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Shifts in space and self: Moving from community to university

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Abstract

University enrolments have grown at an unprecedented rate over the last decade and this participation is only set to increase (Kemp & Norton, 2014; Universities Australia, 2015). However, rates of completion during the same period have remained relatively static, and the numbers of students who depart university remains significant, consistently hovering between 15-18 per cent of the total Australian student population (Higher Education Standards Panel, 2018). Disproportionate numbers of these early leavers are from rural and remote areas, so exploring how regional and remote learners consider their post-schooling futures can provide some insight into the fundamental issues behind this attrition. In addressing the rates of attrition from university, a better understanding of the 'lived experiences' of learners is required (West, 1996; O'Shea, 2007, 2014). This research project employed a digital storytelling methodology to foreground the cognitive, affective and embodied nature of this university experience (O'Shea, Harwood, Kervin, & Humphry, 2013). For students from regional and remote regions the movement into higher education requires not only a geographic shift but also changes to both identity and relationships (Holt, 2008). Drawing upon a combination of interviews, focus groups and also digital storytelling, this project sought to deeply investigate two key areas. The first relates to how young people from rural and remote areas contemplate post-schooling options and the second area of exploration was the subjective experience of both considering and actually moving into the university space. Our research points to the deeply embodied nature of this shift and how young people themselves reconcile the changes and adaptations such movements require. Interviews and focus groups complemented the digital stories, which enabled participants to narrate their own experiences incorporating a range of media including oral, written and pictorial representation. This audio-visual genre is produced via accessible software and in a diversity of formats ranging from voice-over PowerPoint photos to edited videos, interview style (iMovie) to light-weight animations with voice-overs.

Keywords

space, shifts, moving, university, self., community

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Shifts in space and self: Moving from community to university

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2019

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Finally, thanks to the Digital Storytellers (<https://www.digitalstorytellers.com.au/>) who provided training to the ASPIRE staff and the investigators, as well as kindly agreed to run a series of hands-on sessions for the high school students involved in this project.

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Executive Summary

University enrolments have grown at an unprecedented rate over the last decade and this participation is only set to increase (Kemp & Norton, 2014; Universities Australia, 2015). However, rates of completion during the same period have remained relatively static, and the numbers of students who depart university remains significant, consistently hovering between 15–18 per cent of the total Australian student population (Higher Education Standards Panel, 2018). Disproportionate numbers of these early leavers are from rural and remote areas, so exploring how regional and remote learners consider their post-schooling futures can provide some insight into the fundamental issues behind this attrition.

In addressing the rates of attrition from university, a better understanding of the ‘lived experiences’ of learners is required (West, 1996; O’Shea, 2007, 2014). This research project employed a digital storytelling methodology to foreground the cognitive, affective and embodied nature of this university experience (O’Shea, Harwood, Kervin, & Humphry, 2013). For students from regional and remote regions the movement into higher education requires not only a geographic shift but also changes to both identity and relationships (Holt, 2008). Drawing upon a combination of interviews, focus groups and also digital storytelling, this project sought to deeply investigate two key areas. The first relates to how young people from rural and remote areas contemplate post-schooling options and the second area of exploration was the subjective experience of both considering and actually moving into the university space.

Our research points to the deeply embodied nature of this shift and how young people themselves reconcile the changes and adaptations such movements require. Interviews and focus groups complemented the digital stories, which enabled participants to narrate their own experiences incorporating a range of media including oral, written and pictorial representation. This audio-visual genre is produced via accessible software and in a diversity of formats ranging from voice-over PowerPoint photos to edited videos, interview style (iMovie) to light-weight animations with voice-overs.

This project was guided by **three interrelated questions:**

1. How do young regional/remote people articulate their movement into the university environment and the roles of their community/family in this process?
2. How do these young people understand themselves as university learners and how do these perceptions evolve throughout the first year of study?
3. How do members of regional/remote communities articulate the influences or impacts brought by these young people back to their communities of origin?

This was a three-staged study, and each of the questions was addressed through discrete activities associated with each stage:

Stage 1: Digital storytelling workshops were offered to commencing Year 11 students as part of the ASPIRE regional outreach program, seven high schools agreed to be involved. These digital storytelling workshops were themed as “*ASPIRing for my/our future*” and each session encouraged Year 11 participants to consider their plans post Year 12. A total of 26 digital stories were created and these were complemented by interviews with the young people and focus groups with their teachers in order to deeply explore how participants considered movements beyond high school and how this impacted the general community.

Stage 2: The next stage of the project involved current university students in the design, scripting and production of one digital story. These stories were complemented by blog entries that explored the following themes: i) arriving at university and being a student; ii) moving between university and community, and iii) reflecting on the first year.

Stage 3: The final stage of the project involved in-depth analysis of the stories including textual analysis of the scripts. In order to do justice to the multiplicity of perspectives and open up the analytic possibilities, each of the stories was examined in a multi-variegated way. This process began with the naming and categorisation of the visual data and scripts to create thematic codes using interpretivist frameworks. The analysis explored how students convey their experiences of moving between the university and their community.

The summary findings from this study are detailed below:

- The very embodied nature of this movement away from the community and the ways in which this was conceived by young people in terms of ‘hardship’ or difficulty rather than being a positive rite of passage.
- The complexity of transitions between the homeplace and the world that exists beyond the confines of rural community settings, these transitions were not only defined by geography but also, defined in terms of relationships and identity formation.
- Perceptions amongst young regional people that university was not necessarily for “people like them”; a sense that attending higher education was an “exceptional” rather than an “expected” life course trajectory.
- The ways in which the desire to “give back” to the community informed post schooling decisions about attending university and also, what to study.

Based on these findings we recommend the following:

Recommendation One: Universities need to develop dedicated and targeted pre-enrolment, enrolment and transition support timed to critical stages in the year that is designed and delivered with the rural student cohort in mind. These strategies need to consider learners in a holistic sense, addressing not only academic knowledges but also addressing the emotional repercussions of moving away from the community to attend university.

To ensure authenticity, these university initiatives need to be developed by regional/remote students using a “students as partners” framework and also, draw upon strengths-based thinking that recognises the particular attributes and cultural wealth these students already hold. The program should have the objective of explaining or considering how these existing attributes can be applied within the university environment to assist individuals to achieve their academic goals.

Recommendation Two: The Department of Education needs to explore approaches to better utilise existing online opportunities in high schools to enable regional and remote students to avail themselves of online university opportunities. This could include incorporating university subjects within the high school curriculum to both introduce these learners to higher education expectations but importantly provide a structured introduction to studying online at a tertiary level. These subjects would be credit-bearing and so lessen the time required to obtain a degree whilst simultaneously providing key skills in the navigation of online learning.

A number of our participants mentioned that their high schools already delivered subjects via online modalities and hence utilising existing technology to deliver university preparation programs or even subjects that have degree bearing credit would not only have economic benefits but importantly, provide necessary academic capital in a safe and familiar context.

Recommendation Three: Equity researchers should leverage the impactful nature of Digital Storytelling as a place-based methodology that is effective in understanding what is “inside students’ heads” (Brookfield, 1991). This methodology provides an opportunity for learners

to both narrate and visually represent personal perspectives, such “local narratives” (Parsons, Guldberg, Porayska-Pomsta, & Lee, 2015) providing alternative or additional insight to quantitative or statistical evidence. These insights include understanding the strength of family, community ties, connections to country which may often include a sense of ‘giving back’ and reluctance to leave. Also this approach assists in foregrounding the particular circumstances (historical, traditional and current) that may be impacting on whole communities and schooling such as the pervasive effects of drought, floods, bushfires etc.

Recommendation Four: The university sector should strive to create productive collaborations/partnerships across regional and metropolitan universities that are characterised by united and cohesive outreach programs. These programs should provide multiple opportunities for regional and remote students and their families to engage with and experience a range of different institutions across the high school cycle.

Presently, the outreach area is somewhat “siloeed” and this places additional pressure on schools and also students to make multiple contact with different institutions. Partnership activities would ensure greater reach and also, avoid duplication.

Recommendation Five: Education policymakers need to appreciate regional and remote populations in terms of their multi-dimensionality. Acknowledging the rich diversity of communities avoids individuals only being defined by location and instead foregrounds the importance of relationships with the family, broader community and the land.

This recognition would include understanding that this is not a group without aspirations or goals but rather a cohort that may simply require additional recognition and support in realising these ambitions. Such recognition also needs to consider the nuances of this rural and remote lived experience rather than collective or mythic constructions of these environments.



Figure 1: The distances involved in travelling

Introduction

Overview

This project was designed to explore the nuanced experience of being a young person in a regional or remote setting, with particular focus on how this impacted on educational and vocational trajectories. This focus was informed by a recognition that young people from rural settings have diverse and varied issues impacting on decisions regarding post-schooling options. To further contextualise these perspectives the project also interviewed teachers working with regional and remote high school aged students as well as first-year university students who were asked to reflect upon their experience of moving away from their communities and entering university.



Figure 2: Tash 'our storyteller' during workshops

To ensure authenticity, this project employed a place-based methodology by drawing on digital stories as a framework for data collection and presentation. Digital Storytelling methodology is an “asset-based” approach to data collection enabling the participants themselves to be “self-empowered social change agents through the documentation of their stories” (Smalkoski, 2015, para 2).

