"HAVING A YARN:" FROM ONE RURAL STUDENT TO ANOTHER, PRACTICAL IN-SCHOOL PROGRAMS DEMYSTIFYING UNIVERSITY AND ENABLING STUDENT PROGRESSION

Brittany Brown, Samantha Avitaia*, Kylie Austin, Jaimey Facchin
University of Wollongong
*Corresponding author sam_avitaia@uow.edu.au

Abstract

The University of Wollongong's (UOW) Outreach program was established in 2011. In 2017, through a National Priority Pool Grant, UOW piloted the regional and rural outreach program, *Rural In2Uni*. The *Rural In2Uni* program enabled university students to "pay it forward" through a pedagogical model which places rural schools and students at the centre of tailored programs. Through a mixed-methods research approach, this study explores the diverse experiences of students from regional and rural areas of Australia in imagining and accessing higher education (HE). It also examines the extent to which the local implementation of schools' outreach impacts students' intentions for university. The research revealed the need to re-imagine partnerships for schools outreach, highlighting the importance of programs that embed local knowledge and strong collaborative relationships between universities and schools to foster progression and access to HE for students located in regional and rural areas.

Key Words: *Contextualised school outreach, collaborative partnerships, regional and rural, widening participation, aspirations and trust, increased awareness.*

Rural In2Uni Program

UOW's *Rural In2Uni Program* was delivered to four schools located in inner regional, outer regional and rural areas of New South Wales (NSW) and Victoria. The program endeavoured to change the focus of university outreach in the target areas, providing schools the opportunity to lead the program in partnership with the university. Instead of a 'one size fits all' approach, the *Rural In2Uni* program was tailored to the local school context while still offering a transferable framework that can be utilised by other regional and rural schools. The outreach workshops included in the program were delivered by current university students from regional and rural backgrounds, who often had previously attended the same schools as those engaged in the project. Specifically, the workshops involved on-campus experience days for primary and secondary students, HE awareness activities for middle-secondary cohorts, and in-school university preparation and career development sessions for senior high school students. The collaborative partnerships between UOW and the engaged schools fostered the development of an online resource package that enables any school, Australia wide, to work with a University to improve HE access for their students (UOW, 2019). This online toolkit provides schools with the resources to co-deliver university transition programs that have previously been unavailable due to remoteness, while further offering skills acquisition opportunities to teachers, careers advisors, primary, secondary and tertiary students located in regional and rural environments. For

the purpose of this research, the individuals and locations involved in this study will be referred to as 'regional and rural' (RR).

Background

Since the introduction of the *2008 Bradley Review*, students from RR areas of Australia have been identified as one of the most disadvantaged groups in accessing HE (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008). Koshy (2018) highlights that while RR student participation grew between 2012-2017 by 14.1% and 13.6% respectively, participation rates still fell behind those within other equity groups. This research is concerned with addressing these issues. After defining the RR student cohorts in this study, we explore the current barriers faced by RR students in accessing HE, specifically in terms of educational access, distance, economic and family factors. The paper also seeks to engage in the debate surrounding practices currently being embedded in RR Australia, including those widening participation (WP) interventions which are aimed at enabling post-school aspirations.

Geographical location in Australia is strongly linked to an individual's likelihood to participate in HE. Varied expressions are used within Australia to describe the locations sitting outside of the country's major metropolitan areas (Halsey, 2018). As classified by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), Australia is categorised into the following regions, Major Cities of Australia, Inner Regional Australia, Outer Regional Australia, Remote Australia and Very Remote Australia (ABS, 2018, Pollard, 2018). Research by Pollard (2018) highlights that students located in RR areas are more likely to belong to multiple equity groups. Koshy (2018) notes that equity group categories include low-socioeconomic status (SES) students, individuals from rural and remote locations, women in non-traditional fields of study, non-English speaking background (NESB) students, learners with disabilities and those who identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. Moreover, Nelson, et al. (2017) recognise that belonging to multiple equity groups has an exacerbating impact on the challenges associated with accessing and participating in HE. Edwards and McMillian (2015) further identify location as being a major factor in magnifying the effects of other equity issues. In this study 35% of non-metropolitan students compared with 27% of their metropolitan cohort, perceived financial difficulties as a reason for early university withdrawal. In addition, non-metropolitan students (along with students from low-SES and Indigenous groups) cited moving residence, health or stress, workload difficulties, study/life balance and the need to be in paid work as further reasons that impacted their decision to withdraw (Edwards et al., 2015). Such compounding pressure draws attention to why students from equity groups, from RR areas, stand out as a key focus for engagement in university retention strategies (Edwards et al., 2015).

RR students experience significant disadvantage in accessing HE, in comparison to their metropolitan peers. ABS data highlights that in 2017 almost 45% of people aged 25-34 years in major cities held a bachelor degree or above, with inner regional areas sitting at 20.5% and outer regional areas at 20.6% (ABS, 2017). While these figures are not reflective of previous RR student academic achievements, they highlight the reduced opportunities for employment requiring tertiary qualifications in RR areas (Barnes et al., 2019). For people who do hold university qualifications in RR locations, most full-time employment opportunities exist in Agriculture and Environmental positions, Health Services and Education while many part-time opportunities exist within the Food, Hospitality and Personal Services sector (Novus Group, 2018). Additionally, Vocational Education and Training is further recognised as a common post-school pathway for many RR people, resulting in a trade that provides immediate financial incentives and skills which align with RR employment opportunities (Department of Education and Training, 2018a). The Australian Government recognises the potential of regional universities as drivers of high-skilled jobs, presenting less relocation challenges for RR students when considering post-school tertiary options and employment in their area of study (DET, 2018a.). Regardless of this, having lower

proportions of tertiary qualified people in rural communities presents a multifaceted web of challenges that hinders RR student access to the important cultural, social and financial resources that support the pathway to HE (Smith, 2011). The literature reveals that bridging the gaps between RR students, and other student groups, entails a clearer enquiry into the key issues and social context in which these multifaceted challenges and disparity have developed (National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE), 2017; Fleming & Grace, 2014; Cooper, Strathdee & Baglin, 2018; Halsey, 2018).

