An Exploration of Tertiary Education and Community Experiences for Persons Living in Australian Rural Areas

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Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (Education)

in the College of Arts, Society and Education

at James Cook University

29th of April 2022

Acknowledgements

In the spirit of reconciliation, I acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia and their connections to land, sea, and community. I pay my respects to their Elders past and present and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples today. It is a privilege to live and share knowledge on indigenous lands.

I first heard about undertaking a PhD in 1993 during my mature-age university orientation. The class was led by Eva, a doctoral candidate who informed us about university life as well as her doctoral research. After this brief introduction, it became my ambition to complete a doctorate and this dissertation is the culmination of the necessary support for me to do so.

Despite my early ambitions, my goal was set aside for many years. Shortly after completing my master's degree, I read "Living Low Paid: The Dark Side of Prosperous Australia," written by Dr Barbara Pocock, a "country girl" who had grown up in rural South Australia. I reasoned that if one South Australian "country girl" could attain a PhD, then I as another could do the same.

My search for a university that would permit me to complete my PhD without leaving my rural area led me to correspond with Dr Melissa Vick at James Cook University. Melissa, after perusing my initial research proposal, thought that I, as an unemployed manual labourer living in a drought-stricken area, was well placed to make an original contribution to research knowledge. She also generously agreed to supervise my rural candidature, for which I am deeply grateful. Without the initial opportunity that Melissa afforded me, it would have been extremely difficult for me to integrate my doctoral research with my other responsibilities.

The resultant dissertation has one author but involved many other people who shared the workload. I would like to thank everyone for their support; however, the efforts of some people warrant particular attention. First, to thank each person who candidly shared their experiences under the pseudonyms of Amber, Anne, Dawn, Derek, Emily, Heidi, Helen, Jane, Julie, Kate, Lily, Lisa, Maggie, Margaret, Meg, Oigle, Pat, Sandy, William, and Wynne, I am deeply grateful that you gave me privileged access to your lives. Your willingness to assist me

has provided me with the welcome as well as intense intellectual challenge to develop an academically rigorous understanding of your experiences. As a small recompense for your faith in me and my research, please be assured that your voices have been heard around the globe. From my brief time with each of you, I know that all of you would experience satisfaction from knowing that your efforts have instigated meaningful differences for rural peoples who aspire to attain their tertiary education.

I also wish to sincerely thank my advisers that have been involved in shaping the research. To this effect, I would first like to thank Dr Bryan Smith who guided me from the first draft to the completion and submission of the thesis. Bryan was my ideal adviser, treating me as a colleague in waiting and understood my goal for the thesis to generate the highest possible contribution to research knowledge. I am deeply impressed by Bryan's commitment to the completion of my thesis with his willingness to be reliable and responsive to my requests for connection until the dissertation was complete. I am also deeply grateful for both his keen intellect and his eye for detail as well as his commitment to guiding me through the tedious challenges in the final stages. He did so in a way that made the process as straightforward as possible without neglecting the necessary edits that were required. To this end, Bryan demonstrated the flexibility to accept and build on the analytical ideas that I had established in the thesis and was considerate in offering editing advice. Bryan's dedication was instrumental in my completion of the thesis, and I am deeply indebted to him. Thank you, Bryan, I can only hope to exemplify your competence and professionalism in the future.

I would also like to acknowledge the efforts of Dr Lai Kuan Lim who was involved with my research for most of my candidature. She generously assisted my learning, and in particular, my research writing so that I could complete the first full draft. Lai Kuan was an excellent adviser, responsive in demonstrating her support for me as well as my research. I consider Lai Kuan to be a dedicated educator of the highest calibre who challenged me to fulfil my potential and make an original contribution to knowledge through the conduct of this study. My diversion from the ideas in my early research is a testament to Lai Kuan's insistence that I scrutinise rather than accept my sense of profound familiarity with the rural world and its laypersons. Lai Kuan's staunch commitment to my PhD inspired me to continue and it is my sincerest wish that the completion of this thesis is in part, evidence of Lai Kuan's considerable

Statement of the Contribution of Others

Nature of Assistance	Contribution	Name and Affiliation
Intellectual Support	Doctoral Advisers	Dr Bryan Smith James Cook University Professor Brian Lewthwaite James Cook University Dr Lai Kuan Lim James Cook University Professor Elaine Sharplin James Cook University Professor Pauline Taylor-Guy Australian Council for Education Research Associate Professor Melissa Vick James Cook University
Financial Support	Student Support Fund	James Cook University
	Australian Postgraduate Award 2012 to 2017	Australian Government Department of Education
	Scholarship 2017	Anonymous Sponsor

for Judith Snow, in Memoriam

We usually think of gifts as being extraordinary qualities. We think that only a few people have them. But giftedness is actually a common human trait, one that is fundamental to our capacity and need to be creatures of community. Gifts are our capacities to create opportunities for ourselves and others to interact and do things together, things that have mutual meaning. Our presence is the fundamental gift that we bring to the human community. Presence is the foundation of all other opportunities and interactions, of everything that is meaningful.

- Judith Snow (1949 -2015)

List of Publications

The table that follows lists presentations, articles, and chapters that support arguments at various points in the thesis. Each is properly cited where appropriate but are themselves not included in the body of the thesis. The presentations, articles, and chapters pursue different research questions and concerns to those in the thesis.

Chapter Number	Details of publication(s) in the Chapter	Description of the argument supported by the work
1	Marchant, J. (2013, 1-5 December). Learning about social inclusion from adult students in rural communities. [Paper presentation], Australian Association for Research in Education: Shaping Australian Educational Research, Adelaide, Australia.	My analysis of the pilot study data in this paper highlights experiences of being included and/or excluded as a person living in an Australian rural area in comparison to ideas in policy. This supports my argument that experiences in rural areas cannot be captured by ideas about social inclusion.
	Marchant, J. (2013). Will learning social inclusion assist rural networks? *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education, 23*(2), 1-20.	In this article, I review the applicability of social inclusion and social exclusion as it pertains to what is known about rural networks. This supports my argument about the complexity of rural networks for individuals living in Australian rural areas.
	Marchant, J. (2014). Social inclusion strategies: Endorsing conformity or promoting diversity? *The International Journal of Community Diversity, 13*(3), 13-23.	The background review of research and policy literature in this article explores the concept of social inclusion. I highlight that social inclusion could be a process or a state, or both, supporting my claim that such a concept is inappropriate for the conduct of the study.

	Marchant, J. (2015). Australian definition of Poverty. In M. Odekon (Ed.), *The SAGE encyclopedia of world poverty* (pp. 90-92). Thousand Oaks, USA: SAGE.	This chapter is a summary of ideas about poverty in the Australian context in which the differences between rural and metropolitan areas are highlighted. This supports my claim that many Australian rural areas are deprived.
2	Marchant, J. (2014). Adult education in rural areas: Lessons from students in the South Australian context. In A. Husain, A. Masih, I. Husain, & H. K. Bhatia (Eds.), *Education as a right across the levels: Challenges, opportunities and strategies* (pp. 1064-1071). New Delhi, India: Viva.	This article is based on a preliminary data analysis where I review the education experiences of adults as part of their context. This supports my claim that an improved understanding of tertiary education experiences can be generated by considering the context in which they occur.
	Marchant, J. (2014). Connecting the bush telegraph: Promoting networks in the global countryside. *The Global Studies Journal, 7*(3), 13-20.	This is an article based on a preliminary data analysis in which I examine the connections of adult learners within their rural areas as well as their linkages to a globalised world. This supports my argument that globalisation has presented more challenges than benefits for persons living in rural areas.
	Marchant, J. (2014). "Just ask me" mechanisms for being together in fragile communities. Proceedings of *The IAFOR European Conference Series 2014* (pp. 65-74). Aichi, Japan: International Academic Forum.	The paper was generated from a preliminary analysis of the data by examining the social bonds for persons living in Australian rural areas. This supports my claim that the role of tertiary education can be of benefit to individuals and

		communities in Australian rural areas.
	Marchant, J. (2015). Voices from the distance: Communicating the experience of remote education. Proceedings of the Second International Conference of the African Virtual University: Linking Open Learning and eLearning to Practice, Nairobi, Kenya.	This is a presentation based on my preliminary analysis of the data that reviews the processes that assist or detract from learning for persons who live in rural areas. This supports my claim that further research is required to understand the learning experiences of persons living in Australian rural areas.
	Marchant, J. (2020). Undermining education: Exploring selected experiences of persons who live in the rural areas of Australia In B. Montoneri (Ed.), *Academic misconduct and plagiarism: Case studies from universities around the world*. Washington DC, USA: Lexington Books.	In this chapter, I present a preliminary data analysis to portray concerns about education integrity for tertiary-educated persons living in Australian rural areas. This supports my claim that an exploration of tertiary education experiences is warranted in the present study
3	Marchant, J. (2013). Will learning social inclusion assist rural networks? *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education, 23*(2), 1-20.	In this article, I review the applicability of social inclusion and social exclusion as it pertains to what is known about rural networks. This supports my claim that ideas from persons in the study are having an impact on research and practice.
	Marchant, J. (2015). *Just Google or just research to improve the response-ability of research participants?* Proceedings of the 21st Century Academic Forum Conference at	The article in the proceedings reviews ways to generate benefits for marginalised participants who engage in research. This supports my claim, that with further

	Harvard, Boston, USA.	investigation, marginalised participants could benefit from research.
7	Marchant, J. (2013, 1-5 December). Learning about social inclusion from adult students in rural communities. [Paper presentation], Australian Association for Research in Education: Shaping Australian Educational Research, Adelaide, Australia.	My analysis of the pilot study data in this paper highlights the experience of being included and/or excluded as a person living in an Australian rural area in comparison to ideas in policy. This supports my argument that the voices of contributors to the study have been widely disseminated.
	Marchant, J. (2015). *Just Google or just research to improve the response-ability of research participants?* Proceedings of the 21st Century Academic Forum Conference at Harvard, Boston, USA.	The ideas presented in the proceedings reviews ways to generate benefits for marginalised participants who engage in research. This supports my argument in the thesis that ideas from the perspectives of persons living in Australian rural areas have been widely disseminated.
	Marchant, J. (2015). Voices from the distance: Communicating the experience of remote education. Proceedings of the Second International Conference of the African Virtual University: Linking Open Learning and eLearning to Practice, Nairobi, Kenya.	This presentation is based on a preliminary analysis of the data to review the processes that assist or detract from learning for persons who live in Australian rural areas. This supports my argument that the voices of contributors to the study have been widely disseminated.

Abstract

In this study, I present an account of the meanings of tertiary education and community experiences for twenty persons, each of whom lives in one of fourteen distinct Australian rural areas. To do so, I conduct an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of each contributor's narrative account of their experiences recorded in interview transcripts. The findings from the analysis present an account of each person's understandings of their experiences with tertiary education as well as their communities as part of their particular rural context.

To contextualise the Australian rural areas featured in the study, I use a broad description that is supplemented by each contributor's perspectives about the details of their particular rural context. As such, persons recruited to the study lived in Australian rural areas that are described collectively in the study as places located in Australian Local Government Areas that have between 200 and 30 000 inhabitants. Such places also have a population density of fewer than two people per square kilometre (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011; Cameron-Jackson, 1995). While such rural areas may share some similar characteristics, each may be differentiated by its distinctive qualities (Gorman-Murray et al., 2008; Holt, 2009; Marsden, 2006). Despite each Australian rural area having distinctive features, tertiary education is delivered to such places and their people as a whole (cf.Halsey, 2018; Napthine, 2019). Further, previous research outlines that for persons who live in Australian rural areas their experiences of tertiary education and communities are intertwined. For example, a study conducted by Redpath (2004) details connections between graduate women's experiences of their tertiary education and their communities. The present study builds on previous research by detailing linked as well as distinct experiences of tertiary education and communities for a small number of students and graduates as tertiary-educated persons who live in Australian rural areas.

Previous reports about outcomes for people who live in Australian rural areas often document poor educational attainment, with many adults only reaching a basic level of education (Johnson et al., 2009). Such attainment occurs in the face of research by both Dymock (2007) and Lear (2011, 2013) who argue that many people living in Australian rural areas are both appreciative and enthusiastic about the prospect of continuing their formal education. Early research by Sher and Sher (1994) explains that poor educational attainment persists in rural areas because there are missing opportunities for their peoples to continue their

education. Since Sher and Sher's (1994) seminal research, infrastructure developments in many Australian rural areas have advanced, supporting access to tertiary education through the online delivery of courses (Maltzan, 2006). Other initiatives intended to bolster rural educational outcomes include government funding to assist relocation to campus, and the recent establishment of regional university centres (Halsey, 2018; Napthine, 2019). The recent establishment of such centres means that their influence on educational outcomes will be understood in the future. Preceding initiatives, however, such as funding relocation and developing local infrastructure; have achieved only modest success, with people originating from rural areas who engage with tertiary education recording lower participation and completion rates than their metropolitan counterparts (Australian Department of Education and Training, 2017a; Stone & O'Shea, 2019). Persistent discrepancies in educational outcomes make the present study both urgent and important for people living in Australian rural areas.

Each person that I recruited to the study formally consented to participate in a recorded semi-structured interview and approved their transcripts for analysis to inform the research. During their interviews, each contributor described the aspects of either a vocational education and training or university course that were valuable to them as well as the ways that they attained their credentials. Contributors spoke of the support and resources at their disposal throughout their course and their attempts to navigate constraints in order to achieve course completion. Each contributor also shared their experiences of communities as either a student or tertiary-educated person, including their interactions with people who lived nearby as well as their other roles in far-reaching communities.

The account I present in the findings offers an understanding of the meanings of each contributor's experiences with tertiary education and their communities in their particular rural context. Such presentation centres on a discussion of verbatim extracts from each contributor's transcript that are particularly compelling instances to illustrate experiences of tertiary education and communities that were significant for each of them. The meanings of each contributor's experiences I discuss in twenty-seven subthemes that are collated into five experiential themes that include, improving self through engaging with tertiary education, social support for commencing and continuing a course, shedding constraints to achieve course completion, alternate spaces for community engagement, and performing educated roles as a local resident.

The findings contribute to knowledge about tertiary education and communities through the voices of persons living in Australian rural areas. My peer-reviewed dissemination of a selection of preliminary research findings has begun to influence both tertiary education and community research and practices (cf. Marchant, 2013b). The present study also opportunely generates lines of inquiry, that if pursued may improve practice and outcomes in regional university centres (Australian Department of Education and Training, 2019; Birmingham, 2017). In addition to providing a platform for future research, the study also provides a resource for scholars and policymakers and may inform people as learners, community members, education practitioners, and administrators.

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CHAPTER 1   — INTRODUCTION

In this study, I explore both the tertiary education and community experiences of twenty persons who were between twenty-eight and seventy years of age, each of whom lived in one of fourteen distinct rural areas in Australia. Previous research shows that for older people living in Australian rural areas, there is an interrelationship between their experiences of their communities and their tertiary education (Redpath, 2004, 2007). Specifically, in Redpath's (2004) study of graduate women living in rural New South Wales, she highlights that her older participants had decided to engage with their course while living in their rural areas. In contrast, her younger research participants made the decision to engage with tertiary education while attending boarding school some distance away from their rural areas. Regardless of their age at course completion, as graduates her participants reported being somewhat precluded from community activities, diminishing their sense of social acceptance in their rural areas (Redpath, 2004, 2007).

In related research, Lear (2011) examined the significance of formal and informal learning for older women living in a rural region of South Australia. For older women living on the Lower Eyre Peninsula, continuing their learning had profound benefits for them and their communities (Lear, 2011, 2013). Participants' post-learning roles offered them a renewed sense of identity, and their activities were instrumental in revitalising their communities (Lear, 2013). Evidence that rural living exerts influence in people's decisions to continue their education, as well as the tension between Redpath's (2004, 2007) and Lear's (2011, 2013) findings about post-learning community experiences of women living in Australian rural areas, offers a footing for the present study. Namely, the study revisits and extends what is known from research about the interrelationship between experiences of tertiary education and communities in Australian rural areas for a small number of women and men. To this end, I recruit persons from a selection of Australian rural areas to present an account of their experiences with tertiary education and communities. By doing so, I provide specific insights into what is known about tertiary education and communities for persons living in Australian rural areas to provide a platform for further investigations that assist their education and community endeavours.

1.1 The Researcher

My interest in the research arises from my long-term residency in Australian rural areas as a tertiary-educated, fourth-generation, European Australian. I was born on the West Coast of South Australia and spent my formative years living on a family farm adjacent to the rural town of Ceduna. An overview of my perspective about living on the coast is succinctly depicted by Faull (1988, p. 3) in *Life on the Edge* when he states that "for years… the people of the West

Coast have battled on, often times against great odds, and everyone else in the State seemed content to let them." People's lengthy isolated battle for survival on the colonised lands of Ceduna and its surrounding areas has given rise to a distinctive local culture. Such culture, and in particular, "Ceduna-ness;" is described by Poore (2001) as affording a deep sense of social support between socially connected local residents:

> Ceduna People stress that it is not things that are important to Ceduna People.
> Instead, it is Ceduna People that are important to Ceduna People, and these
> people, they will tell you, are honest, tough, community-minded and, as a
> consequence of their isolation, know how the world really works because they
> experience its problems more acutely than most (Poore, 2001, p. 15).

Despite my out-migration from the marginal farming lands of the West Coast many years ago, a sense of Ceduna-ness is a significant part of my social identity and shaped my decision to conduct research that is concerned with people as well as their communities in rural areas.

My experience with engaging in a postgraduate course also led to my interest in the experiences of others who engage with tertiary education while living in their rural areas. In addition, applying my course knowledge in community groups focused my attention on conducting research by recruiting others who are conduits between their rural and academic communities (Lear & Marchant, 2013). Subsequently, when the research opportunity presented itself, I embraced the chance to engage with doctoral research to study the perspectives of others about their experiences as students and graduates in Australian rural areas.

1.2 Context of the Study

The perspective of each person that I recruited to the study is critical to inform the research, and I accordingly frame each person as a contributor rather than a research participant. Further, each person's individual significance is preserved in the research by referring to contributors collectively as persons rather than people. In addition, when referring to contributors' education courses, I use the term "tertiary education." My reference to "tertiary education" in the study includes courses that are documented as offering recognised Australian credentials, such as vocational education and training as well as university programs (Australian Qualifications Framework Council, 2013, p. 107). Further, for the sake of brevity within the thesis, each contributor's local Vocational Education and Training campus is referred to as their local vocational campus. In contributors' rural areas, residents increasingly draw on tertiary education programs both nearby and afar, in part to navigate local challenges. Such challenges have intensified due to pressures from population changes, difficulties with securing essential services and resources as well as diversifying local economies (Argent et al., 2016; Holmes, 2006). Navigating complexities in rural areas that are rapidly differentiating requires residents

to engage with a comprehensive range of courses, prompting my decision to use a broad definition of tertiary education for the study.

Contributors to the study lived in a selection of rural areas situated in regions that for public administration purposes are termed "Australian Local Government Areas" (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011, p. 21; Cameron-Jackson, 1995). A similarity in all of the Australian Local Government Areas in the study is that they have low population densities in their small towns and the surrounding areas (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011; Cameron-Jackson, 1995). For Australian rural areas and their residents, assumptions about their further similarities prompt government policy and funding that is often directed towards them as a homogenous entity (Gorman-Murray et al., 2008; Holt, 2009; Marsden, 2006). In contrast, each particular rural place has distinctive qualities such as its own cultural identity that is shaped by a multiplicity of past and present associations among people (Gorman-Murray et al., 2008; Holt, 2009; Marsden, 2006). To cater for the distinctions between the rural areas featured in the research, I adopt a broad term for the context of the study – "Australian rural areas" (Macqueen, 2017; Shucksmith, 2018) – that offers a provisional platform that each contributor individualises in chapter four by detailing the distinctive qualities of their particular rural area. Capturing such qualities illustrates some similar as well as profoundly different social and cultural features in contributors' rural contexts. Striking similarities were usually located in the significant challenges facing contributors' futures arising from decreasing or highly mobile populations, struggling local economies, and restricted access to public resources. In contrast, differences in local features included nuances in connectedness as well as subtle particulars in social rules and customs.

The exploration of persons' experiences as part of their context in the study is supported by previous research detailing both historical determinations and contemporary challenges that influence everyday living in Australian rural areas. One of the most significant disruptions for living on the lands was and remains, British colonisation which initiated varied psychosocial and corporeal acts of violence upon the First Nations' Peoples (Singh, 2007; Watson, 2009). The significance of colonisation for the study was its extension by British administrators who gave newly designated rural landholdings freehold status, permitting rural lands to be used as a metropolitan commodity (Eversole & Martin, 2006; Woollacott, 2015). Consequently, capital from rural production began to serve metropolitan rather than rural interests (Eversole & Martin, 2006; Woollacott, 2015). As such, people's labour in rural areas became integral to the economic wellbeing of the entire nation, obligating British administrators to compensate residents for living conditions that were poor in comparison to those in the metropolitan areas (Eversole & Martin, 2006; Woollacott, 2015). Government commitment to maintaining

equitable living conditions across the nation changed in the early 1970s when accelerating international trade meant that the priority became cutting domestic production costs to sustain Australia's competitiveness in global markets (Collits, 2006; Lawrence et al., 2013). To facilitate cutbacks in public spending, government administrators adopted neoliberal strategies that allocated public benefits based on assumptions of inherent equity among people and their regions of occupancy (Collits, 2006; Lawrence et al., 2013). In rural areas, neoliberalism prompted the restructuring of local economies initiating widespread depopulation that added to the demands placed on remaining residents to navigate the growing influence of state initiatives in local decisions. In Australia, such outcomes from neoliberalism have nuanced and localised manifestations, but as a whole, they have contributed to the persistence of the most extensive deprivations in the nation being experienced by those who live in rural areas (Alston, 2005; Marchant, 2015a; Welch et al., 2007; Woods, 2005).

In a handful of rural areas, residents have defied widespread decline by securing alternate income sources that have supported local economic and social revitalisation (Beer, 2014; Cheshire & Lawrence, 2005; Holmes, 2006; Woods, 2005). Such revitalisation includes residents enlarging their social networks of supportive relationships with others, generating alternate income sources, and developing rural citizenship practices that secure resources for their futures (Beer, 2014; Cheshire & Lawrence, 2005; Holmes, 2006; Woods, 2005). Researchers have speculated about the roles of both local resources and residents' activities that are essential for local revitalisation and securing their futures; however, the details of such are uncharted in research (Beer, 2014; Cheers & O'Toole, 2003). To improve an understanding about the activities that forge both local and personal futures in the study, I concurrently explore the experiences of students and graduates. Such exploration of experiences include their roles in their communities, and the part their communities play in supporting their educational aspirations.

A previous basis for understanding the communities of persons who live in Australian rural areas is research that documents similarities in their social dimensions that play various roles in the everyday experiences of their residents (Eversole, 2010; Tierney & Parton, 2014). For example, findings about a working unwritten social rule in rural areas is that status and therefore access to local decisions as well as resources is ascribed to each resident according to individual attributes. Such attributes include local tenure, wealth, or cultural background that influence residents' experiences of their local communities (Pini, 2006; Soldatic & Pini, 2012). Another relevant example is the social enforcement of local norms that preserve traditions in rural areas is dichotomised gender roles that influence the educational and community ambitions of residents along gendered lines (Jarvis, 2010; Pini, 2006; Soldatic & Pini, 2012;

Williamson, 2000). Also relevant for the everyday experiences of persons in the study is research about the social advantages that arise from the strong bonds between residents in each rural area (McIntosh et al., 2008; Otero, 2016). Such bonds offer residents in rural areas an advantage by facilitating improved social exchanges of information among them (Goastellec & Picard, 2014; McMahon, 2009). In addition, the opportunity for a greater number of social exchanges among people who live in rural areas offers improved chances to share knowledge (Goastellec & Picard, 2014; McMahon, 2009). Such social arrangements afford socially connected local residents, and in particular, local people more expeditious access to course knowledge in comparison to their metropolitan counterparts who live in high population densities in capital cities and their surrounds (Goastellec & Picard, 2014; McMahon, 2009). However, social connectedness in rural areas is reported as undergoing changes with social bonds identified as deteriorating in some contemporary rural areas, jeopardizing the exchange of knowledge among local people (Bock & Derkzen, 2006; Bryant & Pini, 2009). Overall, little is known about the nuances of social dimensions in contemporary rural areas that restrain or facilitate the sharing of course knowledge among their residents or the role of such knowledge in the lives of local people and their communities. To extend research, I explore persons' experiences of both their tertiary education and their communities as residents in Australian rural areas.

1.3 Research Approach

Throughout the course of the study, the research approach was modified. An initial pilot study determined if the question in the initial research proposal could be addressed; namely, to understand the tertiary education experiences of persons who live in Australian rural areas in terms of their capacity to make a social contribution of their choosing, and in particular, their social inclusion outcomes (Marchant, 2013a). The complexities that the first six contributors shared with me during their interviews meant that the term "social inclusion" did not begin to capture the nuances of experiences for persons living in Australian rural areas (Marchant, 2013b, 2014d). Such an outcome was not unexpected as in the initial research proposal, similar to other scholars, I had identified the possibility that the tensions about the central ideas of social inclusion made it a possible limitation for the study (cf. Averis, 2008; Cobigo et al., 2012; Gidley et al., 2011; Goodwin-Smith, 2009). Equipped with the analysis of the complexities of contributors' experiences in the pilot study, I made the strategic research decision to re-orient the research question and to extend research by exploring what experiences of tertiary education and communities meant from the perspective of each person in the study. Such exploration avoids relying on social inclusion as a notion that the pilot study made clear precludes capturing the nuances that I sought to investigate. Decisions to re-orient the research focus are not

uncommon as research processes are often emergent, with changes often implemented shortly after the collection and analysis of pilot study data (Aspers, 2009; Smith et al., 2009).

My selection of a research question for the study is guided by a lack of previous research that concurrently examines the experiences of tertiary education and communities from the perspectives of persons living in Australian rural areas. Blaikie (2019) proposes a way to approach generating research questions that explore relatively unknown topics:

"What" questions normally precede "why" and "why" precede "how", we need to know what is going on before we can explain it and we need to know why something behaves the way it does before we can be confident about introducing an intervention to change it (Blaikie, 2019, p. 61).