Rationale for this study

This focus on the regional and remote experience reflects the contextual disadvantages in the educational and vocational opportunities or choices available to those residing outside urban locales (Alloway & Dalley-Trim, 2009; Parker, Jerrim, Anders, & Astell-Burt, 2016; Cooper, Baglin & Strathdee, 2017). This difference is noted within the primary education sector by the Australian Curriculum Reporting Authority (ACARA, 2016) which states:

For Australia overall, the highest percentage of students achieving at or above the national minimum standard attend schools in the major cities and the lowest percentage attend schools in very remote geolocation. (p. 64)

Completion rates at high school are similarly demarcated by geographic location. The most recent statistics indicate that nearly 78 per cent of students complete the final year of schooling in urban areas compared to only 43 per cent for very remote areas (Mitchell Institute, 2015). This difference continues into the higher education sector with proportionally less people from rural and remote areas having a degree and aged between 25–34 years. In 2014, those residing in a major city with a degree was 42.2 per cent of the population compared to 19.5 per cent for Outer Regional and only 17.8 per cent for remote and very remote areas (Universities Australia, 2015).

Such clear discrepancies require much deeper analysis of what the barriers and obstacles of participating in higher education might be for those outside urban environments, as Halsey (2017) points out:

Overwhelmingly, the national statistics consistently show there is a powerful and persistent relationship between location and educational outcomes when data for the various measures is aggregated. (p. 11)

Rationale for using digital storytelling

Digital storytelling is emerging as a powerful qualitative research tool as it supports the goals of participatory and inclusive research which seek to change the power relationships between researchers and researched (Parsons et al., 2015). According to Williams et al. (2017), research methods should not repeat historical, cultural domination but repair mistrust by fostering partnerships which are culturally sensitive and acknowledge and engage with the cultural worldview and practices of participants. In this way, digital storytelling can meet the need for diverse approaches to understand underrepresented groups, minorities and Indigenous populations (Williams et al., 2017). It is suggested that this approach “offers marginalised groups a means for expressing alternative voices that can be absent or misrepresented by mainstream discourse.” (Williams et al., 2017, p.7).

Digital storytelling is also popular in the field of education as a pedagogical tool to promote learning. Much research demonstrates that student involvement in digital storytelling (DST) results in higher learning outcomes and achievements when compared with non-DST methods (for example, Aktas & Yurt, 2017; Rahimi & Yadollahi, 2017). Studies also report students’ development of positive attitudes, creativity and social and communication skills through these visual projects (Rubino, Barberis, & Malnati, 2018; Wu, Fan, & Liao, 2016). One important reason for these benefits is that this type of storytelling increases the motivation, interest and engagement of learners with the learning task (Aktas & Yurt, 2017; Campbell, & Cox, 2018; Kasami, 2017), particularly for learners whose usual engagement with learning is low (Rubino et al., 2018).

Within the broad educational field, this approach has the potential to allow participants to engage in an authentic, personalised experience that fosters personal choice and collaboration (Campbell & Cox, 2018). Creating digital stories provides their authors with a voice, fosters empowerment, activates agency and creates a sense of belonging (Campbell & Cox, 2018; Parsons et al., 2015; Williams et al., 2017). This type of storytelling also has multiple applications within the higher education equity and access field including the creation of powerful individual reflections on participation in outreach programs, insights into how student identity and/or higher education participation is negotiated at a personal level and can even offer a valuable evaluation tool for strategies and interventions that are being trialed. To ensure that digital storytelling can be employed across the equity field, we have also created a website that **1)** details how digital stories can be developed, **2)** the various ways in which they have already been used within different equity programs and also, **3)** downloadable resources and web links to assist in this application (please see: <https://shiftsinpaceandself.wordpress.com/>)

Focus

Our intention was to explore this issue from a diversity of perspectives and importantly to centre the study on those best positioned to reflect upon the issues and considerations related to post-schooling futures. Collaborating with the UNSW ASPIRE team enabled the study to work with seven high and central schools that were located in regional/remote locations. These schools all agreed to participate in a Digital Story workshop that was themed as “ASPIRing for my/our future”. The workshops were held over two days (as part of a four-day residential outreach program) and during this period the students scripted, filmed, edited and narrated their personal digital stories, each of which considered how they saw their futures upon completion of school. The young people also engaged in short interview conversations that enabled them to further elaborate on their goals and aspirations after they completed school. The teachers from the schools participated in a focus group that explored the realities of teaching in rural contexts. These group conversations provided space for reflections about how they had contemplated the move from their community to gain their teaching qualifications and the impact this movement had personally and publicly.



Figure 3: Conducting the Digital Story workshop

Finally, to provide a 360-degree view of this issue, a small number of university students (n=3) agreed to produce digital stories that detailed their experiences of moving from regional/remote areas to the university setting. Two of these students were in the early stages of their degrees (year one) and another recommenced in year two after deferring for 12 months, so these were recent transitions. Each produced a digital story that was themed on one of the following areas:

- 1) arriving at university and being a student
- 2) moving between university and community
- 3) reflecting on the first year

Along with the digital artefacts, a short reflective blog was posted online and this was guided by the following prompts:

- *How were things before?*
- *What happened to change that?*
- *What challenges did you face?*
- *What has that change meant to you?*
- *Where did you grow up — what type of environment /sights/sounds/food/language?*
- *What was your experience of education?*

The combination of this data with the teacher stories and also, the interviews and digital artefacts of the Year 11 students provides an in-depth and deeply descriptive overview of some of the issues that young regional and remote people both consider and encounter when contemplating their post-schooling options. This formed the basis for a website and a curriculum document prepared for teachers and other community workers who may be interested in implementing a digital story methodology with young people.

Outputs

The project aimed to have a diversity of outputs in order to reach a broad audience of not only researchers and equity practitioners but also, teachers, community members and learners themselves. The key output was the **project website: *Shifts in Space and Self — Moving from community to university*** which houses the following key resources:

- **Resources for Practitioners including a Curriculum Guide:** Available [here](#)
- **Resources for Students:** This provides simple instructions about how individual learners might approach developing a digital story: Available [here](#)
- **Examples of Digital Stories:** Featuring both the university students' stories of moving from community and a selected number of the school students' stories of contemplating post-schooling futures, this webpage will both delight and inspire: Available [here](#) or <https://shiftsinpaceandself.wordpress.com/>
- **A digital story that outlines how this methodology can be applied** to the equity field, called "Stories from the field" this has been created and narrated by equity and outreach staff at UNSW: Available [here](#) or <https://shiftsinpaceandself.wordpress.com/resources-for-practitioners/>

Literature Review

Introduction

This section will begin by providing a summary overview of the literature related to the educational barriers experienced by students from regional and remote areas. There are numerous interrelated factors which impact the learning and educational opportunities of regional and remote youth. These factors are underpinned by the multiple disadvantages which are found in rural, regional and remote areas (Halsey, 2017). Many students from these areas fall under multiple equity categories such as being from a low SES background, being Indigenous, being first in their family to attend university, and having a disability (Cardak et al., 2017; Nelson et al., 2017; Pollard, 2018). These levels of disadvantage have a compounding impact on learning and opportunity (Nelson et al., 2017; Pollard, 2018) and the main issues are analysed in the sections that immediately follow. The review will then focus specifically on the rural student transition to university in order to provide context for the choices in research design that are detailed in the next section.



Figure 4: The dry and parched land throughout rural areas in Australia

Geographical Issues

Central to the problem of remote and regional students' access to education is geography. The geographical isolation of many regional/remote learners in Australia means that they are further from many of the services and resources that metropolitan students have access to (Pollard, 2018). Regional/remote students face challenges associated with travelling for education including time, distance and risk of travelling, vehicle maintenance, registration and fuel costs, and difficulties dealing with public transport (Nelson et al., 2017). It is suggested that improving rural students' access to quality and affordable education can be achieved through distance education, ICT, collaboration between schools and boarding schools (Farnhill & Thomas, 2017) however these are not straightforward solutions either. The issues with using ICT specifically include location and weather complications and teacher expertise in managing, balancing and optimizing the benefits of the various technologies (Halsey, 2017; Farnhill & Thomas, 2017). Furthermore, access to high speed, reliable and value-for-money ICT services is more difficult in remote areas than urban ones (Farnhill & Thomas, 2017).

Curriculum Focus

The curriculum, teaching and leadership are some of the most critical influences on the short and long-term education of this group of students but again, these areas are also problematic in this context. Despite the adoption of a research-based national curriculum, Halsey (2017) suggests that there are changes which could and should be made to the curriculum and assessment implemented in regional and remote schools to meet the diversity of learning needs in these locations, and to improve the achievements of students and their transition to further study, training and employment. Achievement at high school is a strong predictor of university admission and outcomes which means that an effective way to improve the higher education participation and success of regional and remote youth is to

improve educational outcomes in regional and remote schools (Cardak et al., 2017; Gore et al., 2015).

Staffing

Quality teaching and learning also requires quality teachers and leaders but attracting and retaining the best staff for country schools continues to be one of the most persistent challenges in this field (Halsey, 2017). Predominantly, beginning teachers are lured to regional and remote schools with financial incentives and the promise of employment at preferred schools later in their careers, but difficulties still remain in attracting experienced high performing teachers, teachers that students in these schools need (Halsey, 2017). In addition to the implementation of a quality curriculum, the student-teacher relationship is crucial in students' experience of and engagement in their schooling and supporting the aspirations of students (Gore et al., 2015). Teachers' educational expectations for students are positively related to the educational aspirations of rural youth (Byun, Meece, Irvin, & Hutchins, 2012).

The filling of leadership positions too is plagued by difficulties usually resulting again in the recruitment of the least experienced people to schools which require just the opposite (Halsey, 2017). Leadership in small schools is complicated as Principals may be required to teach and also have other duties not required of the leaders of larger schools, for example, the organisation of bus transport and staff housing, and community group involvement (Halsey, 2017).

