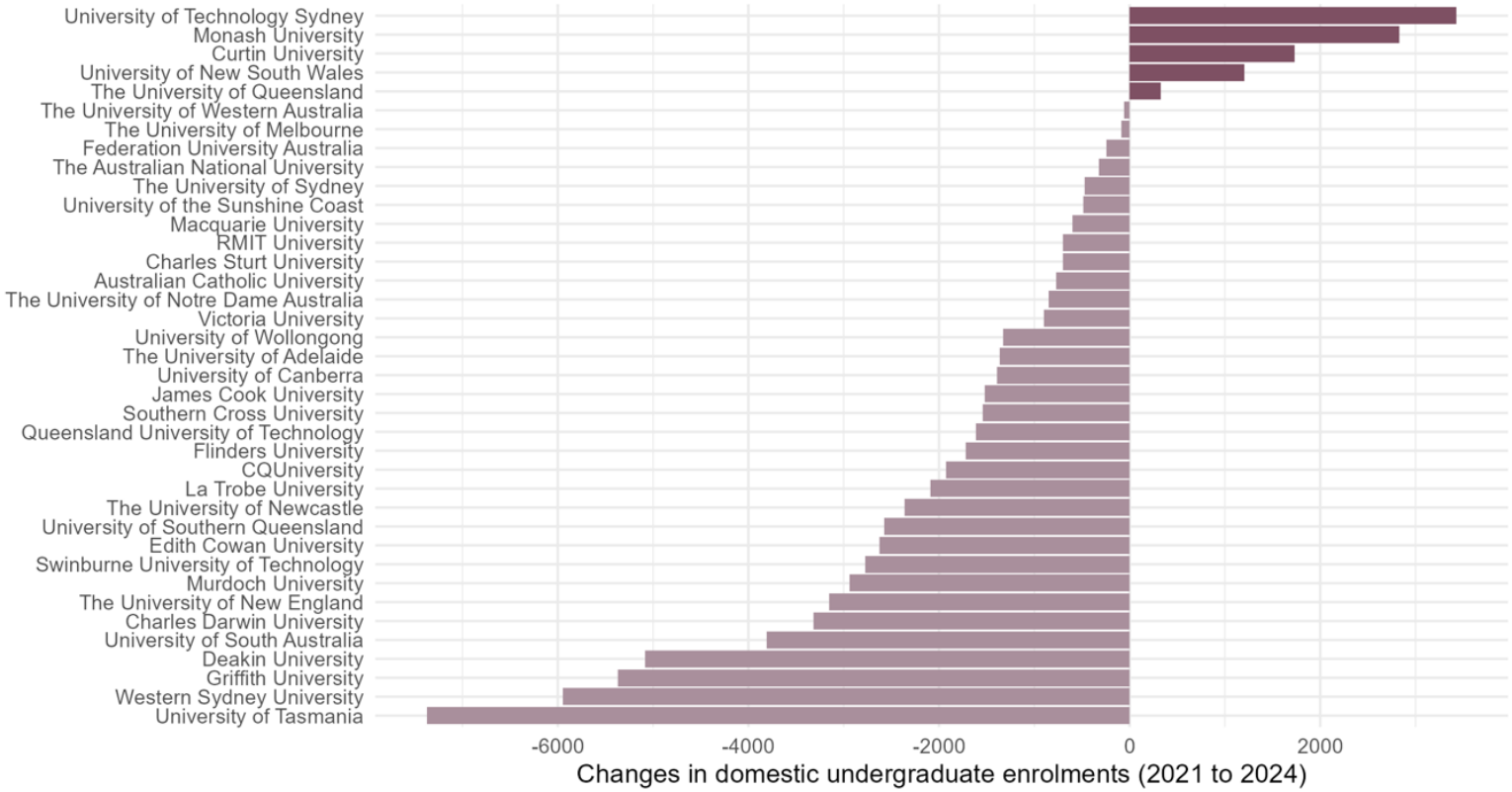
In this report, we build on earlier ACSES work examining options for achieving equity participation parity by 2050 to ask: where are we now? Using the most recent available data, we examine changes in enrolment headcount and equity participation between 2021 and 2024 and assess progress towards 2050 parity targets.

Domestic undergraduate enrolments declined by 56,000 between 2021 and 2024

Domestic undergraduate enrolments fell from 798,084 in 2021 to 742,289 in 2024, a decline of 55,795 students over this period.

This decline was widespread, with only five universities recording increases in enrolments (ranging from 325 to 3,430), while the remaining 33 experienced declines (ranging from 61 to 7,374 students) (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Changes in total headcount enrolment between 2021 and 2024 for Table A universities



Equity enrolments have declined for all groups, except for students with disability

Between 2021 and 2024, enrolments fell markedly for students from low SES areas and regional and remote areas, with declines of around 9% (Table 1).

Enrolments for First Nations Australian students remained broadly stable, while enrolments for students with disability increased by around 21%.

