

'Tipping Points' to Higher Education for NSW Rural and Remote Students



Education
Public Schools

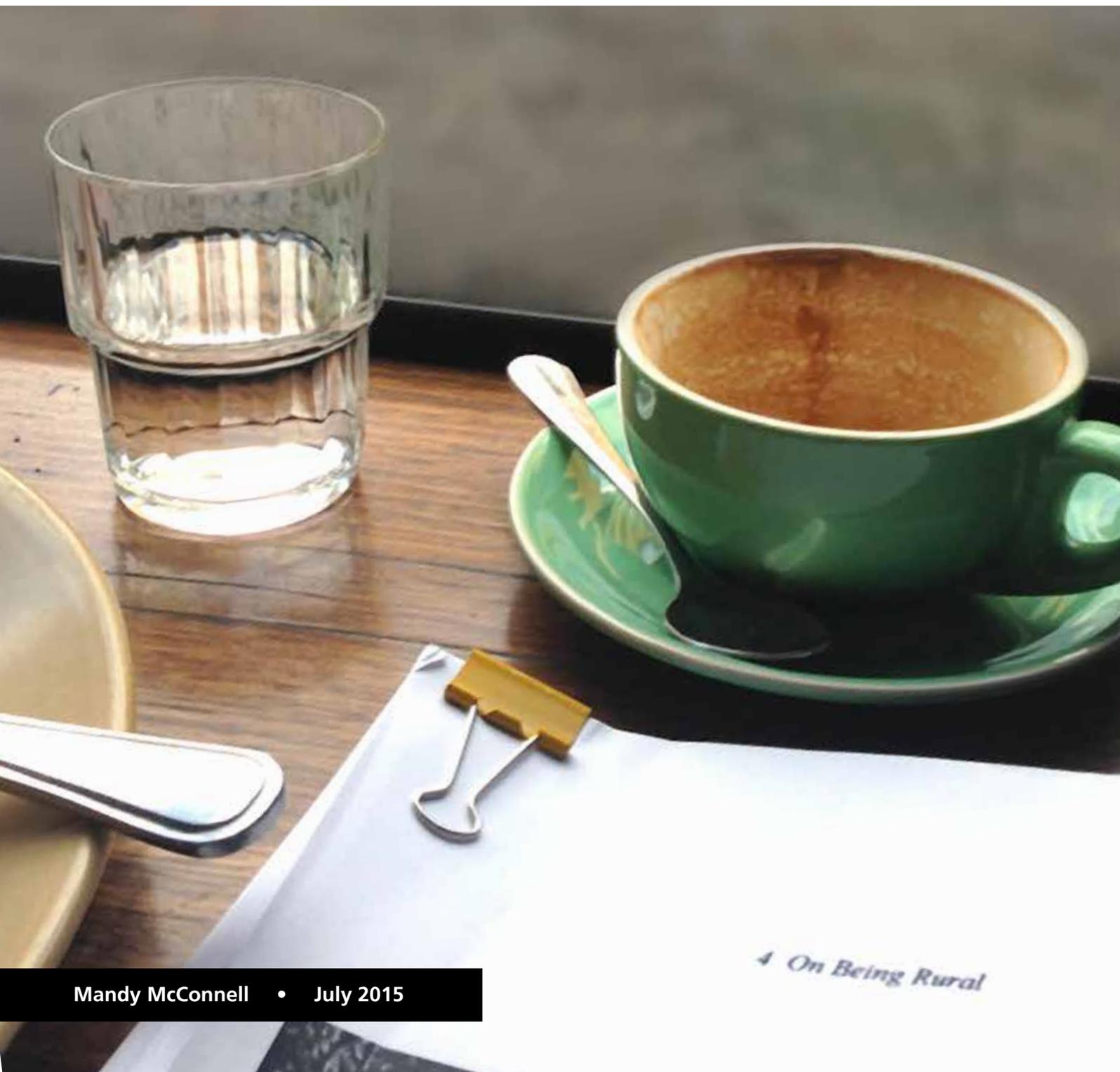
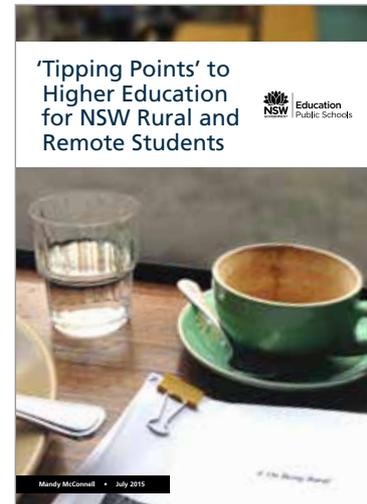


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PART 1 - INTRODUCTION

This report is one of the outcomes of a locally-developed project supported by Senior Pathways in Secondary Education in 2014-2015 in the NSW Department of Education. It addresses the concern identified in the Department's *Rural and remote education: Literature review* that 'where a student lives makes a difference to their post-school expectations and the pathways they take into further study or employment ... Living in a rural location also adversely impacts on the aspirations of high-performing students.' (p.7)

The project was undertaken by the careers adviser at one of the state's rural and remote schools. The report identifies key tipping points and provides both theoretical insights and practical steps to significantly improve the chances of rural and remote students 'getting into and staying in' higher education.

1.1: Synopsis

This report identifies the particular hurdles for rural and remote students in both getting into - and staying in - higher education. The report cites academic research and draws on interviews with university staff from more than seven institutions in NSW and Victoria working in the area of widening participation in higher education.

Those hurdles to higher education include the relationship between 'broadening' aspirations and the need for greater support to ensure academic achievement to realise those aspirations; unique financial, personal and emotional relocation challenges for rural and remote students; and identifying the need to start the transition to higher education much earlier in schooling, and to support the transitioning of rural and remote students for longer.

The report identifies 12 tipping points for rural and remote students and their families and these are summarised in the Executive Summary. The researcher was encouraged to include her reflections as a practising careers adviser writing for other careers advisers, and to identify gaps in provision and recommendations resulting from those reflections. These are provided in Section 2.3.

A really useful collection of resources for parents and students, ideas for schools and practical tips for students gleaned from the research is provided in Part 3.

This report strongly supports the *Curriculum access for all* platform of the Department's *Rural and Remote Education – a Blueprint for Action* (November 2013) and in particular the action that:

Students have expanded career options through innovative programs and strengthened partnerships between schools, ... [and] universities....

It is very pleasing that the international First Year Higher Education Conference in July 2015 was renamed as the inaugural STARS (*Students Transitions Achievement Retention & Success*) Conference. It included a focus within 'Transitions' on pathways to tertiary education and transitions into the first year experience. One session involved and addressed the needs of school careers advisers in rural and remote schools and their students.

1.2: Executive Summary

This project aimed to address the remoteness gap from the perspective of a careers adviser and border school. As an experienced careers adviser at Barham High School (175 students) in south-west Riverina on the NSW-Victorian border, I realised that equity of opportunity was as important for me as it was for my students.

In Australia, students in rural and remote areas are *less likely to expect* to go to university than their metropolitan peers ... Higher School Certificate results are also lower for rural and remote students who do stay at school to complete Year 12.

(Rural and remote education: Literature review, CESE, 2013, pp.7-8.) [Emphasis added.]

A remoteness gap exists in Australia that affects education opportunities and is to the detriment of regional communities' economic growth and social wellbeing.

Students and staff in rural and remote schools have limited opportunity to directly experience career and higher education course options and access avenues due to geographic isolation. Rural and remote careers advisers do not have the same equity of opportunity to attend on-campus university information seminars, as do their metropolitan counterparts, due to the time and cost involved. This in turn can limit aspirations, access and transition to higher education for our students.

The hurdle of inevitable relocation impacts heavily on many rural students and families, with associated emotional and financial costs.

Educational access, then, involves urbanizing the self, and when that self is rural with values of stability and connection, there is great resistance.

(Holt 2009, p.4).

This resistance may be a 'tipping point' for rural and remote students. This is a transition factor that metropolitan students do not encounter and contributes to the remoteness gap of access to higher education.

The varied classifications of 'rural and remote' communities and schools compound the issues arising from the remoteness gap. Schools and communities on or near state borders can be disadvantaged by these classifications when funding sources such as education are administered by the states and territories.

These issues include hurdles that affect broadening aspirations to pursue higher education and building capacity to address the lower academic attainment of rural students in general. Commonwealth funded HEPPP (Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Programme) programs, which support these outcomes, are such an example, whereby only targeted rural schools are partnered with higher education institutions. This results in an 'access gap' to these valuable partnerships for all other rural and remote schools.

Year 12 school leavers aspiring to higher education in rural and remote areas face limited access to support and advice during the summer months between December and February. This can impact on their decision to make informed choices on tertiary preferences, university and accommodation offers. The first year at university also offers transition challenges when relocation results in financial pressures, homesickness and a loss of a sense of belonging.

Students in rural and remote areas find it difficult to access financial support unless they are eligible for government benefits through Centrelink, which are means tested. This produces an inequity that by solely being 'rural and remote' disadvantages students over their metropolitan counterparts in meeting the financial pressures of higher education.

The remoteness gap produces unique challenges for rural and remote students in getting in and staying in higher education. These challenges create tipping points that can impact heavily on a rural student's success in aspiring to and attaining higher education. The tipping points are intertwined, complex and accumulated over time.