Wider community impacts

Corbett (2016) regards it as being "precarious times for young people in rural communities" (p. 277) manifested through a "tension" within rural communities that may have limited employment or educational opportunities but do have "a greater sense of connectedness, place attachment and community" (p. 278). Specific geographic and social factors force many young people to remain in the local place despite state and national initiatives to promote mobility (Webb et al., 2015). Yet many young people value their close-knit and supportive communities and the attractiveness of their locality which made up for the lack of opportunities within it (Webb et al., 2015). Young men, in particular, adapt their aspirations to replicate family and local traditions (Webb et al., 2015). Young women, however, are more likely to relocate to take up opportunities (Webb et al., 2015). Regional and regional areas are often regarded as "thin markets" (Halsey, 2018, p. 57) within the tertiary sector as they are not economically viable for high cost and low response courses which means that the decision to stay or relocate continues to create tension for many students. However, Halsey (2017) suggests that we should not be focused on higher educational attendance but skill development and what is relevant to shaping the lives of people in regional Australia.

It is important to note though that a specific experience or the influence of an individual can act as a turning point, enabling youth to imagine a different future and navigate complex choices and circumstances to pursue it (Webb et al., 2015). For example, as students transition through high school, partnerships with universities can "crystallise realistic possibilities for students, simultaneously supporting their university desires and expectations" (Vernon, Watson, & Taggart, 2018, p. 100).

The attitudes of parents and the community towards employment and further study also have a large impact on the achievement and aspirations of remote and rural students. Specifically, student aspirations for further study are developed and influenced by parental expectations and encouragement. As Byun et al. explain:

Students who perceived that their parents expect them to attend college and who had more-frequent discussions with their parents about college had significantly higher educational aspirations. (2012, p. 11).

Parental encouragement towards further study stimulates regional and remote youth to apply for university (Halsey, 2017), but this is dependent on the child's academic ability and parents' own educational and occupational backgrounds (Koshy, Dockery, & Seymour, 2017). Conversely, regional and remote youth may be disadvantaged towards aspiring for further study when they grow up in a non-traditional family setting and their parental expectation is low (Byun et al., 2012). This is part of the "web of disadvantage" that these learners encounter (Halsey, 2017) and is exemplified in a lower proportion of students from low SES backgrounds intending to attend university than their high SES counterparts (Gore et al., 2015). Similarly, a belief in the community that university doesn't offer a rewarding career (Halsey, 2017) can hinder the aspirations of youth to attend university. For those that do aspire to further education, the issue is that they have to "go away" for employment and a career to take up such opportunities.



Figure 5: Rural billboard

Rural learners' transition to higher education

Once a decision to study is made, the transition to higher education for regional and remote students becomes even more challenging as it involves moving away from home, family, friends, and the support and familiarity of those things. Students who relocate to take up further study face logistical, financial and emotional challenges such as transport logistics, finding suitable accommodation, accessing allowances and financial support, and the seeking of part-time work (Burke et al., 2017; Halsey, 2017; Gore et al., 2015).



Figure 6: Farm working life

Furthermore, the high cost of university, relocation costs and ongoing living costs are a burden for students who commonly need to take up part-time work to alleviate financial pressure (Burke et al., 2017; Cardak et al., 2017; Farnhill & Thomas, 2017). While taking their study seriously, students sometimes need to miss classes out of necessity in order to juggle the multiple demands on their time (Burke et al., 2017). During semester time, relocators must worry about childcare, the potential loss of income whilst on placement and the cost of travelling home to visit family (Nelson et al., 2017). The challenge of financial hardship causes stress, affects wellbeing and contributes to attrition (Nelson et al., 2017). Furthermore, these work and family commitments leave less time for co-curricular and social activities (Pollard, 2018), which compounds emotional and social disadvantage.

Relocating students also face challenges transitioning as a result of social and emotional factors. Regional and remote youth needing to leave their families and home experience conflicting goals, homesickness and culture shock (Byun et al., 2012; Nelson et al., 2017; Pollard, 2018). The 'distance' that these students must navigate is physical, psychological and socio-cultural. Furthermore, remote and regional students may not have the cultural capital valued in higher education, are more likely to face challenges associated with academic preparation and may lack resources and confidence to access support (Nelson et al., 2017; Pollard 2018). The separation experienced by these students when they attend university can result in psychological distress and impaired mental health (Farnhill & Thomas, 2017; Pollard, 2018).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students may encounter additional hurdles due to their cultural background. These students may experience challenges with moving off-country and may be required to return home more frequently to attend cultural activities (Pollard, 2018). Recent analysis shows increasing numbers of Indigenous students relocating for study (Cardak et al., 2017) and it is recommended that there should be a stronger focus on supporting Indigenous students emotionally (Frawley et al., 2017). This is based on findings that Indigenous students' motivation to succeed is often drawn from their desire to give something back to family and the community (Frawley et al., 2017).

Finally, the method and mode of study has implications for the success of remote and regional students in higher education. Online/distance/external students have poorer outcomes than internal students, and part-time students fare worse than full-time students (Nelson et al., 2017; Stone, 2017). Regional students are taking up these online approaches to study in greater numbers than metropolitan students (Pollard, 2018) decisions often dictated by a need to work to support themselves financially and their geographic isolation from facilities. Thus, the mode of study adds another layer of complexity to understanding the challenges faced by rural, remote and regional students.

In Summary

Corbett (2016) identifies how there has been a "persistent insensitivity to difference" within the rural context and how this is manifested through an assumption that being rural can be understood in a collective or universal sense (p. 276). Categories such as "regional and remote" (Pollard 2018) and aggregated test results (Halsey, 2017) hide the full picture of this cohort and the differences that exist between individuals, schools and locations. Research has shown that students from remote, regional and metropolitan areas are distinct from one another (Pollard, 2018) but due to the perception of homogeneity, there has been a "gap" in the diversity of responses to these students (Farnhill & Thomas, 2017). Understanding the individual differences is important for effective student support services and policy directions (Pollard, 2018). Digital storytelling has been used in this study to better understand the diversity of experiences of this cohort. The following section reviews the methodology of the study and how this was designed to foreground the diversity of this cohort.

Methodology

Overview and Context

This project focuses on two participant groups from regional/remote areas: 1) **Shifts in space and self: Thinking about your future after school** (Year 11 student focus); and 2) **Shifts in space and self: Moving from community to university** (university student focus). The focus on students from regional/remote areas is in response to the disproportionate departure rates of these students from higher education, which is often blamed on the “individual” who is perceived as lacking the necessary knowledge. Thus, the project’s intention was to employ a digital storytelling methodology to investigate the subjective experience of Year 11 students and university students from regional/remote areas as they consider their futures after school or transition and move from their communities to study at university.

The university students were all enrolled in a regional university but, like the Year 11 participants, had all come from the Central West region of New South Wales. This location covers an area of approximately 63,000 square kilometres and accounts for approximately nine per cent of the total land area of NSW yet has less than three per cent of the population. The population of some 200,000 people is dispersed over a large area, with a few larger regional centres providing a range of facilities such as supermarkets and medical facilities and many smaller and more isolated communities. Demographically, the population in this region is slightly older than the state median, twice as likely to be of Indigenous background but much less likely to speak a language other than English at home. Examining educational outcomes, its population is far less likely than the population of the state overall to complete Year 12 of schooling (35.5 per cent compared with 52 per cent) or go on to complete a bachelor degree (9.4 per cent compared with 16 per cent). Employment outcomes appear to be similar to the state outcomes, although the median household income is approximately 17 per cent less than the state overall (ABS, 2016).

While each located in rural settings, there were very subtle differences between each of the schools that participated in this project. Five of these schools were central schools, educating students across the whole school lifecycle from Kindergarten to Year 12 (pseudonyms: Waterslea, Rivertown, Acaciaville, Valley, Tibiah and Gowenville Central Schools). The remaining two schools were high schools for students from Year 7 to Year 12. The seven schools ranged in size from a central school with a total of 63 students to a high school with over 260 students (pseudonyms: Lachlanwest, Wheatfields High Schools). Applying the Family Occupation and Education Index (FOEI) to measure disadvantage, six out of the seven schools fell within the bottom 40 per cent of disadvantage and had over 50 per cent of their students in the bottom quartile of socio-educational disadvantage (SEA). FOEI is a measure of educational disadvantage based on socioeconomic background and applied at a school level (NSW DoE, 2014). Both these statistics point to the diverse nature of these school sites and how learners were often intersected by issues related to social and economic disadvantage and also, generational, educational biographies.

These school populations were predominantly English speaking with four schools reporting students from a language background other than English and percentages at each of the schools as being under three per cent. The Indigenous populations of the schools varied from eight per cent to 72 per cent (ACARA, 2018). All the schools had been partners in a longitudinal university outreach program for between seven and nine years and had agreed to participate in a digital study workshop being offered as part of an annual residential outreach program.

Digital Storytelling Methodology

Digital stories are a mode of storytelling which has appeal to young people, especially in an age of visual generations where memes, photo sharing and YouTube are popular and creative conduits of communication across geographic and socio-cultural spaces (Burgess & Green, 2013). Digital stories are multimodal, digital texts, which utilise a combination of photos, and voice compiled via computer video-editing software, easily created on digital devices via accessible software. These short narrative films are highly personal; they act as avenues for self-expression, allowing individuals to represent their thoughts, memories, opinions or ideas (Hartley, 2008). They are non-directive, allowing students to represent their own lives and experiences rather than simply respond to questions. This project used digital storytelling as an innovative way for students to express how they envisaged their futures after school, or how they navigated university and how this impacted their understandings of self and others in their community of origin.