In light of Blaikie's (2019) recommendations, my selection of an exploratory research approach to investigate an under-researched topic lends itself to being guided by a "what" research question, and accordingly, I pose the following central research question for the study:

For persons living in Australian rural areas, what are their experiences of both their tertiary education and their communities?

The findings from the research that is guided by this question are presented in chapters five and six.

The research methodology that generates the findings for the study is underpinned by the principles of a human science approach, widely used to examine aspects of human existence (Heidegger, 2005; Husserl, 1965). Such an approach is concerned with the particularities of everyday happenings for individuals, or their lived experiences that for the sake of brevity, as is the convention in other studies, are herein termed "experiences" (Finlay, 2014, p. 129; Shinebourne, 2011). I elected to explore each person's experiences by conducting an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis while adhering to principles that safeguard the quality of the research (cf. Smith et al., 2009; Yardley, 2000). Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis entails examining textual data to generate findings about what a person's experiences meant for them, such as by analysing an interview transcript that contains a narrative account of a person's experiences in their everyday language. Such analysis requires recruiting persons who have experience with the topic of research interest and who, by informed consent, agree to contribute their textual data to inform the study. Further details about my methodological choices for the research, including the suitability of the research approach, the procedures that safeguard research quality, and the sequence of research activities that generate the findings are presented in chapter three.

Each of the twenty persons recruited to the study generously consented to share their experiences by voluntarily participating in a recorded semi-structured interview. When they spoke about their tertiary education, each contributor described their experiences related to their voluntary engagement with at least one tertiary education course that they undertook some years after completing all, or part, of their Australian high school education. Each contributor also shared their thoughts about contemplating as well as commencing, their courses and in addition the significant happenings during their tertiary education. Such happenings included events and circumstances that contributors viewed as leading them to either complete or withdraw from their courses. Further, each contributor spoke about their connections with others who live nearby, and in particular, other local people, such as residents in either their local town or those who lived in other parts of their local region. In addition, contributors also talked about their committed involvement with current and previous roles in various communities. In describing their sense of connection to their communities, contributors emphasise that making social contributions of their choosing, some of which were inspired by their course knowledge, was integral to their sense of belonging.

During the data collection process, no contributors expressed any form of disillusionment to me about their involvement or indicated that participating in the study was detrimental to them. Some contributors commented that the interview process was enjoyable as they felt that their long-held views about their circumstances were heard. Further, as part of their involvement in the study, contributors shared that it was useful for them to reflect on their experiences and develop strategies for their futures. Many spoke of the interview process as prompting them to reconsider their options for building on their education in the near future. Some contributors relished the broad questions during the interviews that gave them scope to express their ideas and tell their stories as they had not been given the space to do so previously. It was apparent to me that it was significant for each person who contributed to the study to have their opinions about their circumstances in their rural context formally recognised in the research.

Many contributors expressed that both their social accomplishments and challenges are frequently overshadowed by discussions about other public matters in rural areas, such as local economic imperatives. Subsequently, contributors as well as their efforts and concerns, are often invisible to local as well as metropolitan decision-makers. Contributors' efforts to address local concerns are also sometimes eclipsed by social happenings related to other dominant activities in some rural areas, such as sporting endeavours. Many contributors subsequently reported that it was cathartic for them to freely discuss their involvement in a wide variety of social accomplishments in their communities as well as articulate the restrictions that they face when

they attempt to make additional social contributions. Although often surprised by the line of questioning, each person also appreciated being asked about their opinions as well as their experiences of addressing the challenges that they face in their rural context – something that they expressed is not routinely solicited from them. Overall, contributors communicated that their involvement in the interview process contrasted with encountering what they viewed as insurmountable barriers that previously prevented them from voicing their opinions on matters that meant the most to them. Such barriers to their voices being heard include restrictions in the decisions that are available to them as residents in rural areas as well as structural constraints in decision-making, such as their perceptions that the dominant influence in shaping rural futures is metropolitan-based ideas. In addition, it is important for contributors that the challenges they observe in their rural areas as well as their ideas about possible solutions, be witnessed. I consider it a powerful benefit of the present study that contributors expressed that as part of their involvement in the research they felt listened to and that their opinions were valued.

During my subsequent analysis of the textual data in each contributor's interview transcript, I contemplated the expressions contained in their narrative accounts that conveyed their experiences as a resident in their rural area. As recommended by Finlay (2014) and Larkin et al. (2011) I examined contributors' everyday language that contained their reflexive awareness about their experiences, forming the starting point for my analysis. Previous scholarly advice to complete a written analysis of selected verbatim extracts from contributors' interview data permitted me to generate findings about what the experiences of tertiary education and communities meant for each person in their particular rural context (Heidegger, 2005; van Manen, 2007, 2016; Wertz, 2005). To present the findings, I constructed subthemes by collating emergent themes from contributors' key experiences, that I had highlighted with descriptive labels, such as "commencing tertiary education" and "town communities." I then assembled the subthemes into five themes related to key events in contributors' experiences with their tertiary education, such as "achieving completion" as well as their experiences with key functions or roles in their communities, such as "community engagement." I finalised the written analysis in each of the twenty-seven subthemes by discussing my analysis of contributors' experiences with regard to the relevant literature, permitting me to make knowledge claims that are contained in findings chapters five and six.

1.4 Significance of the Study

The study extends what is known in research about tertiary education and communities in Australian rural areas by privileging the voices of persons who live there. Examining the particularities of each contributor's experiences from their perspective, as either a student or a graduate, permits me to present individualised experiences of learning and communal activities

for them in their distinctive rural places. In doing so, I illuminate the complexities in, as well as the idiosyncratic interrelationships between, the experiences of tertiary education and communities for persons living in Australian rural areas. In this way, the findings (a) offer an alternative to assumptions and opinions about the generalised role of tertiary education for persons who live in rural areas, and (b) make visible the contributions of students and graduates to their communities, Australian society, and international settings. As such, the research offers a platform for further investigations to explain both why and how tertiary education and community endeavours are realised for the benefit of people who live in Australian rural areas.

1.5 Structure of this Dissertation

As per the convention for doctoral dissertations that utilise Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, the thesis comprises an introduction, literature review, methodology, findings, and conclusion chapters. Rather than the customary single findings chapter, three chapters were required to present the findings including each contributor's perspectives about their particular context as well as their experiences with both their tertiary education and their communities. This introductory chapter has provided the background for the study by stating the research aim and providing a brief outline of my life experiences that prompted me to conduct the research. I also briefly outlined some literature to situate the study and provided an investigative focus by stating a central research question. My description of the research approach is the basis for a review of selected literature in chapter two. Accordingly, in the next chapter, I situate the study by reviewing research and policy literature that is relevant to persons' experiences with tertiary education and their communities in Australian rural areas. The literature review includes an examination of influences in the everyday experiences of people living in Australian rural areas, such as outcomes from previous government decisions as well as some of the contemporary challenges facing their futures. With reference to Australian rural areas, I detail their social dimensions, characteristics of residents' communities, and research that discusses adult learning and tertiary education in such contexts.

I follow the discussion of the literature, with a third chapter in which I describe the methodology for the study, beginning with a description of my researcher identity that influenced my selection of the paradigm that guides the research. I also detail the methodological approach that I used to respond to the research question, describe the data collection process, and detail the application of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. To foreshadow the presentation of findings about contributors' experiences, I present an account in chapter four through a written analysis of a selection of verbatim extracts from interview data. Such analysis provides details of the socio-cultural realities that each contributor experiences as part of their lived context. The findings that I present in chapter five provide an account of

contributors' key experiences with their tertiary education. In chapter six, I present an account of the meanings of contributors' key experiences with their communities. In the seventh and final chapter, I summarise the findings of the research project, by discussing both the implications of the findings and the limitations of the study as well as by making suggestions for further investigations that ends with my final reflection. In accord with my earlier intent, in the next chapter, I review both research and policy literature to situate the study.

CHAPTER 2   — LITERATURE REVIEW

I examine several bodies of literature to provide context for the study where I explore the experiences of tertiary education and communities for persons living in Australian rural areas. A discussion about tertiary education, including the definition for the context of the study, is preceded by a review of literature pertaining to rural areas. There are numerous definitions of rural areas that feature in research, and I draw on literature to generate a broad definition that reflects the contexts of contributors to the study. Moreover, to understand the forces that shape the everyday experiences of persons living in Australian rural areas, I detail both historical determinations and contemporary challenges for their futures. With reference to experiences with communities, I first discuss influences on social behaviours in rural areas, and in particular, the impact of social dimensions, such as their formal and informal institutions. The description of such dimensions permits me to provide an overview of the characteristics of communities that are relevant for resident students and graduates in Australian rural areas. Next, to provide a basis to explore persons' experiences with their tertiary education as adults, I review literature that details andragogical principles as well as the support mechanisms and delivery methods that are reported as assisting adults to learn from their course materials. Lastly, I explore the perspectives of those in rural areas about education, and in addition, its purported value for them and their communities. Overall, I claim that despite reports of over a century of metropolitan-based design and delivery of tertiary education being brought/applied to Australian rural areas, little is known about persons' experiences of such education and its influence in their communities (Evans, 1995; Naidu, 2018). Following on from this, I argue that understanding the experiences of tertiary education for persons living in Australian rural areas (that is absent from scholarship) is necessary, something I take up in the analysis.

2.1 Definition of Australian Rural Areas

Descriptions of rural areas differ in the literature, and I make use of a selection of terms from research and policy to provide a definition of the Australian rural areas featured in the study. For such areas, historical as well as ongoing social interactions among people in each particular landscape generate profoundly complex and unique distinctions with regard to their socio-cultural characteristics (Gorman-Murray et al., 2008; Holt, 2009; Marsden, 2006). As such, providing a universal definition of Australian rural areas is impossible. In light of this, scholars suggest that definitions of rural areas need to be context-specific (Cheers et al., 2007; Hawley et al., 2016). To describe the contexts that feature in the study I use ideas, such as drawing on early research by Cameron-Jackson (1995), who describes Australian rural areas as small towns and their surrounding areas, a delineation that has been used to effectively situate contemporary education research (cf. Kuhl et al., 2015; Moriarty et al., 2003). I supplement

Cameron-Jackson's (1995) definition with additional details that are relevant for the research. Specifically, Australian rural areas featured in the present study are located in Australian Local Government Areas that have between 200 and 30 000 inhabitants, comprising a population density of fewer than two people per square kilometre (Australian Bureau of Rural Services, 2011; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). Elsewhere, in Australian government literature, such rural areas are classified further in terms of their proximity to a metropolitan area, described as either outer regional, remote, or very remote regions (Australian Bureau of Rural Services, 2011; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). In contrast, I choose to focus on rural areas in their own right rather than in opposition or as distinct to metropolitan areas. As such, for my purposes, I describe Australian rural areas as small towns and their surrounding areas that are situated in Local Government Areas with low population densities as described above. To better understand the circumstances of persons who live in these rural areas, I detail the nuances of rural spaces later in this chapter. I begin by describing the historical geography in Australia.

2.2   Historical Determinations and Contemporary Complexities

In Australian rural areas, residents' everyday experiences as well as their futures, are profoundly influenced by European ideas that were introduced to the lands after British colonisation in 1788. Colonisation initiated varied psychosocial and corporeal acts of violence upon the First Nations' Peoples, damaging their sophisticated social arrangements (Singh, 2007; Watson, 2009). As part of those arrangements, First Nations' Peoples prioritised social organisation that promoted social equity in the lands (Dunn, 2016; Keen, 2006). In contrast, British social structures generated and sustained gross social inequities, primarily through the introduction of the idea of land ownership (Henzell, 2007; Moran, 2005). Despite previous British failings in other places, administrators in the newly colonised land anticipated that they would realise the epitome of an egalitarian European society in Australia by establishing small family farms and safeguarding ethno-cultural homogeneity (Henzell, 2007; Moran, 2005).

An initial complication for the establishment of an egalitarian Australian society was the resolve of British administrators to use newly established rural landholdings as a commodity, leading to metropolitan ownership and control of lucrative rural production (Eversole & Martin, 2006; Woollacott, 2015). Subsequently, the economic wellbeing of metropolitan areas as well as the nation as a whole, relied on the efforts of people living in rural areas, obligating administrators to compensate them for living conditions that were poor in comparison to metropolitan areas (Brett, 2007; Eversole & Martin, 2006; Hogan & Young, 2014; Woollacott, 2015). One of the biggest shifts in compensatory practices was the ascendency of neoliberalism in the 1970s, signalling the demise of the Australian Government's

commitment to maintaining comparable living standards across the nation. At that time, the acceleration of global trade pressured the Australian Government to strategize to sustain the nation's international competitiveness (Brett, 2007; Collits, 2006; Tonts & Horsley, 2019). To cut domestic production costs, government administrators elected to adopt a neoliberal approach (Brett, 2007; Collits, 2006). Such an approach allocates public benefits based on assumptions of inherent equity among people as well as their regions of occupancy (Alston, 2005; Cheshire & Lawrence, 2005). In spite of assumptions of equity, neoliberalism has resulted in discrimination against people who live in Australian rural areas (Staeheli, 2008). For instance, in such areas, essential public services have been downgraded, centralised, and privatised. Medical services, in particular, are now more and sometimes only, accessible in metropolitan areas (Alston, 2005; Cheshire & Lawrence, 2005; Ripepi, 2014; Shucksmith, 2018). Further, residents are reported as experiencing the most extensive social deprivations in the nation, with the vast majority of those who exist in circumstances of extreme poverty living in rural areas (Alston, 2005; Bertolini, 2019; Welch et al., 2007). Overall, within the Australian context, the shift to neoliberal strategies for allocation of public benefits ended compensation for those who live in rural areas, as a result of their divestment by government. Challenges with shaping their futures in areas that are often categorised as disadvantaged in comparison to metropolitan regions are part of many residents' experiences of their communities (Adhikari, 2006; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016). Such circumstances, including the poor provision of resources in rural areas are significant for the study as they reduce the chances for residents to complete tertiary education courses.

The impacts of neoliberalism in Australian rural areas have been described critically by some residents. Residents refer to the selective application of economic self-reliance principles that are a part of neoliberalism as "economic rationalism," a pejorative term that highlights their view that government administrators consider financial costs before human consequences (Brett, 2007, p. 13; Pusey, 1991, p. vii; Staeheli, 2008; Weber, 1978). Underlying such a scathing view is residents' anger and confusion that the government does not fulfil its obligation to afford them protection against the risks and vulnerabilities that are part of living in their rural areas (Raymond et al., 2010; Smailes, 1995). A salient point in their felt sense of neglect stems from residents' awareness that their rural production continues to make a significant economic contribution to the nation (Brett, 2007). A readily available example is mining activities that have and are predicted to continue to generate enormous wealth for the nation (Courvisanos et al., 2016; Measham et al., 2013). Despite their contribution to the economic stability of the nation, neoliberal-inspired strategies have reduced the social and political resources that are available to rural areas (Baker, 2018; Brett, 2007; Raymond et al., 2010; Smailes, 1995). Such scarcity of public resources suggests to people living in rural areas that they are somehow

unaffordable for the nation (Raymond et al., 2010; Smailes, 1995). In this way, neoliberal policies denigrate residents and their efforts as well as the overall value of rural areas, impacting experiences of living there (Raymond et al., 2010; Smailes, 1995).

2.2.1 Contemporary Social Connectedness

For persons living in Australian rural areas, their experiences of stable, supportive connections with others in their communities are influenced by local population re-arrangements. Out-migration from rural areas deprives residents of supportive local connections, but in-migration could offset this by offering chances to build new supportive relationships. Since the ascendancy of neoliberalism, there has been an acceleration of out-migration from impoverished rural areas to more lucrative metropolitan regions. Such out-migration lowers the number of local people who can offer social connections (Collits, 2006; Gray & Lawrence, 2001b). Elsewhere, Baum et al. (2005) and Smailes et al. (2014) have identified that a smaller number of metropolitan residents have in-migrated to rural areas, relocating to both deprived and prosperous areas alike. Such relocation offers chequered improvements in the connection between people living in rural and metropolitan regions. More recently, research has complicated understandings of rural migration patterns by demonstrating that relocation predominately involves people moving from one rural area to another, potentially generating stronger connections between people in rural regions (Argent et al., 2016; Connell & McManus, 2016). Such increased population mobility complicates the chances for residents to establish and maintain social bonds.

With respect to what population mobility means for social bonds, there is little research that explores the role of such for residents' contemporary sense of connection with others in rural areas (Collits & Rowe, 2014). Previously, many residents in Australian rural areas report that a strength of their communities is they have a sense that local people are friendly and willing to help them when they need it (Slowinski, 2013; Starr, 2007). Heavy reliance on negotiating both their everyday and novel challenges with support from one another means that population mobility is a significant factor for residents in rural areas. As such some studies speculate that population re-arrangements in rural areas provide for an increased number of supportive social connections in residents' communities, both locally and elsewhere (cf. Amin, 1999; Shucksmith, 2010). Such growth in connectedness is argued as increasing the chances for residents to draw on supportive relationships that expand their knowledge and skills to improve their ingenuity for facing personal challenges as well as those related to their communities (Amin, 1999; Shucksmith, 2010). In contrast, other researchers argue that the magnitude of population re-arrangements has meant the dilution of the supportive relationships that are available to people living in rural areas (Marsh, 2005; Milbourne, 2007). For instance, the

enormity of population re-arrangements is argued as eroding both collective local knowledge and routine communal activities that sustain co-operative behaviour in rural areas (Gray & Lawrence, 2001a; Marsh, 2005). Evidence of such social erosion can be seen in community groups that are reported as strained and ill-equipped with little chance of accounting for the enormity of contemporary local changes (Marsh, 2005; Smailes et al., 2019). In short, despite reports of contrasting outcomes from population mobility and the possibility of specific migratory patterns for each rural area (such as those featured in the study) it has meaningful consequences for residents and complicates their chances for connection.

2.2.2 Governing-at-a-distance

Another substantial consequence for residents and the future of their rural areas is a change in political structures that includes the introduction of governing-at-a-distance strategies in Australia. Such strategies devolve state responsibility to local bodies to initiate local developments that keep pace with global changes (Cheshire, 2006; Lockie et al., 2006; Marsh, 2005; Worthington & Dollery, 2008). As such, government representatives have expressed that the state does not have the power or resources to intervene in global forces to secure local futures, however, nonetheless, they attribute such capacities to rural areas (Brett, 2007; McCarthy, 2007). A particular challenge of governing-at-a-distance strategies for residents in rural areas is the imposition of onerous barriers to the exercise of their political will, especially for those who are attempting to influence the decisions that affect them the most (Cornwall & Gaventa, 2000; Hautz, 2020; Marsh, 2005). For example, governing-at-a-distance involves the use of coercion through means such as funding conditions that shape rural decisions to align with ill-fitting state priorities rather than local objectives (Cheshire, 2006; Hautz, 2020; Rose & Miller, 2010). Such mechanisms can undermine the chances for residents to make and sustain changes that address local hardships to improve conditions in their communities (Appiah et al., 2007; Beer et al., 2005).

Despite the imposition of governing-at-a-distance policies, local government representatives have been able to make and sustain local improvements by revitalising local planning to focus on generating public goods rather than microeconomic considerations (Gleeson & Low, 2000). With this in mind, Beer (2014) and Davies (2007) have examined the education and training that is supplied by the state to assist local government leaders to express and realise a vision for their futures. Both argue that rather than affording preparation to plan local futures, the focus in local government leadership training programs is on activities to accomplish State and Commonwealth administrative functions, such as using the correct reporting methods. A lack of educational support in local government programs for developing

planning capabilities is a significant barrier for residents to sustain development in their rural areas (Cheshire et al., 2012).

In the absence of educational support to achieve local planning goals, some residents seek to secure their futures by mobilising and acting on rural citizenship. Such citizenship is defined here as residents in rural areas exercising their vested rights, privileges, and duties in the distinctive social, cultural, and political networks of their local spaces (Kelly & Yarwood, 2018; Sherval et al., 2018; Woods, 2006). An example of mobilising rural citizenship includes residents engaging in acts of spontaneous leadership (Mowbray, 2011; Sherval et al., 2018). Beer (2014) identifies that such leadership includes residents performing negotiations with local and state governments. For instance, he illustrates that as local agents, residents' negotiations can challenge government decisions that they perceive as inadequate to serve local interests. In other places, mobilising rural citizenship has powered contestation and negotiation of state decisions. As examples, both Beer (2014) and Herbert-Cheshire (2003) report that in one instance, despite formidable state opposition, residents were able to form action groups that worked to retain their local health and welfare services. On a separate occasion, another group put pressure on the Australian Government to improve flexibility in program funding, allowing community groups an opportunity to satisfy actual rather than the state's perception of local needs (Beer, 2014; Herbert-Cheshire, 2003). Favourable local outcomes were achieved in both instances by residents whose rural citizenship practices moved beyond negotiating to include contestation that threatened to derail the plans of the Australian Government. In both examples, residents demonstrated sophisticated political performances that secured resources for rural areas (Scott, 2013; Webster, 2004). Further, to achieve local objectives in the future, including acquiring resources that ease local hardships and advance community conditions, similar acts will be required whereby residents exercise their political will as leaders and citizens (Scott, 2013; Webster, 2004). My analysis presented in the findings demonstrates how residents' experiences with performing civic roles as tertiary-educated persons support rural citizenship practices that scholars suggest might secure local futures (Beer, 2014; Davies, 2007; Marchant, 2014c; McMahon, 2009; Shortall, 2008).

As citizens, tertiary-educated persons' everyday acts of civic engagement can afford considerable benefits for their communities. For instance, in metropolitan areas, leadership and membership roles are more likely to be performed by graduates to the benefit of members in both their civic and community groups (McMahon, 2009; Nixon, 2010). Such activities by graduates may apply in rural settings; however, the extent of graduate involvement in their governing assemblies for purposes such as providing local benefits is unknown. Further, some researchers argue that it is unrealistic to expect that residents of any educational background can

address all of the contemporary challenges in their rural areas (Hogan & Young, 2014). For instance, even in the event that current challenges are met by residents in rural areas, the benefits of any imaginative local development may be suddenly and irreparably damaged by unforeseen issues that transcend local control. One such readily available example is addressing the impact of climate change which requires coordinated efforts by local, state, and global institutions (Corbett, 2016; Crampton, 2014). Regardless of global events, each resident's tertiary education offers them capabilities that can be exercised as part of their community engagement, such as equipping them with skills to forge relationships with other regions as well as state, and business organisations.

2.3   Social Dimensions in Rural Areas

Assumptions about universal characteristics of communities in research are inadequate to describe each person's experiences in their rural area. While a focus on research about uniformities in such places fails to capture the nuances encountered in each rural area, it is necessary to set the context for the study so that the specificities of contributors' experiences in their rural settings can be analysed. As such, integral to my exploration of persons' experiences of communities as residents in their rural areas is a discussion of research about generalised social dimensions, that is, social environments comprising peoples' interactions, culture, institutions, and the natural surrounds. Predominately, previous research about the social dimensions of rural areas has focused on locating their uniformities. However, the utility of such research is challenged by contemporary social shifts in each rural context. Such shifts include variations in social connectedness due to growing population mobility and diversity as well as localised changes in expectations about social behaviour (Hearn et al., 2005; Luck et al., 2010; Stanley et al., 2019). Such changes in rural areas also receive chequered influence from virtual connections where local infrastructure is still developing (Berg et al., 2017; Marchant, 2014b; Tiwari et al., 2019). As such, uniform accounts of contemporary rural areas are inadequate to understand such spaces and the experiences of individuals who live there. However, while each rural context is unique and not captured comprehensively by universal definitions, nonetheless there are some previously researched characteristics that help to contextualise the scope and locations of the present study.

In rural areas, social dimensions such as social bonds, institutions and the influence of local status are of particular importance for persons living there which I discuss, in turn, below. With regard to social bonds, they are reported as a common characteristic of rural areas that sustains co-operative social behaviour among people to ensure their survival in a particular setting (Jessop et al., 2008; Mormont, 1990). For instance, many people who live in rural areas are accustomed to relying on others who live alongside them to provide them with everyday

support (Cavaye, 2001; Measham et al., 2012). Such a profound sense of inter-reliance among local people is a cornerstone in providing them with informal insurance to surmount their everyday challenges, and as a consequence, residents place a high value on their bonds with other local people (Besser, 2013; Measham et al., 2012). Those residents who do not have such bonds cannot access local social resources and often report a sense of isolation and loneliness (Kelly et al., 2019).

Ideas about social cohesion, including the homogeneity of populations as well as the preservation of diversity in rural areas, are also significant for the social bonds of their residents (Moran & Mallman, 2019). For instance, people in rural areas are often reported as having strong mutual bonds that arise from frequent and intense social interactions with one another in more contemporary rural settings (Brooks, 2008; Holdsworth & Hartman, 2009). For example, as residents in a particular rural place go about their everyday activities, they often meet with one another to pursue their shared interests as well as compete for access to opportunities and resources in various social fields such as work, sport, or education (Cheers et al., 2007; Mormont, 1990). Apart from influencing the cohesion of their populations, frequent interactions also offer residents in rural areas a chance to rapidly draw on the knowledge of others as well as extensively disseminate what they know. In this way, frequent social interactions in rural areas also mean that knowledge from tertiary-educated residents has a more rapid and extensive diffusion than among their metropolitan counterparts (Black et al., 2000; Otero, 2016).

2.3.1 Institutions

Frequent and intense social interactions among small and relatively stable populations in rural areas also help to establish social rules and customs, such as formal and informal institutions, that are helpful in maintaining social arrangements beneficial for collective co-existence (Foa, 2008; Lowndes et al., 2006). In particular, Foa (2008) and Lowndes et al. (2006) both claim that at the heart of such institutions are distinctive and enduring social patterns that guide co-operative social conduct. They also argue that both formal and informal institutions govern social practices by shaping future exchanges so that they accord with existing patterns and norms. For instance, formal institutions may include local, state, national or international regulatory bodies, with an example being local government that provides residents with regulatory frameworks as well as public goods and services (Lowndes et al., 2006). Helmke and Levitsky (2004) and Lowndes et al. (2006) identify that in contrast to formal institutions that are usually visible, informal institutions such as social customs are more difficult for a casual observer to discern. They detail that, unlike their formal counterparts, the rules of informal institutions that guide social behaviours to accord with established social norms and customs, are often subtle, and are sometimes hidden, or even illegal, in nature.