The tipping points vary for each individual student depending on their physical location, career interests, academic ability, school and home environment, and personal drive and resilience.

Broadly speaking the tipping points identified in this paper include:

1. How a school community is classified in terms of rural and remote eligibility, resulting in funding opportunities and access to other resources.
2. Whether 'rural and remote' is tagged with another equity criteria such as low SES. For example, when HEPPP funded programs invite schools to participate and when rural students are applying for financial support.
3. Exposure to career options to broaden aspirations including the ability to visit higher education institutions at an early age.
4. Support from the home environment to aspire to higher education especially when compounded by the pressures of inevitable relocation.
5. Whether academic rigor is addressed in the school in conjunction with broadening aspirations.
6. Whether special consideration by higher education institutions is given to rural students with lower academic attainment than metropolitan students.
7. Knowledge about, and access to, financial support to enable relocation and living away from home expenses, for example, Centrelink eligibility and success in obtaining scholarships.
8. Transitioning support during secondary schooling to prepare and arm students with strategies to meet potential post-school transition hurdles.
9. Whether those students affected by the 'reality check', and for some a grieving period or paralysis, that can result from the NSW ATAR being released a day after the HSC results, can overcome this and proactively seek alternative course preference advice.
10. Transition support during the summer months including access to personal career advice, positive encouragement to pursue higher education and support during the change of preference, offer process and enrolment period.
11. Whether a student defers a university offer, especially for financial reasons, and whether they lose the drive to pursue their offer in the future.
12. Transition support during the first year of university and engagement in orientation programs to enhance social connectedness, study skills and help overcome the imposter syndrome.

The opportunity to explore these issues and gain personal and professional development in doing so has assisted my endeavor to address the remoteness gap as a rural and remote careers adviser.

This report details the supporting background research, project methodology and findings, personal reflections and resultant personal recommendations.

1.3: Project Background and Methodology

My passion and drive to research rural and remote higher education equity issues began in 2008.

I was keen to investigate 'the remoteness gap' i.e. the education divide between rural and urban for rural and remote careers advisers and students and to support rural school communities through established careers adviser networks.

The key issues stemmed from the following:

- Careers advisers in rural and remote schools require currency to assist their students to overcome the 'remoteness gap' in aspiring and attaining access to higher education as well as preparing for transition.
- Careers advisers in rural and remote schools have internet access but limited capacity to attend metropolitan information days where practical advice and support is provided about access opportunities for their students to higher education.

The key issues to explore were:

- Access and equity issues for rural and remote students i.e. 'getting in' to higher education.
- Transition issues (especially relocation) for rural and remote students i.e. 'staying in' higher education.

This research has been undertaken in context of the [Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians \(2008\)](#). These goals include promoting equity and excellence regardless of geographic location as well as supporting young Australians to reach their full potential.

Through my initial research in seeking funding I discovered the timely nature of this project and its connection to government initiatives and research in the field. These included:

National Higher Education Reforms

- The December 2008 [Review of Australian Higher Education](#) (Bradley Review) and [Transforming Australia's Higher Education System](#) (2009) include a focus on equity groups in higher education in Australia: low socio-economic status, indigenous, non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB), disability, non-traditional areas and rural and remote students.

The Bradley Review recommended a Government target that by 2020 20% of all Higher Education student undergraduate enrolments will be from low SES backgrounds. Rural and remote students also predominantly feature in the low SES category. In 2009 the Australian Government injected \$435 million over four years into 'Transforming Australian Higher Education'.

National Higher Education Initiatives

- The 2010 [Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program](#) (HEPPP) stemmed from the above injection of funding to financially support higher education institutions to address widening participation at university for the above equity groups. Although HEPPP funded programs at universities target some rural and remote schools, they are not able to target all. Eligible schools are invited to participate based on the competitive HEPPP grant criteria. In reality, the amount of funding and resources could not cover every rural and remote school in each state or territory.

NSW Department of Education Reform

- The [Rural and Remote Education - a Blueprint for Action](#) and the related [Literature review](#) were released in 2013. The aim of this initiative is '...that over the next four years to take the steps necessary to reduce the gap in educational achievement between rural and urban schools.' The Literature review indicated that 'There is a sizeable 'remoteness gap' in student outcomes' (p.4); 'lower levels of [rural and remote] student attainment' (p.5) and that 'Available research has identified a number of obstacles to rural students participating in post-school study, particularly university....' (p.9). The Rural and Remote initiative includes as one of four key areas, *Curriculum access for all* with the goal that rural and remote students have expanded career options through innovative programs and strengthened partnerships between schools and universities as well as with TAFE, business and employers.

Reflection

- As a rural and remote careers adviser from a school not involved in a HEPPP partnership, I saw the potential to pursue the opportunity to gain knowledge and experience of a range of HEPPP-funded programs in NSW and Victoria. I would 'in-reach' to the university in lieu of an out-reach partnership and then share this experience with rural career adviser networks particularly through south-west NSW. This vision would not only address an equity issue but also contribute to the reach and sustainability of HEPPP based programs.

In order to do this I personally had to overcome 'the remoteness gap'.

From Aspiration to Research Project

In 2014 Senior Pathways in Secondary Education in the NSW Department of Education funded my project proposal enabling my aspiration to come to fruition. What began as a personal and professional need to physically visit a small number of 'feeder' institutions from my school (one regional, one suburban and one inner metropolitan), gradually expanded to seven universities with visits to twelve campuses.

I also delved into research to a greater depth than I expected and was fortunate to meet with experienced and passionate academics and practitioners in the field of educational equity. The journey grew beyond my expectations and I constantly felt I was 'in my students' shoes'. I grappled with city and campus orientation, academic research skills and the 'imposter syndrome' that particularly affects rural and remote students. This syndrome comprises feelings of inadequacy, self-doubt and being an intellectual fraud.

Project Methodology

As a preliminary step I met informally with parents and students. This included an informal interview with a small group of ex-students at the end of their first year of university in January 2014. The interview assured me that I wasn't making assumptions about the 'remoteness gap' and the hurdles rural and remote students face in aspiring to and attaining higher education. The students themselves raised many of the equity issues I was already keen to investigate.

The project methodology also involved:

- Research in the areas of rural and remote education, rural aspirations and transition hurdles, retention in higher education and access and equity issues.
- Visits to universities in NSW and Victoria to meet with and interview access, equity and transition personnel, academic researchers and HEPPP funded Widening Participation Teams at:

Charles Sturt University	University of Melbourne
Deakin University	University of NSW
La Trobe University	University of Sydney
Macquarie University	
- Interviews with regional scholarship programs: Country Education Foundation (CEF) and Chances for Children. Both these organisations focus on rural and remote students' access to educational opportunities through scholarships and grants. They also provide web-based resources for rural students and parents. They differ in that CEF empowers rural communities to fund scholarships whereas Chances for Children administers the scholarships themselves.
- Research and interviews about the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program at The Victoria Institute and Wodonga Middle Years College.
- Attending HEPPP workshops in seven schools and six on-campus school programs. Some of the programs included the Special Entry Access Scheme in Victoria workshop, Promote Yourself (E12 Early Entry) workshop, Perceptions of University (Year 10), Future Directions Day (Year 9) and Rural Students University Experience Day.

- Attending the 17th First Year Higher Education (FYHE) Conference in Darwin (July 2014) which featured national and international perspectives on transition and retention issues. This built on my interest in the University of Auckland's 'Starpath Project' and paper, *Stumbling blocks or stepping stones? Students' experience of transition from low-mid decile schools to university.* (Madjar et al. 2010)
- Attending the inaugural STARS Conference (July 2015) in Melbourne and participating in the Invited Panel, Bridging the Gap - From Secondary Schools and other pathways to Higher Education.

Reflection

- The FYHE conference exceeded my expectations. I gained exposure to relevant research, best practice and emerging ideas in student transition and success at university. Unknowingly, I was attending the last FYHE Conference. A change of name was announced for 2015 to broaden the agenda.
- After seventeen years the FYHE Conference was replaced by the 2015 inaugural Students Transitions Achievement Retention & Success (STARS) Conference. The significance for Career Advisers is that the Transitions focus includes 'transitions into the first year experience', i.e. an avenue for focusing on school to university transition and potential growth of engagement between the two sectors of education.
- The STARS Conference is an exciting opportunity for careers advisers to become actively engaged in this field, build networks with university personnel and gain professional learning to support students to not only 'get in' but 'stay in' higher education.
- Rural and remote students' transitions, achievement, retention and success will become even more paramount if the proposed government bid for deregulation of higher education fees succeeds. Careers advisers will need to be more supportive and aware of access and transition hurdles.

PART 2 - RESEARCH AND EVIDENCE

2.1 Defining Rural and Remote and Equity Issues

Several definitions of 'rural and remote' are in use nationally and by states and territories. Being classified 'rural and remote' has significant implications for these communities in terms of the levels of funding and other support provided by government agencies.

The MySchool website classifies Australian schools by four locations: metropolitan, provincial, remote and very remote. 'These [categories](#) denote varying degrees of proximity from a state or territory's capital city, and were originally defined in the MCEETYA Remoteness Classification 2001...'