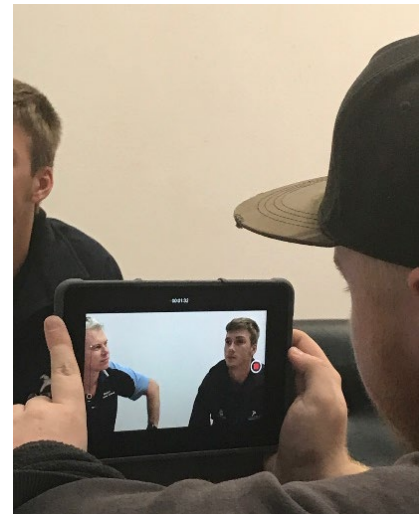


Figure 7: Using Ipads during the digital story workshop

This methodological approach has been used with the Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience (AIME) to explore how Indigenous young people and their university mentors imagine and position higher education participation. The “Imagining University” project (O’Shea, Harwood, Kervin, & Humphry, 2013) produced a series of digital stories that explored the nuances of educational participation for Indigenous young people and their mentors. The project explored the digital story methodology and its applications within social science research (Kervin, McMahon, O’Shea, & Harwood, 2014) and outlined how participation in the AIME program impacted on the mentors involved, providing rich insight into their motivations and the changes in perspectives that occurred (O’Shea, et al., 2013).

It is important to note that this audio-visual genre can be produced via accessible software (for example, it was preloaded on iPads for Year 11 students with free editing apps) with each story being between two to three minutes in length and told in the first person. Digital stories have been utilised to represent a range of perspectives that often remain untold and the audience is invited into areas of life that are personally significant to the story’s producer. A key element of the digital story approach is the viewing and celebration of the digital stories. Such opportunities also validate the importance of place-based narratives and also confirm the contribution that first-hand experiences and perspectives make to social research.

Recruiting participants

Recruitment of participants occurred differently for each context, which is explained below:

1) Recruitment of Year 11 students — Shifts in Space and Self: Thinking about your future after school

This aspect of the research project ran alongside a four-day workshop conducted in May 2018 by ASPIRE — an award-winning outreach program from UNSW which for the last decade has provided wholly school-based programs targeting low socioeconomic status (SES) students. After University of Wollongong (UOW) Ethics and SERAP approvals, information and consent forms were sent to the schools at the same time as the ASPIRE information. Parents returned completed consent forms to the schools, and it was made clear that workshop participation was separate to the research and non-participation in the research would not preclude the student from attending the workshop activities.

ASPIRE has developed productive and long-term relationships over many years with schools in regional and remote regions. To introduce this project, ASPIRE ran a digital storytelling pilot project in 2017 with Year 11 students which enabled consultation to occur with the schools (i.e., principals, teachers, teacher's aides, and support/liaison officers) and also feedback on the process to be obtained from the students. Having skills in digital storytelling is recognised as offering individuals the opportunity to record significant events or provide historical documentation that is relevant to the location and context. Digital storytelling has also been described as a cathartic and embodied experience for participants (Wilcox, Harper, & Edge, 2013) as individuals report how telling their own stories is both validating and experientially rich. As a result, the pilot project was considered highly beneficial for the students involved due to the applicability of the digital storytelling methodology to other aspects of the curriculum, and schools were eager to be involved in the current project.

Year 11 support for digital story making

The theme for the 2018 workshop was 'ASPIRing for my/our future' with around 50 Year 11 students and nine teachers from seven high and central schools travelling to Dubbo. Two of the four days focused on Digital Storytelling with instruction and support provided through an independent and not for profit organisation (www.digitalstorytellers.com.au/). The first session included guidance on planning, filming and creating a digital story with prompts to guide students. Students worked in pairs using ASPIRE iPads or their own phones, and were given time to create their stories ready for editing the following day. The free version of Kinemaster™ app was used for editing, with the Digital Storytelling team providing explicit instruction, advice and support as students edited and finalised their digital story. Links to copyright free resources (for example, images, music) were also provided. By the end of the second session, students uploaded their completed digital stories to an online repository and were invited to write their names on a whiteboard if they were willing to show their video at the celebratory event at the end of the day.



Figure 8: One of the workshops for digital storytelling

2) University students — Shifts in space and self: Moving from community to university.

University students were recruited via advertising targeting students from regional/remote areas and through snowball sampling. Advertising used existing school or faculty student support networks (for example, newsletters, mailing lists etc.), as well as posters on noticeboards. At UOW, an interview on UOW TV with the lead investigator, Associate Professor Sarah O'Shea was also produced and subsequently embedded into the Shifts in Space website. An incentive of A\$150 voucher was offered as a way of recognising the time that would be involved in participating in the study.

University student support for digital story-making

A number of strategies were used to support university student participants to create their digital story and reflective blog. A website was developed to house general information about the project, contacts, expectations of participants, resources (such as examples of digital stories, links to how-to resources, storyboard templates, copyright-free images and music sites), as well as specific instructions on "What do you need to do?" (see

<https://shiftsinpaceandself.wordpress.com/digital-story-project/>). In addition, an agreement was entered into with Digital Storytellers (<http://digitalstorytellers.com.au/>) to provide mentoring, technical support and advice, which included permission to use the resource materials from the Year 11 ASPIRE workshop (described in Year 11 support for digital story-making section).

At UOW, a number of face-to-face information sessions were held, as well as a get-together over lunch in the planning stage of the digital stories, which included opportunities to share tips and tricks, some discussion on accessible editing apps as well as setting up a peer support mechanism between the participants. UOW Fileshare was suggested as a preferred option to upload their completed digital story; it would then be added to a private YouTube site by one of the UOW team with a link added to the Shifts in Space and Self website. Students were given instructions for uploading their blog directly to the website. As an important part of the digital story methodology, a celebratory viewing was held at UOW over lunch with students and the team, where each digital story was viewed, celebrated and the experience reflected on.

Data collection

Data collection from Year 11 students included the digital stories, and short conversational-style interviews held with willing students during breaks or lulls in the workshop activities. Teachers accompanying them took part in a focus group interview. Data collection from the university students included the digital stories and a reflective blog.

Year 11 student interviews

A total of 36 consent forms were returned. Twenty-six digital stories were collected (all having written consent) and interview data was collected from 15 students for whom written parental consent had been given. A focus group with eight teachers was completed. Interviewees were all given the option to receive a copy of the transcript before analysis commenced. The approach to interviewing was designed to be unobtrusive and very informal, given that the two researchers conducting the interviews were not known to the students as well as the potential vulnerability and power relationships that



Figure 9: Hard at work in the workshop

could be perceived between researchers and students. On the day, the students were divided into three groups and each rotated between various activities. The interviewers stayed in the digital story editing room for the day as each group participated in this session. At lulls during the session, or when students appeared ready for a break, the interviewers approached individuals or pairs, inviting them to move from the main workshop area to a nearby open location (for example, in the hallway, or outside). This approach was premised on a thorough approach to child assent. In order to assure that the young participants were fully aware of what they were agreeing to ethically, we not only asked for signed permission from parents and the participants before commencing the study but also engaged in ongoing checks of this assent. This was a continual process that involved verbal consent throughout all the data collection stages of this project.

As the researchers did not know the students, it was important that the first questions identified the student name and school attended in order to later match with the consents received. As an additional ethical consideration, the researchers sought verbal consent from students for their digital story to be used in presentations, meetings and publications. This was to ensure that students understood what consenting entailed, due to the complexity of the consent forms required to be completed by parents. The kinds of questions following this were: *What kinds of futures do you imagine for yourself? What are some of the obstacles or barriers that young people feel need to be overcome to achieve their goals? What do you think about the idea of going to university as part of your future? What makes you think this way?* A total of 17 students were interviewed and audio-recorded with two of these recordings later discarded as no consent had been received. Nine of the interviewed students gave their verbal consent for their digital story to be used in dissemination activities, and the others declined.

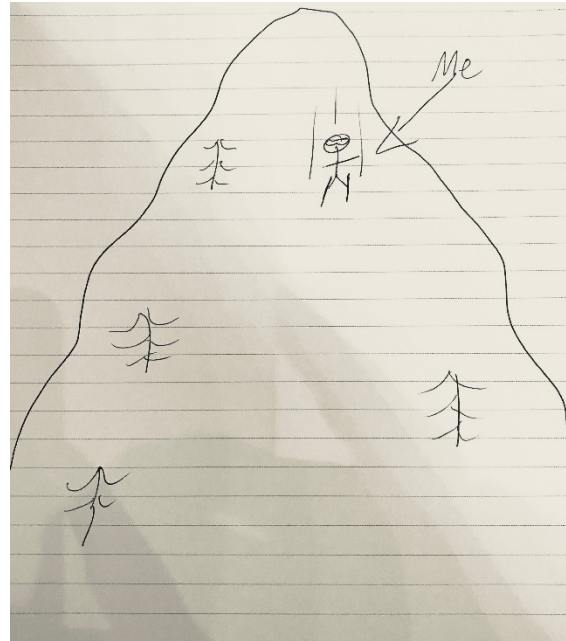


Figure 10: An example of a 'how I see the future' drawing

In addition to student interviews, teachers accompanying them were invited to participate in a focus group session. Eight teachers participated, representing all the schools involved in the ASPIRE event. The focus group interview was audio-recorded and transcribed with pseudonyms given to each of the teachers. The kinds of questions included: *What are some of the obstacles or barriers that young people consider need to be overcome to attend university? What kinds of futures do young people in this community imagine for themselves? What contribution can schools make to supporting students in their desires and ambitions? Can you give us an example of when you have been surprised by the choices a student has made post-compulsory schooling? Why did this surprise you?*

Year 11 digital stories

A total of 26 digital stories (with consent) were collected. These were uploaded by students to an online repository (organised by Digital Storytellers) and checked against consent forms by the UOW research team. Students were encouraged to develop their stories guided by prompts, such as: *Introduce yourself; If you could choose anything — what would you love to do when you finish school? Is this different from what you actually see yourself doing and why? What is helping or could help you achieve your goals? What do you think could stop you reaching your goals? How do you feel about university as a future pathway for you? What advice would you give other students at your school when considering their career options? And do you have anything else you'd like to add?* Students tended to opt for a Question and Answer format. The videos were also interspersed with “cutaway” shots, a “hero” shot (representative of what their future looks like) and time-lapse drawings (a “how I see my future” drawing). While the students had access to ASPIRE iPads, the digital storytelling approach also allowed for students to use their own devices to immediately access copyright-free images and music (links to these were provided).