Table 1: Headcount enrolment for 2021 and 2024, both overall and for each equity group

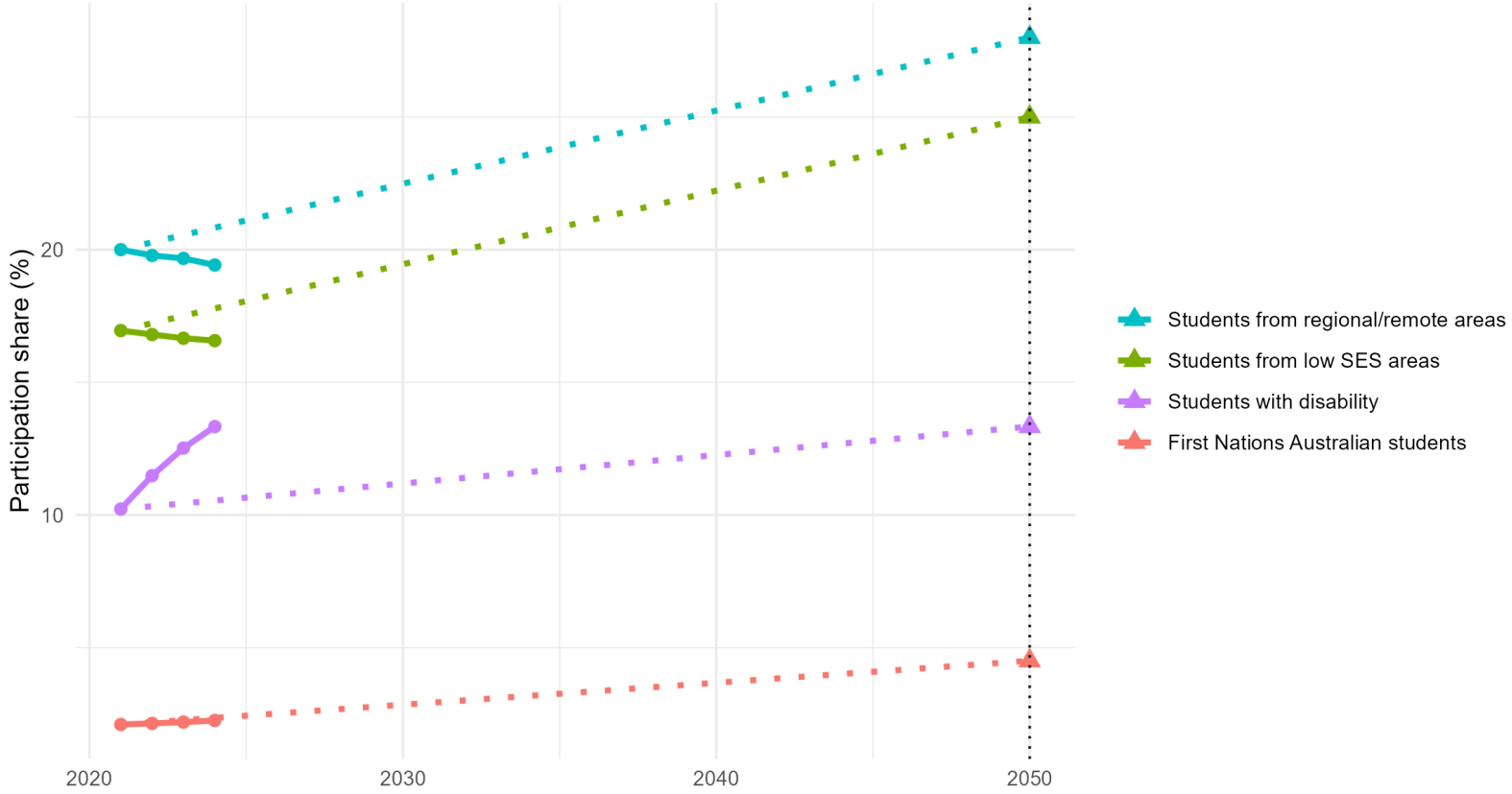
Group	2021 headcount	2024 headcount	Change in enrolment between 2021 and 2024	Percentage change (%)
Students from low SES areas	135,269	123,007	-12,262	-9.1
Students from regional/remote areas	159,620	144,125	-15,495	-9.7
First Nations Australian students	16,737	16,718	-19	-0.1
Students with disability	81,529	98,934	17,405	21.3
Equity students	296,499	286,331	-10,168	-3.4
Non-equity students	501,585	455,958	-45,627	-9.1
Domestic undergraduates	798,084	742,289	-55,795	-7.0

Note: Students may belong to more than one equity group, therefore changes observed within individual equity groups will not sum to the total change for all domestic undergraduates.

Participation parity target tracking

Recent participation trends indicate mixed progress towards student equity parity. Participation shares for students with disability have increased markedly since 2021, while shares for students from low SES areas and regional and remote areas have declined. Participation among First Nations Australian students has increased steadily and appears to be on track towards 2050 parity targets, despite a slight decline in overall enrolments over the same period.