The other main classification widely used is the Australian Bureau of Statistics Accessibility/ Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA). The ARIA Index is based on road distance to service centres and population of the service centre. The [Smart and Skilled](#) Reform of the NSW vocational education and training system (2015) uses the ARIA to recognize and provide 'loading' for the higher cost of course delivery in rural and remote NSW locations.

To identify which locations fall under which ARIA remoteness classification, each location must be searched individually.

An example of the application of the ARIA classification is the Australian Government Department of Health's [Doctor Connect](#) website. It allows the user to search by address to identify the relevant ARIA Remoteness Area that applies to that location.

However, the ARIA classifications are not perfect. In 2011, issues were identified arising from where places lie on or close to boundaries between different Remoteness Area (RA) categories.

(ARIA Review by the National Centre for Social Applications of Geographical Information Systems (GISCA), Final Report, The University of Adelaide, (2011)).

The table below gives examples of the variation in location/remoteness classifications:

Town/School	MySchool location	ARIA + Score	Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Remoteness Areas (RA)	Smart and Skilled Reform Classification (ARIA based)
Deniliquin	Provincial	2.46	Inner Regional	Regional
Barham	Provincial	3.08	Outer Regional	Remote
Coleambally	Provincial	3.68	Outer Regional	Remote
Broken Hill	Provincial	3.59	Outer Regional	Remote
Tullibigeal	Remote	5.48	Outer Regional	Remote
Lake Cargelligo	Remote	5.65	Outer Regional	Remote

It is not within the scope of this paper to identify which remoteness classifications apply to which sources of funding that support rural and remote students. However, it needs to be recognised that students' access to funding support, resources and services can vary significantly depending on the classification applied.

These discrepancies can result in equity and access issues which impact on broadening the aspirations and increasing the academic attainment of rural and remote students. This in turn affects their access to higher education.

This is a significant point that this paper is aiming to address.

For consistency, this paper refers to 'rural and remote' as used in the Department's *Rural and Remote Education – a Blueprint for Action*.

Equity Issues

There can be a close correlation between being rural and remote and equity issues. The Gonski Report in defining equity, states that 'it means that all students must have access to an acceptable international standard of education, regardless of where they live or the school they attend'. The report further adds that all schools must enable a child 'to realise their full potential'.

Equitable access to opportunity should be a 'given'. Unfortunately, distance and isolation often precludes rural and remote students from aspiring and attaining their full potential. Where a student lives and goes to school should not be a 'tipping point' in reaching their full potential.

NAPLAN results from 2010 show that students in remote and very remote schools are consistently outperformed by students attending metropolitan schools. While 92 per cent of metropolitan students performed at or above the national minimum standard of achievement in Year 9 reading, 79 per cent of remote students, and only 45 per cent of very remote students, performed at this level.

(Review of Funding for Schooling. Final Report). Gonski, D., Boston, K., Greiner, K., Lawrence, C., Scales, B., Tannock, P. (December 2011)

In 1990, A Fair Chance For All established the Commonwealth's overall objectives for equitable participation in higher education. The report identified six equity groups as requiring particular assistance [including] ... people from rural and isolated areas.

Analysis of Equity Groups in Higher Education 1991-2002. James et. al. (2004)

Reflection

- The access issue that concerns me most stems largely from the lack of initiatives directed solely at the rural and remote category. Gale and Parker (2013) state that 'Widening participation policy in Australian education has increasingly focused on the representation of this target group (low SES) (see Chapters 1, 5 and 6), often ignoring or subsuming other groups under a low SES umbrella.'
- Rural and remote can become a 'grey area' or 'umbrella term' that results in those who 'solely fit the rural and remote category' missing out on targeted equity initiatives such as Institution Equity Scholarships (IES). For example, although UAC identifies 'regional or remote' students as an equity group, most institutions' eligibility criteria state 'financial need' as the overarching qualifier for IES.
- The varied classifications of rural and remote further muddy the debate.
- Anomalies can arise because of linking of other equity groups with rural and remote, such as low SES. All of these other groups exist in metropolitan and/or provincial areas.
- **Being 'rural and remote' is a disadvantage because you are 'rural and remote'. Until this is recognized and addressed in an equitable manner, rural and remote students will remain disadvantaged in comparison to their metropolitan counterparts.**

2.2 Hurdles to 'getting in and staying in' Higher Education

The most common hurdles for rural and remote students include:

- Broadening aspirations and building capacity
- Relocation issues and impact
 - a) Financial issues
 - b) Personal and emotional issues
- Transition to higher education
- Border issues.

2.2.1 Broadening Aspirations and Building Capacity

The term 'broadening aspirations' is used in this paper rather than 'raising aspirations' after discussions with Professor Richard James, Director of the Melbourne Centre for the Study of Higher Education and now also Pro Vice-Chancellor (Academic) at the University of Melbourne. The term 'raising aspirations' infers that the students' current career goals are not considered good enough and that they need to aim higher. 'Broadening aspirations' highlights that those involved in the awareness raising process are simply widening the potential options to include higher education as a possibility.

The Department's Rural and Remote Education – a Blueprint for Action also states that 'Evidence suggests that the best way to raise student expectations is to raise awareness of career options, use innovative technologies to engage students, and provide appropriate role models and mentoring for rural students.....' (p.3) [Emphasis added.]

Broadened aspirations are developed by increased exposure to career and course options. However, these aspirations often need to be enabled by building academic rigor and achievement within the school system. Both areas require simultaneous targeting to support each other in enabling rural and remote students increased access to higher education.

The *Rural and remote education: Literature review and Blueprint* identifies the disadvantage rural students face in relation to broadening aspirations and academic achievement:

In Australia, students in rural and remote areas are *less likely to expect* to go to university than their metropolitan peers ... Higher School Certificate results are also lower for rural and remote students who do stay at school to complete Year 12 ... Provincial students in turn outperform their remote peers. This gap in performance has widened since 2008. The effect of lower aspirations and poorer HSC results can be seen in rural and remote students' attendance at university.

(Rural and remote education: Literature review, CESE, 2013, pp7-8) [Emphasis added.]

However, broadening aspirations is not a simple case of increasing exposure to career options. Broadening aspirations is also linked to family background. James et al. (1999) identified some years ago that 'the attitudes towards going to university of rural and isolated school students were *overwhelmingly shaped by their families and communities* rather than their proximity to a campus'. [Emphasis added.] Therefore, 'the value placed on university education' that can stem 'principally from socio-economic' effects and 'first in family' scenarios has great impact on rural and isolated students.

Reflection

- This evidence base supports the need for rural and remote schools to prioritise career education in the curriculum to broaden aspirations in conjunction with a comprehensive school approach to building academic capacity.
- To do this, rural careers advisers need professional development and support, such as the ability to attend Career Advisory Days at metropolitan and regional universities and professional association conferences.
- Schools now have funds under the Resource Allocation Model (RAM) to prioritise this support.
- Higher education institutions could consider initiatives to support the professional learning of rural and remote careers advisers such as a 'Rural Careers Advisory Week', whereby rural careers advisers could attend several higher education institutions' information sessions over 4-5 consecutive days.
- Rural careers advisers not only need to maintain their currency to properly support rural and remote students. They also face the challenges of cost and access to maintain that currency. This is an equity issue for rural careers advisers, other staff and ultimately students and their families. Under Local Schools Local Decisions and RAM funding, there is reason to hope this may no longer be an issue.

Broadening aspirations and building capacity – some initiatives to date

In NSW, broadening aspirations for equity groups took hold in 2009 when the Sydney Widening Participation in Higher Education Forum (SWPHEF) was held. Later in 2010, five NSW universities formed 'Bridges to Higher Education'. A collaborative approach was born to address the Bradley Review recommendations supported by HEPPP funding to broaden aspirations.

'The [Bridges Partner Universities](#) recognise that individual universities working alone cannot provide the breadth and depth of programs that research shows is required to assist both schools and communities.'

Unfortunately, not all NSW rural and remote schools and communities are supported by HEPPP funded programs. This in itself is an equity issue.

The HEPPP funded UNSW ASPIRE program data reflects positive impact on broadening aspirations. Partnerships with Sydney schools began in 2007. Partnerships with regional schools began in 2010. UNSW ASPIRE now partners with 57 schools, 30 of which are regional NSW schools (2014 data).

Data comparing the impact on metropolitan and regional schools is difficult at this stage due to the shorter timeframe that regional schools have been involved. Overall, ASPIRE currently demonstrates a 48% increase in offers to university for students from ASPIRE partner schools. In 2014, 29% of students from ASPIRE regional schools indicated a positive shift in attitudes towards higher education.

The UNSW ASPIRE data is significant in demonstrating the positive impact on broadening and attaining aspirations for equity groups. Limited access for all NSW rural and remote schools to widening participation programs, however, also creates disadvantage for those schools not involved in a partnership.

Building capacity in rural and remote schools is a critical issue. As the *Rural and remote education: Literature review* mentioned, the performance gap is widening between provincial and remote peers. Broadening aspirations and increasing academic attainment are not stand alone issues for rural and remote students and need to be addressed hand in hand in the school curriculum to truly have impact.