Distance is a major barrier facing RR students in accessing and participating in HE. Gale et al. (2010) refer to RR students being faced with geographic challenges that require a *"significant social and cultural re-adjustment"* (p.39) upon moving for university study. As a result of an inherent comfort with rural living, RR students are less likely to progress to HE and instead consider a more restricted range of courses within their local area, even though this may not align with their career goals or abilities (Cooper et. al., 2018). This is in addition to other geographical challenges RR people face when accessing university including: relocation to an unfamiliar context, access to technology, negotiation of accommodation issues, costs associated with travel, limited public transport options and navigation of unfamiliar facilities and services (Gale et al., 2010; Halsey, 2018; Alloway & Dalley-Trim, 2009; NSCEHE, 2017; Cooper, et. al., 2018; Nelson et. al., 2017).

RR communities are often faced with having lower incomes, limited employment opportunities and decreased access to affordable health and education services in comparison to those residing in metropolitan areas (Cardak, Brett, Barry & McAllister, 2017; Mills & Gale, 2007). This has a direct impact on community expectations towards university study; as Halsey (2018) points out that the cost of foregone income while studying acts a deterrent for rural student university participation. In 2018, 17.7% of non-metropolitan students deferred their university offer in comparison to 8.1% of students from metropolitan areas (NSW DET, 2017). The NSW Department of Education (2017) notes that while many students have the intention to transition to university, internal records highlight that even 5 years after finishing school many eligible regional students had not enrolled. It is often students with concrete career plans and the economic means who are more likely to immediately transition to HE compared to those students whose future plans are unclear or who need to become financially secure prior to study (NSW Department of Education, 2017).

Students from RR areas are less likely than their metropolitan peers to have families who have had HE experiences. This has been shown to significantly impact on HE participation. For example, Cooper et al. (2018) indicate that RR students are less likely to be familiar with HE in comparison to individuals from metropolitan areas, who Vernon, Watson & Taggart (2018) argue, are *"more likely to have tertiary educated parents … resulting in strong expectations of a university pathway"* (98). Alternatively, research by Barnes et al (2019) notes the positive influence that regional community members who have studied at university, such as family and teachers, can have on equity student participation. Through interviews, the researchers revealed that when regional communities place a strong emphasis on the importance of education, it aids in creating a narrative which benefits not only the younger generation but also the overall success of the regional community. In contrast to this, Kilpatrick and Abbott-Chapman (2002) suggest that family networks concentrated in rural areas tend to reinforce the notion of aspiring for a local job, offering rural young people incomplete understandings and a lack of trust towards metropolitan educational institutions. This creates what Ball and Vincent (1998) refer to as *"grapevine knowledge"* (p.377) where RR people obtain information on HE information that is socially embedded within local networks and unevenly distributed through *"transgenerational family scripts"* (Ball, et al., 2002). Bok (2010) argues that the support of RR aspirations towards HE relies heavily on sustained encounters with individuals who have experienced navigating different pathways. This is often missing in the lives of many RR students, therefore preventing

encounters with an experienced peer who can challenge traditional perceptions of HE (Alloway et al., 2009).

University and school outreach programs are broadly recognised as an effective mechanism for widening the participation of RR students in HE (Fleming et al, 2014). Enabling RR aspirations for HE has predominately occurred through the wide-scale implementation of university outreach programs funded by the Australian Government's Higher Education Participation and Partnership Program (HEPPP). The Partnership element of HEPPP aims to "*raise the aspirations of low SES students towards higher education*" (DET 2018b). Current university and school outreach literature in Australia challenges the government emphasis on "raising" aspirations in order to achieve increased post-school outcomes for students from RR backgrounds (Spohrer, 2011). Instead literature points to the positive impact WP activities have on RR students' awareness of post-school pathways to *enable* aspirations (Sellar & Gale, 2011; Bok 2011). University-school partnerships have flourished in Australia over the past ten years resulting in outreach programs that involve in-school university mentoring, post-school pathways support, HE awareness activities and on-campus experience days (Fleming et al., 2014; Lynch, et al., 2015; Blackmore, et al., 2017).

While such elements work to address educational disadvantage by removing barriers to HE, an analysis of the research exposes the design, delivery and evaluation of schools outreach programs to be mostly university-led (Penman, 2010; Fleming et al., 2014; Lynch et al., 2015; Blackmore et al., 2017). This creates the risk of RR students participating in institutionally focused outreach events that offer a menu of activities, instead of programs designed through collaborative partnerships, contextualised to the needs of the school and in "*tune with the local community*" (Armstrong & Cairnduff, 2012, p.924). The literature reveals that contextualising outreach content increases opportunities for direct access to social, economic and cultural resources that render the actual pathways to aspiration attainment visible (Bartholomaeus, 2006; Cooper et al., 2018, Cooper, et al., 2017; Mills & Gale, 2011). Gale and Mills (2013) note that this is achieved through practices that "*work with rather than act on*" (p.15) the various forms of knowledge found within disadvantaged communities. Consistent with this approach, this study explores the role of WP programs in increasing access to HE for RR students.