The influences of both formal and informal institutions in rural areas impact the experiences of tertiary education for persons who live there. For instance, formal institutions, such as local educational establishments, and in particular, vocational and university campuses, play a part in supporting residents' tertiary education attainment. Informal institutions in the same setting may mediate a person's dissemination of their course knowledge. For instance, Helmke and Levitsky (2004) and Lowndes et al. (2006) propose that residents who publicly champion course knowledge in rural areas may be considered as displaying social agency that threatens established social norms. They argue that residents who exercise such agency may be met with various forms of harassment such as hostile remarks, ostracism, gossip, and other displays of social condemnation. Such acts are very effective in shaping social behaviours in rural areas, including swaying members of community groups to make decisions that conform to existing norms (Heley & Jones, 2012; Herbert-Cheshire, 2003). In this way, informal institutions may impose a series of heavy restrictions upon expressions of individual agency that could, in turn, restrict residents' expression of their course knowledge in their rural areas (Evans et al., 2016; Helmke & Levitsky, 2004; Liepins, 2000; Lowndes et al., 2006; Pini & Haslam McKenzie, 2006). While the role of informal institutions in confining individual agency in rural areas is known, experiences with such that potentially facilitate tertiary education attainment and espousement of course knowledge are relatively undocumented which I address in the analysis.

2.3.2 Local Status

An established and influential custom that Crow et al. (2001) and Milbourne (2007) argue is significant for residents' experiences is their keen interest in each other's histories which is explained in part by tenure in rural areas heavily influencing their local status. They propose that each resident in a rural area is attributed with a local status on an insider/outsider continuum. For example, Garbutt (2006, 2011) and Helmke and Levitsky (2004) argue that residents whose European forbearers were recipients of land allocations have a history that is socially significant in their rural areas, with their familial tenure bestowing privilege, and in particular, an insider status. They also argue that familial tenure and the power and wealth of their land ownership offer insiders greater social influence. In addition, they illustrate that insiders often prioritise maintaining connections with other families who have intergenerational tenure in their rural areas, offering them a strong sense of social connectedness. In contrast, residents whose local histories include recent in-migration are deemed incomers to their rural area and are marginalised as outsiders, with the attribution of an "almost insider" status sometimes coming only after decades of local residency (Crow et al., 2001, p. 35; Milbourne, 2007). Conceivably, the magnitude of social changes in some contemporary rural areas may

undermine previous research findings about the significance of local status; however, research is yet to determine the impact of such contemporary shifts on residents' community experiences.

Local status is also significant for community experiences as it influences each resident's access to roles in decision-making about the trajectory of their rural area. For instance, the local status of each resident may influence the role and power of their knowledge in their communities. As an example, previous research illustrates that insiders rather than outsiders are more likely to be involved in leadership and membership roles in community groups (Davies, 2009; Epps & Sorensen, 1996). Weber (1921/2010) was the first to explain that the decision-making activities of insiders can generate social closure whereby those who are privileged are able to maintain their position by foreclosing opportunities for less powerful others. To this effect, insiders in community groups often make choices about who is included in such groups, just as they make decisions about entitlement to, and timing of, community benefits for other residents in their rural areas (Derkzen et al., 2008; Liepins, 2000; Lowndes et al., 2006). Despite the social shifts that have occurred since such research, more recent investigations demonstrate that social closure continues largely unabated in rural areas (Heley & Jones, 2012; Henderson, 2017). Such findings are significant for tertiary-educated residents in rural areas as, unlike their metropolitan counterparts, their engagement in both leadership and membership roles may be restricted due to their local status (Beer, 2014; Davies, 2007; McMahon, 2009; Shortall, 2008). Evidence that a person's decision-making in their communities varies according to local status in their rural area warrants further research attention (Black et al., 2000; Stokes et al., 2006).

Another pronounced influence on status in rural areas is that bequests of land through succession planning favour men, fortifying patrilineal tenure and wealth that maintains their privileged social positions including access to leadership roles (Luhrs, 2016; Pritchard & McManus, 2000). Research by Pini (2006) and Shortall (2006), and more recently Gorman-Murray and Baganz (2019), identifies that an outcome of such planning practices is that men primarily continue to retain roles related to control over labour and leadership in rural areas. All offer that in contrast, women in rural areas continue to occupy roles that largely involve caregiving or social support and are often marginalised from guiding public decision-making. To this end, Pini (2006), Shortall (2006), and Gorman-Murray and Baganz (2019) maintain that women, in particular, cannot present their ideas for consideration in community decision-making processes and are subsequently often dissatisfied with the outcomes from their local involvement. Pini (2006) and Shortall (2006) highlight that as a consequence of their marginalisation, some women decide to withdraw their presence from local activities, redirecting their involvement into groups that are located elsewhere and that permit them to

make social contributions of their choosing, such as occupying leadership roles. Women's practice of abstention from some local groups can in effect also be a form of nonviolent resistance that improves their sense of wellbeing and empowerment, just as it subverts gendered social positioning in rural areas (Chenoweth & Lawrence, 2010; Shortall, 2004). I discuss the way that experiences of community roles in rural areas vary according to gender in the findings.

Regardless of their gender, insiders may not consider tertiary education valuable as their wealth and authority serves to protect their futures (Cuervo, 2017; Stokes et al., 2006). Such influence in local perspectives about tertiary education is complemented by histories of poor educational attainment in Australian rural areas. A relative lack of attainment, coupled with tertiary education being traditionally located within metropolitan areas, results in course knowledge being perceived in some rural areas as an "outsider" activity (António & Edmée, 2016, p. 144). Marginson (2014, p. 158) and McLachlan and Arden (2009) argue that those who decide to engage with tertiary education courses in rural areas may subsequently be viewed as being involved with "outsider knowledge" and be perceived as mistrusting local knowledge. They highlight that as a consequence students or graduates may themselves be regarded with mistrust. Such consequences arise because local, rather than outside knowledge, fosters inter-reliance that permits residents to navigate their everyday challenges and is regarded as the basis for critical co-operative social behaviour in rural areas (Marginson, 2014; Nixon, 2010). As a reflection of its critical role both local knowledge espoused by insiders as well as the espouser are subsequently held in high esteem by residents in rural areas (Marginson, 2014; McLachlan & Arden, 2009). In contrast, those who promote "outsider" or course knowledge may be perceived as a threat to local cohesion and authority and be subjected to social disapproval (António & Edmée, 2016; Helmke & Levitsky, 2004; Lowndes et al., 2006). As an example, Redpath's (2004) study demonstrates that both local approval of Australian graduate women living in rural New South Wales and their knowledge were often limited. Elsewhere, a contrasting understanding of the utility of course knowledge in rural areas is supported by Lear's (2011) finding that the women in her study living in a rural South Australian area engaged in satisfying post-learning community roles. Regardless of their local tenure or type of educational engagement, Lear's (2011) participants' social contributions were heightened post-learning, in ways that contrast with Redpath's (2004) findings. What can be seen here is that while course knowledge and tertiary-educated persons may be viewed with distrust in some Australian rural areas, these views are not universally held, a point I take up in the analysis.

2.4 Community Connections

When making sense of communities for tertiary-educated persons who live in rural areas, it is important to understand the specific and nuanced features of residents' community

groups that are located both within and outside of their rural areas. In the first instance, I examine theoretical research about connectedness that offers me a basis to explore each person's experiences of such connections with both their rural place and groups of people. In addition, I then detail literature describing community groups located both within and outside rural areas, and in particular, geographically determinate, and indeterminate communities both of which are significant for persons in the present study.

One fundamental aspect of community for people who live in Australian rural areas is the personal significance of geographical spaces adjacent to where they live, what some scholars call their community of place. Community of place for each person may be understood through three attributes that they ascribe to their residential areas (Hunziker et al., 2007; Pretty et al., 2003; Raymond et al., 2010). The first attribute "place identity" describes the way that a person assigns personal significance to their place of residence to identify that it is "the place" for them, such as feeling "at home" in their rural area (Pretty et al., 2003, p. 273). The next attribute Anton and Lawrence (2014, p. 452) and Raymond et al. (2010) identify is "place dependence," or a person's view about their access to social and physical resources in their particular setting to potentially meet their goal and activity needs, often reflected in their level of satisfaction with local activities. The last community of place attribute according to Anton and Lawrence (2014, p. 455) and Raymond et al. (2010) is "place attachment" and, in particular, the emotional bond that a person has with the natural environment that surrounds where they live, such as their appreciation for the local landscape.

Some scholars have incorporated ideas about factors in a community of place into a broader concept, namely a sense of place (Giardiello & Cuervo, 2018; Soini et al., 2012). Soini et al. (2012) argue that a sense of place is multidimensional, expanding beyond place identity, place dependence, or place attachment to include aspects such as adapting to everyday living in a particular landscape. In addition, both Giardiello and Cuervo (2018) and Soini et al. (2012) argue that significant components of a sense of place include everyday social and cultural practices that impact each resident's sense of belonging, especially in places with uncertain futures. Such practices, in turn, shape residents' perception of their sense of connection as well as their relationship with the landscape (Giardiello & Cuervo, 2018). Another contemporary dimension that influences residents' sense of place is the role of digital representations of rural places, such as their depictions on social media platforms (Birnbaum et al., 2021). Multidimensional attributes that each person ascribes to their sense of place permit me to explore each person's contextualised experiences in their rural area.

In addition to experiences of their place, persons who live in rural areas may also connect with others in communities, both locally and elsewhere. Such connections to their communities can be defined according to four broad features. First, McMillan and Chavis (1986) and Talò et al. (2014) identify that as a member, each person can identify how their community provides them with a sense of belonging. Second, they propose that people can perceive a reciprocal influence between their community and its members. Third, they highlight that as members of communities, people have shared bonds that fulfil their social and emotional needs that serve to reinforce acceptable communal behaviour. Last, Elias (2008) claims that people can experience a sense of community when they appreciate the dissimilarities of their members. She argues that members' recognition and promotion of diversity in their membership provide their community with a unique identity as well as affording it with capabilities that can be used to achieve a greater variety of shared goals. Exploring persons' community experiences may be informed by each person's sense of belonging, reciprocal influence, emotional bonds, and appreciation for the dissimilarity of members.

For persons who live in rural areas, their experiences with connection to their communities are often based on their deep appreciation for their bonds with others (McIntosh et al., 2008; Otero, 2016). Dymock (2007) and McIntosh et al. (2008) argue that residents accordingly engage in activities that privilege such bonds, such as frequently interacting with others in their local communities. They claim that residents' willingness to engage in frequent social activity is indicative of their committed involvement with their community groups. Further, they identify that such interactions also provide consistent opportunities for people who live in rural areas to draw on their local communities to meet their everyday challenges. In addition, they offer that such interactions offer persons the chance to expediently disseminate their knowledge in their rural areas, including what they understand as a layperson as well as the ideas gathered from their course materials (Dymock, 2007; McIntosh et al., 2008; Otero, 2016).

With regard to a sense of community connection for persons living in rural areas, I argue it is problematic to assume that a collective co-existence in a particular space affords a resident a sense of community. For instance, interacting with others in a small town and its surrounds does not necessarily constitute an experience of a "rural community" for every resident. Instead, I claim that what is significant and distinctive for a person living in a rural area is being governed as part of a particular rural society. Just as significant and distinctive is their experiences with social interactions in a "local community," a term that I use in the present study to distinguish each resident's selected associations with others who live nearby and with whom they frequently exchange mutual support (Cheers et al., 2007; Smailes, 1995, p. 145). I also make a distinction between "local communities" and "rural communities" as the latter is

often used in the literature to portray universal views about a "rural idyll" or "countrymindedness" that are in part based on assumptions that collective co-existence in rural areas naturally constitutes an experience of community for all residents (Aitkin, 2005; Shucksmith, 2018). As part of individualising experiences in the study I, therefore, refer to each person's local community.

Cheers et al. (2007) and Gieryn (2000) show that with regard to their local community, each person living in a rural area chooses to maintain connections with a selection of residents who live nearby, such as others in their small towns and adjoining areas. They demonstrate that such areas may include a collection of local government districts comprising their local or adjacent region. Further, they highlight that social interaction with a selection of people who live in a variety of adjacent areas prompts residents to incorporate such into their sense of local community. In this way, despite both the potential geographic breadth of each person's local community and sparsely populated areas, residents connect with local people for various social purposes, such as navigating their everyday challenges as well as pursuing common interests (Cheers et al., 2007; Gieryn, 2000).

For persons living in rural areas, there are also a variety of communities where they frequently engage with people. For instance, different communities of interest reflecting particular concerns that may be located either within or outside of their rural areas offers people a chance to explore mutual passions and activities (Lloyd et al., 2016; Raymond et al., 2010). Such communities may include networks of people who share the same identity, interests, knowledge, or understandings of a topic that facilitates connections with like-minded others both locally and afar. With specific respect to communities of interest pertaining to education, previous research by both Alison et al. (2006) and Macadam et al. (2004) shows that tertiary education students have educational communities located both within and outside of their rural areas where they can explore their course knowledge. They further suggest that existing access to community support challenges policies suggesting a factor contributing to poor educational attainment in rural places is an absence of local learning communities. Rather, by being located within a residents' rural area, such educational communities support students as well as add to their sense of community in their place.

An additional community significant for tertiary-educated residents in rural areas are their communities of practice, such as professional associations, that are often geographically indeterminate and where members can be located across national or international settings. Gore et al. (2019) and Power and Armstrong (2017) argue that communities of practice offer members other benefits apart from a sense of belonging including, reciprocal influence,

emotional bonds, and a chance to appreciate the strengths of dissimilar members. Specifically, they claim that such communities permit people to improve their role proficiency by facilitating information exchange between members with differing levels of expertise who are located in a variety of contexts. Mellow (2005) and Morrow (2012) demonstrate that such specialised associations are significant for tertiary-educated residents who navigate distinctive challenges in local professional roles. They show that professionals in rural areas face multifaceted demands that differ from those of their metropolitan colleagues, including the challenge of meeting metro-centrically inspired professional standards, such as those set by professional bodies. Another readily available example of local demands includes challenges for educators when applying national curricula in rural and remote places, and the ongoing role of colleagues, both locally and afar, to assist in addressing such challenges (Bailey et al., 2014; Guenther et al., 2014).

To provide further assistance with applying professional standards in rural areas, some residents elect to form geographically situated learning communities. Such learning groups are shaped according to the ethos of communities of practice. Illeris (2016) and Hicks (2014) demonstrate that geographically situated learning communities include both professional as well as student members who are focused on developing their skills, such as navigating metropolitan inspired curricula and standards to practice as professionals in rural areas. In this way, situated learning communities in rural areas aid those who are preparing for a local vocation as well as support the practices of those who have established local careers. Illeris (2016) and Evans and Haughey (2014) add that situated learning communities also afford people who are distant from their education provider and professional associations, such as those living in rural areas, the opportunity for both personal and professional development tailored to meet local demands. Communities such as those that I have outlined here highlight that there are many communities that are significant for residents as either students or graduates living in rural areas. Such evidence supports my approach to further research by exploring the experiences of individuals in rural contexts with their various communities.

2.5 Rudiments of Tertiary Education in Rural Areas

To more fully appreciate the tertiary education experiences of persons living in Australian rural areas, it is necessary to examine literature that discusses the motivations, learning processes and supports for adults to continue their formal education; particularly as adults are the population considered in this study. It is also necessary to review the benefits and challenges with prevailing course delivery methods, such as online delivery because each method has a distinct relationship to learning. After reviewing the literature on adult learning, I focus on a particular subset of adult learners, namely mature-age learners who engage with

tertiary education courses after the age of 25, and who contribute their experiences to the present study. Further, as a platform to understand residents' experiences with their tertiary education in their rural areas, I also outline the social spaces in which they can exercise their course knowledge. Such spaces permit them to fulfil their community ambitions such as their vocational goals, and I review the subsequent advantages for all their communities when they do so.

Education courses that are taken either after, or in lieu of, a compulsory Australian high school education are described in a variety of ways in the literature, including the use of the term "adult education." In Australian research, however, adult education often refers to Adult Community Education programs, and while studying such programs may provide a credential, the focus is often on developing the skills of individuals to navigate everyday challenges in their lives (Harris & Morrison, 2011; Thompson, 2013). For the purpose of the study, I choose to refer to each person's experiences with "tertiary education" or courses that are linked to nationally recognised credentials, such as vocational education and training certificates I to IV as well as those awarded after the completion of university programs delivered by Australian education providers (Australian Qualifications Framework Council, 2013, p. 107). I am interested in experiences with such courses as research demonstrates that engaging with them can improve a person's quality of life and vocational chances as well as enhance the quality of their contributions to their communities (Hodkinson et al., 2006; Kenway & Hickey-Moody, 2011).

In the first instance, understanding both the strengths of and challenges for, mature-age learners as persons living in rural areas requires drawing on research about the principles of adult learning. Such principles are grounded in the idea that regardless of their age, adults have some universal learner characteristics (Knowles, 1975; Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020). For instance, Knowles (1975) was the first to offer that a learner characteristic of adults includes that (a) they are self-directing and; (b) they appreciate knowing the purpose of their learning. Elsewhere, research shows that adults also have an abundant reservoir of experiences that assists them to learn from their courses and then apply their knowledge in their everyday activities (Jarvis, 2006; Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020). Further, adults deeply appreciate immediacy in the application of their course knowledge and are inspired to learn when it is related to their personal development; in particular when it enables them to perform their duties in their social roles (Boileau, 2017; Knowles, 1975; Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020). Such duties may include completing tasks as community members, caregivers, or employees.

Adult learning is also shaped by context, with each person's rural context being a powerful determinant in shaping their learning experiences. Illeris (2016) and Jarvis (2006) claim that influences from a person's social environment in their context set the frame for what that person can learn and how. They offer an example, whereby social interactions through different methods of course delivery as well as the norms and structures of both social environments, such as rural contexts that in addition to society, are conditions that impact each person's learning outcomes. Further, they demonstrate that each person's context also influences their motivational drive to acquire and extend their knowledge. In addition, they show that in this way, a person's learning from their tertiary education course is mediated by their experiences in their particular context, supporting the aim of the study to explore persons' tertiary education experiences as part of their rural contexts.

An aspect of adults' motivation to engage in tertiary education is what Illeris (2016) calls their psychological dimensions. Arden (2016) and Illeris (2016) propose that each person's thought process has three elements, including cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions. For instance, they claim that every adult has a different combination of knowledge and skills, feelings, and motivations as well as communication and co-operation abilities that influence their experience of formal learning. In addition, they offer that there is a general link between the elements of a person's psychological dimensions and their context that influences their sense of self, meaning that the social environment in which adults learn is also significant for the development of their educated identity. Consistent with such ideas about education as an influence on adult identity is a finding in research highlighting that older adults who continue their education report that becoming a tertiary-educated person adds to their sense of identity (O'Shea et al., 2017). For adults living in rural areas, their sense of educated identity is relatively unknown in research.

Related to the shaping of educated identity in rural areas is research that has sought to understand residents' perspectives about education and learning in Australian rural areas. In one study, Dymock (2007) argues that a small number of women and men expressed interest in tertiary education for its own sake and viewed it as more than an exercise to attain credentials for career advancements. Further, he and I both argue that the tertiary education of residents in rural areas is viewed by them as a valuable activity as it is regarded as providing benefits for communities as well as individuals (Marchant, 2014a). Despite previous research capturing residents' understandings of the social benefits of tertiary education as well as their enthusiasm for continuing their formal learning, many who live in Australian rural areas attain only a basic education (Johnson et al., 2009; Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, 2018). For several decades, such poor educational attainment for people who are motivated to continue

their education as residents in rural areas has been consistently attributed to missing opportunities for them to pursue their educational ambitions (Halsey, 2018; Sher & Sher, 1994). I discuss the qualities of contemporary educational opportunities further in the analysis.

For those adults who have the opportunity to complete their education while living in their rural areas, local community support is significant. For instance, Hayton's (2009) study of young men's perspectives about engaging with tertiary education as residents in rural areas of the United Kingdom shows that they viewed their experiences in their local communities as the most significant factor for helping them to focus on their educational aspirations. The young men cited interactions with local role models as inspiring them to continue their education after high school, including their parents who had attained their tertiary education credentials before relocating into their rural areas. Elsewhere, Robison (2007) identified that as residents in rural areas of the United States, older women from diverse backgrounds have local support mechanisms enabling them to continue their formal education. In particular, participants expressed that a critical resource that enabled them to engage with a course until completion to realise their life goals in their rural areas was the social support provided to them by other residents. In addition, within Australia adults' interactions with others in their communities, both before and during their courses, supported both their decision to continue their formal learning and their course completion (O'Shea et al., 2017). Further, Roberson and Merriam's (2005) research with older adults in a rural setting, again in the United States, also highlights the nuances of both personal and contextual factors including social and community support that assisted participants to engage with, and continue their learning. Apart from the participants' interests that initially motivated them to continue their learning, other significant factors for fulfilling their educational ambitions include (a) access to the necessary resources, (b) the ability to give systematic attention and time to their learning and, (c) the capacity to make adjustments to overcome their barriers, such as finding ways to become familiar with digital technologies (Roberson & Merriam, 2005). Overall, previous research demonstrates that in addition to personal attributes, for people who live in a variety of rural areas, their decisions to continue their formal learning and the subsequent realisation of their goals is strongly influenced by local factors.

2.5.1 Mature-age Learners

Contributors to the present study are part of a particular cohort of adult learners, namely mature-age learners. In Australian education policy, adults who engage with tertiary education courses after the age of 25 are termed mature-age and are a cohort of adult learners who also receive separate attention in research. With a particular focus on course retention and attrition, research that describes the attributes of mature-age students illustrates that they have particular

strengths and challenges that influence their persistence with, or withdrawal from their course engagement (Drury & Charles, 2016; Stone & O'Shea, 2019). For instance, a strength that mature-age students bring to continuing their education is commitment and resilience that is forged by their life lessons (Jarvis, 2006; Spivey, 2016).

Mature-age students may also face circumstances that detract from their educational experience, including issues with time and course costs. In rural contexts, such issues intersect with disproportionally acute deprivations that are often in addition to personal histories of little previous educational success (Jarvis, 2006; Spivey, 2016). Such barriers to educational engagement have attracted the attention of researchers with Cross (1992) first suggesting that the challenges adults, including mature-age students, face falls into three categories – situational, institutional, and dispositional – that are widely used by contemporary researchers to define obstacles to adult learning and to investigate ways to overcome them (cf. Burton et al., 2011; Jarvis, 2006; Rubenson, 2011a; Spivey, 2016).

The first category – situational barriers – are obstacles identified in research as arising throughout the life course and include income restrictions, care responsibilities, and work commitments. Older adults usually encounter more and a greater variety of situational barriers than their younger counterparts (Australian Department of Education and Training, 2017b; Cross, 1992). For persons who live in Australian rural areas, research highlights that some of the situational barriers that have persisted for adults include affording the time and cost of their education (Australian Department of Education and Training, 2017b; Purnell & Cuskelly, 1996).

Jarvis (2006) and Desjardins (2011) state that the second category – institutional barriers – are policies and practices that hinder engagement with or completion of a tertiary education course. They propose that such barriers in rural areas include (a) delayed infrastructure development that supports the online delivery of courses, (b) ill-fitting government initiatives for continuing education based on assumptions of equitable circumstances of people regardless of location, and (c) a lack of comprehensive information from education providers. An example of an institutional barrier relevant to the present study that Stone and O'Shea (2019) argues has persisted was first explored by Purnell and Cuskelly (1996) whose seminal study in the rural areas of Queensland highlighted that even with access to online delivery, the courses that educational institutions deliver are limited.

The third category – dispositional barriers – refers to the impact of previous learning experiences on older persons' views about their capacity for learning that may influence their

perspectives about their chances to continue their education (Jarvis, 2006; Rubenson, 2011b). For instance, a person who has a record of poor performance during their compulsory schooling may find that their drive to acquire and extend their knowledge is undermined by a view that their previous education record reflects their future capacity to learn (Morris, 2010; Zacharias et al., 2018). For mature-age students living in rural areas, situational, institutional, and dispositional barriers may either individually or in combination impact their engagement with tertiary education as well as their chances of course completion.

The Australian Government has established policy and funding to address some barriers and assist mature-age students to continue their education while living in rural areas. At the time of the study, the *National Social Inclusion Initiative* provided funding to assist eligible adults to continue their education that, while tailored somewhat to the needs of mature-age students, was problematic (Hayes et al., 2008; Social Inclusion Unit, 2009). Funding in the *Initiative* was based on neoliberal assumptions that people across the nation live in conditions that are comparable to metropolitan settings and that similar efforts by each individual in their particular context will produce similar outcomes for each of them (Adam, 2012; Australian Social Inclusion Board, 2011). The impetus to adopt "social inclusion" notions into public policy arose from policymakers' observations that since transitioning to neoliberalism, inequities between rural and metropolitan areas have increased (Australian Social Inclusion Board, 2011; Social Inclusion Unit, 2009). Policymakers subsequently anticipated that funding engagement in education would improve outcomes for people, primarily through securing employment, as a way to improve equity across the nation (Australian Social Inclusion Board, 2011; Social Inclusion Unit, 2009).

With a similar focus on equality, government education policy and funding are also intended to assist people from 'non-traditional' backgrounds to continue their education, such as by supporting those who are first in their family to engage with a course after high school. Support for "first in family" students is particularly relevant for many people who live in Australian rural areas. Of specific research interest is the government initiative – *Widening Participation* – that provides financial incentives for education providers to enrol and support more students from 'non-traditional' backgrounds. Included are individuals belonging to groups that are identified as having histories of poor educational attainment, such as undergraduates who are mature-age learners, first in family students or individuals with rural origins (Southgate & Bennett, 2014; Wilkins & Burke, 2013). In their review of the *Widening Participation* initiative, O'Shea et al. (2017) highlight that since its introduction, a higher number of students from rural areas are attempting to complete tertiary education courses; however, the course engagement and completion rates of such students continue to be lower than those with

metropolitan origins (Koshy, 2019; Napthine, 2019). Lower rates of course engagement coupled with higher rates of course withdrawal involving students from rural areas suggest an urgent need for research, such as the present study, to illuminate individual experiences that drive course (in)completion (Marchant, 2015c; Sher & Sher, 1994; Stokes et al., 2006).