One example of addressing academic rigor is the AVID ([Advancement Via Individual Determination](#)) program. It is an independent program embedded in the school curriculum in conjunction with higher education partners. AVID equips low socio-economic and under-performing students with the academic, social and emotional skills to be successful at university and is highlighted as a case study for excellence in the OECD report: [Equity and Quality in Education](#) (p. 141). There is a financial cost, time commitment and contract for schools that participate in the AVID program.

The partnership between AVID and the Charles Sturt University HEPPP funded Future Moves program is an example of both 'broadening aspirations' and 'closing the achievement gap'. Wodonga Middle Years College was the first school in Australia to commence this partnership in 2009. The college has built an intensive suite of supported curriculum and extra-curricular programs to potentially achieve a higher success rate of offer and retention at university. Since 2009, AVID is approaching 25 sites across Australia with more than 10,000 AVID students. In NSW, it is known Macquarie University is working with partner schools from Tuggerah Lakes Secondary College -Tumbi Umbi, Berkeley Vale and The Entrance campuses in implementing AVID.

Reflection

- Widening Participation programs are largely funded by the Commonwealth Government. These outreach programs are generally located within state boundaries, depending on the institution and grant criteria. Border anomalies can result, limiting access for some schools. Stumbling blocks to access these opportunities are still affecting rural and remote schools such as Barham High School.
- Current research and trends are introducing students as early as primary school to contemplate higher education as a career option. However, access to university on-campus visits can be limited for Stage 4 and 5 students when a school is not given an opportunity to be involved in Widening Participation HEPPP programs. HEPPP refers to the Commonwealth Government's 'Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Programme'.

- University marketing departments are generally limited to providing on-campus services for students in Years 10-12. An 'access gap' results for non-HEPPP partnered schools who propose on-campus university visits for their students as neither HEPPP nor marketing personnel are able to coordinate the on-campus program. This access and equity issue arose for Barham High School during this project when the school attempted to implement a program to broaden aspirations for Year 9 students.
- This on-campus access issue will be compounded should HEPPP outreach partnerships no longer be funded and schools endeavor to continue to broaden aspirations for younger students.
- The HEPPP (Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Programme) was recently consolidated in 2015 to HEPP (Higher Education Participation Programme). The HEPP will have three components: the new Access and Participation Fund, the new Scholarships Fund and the existing National Priorities Pool.
- Higher education institutions are addressing the uncertain future of funding and long-term sustainability of these programs and partnerships. Funding through faculties, rather than Widening Participation, is one option for which some institutions are planning.
- Another option I foresee is to take best practice HEPPP programs and offer professional learning opportunities to all rural and remote careers advisers. This will promote sustainability by embedding the ideas, resources and partnerships in rural school curriculum and help overcome the access issues mentioned above. The 2015 Riverina Careers Advisers Association (RIVCAA) Conference is one avenue that enabled this process.
- Due to geographical distance, access to on-campus partnerships has to date been difficult for rural and remote schools. RAM funding to schools may enable these visits. Another possibility would be to integrate existing visits such as HSC Study Days or Tertiary Tours with partnership programs.
- An AVID type program provides a holistic approach to broadening aspirations and building capacity. State and territory education departments could investigate this opportunity for rural and remote schools.

2.2.2 Relocation Issues and impact

Most rural and remote students have no other choice, other than to relocate to take up higher education opportunities. As a result they face financial and emotional issues that are generally intertwined.

Unlike other western countries, Australian young people do not have the tradition of moving away from home to go to university; the most common living arrangement for Australians in their twenties is to be living in the parental home' (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2005). For rural young people accessing tertiary studies, however, staying at home is rarely an option ... Thus, within Australian higher education, mobility is an ontological absolute for a rural young person.

(Holt, 2009 p.1).

Metropolitan students who live at home during university study do not contend with the same issues. For example, the financial cost of contemplating university may initially prevent rural and remote students from even raising at home the conversation of aspiring to university. Without potential encouragement and support from home, these students may not apply for university.

If they do apply and are successful, the added financial burden of relocating and surviving first year may be impacted by a student's need to work part-time. Depending on the number of hours worked this may affect study time and ability to connect socially with others and maintain connections with home. This in turn may limit their successful transition in the first year to higher education and attainment.

a) Financial Issues

The Rural and remote education: Literature review identified that rural students are highly conscious of the potential financial impact of higher education on their family, and that some students apply for scholarships without telling their parents. If they are unsuccessful their parents would not find out they had tried to find a way to attend university that would not impact on their family finances. (p9.)

Deferring a university offer and taking a 'gap year' to earn money is an option rural and remote students often contemplate.

Gap Year

Young people from regional and remote areas undertake a gap year at a greater rate than those in metropolitan areas' and 'taking a gap year for economic reasons may be particularly pertinent to certain groups of students, such as those from rural and remote areas, where there is an extra cost associated with relocating to study.

(Lumsden and Stanwick in *Who takes a gap year and why?* LSAY, 2012)

Deferment

The release of the Final Report 'Deferring a University Offer in Victoria' (Freeman, B., Klatt, M., Polesel, J. (June 2014) adds significant support to the hurdles rural and remote students face in accessing higher education and inequities faced, from the voices of students in regional Victoria.

The report states that:

Young people from non-metropolitan areas defer their university offer at twice the rate of their metropolitan counterparts, nearly 40% of deferrals do not take up their university offer after a year of deferment, and that financial stresses and travel related factors seem to be the biggest barriers to taking up their place at university, particularly in the first year out of school.

This data emphatically demonstrates rural disadvantage in accessing higher education. At this stage it may be timely to address the opportunities and possibilities to address the financial issues.

Scholarships for Rural and Remote Students

'...no takers for tens of thousands of dollars in scholarships...'

This alarming comment is taken from the 2013 media release by Sarah Taylor, CEO, Country Education Foundation (CEF). She followed with, 'There are some great opportunities out there but students often don't know about them and in many cases they simply don't have the confidence to apply for them because they don't think they'll be successful.'

Several issues lay within this media release such as advertising of scholarships, meeting the criteria and having the confidence and skills to apply for the scholarships. The CEF used this statement to highlight the fact that students need to be proactive when seeking financial support through scholarships. Schools also need to be proactive in promoting these scholarships.

The [Country Education Foundation](http://cef.org.au) empowers rural communities to support young people in their community to fulfill their dreams. CEF also, within the power of its resources, provides support for young people, parents and communities to source scholarships as well as survive transition away from their local community. CEF also partners with Bridges to Higher Education to broaden aspirations of rural and remote students. More information is available at: <https://cef.org.au/students/student-support/>.

The Chances for Children program operates on a similar premise in the Mallee region along the Victorian and NSW border, although 'Chances' management administers the financial support rather than individual communities. It has developed the '[Chances Tertiary Resource Guide](#)', as well as supporting rural and remote students with school and higher education financial support and mentoring.

Sourcing scholarships is a difficult and time-consuming task for any student as the origin of scholarships can vary from institutions to private industry to Shire Councils to individual benefactors. Rural and remote students have a greater need to source financial assistance due to their immediate relocation and living costs in attending higher education. Unlike a HECS debt, relocation costs cannot be deferred.

Paradoxically the centralised application systems through tertiary admission centres can inadvertently relax a student's drive to research and apply further afield. Students may think they have 'covered all bases' by applying through the centralised system. The challenging task for students sourcing and applying for scholarships, frequently with the support of their careers advisers, also places demands on a student's time and research skills at an already time precious period during their final year at school.

Building confidence to apply for scholarships is a key factor for rural and remote students who often feel they will not be competitive applicants, especially for merit-based criteria. The University of Sydney COMPASS team delivers a well-honed workshop to partner schools on preparing for their E12 applications. It empowers students from low-SES schools to address the selection criteria and 'promote themselves'.

Another supportive financial strategy gleaned from this study project includes the Kalamazoo Promise scholarship model that [La Trobe University](#) is encouraging in the Shepparton area in Victoria. The model promotes the concept 'school regionally, study regionally, stay regionally' with the overarching aim of building economic capacity in a regional area whilst providing access to higher education.

Proximity to 'study regionally' is a further issue. If access to study regionally still requires relocation how is it addressed? The Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee's 2009 inquiry into *Rural and regional access to secondary and tertiary education opportunities* strongly recommended a Tertiary Access Allowance for students who are required to move away from home ([Recommendation 4, S 5.17](#)). This would be a practical incentive for students and their families where relocation is inevitable and succinctly addresses the major issues. It would not be means tested on parental income, nor is it linked or 'tagged' to any other income support payment and would be available to any student required to move away from home to pursue their choice of tertiary study. At the time of writing, this recommendation has not been adopted.

The Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia is an active supporter of current lobbying for the tertiary access allowance. ICPA (Australia) recognises the inequity of tagging the current federally funded Relocation Scholarship to dependent Youth Allowance recipients only.

All rural and remote students are presented with the same high costs for relocation regardless of whether or not they are a dependent Youth Allowance recipient. A tertiary access allowance would enable a rural and remote student to access their place of study including securing accommodation, assisting with relocation expenses, travelling to their institution for enrolment to commence study and facilitating travel home during the year.

(ICPA (Australia) Current Issues, 2014.)

Reflection

- Perhaps the practicalities outweigh the potential dreams of rural and remote students? Should the lens be framed on the recent decade of drought and other contributing economic factors that compound rural disadvantage?
- To open the door wide enough for rural and remote students to contemplate entering higher education, financial issues need to be addressed in a more substantive practical manner. The weight of these issues and the complexities involved are beyond the scope of this study yet close to the heart of many access and transition inequities.