University student data collection

Data collected from university students were the digital stories and reflective blogs. At UOW, a total of 11 students expressed interest in participating, however a number of issues such as timing, study load/assessment stress meant that only three students completed the research activities. At the University of Newcastle (UON) one student expressed interest but did not complete, and unfortunately, there were no participants at the University of New South Wales (UNSW). However, as the total number of regional/remote students at each of the universities is known to be small, the investigators were not expecting high numbers of participants.

Participants created a digital story with the program/app of their choice, using 15–20 images and two to three minutes of narration (subsequently transcribed) guided by one of the themes: *Arriving at university and being a student; Moving between university and community; or Reflecting on the first year*. The reflective blog was based on their experience guided by a number of prompts: *How were things before? What happened to change that? What challenges did you face? What has that change meant to you? Where did you grow up — what type of environment/sights/sounds/food/language? What was your experience of education? Values instilled by family/formal education structures/institution/ particular teachers you remember?*

The following Table outlines the data collection across the whole project and details the various forms of material that informed the analysis:

Table 1: Details of data

DATA			
Participants	Student-created	Transcriptions	Support
Year 11 students from 7 schools	Digital Stories (n=26)	Interviews (n=15) Digital story narration	ASPIRE workshop facilitated by digitalstorytellers.com.au
Year 11 teachers from 7 schools		Focus group interview (n=8)	
University students (from UOW)	Digital Stories (n=3) Reflective blog (n=3)	Digital story narration	Shifts in Space and Self website Face-to-face informal meetings

Ethical Considerations

For both parts of the study, there were numerous ethical considerations which we have listed below — while we have separated these, many were common across both foci and necessitated two separate ethics applications in order to manage the requirements of the project in a timely manner:

1) Year 11 student component:

- Students were likely to be under 18, and parental consent would be required.
- SERAP application and approval was also required in addition to university ethics approvals.
- Students could potentially be from vulnerable communities/situations.
- Some schools had a high proportion of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander student population, therefore cultural sensitivity and consideration was paramount to ensure participants retained ownership of their digital stories, and were appropriately acknowledged.

- Clarity around the ASPIRE program and digital story workshops being offered to all students regardless of whether they consented to involvement in the research aspect running alongside the workshops.
- The research ran alongside the Digital Story workshop with those who gave consent providing data for the research by participating in short interviews that were completed during the workshop (see Appendix 1 for questions). In order to avoid feelings of exclusion for any students who had not consented but were participating in the workshop, the interviewers would not discriminate as they did not know the students and whether they had consented or not. Questions were focused on student perspectives in the context of the workshop and activities. Each interviewee was asked for their full name and school, and following the workshop the chief investigators (CI's) conducted data matching to use the interview data only of participants who provided consent. Interviews from non-participants were not used for research purposes.
- The digital storytelling medium offers beneficence to both the students and also the schools/teachers by providing a new skill set that can be applied to other areas of learning and curriculum.
- All digital stories material includes acknowledgement of the student producer (and others as required) to ensure respectful recognition. School teachers from the schools were present at the workshops to actively support students in the process of filming and reviewing appropriate material for the digital story.
- Social media platforms acted as a repository for the videos (with permission from participants) and were fully utilised to ensure participants, their communities and others living in regional/remote Australia have access to the digital storytelling videos for inspirational and pedagogical purposes. The digital stories provide pedagogical resources such as for career teachers so that they can replicate the methodology to allow students to explore post-school education options in a fun and innovative way. This ensures that the project has impact beyond its initial participants and their specific communities.

2) University student component:

- Time involved in creating and producing a digital story — A\$150 voucher incentive offered in recognition of this.
- Support for the development and editing of the digital story — Shifts in Space website created, as well as a number of face-to-face information sessions (at UOW).

Ensuring validity

A key element of the digital story process is the viewing and celebration of the outputs from the workshop. The budget for this project included funding for hosting such events. These opportunities also validate the importance of place-based narratives and also, confirm the contribution that first-hand experiences and perspectives make to social research. Celebratory events occurred differently with the two participant groups: the university students and UOW research team met over lunch to view their digital stories and reflect on their experience, while the Year 11 event was held in a “cinema” style room at the end of the editing day, with a selection of digital stories showcased, and all students and teachers present.

For the ASPIRE workshop: as a school-based project, the digital story workshops provided useful skills for all learners in writing and scripting, editing, picture composition and also sound production. While we utilised an application called Kinemaster™, a number of free apps exist and these short videos can also be created via mobile phone technology. This is a versatile and accessible way to produce validating and important visual artefacts. These skills can be used not only in educational contexts but also, to tell stories relevant to the community and the region. Having skills in digital storytelling offers individuals the opportunity to record significant events or provide historical documentation that is relevant to the location and context. Digital storytelling has also been described as a cathartic and embodied experience for participants (Wilcox et al., 2013) as individuals report how telling their own stories is both validating and experientially rich. We hoped that the participants in this project had equally validating experiences.



Figure 10: The screening of the stories

Findings

The findings from this project were both rich and diverse, providing insights into this field that have been detailed in both presentations and publications. This section will address the three key questions that this project explored, drawing upon a range of relevant ‘voices’ and ‘perspectives’ in each of the responses. The first question is answered through reference to students’ interviews and digital story scripts, while responses to the second and third questions draw collectively upon the data derived from the school students, university learners and also the teachers who participated in the project.

Research Question One: How do young regional/remote people articulate their movement into the university environment and the roles of their community/family in this process?

Setting the scene

There was no shortage of ambition or aspiration amongst the Year 11 students who participated in this project. Goals after schooling were diverse but clearly articulated, ranging from pursuing a trade, being a pilot, training horses right through to becoming a paediatrician or a criminologist. Many of the students outlined the process for achieving these ambitions and despite their relative youth (16–17 years) had clearly considered these futures in some depth:

I wanted to do something sportsy, like sports science or even be a physio because I'm pretty interested in working with the body so I think it does correlate to what I want to do. (Quentin, Lachlanwest High School)

After high school, I'm planning to go to university — obviously get as high an ATAR as I can so I can do Medical Science. I want to end up doing neurology. (Rhys, Lachlanwest High School)

If I could choose anything I would want to be an optometrist once I finish school. I have been looking forward to do this since I was a little kid. (Sally, Wheatfields High School)

After Uni I would like to be a licensed accountant or engineering and be successful like the professionals (Lennon, Waterslea Central School)

While 18 of the 29 Year 11 participants clearly articulated a desire to attend university after completing school, other participants had alternative but equally defined aspirations. In Wyatt’s case his “*dream is to work on a station up north, own a V8 Cruiser, big muddies, big tough bar*”, this ambition underpinned his plan to “*head up north to work on a station for about three to four years*” and get his “*Certificate in Agriculture*” (Valley Central School). In Beau’s case, his life after school was similarly based on a long-held dream: “*I’d love to be a musician and travel the world doing lots of collaborations with people*” (Tibiah South Central School). However, many of these aspirations were also tinged with a touch of loss and even sadness as many recognised that in order to “become” what they desired, movement away from the community was required.

Moving away

As indicated, the students in the project all came from small communities where social networks were established and profoundly embedded in the biographies of individuals. The pull of the community and deeply held rural identities was a strong theme for many in their narratives and when talking of making choices about university. Such strong ties to community amongst regional and remote students has been noted by Elder and Conger (2000) while Petrin et al. (2011) suggested that the ties may be strongest within students who are most likely to gain university entry. The influence of this pull of community has been

identified in other studies. Hinton (2014) identified the importance of keeping community ties as part of the decision-making process for rural students in part of the UK, where rurality is on a much smaller scale than that experienced by the students in this study. When examining low SES students leaving home to go to university, Allen and Hollingworth (2013, p. 514) reflect upon the notion of “stickiness of place” keeping students from realising aspirations.