Intent of the Research

Despite the increasing body of research surrounding the design and implementation of schools outreach programs, an identified gap in the literature exists about the impact of reciprocal university-school partnerships, specifically those that offer each stakeholder an equal role in the approach to WP for RR students. Thus, this study was designed to address the research question: *What impact does the local implementation of a university outreach model, based upon mutually-beneficial university-school partnerships, have on the knowledge and decision making of RR students regarding higher education?*

Methodology

Approval to conduct the research was obtained from the University's Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) who reviewed the research proposal for compliance with the Australian Research Council's guidelines for ethical research (Australian Research Council, 2019)**.** A mixed-methods parallel research design was adopted to evaluate the effectiveness of school engagement with contextualised outreach programs. The rationale for this research design centred on acquiring a deeper understanding of schools outreach in RR locations. The research utilised a targeted approach to selecting participants from the four RR schools as determined by the Australian Government's 2016 National Priorities Pool *Rural In2Uni* grant.

Engaged schools were identified as having a significant number of low-SES students, and not having current engagement with any university outreach program. All members involved in the study were able to withdraw from the study at any time. In the quantitative stage of the research, 221 students from Year 6-12 voluntarily completed a survey in the final session of each program. This sample size is a reflection of the total number of student participants who engaged with at least one outreach workshop as part of the *Rural In2Uni* program. Of the 221 students, 32.13% identified as first-in-family (i.e. did not have immediate family members who had attended university) and 14.48% of students identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. Due to the study focusing on students under the age of eighteen, permission was sought from the schools to employ an opt-out research approach. This involved the dissemination of an opt-out consent form to parents of students involved in the research detailing information about the study and the process for withdrawing their child's participation. One site did not want to use the opt-out method, so as an alternative measure, an opt-in consent form was available at that school for parents to confirm their child's participation in the study. During the qualitative phase of the research, 3 university mentors, 3 school teachers and 2 school principals volunteered to partake in one-hour focus groups conducted individually across the four NSW and VIC school locations.

The study captured quantitative data through a series of de-identified post surveys. Surveys were distributed to participants from Years 6-12 who partook in the programs. All surveys included a set of nine demographic questions based upon gender, cultural indicators and first-in-family status. Surveys were distributed at the completion of each program and were designed with a seven-point Likert Scale extending from 1-*strongly disagree, to 7- strongly agree* for capturing ordinal data through statements that measured student attitudes towards HE, education pathways and barriers to achieving career goals. The senior and middle-secondary cohorts completed post-surveys with additional ordinal scale questions designed to reveal participants' future study and work destinations, post-school career plans, level of confidence in seeking information and the impact that workshop content had on their decisions to attend university. Finally, all post-surveys included three open-ended questions that offered participants a space to provide their insights into the outreach program's approach to enabling students' awareness and attainment towards university (Robson, 2002).

Qualitative data were obtained from a series of five audio-recorded focus groups conducted with university mentors, teachers and principals across the four NSW & VIC locations. The focus groups lasted for one hour and consisted of ten open-ended questions that complemented the statistical information obtained from participant surveys (Davies, et al., 2014). The researchers provided school and university staff with the opportunity to member check the transcribed data (Creswell, 2012). The reflective process of focus group discussion assisted in the design of an outreach model that supports a diverse range of student needs, learning approaches and informed decision making of RR students (Herington & Weaven, 2008).

The analysis of data conformed to a mixed-methods parallel design with the researchers examining the quantitative and qualitative data separately, comparing the results and interpreting the emergent themes (Creswell, 2012). In the quantitative stage of data analysis, Likert scale responses were calculated using percentage, with the highest score being recorded in table format showing the precise number and frequency of overall measures (Creswell, 2012). The qualitative data were analysed according to the foundations of grounded theory and involved breaking the data into discrete incidents to create coded categories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The categories were emergent and took two forms (1) based on the researchers' interpretation of the data and (2) the participants' conceptualisations of their own experiences. These categories were redefined by the researchers as relationships and understandings within the data emerged (Glaser et al., 1967). This enabled the researchers to obtain findings that

accounted for the interconnected, yet disparate nature, of the diverse rural and regional contexts being studied (Basit, 2010).

Results and Discussion

The findings of the research revealed four corresponding themes relevant to the diverse understandings held by RR students and teachers towards HE participation. These included:

a) the importance of <u>collaborative school and university partnerships</u> that are locally-driven and school-focused;
b) the need for <u>contextualised and place-based outreach programs</u> that draw upon local community knowledge to inform program design;
c) <u>the notion of aspirations and trust</u>, particularly the importance of university mentors and students working collectively to support students' knowledge and skills for achieving their post-school aspirations; and
d) <u>an increased awareness of options</u> for RR students, a result of including university mentors from similar backgrounds as key resources for supporting rural students in demystifying HE and navigating post-school pathway opportunities.

Collaborative School and University Partnerships

One of the major findings of the *Rural In2Uni* program was the important role of university-school partnerships in delivering WP programs. Throughout the study it became apparent that for outreach programs to strongly support RR students, they require deep and broader collaborative partnerships. Billett, et al. (2007) classify a partnership as a collaborative working process whereby stakeholders identify, negotiate and articulate common goals through a continual process of learning. Institutional collaboration is recognised by Gale (2011) as a key component for increasing the engagement of underrepresented students in HE, a notion reflected upon by one School Principal involved in the study who stated:

> *there is a great divide developing between urban and rural kids and that's the core of our work… changing teacher practice and student practice, and community practice and the expectation that kids will need to work harder and differently to get in the world (Principal 1, 2017).*

The rapidly changing nature of the HE environment requires increased university presence to work *with* schools to provide up-to-date information that informs students' post-school decision making. The *Rural In2Uni* program found that universities are required to play a sizeable role in a whole-of-stakeholder approach to schools outreach, evident by the following principal comments made in focus group session:

> *…I think what you've done is really, really useful because otherwise it's, we're not the experts, the rules keep changing, that's your world, we're experts in this world" (Principal 2, 2017);*

> *Somebody external brings an entirely different sense of narrative …Having mentors down, it provides a different world view" (Principal 1, 2017).*

The *Rural In2Uni* program addresses Halsey's (2018) call for productive partnerships to eliminate an increasing pressure for non-metropolitan schools to do more with less (Naylor, et al., 2013). The *Rural In2Uni* model's emphasis on strong, local partnerships that are school driven, enables students from low-SES backgrounds to participate in programs that are delivered collaboratively between schools and their nearest university(ies). This builds the capacity of students from low SES backgrounds while also filling the resource gap experienced in so many rural schools (Vernon

et al., 2018; Naylor et al., 2013; Devlin & McKay, 2017). This gap is noted by one school teacher who stated

> *I tend to work on a student-to-student basis and unless they identify that uni is an option I won't go through the (process)….if they come to me and say TAFE, I just haven't got the time to say oh well you can go to university or let me look at that for you (Teacher 1, 2017).*

Partnerships that enabled close stakeholder collaboration to support RR students established post-school connections through engagement with HE. Penman (2010) highlights that such connections enable university to be recognised as a natural progression of primary and secondary school, allowing programs such as *Rural In2Uni* to aid in slowly removing any barriers that prevent effective transition between the educational contexts. Such outcomes are evident in the student survey qualitative data responses which detail students' favourite part of the on-campus "Future Finder" day through statements such as, *"Probably looking into careers that are involved with what your subject selections are for year 11 and 12" (Student 1, 2017)* and *"Looking at different careers in the subjects I enjoy" (Student 2, 2017).* The importance of outreach work which fosters the idea of a natural progression from primary education to university study is also recognised by one Principal who stated: *"I think our kids have to learn that learning doesn't stop" (Principal 2, 2017).*

Establishing personable connections and pathways through a collective outreach partnership approach supports student progression by linking student interests, school subjects and the notion of further study to successful post-school outcomes (NCSEHE, 2017). This is reflected in the quantitative data captured at the on-campus "Future Finder" day where 76% of students found the program beneficial and 83% agreed that after participating in the on-campus event they now knew what they needed to do to get the job they want after finishing school. Similarly, 83% of students who attended the Primary School *Kids In2Uni* on-campus experience agreed that they learnt something that they did not know previously. Viewing university outreach through the lens of 'achieving together instead of alone' positions school-university partnerships as key mechanisms for improving university transition (Vernon et al., 2018). Such models expose a multitude of post-school opportunities and make the pathways to HE more mentally *and* physically navigable for students in RR areas (Vernon et al., 2018).

Contextualised Outreach

Rural In2Uni's focus on collaborative peer-to-peer engagement and local partnerships fostered the development of WP programs that aligned with the specific needs of RR students and schools. The model achieved this by enabling RR schools to lead the delivery of WP programs in partnership with a university as well as parents/guardians and school alumni. This structure differed from traditional university outreach models and placed the schools at the center of the partnership. The qualitative data from the teacher and principal focus groups revealed the importance of outreach work which focuses on shared objectives and sustainable initiatives designed to provide long-term benefits to RR students:

> *I think we have found a really good balance, spaced out across the entire year, different focus groups at different times of the year when it's strategically important (Teacher 1, 2017).*

> *…The uni presence is definitely a huge bonus… the kids in XXXX… don't get to see a whole lot of other people from outside on a regular basis so having you come down… with your colleagues has been tremendous (Teacher 3, 2017).*

The *Rural In2Uni* program recognised the need for contextualised outreach content with educational opportunities based upon rural students' lived experience (Bartholomaeus, 2006). To address this gap, the *Rural In2Uni* program aided in the creation of a *"socially inclusive pedagogy"* (Gale & Mills, 2013, p.8) that positioned *all* stakeholders as co-producers of outreach program content. This enabled content to be adapted based upon specific learning needs, school resource requirements and preferences, while also considering the complexities that exist within the wider rural school environment (Penman, 2010; Devlin et al., 2017). The importance of integrating the diverse experiences of rural communities within the *Rural In2Uni* program is recognised by one school principal who stated:

> *… We're dealing with evidence-based practice, trial and, trial and run, and there's a really good chance that - and we understand in a small school - that what works really well one year, doesn't work really well the next year… It's always an ongoing negotiation which is the reality of schools (Principal 1, 2017).*

Reframing outreach work in RR areas is largely dependent on program content which focuses on opportunities for accessing HE, rather than barriers to participation (Halsey, 2018). The *Rural In2Uni* program was built upon the formula of school alumni + academic mentoring + university familiarisation, while maintaining sustained and long-term engagement. The researchers discovered that school-centered frameworks act as a motivator whereby university mentors from the same backgrounds as the targeted schools instill a 'if they can do it, I can too!' mentality for students from low SES backgrounds. Embedding contextualised content within the *Rural In2Uni* program involved a *"students as partners"* approach (O'Shea, et al., 2017, p.113),along with a *"place-based"* (Bartholomaeus, 2006, p.480) educational design. The local community knowledge of school alumni mentors, coupled with relatable in-school and on-campus educational experiences effectively supported the progression of the engaged RR students, demystifying the pathways available in a post-school environment. The importance of a contextualised outreach approach was noted in the focus group data, with multiple references to the importance of targeted progression activities and situating students in a HE environment:

> *I like the different focuses on the different year groups … it's like a progression and students don't think 'oh I've got to do that again' because it's something completely new… (Teacher 1, 2017).*

> *They need that context (Teacher 2, 2017).*

> *In my experience, is that the actual going to the place can be the start of actually making the perception "I can imagine myself here" (Principal 1, 2017).*