Some possible ways forward include:

- The University of Sydney E12 COMPASS workshop could be adapted, shared and delivered by school staff in rural and remote schools to empower students to build confidence and skills to apply for scholarships.
- Individual schools could target a current internal or external scholarship or award, and conduct a formal application process. This process would help build students skills in written applications. Students would learn how to address scholarship criteria and identify their own strengths and extra-curricular activities. An interview panel could be conducted and feedback given to all applicants. This would enable students to develop application writing skills and build self-confidence through participating in an internal 'application process'.
- As part of this project, a workshop titled 'Application Writing' was devised in conjunction with Charles Sturt University with pilot workshops conducted late in 2014 and more are planned.
- 'Weighting' of scholarships is indeed a challenging thought but one with potential. Merit-based scholarships rarely recognise the achievements of rural and remote students when competing against their metropolitan counterparts. As noted above in CESE data (Rural and Remote education: Literature review p.8), these students generally achieve lower HSC results. What if a student who gained an ATAR in the 90's from a rural or remote area gained 'weighting points'? Would they become competitive for merit scholarships when assessed against their metropolitan counterparts? As rural and remote is an identified equity group a 'relative approach' could be considered to help overcome the inequity of rewarding academic merit against a bar set in the city. This weighted approach could also serve to promote academic aspirations in rural and remote schools. This concept is not dissimilar to how 'guaranteed entry' occurs for underrepresented schools or the regional bonus points systems.
- It is a frustrating catch cry from some institutions that their scholarships go un-awarded. Factors that determine whether all scholarships are awarded can be attributed to: status of institution (elite institution versus other), scholarship donor (hence selection criteria), number of criteria to be met, and promotion of the scholarship. Elite universities in Australia (Group of Eight) <https://go8.edu.au> generally have scholarships in most demand due to the large number and high academic quality of applicants. This is an instance, however, where 'weighting for rural merit' could come into play to compensate on an equity basis for rural academic disadvantage.

Scholarships that require multiple equity criteria to be met (such as rural and low SES), disadvantage students who are solely 'rural and remote'. This occurrence is ironically quite common for 'equity scholarships' at higher education institutions. Therefore, scholarships targeting rural and remote students who face inevitable relocation for higher education need to be on offer without low-SES financial need being a component of the criteria. Low SES students are already supported through Centrelink payment avenues.

b) Personal and Emotional issues

Besides the physical and financial hurdles of relocating to university, for rural and remote students there is the emotional hurdle of loss of connectedness with family and community.

The Department's *Rural and remote education: Literature review* recognises that 'Rural communities are known for being close-knit, and leaving behind the support of family and friends to study at a distant location is a genuine obstacle to a tertiary pathway for rural young people.' (p.9)

An interesting source of evidence from this sociological perspective stems from research on the 'rural cultural narrative' by Holt (2007).

'Educational access, then, involves urbanizing the self, and when that self is rural with values of stability and connection, there is great resistance' (Holt 2009, p.4). This resistance may be a 'tipping point' for rural and remote students depending on self-confidence, sense of purpose and adaptability. This is a transition factor that metropolitan students do not encounter and contributes to the remoteness gap of access to higher education.

In her research, Holt states the '...necessity of mobility results in an ontological absolute' in rural students' lives.' The move from rural to metropolitan is inevitable in a rural student's life story in pursuit of higher education. It not only requires physical relocation; it also carries a shift of identity from rural to urban. Although being 'rural' is diverse in nature, Holt found that 'as an identity claim, the rural is imbued with values, identity and ontological underpinnings that run counter to the globalised other' (2007, p.28). Many rural young people resist the 'new urban sophistication' and contradictory 'urban university's narrative of mobility and global citizenship' (2009, p.2).

This creates disadvantage when compared to metropolitan and or provincial students who do not face the necessity of relocation in order to pursue higher education and the potential emotional hurdle of contradicting identities. The 'emotional hurdle' of leaving home can impact heavily on whether a rural and remote student overcomes the 'remoteness gap', to successfully attain a higher education degree.

Tailored support for rural and remote students is therefore, very much needed. Vincent Tinto in 2007 stated that 'access without support is not opportunity' (p.1). Tinto continues 'and we now know that for some if not many students the ability to remain connected to their past communities, family, church, or tribe is essential to their persistence' (p.4).

Successful supportive transition for low SES students includes building a network of trusted contacts, as presented by White (2014) at the First Year Higher Education (FYHE) Conference. In relation to metropolitan schools, rural and remote schools are concentrated in the lower end of the SES spectrum. White noted that 'these students tend to access people in their personal network'. These are people they come across anyway such as tutors, administrative office staff, peers and family. The 'trust equation' consists of 'credibility, reliability, intimacy and self-orientation'. To enable trust to develop, bridges need to be built prior to and during the first year. Marketing services are selling an institution, not a person, and therefore do not usually acknowledge or build the 'trust equation'. Student Services at institutions need to provide multiple entry points to enhance the opportunity for face-to-face contact and build the potential for trust to develop.

In addition to the above challenges, many students experience the 'imposter syndrome'. At the 17th FYHE Conference, Dr Martin Harris presented a paper titled *I'm not supposed to be here: The unsettling transition to Higher Education*, which referred to 'the imposter syndrome' concept.

This feeling of inadequacy can occur for students after the excitement and 'honeymoon' period, when uncertainty and loss of confidence can impact on their sense of belonging. Harris described the scenario of a student feeling 'this isn't my place, they must have mistaken my name for someone else, I'm not supposed to be here'. A 'tipping point' ensues and successful coping mechanisms need to come into play. If students have been able to build trust relationships with tutors, support staff and other students, the chance of successful transition increases.

Reflection

- From my experience, anecdotally, some students cite financial issues as being the reason to contemplate deferment, when possibly the emotional tug of leaving home and their small close-knit community is too daunting during Year 12. This again is a hurdle with which metropolitan and provincial students rarely have to contend, although these students may have to leave their families and communities to take up higher education opportunities elsewhere and so face similar challenges.
- Higher education institutions face a 'catch 22' situation when contemplating or introducing parent engagement programs to assist connectedness with home. As most students are 18 years or over, privacy issues come into play. Successful transition also requires students to become successful independent learners and citizens in their new community. Therefore, universities tend to avoid or limit engaging with parents. I feel a middle ground of communication is needed to support the transition of those who relocate for higher education such as rural and remote students.
- Careers advisers can help facilitate building the 'trust equation' to support their students to transition into first year by seeking out contact with Student Services. Contact could be made during Tertiary Tour visits or perhaps through Tertiary Information Seminar (TIS) events.
- Persistence is a valued quality during the pathway of getting in and staying in, and considering the hurdles faced by rural and remote students, builds resilience if they succeed.

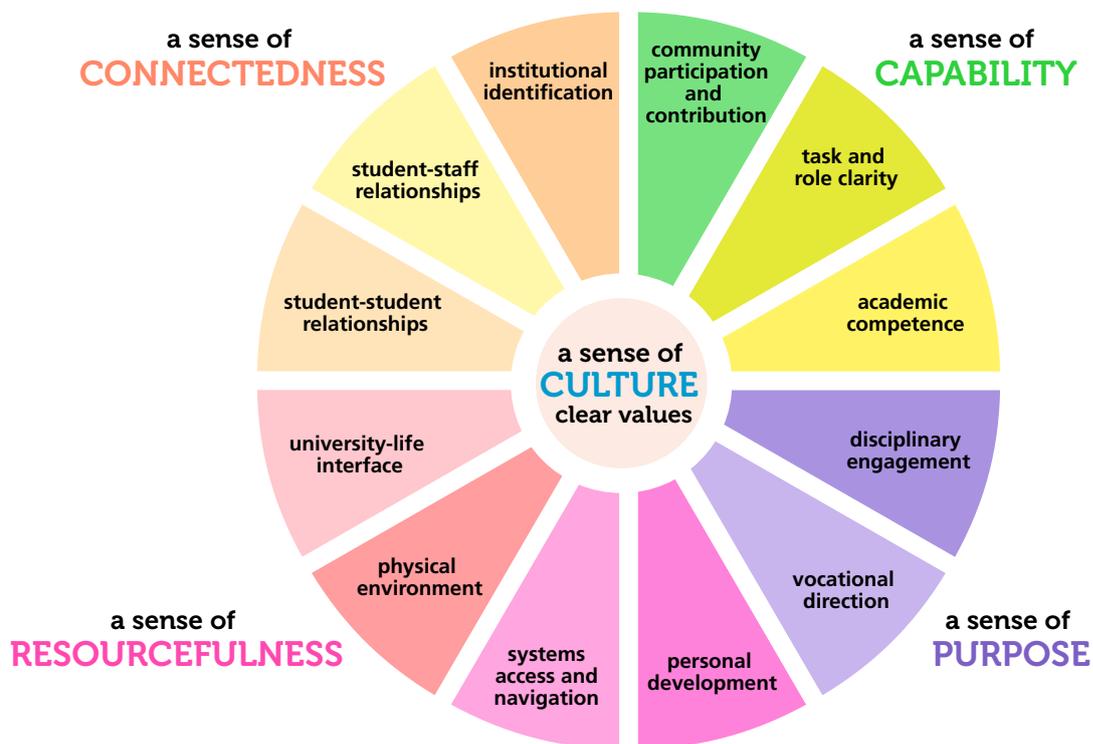
2.2.3 Transition to Higher Education

Transition has been described as a linear process involving the abandonment of the familiar, followed by a period of disequilibrium and a new beginning. This unsettling process can particularly impact 'at risk' groups such as rural and remote, low SES and first in family.