Other government initiatives influencing educational attainment for persons of rural origin include funding the relocation of students so they reside adjacent to their preferred campus (Alloway et al., 2004; Zacharias et al., 2016). Researchers have noted some progress from relocation initiatives with improved tertiary education engagement for persons from rural areas (Alloway et al., 2004; Zacharias et al., 2016). However, in ways that are analogous to outcomes from "*Widening Participation*," relocation initiatives have improved participation rates, but course engagement and completion rates for people with rural origins are persistently lower than that of their metropolitan counterparts (Napthine, 2019; O'Shea et al., 2017). Evidence of persistently lower rates of completion for persons from Australian rural areas makes my exploration of their educational attainment experiences in the present study both important and pressing.

Funding initiatives centred on relocation also have other limitations, with persons who have out migrated from rural areas often feeling disconnected in their new social, cultural, and physical environments. Such social dislocation can undermine educational engagement, and ultimately, course progression, which helps to explain the poor educational outcomes for students who have out-migrated from rural areas (Dawborn-Gundlach & Margetts, 2018; Napthine, 2019). Relocation also results in social disruption in rural areas as the removal of some of the best and brightest people diminishes local social fabrics (Corcoran et al., 2010; Olfert & Partridge, 2010). Further, the majority of people who out-migrate to continue their education do not return to live in their community of origin (Bruning et al., 2006; Stokes et al., 2006). Apart from sporadically sharing some of their ideas through connections with remaining residents such as family members, the chances for a former resident's course knowledge to influence the trajectory of their rural areas is minimised when their out-migration becomes permanent (Bruning et al., 2006; Stokes et al., 2006). Without opportunities for tertiary-educated people to offer benefits for their communities of origin, tertiary education may be perceived by residents in rural areas as a negative force (Morse, 2004; Welch et al., 2007).

2.5.2 Course Delivery

Delivery of courses in rural areas is primarily provided through either local educational establishments or online delivery methods. Courses that are supplied through online delivery methods, and in particular, online courses that do not require relocation rely on local

infrastructures, such as technological availabilities are significant for people who live in Australian rural areas. Development of educational technologies has accelerated since the early 1990s when they were first anticipated as offering people living in rural areas unprecedented access to tertiary education through online delivery methods (Hearn et al., 2005; Twyford et al., 2009; Zacharias et al., 2018). In this way, online courses are promoted specifically by policymakers as providing flexible study options so that adults can continue their education in a way that is intended to fit around their competing responsibilities (Muir et al., 2019; Stone, 2019a). Indeed, the *"Widening Participation"* program uses such methods to support people from a diverse range of backgrounds to continue their education (Hearn et al., 2005; Twyford et al., 2009; Zacharias et al., 2018). Despite the significance of online delivery to provide courses for a diverse range of students in a variety of locations, researchers have raised concerns about the quality of knowledge acquisition through such methods. In particular, the credentials issued upon completion of online courses are subject to questions of legitimacy, including uncertainty about the quality of learning through such methods (cf. Latchem, 2014; Marchant, 2020; Twyford et al., 2009). In addition to such critical concerns, there are some widely reported challenges with online courses. Such challenges include (a) people's difficulties with navigating educational technologies, (b) course components that are inappropriate for online delivery, and (c) inadequate interactions with classmates and educators to support learning from course materials (Drury & Charles, 2016; Stone & O'Shea, 2019; Townsend & Delves, 2009; Zawacki-Richter, 2009).

Concerns about both learning and facilitation of online courses for people living in rural areas are significant as online delivery has increasingly become the vehicle to provide tertiary education, especially during the current pandemic. One concern is that despite the promise of universal access, the opportunities for people in Australian rural areas to engage with online courses lag behind those in metropolitan areas (Park, 2017; Robinson, 2012). For instance, in comparison to their metropolitan counterparts, people living in rural areas continue to experience a delay in technological availabilities, potentially prohibiting them from the chance to engage with tertiary education (Park, 2017; Robinson, 2012). As a consequence of such delays, people living in Australian rural areas also have a lack of opportunities to develop their digital literacies, are subsequently often unfamiliar with educational technologies, and cannot easily engage with online courses when they become available (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011; Stone, 2019b). Solutions to a lack of digital literacy were first offered by Purnell and Cuskelly (1996), who reviewed the experiences of people engaged with online courses while resident in the rural areas of Queensland. Perhaps unsurprisingly at the time, the findings highlighted that participants needed additional assistance at the beginning of their courses to be able to use educational technologies (Purnell & Cuskelly, 1996). Of concern is that more recent research

illustrates that contemporary students continue to experience a similar lack of assistance that they routinely need to navigate educational technologies (Granger & Bowman, 2013; Spivey, 2016).

Other forms of support that are necessary for persons who live in Australian rural areas to engage with online courses are also often absent. For instance, Rush (2014) examined the needs of students who are living in Tasmanian rural areas and distant from their education providers. She claims that adequate communication about institutional requirements is yet to be supplied to people who engage with online courses. Such findings point to persistent institutional inadequacies as they correspond to early research by Purnell and Cuskelly (1996) whose foundational research examined persons' experiences with engaging in online courses as residents in a rural area in Queensland. In such places, there are often histories of poor educational attainment, and fewer chances for residents to exchange information about the workings of tertiary education in their everyday interactions. An absence of local knowledge about tertiary education means that some people who are distant from campus and removed from (their) educational communities appreciated additional advice from their providers (Purnell & Cuskelly, 1996). Specifically, students require information from education providers about institutional requirements such as administrative procedures, and academic conventions as well as an explanation of technical terms related to their courses (Purnell & Cuskelly, 1996; Rush, 2014). Continuity in reports of unmet communication needs by education providers highlights ongoing concerns that warrant the present study.

Research has also shown that a pressing deficiency in current online courses is inadequate human interaction to facilitate learning (Stone & O'Shea, 2019; Webb & Cotton, 2018). An absence of human connection during online delivery has been a persistent and immense concern for people who live in rural areas, with a lack of educator presence being a particular source of concern and learning disruption for mature-age students (Herrmann, 2015; Kryczka, 2014; Purnell & Cuskelly, 1996; Visse, 2013). Stone and Springer (2019) and Wallace (2008) claim that without adequate opportunities for connecting with educators during their online courses, people living in rural areas face difficulties with communicating their learning support needs to their education provider. Such needs are subsequently often left unaddressed, jeopardising students' chances to successfully navigate their online courses. Further, Stone and Springer (2019) and Wallace (2008) illustrate that education administrators lack familiarity with the circumstances of online students resulting in little understanding about the limitations in technological and public resources that are available to course attendees. Specifically, they show that a lack of direct human engagement with their education providers means that assumptions that students have access to and are conversant with technologies have precedence

in provider decisions about their support requirements. Indeed, somewhat unsurprisingly Curry (2013) and Granger and Bowman (2013) argue, echoing Purnell and Cuskelly (1996), that students in rural areas who enrolled in online courses view themselves and their circumstances are misunderstood. In addition, such misunderstanding means that students in online courses are further marginalised when confronted by their education provider's expectations that everyone has adequate resources and capabilities available to them (Curry, 2013; Purnell & Cuskelly, 1996). Such experiences, along with a lack of human connection, Busher et al. (2015) claim explain in part findings that while people who live in rural areas appreciate the chance to engage with online courses, given a choice, they would prefer to attend a class with other people. They highlight that students report that when attending a classroom, there is a chance for them to make a human connection with both classmates and educators. Such connections mean that students' nuanced learning support needs and lack of resources are more likely to be identified and addressed so they can pursue their education ambitions (Busher et al., 2015).

Of interest to education providers and researchers alike are other events that relate to attrition rates and, in particular, the withdrawal of students from their courses. Efforts are made by education providers to stem attrition through retention programs. For administrators of such programs, a particular focus with regard to online courses is higher attrition rates compared to courses that are delivered on campus. In addition, regional universities that provide the majority of online courses for persons living in rural areas, report more withdrawal than metropolitan campuses (Muir et al., 2019; Stone, 2019b). Key factors in withdrawal or retention are the age and enrolment status of students. For instance, Hales (2007) and Stone and O'Shea (2019) show higher attrition rates at regional campuses are attributed to more part-time mature-age enrolments, a cohort who have competing responsibilities. In contrast, they argue retention at metropolitan campuses is attributed to higher rates of full-time younger students who have fewer barriers to completing their education. Given their differences, retaining mature-age students, in particular, requires education providers to improve their connection with such students to develop a comprehensive understanding of their circumstances and to cater to their individualised learning support needs (Bunn, 2007; Stone & O'Shea, 2019). To this end, some education providers are offering blended delivery that combines online options with opportunities for students to learn and connect with others on campus, an arrangement that is boosting course completion rates (Australian Department of Education and Training, 2017a; Stone & O'Shea, 2019).

Rather than engage with online courses, some people living in rural areas attend a campus situated nearby, and in particular, their local campus. A benefit of such localised tertiary education establishments is that it prompts residents to continue their education in a way that is

yet to be realised through the provision of online courses (Ellis et al., 2008; Robinson, 2012). Research illustrates that a local campus prompts residents to continue their education because it offers them social benefits, with people often being motivated to engage with a course at their local campus by the chance to make social connections with others (Gervasoni et al., 2010; Mallman et al., 2018). By attending their local campus, the opportunity for residents to engage in ongoing interactions with their classmates provides them with personal contact, which is often absent in online spaces, and offers encouragement for them to continue their courses (Broadbent, 2013; Illeris, 2016). With regard to the experience of a local campus for mature-age students, in particular, they appreciate attending campus as it offers them the opportunity to collaborate with others to bolster their learning achievements and benefit from a sense of support from their education providers (Busher et al., 2015). Moreover, mature-age students identify that attending a local campus offers them a chance for respectful interactions with their educators who can clearly explain learning practices and assist them to become independent learners (Busher et al., 2015; James & Busher, 2018).

A local campus also plays a part in building a sense of community for resident students in rural areas with human connection at a local campus bolstering attendees' sense of belonging to both their local and educational communities. In the first instance, in addition to interactions with their classmates improving their knowledge acquisition, attendees report an improved sense of belonging in community that also inspires their academic success (Ellis et al., 2008; Macqueen, 2017). Further, incomers from a variety of backgrounds who attend campus have the chance to interact with other local people, increasing their recognition and acceptance in their rural areas (Balatti & Black, 2011; Mallman et al., 2018). As such, sharing local knowledge on campus plays a significant part in assisting newer residents in achieving their goals, such as securing local employment (Balatti et al., 2006; Priest, 2008). Moreover, interactions on campus can also offer social exchanges with people living in other regions, bolstering the knowledge that residents can use to anticipate and respond to challenges in both their lives and their rural areas (Johnson et al., 2009; McIntosh et al., 2008). As such, attendance at a local campus is pivotal to improving the capabilities as well as connections of residents just as it helps with building local knowledge for the development of their communities (Black et al., 2000; McIntosh et al., 2008).

A local campus also offers benefits for rural areas by educating residents to become local professionals. As an example, Akademi Norr is a collective initiative of local governments in the northern region of Norway that established campuses in each of their rural areas to provide residents with tertiary education by sharing their assets, such as infrastructure and educators (University Collaborations in Regional Development Spaces, 2012). Each educational

establishment in the Akademi Norr campus network provides opportunities for residents to learn from their course materials, and in addition, students learn how to navigate the complex demands of local occupations to provide services in their particular rural context (Allison & Eversole, 2008; Ambrosetti et al., 2019; University Collaborations in Regional Development Spaces, 2012). For instance, local tertiary-educated professionals are required to meet the demands of working in and between complex social networks in their combined roles as both professionals and community members. As an example, tertiary-educated professionals face the challenge of ensuring confidentiality and privacy for their clients in their context while they also both interact as ordinary community members (Allison & Eversole, 2008; Garlick & Langworthy, 2008). Further, by preparing residents as community members to be local professionals, Akademi Norr stems out-migration of residents and reduces the need to rely on in-migration to fill local professional positions (Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, 2018; Strasser et al., 2016). In this way, Akademi Norr secures "home-grown," and in particular, skilled local people in northern Norway in a way that is aspired to by the newly established Regional University Centres in the rural areas of Australia (Australian Department of Education and Training, 2019; Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, 2018). Such centres are anticipated to provide in-person support to residents in rural areas who are engaged with courses so they can fulfil their academic and professional goals (Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, 2018; Strasser et al., 2016). In this study, I focus on building on an understanding of experiences with activities related to such goals, for example, residents' engagement with work placements in rural areas that prepare them to perform in occupations. In addition, exploring tertiary-educated persons' experiences either at local campuses or in the increasingly dominant provision of online courses will further understandings about the role of delivery for preparing them to become resident professionals in rural areas.

In summary, regardless of a person's region of occupancy, researchers such as Arnason (1995) and Nixon (2010) both argue that apart from vocational competencies, tertiary education offers individuals skills and knowledge to perform public roles, such as those located in communities. They elaborate that in this way tertiary education provides for the flourishment of individual agency as well as the promotion of personhood, and the illumination of individual differences. Tertiary education also initiates a circle of mutual recognition by, in the first instance, becoming a biographical project to the self that then enhances understanding of others (Bansel, 2007; Rose, 1999). As such, tertiary education permits the recognition of the self, helping in the elucidation of commonality with others to promote aspects of wellbeing in human cohabitation. Further, tertiary education also fosters a sense of interconnection with one another and the outside world, deepening a person's sense of cohabitation in the broadest sense by permitting recognition of the interdependencies that support and advance human life (Woods,

2011; Young, 2009). In this way, tertiary education at its best can sustain a sense of commonality among individuals despite their conflicting needs and interests (Nixon, 2010; Ricoeur & Pellauer, 2005). Tertiary education, therefore, is significant for the development of a sense of self and its articulation in the public, and it is necessary that experiences encountered by individuals while developing their self be investigated. To this end, it is critical to understand experiences with tertiary education from the perspective of individuals who live in rural areas, whose views have been neglected in previous research as well as overshadowed by neoliberal imperatives. Understanding tertiary education experiences in relation to personal as well as community goals through my concurrent exploration of each person's experiences with both their tertiary education and communities is thus done with the intent of illuminating the interrelationships between such experiences. In this way, my examination of individual tertiary education and community experiences furthers understandings about the possibilities for tertiary education to be a constituent element of a flourishing public sphere in rural contexts. In the next chapter, I detail the methodology that I use to explore experiences of tertiary education and communities for persons living in Australian rural areas.

CHAPTER 3 — METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, I describe the methodology that I used to extend what is known about tertiary education and communities for persons living in Australian rural areas. In what follows I first describe my investigative choices including why I elected to conduct an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to inform the study. I also outline my understanding of researching rural matters and I detail the strategies I used to uphold the quality of the research as well as my approach for engaging with contributors. I then detail the sequence of steps that I engaged in to collect and analyse the data. First, though, I follow the advice from other researchers to outline my identity and the life experiences that shaped my investigative approach (Averill & Clements, 2007; Cohen et al., 2017; Heidegger, 2005; Pillow, 2010).

3.1 Researcher Identity

In chapter one, I outline how my extensive rural tenure shaped my personal identity and oriented my academic interest in both rural matters and the collective activities of people. After leaving my community of origin, I was the first member of my family to complete a bachelor's degree that, at the time, was only accessible by moving away from my rural area. Since graduating, I have witnessed profound changes in tertiary education, with some people now able to complete courses while residing in their rural areas. I have also had the opportunity to complete an online postgraduate course as a resident in a rural area. The subsequent application of my course knowledge in my local community drew my attention to both the tertiary education and community engagement of others. I observed that local people and their input, including from resident graduates, had varying impacts on the decisions about the future directions of their towns. More specifically, I wondered about the community contributions of tertiary-educated people living in rural areas and the ways that they could use their education to fulfil both their personal and community goals. When an opening in doctoral research presented itself, I accepted the opportunity to conduct a study with a view to promoting perspectives about tertiary education and community endeavours for persons living in Australian rural areas (Bohren & Marchant, 2016).

My decision to focus on research to assist the endeavours of others is supported by my humanist epistemological positioning, a position shared by researchers who have similar commitments to myself (Mitroff & Kilmann, 1978; Werner & Rogers, 2013). Conceptual humanist researchers have a preference for holistic inquiry that generates knowledge through analysing human behaviour (Sieber, 2012; Werner & Rogers, 2013). As a researcher concerned with understanding the experiences of tertiary education and community for individuals in rural contexts, I elected to conduct a human science study, an approach that is often adopted by many

conceptual humanists (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Vico, 1744/1948). Conventionally, human science research is centred on the exercise of *verstehen*, defined here as understanding each person's point of view (Makkreel & Rodi, 1985; Weber, 1956/1978). Engaging with such an approach permits me to explore the experiences of persons living in a selection of Australian rural areas. Such exploration affords an alternative to a common approach in rural-focused research that provides an overview of both people and their rural contexts as a whole. In light of the need to understand each individual's perspectives about their experiences or *verstehen*, I conducted an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. Such analysis is a methodology that is part of a human science approach and one that allows me to present each contributor's experiences as part of their particular rural context (Smith, 1996, 2017; Smith et al., 2009).

3.2   Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

While all phenomenological research provides a complete and in-depth understanding of experiential events, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis offers a powerful investigative advantage for the present study by privileging the perspectives of individuals (Cuthbertson et al., 2019; Hefferson & Gil-Rodriguez, 2011; Smith & Osborn, 2015b; Tuffour, 2017). Devised by Jonathan Smith in the mid-1990s, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis differs from other phenomenological undertakings by focusing on presenting what an individual's experiences mean for them as part of their socio-cultural reality, and in particular, their lived context (Miller et al., 2018; Smith, 1996, 2017; Smith et al., 2009; Tuffour, 2017). Such an approach is not adequately supported by other phenomenological methods.

Smith (1996) initially utilised Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis as a way to convey the perspective of a diagnosed individual about what their experiences of their medical condition meant for them in their lived context. The analysis has since been adapted for use in studies similar to the present research that focuses on lived experiences of education and community. For example, Felder's (2016) research with a small number of students presents individual experiences with living-learning communities by detailing what aspects of such experiences in their college dormitories meant for each participant in her study.

In a similar way to previous research, an Interpretative Phenomenological Analytical approach in the present study privileges individualised understandings of lived experiences as part of a particular context. For those who live in rural areas, such understandings may be otherwise unnoticed in broad overviews or could be missed when reading the experiences of residents through confining terms, such as social inclusion or social capital (Hefferson & Gil-Rodriguez, 2011; Smith & Osborn, 2015b). My conduct of an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, therefore, contrasts with existing overviews by permitting me to present nuanced and

contextualised understandings of each person's experiences of their tertiary education and their communities. While a detailed account of individual experiences can be generated through such an approach, it is not possible nor intended that the entirety of all possible meanings of such experiences for all persons in every rural area will be captured in the study. Rather, I present an exploration of individual experiences with tertiary education and communities for a small number of persons living in a selection of Australian rural areas.

To summarise, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis affords me a conceptual and methodological toolset that focuses my study on both tertiary education and community phenomena, including the idiographic features of individualised experiences. Exploring experiences in this way offers a fine-grained understanding of persons' tertiary education and communities in rural contexts. By doing so, it offers an alternative to generalisations in research and policy, provoking a reappraisal of what is considered known about rural areas and their peoples. As such, the findings could inform the practices of community representatives, metropolitan administrators as well as those concerned with the tertiary education of persons living in rural areas. In addition, presenting finely tuned ideas about tertiary education and the communities of persons living in rural areas provides a platform for further research. In what follows, I describe the central ideas of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to detail its investigative advantage for the present study.

3.2.1 Central Tenets

Understanding Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis requires defining a central concept: the notion of "being." Assumptions in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis about "what is being" are contended. Researchers make various claims about the theoretical groundings for " being" that includes social constructionism, interpretivism, and realism respectively (Larkin et al., 2006; Willig, 2013). I argue that understanding "being" in the world centres on Heidegger's (2005) phenomenological notion that things exist in the world, but they are encountered and given meaning by each person. More specifically, phenomena or happenings that each person experiences are considered to be real, but meanings of such that are given by each individual are subject to considerable variation between people (Eatough & Smith, 2008; Heiner, 2014). Understanding such variation accords with how "being" is understood in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis where meanings of experiences are also based on contextualism. For instance, understanding each person's various experiences of "being" depends on considering the meanings that they attribute to "being" as part of their particular context (Eatough & Smith, 2008; Heiner, 2014).

The advantages of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis for understanding "being" also requires a description of its central guiding and interrelated tenets: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography. Phenomenology refers to the study of "being in the world," and in particular, exploring and identifying the process of understanding "being" (Heidegger, 2005, p. 23; van Manen, 2016). While a person is "being" in the context of the ordinary lifeworld or the setting where their experiences appear, in particular their *Lebenswelt*, a thing that may exist or happen to them is referred to in research as a "phenomenon," derived from *phainesthai*, meaning to show itself or appear (Finlay, 2009, p. 6; Heidegger, 2005). As the study of phenomena that are part of being, phenomenology offers an interpretive form of research that assists researchers to explore nuanced meanings of phenomena including biological, social, and cultural happenings that appear in individual lives (Creswell & Creswell, 2019; Groenewald, 2004, 2018). In an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, phenomenology provides a foundational core to analyse expressions of individual experiences. It does so in a way that is distinguished from other phenomenological methodologies, as it is centred on the perspective of the person to present what their experiences mean for them in their particular context.

The second central tenet of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis is hermeneutics, a term that derives from *hermeneuin*, meaning to interpret (Finlay, 2014; Schleiermacher, 1838/1998). A hermeneutic approach proposes that our understanding of "being in the world" can only be understood and conveyed by language, the meaning of which is interpreted by each individual (Heidegger, 2005, p. 23; Schleiermacher, 1838/1998). As such, integral to a researcher presenting what an individual's experiences of a phenomenon mean for them is scrutinising and interpreting textual data. In the present study, textual data includes a person's narrative account in their everyday language that is recorded in an interview transcript. Such interview data can be examined and interpreted by the researcher (Finlay, 2014; Larkin et al., 2006; van Manen, 2016; Yardley, 2000). In this way, a hermeneutic approach focuses on participant's everyday language about their experiences that emanates from and reflects their particular context.

The final tenet of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, its idiographic dimension, calls attention to the specific details of individual experiences rather than generalised or broad conclusions. Inquiries based on idiography are used in research to enlarge insights about particularities of cases (Allport, 1937; Shinebourne, 2011). In this way, an idiographic focus provides evidence to provoke a re-examination of what is considered known and understood about phenomena in research (Stephens, 1982; Yardley, 2000). Further, observations about the particularities arising from idiographic studies can also form the basis to initiate experimental investigations for nomothetic endeavours (Stephens, 1982; Yardley, 2000). Accordingly, the

findings from an idiographic reading can identify potential lines of inquiry to form the basis for further research.

Taken together, the central tenets of an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis provide a conceptual framework for me by directing my analysis to the meanings of each contributor's words as part of their idiographic context. By doing so, I am able to present individual perspectives about experiences of tertiary education and communities in rural areas. Next, I discuss my contemplations that guide my application of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.

3.3 Spatiality

My Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to explore each person's experiences of their tertiary education and their communities in Australian rural areas is informed by theories about the social construction of spaces, and in particular, spatiality. In the first instance, Australian rural areas, the communities of their residents, as well as education establishments, can be understood as locations with particular social, cultural, historical as well as geographical aspects. In addition to the aforementioned aspects, rural, community, and educational spaces are also attributed with shared meanings by their occupants, suggestive of their social construction (Butler & Sinclair, 2020; Soja, 1989). A significant feature to consider here is Soja's (1989) not of spatial (in)justice and how the social construction of spaces influences the distribution of socially-valued resources and opportunities for occupants to use them. Similar to research by Young (2011) for the purpose of the study I consider justice to be defined as a wide range of opportunities for persons to develop and exercise their capacities. In addition, both spatial justice and injustice are shaped by social, economic, and political conditions that, in turn, shape each individual's lived experiences. A focus on individualisation is consistent with the idiographic approach of the study that seeks to understand each person's experiences with their tertiary education and their communities. An individualised approach that is underpinned by an understanding of spatiality as theorised above assists my exploration of each person's lived experiences of spatial (in)justice while living in their rural area.

My exploration of each person's experiences of tertiary education and community spaces is also informed by Mowat (2015) and Butler and Sinclair (2020) who both add that there is not a mirror relationship between spaces of constraint and spaces of empowerment that generate spatial (in)justice. A lack of mirroring between spatialities of domination and opportunity means that exploring the experiences of a person as either a student or tertiary-educated resident living in Australian rural areas may entail either marginalisation, enablement, or both. In addition, while spaces are structured, they are also contested, a process that assists

identity formation for each individual by providing opportunities for experimenting with alternative lifestyles and communities (Morgan, 2000; Mowat, 2015). Understanding the ways in which persons living in Australian rural areas navigate spatiality, including their social, political, and economic circumstances highlights their contestation and/or acceptance of existing structures. Such contestation or acceptance can be understood by exploring persons resistance or engagement with the social construction of their tertiary education as well as their communities. Succinctly, spatiality offers a basis to understand each person's chances to make a social contribution of their choosing as well as the opportunities for them to influence the decisions that affect them the most, illustrating their presence and/or absence in tertiary education and community spaces.

An example of the intricacies of experience with spatiality in rural areas and the complex ways it may influence the social contributions of individuals is suggested by hooks' (1990) research. While concerned primarily with race and gender, significant for the study is her research that theorises rurality and marginality. To this end, hooks (1990) argues that as someone who out migrated from a rural area and is subsequently engaged with metropolitan tertiary education spaces, a marginalised background offers her novel social insights that could generate alternative social outcomes. Such insights can be generated because marginal spaces offer individuals a radical perspective whereby they transgress spaces to see and imagine social possibilities that are different from the hegemonic understanding of spaces (hooks, 1990). In the study, I complicate hooks (1990) ideas by examining the experiences of persons who engage with an assortment of spaces while living in their rural areas. I do so by exploring the experiences of students and tertiary-educated persons to detail their perspectives about their sense of engagement with, and the qualities of, their contributions in an array of social spaces.