Figure 2: Progress towards 2050 equity targets for each of the four priority equity groups. The dotted line indicates a uniform trajectory from 2021 to achieving the 2050 target.



Relationship between changes in participation share and enrolment headcount for equity student groups

Figures 3 to 8 show the relationship between changes in participation share and enrolment headcount from 2021 to 2024 for each of the five equity groups and equity students overall.

Within each plot, four quadrants are labelled. These are:

- **↑ Headcount & ↑ Share**: An increase in both enrolment headcount and equity participation share—indicating increased representation and growth in student numbers.
- **↑ Headcount & ↓ Share**: An increase in headcount but a decline in equity participation share—indicating that equity representation is reducing despite an overall growth of student numbers.
- **↓ Headcount & ↑ Share**: A decline in enrolment headcount alongside an increase in equity participation share—indicating improved equity representation despite declining enrolments.
- **↓ Headcount & ↓ Share**: A decline in both headcount and equity participation share—indicating both contraction and reduced equity representation.

Figure 3: Students from low SES areas: Relationship between changes in headcount and participation shares between 2021 and 2024

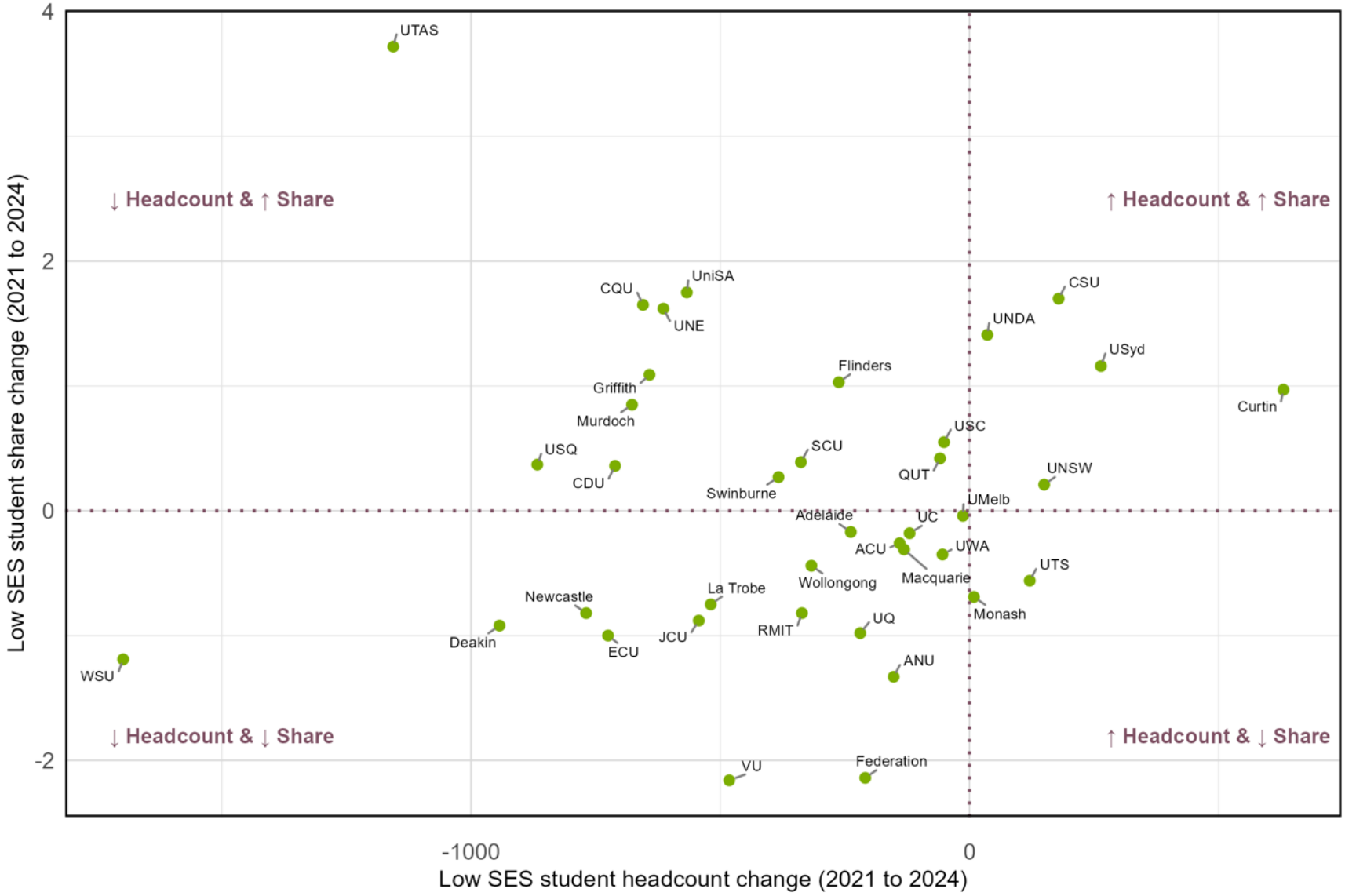


Figure 4: Students from regional areas: Relationship between changes in headcount and participation shares between 2021 and 2024