(Harris, 2014).

Harris described the 'Thriving Transition Cycle' as a proactive, ongoing cycle of support. If transition is negotiated in a meaningful, timely manner, as opposed to a homogeneous model, such as Orientation Week followed by reactive crisis intervention, transition issues can be addressed in a learned, proactive manner with a higher degree of potential success.

To identify the major transition hurdles, the [student lifecycle model](#) developed by Lizzio and Wilson (2010) describes the five aspects of student success: a sense of connectedness, a sense of capability, a sense of purpose, a sense of resourcefulness, a sense of culture – clear values.



Support for these five aspects can begin in secondary school; needs particular attention in the 'summer months'; and has been well underway in first year at higher education institutions for several years, as evidenced by the 17th [FYHE Conference](#) and past papers.

Through this research project it has become clear that the following model could demonstrate the three key phases of transition into university. Each phase has particular challenges and strategy implications for rural and remote students.



a) Transition: Senior Secondary School

[The Auckland University Starpath Project](#) describes the transition from school to university as a complex process that begins well before day one on-campus. The following factors were found to influence this process acting as either 'stepping stones' or 'stumbling blocks' prior to university:

- Developing clear academic goals and realistic expectations of university study is enabled by positive, informed support.
- High family expectations accompanied by informed advice and encouragement which also allows independent decision making by the student on where and what to study.
- Personal determination or 'sense of purpose' (also see Lizzio and Wilson 2010).
- Early planning including subject selection at secondary school linked with career goals.
- Strong academic preparation and development of independent study skills.
- A broader range of extra-curricular and community activities and interests.

(Madjar et al. 2010, p. 4-5)

Put another way,

..successful transition to degree-level study depends on a range of factors – including the learning environments of schools and universities – which together contribute to the student's preparation, readiness, expectations, and eventual experience of transition from school to university. Transition itself starts while students are still at school, considering educational and career options, choosing courses of study, and honing study and other skills.

(Madjar et al. 2010, p.102)

The fact that 'students in rural and remote areas have fewer opportunities to participate in transition activities due to geographical barriers' (Department's Rural and Remote Education – a Blueprint for Action, p.15) highlights the need for purposeful strategic partnerships to be developed between rural and remote schools and higher education. This should be at an earlier stage than previously considered.

Transition initiatives now

HEPPP programs are developing a wide range of excellent transition programs both on and off-campus for partner schools that help address the issues above. Universities are becoming more aware that marketing and recruitment strategies need to be integrated with transition activities, especially for students who need to relocate. A range of resources are available. See Part 3.1 Useful Websites later in this report for links to HEPPP program resources.

Reflection

- Career education programs and excursions are vital for rural and remote students to prepare, adapt and develop strategies to recognise and overcome transition hurdles.
- On-campus visits are invaluable experiences for rural and remote students. Not only to provide exposure to courses but perhaps more importantly to provide face-to-face contact and familiarity which leads to building trust. Like many rural schools in our district our senior students can annually attend a 'Tertiary Tour'. Recently I trialled an on-campus activity with students using the 'Lost on Campus' app to encourage independence and help overcome the fear of 'getting lost on campus'.
- At the 17th FYHE Conference 2014 session 'Tour de Campus', the University of South Australia incorporated QR codes into a campus orientation activity. This 'smart' idea could be adapted into the 'Lost on Campus' activity.
- Access to on-campus visits for younger rural and remote students needs to be addressed by higher education if current research about the importance of starting younger is to be supported. Access must also be available to all schools, not just those in partnership relationships through HEPPP funded programs. The earlier students are enabled to develop trust and familiarity with campus staff and surrounds, the greater the chance of future transition success.
- In the future I would like to put more focus on Student Support Services during our Tertiary Tour to help foster help-seeking behaviours in potential first year students.
- For schools that are not partnered with HEPPP programs at higher education institutions, the HEPPP developed resource ideas in Part 3 of this report could be integrated into career education lessons and excursions if schools are informed, proactive and supported professionally and financially.

b) Transition: The 'Summer Months'

The Auckland University Starpath Project identifies the 'hiatus between school and university' as the 'summer months'. This period of December to February, is of particular relevance to rural and remote students, and in particular, state border students, due to the 'remoteness gap' and the transition hurdles mentioned above and below.

The Starpath research shows that for some students 'self-doubt, loss of focus and weakening of resolve' can occur during this period. Support services that rural students can connect to with an element of trust and familiarity are therefore critical. (White. C., FYHE 2014)

This project identified a range of difficulties for students in the summer months including:

- NSW students receive their ATAR the day after their HSC results. Anecdotally, a reality check and grieving period can occur whereby some students are paralysed by disappointment and perhaps embarrassment, after receiving an ATAR rank that they perceive does not equate to their HSC results. This can be in spite of their understanding of the purpose of the ATAR. This paralysis can prevent those students from accessing career advice support in a timely manner.
- NSW students have a very limited timeframe to access support services between receiving their ATAR and the Victorian Change of Preference (at times only two full working days). This is a critical timeframe, especially if the student does not proactively seek support.
- Rural and remote students have limited face-to-face access to their Career Adviser once leaving school, which inhibits access to career advice. The 'trust factor' (White) demonstrates that face-to-face post school transition support is important if rural students are to proactively seek assistance. This disadvantages them in comparison with metropolitan counterparts.
- Online enrolment has reduced the travel time and cost factors for rural students but difficulties arise with lack of technical support, cost of phone calls to universities when trouble shooting, and access to face-to-face support.

- The physical distance to attend 'university advice' days or transition program opportunities such as 'Destination Melbourne' can be prohibitive due to family and work commitments, and associated time and cost involved to travel.
- There is lack of flexibility in higher education support services during the summer months transition period. Each of the three points of access and support: Student Recruitment, Office of Admissions, and Student Life divisions, is restricted in their communication and access to support future students. Restricted access results from differing staff roles and responsibilities, access to student data, privacy and ethical constraints within universities. Limited funding also restricts support services that can be critical to future rural students.

The diagram below shows the typical avenues of career advice support for students transitioning from secondary school to higher education.



Progress is being made during the first two stages of this framework as universities are increasingly initiating transition support such as:

- making phone contact with future students
- offering mentoring programs
- providing social media communication opportunities
- producing smartphone apps
- offering transition programs prior to Orientation week
- developing e-modules and webinars to assist transition
- producing engaging websites such as Queensland University of Technology's ProjectU. 'Project Unknown' follows a group of young people prior to and during their university transition and can be found under 'cool stuff' on the [ProjectU website](#).

The University of Melbourne provides the '[Destination Melbourne](#)' program held in January and has also introduced 'Moving to Melbourne Newsletters' for rural, low SES and interstate students. These initiatives help rural and remote students feel included and supported in what could be an overwhelming transitional experience to a large metropolitan institution.

c) Transition: First Year Higher Education and Beyond

Universities provide transition programs during Orientation week (O Week), the first week of formal commencement of university for first year students, and through faculty programs. Rural and remote students generally are not specifically targeted during these orientation programs.

Transition support for rural and remote students generally stems from on-campus accommodation, early entry programs and resource material.

This report found that on-campus residential colleges generally offer transition support that can best meet the needs of rural and remote students. Colleges often provide a close-knit connected community atmosphere, pastoral care through Residential Advisers and college staff, a direct avenue to meet people and develop a network of friends, and study support through tutor groups.

Rural students are also encouraged to apply for early entry schemes that can lead to opportunities to apply and secure on-campus accommodation earlier and/or have application fees waived (eg. USyd E12 scheme). Some of these schemes also include transition support such as mentoring and peer assisted study support.

UniSA presented *Students, parents, partners, friends and the uni: collaborators in successful first year transition* at the 17th FYHE Conference. Recognition of the 'need to consider whole life connections of the first year student' was reinforced in this presentation.

UniSA produces resources such as the *Parents, Partners and Friends guide* and *Smart Start* guide. A parent information session is also held at the start of the year and the opportunity to engage in a mailing list to receive university event photos and information further enables support. This initiative is one of a few deliberate opportunities to engage significant others in the transition process. This is an initiative that holds great merit for rural and remote students to retain links and support networks with home.

Reflection

- Although on-campus residential fees can be an expensive option for rural students and families, the inclusions and higher retention prospects should be taken into consideration when making future accommodation decisions. Bursaries are usually available for low SES students.
- Rural and remote students are also encouraged to participate in any transition programs that are on offer if physically and financially able. Any opportunity to increase transition success will be an advantage. Opportunities for invitations can be enhanced by agreeing to mailing lists and further correspondence from the institutions, and 'liking' social media pages.

2.2.4 Border Issues

The Department's *Rural and Remote Education - a Blueprint for Action* recognises that solutions to issues impacting on students' education in border communities needs to be investigated and addressed (p. 20). State borders should not impact on students' access to educational opportunities, resources or support.