3.4 My Fore-understandings of Rural Matters

With regard to my prior experiences, assumptions, and preconceptions, Giorgi (2010) and van Manen (2017) both argue that Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis does not offer clarity about the role of such fore-understandings in analysis. In reply, Smith (2010, 2018) maintains that Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis conducted in the manner that he prescribes contributes to scientific understandings of lived experience. I address any potential concerns by acknowledging that my fore-understandings, and in particular, my identity as a long-term resident in Australian rural areas, have implications for the research. For instance, researchers, such as myself who are residents in rural areas, may be deemed insiders and able to access information from other residents that might otherwise be inaccessible to those they consider to be outsiders, such as metropolitan-based investigators (Onyx & Bullen, 2000). It is not a requirement for me to have status as a rural insider or extensive experience with rural

matters to conduct an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis; however, I am part of a growing tradition whereby researchers investigate topics with which they are intimately familiar (Smith et al., 2009; Symeonides & Childs, 2015). In addition, despite being positioned as an insider in some rural contexts, I am also perceived as an outsider by some residents. For instance, in rural areas where educational attainment is poor, my status as a doctoral candidate means that I can be viewed more so as an outsider, thereby complicating my position as a researcher. For the most part, each person who I recruited to the study was at ease with my tertiary education endeavours and expressed particular appreciation for my rural residency.

My position as a rurally situated scholar aided my rapport with contributors and means that my fore-understandings dispose me to meaningful and rich readings of their rural experiences. However, as noted in previous research my presuppositions and subjectivity could bias my analysis and the presentation of the findings (Heidegger, 2005). While a prescription for managing and minimising my fore-understandings and their influence is absent in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith, 1996; Smith et al., 2009), other phenomenologists have identified relevant strategies. Specifically, researchers conducting phenomenological studies according to the methods prescribed by Husserl (1965) commit to *epoché* or bracketing, an attempt to suspend personal judgement during the conduct of their research analysis. In contrast, other theorists argue that a researcher's presuppositions about a topic cannot be bracketed from their interpretations and there is a danger that trying to ignore what we know about a topic may allow personal bias to have an even greater influence on the research (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; van Manen, 2016). I argue based on previous advice that I should not underestimate the influence of my fore-understandings about rural matters in the research (Halfacree, 1993; Jones, 2015). Although there is no guarantee, articulating some of my more dominant ideas helps me to attend to their influence in the study (Halfacree, 1993; Jones, 2015). To this end, I elect to document some of my most pertinent fore-understandings, while acknowledging both Smith (1996) and Smith et. al.'s (2009) arguments that articulating such understandings may change my ideas about rural matters. Moreover, formally recording my fore-understandings allows their influence in the research to be interrogated by the reader. To this end, I identify three broad fore-understandings that I suggest are most relevant to the study:

1. My position and experiences as an Australian rural person with European heritage who identifies as a woman and is a low-income recipient influence how I contribute to research, including the conduct of my analysis that informs the knowledge claims that I make in the findings.

2. I have a sense of solidarity with people who live in Australian rural areas and a longstanding admiration for their ingenuity and may subsequently be less critical of them.

3. As a researcher, I am focused and committed generally to social critique that is often orientated to a critical reading of power relations between groups and issues of spatial injustice between different geographical places.

3.5 Promoting Research Quality

To conduct the study, I am guided by principles that are conventionally used to safeguard the research quality of Interpretative Phenomenological Analytical approaches (Miller et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2009; Yardley, 2000, 2017). The four principles according to Yardley (2000, 2017) are sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, transparency and coherence as well as impact and importance. Adherence to such principles throughout the study, examples of which are given below, is recommended to uphold academic rigour in research centred on Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Miller et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2009; Yardley, 2000, 2017).

The first principle that Yardley (2000, 2017) recommends is sensitivity to context. She details such as involving (a) reviewing the relevant literature, (b) paying attention to the socio-cultural settings of persons in the study, (c) ensuring that each person's perspective is captured in the research, and (d) attending to ethical matters. With regard to Yardley's (2000, 2017) points, in chapter 2 I reviewed literature that is relevant to the everyday experiences of persons living in Australian rural areas. Centring sensitivity to context in the study is also supported by my position as a rurally situated scholar, a positioning that allows me to offer improved insights into each contributor's socio-cultural experiences. To this end, I analyse each contributor's experiences in their lived context rather than the views of contributors as a whole to present individual perspectives about the nuances of both existence in rural areas as well as happenings in tertiary education. With regard to the ethical conduct for the study, I complied with formal ethical standards that are detailed later in the section on data management. I also made methodological choices to ensure that each contributor could benefit from their involvement in the present study, such as offering my time to their personal projects. I describe such arrangements later in the section on deliberations for engaging with contributors.

The second principle, commitment and rigour, recommends that researchers have in-depth engagement with the topic being researched, conduct thorough data collection, and engage in depthful analysis (Yardley, 2000, 2017). Examples of my engagement with the research topic include extensive experience in various roles to seek improvements for peoples

and communities in my rural area, including the organisation and delivery of both compulsory as well as tertiary education. I have also held roles that support community endeavours. With regard to systematic data collection as well as data analysis processes, the details of my commitment to academic rigour for both undertakings I describe later in this chapter.

The third principle, transparency and coherence, includes communicating clearly and in a way that offers a powerful illustration of experiences for each person in the study (Yardley, 2000, 2017). In the first instance, I use detailed, transparent methods to present each person's experiences. Such methods include an outline of my fore-understandings that could influence the analysis, a description of the data analysis sequence detailed later in this chapter as well as a clear presentation of the findings in chapters four, five, and six. The principles of transparency and coherence also guide my use of appendices where I provide examples that demonstrate the steps in my research analysis. Such examples include excerpts from my research journal as well as examples of software outputs, notations, and my preliminary written analysis that form the findings. In the findings' chapters, I offer clear descriptions that present the meanings of each person's experiences as part of their particular context through a discussion that is grounded in a selection of verbatim extracts from their transcripts. As is the convention with Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, contributors' extracts are distinguished in the text by either quotation marks or block quotations. Some quotes may be a single utterance whereas others are presented at length in blocks to ensure that the details in contributors' stories drive the discussion in the findings.

The final principle, impact and importance, relates to my knowledge claims in the findings that extend what is known about tertiary education and communities in research (Yardley, 2000, 2017). The findings that I present offer an enriched understanding of the experiences of persons living in Australian rural areas that are currently absent in the literature and can inform community members and representatives in rural areas as well as scholars, policymakers, and education administrators. In addition, impact and importance are demonstrated by peer-reviewed publications and presentations listed at the beginning of this dissertation, showing that ideas from the present study have an impact on research and practice (cf. Ellis, 2015; Lear & Ellis, 2018; Marchant, 2013b).

3.6 Deliberations for Engaging with Contributors

As a conceptual humanist researcher, the quality of the present study hinges on my adherence to principles that uphold academic rigour as well as ethical consideration for persons who contribute to the study (Hekman, 1999; Strega, 2015). In light of this, a guiding principle for my research practice is that in addition to extending knowledge, it must also afford benefits

for contributors (Baker et al., 2016; Jones et al., 2006). To this end, I argue in the literature review that many people who live in Australian rural areas face various forms of marginalisation, and while not everyone eligible to inform the study endures socioeconomic deprivations, many may be in vulnerable circumstances (Appiah et al., 2007; Vinson, 2007). Reviews of outcomes from previous research conducted with people in such circumstances demonstrate that some studies have often been of greater benefit to researchers than those who inform the research (Lather, 1986; Strega, 2015). A lack of reciprocal benefits makes researchers complicit in perpetuating participants' circumstances of vulnerability (Lather, 1986; Strega, 2015). I resolved to undertake a Doctorate of Philosophy with the proviso that it would offer benefits to people who live in Australian rural areas. To provide such benefits, I decided to offer each person an amount of my time that they could apply to achieve their goals, and in particular, a time-in-lieu arrangement. Such an arrangement means that I offer each contributor an amount of my time that is equivalent to what they give to the study. I anticipated that such an arrangement could be more beneficial than offering a voucher or the possibility of a prize. In this way, each contributor's involvement in the study offered them a direct and tailored benefit as part of a sensitive and ethical practice of care for them (Lather, 1986; Strega, 2015).

Before completing an ethics application to secure formal approval to commence data collection, I contemplated my intent to explore a wide variety of experiences for persons living in rural areas. In the Australian context, adults who are at least 18 years of age are more likely to engage with a wider range of tertiary education and community experiences than younger people. I was subsequently prompted to recruit adults who could potentially enrich the study by affording different perspectives about a greater variety of experiences than younger people. For the purpose of data collection, I also assumed that those who lived in a rural area for the duration of their courses could offer me their views on experiences of connecting with others and contributing to their communities as either students or graduates in their local context. Further, I elected to recruit both students and graduates to the study as a way to understand a broad spectrum of tertiary education experiences in Australian rural areas. Moreover, in accordance with my intent to explore experiences that led to engagement with a tertiary education course, I elected to recruit persons whose course engagement was voluntary. I decided that I would check before setting an interview time that each person had engaged with a course of their own volition, rather than being required to continue their education to qualify for government subsistence programs, such as unemployment benefits. I also decided that I would seek volunteers rather than offer a reward for contributing to the study as I anticipated that persons whose primary motive was to share their experiences with me would improve their contribution to the research.

As part of seeking formal approval to conduct the study, I generated a data management plan that included devising administrative procedures for the secure management and storage of data recommended to guarantee contributors' confidentiality and protect their anonymity (Creswell & Creswell, 2019; White, 2011). To this end, completed consent forms and interview transcripts would be stored separately and securely at all times. In addition, as a way to preserve the confidentiality and anonymity of contributors I elected to be the sole transcriber of the recorded interviews, a method that two contributors explicitly expressed their appreciation for during the data collection process. To further ensure the anonymity of each person who contributed to the study, I use pseudonyms for each of them as well as the locations that they referred to during their interviews (I sought contributors' assistance to generate these). I discuss the challenges for ensuring the anonymity of contributors in rural research further in the section about preparing the interview data for analysis.

After making all of the necessary decisions about the interview process and data management and before approaching potential contributors, I submitted an ethics application to the James Cook University Ethics Committee; an institutional body organised in accordance with the National Health and Medical Research Council Statement on Human Experimentation (National Health and Medical Research Council et al., 2007, 2018). Included in the application was a plain English information sheet that was printed on James Cook University letterhead which describes the present study, introduces me as the researcher, and lists contact information for both my research advisers and me. The information sheet also states an assurance of confidentiality and anonymity for each person who takes part in the study by being interviewed, and how findings based on their data might be published and publicly presented (Creswell & Creswell, 2019; Jones et al., 2006). I also listed a projected interview length of approximately one hour. A copy of the information sheet is contained in Appendix A. In addition, I generated a consent form that required each contributor's signature as a way to secure their formal written permission before proceeding with both the recorded interview and the analysis of the finalised transcripts. Appendix B contains a copy of the consent form. The James Cook University Ethics Committee granted approval for the study on the 14th of February 2013 under their reference of H4685. To finalise the formal ethical obligations for the study, an annual report was submitted in 2014 to the Committee about the progress of the research, with a final report being completed after the ethics approval expired on the 1st of July 2015.

While I was waiting for the approval from James Cook University Ethics Committee, I contacted a large vocational education and training provider with campuses in Australian rural areas to seek permission to recruit their students to the study. Along with the formal written request, I sent a copy of the submitted ethics application. A letter of reply from the provider

supporting the recruitment of their students to inform the study was generated on the 12th of November 2012, a copy of which is contained in Appendix C. Support was granted by the provider in part due to their administrators acknowledging that the findings from the present study would be of benefit to them. Further, I claim that research about tertiary education experiences could potentially improve practices by the provider that delivers both classroom and online courses to persons living in Australian rural areas. What follows are the details of the procedures that I engaged in to collect the data for the study.

3.7 Strategy to Collect the Data

In addition to enlisting the assistance of the vocational education and training provider, I elected to interview persons who were known to me, and in turn, tertiary-educated persons who were known to them. A limitation of such chain-referral sampling is that contributors are socially linked and there is a higher chance their perspectives will be similar, generating community bias in the research data (Bagheri & Saadati, 2015; Biernacki, 1981). The possibility of such bias is significant for the present study as chain-referral sampling could involve the recruitment of contributors whose experiences as well as their attribution of meanings to such, are similar rather than diverse. To moderate the possibility of community bias in the study by promoting the collection of rich data to inform the research, I reviewed ways to recruit contributors who were unknown to me and each other through different enlistment mediums. I did so by examining research that was concerned with Interpretative Phenomenological Analytical methodology and the conduct of such research in educational settings (cf. Osborn, 2013; Roberts, 2013). The perusal of previous research led me to value the aforementioned assistance from a large vocational education and training provider as well as recruit contributors in alternative ways, such as by advertisement in a national newspaper for four weeks. I also opened a Facebook page and created a blog for the project on the 25th of November 2013. I paid for the Facebook page to be advertised to potential contributors living in Australian rural areas, with both the Facebook page and blog remaining open until the 3rd of December 2014. The advertisement processes attracted only one contributor to the study.

In addition to my efforts to recruit contributors, the administrators at the vocational education and training provider generously sent an email on the 2nd of May 2014 to invite their students to contribute to the study. A copy of the email invitation sent by the provider is contained in Appendix D. The invitation generated replies from thirteen potential contributors that were unknown to me, eleven of whom volunteered to contribute to the present study.

3.7.1 Semi-structured Interviews

To prepare for collecting data by engaging with potential contributors, I followed previous advice and elected to use a semi-structured interview format as it gives some order to the interview as well as permitting exploratory questions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Smith et al., 2009). For instance, semi-structured interviews help to generate rich textual data suitable for conducting an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis by affording exploration of both planned as well as unforeseen areas of research interest (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2015a). In this way, a semi-structured interview format allows participants to contribute insights that are meaningful to them in ways that are not afforded by a more rigidly defined set of questions. For example, during a semi-structured interview, each person has space to recount their stories related to topics of research interest, with their narration offering rich, detailed descriptions of their experiences (Finlay, 2008; Langdridge, 2007). As such, semi-structured interviews give participants some control over where the interview leads just as it affords researchers the opportunity to extend their questions, allowing for divergence in ways that may generate unexpectedly fruitful data (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2015a).

For the purpose of conducting the semi-structured interviews, I drafted an interview guide that contained questions designed to record each person's experiences with their tertiary education and their communities. To generate textual data during an interview, Moustakas (1994, p. 66) recommends centring on two general interview questions: "what have you experienced in terms of the phenomenon?" And "what contexts or situations have typically influenced your experiences of the phenomenon?" In adopting such advice to conduct an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis for persons living in rural areas, I designed questions to gather data that would permit me to analyse the idiographic dimensions of experiences centred on the phenomena being considered. To this end, I decided to collect data by beginning with questions that were broader and less invasive so that I could build rapport with each contributor before asking more pointed questions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Passer, 2019). In this way, I designed the interview to more closely resemble an everyday social exchange instead of an intrusive interrogation. The goal here was to develop questions that yielded improved data about persons' experiences in their particular rural contexts. The interview guide that I designed to facilitate data collection is located in Appendix E and includes questions about communities, education, and social background.

Interviews to collect the research data for the study commenced on the 23rd of August 2013 and were completed on the 3rd of December 2014. During the initial interaction to set an interview time, I asked each potential contributor to briefly describe the reasons for their

engagement with a tertiary education course to determine if they had voluntarily decided to continue their education[1]. After setting an appointment time, I emailed an information sheet and consent form to the potential contributor. I then filled out an interview schedule, detailing their first name, contact details as well as an agreed time and location for the interview. The day before the scheduled interview, I contacted each potential contributor to confirm the suitability of the appointment time for them and if necessary, arranged for re-scheduling.

At the mutually agreed appointment time, I met with or telephoned each potential contributor, engaging with them through an introductory script and checklist. As part of that script, I began to build rapport by introducing myself and explaining my position as an insider in terms that included being a resident in a rural area as well as studying a course that is part of the broad spectrum of tertiary education. I introduced the research as central to learning in my course and reiterated that the aim of my study was to understand experiences. I stated that during the interview, the questions that I would ask had no right or wrong answers, but rather I was interested in what each person had to say. I also communicated to each potential contributor the activities that we would engage in during the interview and data collection process. Potential contributors were also informed that after I transcribed their recorded interview, they would be provided with the opportunity to correct, comment on, or completely withdraw their interview transcripts. In this way, contributors would make the final decision on their data contribution to the study. I reiterated that if they agreed to go ahead with the interview that it would take approximately one hour, during which answering any question was voluntary. For instance, they could either refuse to answer any questions or stop the interview at any time. Each potential contributor gave their written permission to proceed with the interview and provided their separate written consent for the interview to be recorded. A copy of both the information sheet and the consent form, contained in Appendices A and B respectively, were given to each potential contributor. Following our preliminary discussions, I allowed time to answer questions before the interview. I then started the recording, the interview began, and I guided the potential contributor through a series of interview questions, a copy of which is contained in Appendix E. The interviews took between 25 minutes and 2 ½ hours, with the most usual time being approximately an hour.

During each interview, I strove to understand the experiences of each contributor as a person in a particular rural context. In this way, I focused on gathering data to cater to the idiographic dimensions of human experience that is the focus of Interpretative

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[1] Even where contributors were known to me, I questioned them about their reasons for deciding to engage in a course before inviting them to be interviewed. I considered this a way to recruit contributors who had voluntarily engaged with their tertiary education.

Phenomenological Analysis. To this end, I began the interview with broad questions that permitted me to begin to understand each person and their lives, such as "So, I wonder if you can talk to me about your background, perhaps to start with how long have you lived there?" I then eased into questions related to their communities (for example, "Can you tell me why you stay there?") as well as their education (for instance, "Obviously, you have done a bit of study, can you tell me your reasons for studying?"). I also asked exploratory questions to improve my understanding of each person's particular experiences. When asking questions, I focused on persons' overall experiences of course engagement, such as their perspectives about learning from their courses rather than their grades, as the latter does not provide a nuanced measure of their course experience. I also sought to understand persons' past and present experiences in their community roles, both locally and elsewhere. Each person's answers provided rich descriptions that broadened my understanding of what it means to engage with tertiary education as well as communities while living in rural areas. Accordingly, during the interviews, I sought to understand each person's experiences, and in particular, the meanings of idiomatic expressions from their everyday language, such as what "being local" meant for each of them. The exploration meant that as advised, I was striving to understand the contextualised meanings of each person's lay terminology from their perspective (Brann-Barrett, 2015; Saltmarsh & Zlotkowski, 2011).

As an alternative way to conduct interviews, engaging with potential contributors who lived in a variety of rural locations through their available internet services proved to be a poor platform. For instance, an attempt to conduct an interview through Skype had a disjointed feel, making asking and answering questions difficult, and I abandoned the medium. Instead, when travel was not feasible, I elected to use a telephone interview process that proved to be a satisfactory means to collect data except for one occasion when a recording was irretrievably corrupted by an unknown source of electronic noise. A subsequent ethics amendment approved on the 7th of May 2014 permitted me to re-interview one contributor via email. Overall, the telephone interview process was an adequate alternative to in-person interviewing (Annand & Haughey, 1997; Cohen et al., 2017). Throughout the interviews and data collection activities, no issues were raised by contributors.

To capture developments in my understanding about each person's experiences, I took notes in my research journal throughout the interviews about significant utterances that served as the beginning for exploring what each contributor's experiences meant for them. An example of such notes, including those taken during an interview, my summaries of the interview, ideas that occurred during the discussion about the transcript, and my initial thoughts about potential knowledge claims are contained in Appendix F. As recommended, my note-taking was the start

of an audit trail comprising analytic memos, questions, musings, and speculations about the evolution in my understandings of the meanings that each contributor ascribed to their experiences (Bloor & Wood, 2006; Saldaña, 2012). In this way, my note-taking allowed me to get the words out of my head and onto paper, and similar to other scholars was the beginning stage in generating a thoughtful, written analysis that is the basis of the findings (Groenewald, 2004, 2018; Marchant & Burton, 2016; Zinsser, 2012).

Increasingly interviews in research are seen as a moral inquiry, and I anticipated that listening to a person during an interview would potentially be of benefit to them, especially when their primary motive for being involved with the study was to inform me of their perspective (Creswell & Creswell, 2019; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). I also anticipated that research knowledge could benefit from the involvement of each contributor who volunteered. To this end, each contributor would be able to voice their experiences that are absent from research and could improve the study by offering me a chance to present an enriched understanding of tertiary education and community experiences in rural areas.

The number of contributors in total far exceeded my expectations, with twenty-three persons in total offering to contribute to the study, and of that number, twenty-one consenting to be interviewed. The number of contributors in the present study aligns with recommendations to conduct an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis by recruiting between five and twenty-five persons who have the experience that is the focus of the research (Alase, 2017; Smith et al., 2009). I finalised the data collection on the 19th of January 2015. One interview transcript is not utilised in the analysis, as the experience of education occurred in an international rural setting, an analysis of which will be published in a journal concerned with experiences of tertiary education for persons who have in-migrated to Australia. In summary, twenty contributors from fourteen distinct rural areas inform the study.

At the conclusion of discussions that culminated in the finalisation of their interview transcripts, I offered each contributor a reciprocal amount of my time to further their goals. Most were somewhat delighted that I had considered offering them my time, with eleven contributors subsequently engaging with me. In responding to contributors' requests, my assistance was given in alignment with what each contributor perceived as a priority, as they were best placed to understand their needs and therefore, the most fruitful ways to utilise my skills. Accordingly, allocations of my time were applied to contributors' projects including educational endeavours, employment gain, and various matters related to the development of their community groups. Contributors recruited me to assist with either their community or personal goals with equal enthusiasm. Some contributors were undecided if they would require

my assistance in the future, while others were satisfied to simply give me the gift of their time. For contributors who did not require my assistance, their responses suggest that some may have received an adequate reward from being listened to as part of being involved with the study. Research would benefit significantly from further investigations to understand the nuances of improving reciprocal arrangements when engaging with various populations of research contributors (Marchant, 2015b). What follows are the details of the procedures that I engaged in to analyse the data for the study.

3.8   Preparing the Interview Data for Analysis

As recommended by Smith (2017) and Smith et al. (2009), I transcribed each interview as soon as possible after recording it. Early transcription meant that I could easily recall my thoughts about the nuances of the interview and build on them through note-taking. I transcribed each audio recording verbatim, making sure to anonymise as needed. For instance, during their interview, a contributor may have discussed significant features of the landscape that were adjacent to their residence that could reveal their location. With assistance from each contributor, I elected to carefully remove such references to their places. To minimise the possibility of the identification of contributors, features of places were also removed or altered in transcripts, such as by substituting the term "water" for an ocean, river, or lake. Preserving anonymity in rural studies is challenging as even with such precautions to preserve the research data with the intention of making the identification of a contributor difficult, other residents may recognise or make assumptions about contributors' identities.

As part of the strategy to preserve anonymity as well as enhance the data collection, I forwarded each contributor's draft interview transcript to them to read and edit. I also made an appointment time to discuss the contents with them. The opportunity for each contributor to discuss their transcripts with me permitted both of us to reflect on their experiences. Contributors shared their thoughts about their transcripts, identifying new insights about social strategies that they could use to improve their life chances, permitting me to write more analytic memos about the meanings of their experiences. I also strategized with each contributor to ensure that all of their identifying information, such as personal and place names as well as landmarks, were removed from their interview transcript. Each contributor was also invited to remove any information that they were sensitive about, including that which may identify them, cause them discomfort, or that they perceived as inaccurate after their spoken words had been transformed into written text. To increase the strength of the data, I left the responsibility for finalising the draft interview transcript with each contributor, so that they could make the final decisions about editing or omitting passages of text. I also offered each contributor an opportunity to discuss the interview process as well as choose the pseudonym that would

represent them in the study so that they could easily locate themselves in the text. Before returning their transcript to me, each contributor selected their pseudonym, reviewed their interview transcript, and completed all edits. I read each finalised transcript and sent a copy to contributors along with a request that they provide written consent for their interview data to be used to inform the study. See Appendix B for a copy of the consent form that has a separate consent section for interview data. All of the contributors gave me written permission to use their interview transcripts in the study.

3.9 Data Analysis Sequence

After preparing the interview data, I completed the data analysis by following a sequence of five steps recommended to analyse data in an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2015b). The steps that I engage in that I discuss, in turn, below include:

1. reading and rereading the data;
2. initial noting;
3. developing emergent themes;
4. searching for connections across emergent themes, and;
5. looking for patterns across cases (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2015b).

In light of the above, while engaging with each step of the data analysis, I strove to be aware of my fore-understandings. To this end, I adopted an open and sensitive outlook to generating an account of experiences for persons living in Australian rural areas by focusing on what each contributor's experiences meant for them (Eatough & Smith, 2017; Goldspink & Engward, 2018).

While completing each recommended data analysis step, I relied heavily on taking notes in my research journal. I had begun taking journal notes during interviews to capture my initial thoughts about the experiences that contributors shared as well as ideas about their experiences that occurred to me afterwards, such as during discussions to finalise their transcripts. As recommended, I added to my journal notes throughout the steps of the data analysis that culminated in the written analysis to generate findings for the study (Polkinghorne, 1983; Smith et al., 2009). In Appendix F I provide example excerpts of notes from my research journal that highlight changes in my researched understandings of a selection of experiences in the interview data at different analysis steps. Such excerpts show developments in my understandings of what contributors' experiences meant for them throughout the data analysis sequence. The preliminary understandings of contributors' experiences noted in my research journal I finalised during my written analysis.

3.9.1 Read and Re-reading the Data

To complete the first recommended analytic step, read and re-reading the data, I began by reading the interview transcript while transcribing the recorded interview. I also re-read each contributor's transcript while engaging in discussions with them as part of securing their consent for their finalised interview transcripts to inform the study. While becoming more familiar with the data that I had read, I focused on conducting an analysis that centred on understanding what each contributor's experiences meant for them rather than simply identifying the happenings that were illuminated by their experiences.

After each interview transcript was finalised and I received consent to use their data, I uploaded each contributor's interview transcript into NVivo to begin a detailed analysis of their textual data. Using software as part of the research process departs from the recommendation to complete an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis by making handwritten notes or utilising word processing software (Dean et al., 2006; Smith et al., 2009). On the other hand, data analysis practices that harness the power of computer programs offer a foundation to generate profound insights into human experiences, provided that the process is driven by the researcher's analysis rather than software outputs (Bazeley, 2020; Mishler, 2009).