> *The physical exposure of being outside of school would be beneficial to understanding what is out there (Mentor 1, 2017).*

> *It has to be authentic to be worthwhile so otherwise we are just role playing (Principal 2, 2017).*

Contextualised outreach models, such as *Rural In2Uni*, promote the development of collaborative partnerships that enable the aspirations, awareness and attainment of individuals from underrepresented backgrounds in HE from RR communities. Such notions are reflected in the quantitative survey data with 81% of students indicating that the senior school University Preparation Program (UPP) had a level of influence on their decision to attend university. The results of such survey data can be attributed to the *Rural In2Uni* model framing program content according to the needs of each engaged school. This resulted in discussions surrounding tutorials, lectures and timetables to take precedence in some schools, while early admission interview requirements, career-ready and academic skills remained the priority in others. The flexibility of program delivery is noted by one University Mentor who stated:

…It (the program)… had that differentiation for the students in terms of whether they were 100% sure of going to university or not, it… kept all of the students engaged (Mentor 3, 2017).

Taking a flexible approach leads programs that possess a strong rural focus and specifically designed educational experiences that engage the entire RR learning community. Consequently, the *Rural In2Uni* program is recognised as a lever to increase HE participation in rural areas, allowing outreach work to move away from being a process of *"knowledge transfer"* (Scull & Cuthill, 2010, p.62) to become a vehicle for rural communities of practice and their collective forms of knowledge.

Aspirations and Trust

In the early stages of the project, the researchers discovered that the university mentors were considered as trusted individuals by the schools and students due to their rural backgrounds and experiences. This trust positively impacted students' willingness to discuss their aspirations, reinforcing that RR students do have aspirations for HE (Spohrer, 2011; Sellar et al., 2011; Gale et al., 2013; Fleming & Grace, 2017). The confirmation of RR students' existing aspirations was verified by one school principal who noted that rather than 'raising' student aspirations, the *Rural In2Uni* program offered a platform for 'enabling' students to map a pathway for achieving their post-school goals:

We have a really high correlation with kids saying that they would like to go to tertiary education. What they actually don't have is perceptions of what that actually means… the idea of running a program just helps people to ideate that sense of what that might mean and what they might do (Principal 1, 2017).

Reconceptualising university-school partnerships in a post aspiration 'raising' era requires the adoption of an alternative lens to view the design and delivery of WP programs. Appadurai's (2004) *'capacity to aspire'* offers one such solution, highlighting how students from regional and rural backgrounds do aspire but due to limited access to resources, networks and opportunities their ability to imagine their futures is negatively impacted (Gale & Parker, 2015; Smith, 2011). As one school principal states:

I think they self-select out between Year 5 and Year 9 … they still want to go to uni, but they don't think they are capable of doing it … you are putting yourself out there and if you don't meet that expectation you believe that the entire of the community and particular in a rural, small environment, think you're a 'loser' … (Principal 2, 2017).

The *Rural In2Uni* program adopted Appadurai's (2004) approach by creating a supportive educational environment where RR students were provided with the learning conditions for imagining their *"alternative futures"* (Sellar et. al., 2011, p.130). Such conditions created a trusted learning context in which students felt comfortable to remove the 'front' often established when discussing post-school aspirations:

…A lot of them are like 'I'm not even going to go to Year 12' but once we talked to them… they actually have an interest… (Mentor 2, 2017).

…You are turning something like 'oh that would be really cool but I won't say it out loud cause I could never really do it' into 'oh yeah I can do that' (Principal 2, 2017).

…These students are building a relationship with you guys as well (Teacher 1, 2017).

Sustained engagement with HE mentors from rural backgrounds offered RR school students the opportunity to see *"what is possible for 'people like them' to achieve"* (Austin & Hatt, 2005, p.4). The rural mentors aided in breaking down perceptions of a 'typical university student' resulting in students experiencing an increased level of self-confidence towards accessing post-school transition resources. This outcome is evident in the survey results for the UPP, where 91% of students agreed they had a level of confidence towards using HE and other training provider websites because of participating in the program. Additionally, 73% of students who attended the on-campus "Future Finder" day agreed that they felt more confident in overcoming barriers to HE participation.

University and school partnerships that are based upon trusted relationships between mentors and students work to develop students' knowledge and skills for achieving their post-school goals. The research discovered the importance of working in partnership with students to develop their knowledge and skills to be able to determine their situation. This included working with the students to navigate the expectations of the institutions that they are entering and focus on what outcomes and imagined futures would be of importance to them (Sellar et. al., 2011):

> *… There is always going to be one or two in each cohort that has university written all over them and will apply regardless but there was also some that didn't think it was for them but then after doing the program thought yeah I can do this! (Teacher 1, 2017).*

> *… Sparks are lit, and connections are made, sometimes they are actually life changing (Principal 1, 2017)*

> *This program was really helpful for me personally and has made me more confident with the idea of going to uni (Student 3, 2017).*

The sustained engagement of university mentors from RR backgrounds fostered a learning environment which initiated a sense of belonging for RR school students, directly enabling their aspirations and expectations toward HE through trusted working relationships (Eccles, 2009). This important component of the *Rural In2Uni* program situated the university mentors as role models for participating students, enabling them to become individuals who the RR students *"aspired to emulate"* (Austin et. al., 2005, p.2). Such practical frameworks offer an outreach model that empowers students to become agents of change against the social structures that limit aspirational achievement.