This project did not delve deeply into these issues in a formal manner, however, experience in the careers adviser role gives personal insight into border issues in accessing higher education. These can include access to interstate state funded resources, personnel and programs such as School University Liaison Officers (SULO) and some Local Learning Employment Network (LLEN) funded projects. 'Underrepresented Schools' categories at some Victorian Higher Education institutions do not include interstate schools. This limits access opportunities for rural and remote border students.

The main obstacle, however, for border students pursuing higher education in Victoria is that the NSW ATAR results are released later than Victorian ATAR results. The VTAC change of preference period is generally only open for one week after Victorian students receive their ATAR. This results in NSW students having limited time (generally two full business days) to seek advice from Victorian institutions or careers advisers if course advice and preference changes are needed for main round offers. The impact of this short time frame can be detrimental if the NSW student suffers from a 'reality check' and is then paralysed by disappointment from seeking advice and support about alternative options.

2.3 Summary and Recommendations

This project aimed to address the remoteness gap from the perspective of a careers adviser and border school. The research confirmed that the gap for rural and remote students in aspiring to and attaining higher education is impeded by numerous obstacles: limited exposure to career possibilities, academic attainment, financial considerations, family expectations and aspirations, social impact on loss of connectedness, and issues especially related to distance and relocation.

Although an array of access, equity and transition initiatives have, and continue to be, developed through higher education institutions, a key 'tipping point' is whether rural and remote students, careers advisers and schools have gained awareness of, access to and the ability and support needed to take advantage of these initiatives.

In particular, the 'summer months' can be a critical time when students on summer holidays at the end of Year 12 are going through the tertiary admission process. A further 'tipping point' is whether students accept, reject or defer an offer. This could relate to many of the obstacles mentioned above. If, and when, they are successful in 'getting in and staying in' a plethora of additional opportunities are then available to help overcome the remoteness gap. Further 'tipping points' may arise during the cyclical transition process to attainment, as described by Harris (2014).

Identified gaps and recommendations for consideration by relevant stakeholders include the following:

2.3.1 Academic Attainment, Broadening Aspirations and Access to Higher Education

The evidence presented by the Department's Rural and Remote Education – a Blueprint for Action concludes that students in rural and remote schools have lower academic outcomes, lower aspirations than students in metropolitan areas and less exposure to broadening career aspirations. Importantly, rural and remote students often do not recognise their disadvantage and lack the ability to articulate the impact of isolation on their education when accessing special consideration and early entry schemes.

Recommendations:

- 2.3.1.1 Develop a matrix of online HEPPP resources.
- 2.3.1.2 Develop a matrix of NSW-Victorian Access, Equity and Transition avenues for rural and remote students.
- 2.3.1.3 Investigate an 'AVID type' model approach to increasing academic attainment in conjunction with broadening aspirations (see p.12).
- 2.3.1.4 Develop greater access for rural and remote schools to be involved in HEPPP funded programs and reduce overlapping of servicing to some centres in NSW.
- 2.3.1.5 Enable professional learning for all rural and remote career advisers and schools to HEPPP funded programs, workshops and resources.

2.3.2 Financial Support

To pursue higher education rural and remote students and families suffer a higher financial burden due to distance associated with relocation costs and ongoing living expenses. Accessing financial support is often difficult due to:

- the arduous task of sourcing and applying for scholarships
- Centrelink ineligibility, and
- consequential limited access to equity and other scholarships tagged to low SES criteria.

Merit-based scholarships are competitive and often out of reach against metropolitan students' higher academic attainment.

Rural and remote students often lack confidence in applying for scholarships, identifying and recognising selection criteria and articulating the outcomes of their involvement in community and extra-curricular activities.

Recommendations:

- 2.3.2.1 A 'weighting approach' to merit based scholarships for rural and remote students would introduce a more equitable system between metropolitan and regional academic attainment. It could also potentially lead to a source of motivation to academic attainment and broadening aspirations for rural and remote students.
- 2.3.2.2 Reducing the number of equity scholarships that require not just meeting 'rural and remote' but also 'at least one more' category for eligibility.
- 2.3.2.3 Support those groups such as Isolated Children's Parent's Association that are lobbying for the tertiary access allowance.
- 2.3.2.4 Professional learning workshops for all regional schools in 'Application Writing' to build student confidence and application writing skills.
- 2.3.2.5 Schools could implement an application process for a scholarship (for example, Defence Forces Long Tan Awards), preferably in Year 12 (or earlier), based on the workshop model described on page 16.

Personal and Emotional Issues

Inevitable relocation for many rural and remote students can result in loss of connectedness and identity challenges that require tailored supported transition to higher education. The 'reality check and paralysis' that can result from HSC-ATAR notification time delay, dramatically affects some students to the degree that they do not proactively seek career advice or change university preferences in a timely manner. These emotional issues can result in tipping points that inhibit access to higher education.

Recommendation:

- 2.3.2.6 Consider the release of the NSW ATAR on the same day as the HSC results to avoid the 'grieving process' some students experience. This grieving period, or paralysis, inhibits proactive help-seeking behaviour. It can be a 'tipping point' whereby students lose confidence and the resolve to pursue higher education and anecdotally can affect proactive decision making.

2.3.3 Transition to Higher Education

Rural and remote students need transition support to identify potential hurdles and develop knowledge and strategies to overcome the hurdles during secondary school, the summer months and in first year and beyond at university.

Fostering a sense of purpose, help-seeking behaviours and connectedness along with tertiary academic skills will promote successful access and attainment, especially when the 'going gets tough' and student resolve weakens. This could be done through proactive preparation in secondary school, summer months support and advice and building stronger partnerships between schools and student services as well as marketing and recruitment at higher education institutions.

The 'summer months' gap is an area that particularly needs further attention. The FYHE Conference was renamed [STARS](#) in 2015 (*Students Transitions Achievement Retention and Success*) with a focus within 'Transitions' on pathways to tertiary education and transitions *into* the first year experience. This could be a valuable avenue to develop networks, professional learning and partnerships in the early transitions arena.

Recommendations:

- 2.3.3.1 Enable a number of careers advisers from rural and remote schools to attend future STARS Conferences through professional learning funding or scholarships.
- 2.3.3.2 Enable careers advisers from rural and remote schools optional flexibility to work in the summer months period (eg. Change of Preference and Offer period) ideally in the December-January period, with time in lieu during the school year.

2.3.4 Border Issues

The scope of border anomalies is beyond this paper. The NSW government appointed the first Australian Cross Border Commissioner in early 2012. The *Rural and Remote Education: A Blueprint for Action* in section 14, acknowledged the frustrating border educational issues as an area the Cross Border Commissioner should support.

Recommendations:

- 2.3.4.1 That the NSW ATAR be released on the same day as the NSW HSC results. The time delay particularly affects border students who largely apply for higher education through the Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre (VTAC).
- 2.3.4.2 That the 'Underrepresented Schools' categories at some Victorian Higher Education institutions include interstate border schools.

PART 3 - A COLLECTION OF RESOURCES, IDEAS, AND TIPS FROM THE PROJECT

3.1 Useful Websites

NSW

<http://www.makeyourmark.edu.au>

NSW Bridges to Higher Education web based information and access to resources. Aims to encourage aspiration and increase participation, particularly in underrepresented groups.

<http://sydney.edu.au/compass/>

University of Sydney COMPASS program is divided into 4 stages: Discover (Year 3-6), Explore (Year 7-8), Inquire (Year 9-10), Experience (Year 11-12).

<http://sydney.edu.au/compass/programs/teachers/resources.shtml>

COMPASS Teacher Resources.

http://www.mq.edu.au/about_us/offices_and_units/widening_participation/the_leap_program/

Macquarie University LEAP Program comprises a variety of school and community engagement initiatives that raise aspiration, create possibilities and actively support students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

<http://www.aspire.unsw.edu.au>

UNSW ASPIRE is an outreach program for low SES students in metropolitan and regional schools, with the aim of increasing educational aspirations and to assist in accessing university education.

<http://www.csu.edu.au/future-moves>

CSU Future Moves program promotes awareness of university opportunities and enables students to see how university might be part of their lives, while making school studies more relevant.

<http://www.whats-uni-like.edu.au>

A free, self-paced massive open online course (MOOC) to build students' pre-tertiary achievement levels and explore aspects of the transition to university. Key areas include academic writing and reading, student expectations, digital literacy and online learning skills. Simply register on the home page.

Victoria

<http://www.leap.vic.edu.au>

LEAP program aims to demystify the links between school, university and professions.

<http://www.deakin.edu.au/about-deakin/administrative-divisions/equity-diversity/student-access/deap>

Deakin Engagement and Access Program is a coordinated program of activities from Year 7-12.

<http://msl.unimelb.edu.au/equity-engagement/student-equity/seams>

University of Melbourne Strengthening Engagement and Achievement in Mathematics and Science.

<http://www.latrobe.edu.au/study/how-to-apply/your-options/leap>

La Trobe University Learn, Experience, Access Professions (LEAP) program introduces secondary school students to university through exposure to the professional areas of business, design, law, engineering, health and science.