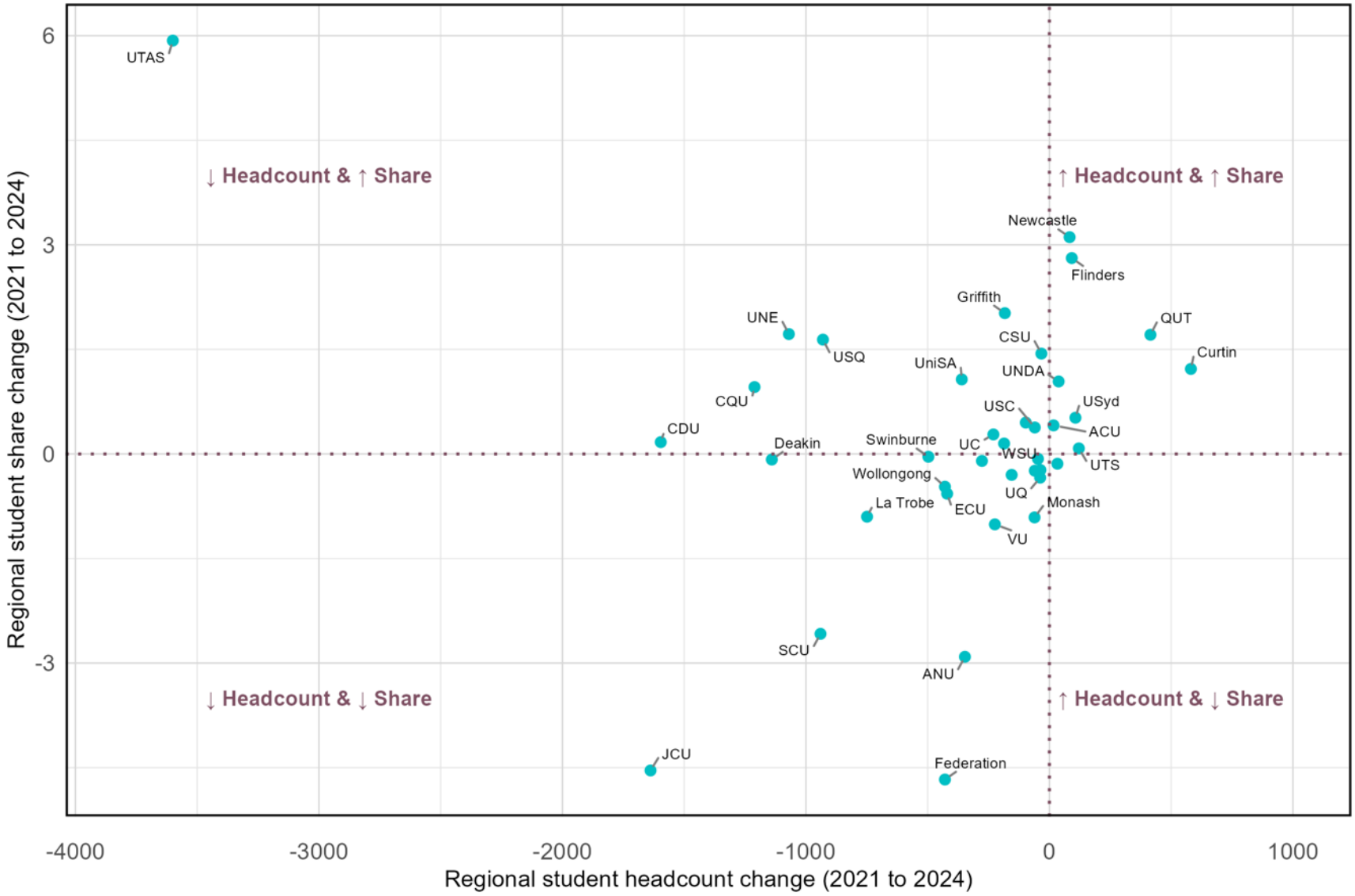


Figure 5: Students from remote areas: Relationship between changes in headcount and participation shares between 2021 and 2024