3.9.2 Initial Noting

During the initial noting step of the data analysis, I used NVivo to highlight experiences that were significant for a contributor by attaching descriptive labels and comments to selections of text in their transcripts. Some of the initial notes that I allocated to selected verbatim extracts included descriptive labels and comments such as "social support," (experiences of support from local people) "education restriction," (experiences of barriers to tertiary education), and "education facilitation" (experiences of enablers for tertiary education). In addition, as advised I also noted some extracts as "surprises" when I found that the experience a contributor described was particularly evocative, such as departing significantly from what was portrayed in the literature or diverging significantly from what was known by me (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013; Ratner, 2002). It was essential that I quickly delineate experiences that I found surprising because as I continued with the steps in the analysis, contributors' experiences were integrated into my understanding of living in rural areas and became familiar and ordinary to me. In Appendix G I provide an example of an early NVivo software output after the initial noting that shows an excerpt of an interview transcript with descriptive labels. In the example, the descriptive labels include "time" (the influence of time experiences), "Social Inclusion Process" (the ways a person becomes included in their community), "Social Inclusion" (the way that they experience being included), and "Meaning of Social Inclusion" (what it means to be included). During the initial noting phase, the comments that I attached to the descriptive labels were often

shaped by the notes that I had previously made in my journal. For instance, during the initial noting as per the example in Appendix F, I drew on my previous notes from a discussion with Heidi to generate the descriptive label "community experience" as well as write comments about the meanings of such for her in her local town.

Throughout the initial noting of the interview data, as detailed above, I also selected compelling verbatim extracts that detailed both tertiary education and community experiences and marked these with a "quotes" label. In Appendix H I include an example of my initial noting and descriptive labelling of an excerpt of textual data in Julie's transcript with selected verbatim abstracts or quotes that were to be considered for further written analysis. Along with the excerpt from Julie's transcript, the example contains notes about experiences to the left of the text, and on the right are my descriptive labels that are to be developed into emergent themes (that I explain below). In the example, Julie is describing her experience of voicing her concerns as part of living in her town and states, "I don't see myself as living within the community. I see myself as living within the outskirts of the community. And I'm happy with that." I labelled that text as *sotto voce*, to mean an experience of expressing a quiet, emphatic voice from the fringe of community that goes unheard. I also labelled the excerpt with "quote" and as a "surprise" as, unlike my understanding of community experiences that were in part informed by previous research, Julie was both caring and vocal about her community while being comfortable in her position as an outsider. I also made notes that Julie exercises [her] voice but she is unsupported in [her] community. In a similar way, I continued noting quotes related to a contributor's experiences for subsequent analysis until no further descriptive labels were apparent. The descriptive labels in the initial noting provide a platform that upon further analysis generates emergent themes about individual experiences of tertiary education and communities.

3.9.3 Developing Emergent Themes

The next step, developing emergent themes or organising my initial thematic ideas, began with me re-examining my exploratory comments attached to excerpts of text in the interview transcript. While doing so, I checked that I had given each excerpt an appropriate descriptive label, as the textual data sometimes contained tertiary education and community experiences that were deeply intertwined. To this end, I checked to ensure that each descriptive label highlighted the experience that was most pronounced in each excerpt. For instance, I analysed if a contributor's narrative about their experiences as a tertiary-educated person resident in a rural area primarily related to their tertiary education or their communities. As recommended to develop the emergent themes I then scrutinised the initial descriptive labels,

altering words or short phrases to develop emergent themes to describe significant experiences for a contributor (Saldaña, 2012; Tesch, 2013).

I then followed the recommendations of Shinebourne and Smith (2010) and Smith et al. (2009) to develop the emergent themes according to a contributor's experiences of both their key events and key roles. As an example, some contributors' key experiential events related to tertiary education include the commencement of their courses. Such experiences with commencing a course I allocated to an emergent theme labelled, "beginning a course." I also identified emergent themes for a contributor's experiences with their everyday activities, such as their key roles in their communities. An example here is contributors' experiences as members of their community groups. To assist with the allocation of emergent themes according to key events or key roles, I used FreeMind software to organise the emergent themes for a contributor. An excerpt of the FreeMind Map that shows some emergent themes is located in Appendix I. In the example, I intend to relate experiences of being socially confined in communities in the emergent theme "confinement." Some of the emergent themes related to "confinement" are a contributor's experiences related to social closure, gender relations, location, organisation in community, social withdrawal, and civic deficits. Mapping interrelationships between emergent themes for a contributor in this way is a beginning in generating a more concise understanding about their experiences while preserving the complexity in their verbatim extracts. In this way, my use of FreeMind prepared the emergent themes for the next analysis step, searching for connections across emergent themes.

3.9.4 Searching for Connections Across Emergent Themes

Completing the next step in the analysis involved me connecting a contributor's emergent themes. Recognizing the connections between a contributor's experiences was greatly assisted by my research journal where, as advised, I had continued to write notes to reflect on tertiary education and community experiences (Bazeley, 2020; Merriam & Grenier, 2019). I reread my notes to re-engage with both my prior and developing understandings of a contributor's experiences. I then searched for connections across emergent themes according to a contributor's key experiences, identifying and linking different moments in their transcripts to strengthen the emergent themes. For example, during their interview, a contributor could discuss either events that led them to begin their tertiary education or their roles, such as course commencement or volunteering in their community, several times. By reviewing the transcript and the FreeMind Map, I was able to connect a contributor's key experiences to strengthen emergent themes, an example of which is given in Appendix J. In the example, I provide the verbatim extracts that can be connected into emergent themes for two contributors. First, Heidi offers three narratives about her tertiary education that upon analysis provide three key

experiences related to her attainment of a tertiary education credential. In her interview transcript, Heidi's first tertiary education narrative highlights that attaining a tertiary education credential was significant for her to secure her current paid position. Relating to the same emergent theme, Heidi later identifies that her tertiary education is significant for alternative paid positions in the future. Last, when discussing engaging with another tertiary education course, Heidi considers such as a way to again navigate into a more suitable paid position. Each narrative about gaining a tertiary education in Heidi's interview transcript supports an emergent theme relating to the attainment of a tertiary education credential as connected to her experience with satisfying her employment goals.

Similarly, in the example, Anne talks about her key roles in her community. Anne's related narrative in her transcript centres on her volunteer roles and she first talks about her volunteering as arising from caring for her local community and its future. Later, she speaks of some of her dissatisfactory experiences with volunteering that did not permit her to shape local futures and the futility of her input with a group where members had made the decisions before meetings. Anne's last narrative about volunteering highlights that some people who have volunteer roles in her town are more so interested in themselves rather than community futures. The narratives from Anne's transcript can be connected in an emergent theme to relate her experiences with volunteering in her town. Collating experiences for each individual, in turn, offered a platform to complete the next step and connect emergent themes for all of the contributors.

3.9.5 Looking for Patterns Across Cases

While considering the connections between emergent themes for contributors as a whole, I wrote notes about the way their experiences were related. I also noted the possibilities for several contributors' emergent themes to be collated to form subthemes with the intention of organising them into themes later in the analytic process. To this end, I clustered emergent themes, their verbatim extracts as well as my notes according to contributors' experiences with similar happenings. Such happenings included their shared experiences of their key events as well as their key roles for both their tertiary education and their communities that formed the subthemes. I labelled each subtheme with a key experience followed by a phrase that captures the experiential qualities presented in the subtheme. An example of a collation of some contributors' experiences with their community groups into a subtheme is provided in Appendix K. The initial analysis of Amber, Anne, Heidi, Julie, Margaret, and Wynne's verbatim extracts offers an understanding of their roles in their community groups with their experiences that range from "limited" to outright ostracism. The contents of such initial subthemes were altered during the written analysis.

With detailed written analysis, I finalised subthemes that highlight contributors' key experiences with both their tertiary education and their communities. I then grouped the subthemes into themes that related to contributors' experiences with either beginning, continuing, or completing their courses, followed by their engagement and their roles in their communities. The sequence in which the subthemes are organised in a theme was decided based on how prominent that set of experiences was in the data. For instance, the intention of most contributors to attain a credential for employment purposes was a more prominent experience in the data than achieving greater satisfaction in their everyday roles.

An example of organising emergent themes to generate subthemes and a theme is contained in Appendix L. The example includes the collation of emergent themes labelled "genuine offensive" and "underwhelming response" from several contributors' experiences that with further written analysis, were relabelled to generate finalised subthemes as part of the theme *Community Engagement: Alternate Spaces*. A table of the finalised labels for the themes (five) and subthemes (twenty-seven) that are presented in the findings is located in Appendix M, with a schematic of their thematic labels presented in Appendix N. An illustration of the sequence of analyses to finalise the subthemes and themes with two-way arrows emphasising reflexivity and openness to revision throughout the analysis I provide in Appendix O. A Gantt chart of the methodology, as well as the timeline for publications, and writing up of the thesis I provide in Appendix P.

3.10 Final Analytical Consideration

Writing an analysis using academic conventions to present thematic experiences centred on the narratives of contributors is challenging. Prior to candidature, my work as a postgraduate in my local community afforded me a profound awareness of the chasm between everyday language in rural areas and language that is used more often in metropolitan settings. To resolve dilemmas about language differences when writing my analysis, I relied on contributors' elaborations about what idiomatic expressions meant for them. By paying close attention to contributors' rhetoric by first analysing semantic devices such as each person's lay terms and idiomatic phrases, and then discussing etymological matters, I anticipated bringing the lived meaning of each of their experiences into focus in the findings. While completing the dissertation, I followed the advice of other scholars, striving to make the complexities and nuances of the meanings of each person's experiences from their perspective both explicit and accessible (Kamler & Thomson, 2014; van Manen, 2016). For instance, upon my request during interviews, some contributors had detailed what experiences of "community" meant for them. Contributors' elaborations about meanings that are presented in the findings illuminate the

differences between what is written in mostly metropolitan-based texts and lay terms used in rural contexts. Similar to previous research, the written analysis here adds to what is known about rural contexts by presenting language that diverges or is absent from current texts (Halfacree, 1993; Jones, 1995). In this way, the gaps between academic and lay knowledge highlighted in the study are an example of one of the ways that the research extends academic discourse about rural matters.

There was further tension in completing the final phases of the written analysis. At the time, my concerns were similar to those raised by Osborne (2015). She also experienced apprehension while conducting a phenomenological study of her participants' sense of community on Stradbroke Island. Osborne's (2015) sense of trepidation foretold my own, namely that there would be inaccuracies in the research that could arise through possible misrepresentations, or worse, over-imposition of ideas by us as researchers that would take away ownership of the meanings of experiences from contributors. To address my research dilemma, I was guided by advice from Jones et al. (2006) and Cousin (2010) to spend time thinking and writing about what was happening between me as the researcher and my textual representation of each contributor. The outcome of this exercise was that it was apparent to me that due to my fore-understandings and position as a rural resident, I am deeply aware of the repercussion of self-proclaimed "experts" in similar positions to myself making decisions on behalf of people living in rural areas. Such decisions often cloak the nuanced articulation of ideas by people who live in Australian rural areas about both their circumstances and suitable strategies for their futures. Subsequently, I likened both my own and Osborne's (2015) research predicament to *aporia* and, in particular, what scholars refer to as a quandary that made me question my position as a scholar and encouraged me to seek new understandings about the analytic process and my role in it (Macklin & Whiteford, 2012; Williams, 2009).

In contemplating my role as a researcher, I questioned how I could be "halted" to honour the boundaries between my knowledge and that of the contributors. Previously documenting my fore-understandings made me aware of some of my preconceptions that could influence the study, but I also wanted to ensure that I avoided being somehow dismissive of contributors' understandings about the meanings of their experiences. Such issues were especially pressing where I had encountered similar events to contributors, such as engaging with an online course or initiating a community group. Similar experiences were where my fore-understandings were particularly salient in potentially exerting influence in what such experiences could mean for contributors. To resolve the issue in a way that maintained the quality of the present study, I committed to the convention in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of privileging each contributor's experiential claims in the research (Miller et al.,

2018; Smith, 1996, 2017; Smith et al., 2009; Yardley, 2000). In particular, I followed advice to present what I consider best expresses what experiences meant for each contributor in their particular context, rather than what my experiences meant for me in my rural setting (Kafle, 2013; van Manen, 2016). In this way, and through my commitment to an Interpretative Phenomenological Analytic approach, the account I present about the meanings of contributors' experiences in the findings is centred on faithfully conveying what I understand each contributor's experiences meant for them (Frost et al., 2010; Josselson, 2004). To this end, the findings are textured qualitatively by presenting each person's views about their experiences by considering the particulars of their context, the details of which I present in the next three findings' chapters. Two findings chapters detail contributors' experiences with their communities and their tertiary education, with the following chapter outlining each contributor's perspectives about their contexts.

CHAPTER 4   — FINDINGS: CONTRIBUTORS' CONTEXTS

Presenting the meaning of each contributor's experiences of both their tertiary education and their communities rests on first understanding their contexts, and in particular, both their rural and their educational settings. To this end, and in a similar way to other studies that use Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, I present an overview of contributors' understandings of their contexts (cf. Ballam, 2013; Brauer, 2014). I do so by first presenting a curated amount of quantitative data broadly describing contributors' circumstances. I then elaborate on such circumstances through the presentation of a nuanced account of each contributor's qualitative descriptions that detail both their sense of community and their views about engaging with tertiary education in their rural area. Taken together, such an account provides a foundation for me to explore, in detail, each contributor's experiences of their tertiary education and their communities in the experiential themes presented in findings chapters five and six. I begin by presenting the quantitative data that gives an overview of contributors' circumstances as a whole.

4.1   Enumerative Representations of Contributors

Contributors to the study identified according to traditionally dichotomised gender categories with seventeen identifying as women and three identifying as men. An overrepresentation of women in the present study is congruent with previous research highlighting that in rural areas, both in Australia and elsewhere, women form the majority of older adults who engage with tertiary education (Jarvis, 2010; Williamson, 2000). The age of contributors ranged from twenty-eight to seventy years of age. An absence of younger persons from the study aligns with findings in other rural research describing that after completing high school, rural young people often relocate to a metropolitan area to engage with tertiary education and/or secure employment (Corcoran et al., 2010; Olfert & Partridge, 2010). The number of contributors, according to age range is displayed in Table 1.

Table 1

Contributors' Ages

Age Range	Number of Contributors
25-34	3
35-44	5
45-54	7
55-64	1
65-74	4

As previously noted, contributors lived in one of fourteen separate rural areas. Contributors reported living in their rural areas for periods from one year to their entire lives. Two contributors who consider themselves lifetime residents in their rural areas had spent time living in a metropolitan area. Most contributors had lived in their rural areas for fifteen to thirty years. Except for one person, contributors also reported having a committed involvement with community groups. The exception here was a person who had resided in their rural area for less than a year and was beginning to build connections with others in their local community. Contributor numbers according to the length of their rural tenure are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2

Contributors' Rural Tenure

Tenure Range (Years)	Number of Contributors
1-5	3
5-15	4
15-30	8
30-50	2
Lifetime Residency	3

Many persons who contributed to the study were in social groups whose marginalisation has attracted the services of scholars and policymakers alike. Such marginalisation is not necessarily tied to personal income as a slight majority of contributors had incomes that were above the Henderson Poverty Line (McLachlan et al., 2013; Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research, 2013). Further, a large number of contributors had severe ongoing health conditions, and while not a focus of the study, it is an issue that I revisit in the final chapter as a potential research direction. In addition, thirteen contributors reported that they had significant caring responsibilities for family members. A high number of contributors with such responsibilities aligns with a previous study reporting that people who engage with a tertiary education course while living in Australian rural areas are more likely to have significant care responsibilities than their metropolitan counterparts (Richardson & Friedman, 2010). Ten persons also identified as being underemployed, whereby securing adequate employment income or utilisation of their skills was not possible for them in their current circumstances. With further regard to their employment outcomes, the number of contributors employed according to official industry categories includes five in education and training, seven in health care and social assistance, and two in accommodation and food services (Australian Bureau of Statistics & Statistics New Zealand, 2006; Pink & Bascand, 2008). Six contributors had secured employment in their chosen profession after the completion of their courses. In addition, I also note, with considerable despair, that two persons who had

significant care responsibilities were also without adequate housing. Some contributors' circumstances were represented by more than one social group presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Contributors in Social Groups of Interest

Social Group of Interest	Number of Contributors
Income Below Poverty Line	9
Income Above Poverty Line	11
Ongoing Health Issues	9
Significant Care Responsibilities	13
Underemployed	10
Without Adequate Housing	2

Of the twenty persons who contributed to the study, nineteen reported that they engaged with their most recent tertiary education course predominantly through online delivery, with only one person reporting that they received and returned their course materials through the postal service. Of the nineteen persons who engaged with online delivery, eighteen had previous experience of engaging with a tertiary education course in a classroom environment in either a rural or metropolitan setting. Ten persons had experience with both online and classroom delivery while living in a rural area.

Overall, similar to North American research in adult education by Merriam and Baumgartner (2020) and Merriam (2001), the persons who volunteered to contribute to the study were more likely to have a history of previous educational attainment and were, predominantly, older (i.e. 35+) white middle-class women. Contributors who diverged from this, such as those identifying as men, were younger contributors, or whose income was below the poverty line added to the diversity of contributors.

Concerning their course engagement, all contributors were, coincidentally, the first member of their families to engage with a tertiary education course. With regard to their credential attainment, most contributors reported that they had engaged with a variety of previous courses while living in their rural areas. They all did so while living in regions where tertiary education attainment was at least 15 per cent less than their nearest metropolitan centre (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2015). When identifying their reasons to continue their education in their context, many contributors reported that they were prompted to engage with their courses to satisfy requirements for future employment aspirations or to meet obligations in their existing workplace. To satisfy the latter, some were studying for a credential that was

below their existing qualification. In discussing their course withdrawals, two contributors reported discontinuing their course engagement because of challenges with navigating online delivery. Other instances of course withdrawal were attributed to a lack of time due to employment commitments. The credential attainment and current course undertakings for each contributor are depicted in Table 4.

Table 4

Contributors' Attained Credentials and Current Tertiary Education Endeavours

Contributor	Highest Credential	Current Course
Amber	Graduate Diploma	Certificate II
Anne	Bachelor's degree (withdrawn)	Certificate IV
Dawn	Honours Degree	Completed
Derek	Master's Degree	Completed
Emily	High School Certificate	Certificate III
Heidi	Honours Degree	Completed
Helen	Diploma	Certificate IV
Jane	Honours Degree	Doctorate
Julie	Honours Degree	Master's
Kate	High School Certificate	Diploma
Lily	Certificate III	Diploma
Lisa	Certificate III (completed)	Certificate III
Maggie	Honours Degree	Doctorate (withdrawn)
Margaret	Postgraduate Diploma	Completed
Meg	Certificate III	Completed
Oigle	Diploma	Certificate I
Pat	Honours Degree	Master's Degree (withdrawn)
Sandy	Certificate II	Certificate III (withdrawn)
William	Certificate II	Certificate III
Wynne	Doctorate	Completed

With regard to the socio-economics of the rural areas of each contributor, the Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas of Australia offers measures from the quadrennial national census which summarise a range of socio-economic variables for each Australian Local Government Area (Adhikari, 2006; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016). As part of such measures, the Index of Relative Socio-economic Advantage and Disadvantage uses five deciles to rank the comparative socio-economic wellbeing of Australian Local Government Areas from most disadvantaged to most advantaged. Such designation should not be taken to represent the

particulars of residents' situations but instead, illuminate the general conditions in their rural areas. According to comparisons made about Australian Local Government Areas in the Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas of Australia, and as was foreshadowed by the literature review, most residents lived in impoverished areas. Only two rural areas featured in the study had a medium advantage in comparison to all other Australian Local Government Areas (Adhikari, 2006; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016). Regardless of their personal circumstances, such as their income, therefore, most contributors live in regions that were disadvantaged in comparison to other areas in Australia. The numbers of contributors according to categories from the Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas of Australia are listed in Table 5.

Table 5

Contributors according to Socio-Economic Index for Areas

Type of Socio-economic Index for Area	Number of Contributors
Most disadvantaged	5
Medium disadvantage	8
Neither advantaged nor disadvantaged	3
Medium advantage	2
Most advantaged	0

Taken together, the data that I discussed here offers a broad overview that is contextualised further by the individual contributors' accounts that are detailed next as a basis to understand them as well as their experiences that are presented in chapters five and six. In this way, the outline of categorical descriptors is intended to offer a brief background as a platform for exploring a deeper understanding of each contributor's rural and educational contexts.

4.2 Contributors Contexts

Presenting the meaning of each contributor's experiences of both their tertiary education and their communities rests on understanding the nuances of their lived context. To this end, herein I present an account of each contributor's context that is based on descriptions in their verbatim extracts that I selected from their interview transcripts. By drawing on interview excerpts I present rich accounts of contributors' descriptions of their rural and educational settings that serve to humanise each of them and provide details of their particular contexts, both of which are often lost in studies of rural spaces. As noted in the methodology, each contributor's verbatim extracts are preserved by quotation marks or block quotations in the text unless editing is needed for clarity.

4.2.1 Amber

Amber relocated into her rural area almost four years ago after she "couldn't afford" metropolitan living. She lives in the same area as her daughter and grandchildren and identifies that in contrast to her circumstances, being a parent who has "[young] children makes it much easier to get to know people in the town" and is an integral part of making good connections with other local people. Amber adds that she is "so glad my grandchildren are growing up in a rural town rather than the city." Despite the benefits that she perceives in rural living, Amber relates that she experiences a sense of social "isolation," both in her town and at her local vocational campus which is located a 10-minute drive from her home. One aspect of Amber's sense of "isolation" at her local vocational campus is that both she and the other students are engaged with separate online courses and with "everyone in the class doing different courses, there's very little opportunity for class discussion, sharing ideas." Amber views online courses as contributing to a lack of social interaction among students that detracts from her chances to enjoy interactions with others as part of her course experience. With regard to additional opportunities to connect with local people, Amber also shared that "I haven't made any close friendships here. Yet!" She knows her neighbours, but "not well," and is somewhat dismayed that "there's not been anybody banging on my door wanting to get to know me." Amber's perspective is that local people "are very friendly and welcoming – they just show a reluctance to let me be involved in the ways I would like – I feel like they don't really trust me and that they are suspicious of people from the city." Amber senses that her metropolitan background prevents her from being fully accepted in her town.

Like many others, when talking about her rural area, Amber uses the term "country" and suggests that "sport, or the church, or the pub are the three things that make country communities tick" and, in particular, help to promote social interactions among local people. In realising her preference, Amber shares that she is "finding it hard to find a church 'home' – a place I really feel comfortable, here in the country." In her view, Amber's city congregation was much less "conservative," playing a part in her sense of acceptance and belonging there. Contributing to Amber's sense of being unsettled is a feeling that her incomer status means a local leadership role is unavailable for her in her local congregation, a circumstance that persists despite her being an accredited lay preacher with a bachelor's degree in theology and having a role as an elected representative on the State governing council of her church. A lack of opportunities for Amber to make a contribution that reflects her capabilities undermines her sense of belonging in her rural area. However, despite her sense of "isolation," Amber feels that a smaller population in her rural area lends itself to a peaceful and comfortable existence. Amber shared that she feels "very safe. Even though I'm a woman living by myself. It's a little community; it's quiet, small. It's got a good feel about it." Like many contributors, Amber

refers to her town as a "community," highlighting the hope that residents will co-operate to both realise their goals and benefit from their shared achievements. Amber suggests that despite her sense of isolation, the social atmosphere in her town provides a sense of community for her. She has a strong sense that her town is the place for her, stating that:

> even though I haven't made any close friends, the people I've met and the people that I have more to do with are really good people. They seem really pleased that I want to settle down here and that I'm not intending to move on. I intend living here for the rest of my life.

4.2.2 Anne

Anne is a fourth-generation resident living in her birth town, where she and her husband own their own business. Anne shared that she likes living in her area because of her "family, and I guess recreationally it's very good here as far as outdoor activities and making your own fun, I guess. Back to basics sort of things." Anne's experience of living in her rural area is focused on simple, but important things, such as time with family while experiencing the natural environment. As part of a lifetime of observing local conditions, Anne acknowledges that the local population is "changing" and related that "you can walk up the street now and I don't know half the people. Because I guess we have a lot of government workers and a lot of itinerant people that come and go." She continued by sharing that "we used to know everybody, but we don't know [everyone] anymore," suggesting that due to population mobility and a scarcity of opportunities to generate connections, social connectedness in her town is fraying. Despite such changes, as part of a family with intergenerational tenure, Anne's experience is that she is "very lucky to have a lot of close friends here, that are both family friends and personal friends." Anne's connections with other local people include members of local families who have intergenerational friendships with her family as well as friends that she has made during her life. She explained her social commitments thusly:

> because we're in business and because we've grown up here, sometimes we might have three invitations in one evening, and sometimes I don't have time to go out of my way for other people. That sounds horrible. I try to as much as I possibly can, but because we're very social people, as well, it's very hard to accommodate everybody.

Anne regrets not having time to connect and socialise with the "other people" who have in-migrated and shares her observations about the ways that incomers can make local connections: "a lot of the time in small communities I think people generally make friends... or new people to our community generally make friends through their children or their family." She views children and family, in particular, as a "common denominator" that prompts residents to make connections with one another in what some contributors term their "small communities" or rural

towns. In discussing opportunities to make local connections, Anne shares that she "has also heard that people think that our community is really cliquey and hard to get into, so I guess it's hard to look at it from an outsider's point of view, and I've always been inside." As a socially connected insider in her town, Anne also has a deep sense of local commitment, stating that "I care about our community, and I care about where it's going. I've got children growing up here as well," highlighting that, for Anne, shaping the future of her rural area for the next familial generation is important to her. Anne shares that as part of her commitment, her volunteering is, "just a passion, [but] if people don't put their hands up to be involved in things, well maybe they won't happen," suggesting that she views the volunteer involvement of local people such as herself as integral to securing a viable local future. Anne also views that there is more community work that needs to be done locally. She states that "there is a sense of togetherness here, but in saying that there's also a divided sort of community too. That's probably more orientated around the social issues that go on with the social justice issues here in town." Such issues, Anne views are often related to "drink" or matters related to alcohol abuse that detracts from a sense of community in her town.

In discussing her sense of community, Anne states that she is uncertain about the benefits of local connectedness. She explained it as:

> togetherness, as everyone knows everything about everybody and what they don't they make up. It's very different to living in the city because whilst you're in the city nobody knows you from Adam other than your immediate group of friends and family.