South Australia

<http://fyhe.com.au/expectations/resources/>

First Year Student Expectations and Experience Facts Sheets and resources

<http://exploringfif.weebly.com/resources.html>

Exploring the experience of being first in family at university

3.2 Resources for Parents and Students

- Parent's Calendar – monthly tips for parents of University of Sydney students
http://sydney.edu.au/current_students/counselling/for-parents/index.shtml
- UniSA guides for New Students: Smart Start and Guide for Parents, Partners and Friends
<http://www.unisa.edu.au/Study-at-UniSA/Parents-and-advisers/For-parents/>
- Country Education Foundation – Support, University Survival Guide for Rural and Regional Students and Scholarship Guide
<https://cef.org.au/students/student-support/>
<https://cef.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/Uni-Guide-31-Jan.pdf>
<https://cef.org.au/students/scholarships/>
- Chances for Children – Chances Tertiary Resources Guide
<http://www.chancesforchildren.com.au>

3.3 Ideas for Schools

- **Compile school alumni profiles, 'If I can, you can'. The profile includes the student's current degree information and interview questions and answers:** Did you always want to go to uni? Did it bother you to leave home to pursue study? How often do you go home? How different is uni compared to school? Where are you living and how do you manage financially? What do you want to do when you finish? Any advice for future rural students? What's the best thing and worst thing about uni? (UNSW ASPIRE 'Student stories about uni')
- **Develop a First Year Student's Timeline Calendar similar to the Parent's Calendar:** 'What you could be experiencing', 'Support strategies and where you could get help'.
- **Shadow a Student (ex- school student/a rural student/ student ambassador):** Integrate into your school 'Tertiary Tour'.
- **'What's A Uni Like? Day':** Bus to an Open Day for Students and Parents (Year 7-12). Some institutions offer travel subsidy; if not, source subsidy through school or community groups/businesses.
- **Target a school scholarship/award (eg. Defence Forces Long Tan Award):** develop a 'compulsory application process' for all Year 10 and 'compulsory or optional' for Year 12. Set deadlines and a panel/interview process. The application/interview process develops application writing skills (search online for 'STAR' model) and reinforces the importance of extra-curricular and community involvement.
- **Develop YouTube videos – Current Year 12:** What do I want to know about Uni? First Year Uni Student: What I didn't know about Uni and now do.'

3.4 Higher Education Tips for Students

a) Scholarships

- Start an application and 'save' – this may prompt email reminders from the source.
- Use a 'Word' document then 'cut and paste' – allows you to edit, save and count words/characters.
- Meet deadlines - start sourcing and applying early.
- Have documents ready for upload – eg. updated resume, current referees, and verified copies of supporting documents.
- Use search phrases like 'rural', 'public education', 'institution name bursaries', 'institution name grants', 'first in family', 'your Shire name scholarships'.
- To express 'financial need' (if you aren't a current Centrelink recipient) state 'I am in the process of applying for Centrelink benefits.....' and attach emails/letters to prove communication with Centrelink.
- Check your eligibility carefully – don't waste time applying for a scholarship when you are not eligible.
- Address the criteria carefully- give concrete, specific examples.
- Keep applying! Don't wait for a result from one scholarship application before applying for another. You have the ability to accept/reject if you get a better offer.
- Extra-curricular involvement is highly valued in many applications as it demonstrates motivation. Relevance to your course helps and it's never too late to get involved.
- KEEP A COPY of your application. Make sure you SAVE a copy and SUBMIT.
- Check the status of your application.
- Make a phone call after you have submitted your application to make sure it has been received – unless you get a confirmation email.

b) Special Consideration

- APPLY if eligible (eg. Rural) – once you are 'tagged' other opportunities may be open to you such as scholarships, transition programs, bursaries, etc.
- Provide depth (specifics and relevance) and impact (what happened, when did it happen, how long did it last and what was the impact) in your application answers.
- Ensure documentation is uploaded, verified and correct eg. Centrelink Reference Number.
- Once applications open start the process early and save. This may generate email reminders.
- 'Be the audience' – would the reader who does not know you get a good understanding of your situation?
- Check the closing date. Be aware that different states have different closing dates.
- Check 'who' can provide supporting statements.
- Apply and engage in programs that are offered to you, for example, University of Melbourne's three day 'Destination Melbourne' transition program for rural and interstate students.

c) Transition to Higher Education

Study Skills:

- Log in to your university portal as soon as you have access.
- Learn to navigate the online environment early.
- Check emails regularly. Make a note of assessment dates.
- Be proactive – utilise the university’s central hub (administration) or ‘New Students’ website.
- Attend orientation – go on a library tour, attend an ‘academic ‘O-week’ session.
- Use a Study Skills checklist (see Deakin PASS) such as ‘What is your Learning Style?’ to identify areas of need and then source strategies and support to focus on these.
- Suggested resources: [Deakin University PASS](#) and [Studyvibe.com.au](#).
- Learn ‘Google Scholar’.
- Define an ‘Independent Learner’ – How can I be an independent learner?
- Read the Course outline at the start of each semester.
- Learn how to reference. Check the requirements of the subject and utilise university online resources as well as student services study skills support.

Help-Seeking Behaviour:

- Connect with your teachers – make a note of their name, contact details and availability for consultation.
- Make a list of your needs and wants as a first year student (accommodation, money, friends, study skills) then source strategies or people who could help.
- Apply and engage in programs that are offered to you, for example, mentoring, study support, volunteering, student connect interviews.
- Need help? Help-seek early!
- Build support networks early such as university social media, Open Day, O Week, clubs and societies.
- Utilise resources such as ‘ProjectU’, ‘Make Your Mark’ and the NSW Department of Education’s [Careers Advisory Service](#).
- Read institution emails regularly – be proactive and keep updated.

Accommodation:

- Apply early – always check application fee costs and agreements carefully!
- Compare inclusions between accommodation options carefully. Be aware of the intangibles or ‘hidden extras’ that on-campus accommodation provides, especially for first year students who are relocating, such as Residential Advisers, tutors, proximity to campus, ‘sense of community’ and alumni contacts.
- Check the inclusions of the cost of accommodation. What may look expensive may provide many extras (internet, laundry, meals) as well as a greater opportunity to transition successfully.
- Are there any ‘hidden costs’? Are there ‘payment plan options’?
- Read the ‘application agreement’ / ‘residential agreement’ carefully. Check what is refundable or not.
- Check when applications open and apply early. Note: Institutions often open applications for accommodation on Open Day.
- Involvement in extra-curricular activities and leadership roles at school are invaluable when applying for on-campus accommodation to demonstrate ‘community mindedness’.

3.5 Epilogue

The opportunity to overcome the 'remoteness gap' as a careers adviser working in a rural area was a rewarding and invaluable experience. To a certain extent it paralleled the experiences rural and remote students face when pursuing higher education. A steep learning curve ensued to develop academic skills, self-confidence, city and campus orientation, as well as researching the possibilities of post-graduate studies.

Through the financial support, encouragement and recognition of the project's worth (access and equity) provided by the NSW Department of Education, it enabled the growth of my 'sense of purpose' and opened doors of opportunity that eighteen months ago were unimaginable. The knowledge, skills and contacts developed during this time have undoubtedly helped me as a careers adviser to professionally and personally overcome the 'remoteness gap' to a certain degree. I hope the results of this project are of value to others and can assist colleagues, students, parents, schools and the wider community.

Geographic isolation issues in our large diverse continent are a challenge to overcome, but if students are encouraged and supported to broaden their aspirations and develop skills to access career avenues and equity initiatives, the 'remoteness gap' may provide a wealth of opportunity and returns for regional Australia.

As the Country Education Foundation clearly states:

'What if the cure for cancer is inside the mind of a student who can't afford to go to university?'

3.6 Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the following higher education institutions who enabled my visits during this study project: Charles Sturt University, Deakin University, La Trobe University, Macquarie University, University of Melbourne, University of NSW, University of Sydney and Victoria Institute. I would also like to thank the individual institution staff that gave their time for interviews and willingly shared resources. Also the widening participation staff at Charles Sturt University (Future Moves), Deakin University (LEAP), Macquarie University (LEAP), UNSW (ASPIRE) and University of Sydney (COMPASS), who facilitated my visits to school workshops or on-campus programs, shared their innovative ideas and always treated me inclusively with 'the team'.

The following schools enabled my participation in the widening participation workshops and their students welcomed me into their classrooms: Finley High School, Keysborough College, Liverpool Girls High School, Matraville High School, James Meehan High School, Old Guildford Public School and Birrong Girls High School. Also thanks to Wodonga Middle Years College for information regarding the AVID program.

Thank you to Sarah Taylor (The Country Education Foundation) and Liz Braid (Chances for Children) for their time and conversations regarding scholarship issues and avenues for rural and remote students.

Special thanks to Barham High School staff and students for accommodating my frequent absences from school to pursue my study visits and report writing. I hope that my project will make a difference for our students in particular as well as other rural and remote schools, colleagues and communities.

The project was made possible by NSW Department of Education's Senior Pathways in Secondary Education and I am incredibly grateful to the people that saw value in my idea to overcome the 'remoteness gap' as a rural and remote careers adviser. The opportunity I was given was never taken for granted. In particular, I would like to thank Rosemary Brook who patiently and tirelessly edited and supported my report.

Thank you to my family for supporting my hours away as well as my hours at home.

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