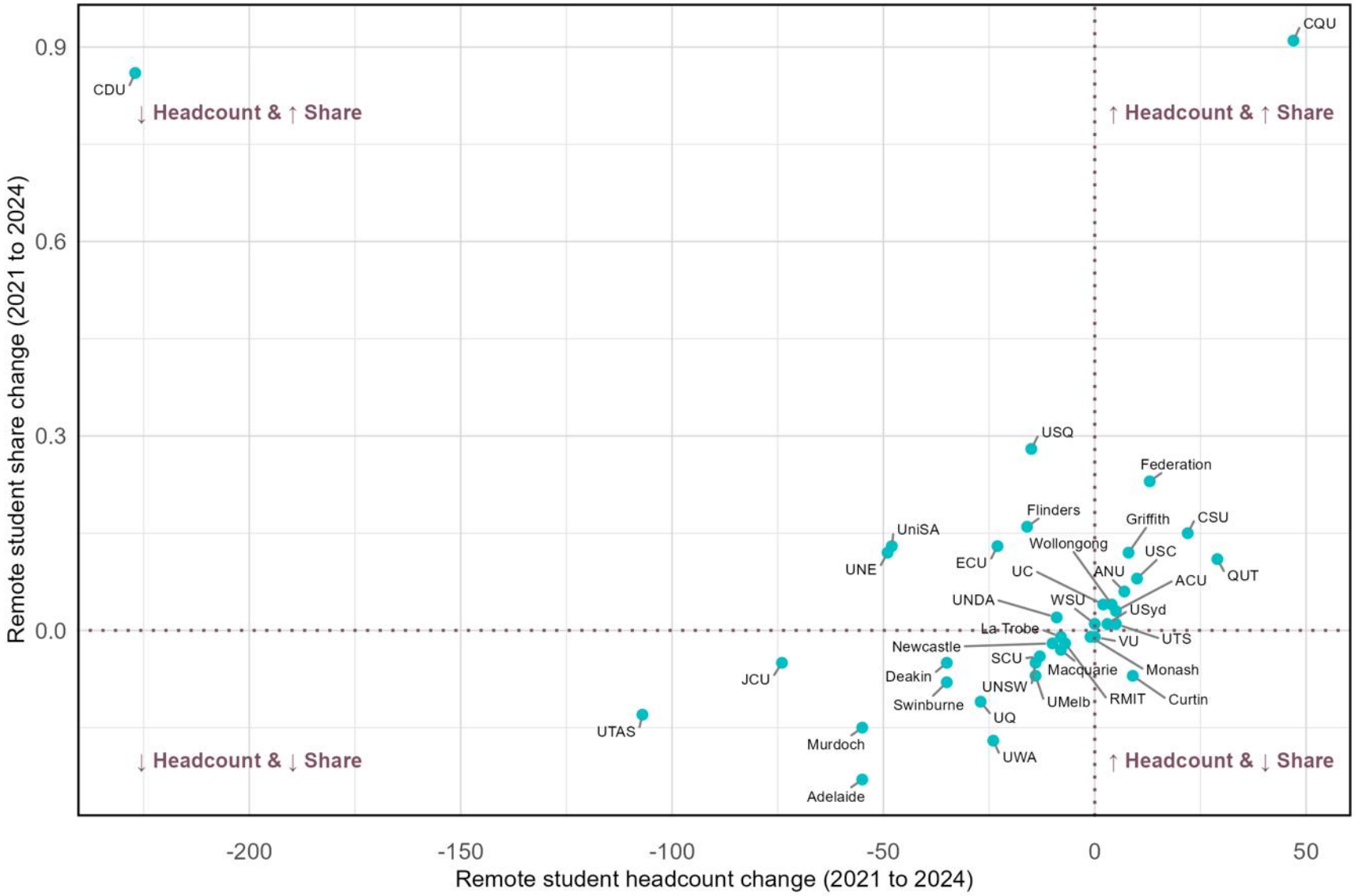


Figure 6: First Nations Australian students: Relationship between changes in headcount and participation shares between 2021 and 2024