In the case of these regional and remote students there was both the sense of “stickiness” and a strong need to maintain ties such as Kayla (Acaciaville Central School): *“Farming is something I know, but I don’t particularly want to do it all my life. That’s something I’d definitely go back to if I failed in anything else”*. For some, this movement was expected but not welcomed; this was not an anticipated rite of passage but rather a necessary sacrifice:

We’re quite a close community school, so we like to help each other and something that gets in the way [of going to university] would probably end up being moving away. I don’t really want to move to a bigger place; I like the country. (Kaleb, Acaciaville Central School)

Movement away from home has previously been identified as a major barrier to university entry for this cohort (e.g., Denzler & Wolter, 2011). However similar to Fleming and Grace (2015) in this project, movement was a key thought and consideration in this decision-making process. Students recognised a need to move away if they wanted to study at university, but some consideration was given to universities closer to home, such as Maddie (Rivertown Central School). Her choice is a few hours drive away so it would be close enough to return home every fortnight. She confesses she is *“a sook. I love being home”* and she reckons she is *“going to get very bad homesick”*. Interestingly no one spoke of the option of studying online and remaining at home, yet remote study via technologies was a common part of schooling for many of these young people, as explained by Kate (Acaciaville Central School): *“We have to do things online because we don’t have suitable teachers, so we have to do virtual face-to-face video chats instead of actual teachers”*.

University and family

The ties with community and fears of self in a new place, while not deterring students from applying to university, did have an influence both on choice of university and choice of degree. In one case a student was drawn towards studying agriculture because it provided a career path back into a rural setting. In other cases, choice of institution was focused on being able to maintain ties with their home:

I’m planning to go to Sandon—they offer Social Work—that way it’s not too far from home, but I’m still close to dad and my brother. (Maddie, Rivertown Central School)

The country’s nice but I wouldn’t mind living somewhere say like Orana or West Calare, like that — I don’t think the big city is that good. (Kate, Acaciaville Central School)

I was thinking about maybe going — there’s one in West Calare I think. I want something close to home. (Kayla, Acaciaville Central School)

As the quotes above indicate, many of these students regarded the need to move as being a “hard” or an onerous thing that they were forced to do. This was a necessary act that was tinged with a sense of loss and even anticipated grief relating to departure:

Yeah, in a smaller community I think it’s harder for us to move away and go to a university because we’ve been with our parents all our life. (Carly, Valley Central School)

I want to become a radiographer, midwife or vet nurse. I'm not quite sure yet. So uni, moving away. I don't want to move to somewhere too big; I'm a bit scared, but that could change yet. I'm not sure. (Rhys, Lachlanwest High School)

This sense of loss and difficulty was similarly echoed in the digital stories and blogs created by the university students, and reflecting upon this move evoked emotionally fuelled memories:

it was really hard for me as semester one went by, to feel like I was fitting in and I was getting really home-sick because my family were six hours away and in about 13 weeks, I only got to go home for four days and that was really heartbreaking because I left behind my mum and my younger brother and my younger sister and also my grandparents and my uncles. (Emma, first year undergraduate from Wheatfields Town)

When Mum and Dad actually dropped me at my university accommodation and left to go home I realised that I didn't know anyone. Shit. I was scared. (Eleanor, second year undergraduate from Gum Swamp)

Finally, the teachers also spoke of this move defining it as something that was both inevitable and almost obligatory, but never easy. There were anecdotes of those who had left only to return due to family or personal issues, as one teacher explained:

Our kids really struggle, not with university because we don't have many who go to uni, but if they leave town for any sort of job a lot of them end up back ... they don't like to upset their families ... (Teacher 5, Wheatfields High School)

While families were generally supportive, many have little understanding of university having never attended themselves. This could be both a negative and a positive influence, the latter highlighted by Mason, whose motivation to attend university is grounded in a desire not to be involved in hard labour for the rest of his working life:

I'm the only one in my family that wants to go to uni, but out of my friends, I have a fair few that's gone. I just want to end the tradition of not going to uni and being in hard labour all my life. (Mason, Wheatfields High School)

Overall, these richly descriptive narratives provide some insight into the complex nature of these movements between the homeplace and the world that exist beyond the confines of rural community settings. As one teacher explained, it required dedication and effort to get these young people to look "*past that sandstone curtain, [because] once you get over there, there's a whole different world*" (T5, Wheatfields High School). The next section focuses on those who did consider this "different world" and describes various experiences of moving between and beyond the home community and the university setting.

Research Question Two: How do these young people understand themselves as university learners and how do these perceptions evolve throughout the first year of study?

Setting the scene

To understand how the young people understood themselves as learners, it is important to understand the context of their education. This understanding can assist in negotiating what Alloway and Dalley-Trim report as "the personal and emotional issues associated with the anxieties of moving to the city, and the powerful sense of loss of family and friends which this implies" (2009, p. 58). Halsey (2018) argues that there are two main types of resources that can assist students from regional and remote areas to positively inform their decisions for the future. The first of these Halsey (2018) refers to as "soft resources" and include those things that "focus on raising aspirations, relationships, networks, values, and reasons for hope" (p. 23). Whereas the other are what he defines as "hard" resources and relate to

financial support and access to a range of materials such as “accommodation, availability of part-time work and transport logistics.” (p. 23)

While some of the participants reflected upon an absence of “hard” resources as these related to subjects and teacher availability, others recognised the benefits derived from the “soft” resources that Halsey mentions:

My school had less than 500 students, because everyone knew each other, we seemed to get away with a lot. (Natalie’s Digital Story Script, first-year undergraduate from Berriganda)

Going to a small school, you literally know everyone. And when you got to a small school, everyone literally means everyone. Year 12’s would talk to year 7s, we played footy and netty with the teachers on the weekend and the school grounds staff, cleaners, bus drivers and nurses were parents of local kids. (Eleanor’s Digital Story Script, second year undergraduate from Gum Swamp)

Both Natalie and Eleanor described the social benefits of attending a smaller school and for both these participants, this attendance had been relatively successful leading to both taking up places at a regional university. However, we recognise that this may not be the case for all students and that the relative absence of such “hard” and “soft” resources undoubtedly impact negatively on both access to university and further training or employment opportunities. The decision to attend university or move away for employment are multiple and complex for any young person, but obviously this is heightened for those from regional and remote settings. The following section provides details of key considerations.

Beyond school

There are innumerable tensions in journeys of extreme social mobility, where people travel large social distances from family and community of origin to take up post-schooling opportunities; a journey that can be both exhilarating *and* confronting (Southgate et al., 2017). At a broad level, there are tensions concerning the notion of aspiration and what is regarded as appropriate to “aspire to” in this neo-liberal context. Gale and Parker (2013, p. 62) argue that post-school education and career aspirations about a “good life” are based on normative, populist and ideological ideas and that such assumptions fail to value and legitimise alternative conceptions, and that universities contribute to this by assuming they are the best possible route to a “good life” destination. Others have questioned the primacy of discourses of social mobility (Reay, 2013) and the personal “price of the ticket” of becoming socially mobile (Friedman, 2014). Nowhere is this “price” more obvious than in the rural context where success is invariably situated within a mobility discourse that assumes a severing of connections with the community of origin and a movement into the desired urban environment:

... the spectral presence of the rural community remains problematic for a neo-liberal educational apparatus that is geared to mobilise its products away from the margins and into the cities. (Corbett, 2016, p. 271)

Such a “rural to urban exodus” (Corbett, 2016, p. 271) creates an expected or anticipated trajectory that imagines the young person’s future as being “elsewhere” (p. 272) as if the young person remains within the community, this is regarded as a type of failure because “schooling is a journey that does not end in the locale” (p. 274). This expectation of departure creates an emotional “push/pull” tension within the community where in order to “get on” or achieve is accompanied by the inevitability of “loss” and parting.

The narratives of all the students were imbued with a level of emotionality when considering or reflecting upon this movement to university. This was largely articulated in terms of the vast geographical distances needed to travel to attend university:

In order to undertake my law degree, I moved approximately six and a half hours from home to Wollongong, NSW. Upon moving to Wollongong, I did not have any friends or family there and this made university lonely for the first few weeks until I became settled in and met new friends. Throughout the semester I had multiple health issues including a broken wrist and surgery which escalated my homesickness to the point where I did not care whether or not I passed my exams I just wanted to go home. (Emma, first-year undergraduate from Wheatfields Town)

This sense of loss or distance is echoed in the scripts and narratives from the Year 11 students:

The fact that moving away from everything that we're used to would be a bit hard. (Belinda, Waterslea Central School)

My whole family lives in Acaciaville, Waterslea and stuff like that, so we're all in small places but if I wanted to go to uni, like a good uni, I'd have to go all the way to Sydney or something like that and that's six, seven hours away from my family. I can't just say, 'Hey I'm coming over on the weekend'. I can't just do that so that'd be a problem, being away from family and stuff.

(Kate, Acaciaville Central School)

There is a strong body of evidence from researchers such as Lehmann (2014) and Reay (e.g., 2016) in terms of the comfort of fit at university of certain cohorts of students. However, in most cases, this is expressed in terms of class or SES identity. In this project, it appeared that this comfort of fit was about rural identity rather than class identity. Students realised they may not have a comfort of fit in moving to bigger communities:

I also think in small country towns it's going to be fear of fitting in, like it's such a big place, such as uni (Beau, Tibiah South Central School)

It would be a bit intimidating because I'm from a small town ... (Ryder, Tibiah South Central School)

I know it's going to be very daunting considering going from Rivertown to a bigger place ... I reckon I'll get very nervous because I don't like talking around many people — there's going to be so many people. (Maddie, Rivertown Central School)

While the fears or anxieties associated with attending university predominated, this was sometimes complemented by a *hopeful anticipation* or level of excitement:

It's obviously scary for just about anyone who looks into it. It's daunting when you first look at it, but it's also exciting at the same time. (Rhys, Lachlanwest High School)

Exciting. More friends — well, not more friends but more wide range of people to socialise with. More things to do in bigger places too; you can try different things.