Anne views that, unlike a metropolitan area where "nobody knows you from Adam" or where residents are largely unfamiliar with each other, familiarity, and social visibility among residents in her town, and in particular, local conspicuity can seem inescapable. Local conspicuity can highlight social differences between residents that leads to gossip which alienates them from one another. In considering her future in the social and economic climate of her town, Anne states that "actually, I'd be keen to not live here, sometimes. Because of the closeness of it and I have talked to my partner about maybe retiring to another town where there are a bit more opportunities." When considering her retirement, Anne is drawn to relocating somewhere without the "closeness," and in particular, a more highly populated rural area that offers greater social space. She is also drawn to a "highly populated" rural place because it offers more certainty about the future that will provide her with "opportunities" or options for her life.

In the interim, Anne engages with an online course at her local Vocational Education and Training campus (VET) that she shares as such: there is "a very good VET here now, like a

new VET that offers a lot of courses and things." She goes on to caution that most of the courses are offered through online delivery that she views as "without support" or as inadequate to assist local people to learn. Despite her misgivings about the lack of learning support for those who begin tertiary education through online courses, Anne shares that her current online experience, as someone who has completed several courses, is positive. She relates that "my lecturer, I have at the moment is very approachable and provides really good feedback," which Anne views as essential for her to learn and apply her knowledge. Anne has a good sense of connection with her educator in her online vocational course which she compares as "a lot more personal" than her previous experience of isolation in an online university course that prompted her to withdraw.

4.2.3 Dawn

As a teenager 34 years ago, Dawn moved into her town with her parents after they secured employment there. Since that time, Dawn has made many friends in her town, including local educators, who before their positions were made redundant, supported Dawn to commence her tertiary education. Her local educators guided Dawn as a mature-age student to attain her first credential at her local vocational campus and to later engage with suitable employment. Dawn described the tertiary education options currently available in her town: "there's VET, but I know that's changed a lot since I was there, a lot of that's going to online as well." She views that online tertiary education courses do not offer adequate learning support for local people. In describing her own path to tertiary education, Dawn related that after she finished high school, she: "didn't want to go to the city or anything, didn't know what I wanted to do. So, I went straight into the workforce, got married, had kids." As a school-leaver in her rural area, Dawn's only option to continue her education was to relocate to a metropolitan area. Without a clear sense about the career that she wanted to pursue, Dawn chose to secure employment, remaining in her town where she started her family.

Dawn's engagement with her childrens' early activities was the basis for strengthening her sense of connection with local people:

> the friendship group I've got was probably through my children, so you
> know playgroup, kindy all that sort of stuff and I'm still friends with them.
> And any committees and that I've got involved with was probably also
> through what my kids were involved with.

When her children needed less of her care, Dawn engaged with her tertiary education. Her friendships endured while she took the opportunity to continue her education at her local vocational campus. After completing her first course, Dawn engaged in an online course and secured related employment in local professional positions. Since commencing her course and

various paid positions, Dawn's sense of connection with others has built her educational community as well as extended her network in her local community:

> I'm still am friends with that I had before, I've met so many people in my
> work it's one of the things I really value in swapping my career direction,
> I've met so many wonderful people that I just wouldn't have met if I stayed
> in the bank. A lot of my friendship groups, I guess have been created through
> my work now and my study.

Like most contributors, Dawn uses the term "study" or "studying" to delineate activities associated with the process of continuing her education that involves time and application to gain knowledge from a course. During her involvement with "study" as well as work, Dawn's sense of making more extensive connections with local people has deepened her sense of commitment to her local region. Even before continuing her education, Dawn decided on a career path that would exemplify her dedication to her local community:

> instead of being in a job that was just a job, why not find something where I
> could be contributing to my community. I love my job. I'm giving to my
> community, I'm organising things, I'm working one-on-one, I'm doing lots
> of different things in my job. And then I think, 'I still want to give to my
> community.'

Her strong connection to others in her local community inspires Dawn's commitment to "give" through her career and motivates her to continue to do so outside of her employment duties. Her sense of commitment to her local region is strengthened further when Dawn observes local people across the region who are "pulling together" or co-operating to face the challenges in their everyday lives.

Dawn's sense of community is sometimes undermined by local social behaviours, with her expressing that the "drink culture is massive up here and it generates barriers, and in particular, social pressure, and if you don't want to drink, well you're made to feel like an 'other'." Apart from generating ostracism, she also views that local "drink culture" has a role in the prevalence of domestic violence in her region. Dawn has witnessed that such violence is particularly devastating for "local young people" who have "horrendous" circumstances and have often lived with "trauma for their whole lives." Her experiences with local "drink culture" coupled with her children relocating to the city to continue their education mean that Dawn is also considering relocating. She shares that she is "probably getting to a stage in my life now that I think 'Yeah, I could probably move on'," meaning that as she gets closer to retirement, the options that are available in the city hold greater appeal for her than remaining in her town.

4.2.4 Derek

Derek returned to his birth town, which is located in a low socioeconomic area, over three years ago, after securing a "challenging but enjoyable" professional position. When asked about the opportunities for residents to continue their education, Derek shares his observations gathered from talking with others in his workplace, and in particular, that "what I see for people coming through there can be all sorts of universities that can offer online courses." In Derek's opinion, there is a variety of online courses delivered to local people by an assortment of education providers. An online course is also Derek's only option to build on his education, but he related that "I do like that face-to-face interaction if I can get it. If I can't get that I'm likely to scrap that and go it alone myself—face to face or nothing." Derek's preference is to study in a class with others, as his efforts to forge connections in online course environments have not been rewarding and he views them as not worthwhile to pursue.

Derek's sense of connection to his local community is challenged by his employment as he is viewed as "a pillar of the community." As a resident professional, Derek finds that both his social activities and behaviour are highly visible to other residents. He shares that his position makes it difficult to "enjoy letting your hair down and being a community member, just like everyone else." Further, as a member of a local church, Derek's experience of connection with others in his congregation is that it's "just like everywhere else that has broken down and fractured" meaning that for him, belonging to a local congregation no longer offers him a sense of community. Derek, along with his wife and children, has subsequently relied on frequent leave to connect with "family in the city, and [to] go there to have that respite" that fosters a sense of privacy and social support. Time outside of his town is a way for Derek to feel both fully connected with others and get some rest from local conspicuity that, as a local professional, he experiences as intense social visibility and monitoring of his activities.

Recently, Derek and his young family have started to make authentic connections with local families. He shared that "being here for three years we are only just starting to find a couple of families that we can really count on that would be happy to step in and take our kids if we needed that luxury." After returning to his birth town, it has taken several years of local residence for Derek and his family to make connections with local people that support them and enrich their lives. He describes the role of such connections as an "opportunity to have those one or two families there that I have that unreserved support [from]." Derek describes the benefit of connection for him and his family as "we've then structured an activity that we can spend that quality time together." Engaging in social activities with selected local families offers Derek and his family respite from a sense of social isolation in his town that arises from his paid position. Despite the challenges of living and working as a professional in a rural town,

Derek views living in his town is "pretty positive, but the thing that gets me occasionally is what I describe as that respite time, which makes me feel that I don't actually live in my community or maybe I'm here as a part-time resident." Like many contributors, Derek predicates his ideas with the term "pretty" as a way to moderate the significance of his utterances, with his "positive" experiences of local living requiring "respite time" meaning they are "pretty" or mostly positive. For Derek, his professional persona takes precedence in his local social interactions, and it is difficult for him to be fully integrated as a person in community rather than always being seen as an employee in his rural context.

4.2.5 Emily

Emily has lived in her local region for most of her life, moving from one local town to another after she married and then temporarily relocated to the city. When prompted, Emily spoke about the reasons for her and her then husband's decision to return from a metropolitan area: "we came back to raise a family in Barditon[2], because we liked the country." Expressed here is Emily's commitment to a rural lifestyle as a suitable environment for her children. She elaborated on her perspective about her town:

> Barditon is a lovely town, very relaxing town, we live near the water, and it
> is beautiful, it is a very, very beautiful, peaceful town, quiet town. Low crime
> rate, but it's not for somebody, like jobs are limited here, you could do like
> low skilled jobs, things like that. But there is not a lot of professional work
> unless you want to do nursing, aged care. Jobs are limited. So, I mean if you
> don't want to work and want to retire, then come here, it is lovely. If you
> want the nice, relaxed lifestyle, then definitely come here.

Emily views that apart from the experience of living in Barditon being undermined by employment shortages, the social space and natural environment in her rural area make it an ideal place to live. For Emily, the only option for work is a paid shift-work position that is located 50 kilometres from her residence. Emily related that due to her employment, her "social life really struggles," as she finds that she doesn't "have the time to get together" with friends. She doesn't even have time to visit "really important" friends who were deeply significant for her when her "kids were little." Emily's chances to forge new friendships are also slight, as she explains that she is "not involved in any activities, I haven't got time. Like, with my work, my work's shift work. And my children are older, and they don't do any activities either." For Emily, both her employment obligations and her childrens' lack of community interests have reduced her chances for interacting with local people. While in her current paid position, she previously attempted to find social "satisfaction" that she views comes from engaging with a

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[2] Pseudonym.

"long process" or lengthy community involvement. However, despite being inspired to volunteer by the particular activities of a local group, Emily found it difficult to commit to frequent meetings:

> because I was going to work or having to sleep before going to work because
> I had to work that night. It just wasn't, I just couldn't fit it in, into my routine,
> it was just too hard, and then with studying as well.

For Emily, her work and study commitments both detracted from her community engagement. Apart from a lack of time, Emily also spoke about the behaviour of members that discouraged her after she decided to join a volunteer group.

> I went to see them and talked to the leader, he was very welcoming, but I
> just found it was a cliquey little group, it wasn't the leader, it was the narrow-
> minded group, and I just didn't feel comfortable.

Emily's sense that she was not accepted as a member of the close-knit group whose opinions diverged from their leader, made her involvement unpleasant. She shared that as someone who was born in a nearby town, one of the biggest challenges for groups in her current town is that they:

> need to learn to welcome people and not just the people that have been there
> years and years, they need to accept new blood. A lot of them are related and
> in it together, when you're new blood, it's very hard.

Emily speaks to the almost impossible task for her as "new blood" or as an incomer to be accepted in a local group. Despite her experience of rejection, Emily identifies that, for her, 'community' is local people in the region forging connections so that they can co-operate. To this end, Emily states that for her, community is:

> our local town, but it can be the entire area. Community, I think locally, but
> I am happy to invite the rest in the area to do stuff with us and share the cost.
> We are only small, so it would help.

In Emily's view, it is important for local people to work together to face their collective challenges to save each town from expending their meagre resources to either compete for benefits or afford initiatives for their futures.

A sense of social disconnection features heavily in Emily's local experiences, including a sense of separation from her education provider that she engages with through a postal service. When prompted, Emily also spoke about the options available for local people to continue their education: "we have VET and a part-time place for younger people, and I think there is something for adults for a high school education." Even with the local options that are available, the only way that Emily could engage with her first course preference as a resident in her rural area was through a delivery method where her "studies are posted." The asynchronicity

in her learning undermines Emily's chances to have a sense of attachment to an educational community.

4.2.6 Heidi

Heidi moved into her town as a teenager over 30 years ago when her parents bought a local business. As someone who has observed the workings of her residential town for several decades, she identifies that "for this community, I think the services are just shutting down more and more. I think that here is just going to end up turning into an aged care facility." In relation to the future of her town, Heidi views that governments are continuing to withdraw essential services and that a growing aging population is beginning to dominate the demographics of the town, signalling inevitable local decline. As part of her employment, Heidi has also observed that government funding and initiatives are contributing to the demise of a sense of community across the region. Compliance with funding arrangements means "working in little silos" or concentrating on government-stipulated objectives, rather than members of different organisations acting together to address local challenges.

Despite speaking about her town as a "community," Heidi has a deep sense of social separation as she has experienced difficulties with finding and sustaining authentic connections with other residents that afford her a sense of community. She shared that "it's still hard to engage the entire community. I find that a lot of people like to keep everything to themselves here and I can understand why." Heidi "understands" the reluctance of residents to "engage" with one another because, with her involvement in groups in her residential town, Heidi has found it to be a "small-minded" and "sexist" experience. Indeed, for Heidi, her local group involvement was marred by severe restrictions determined by her tenure and gender identity. Despite this, as part of her community contribution, Heidi has tried to "fix things" and enhance the benefits for all rather than a few members of local groups. The subsequent derision directed towards her by a few group members who have longer local tenure, and who usually receive greater community benefits in comparison to other residents, has undermined Heidi's sense of belonging in her residential town. As a consequence, Heidi has become "anti-local" and is wary of being involved with other town residents and groups. In contrast, she has a sense of fortune that she can connect with others through her paid position, located in another town almost 70 kilometres away from her residential town. Heidi's employment in another town has changed her sense of local community:

> my community has grown. When I worked for another organisation even though I worked in other towns, my community was here. I was a staunch local. Now, that's changed. Because I'm working in another town, I look forward to getting into my workplace, my new network of people, but then

> if I go to another town and go out to the shops or to a sporting event, it's
> like, 'there's someone I know, there's someone I work with.' But I found
> that's my community now, the whole area as such is now my community.

As part of experiencing a broader sense of local community that includes towns in her local region, Heidi is considering the options her recently attained credential will give her to relocate:

> unfortunately, I got my education, so that we would probably move away
> because there is nothing here. Once my child has finished high school, so
> we're counting it down. So much so that I'm trying to talk my partner into
> moving, but they won't. Because I just said, 'I don't see the point of me
> travelling every day, really.' Really, there's nothing here for me anyway.
> And with all the other stuff that's going on, you don't want to be here, you
> know with all the other stuff that sometimes goes on in the community and
> you feel that your network is just shrinking.

Heidi is struggling to come to terms with the longevity of the social consequences from her previous involvement with local groups which includes diminishing connection with others in her residential town. Along with local decline, Heidi's experience that there "is nothing here for me" or a lack of a sense of community is prompting her to seek other places to live.

Heidi's experience of attaining her credential was also characterised by isolation, as she stated that during her engagement with her online course, she was "on my own" and without the benefit of belonging to an educational community. Subsequently, Heidi "doesn't agree" with online courses as a way to gain knowledge and is concerned about local people that she knows who attend online courses at the local vocational campus. She observes that "everything's going online. So, it diminishes everything that we have built up, to say, 'if you want to learn computing you have to go online,' and they don't understand what this is or what that is, and it's frustrating." From encounters with local people in her workplace, Heidi identifies the exasperating bind for local people who are unfamiliar with information and communication technologies and who are effectively prohibited from online courses and the goal of continuing their education. For instance, in order to begin a computer literacy course, residents in Heidi's rural area are expected to engage in online delivery. Further challenges that arise in the delivery of online courses are highlighted in the experiences of Heidi and her colleagues:

> we all had different experiences we were all doing, at different levels of the
> same degree and we all at the same time withdrew and realised we weren't
> getting the support we needed. You know, exams went missing, another
> woman took time off, and then to get online, her work was meant to be
> online, it wasn't there. Tried to ring the uni[versity], 'oh, I forgot.' You

know, there was one thing after another, and we felt that we never had any

support from that campus.

While conversant with educational technologies before engaging with their courses, Heidi and her colleagues faced a lack of course support from their education provider. In Heidi's experience, the support from the provider of her online course is inadequate for the learning needs of local people.

4.2.7 Helen

Helen moved into her town after she married her first husband 27 years ago. She speaks to the differences between her experiences of living in a metropolitan area and her town:

Well, coming from Albinia City[3], it was very hard to deal [with] because of the small mindset, kind of everyone knowing everyone's business and that sort of stuff. Where in Albinia, you didn't even know your neighbours. And you were lucky if you got on with your neighbours. It sort of, just sort of stuck to yourself and minded your own business. But I think that it's good that I know my next-door neighbour and it's good that I know the lady down the street, and I think it's, in a lot of ways, it's a friendlier place than the city, I really do. There's lots of negatives that, I think if you're going to live your life worrying about what others think of you, which I did do, I think that every place would be negative. I think that the smaller community, well here's pretty big, but compared to the city, I think the smaller communities are good, and your lecturers know what you're going through because they live in town as well. Everyone knows, like it's a uniting in a smaller community.

For Helen, despite the "small mindset" in her town or local people being primarily concerned with gossip about other residents and local events, such familiarity also offers her the opportunity to build intimate relationships with others. Such relationships provide Helen with chances for mutual understanding about personal circumstances and a "uniting" of local people into a community.

A sense of social connection among residents that makes rural towns "friendlier places" than the city is important for Helen, especially after remarrying and caring for her seriously ill partner. Helen speaks about having many connections with local people who are in situations similar to her and who enhance her life by affording chances for mutual support. She talks about

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[3] Pseudonym.

those people in particular whose partners endure illnesses that are similar in severity to her husband's condition:

> [Here, there are a] lot more illnesses that I certainly never would have thought would be severe and common, and common diagnosis. I do know a fair few people; I think because we are on the same wavelength as well. I think that makes a difference.

For Helen, knowing and interacting with other residents whose circumstances are similar to her own "makes a difference" for her by adding to her sense of belonging in her town.

Despite many local connections, Helen is not able to engage in social interactions as frequently as she would like and often experiences a sense of "isolation" due to caring for her partner. However, in the past, her sense of the "unity" in her town has provided Helen with many accessible connections with local people. One such connection that was significant for her education was made while attending her children's activities when they were younger. During such activities, Helen met her future educator, sharing that they "had common friends, and she was in my group, and I was coached into joining through the mothers in the school. That's how I met [lecturer]." As a consequence of her friendship with the educator, Helen enrolled in a class and completed her first tertiary education credential. She also spoke about her experience with others at her local vocational campus.

> I made me [*sic*] really good friends, I have other friends and VET friends, but time permits that I don't see them. And I made me [*sic*] really good friends at VET, and there's a few people that's around my area that I did the course with.

Helen's sense of enjoyment and connection with local people from attending a class contrast with her thoughts about engaging in an online course in the near future. She shared that "I'm just imagining doing my next certificate, and I just know that it's sit, sit, sit, sit, sit and do whatever, I'm just assuming, I don't know yet and it's just cold. It is cold." Helen's idea about the next course being "cold" is centred on her understanding that online delivery does not provide warmth from human interaction.

To conclude, I asked Helen about her recommendations for others who were considering moving into her town, and she said, "they'd have to secure work first, if they were moving to get work, you wouldn't come here without work." Apart from a lack of employment opportunities, she also cautioned about a lack of public services and shared that:

Louisaville[4] is very pretty, but as I said, unless you have purpose and the

health system down here's pretty ordinary, there's many things that

government wise and that… aren't real drawcards. But if they had work and

things like that, then yeah, I would just say that 'you'd love it down here.'

In the community, there's really good areas, and there's many great people

around.

Despite the scarce opportunities for her to secure a paid position, and the local services being

"pretty ordinary" or inadequately funded, Helen enjoys and recommends the natural

environment as well as interacting with the residents in her town.

4.2.8 Jane

Jane moved into her rural area 17 years ago when she secured a paid professional

position in her town after graduating from a metropolitan university. She spoke about the

pressure to be part of the local sporting community after her relocation:

the expectation that when you move to a town or participate in a community

is that you will go and do those things. I really... Sports never has been my

thing, but I really wanted to be not just seen, but active and contribute to the

community in some way. So, my boss at the time was an office bearer and

an active firefighter in the brigade, and he said, 'why don't you come along

and meet a few people? We're always after new volunteers.' So, I did, and I

loved it. Yes, so got actively involved through that way and was an active

firefighter for I'm sure it was about four years or five years.

For Jane, being "seen" or simply living in her town was not enough, and she wanted to

contribute to her community. She was invited into a community group where she made a social

contribution of her choosing that became a highly enjoyable experience for her. Jane also spoke

about the diverse connections with others that she has made and maintained since that time:

I have a really lovely mix of friends who are a mix of professionals, farming

community, volunteers in different circles, and my friends' network is what

I would describe as dispersed, so there is a core, small group of locals, lots

of acquaintances locally, and other friends.

In addition to her varied connections with other local people, Jane shared the further appeal of

living in her rural area:

I love the combination of living, so where we live is about twenty minutes

from town. I love the rural landscape and the community that surrounds our

immediate residence. I love coming to work and being part of more of a sort

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[4] Pseudonym.

of a town community, even though it's still rural. But then being able to

leave that at the end of the day, to be frank.

To be able to connect with others in her town as well as being able to disconnect from the town community by living in natural surrounds is significant for Jane's appreciation of her rural setting. Living out of town also means that Jane's local community consists of a combination of residential and town communities. She explains how she views those communities:

a lot of people would consider community to be probably a 5 km radius

around the centre of town, that's part of it for me, certainly. There's the other

community that I mention around where we live, that's an overlapping

community, but still a separately distinct community from here.

The township and the area where she lives both offer Jane a different sense of community. Another significant aspect of Jane's sense of community is the contribution that she has been able to make in her professional roles by "advocating" for "rural communities" and "rural people." Opportunities for Jane to contribute to local wellbeing are important for her sense of community.

Despite her sense of being a highly connected contributor to most of her communities, Jane feels somewhat isolated when engaging with her online course, contrasting to her previous experience of being highly connected with others on campus. Her other option, local education in a class such as a vocational course, is viewed by Jane as a "waste of time and money" as she has engaged with "VET options before and found them to be entirely dissatisfactory for a number of reasons." Specifically, Jane's observation is that vocational course options did not offer her or other local people a "quite rigorous academic system" to support and assess their learning. Jane anticipates encountering sound educational practices during the online delivery of a postgraduate course that she has chosen despite it affording her little sense of belonging to an educational community.

4.2.9 Julie

Julie moved into her town 28 years ago when she and her husband decided to return to his birth town after the death of her father-in-law. She is familiar with the entire local region, and in her view, "I see our community as being quite a few towns within a 45 km radius. I don't know how I got that idea, but perhaps because that was our boundary with an organisation, I worked with." For Julie, her previous worksites have been incorporated into her sense of local community, but despite this, she has a sense she's "living within the outskirts of the community," a feeling that she attributes to the lingering effects of being an incomer to her town. With regard to her chances to make connections with local people, Julie shared that "I don't think it's unlike in other smaller community [*sic*], but I think that they've sort of got their

friendships marked out at preschool and high school, and I find it very hard to break in." She subsequently stated that "I always see myself as the outsider looking in and I probably have got two good friends [here]." Previously, Julie has attempted to enlarge her friendship circle by being involved with others in her town and joining some community groups. She has found it "useless" because she related that, "during meetings, I would put [my] views across, and no one else wants to agree with you, but as you walk out the door, 'oh, I agree with that'." Julie's experience of community groups is that local people in her town have developed lifelong friendships that offer them support for the public expression of their ideas. As an incomer, Julie has a sense of disconnection from local people that is reinforced by a lack of support for the public expression of her ideas.

Julie is concerned for the future of her local area where the majority of residents are older people, and she views that "instead of being a happy tourist, little beach community, we're now virtually an old folk's retirement village." Julie suggests population changes are exacerbated by a lack of local employment opportunities that has prompted many residents to secure work elsewhere:

> we've got a large contingent of fly in fly out and if they sat down and worked
> out what they really wanted to do, living by the water, bringing their kids
> up, with a steadily paid job, is what their direction would be. But there's
> nothing to offer in this community so unfortunately, they fly in fly out.

Julie's understanding of the circumstances of mobile workers, generated by a lack of local employment opportunities, is a disruption to their family lives as well as severely limits their chances to be a part of a local community. She explained the outcomes for her town:

> I think in a way that affects the community, as a whole, not only for
> infrastructure when we're about talking dollar for dollar. I mean it does
> affect community; it affects the amount of time that person has got to put
> back into a community.

In Julie's view, an absence of local people when they travel out of the community for work commitments influences government funding for her town, but more importantly for her, it detracts from the chances for residents to maintain their local community.

Julie is also concerned that there is a lack of connection between what she views as social enclaves in her town. She explains that there are:

> so many clusters within the community, we've got like a medical cluster
> being the nurses and the doctors, we've got an educational cluster which is
> the schoolteachers, we got another cluster being old money, and we have got

another cluster being riff-raff, I suppose. Which is never the twain shall

meet, which is, that is not what a community is to me.

One of the challenges for fostering a sense of community in her town Julie identifies is forging connections across the "clusters" or between groups of residents who have dense internal and sparse external friendship patterns. She explains experiences among residents in her town that she attributes to both "clusters" and local population changes like so:

I think that idealism that everyone knows everyone else's business, I think

them [*sic*] days are gone. Because I think whether it's the influx of people

that we have had from Perois City[5] …So whether that's sort of made such

mix that no one is really interested in what they did.

Julie is suggesting that the in-migration of professionals as well as retirees from the city have changed both the demographics and quality of social interactions in her town. She is frustrated that there are not more initiatives to foster a sense of community, and asked somewhat rhetorically, "how do you get that common [ground]? How do you move forward without having the common, and how do you make the common?" In considering the possibility of finding answers to removing the barriers that impede the reinvigoration of the "common" or sense of community for residents in her town, Julie's advice for potential newcomers is to "try another town." The barriers to a sense of community in her town she views as too onerous for incomers to successfully navigate.

Julie's advice to seek residence elsewhere also applies to those who are considering continuing their education. Despite online courses being available at the local vocational campus, with regard to support for residents' tertiary education endeavours, Julie shares that, "we have none. I do think that puts a lot of people off study." Julie's experience is that a lack of classroom delivery at the local vocational campus undermines support for local people to continue their education. A primary obstacle, for many residents in Julie's town, is their lack of familiarity with information and communication technologies that would require considerable personal assistance to overcome. Further, obtaining such assistance by travelling to attend class is viewed by Julie as unrealistic. She explains that the difference between an "online subject and a face to face subject is thousands of dollars, and a lot of people can't afford that." Julie went on to express her irritation that: "as far as I know, VET is closing at the end of this year. See that is what makes me cross that should be an adult learning centre." Local educational establishments are viewed by Julie as essential to providing wide-ranging assistance for local people, including generating social benefits for the town. For Julie, a campus that offers in-person classes

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[5] Pseudonym.

supports educational endeavours as well as fosters connections among residents, enhancing a sense of community.

4.2.10 Kate

Kate moved from the city to her rural area with her fiancée 23 years ago. Her current partner has a farm adjacent to her town. Kate's sense of local community is the "surrounding town, like the farming community and the township itself." Her relationship with her partner provides a human connection to a nearby area that prompts Kate to incorporate that place into her sense of community. As an incomer many years ago, Kate made close friends in her town through attending her children's activities, making connections: "through children mainly, yes. Playgroup, occasional care, went on to kindy, school, sporting [activities]." Although her children are now older, Kate continues to make time to engage with her friends, sharing that "I've a close group of girl friends that we all catch up with. All catch up with and keep in contact with regularly." Evidenced here is a strong sense of connection with others in her town.