Increased Awareness of Options

Enabling the realisation of student aspirations within the *Rural In2Uni* program required the integration of content that increased students' navigational proficiency towards their post-school options (Gale et. al., 2015). Increasing this awareness required the university mentors to *"map more than tour knowledge"* (Gale et al., 2015, p.149) to provide RR students with a sense of direction. Ball et. al. (1998) present two forms of knowledge that can influence rural people's post-school navigational capacity; access to 'hot' knowledge passed on through a *"grapevine"* (p.380) of informal social networks that speak from *"direct experiences"* (p.380) and 'cold' forms of knowledge, such as information produced for public distribution. Smith's (2011) research highlights that in many low-socioeconomic contexts, such as rural areas, it is common for minimal family experience with HE to result in a lack of engagement by young people with informative hot knowledge about university. The *Rural In2Uni* program benefited from including 'hot' knowledge via university mentors whose informal conversations during program delivery aided in increasing students' awareness of post-school options (Smith, 2011). Such outcomes are evident in the UPP post-survey student data with 84% of participating students agreeing that they are

now familiar with the steps for achieving their career goals, while 93% of students agreed that they knew who to contact for the information they needed to progress their career. Such results can be attributed to the university mentors acting as translators of formal, cold knowledge sources, allowing the collaboration between mentors and students to aid in the interpretation of formal texts often encountered by RR students such as university websites and brochures (Smith, 2011).

The role of university mentors from RR backgrounds delivering the *Rural In2Uni* program assisted in dispersing HE 'myths' encountered by students located in RR areas. Such frameworks worked to increase student awareness surrounding financial, social, study, and career concerns. Mentors' lived experiences offered school students' an opportunity to realise what is possible for *"people like them"* (Austin et. al., 2005, p.4). Overcoming the barriers to HE was a key element noted by one mentor in the focus group interviews, who commented that prior to completing school they themselves were *…Unaware of (how to overcome) the barriers which was travelling, financial and being way from home (Mentor 2, 2017).*

Increasing RR student awareness of post-school options requires school-university partnerships that work collaboratively to demystify HE through access to resources and activities that offer *"practice, repetition, exploration, conjecture and refutation"* (Appadurai, 2004, p.69). In-school university preparation sessions were offered to senior secondary students, providing faculty and pathways advice, access to tertiary student resources, admissions advice and pathway planning. The addition of career development sessions for senior-secondary students was also an important component of the program. Such sessions offered a practical space for student engagement in 'career-readiness' activities, supporting students to overcome limited social networks experienced in RR areas. The outcomes of such targeted activities are noted in principal and teacher focus group interviews:

> *… It gave them pathways and real trajectories to follow in order to achieve their goals (Teacher 3, 2017);*

> *…I think what it did was confirm for the kids who wanted to go that this was the right path, it unpacked it for them it showed them that France wasn't just the Eiffel Tower, that there are a couple of other things they might need to be experiencing…(Principal 2, 2017).*

Allowing peer mentoring to unveil the often *"unstated expectations and requirements"* (McKay & Devlin, 2014, p.949) of university offered RR students a deeper awareness of how to achieve their aspirations. The emphasis that the *Rural In2Uni* program placed on stakeholders embracing a shared language and strong involvement in the co-construction of the outreach vision, supported students' awareness of the concrete pathways and potential career options available upon completion of school. This resulted in the *Rural In2Uni* model creating a shift in traditional school-university relationships for outreach program delivery, allowing strong partnerships to provide RR students with direct access to the necessary educational, social and cultural resources required to transform existing aspirations into reality (Bok, 2010).

Conclusion

Although most universities have developed schools outreach models, there are still many schools in RR Australia that are not engaged. To achieve long-term and sustainable outcomes for students located in RR areas, there is an identified need to re-imagine WP partnerships. The *Rural In2Uni* Program has revealed that effective partnerships must be tailored to the local context that promotes effective interventions to encourage HE participation through strong community collaboration. The *Rural In2Uni* program's emphasis on collaboration enables the development of differentiated WP activities that are contextualised to the engaged school context and designed

to overcome barriers to HE participation. The *Rural In2Uni* program has resulted in the continuation of working relationships between UOW and the target schools, enabling sustained engagement with students from LSES backgrounds located in RR locations. The findings of the 2017 *Rural In2Uni* program highlight that enhancing capacity for RR students to make informed post-school decisions is a collaborative process that involves strong partnerships between universities and schools.

References

Alloway, N., & Dalley-Trim, L. (2009). "High and Dry" in rural Australia: Obstacles to student aspirations and expectations. *Rural Society*, 19(1), 49–59. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.5172/rsj.351.19.1.49

Appadurai, A. (2004). The Capacity to aspire: Culture and the terms of recognition. In V. Rao & M. Walton (Eds.), *Culture and public action* (pp. 59–84). Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Armstrong, D., & Cairnduff, A. (2012). Inclusion in higher education: issues in university–school partnership. *International Journal of Inclusive Education,* 16(9), 917-928. doi: 10.1080/13603116.2011.636235

Austin, M., & Hatt, S. (2005). The Messengers are the Message: A Study of the Effects of Employing Higher Education Student Ambassadors to Work with School Students. *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, 7(1), 1-8.

Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2017). Education and Work, Australia, May 2017. Retrieved from http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/DetailsPage/6227.0May%202017?OpenDocument

Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2018b). *Defining Remoteness Areas.* Retrieved from http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Latestproducts/1270.0.55.005Main%20Features15July%202016?opendocument&tabname=Summary&prodno=1270.0.55.005&issue=July%202016&num=&view=

Australian Research Council. (2019). *Codes and Guidelines.* Retrieved from http://www.arc.gov.au/codes-and-guidelines

Ball, S.J, & Vincent. C. (1998). "I Heard It on the Grapevine": "Hot" Knowledge and School Choice. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, (3), 377. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1080/0142569980190307

Ball, S.J., & Davies, J., Miriam., & Reay, D. (2002). 'Classification' and 'Judgement': Social class and the 'cognitive structures' of choice of Higher Education. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 23(1), 51-72, doi: 10.1080/01425690120102854

Barnes, R.K., Kilpatrick, S., Woodroffe, J., Crawford, N., Emery, S., Burns, G., & Nobl, M. (2019). *Regional communities' influences on equity participation in higher education.* University of Tasmania. Retrieved from https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/publications/regional-communities-influences-on-equity-participation-higher-education/

Bartholomaeus, P. (2006). Some rural examples of place-based education. *International Education Journal.* 7 (4), 480-489. Retrieved from https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ854303.pdf

Basit, T.N. (2010). *Conducting Research in Educational Contexts.* London: Continuum International Publishing Group.

Billett, S., Ovens, C., Clemans, A., & Seddon, T. (2007). Collaborative working and contested practices: forming, developing and sustaining social partnerships in education. *Journal of Education Policy*, 22(6), 637–656. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1080/02680930701625288

Blackmore, J., Hutchison, K., & Keary, A. (2017). School principals speaking back to widening participation policies in higher education. *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 49(2), 108-127. doi: 10.1080/00220620.2017.1284766

Bok, J. (2010). The capacity to aspire to higher education: "It's like making them do a play without a script." *Critical Studies in Education*, 51(2), 163–178. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1080/17508481003731042

Bradley, D., Noonan, P., Nugent, H., & Scales, B. (2008). *Review of Australian higher education: Final report*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia. Retrieved from National Centre for Vocational Education Research website: http://www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv%3A32134

Cardak, B., Matthew, B., Barry, P., McAllister, R., Bowden, M., Bahtsevanoglou, J. & Vecci, J. (2017). *Regional student participation and migration: Analysis of factors influencing regional student participation and internal migration in Australian higher education*. Perth: National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education. Retrieved from https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/publications/regional-student-participation-and-migration-analysis-of-factors-influencing-regional-student-participation-and-internal-migration-in-australian-higher-education/

Cooper, G., Baglin, J., & Strathdee, R. (2017). *Access to higher education: Does distance impact students' intentions to attend university?* National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, Curtin University: Perth. Retrieved from https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/publications/access-to-higher-education-does-distance-impact-students-intentions-to-attend-university/

Cooper, G., Strathdee, R., & Baglin, J. (2018). Examining geography as a predictor of students' university intentions: A logistic regression analysis. *Rural Society*, 27(2), 83–93. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1080/10371656.2018.1472909

Creswell, J.W. (2012). *Educational Research: Planning, Conducting, and Evaluating Quantitative and Qualitative Research* (4th ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson Education

Davies, K., Lambert, H., Turner, A., Jenkins, E., Aston, V., & Rolfe, G. (2014). Making a difference: using action research to explore our educational practice. *Educational Action Research*, 22(3), 380-396. doi:10.1080/09650792.2013.872575

Department of Education & Training. (2018a). *Undergraduate Applications, Offers and Acceptances 2017.* Retrieved from https://www.education.gov.au/undergraduate-applications-offers-and-acceptances-publications

Department of Education and Training. (2018b). *Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program.* Retrieved from https://www.education.gov.au/higher-education-participation-and-partnerships-programme-heppp

Department of Education and Training. (2018). *National Regional, Rural and Remote Education Strategy Framing Paper*. Regional Education Expert Advisory Group. Retrieved from https://www.education.gov.au/national-regional-rural-and-remote-education-strategy

Devlin, M., & McKay, J. (2017). *Facilitating Success for Students from Low Socioeconomic Status Backgrounds at Regional Universities*. Federation University Australia. Retrieved from https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/project/facilitating-success-students-low-socioeconomic-status-backgrounds-regional-universities-2/

Eccles, J. (2009). Who am I and what am I going to do with my life? Personal and collective identities as motivators of action. *Educational Psychologist*, 44(2), 78–89. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1080/00461520902832368

Edwards, D. & McMillan, J. (2015). *Completing university in a growing sector: Is equity an issue?* Report submitted to the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, Australia. Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), Melbourne, Australia. Retrieved from https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/publications/completing-university-in-a-growing-sector-is-equity-an-issue/

Fleming, M. J., & Grace, D. M. (2014). Increasing participation of rural and regional students in higher education. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 36(5), 483–495. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2014.936089

Fleming, M. J., & Grace, D. M. (2017). Beyond aspirations: Addressing the unique barriers faced by rural Australian students contemplating university. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 41(3), 351–363. doi: 10.1080/0309877X.2015.1100718

Gale, T. (2011). Expansion and equity in Australian higher education: Three propositions for new relations. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 32(5), 669–685. doi:10.1080/01596306.2011.620751

Gale, T. (2012). Towards a southern theory of student equity in Australian higher education: Enlarging the rationale for expansion. *International Journal of Sociology of Education*, 1(3), pp. 238-262. Retrieved from http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30051449

Gale, T., Hattam, R., Comber, B., Tranter, D., Bills, D., Sellar, S., & Parker, S. (2010). *Interventions early in school as a means to improve higher education outcomes for disadvantaged students*. Retrieved from http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30040776

Gale, T., & Mills, C. (2013). creating spaces in higher education for marginalised Australians: Principles for socially inclusive pedagogies. *Enhancing Learning in the Social Sciences*, 5(2), 7-19. doi: 10.11120/elss.2013.00008

Gale, T., & Parker, S. (2015). To aspire: A systematic reflection on understanding aspirations in higher education. *Australian Educational Researcher*, 42(2), 139–153. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-014-0165-9

Gale, T., Parker, S., Rodd, P., Stratton, G. & Sealey, T. with T. Moore. (2013). *Student Aspirations for Higher Education in Central Queensland: A survey of school students' navigational capacities*. Report submitted to CQ University, Australia. Centre for Research in Education Futures and Innovation (CREFI), Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia. Retrieved from https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/publications/student-aspirations-central-queensland/

Glaser, B.G., & Strauss, A.L. (1967). *The Discovery of Grounded Theory Strategies for Qualitative Research*. New Brunswick (USA): Aldine Transaction.