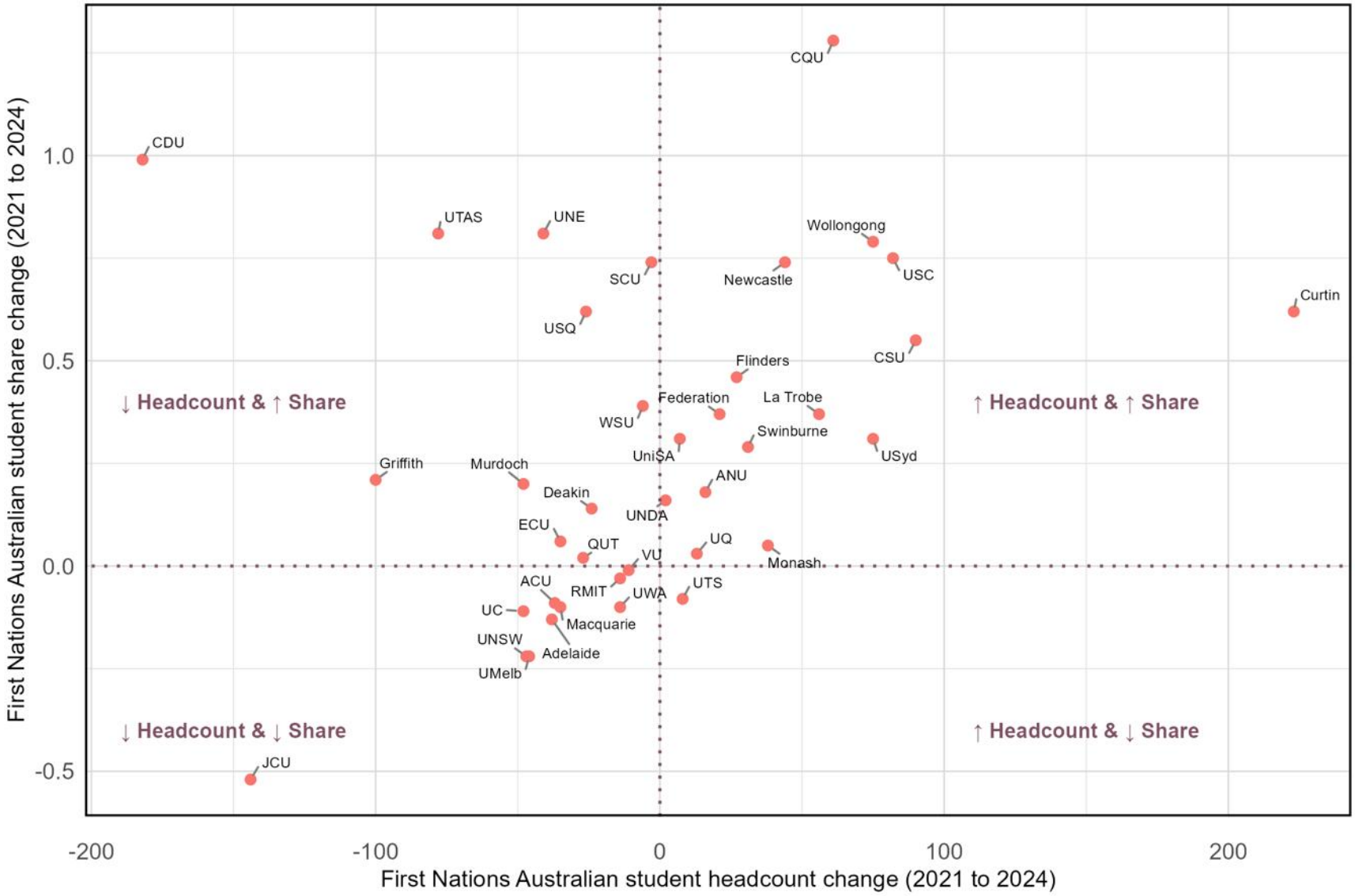


Figure 7: Students with disability: Relationship between changes in headcount and participation shares between 2021 and 2024