(Kaleb, Acaciaville Central School)

Reality of university

Of the three university learners who participated in this study, each encountered difficulties and only one had an uninterrupted journey through their first year of study. Each described challenges that they seemed unprepared for, while they understood that the difficulties of being apart from their families, equally there were many unexpected and unsettling situations that impacted on this transition. In her reflective blog, Eleanor describes eloquently the series of events and realities that impacted on her first year:

As term went on, I realised that I hated my degree. I only had 12 face-to-face hours of classes a week. I couldn't get a job. I was new to everything, so I didn't have any extra curriculums to keep me occupied. And I didn't want to spend money to go do things. I was also getting quite homesick (this probably being the longest time I'd ever been away from home). I spent a lot of time in my room sleeping (quite out of character for me). One time I went down to breakfast and someone asked me what I was doing that day. I replied that I was going back to bed to sleep. This was literally because I had nothing better to do with my time. I had no car to drive home. My bedroom was very small compared to the space I was used to at home and I didn't know where I could go to be alone. It always felt like there were always other people there. Even if you weren't in the same room, you knew they were just on the other side of the wall. I found myself wondering if university was worthwhile considering my HECS debt at the end and whether it was actually going to get me a job at the end of my degree. The first time I went home at Easter time I caught the bus to Canberra and then borrowed my brother's car. The whole 3.5-hour drive from Canberra to home I cried. My parents were slightly startled to welcome home legendarily stoic, now bawling Eleanor.

For Eleanor, this combination of events and differences culminated in her deferring her studies for a year, uncertain that she would even return, as she explained in her digital story:

At the end of the year, I deferred uni for 12 months and I wasn't sure if uni was for me and if I was going to come back, but I did.

In the focus group, the teachers were able to explain some of the difficulties that this rural cohort may encounter both in the initial stages of their studies and also, as they continued through their degrees. One teacher explained that the fear many students held was deeply embedded in a sense that university was not for "people like them" and that it represented an unattainable goal for those in a rural setting:

We have a big problem with our kids having the perception that university's beyond them. In Year 9, 10 when you talk about it 'oh you going to university?' 'Nah, I'm not smart enough for that'. But actually 'yes, you are' There are avenues to get there. That whole perception that university's for that top 10 per cent of academic students is just for them. But it's not actually. You've got other avenues to get there. They don't know that. They can't comprehend that. (T7, Valley Central School)

This theme of "fear" also featured in the response from another teacher who reflected how the students in the school, expressed uncertainty about what subjects to choose to access university, demonstrating uncertainty about entry requirements and expectations:

I find a lot of our kids are frightened in Year 11 when they choose their subjects that they're going to choose the wrong subjects to get into uni, and there's not enough, like teachers explaining to them that there's other ways to get to uni than just choose an ATAR pathway, So some of the kids don't choose subjects that they want to actually do and then they don't really do that well in them because they just thought 'I want to go to uni, so I have to do these subjects' or 'I don't want to go to uni, cos I don't want to do any of those subjects at school. (T6, Waterslea Central School)

University was described by another as a "foreign concept", and so this alien nature impacted on transition into this environment and led to misinformation about the nature of the environment and what university involved, another explained:

Also, a lot of my kids I find until I speak to them about it they have an incorrect assumption of what uni is like. They think it's an extension of school — you finish year 12 and go to uni and it's just the same type of learning. And you go 'no no no no ... it's a completely different learning environment' and they go 'Oh is it?' They just assume it's like four more years of school, 'I don't want four more years of school!' (T1, Acaciaville Central School)

Finally, the teachers reflected upon those who did not make it at university and returned to the community, this was something that was done quietly and with little attention, as another participant described:

"A lot of kids do it [attend university] and stay where they are, we get a few who trickle back into town quietly and tend to stay after that, which is a bit sad for them." (T4, Gowenville Central School)

Research Question Three: How do members of regional/remote communities articulate the influences or impacts brought by these young people back to their communities of origin?

Setting the scene

The school students in this project articulated strong links with their communities, these relationships were important, and many learners did not want to lose this link with their place of origin. Importantly, the voices of others are replete in these interviews and for many of these learners, the motivations to attend university or gain vocational skills/qualifications are negotiated by the desires of family and community members. When asked who or what assisted learners to achieve their goals, it was both family and teachers that featured strongly in these responses:

The support from my family is probably one of the big ones that would help me get there, and friends. (Belinda, Waterslea Central School)

The people helping me with my goal, to achieve my dream to be a graphic artist are teachers and of course my family and friends. (Thomas, Waterslea Central School)

The tight support from teachers, family and friends helps heaps. (Kaleb, Acaciaville Central School)

In their 2015 study, Fleming & Grace concluded that a motivator for university study was not one of selfishness but rather rural students wanted to return with skills and experiences that would support their families. Certainly, the school students in this study articulated wider altruistic feelings of helping their broader communities as a push to go to university and then return, as Mason from Wheatfields High stated *"Give back to community — what they have given you it's more than what you give back really."* For another student the source of giving back came from his lived experience:

I've had a few losses in the family to various disorders — a lot of my family are affected by medical conditions and it's just sort of the drive to help other people. I see what goes on for people that suffer through different things and if I could change one thing for one person that would make my life worthwhile. (Evan, Wheatfields High School)

The next section reflects upon the teachers' perceptions of what it was that the community gained (or lost) when their young people decided to leave to pursue employment or educational ambitions that necessitated leaving their regional and remote locale.

Returning to the community

Those students who returned to their community after gaining qualifications undoubtedly provided a much-needed source of skills, often choosing careers that were beneficial to the community in some way. Teachers in the focus group interview observed that a student's choice of degree was often determined by those professional roles previously encountered or with which individuals were familiar. Such choices included teaching, nursing, optometry, occupational therapy, physiotherapy — all occupations that students had direct experience of and therefore some insight into what such a job might entail:

Occupational Therapy's huge (T5, Wheatfields High School)

... cos they're seeing in the fields, like when they're at netball they're seeing people that a strapped and they know that's a physio, or when they're injured you go to a physio, so even that they can't see outside what they've experienced. (T2, Tibiah South Central School)

Some teachers regarded this narrow focus as a possible missed opportunity as students determined their future career choices only on what was familiar and, in many cases, would facilitate re-entry into the community, as T1 (Acaciaville Central School) commented:

But ... so you get the ones that want to come back to home ... << OVERTALK ... teaching, nursing >> ... and they know that 'I can do that job at home' whereas there might be other great jobs out there, but 'I have to live in Sydney for that job' 'Nah can't do that. Have to leave ...'

The act of returning was often interpreted again in terms of “fear”. This could variously be the fear of trying something unknown or the fear of leaving what was known:

I know one of our Year 12 students last year who got in [to university] — I don't think money was as much of an issue for them - but she's just very shy and ... Got to uni, and ... [too] scary' and just stayed home (T1, Acaciaville Central School)

This reluctance to leave at all or to focus on careers that would enable a return to the community was largely seen as a negative by these educators but equally understandable; as one of the teachers explained:

Even with us as teachers it's hard for us, I live there and come here on these trips and it's like 'Oh, there's people'. It's the same' (female, identity not decipherable).

For this teacher, her own ventures into more urban settings retained surprise and a certain recognition of discomfort.

Family influences and motivations

While the students largely regarded their families and friends as supporting their future lives and choices, some of the teachers has less positive perceptions of these influences:

There is quite a bit of negativity sometimes around people who leave and ... they do end up coming back after a year or so and they, because they really do struggle. (T5, Wheatfields High School)

This teacher also pointed out that there are some in the community who hold outdated attitudes towards girls gaining a university education unless it's for “traditional” careers:

If there's going to be any opposition, it'd be from the parents ... who believe that their daughters shouldn't get a university education, but it's alright for the boys. So the girls should work in a bank, or they should do those sorts of jobs ... they should do teaching or nursing ... and you tie them in. (T5, Wheatfields High School).

The pull of the land and the need for someone to “look after the farm” also featured in both the teacher and the students’ narratives; the latter expectation similarly compromising futures but equally providing a sense of stability for the future. A farming discourse was pervasive for some students as one of the teachers explained:

A lot of students their entire life will be told ‘so when you take over the farm’ since they were like about five years old and at 18 ‘I’m taking over the farm.’ (T1, Acaciaville Central School)

While some of our participants rejected such expectations, for a number of these young people ‘taking over the farm’ was regarded as a familiar or comfortable trajectory and one that would enable both the opportunity to give back to, and connect with, family and community:

I think there’s probably about a quarter of us that are planning to go to university. The rest want to stay in the rural area doing farming or something like that — it’s their home, fair enough. (Maddie, Rivertown Central School)

Farming is something I know, but I don’t particularly want to do it all my life. That’s something I’d definitely go back to if I failed in anything else — I’d probably be able to do a fair bit of that as a farm hand and that. (Kayla, Acaciaville Central School)

Another teacher explained how decisions about post-schooling options were also differentiated according to family and geographical contexts of these young people, reminding us that rurality is not a common denominator but instead nuanced by spatial and cultural contexts:

The farming I don’t see that as being forced into it. I see that as a life choice they make. Farming can be a very good lifestyle. I mean it could be really bad depending on the time of year and the situation, but sometimes I feel that we’re assuming that uni is the right option all the time ... I think tackling the issue of getting farming kids to university is very different to tackling the issues of getting non-farming kids who are rural to uni. They’re two different problems. (T2, Tibiah South Central School)

Such nuanced understanding of distinction or difference was also articulated by another teacher who further elaborated on the importance of understanding context rather than assuming universality:

[The] rural kids come from that background, they have land outside of town, they have more of an idea and have a bit more of a go, whereas the town kids that don’t come from a family of academics or having been encouraged, like you say. Yeah, no, they think they’re just nowhere good enough to do that. But they actually are. (T7, Valley Central School)

These and other quotes highlight how understandings of these communities differ according to the positionality of the young people and their individual contexts and family biographies, further emphasising the nuances found across rural communities and the need to steer away from generalisations about rural settings and those living within such environments.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Overall, this research points to the rich diversity of our regional and remote student populations and the ways in which a variety of factors impacted on post schooling aspirations and destinations. These participants all referred to the difficulties of moving out of the community which was generally conceived of in terms of “hardship” or effort rather than characterised as a positive rite of passage. These decisions were further complicated by the complexity of the transitions that were described. These trajectories were more than those of simply moving from school to work or further study and instead required leaving the homeplace and familiar rural community settings. Such movements sometimes engendered feelings of loss and grief, as well as fear but in some cases, this was tempered by a level of excitement.