Halsey, J. (2018). *Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education: Final Report*. Retrieved from https://docs.education.gov.au/documents/independent-review-regional-rural-and-remote-education-final-report

Herington, C., & Weaven, S. (2008). Action research and reflection on student approaches to learning in large first year university classes. *Australian Educational Researcher*, 35(3), 111-134. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1007/BF03246292

Kilpatrick, S., & Abbott-Chapman, J. (2002). Rural young people's work/study priorities and aspirations : the influence of family social capital. *Australian Educational Researcher*, 29(1). Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1007/BF03219769

Koshy, P. (2018). *Equity Student Participation in Australian Higher Education: 2012 to 2017*. National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE), Perth: Curtin University. Retrieved from https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/briefing-note-equity-student-participation-in-australian-higher-education-2012-to-2017/

Lynch, J., Walker-Gibbs, B., & Herbert, S. (2015). Moving beyond a 'bums-on-seats' analysis of progress towards widening participation: Reflections on the context, design and evaluation of an Australian government-funded mentoring programme. *Journal of Higher Education Policy & Management,* 37(2), 144–158. doi: 10.1080/1360080X.2015.1019122

McKay, J., & Devlin, M. (2014). 'Uni has a different language … to the real world': demystifying academic culture and discourse for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 33(5), 949-961. doi:10.1080/07294360.2014.890570

Mills, C., & Gale, T. (2007). *'Remind me; what's the point of schooling?': Factoring back in the influence of changing economic, political and cultural contexts*. Presented at AARE 2007 International education research conference, Fremantle. Retrieved from https://www.aare.edu.au/data/publications/2007/mil07182.pdf

Mills, C., & Gale, T. (2011). Re-Asserting the place of context in explaining student (under-) achievement. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 32(2), 239–256. doi: 10.1080/01425692.2011.547309

National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education. (2017). *NCSEHE Focus: Successful outcomes for regional and remote students in Australian higher education.* Perth: National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education. Retrieved from: https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/publications/ncsehe-focus-successful-outcomes-for-regional-and-remote-students-in-australian-higher-education/?doing_wp_cron=1539129917.7171969413757324218750

Nelson, K., Picton, C., McMillan, J., Edwards, D., Devlin, M. & Martin, K. (2017). *Understanding the Completion Patterns of Equity Students in Regional Universities.* The National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE), Curtin University: Perth. Retrieved from https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Nelson-Completion-patterns.pdf

Naylor, R., Baik, C., & James, R. (2013). *A Critical Interventions Framework for Advancing Equity in Australian Higher Education.* Centre for the Study of Higher Education, 1-52. Retrieved from https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Critical-Interventions-Framework-20-August-2013.pdf

New South Wales Department of Education. (2017). *Regional Transitions to University: Report Highlights.* Prepared by the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education for the NSW Department of Education. Retrieved from https://education.nsw.gov.au/about-us/our-people-and-structure/higher-education-and-tertiary-policy#Regional3

Nous Group. (2018). *Jobs and productivity effects of the regional universities network*, Regional Universities Network, Canberra. Retrieved from http://www.run.edu.au/resources/RUN%20Jobs%20and%20productivity%20report%20final.pdf

O'Shea, S., Bennett, S., & Delahunty, J. (2017). Engaging 'students as partners' in the design and development of a peer mentoring program. *Student Success, 8*(2), 113-116. doi: 10.5204/ssj.v8i2.390

Penman, J. (2010). Creating stronger ties and engagements with secondary and primary schools: A way forward for regional universities. *Studies in Learning Evaluation.* 7(2), 28–41. Retrieved from http://sleid.cqu.edu.au

Pollard, L. (2018). *Remote Student University Success: An Analysis of Policy and Practice.* 2017 Equity Fellowship Report, National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, Retrieved from: https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/publications/remote-student-university-success-analysis-policy-practice/

Robson, C. (2002). *Real World Research*, 2nd edn, Blackwell Publishing, Carlton, Victoria.

Scull, S., & Cuthill, M. (2010). Engaged outreach: Using community engagement to facilitate access to higher education for people from low socio-economic backgrounds. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 29(1), 59–74. doi: 10.1080/07294360903421368

Sellar, S., & Gale, T. (2011). Mobility, aspiration, voice: A new structure of feeling for student equity in higher education. *Critical Studies in Education*, 52(2), 115–134. doi: 10.1080/17508487.2011.572826

Smith, L. (2011). Experiential "hot" knowledge and its influence on low-SES students' capacities to aspire to higher education. *Critical Studies in Education*, 52(2), 165–177. doi:10.1080/17508487.2011.572829

Spohrer, K. (2011). Deconstructing 'aspiration': UK policy debates and European policy trends. *European Educational Research Journal*, 10(1), 53–63. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.2304/eerj.2011.10.1.53

University of Wollongong. (2019). *Rural In2Uni Program.* Retrieved from https://www.uow.edu.au/engage/outreach-pathways/in2uni/rural-in2uni-program/

Vernon, L., Watson, S. J., & Taggart, A. (2018). University aspirational pathways for metropolitan and regional students: Implications for supporting school-university outreach partnerships. *Australian & International Journal of Rural Education,* 28(1), 87–103. Retrieved from https://journal.spera.asn.au/index.php/AIJRE/article/view/167