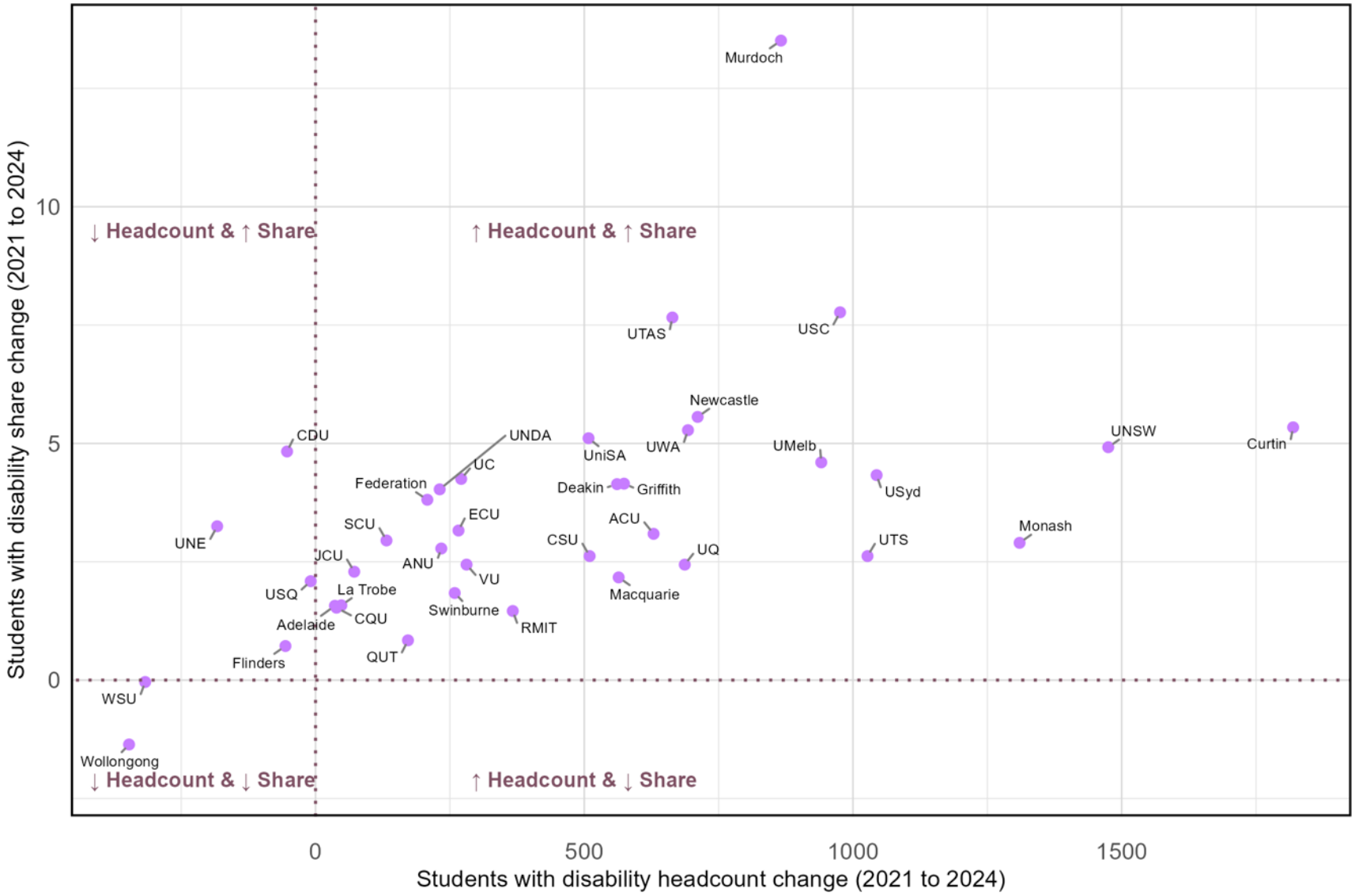


Figure 8: Equity students: Relationship between changes in headcount and participation shares between 2021 and 2024