Some of the teachers spoke of how these young people may perceive of university as being beyond their reach, considering attendance as not necessarily for ‘people like them’. This points to a possible underlying discourse that for some rural learners attending higher education was an “exceptional” rather than an “expected” life course trajectory. For those who did regard university as a viable choice, their decisions around what to study were often negotiated around both a desire to “give back” to the community and also to have the opportunity to return to this rural setting. Yet, despite the many challenges for schools, students and their families brought on by geographic location and by the vagaries of the environment, these students articulated well-conceived aspirations and determination about their post-school futures. Context and geographic isolation can be overcome. There is support within their communities, often provided by the school even after a student has left and there are important role models across the community. What needs to be ensured is that all universities play their part and work consistently and longitudinally with communities such as the ones in this project.

Whilst these findings are rich, the relatively small sample of students means that the recommendations drawn are necessarily limited by the restrictive nature of this sample. Having said that, the research team feel that we have collectively applied an innovative and place-based methodology to a topic that needs to be considered in a creative but also nuanced manner. By utilising digital stories with both young people contemplating their educational and vocational futures post-schooling and those individuals who had made the transition to the higher education sector, we feel that this project makes an original and insightful contribution to this field.

The text in the report does not do the necessary justice to these young people nor their ambitions, emotions and perspectives on life. To better represent the emotionality and the individuality of this lived experience we created the “Shifts in Space” website and so, encourage you to immerse yourself in the visual and textual artefacts that are reproduced there: <https://shiftsinpaceandself.wordpress.com/the-journey-begins/>. The site is designed to be both a portal for students’ stories, but also, importantly it houses a range of resources to assist others to engage with digital storytelling, providing tips and techniques for both digital story makers and facilitators.

This report and the associated website start genuine conversations about how we can productively work with our rural and remote students to enable them to realise personal aspirations and also have equal access to what they desire in life. This conversation is just beginning, but it is clearly one that is recognised as being important by our current Government, with the recent announcement of A\$135 million in funding targeted at this student cohort. However, we hope that what our data, while limited, has shown is that the post-schooling pathways and university participation of this population is a complex and multi-faceted issue. A field, we argue, that requires bespoke initiatives and supports rather than “broad brush strokes” that fail to consider the unique nature and contexts of these populations.

The final section of this report details **five key recommendations** that can be applied at both institutional and broad policy levels. We hope that the combination of textual, visual and oral mediums to this field has provided depth to a subject that is at risk of being viewed in mono-dimensional terms rather than in terms of the richly diverse materiality that truly characterise rural and remote settings.

Recommendation One: Universities need to develop dedicated and targeted pre-enrolment, enrolment and transition support timed to critical stages in the year that is designed and delivered with the rural student cohort in mind. These strategies need to consider learners in a holistic sense, addressing not only academic knowledges but also addressing the emotional repercussions of moving away from the community to attend university

To ensure authenticity, these university initiatives need to be developed by rural students using a 'students as partners' framework and also, draw upon strengths-based thinking that recognises the particular attributes and cultural wealth these students already hold. The program should have the objective of explaining or considering how these existing attributes can be applied within the university environment to assist individuals to achieve their academic goals.

Recommendation Two: The Department of Education needs to explore approaches to better utilise existing online opportunities in high schools to enable rural and remote students to avail themselves of online university opportunities. This could include incorporating university subjects within the high school curriculum to both introduce these learners to higher education expectations but importantly provide a structured introduction to studying online at a tertiary level. These subjects would be credit-bearing and so lessen the time required to obtain a degree whilst simultaneously providing key skills in the navigation of online learning.

A number of our participants mentioned that their high schools already delivered subjects via online modalities and hence utilising existing technology to deliver university preparation programs or even subjects that have degree bearing credit would not only have economic benefits but importantly, provide necessary academic capital in a safe and familiar context.

Recommendation Three: Equity researchers should leverage the impactful nature of Digital Storytelling as a place-based methodology that is effective in understanding what is 'inside students' heads' (Brookfield, 1991). This methodology provides an opportunity for learners to both narrate and visually represent personal perspectives, such "local narratives" (Parsons, Guldberg, Porayska-Pomsta, & Lee, 2015) providing alternative or additional insight to quantitative or statistical evidence. These insights include understanding the strength of family, community ties, connections to country which may often include a sense of 'giving back' and reluctance to leave. Also this approach assist in foregrounding the particular circumstances (historical, traditional and current) that may be impacting on whole communities and schooling such as the pervasive effects of drought, floods, bushfires etc.

Recommendation Four: The university sector should strive to create productive collaborations/partnerships across regional and metropolitan universities that are characterised by united and cohesive outreach programs. These programs should provide multiple opportunities for regional and remote students and their families to engage with and experience a range of different institutions across the high school cycle.

Presently, the outreach area is somewhat "siloe" and this places additional pressure on schools and also students to make multiple contact with different institutions. Partnership activities would ensure greater reach and also, avoid duplication.

Recommendation Five: Education policymakers need to appreciate rural and remote populations in terms of their multi-dimensionality. Acknowledging the rich diversity of

communities avoids individuals only being defined by location and instead foregrounds the importance of relationships with the family, broader community and the land.

This recognition would include understanding that this is not a group without aspirations or goals but rather a cohort that may simply require additional recognition and support in realising these ambitions. Such recognition also needs to consider the nuances of this rural and remote lived experience rather than collective or mythic constructions of these environments.

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Appendix 1

Semi-structured interview questions or conversation starters

- What is your full name?
- What school do you attend?
- What kinds of futures do you imagine for yourself?
- What are some of obstacles or barriers that young people feel need to be overcome to achieve their goals?
- What do you think about the idea of going to university as part of your future? What makes you think this way?

Digital Stories

Find the following digital stories at <https://shiftsin.spaceandself.wordpress.com/>

Tori's Story

Tori comes from a small town near the NSW/Victorian border – a 6 hour drive from Wollongong where she is in her second year of a Bachelor degree in journalism. She went to a small private school where 'you literally know everyone' and her primary school had only 24 students, making it feel 'more like a family'.



I think I chose [University of Wollongong] because it was a good compromise between the city and country lifestyles. I didn't want to be overwhelmed by the big city with lots of buildings and no way of knowing which way you're going but I also wanted to get out of my small, little town and experience something bigger and Wollongong was the perfect combination.

(from Tori's 'Bush to Beach' digital story)

Brianna's Story

Brianna moved to the country when she was in Year 4, attending a high school with around 230 students in total and 30 students in her year. She said that she is "extremely grateful to have attended a small country school ... [and] fortunate enough to be given a plethora of opportunity". She is in her first year of Law and, as this is the first time she has lived away from home, she has struggled with homesickness and being 6 hours away from family.



I found that quite difficult and not having friends or any support mechanisms or anything like that was really, really hard ... [but] a similarity between my community and Wollongong uni was the size of our classes; ... I really enjoyed the small classes because they were similar to the classes in high school, about 20 or 30 people.

(from Brianna's digital story)

Jade's Story

Jade comes from a small town close to the NSW/Victorian border, with a shrinking population of around 2000. The high school she attended had around 370 students and 'because everyone knew each other' Jade said, 'we seemed to get away with a lot'. University was a bit of a shock and she realised she had to take it more seriously than high school as 'the teachers didn't even know my name, and would definitely not allow me to slack off because of who I am'.



Moving away to study at university was an enormous change for me. I feel so lucky to be able to experience both the country and the big city lifestyle ... Education is not all about the things you learn, but also the relationships you make and experiences you have along the way.

(from Jade's digital story and blog)

Zara's Story

Zara is a Year 11 student from a small school with around 47 students ranging from Kindergarten to Year 12. She lives on a cattle farm which is about 2,500 acres and quite affected by the current drought. She is busy with schoolwork and working on the property and has a passion for photography.



I really want to do stuff like photography and digital media and videography and all that. I love doing that sort of stuff. I love telling stories. I'm always trying to think of new ideas to make stuff.

(Zara, Yr 11 from interview)

Peta's Story

Peta attends a central school with less than 140 students ranging from Kindergarten to Year 12. She would like to become a paediatrician, but social work also interests her.



I'm planning to go to [regional university] — they offer Social Work — that way it's not too far from home but I'm still close to dad and my brother.

(Peta, Yr 11 from interview)

Dylan's Story

Dylan attends a small central school of 139 students ranging from Kindergarten to Year 12. He is in Year 11 and is keen to do a degree that will enable him to teach ancient history.



I'm interested in reading and finding out what other people had to go through or what heaps of people had to deal with to get through ... definitely I did consider Modern for a while because of the world wars but I just think Ancient has a bit more raw power to it.

(Dylan, Yr 11 from interview)