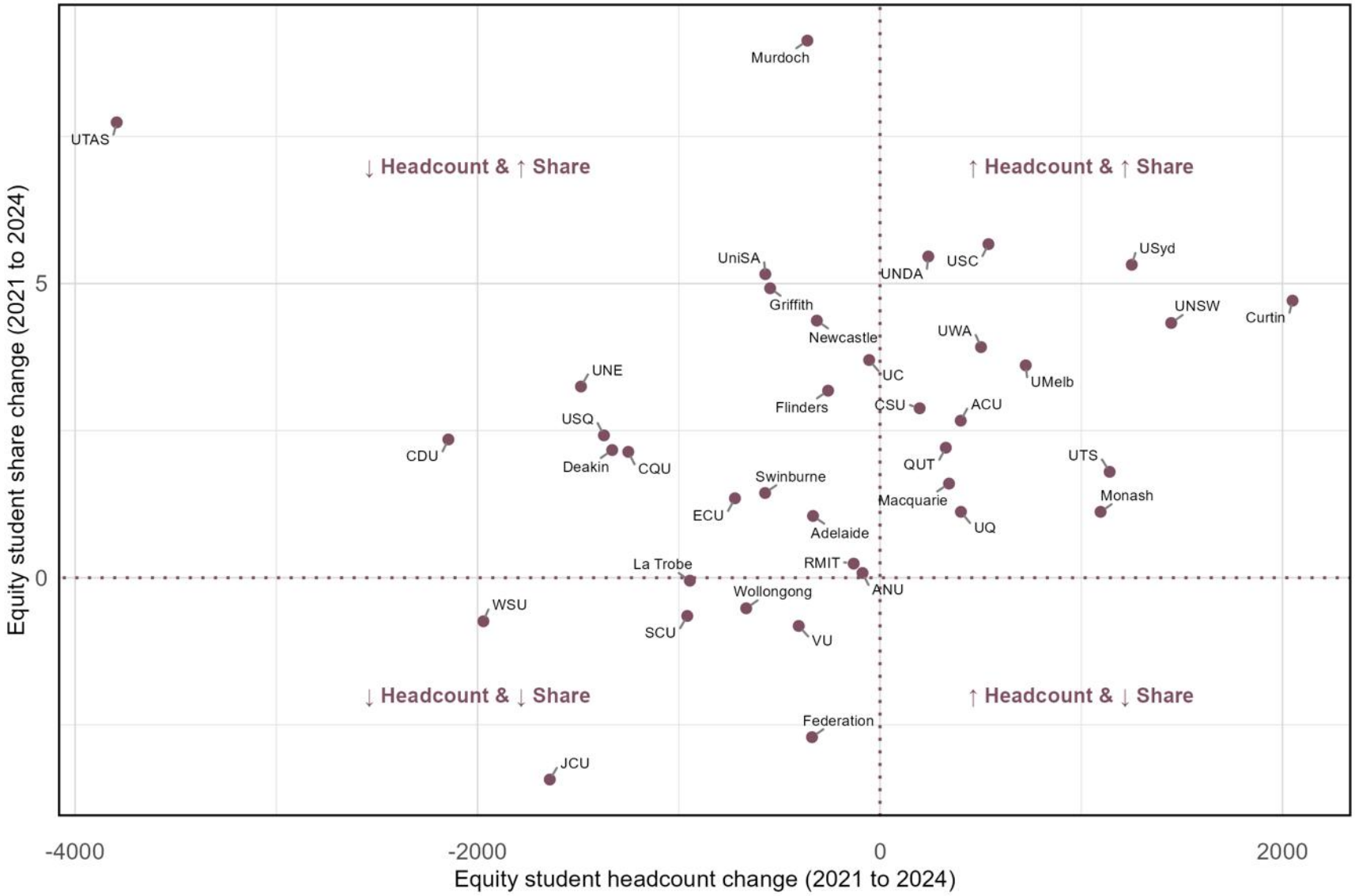


Table 2 summarises the distribution of universities across quadrants for each equity group, providing an overview of the patterns shown in Figures 3 to 8. Across low SES and regional groups, the largest number of universities fall in the ↓ Headcount & ↓ Share quadrant, indicating that declines in enrolment are being accompanied by declining representation. In contrast, students with disability are overwhelmingly in the ↑ Headcount & ↑ Share quadrant, suggesting consistent sector-wide gains.

Table 2: Summary of the number of universities by direction of change in headcount enrolment and participation share, 2021 to 2024, by equity group

Group	↑ Headcount & ↑ Share	↓ Headcount & ↑ Share	↓ Headcount & ↓ Share	↑ Headcount & ↓ Share
Students from low SES areas	5	13	18	2
Students from regional areas	8	12	17	1
Students from remote areas	13	7	16	2
First Nations Australian students	16	11	10	1
Students with disability	32	4	2	0
Equity students	14	17	7	0

Table 3 summarises whether universities increased both headcount enrolment and participation share for each equity group between 2021 and 2024, with "Yes" indicating that both measures increased over the period. Only one university was able to increase its headcount enrolment and participation share for all equity groups between 2021 and 2024, while three universities increased headcount and participation share for four of the five groups.

Table 3: Universities showing increases ("Yes") in both equity group headcount enrolment and participation share (↑ Headcount & ↑ Share) from 2021 to 2024

University Name	Low SES students	Regional students	Remote students	First Nations Australian students	Students with disability	Yes Total
Australian Catholic University	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	3
CQUniversity	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	3
Charles Darwin University	No	No	No	No	No	0
Charles Sturt University	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	4
Curtin University	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	4

University Name	Low SES students	Regional students	Remote students	First Nations Australian students	Students with disability	Yes Total
Deakin University	No	No	No	No	Yes	1
Edith Cowan University	No	No	No	No	Yes	1
Federation University Australia	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	3
Flinders University	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	2
Griffith University	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	2
James Cook University	No	No	No	No	Yes	1
La Trobe University	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	2
Macquarie University	No	No	No	No	Yes	1
Monash University	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	2
Murdoch University	No	No	No	No	Yes	1
Queensland University of Technology	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	3
RMIT University	No	No	No	No	Yes	1
Southern Cross University	No	No	No	No	Yes	1
Swinburne University of Technology	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	2
The Australian National University	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	3
The University of Adelaide	No	No	No	No	Yes	1
The University of Melbourne	No	No	No	No	Yes	1
The University of New England	No	No	No	No	No	0
The University of Newcastle	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	3
The University of Notre Dame Australia	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	4
The University of Queensland	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	2
The University of Sydney	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	5

University Name	Low SES students	Regional students	Remote students	First Nations Australian students	Students with disability	Yes Total
The University of Western Australia	No	No	No	No	Yes	1
University of Canberra	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	2
University of New South Wales	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	2
University of South Australia	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	2
University of Southern Queensland	No	No	No	No	No	0
University of Tasmania	No	No	No	No	Yes	1
University of Technology Sydney	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	3
University of Wollongong	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	2
University of the Sunshine Coast	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	3
Victoria University	No	No	No	No	Yes	1
Western Sydney University	No	No	Yes	No	No	1
Yes Total	**5**	**8**	**13**	**16**	**32**	**74**

Summary and future directions

The findings in this report highlight a dual challenge for the sector. Between 2021 and 2024, domestic undergraduate enrolments fell by nearly 56,000 students, and this decline has not been experienced equally. Students from low SES backgrounds and regional and remote areas saw larger proportional declines (around 9–10%) than the sector overall (7%), indicating that existing participation gaps may be widening, rather than closing.

Nonetheless, the performance of some institutions demonstrates that it is possible to increase enrolments whilst maintaining or even improving equity participation rates.

Looking ahead, reversing the overall decline in enrolments will be important, but it will not be enough on its own. Future growth will need to be actively directed towards underrepresented groups, particularly students from low SES and regional and remote backgrounds, who have experienced the largest declines. Without this focus, progress towards equity parity by 2050 is likely to slow further, and for some groups the gap may continue to widen. In addition, it is important to consider other performance measures such as retention and attainment, as gains in enrolment need to be matched by successful progression and completion, to support meaningful equity outcomes.