To make connections with local people in her rural area, Kate shared that "sports is pretty big in a small community." Further, apart from being a focus in her town, sports are a way of welcoming incomers. In particular, Kate explained "as soon as a new person rocks up, a new schoolteacher, it's like 'what sport can you play?' You know, 'Is it basketball? Is it footy? Is it netball?' You know? 'Right, you're playing for us'." For Kate, her involvement with sports and other community activities is important for her and she continues to volunteer extensively. She elaborated on her volunteering:

> I've always been involved, and probably too much. I don't spend enough
> time with my kids, I think. Yeah, it's a bit too much. Yeah, but you need to
> in a small town. If someone doesn't take over... They fall apart,
> unfortunately.

Kate views that securing a future for her town requires local people to take responsibility and for her, the extent of such is often at the expense of spending time with her children.

Kate also spoke about perceiving an advantage for the future of her town: "it's an ageing community, for sure. Which the needs of ageing communities are diverse." For Kate providing services that cater to the needs of older people creates a variety of opportunities and paid positions for local people that will secure the future of her town. Kate's view overall is that "it's a terrific little community. I mean, there's cliquey parts, as I found too. But, yeah, it's a lovely little community, it's pretty welcoming." She elaborated that while on the whole residents' welcome others, there are established cliques in her town based on wealth: "there's certainly money structure, we are a farming community, and there are richer farmers and poorer

farmers, there are just the workers in the town." Regardless of their income and social position, residents in Kate's local area will be affected by the scheduled closure of the local vocational campus, with options to continue their education in the future including engaging with online courses or relocation. With regard to her own course, Kate engages with a blended mode of delivery through another campus located "100 kilometres" away, making her educational community quite removed from her local community.

4.2.11 Lily

Lily relocated into her mother's birth community as a young child approximately 27 years ago when her mother returned there after separating from Lily's father. Lily's sense of community includes places adjacent to where she lives and where she engages in activities with family and friends. She spoke about her connection with others in her region as adding to her sense of belonging:

> the places that I've been in, one I do my ambulance work at, another place I
> went to high school, another I went to primary school, I've lived in another
> place because I just like it, it's a small town. Another place I grew up in, so
> they're all... That's my community, that's what I classify as my community.

Places, where Lily has had frequent social interactions and are adjacent to her residence, have become a part of her local community.

During her life, Lily has lived in another rural town but was keen to return to her rural area, sharing that "I've moved away a little bit and I've come back again and my hearts kind of here, so I wanted to come back here." Apart from her family and place identity that inspired Lily's return to her rural area, she also mentioned her friendship circle:

> I don't have a huge amount of close friends. I have a few friends that I have
> met through work. Reacquainted with some friends that I went to high school
> with in the last couple of years, which we catch up regularly, probably every
> 3-6 months. Don't live in each other's pockets. I'm quite a... I like my own
> company; I prefer my own company, to do my own thing. I've always kind
> of been that way, but I do have some really, really close friends that we hang
> out, but then I like my own space, too. It's quite good.

For Lily part of the benefit of being a long-term resident in her rural area is that she can exercise her preference to either connect with others or to have time by herself. Another appeal of her town for Lily is the available facilities:

> everything we need is in this vicinity now. Whereas we always use to have
> to travel to the city, which I'm not a city person at all to get things, whereas
> everything is kind of right here and I like that, there is a comfort in knowing

> that, but I think that where I am is getting too built up. I'd rather go out
>
> further where there is [*sic*] not as many people.

For Lily, a low-density population with sufficient local services to meet her needs offers her a sense of reassurance about her town, but local population increases that have "built up" means that she is considering relocating to a smaller population centre. Her thoughts have turned to relocation as Lily's sense of familiarity with other residents is being eroded by an increase in the local population. Since speaking with me, Lily has moved into a town in her region that is "out further" and where she can get to know others in a smaller population.

Lily identifies that children's sports, in particular, have played a large part in building her sense of local community. She shared that during sporting events, parents "can talk, it brings them together, their kids bring them together, and they can network that way. So, it is really, really important; otherwise, we would all just stay in our house and not talk to each other." For Lily, sports as a way to bring local people together is essential, as she views that social connectedness has changed in her town:

> gone are the days where you used to stick your head over the neighbour's
>
> fence to say, 'Hello, can I borrow your whipper snipper?' You do that, and
>
> you get attacked by a ferocious dog, or you don't even know who your
>
> neighbours are, it's just not like that anymore.

In Lily's experience, local people are not as familiar and connected with one another as they once were. Similarly, the chances for Lily to connect with others at her local vocational campus have also diminished as she explained that her course is delivered through:

> both online and lectures. It never used to be when I started; it was all lecture-
>
> based, but yeah now a lot of it's online and we're basically, our group are
>
> the last group of nurses that will be doing the VET thing which is really,
>
> really sad. So, there won't be a lot of face to face contact.

Lily is quite despondent that the benefits of classroom education, such as the support from engaging with local educators and classmates in person, will no longer be available in her rural area.

4.2.12 Lisa

Lisa has lived in her local region for over nineteen years, having returned there recently to be close to the support of family and friends after living in the city for some years. Her return was instigated by a need for mutual support among family members after one of her children as well as her father, were both diagnosed with serious medical conditions. Lisa's family has a history of intergenerational tenure in a town that is adjacent to where she is living. She explains that her experience of connections with others as an incomer to her current residential town is

"limited; it's just due to my personal experiences and stuff like that. I just think it's very limited. It's more family friends." In particular, Lisa mentions connections with family "and friends, mainly. The ones that have actually supported" her throughout the past year when her daughter was ill as significant for her. As her daughter recovers, Lisa hopes to engage more with her local community and told me, "I would like to be a bit more involved. I'm usually more involved; I haven't been for quite a few years now. I want to get back into it and have a sense of belonging." For Lisa, despite her connection with family and friends, she has a sense of detachment from her local community. However, she recommends living in her town:

> the relaxed feel, the sense of community, like kids playing out in the street...
> most people should drive slowly down the street, especially around kids'
> times, like after school. But it's good if you want a relaxed feel and sort of
> an easy-going place and there's a lot of older generation, which I love. I like
> that older generation here. If you like all of that then just come here for even
> six months or a year. It's not that bad. And then there's the water and a lot
> of stuff to do here.

In addition to enjoying and recommending interactions with an aging population, the community atmosphere as well as the natural environment, Lisa also cautions that there are social divisions in her town:

> the little people don't really matter, and they want to keep locals in the jobs,
> so I've heard. When I went down to apply at the supermarket, that manager
> asked me if I was a local, and I said "no", and he said, "You won't get the
> job then."

Living the majority of her life in an adjacent town has made Lisa one of the "little people" in her town, or an incomer with access to very little power and resources who is subsequently precluded from employment opportunities.

Lisa's sense of belonging is also undermined by a lack of local medical services for her daughter, and she finds that "there are services here, but it takes a bit of time to get in there." Waiting for medical services in her town contrasts with being able to access them immediately in the city. She finds such immediate access "comforting. It's really comforting. Especially when you go to everything in the one place." For Lisa, being able to quickly engage with a range of medical practitioners as well as other services that her daughter needs contrasts with the restricted access to services in her local region. When prompted, Lisa went on to speak about the future of her town:

> Is there going to be a future or is it just going to be a retirement, for people
> to retire and tourists and backpackers to work here? That's where I see it

going. What just a few places, the supermarkets will keep going and the aged
care.

In Lisa's view, an ageing population in her town, along with diminishing facilities, signals its demise. A high number of transient workers already work in Lisa's town, and she views that as younger residents out migrate, more of such workers may be required to service essential positions.

With regard to education services, Lisa has also observed their reduction at her local vocational campus, including the removal of a careers counsellor who guided local people into suitable courses:

They had services. But, like there's nothing, there's two admin[istration] people, they know a lot of things, but they're not there to say, there's just not students' services to say, 'you can do this, this or this or do all this.' There's nothing; there's nothing here, you'd have to do it outside of the town. The way that VET is going, if they close, then I will need to go and buy a computer.

For Lisa, the local resources that assist her selection of an education pathway and learning support to complete her credentials are dwindling, and she is concerned about relying on outlays from her meagre income to reach her educational goals. In addition, she argues that if her local vocational campus closes, she will be obligated to travel extensively to continue her education.

4.2.13 Maggie

Maggie and her partner moved into her rural area over 11 years ago. She shares that her town has "many people with a limited income but has quite a good community spirit here. I think people mix well." In Maggie's experience, there are ample chances for residents in her rural area to connect with one another. As part of her sense of community, Maggie has a "wide range of friends in the area" that she attributes, in part, to living and working in the same place:

part of the community is part of my workforce. So, I think what happens in rural areas [is] that it all blends. Whereas perhaps in the city it might be more separate. I notice with my family that they sort of have work friends. But what I find is the work friends are usually part of your community as well.

For Maggie, living in a rural area means that the people she works with form part of her local community. As a resident, she has also been "recruited onto committees" by local people and recommends that being asked to join community groups is a good way to be involved with other people in her town.

After some years living in her rural area, Maggie initiated a community group in an adjacent town and spoke about the benefits of that group for her:

> to be part of the community, you have to become involved in the community in some way. So, through some kind of club or organisation. For me, I really like to be part of the community, but I also don't like it to be all-encompassing. So, for me, I like the fact that I have friends that are away and have family that are away. At least socialise out of the community as well. I would find it very stifling to just be in the community and be born and bred and just live that.

Despite being well-connected through involvement in her local community that includes the adjacent towns, Maggie's experiences lead her to recommend that incomers "keep those connections" with people where they previously lived. While it is important to connect with local people, her observation is that engaging with them as the only social outlet can become "stifling." Maggie highlights the benefits of finding ways to be linked with outside developments:

> I'm about learning as much as you can and keeping up with things, and I think you need that. I mean you do see people out in these areas that become quite isolated. So, it's just keeping in touch with things, technology and things that interest you.

Maggie prioritises her personal development by keeping well informed about new ideas. She anticipates that such development will safeguard her against becoming "isolated" in her rural area. When prompted, Maggie explained the benefits of living in her area:

> what I find enjoyable about living here is the water. So, take an advantage of the environment, I guess. If you like living in that environment. Enjoy and do things like going camping and spend a lot of time on the water. So, it's that peacefulness.

For Maggie, the serenity she finds in the natural surrounds in her area is important for her and she shared how her adult children felt the same:

> They also love it here at the water. They would, they would love to move to this area, but there's not the opportunities for work in comparison as to what they have in the city.

Apart from a lack of work opportunities that prevent her family from reuniting in her rural area, Maggie highlights the challenges they would have with accessing essential services locally:

> the more remote communities, you can't even do your grocery shopping, you have to go out of town, and if you are on a limited income, it's very difficult. My family in the city can walk to the shops, they have all the services, but it

doesn't happen here. We have to travel 100 kilometres to access government

services.

Given her statement about a lack of local services, I asked Maggie about local options for adult education, and she replied there is "nothing." She elaborated that "it's all open access, probably the only way that you can study. Once again, I think it's about the only thing that you do have is that support." Maggie notes that "open access" or online delivery of courses by education providers is without adequate assistance to learn, and her experience is that studying such courses in her rural area requires a considerable amount of "support" from interactions in person.

4.2.14   Margaret

Except for a brief relocation to complete her undergraduate degree, Margaret has lived in her town for over 50 years. As a long-term resident, she enjoys living in her town, including the chance to live alongside people with diverse ethnicities and cultural backgrounds, sharing that "I have so much history here and it's just being able to live in a wider group of people." For Margaret, both her tenure and cultural diversity in her town are important for her sense of community. Margaret's tenure in her town also facilitates her deep sense of connection with local people:

A lot of them I've grown up with, like they've been adults around me for my entire life and I don't have to explain myself or be anybody else, except myself, you know? And they're people that expect the best of me but also expect other parts of me that might not be very good, and that's important.

Margaret subsequently has a strong sense of unconditional acceptance in her local community that is bolstered by her numerous and varied connections in her local region:

I have a very wide friendship circle, I suppose. I often joke about that. It makes for very expensive parties when you turn certain ages. And because I've worked throughout the region, I guess, and I've worked in different careers, I've actually made a very wide circle of friends, and I'm involved in a lot of organisations up here and yeah. So, I guess I've a got a few close friends up here. Probably, interestingly... I don't know I'm just trying to think... A lot of our friends have tended to come from away. I don't necessarily relate strongly... Actually, now [that] I'm thinking about it, probably none of my friends I've ever grown up with from when I was small. I probably don't, didn't identify very strongly with people I went to school with. I did, but I'm interested in different things.

As her life has unfolded in her local region, Margaret's interests have diverged from that of other local people, and she has "always been a very welcoming person to the people, who are

new to the place." Subsequently, she has embraced opportunities to engage and maintain connections with incomers with whom she can explore new interests that are unlike routine local concerns.

As part of her appreciation for her local region and its people, Margaret was "outraged" that the "government pulled people out of close-by offices and put them closer to the metropolitan area." She is angry because the withdrawal of public positions deprives local people as well as detracts from the future of her region that Margaret identifies could easily "go down the tubes" or experience irrevocable decline. In explaining the potential of her region, Margaret related her observations from her trip to South America as an example of how residents in her region are countering local demise by stimulating development to sustain their future:

> [a place that] we visited was the Amazon, and I came back from there
> going... I mean it was fantastic, and I'm really pleased I've been, but I came
> back from there, and I said to all my friends when I got back, 'we really need
> to take a look, a hard long look at ourselves because we have as much, if not
> more than the Amazon right here on our back doorstep.' And I think a few
> places are starting to realise that, like that holiday resort thing and a few
> people are starting to invest time and energy into bringing people and
> show[ing] them that.

In addition to the efforts of residents to advance what she sees as the vast potential of her region; Margaret also views that there is a wide range of other opportunities for local people. She views that such opportunities include chances to "better" themselves by engaging in tertiary education: "through relocation and online; it can be done so many ways." Margaret is confident in recommending classroom and online delivery options which she has previously navigated to attain her credentials, as a way for local people to attain their tertiary education.

4.2.15 Meg

Meg moved into her town 25 years ago as a teenager with her parents. After her marriage, Meg relocated to another nearby town, Noramunning[6], and after separating from her husband has returned to her town. She spoke about her sense of community in her local region:

> community as in supporting community, I don't consider Noramunning as
> any part of me anymore. I don't go back there other than to take my kids
> back there and [then I] go home. I've been invited to go to the outings quite
> a few times and don't feel welcomed there anymore. So, no [here] would

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[6] Pseudonym.

> probably be, if I looked at community, of my community, I don't even know
> if I would even call [here] my community because I don't really feel like I
> have, I don't feel connected here.

Since the breakdown of her marriage and loss of social connection, Meg doesn't consider the adjacent town of Noramunning to be a part of her local community. She also has a sense of being unsupported and socially disconnected in her current town that she explains stems from relocating from a nearby town as a teenager:

> when I did shift here, I was a huge outsider. I had gone from being a well-
> known Novatonian, being in the popular group and getting on with
> everybody and knowing everybody, to coming here and being the Slumdog
> type, getting called names and feeling like I didn't fit in, and it took a while
> to get to know people and I did make friends eventually. But I suppose that
> feeling of still not really belonging, it just carries through, I think. Every
> town has their little cliquey groups, who people have to be in that group, or
> they have to talk to that person or sort of that thing.

Meg chafes against social rules involving cliques in her town. Such rules add to her sense of social disconnection arising from her in-migration that has lingered and reignited in the past decade. When her children were younger, she was better connected. At that time, Meg volunteered in her town and at her children's primary school but lessened her involvement as they became older. Meg explained that "the amount of volunteer work I did I just I think I've done enough for now; I don't feel like I have to be involved because I feel like I did my share of volunteering for however many years." For Meg, her intense volunteer contribution also became unsustainable when she commenced full-time work as the head of a one-parent family, adding to her sense of social disconnection.

When prompted, Meg also spoke about the chances of securing employment in her town, identifying that there is a "very low chance of being able to pick up something decent," suggesting that positions with good conditions are scarce. For families who already have a secure income, Meg views the local lifestyle as ideal:

> If they were looking at wanting to bring a family in here and are stable
> financially, then I would say, 'yeah, it's a pretty good area to bring a family
> up in. It's [a] fairly safe area. It's, people are generally happy here,' so I
> would say that 'it's a pretty good community to bring your kids into.'

Despite stating that her town is a good community for families, Meg has observed recent changes that detract from living there, such as services and local businesses closing. She told me that "it seems to be becoming a starving town" or going into steep economic decline. Meg summarises that the challenges of living in her town outweigh the benefits and that she's ready

to move and considering relocating to the city. Meg gave her reasons for wanting to relocate: "I'm over the small-minded mentality of people who think you can't change your life if you don't like it or who look down at their nose at you when you do decide to change it." In Meg's view, the prominence of her local history in her connections with residents as well as local conspicuity stymies her personal growth and the chances for her to develop her life:

> [I'm] over people knowing everything about me and everything I do, that was one of the things I was talking to my family about, I'm so ready to move to a city where nobody's going to know me, and they have to start from scratch to get to know me, who I am, and not who I was or who I was as a teenager or who I was in my marriage. Get to know me as me. So, I'm ready for that change, and it's also I want more for my children, I want more for their life. I've been in this life; I know what this life entails. I know the shortcomings of it; I know the hardships that you face in just trying to grow as a person. So, I'm ready for a change in that way to show them more opportunities.

For Meg, the predominant experience of "life" in her rural area is one of both social and economic hardship. Consequently, she is motivated to relocate to the city to enhance her and her children's lives by the promise of a more secure future that includes improving both the chances for them to develop as people and to continue their education.

When prompted, Meg spoke about the diminishing tertiary education options at the local vocational campus that is on the brink of closing:

> So, for the programs that we used to run here, they were so well populated, and it helped to keep those people who really needed it on the right track and learning and getting them out into their community because it would build their confidence and knowledge and skillset and everything. Whereas now there is nothing here and so for somebody to do that they either have to have the money to be able to travel… Or they've got to be able to be self-disciplined to be able to learn on their own or be computer literate to be able to study online. So, if they don't fall into those categories, they're stuffed basically because they're in that economic situation that they're in and there's no way out. What have they got? They have got, no chances, no support, no education. So yeah, it just, it's really sad, it's very sad that's happened.

Here, Meg is describing the decline of classroom tertiary education in her town that to her dismay impacts residents who are low-income recipients and digitally illiterate. For such residents, the

reduction of local classes that could improve their circumstances in favour of online courses has restricted their access to education.

4.2.16 Oigle

Oigle and his wife built a house on the acreage that they purchased in their rural area about 18 years ago after returning to Australia from working in overseas positions. Oigle views his rural area as "fairly stable," and he is optimistic but cautious about the outlook for the future. He explained that land ownership arrangements feature heavily in the stability of his local area:

> development restrictions means that the blocks cannot be subdivided. The consequences are that the district will remain much as it has for many years. As some of the older families move on, they will be replaced by hobby farmers and/or investors wanting to use horticultural activities as a means of negative gearing their high income from professional sources. This means a lower number of children at the primary schools.

Oigle is concerned about the effects of fewer families in the area and went on to note that the "community will decline in numbers and the services that are available." In effect, Oigle argues that economic incentives for private owners may reduce the number of residents in his rural area, prompting the withdrawal of government funding as well as a reduction in local services. Oigle considers that in contrast to investors, children and their families living in his rural area are integral to building a sense of community, and he gave an example:

> when you are in a small community, and you go along to the school's AGM [Annual General Meeting] where they report to all the parents and friends what's happened in the school, anybody left standing at the end of the meeting usually gets dobbed on to the council or the parents or friends or something else. So inevitably you get shanghaied into something.

In Oigle's experience, an important part of his sense of community arises from connections with local people after being "dobbed" or imposed upon to play a part in the school community. Such social practices mean being "shanghaied" or persuasively co-opted into doing something for community. In a similar way, Oigle became a part of his local community by attending an Annual General Meeting at his daughter's school after he in-migrated to his rural area. He shared his view that subsequently "I just love the community," a feeling that centres on his appreciation for the natural environment: "it's just a beautiful place to be." In addition to the scenic surrounds, Oigle shares that, socially, there is a sense of acceptance among local people that adds immeasurably to his sense of community:

> The community is very tolerant, I think. I mean it's a very lovely community that we live in, and everybody seems to know everybody else and their situation.

For Oigle, understanding and familiarity among residents make for a "lovely community," offering a good sense of connection that he views as ideal in his rural area. Oigle also shares that many residents are from a similar background which he perceives detracts from the opportunity for rich social experiences. He states that residents make for:

> a fairly monocultural community. People have lived here for a long time; it is a horticultural area. I mean we've had people from other cultures work here, but they are not part of the community. They travel from the other side of town to get up here for work every day. We have very few; in fact, my child was the only non-Anglo in the school. We do not have very many people living at the margins, which is sad in a way, because we are not confronted with those issues. I'd have to say though that there are a lot of people within the community who are very aware of these issues because of their work.

For Oigle, it is "sad" or unfortunate that residents do not have the chance for an enriched and diverse experience of community by frequently and informally engaging with residents who are from a variety of backgrounds.

As a self-employed person living in his rural area, Oigle engages with his course through online delivery. He finds that even though "it can be quite distracting studying from home," a benefit is that his classmates are from diverse settings, and he expressed his appreciation for the chance to connect with them:

> It is unbelievable to think that my class comprises students from all around the State, connected by the magic of modern communications. We can see and talk to each other in real-time.

For Oigle, the delivery of his online course that is supported by good local infrastructure includes the chance for synchronicity in his online interaction with others that, for him, generates a sense of human connection in his educational setting.

4.2.17 Pat

Pat and her husband moved into their town 20 years ago as part of his employment. Before their relocation, they had lived in another rural area for 12 years. Pat offered an overview of her rural town by contrasting it with her experience in her previous town:

> It's very multicultural. Pretty relaxed. There's a wide variety of things and a wide variety of backgrounds. It's quite different from where we were before. I enjoyed the other town before, very much, but it's quite different. Christian, very, very ultraconservative. White colonial fundamental

Christian. Yeah, very... The culture was very traditional, and women had

their place.

Pat's experience in her current town is that many residents are from diverse backgrounds and that the social atmosphere is relaxed, differing from the "ultraconservative" or rigid social arrangements that she encountered in her previous town. Although Pat struggled with the conservative aspects in her previous rural area, it was there that she was able to connect with an educational community after she commenced her tertiary education at her local vocational campus. In contrast, she did not experience a similar sense of connection in her online courses, noting that it was the only delivery option available for her to build on her credentials while living in her current town:

The online system has consistently been for years, terrible, and it's causing

so much distress over the years, it's unbelievable. Yeah, it's a biggie, you

know it sounds all good on paper and online, but it doesn't necessarily give

you everything as well, but then there is [*sic*] problems with every type of

delivery. VET I think is great [for] the fact that it's local.

For Pat, her experience of "distress" with online courses contrasts strongly with her "enabling" experience in class at her previous vocational campus. Essential for "enabling" Pat was that her campus and her educator were local, factors that made beginning her tertiary education accessible.

Since commencing her first course at her local vocational campus, Pat has built on her credentials to qualify for her chosen profession. She now works full-time in her town, has driven community initiatives, and has a sense of being highly socially connected:

I know lots of people, that's different from friends and although most of

them I would class as friends, to be honest. I've got friendship groups related

to work. I've got friendship groups related to... With my children... My

children are well and truly adult now, so connections there. Oh, previous

work, current work friendships. Yeah, it's quite interesting, isn't it? And...

Oh yeah, and friendships related to social, recreational activities. Sport... I'm

involved in sport a fair bit. Yes, and friendships from school. So, all

different. So, lots, I'm very lucky. So, all different reasons, and all different

levels if you like.

Pat knows many local people well enough to call them her "friends," which began with her building her connections in her local community when her children were younger. Since that time, Pat has retained those early friendships. More recently, she has made other friends through her work and her sporting activities which give her a good sense of connection with others in her local region. Pat elaborated on the friendships that she has made through her work:

when I say work friendships, I don't actually socialise with the people I work with like that. I try very hard not to. After saying that, I do with one person. So, it's one person from one workplace, well more than that actually when I think about it because we have mutual interests. Mutual social or recreational interests outside of work, so that works nicely. But generally, I actually try not to. I'm really friendly at work, but I want work to stay at work. Very much so. Yeah, so I socialise with people who are in similar work to myself maybe. I can think of one, there's probably more than one, that I'm good friends with. Nothing to do with work, just because we enjoy each other's company and [they have] got a great sense of humour. But you can have decent meaty conversations too if you want to.

To give her some respite from her workplace Pat tries to avoid socialising with people that she works with. That said, both Pat and some of her "work friends" have mutual interests that have "nothing to do with work." Subsequently, Pat "enjoys" interacting with some of her colleagues outside of work as she can appreciate their company and have "decent meaty conversations" or interesting discussions without re-engaging with workplace issues.

Pat explains that hierarchies in local workplaces have social significance in her rural area. For instance, social dynamics prevent some local people from expressing their opinions in public arenas. Pat details the reasons that some residents conceal their ideas:

I find in rural communities, that interconnectedness between our identity [and] our image, and sometimes people aren't honest and direct because they are frightened of other people's position or role in [the] community. They have to work with them, or their partner has to work with them, so there's a hierarchy as such with the fact that they have to do business with each other.

Pat's experience is that local conspicuity restricts what residents are willing to communicate, reinforcing a hierarchical social stratum that exists based on each resident's roles and positions in their town. Structures that shape such practices mean that the chances for genuine communication between residents are stymied.

Pat went on to describe incidences that have detracted from her experience of living in her town:

I had a leadership role in a church and numerous [other] leadership roles, and oh, dear me I got really targeted, it was just really bad, really, really bad. So, it's not just in sporting clubs. And I made some lifelong friends with some of the people in that church who came in to solve some of the issues.

So, it's more about honest and direct [communication] and not manipulative

and two-faced [communication] which [is] what was going on.

Pat's experience as a church leader in her town is that she was subject to "two-faced" or insincere communication and she was "targeted" or made an object of derision, a practice that she knows also befalls some leaders in local "sporting clubs." As part of her experience, other local people supported Pat through that turbulent time, and she gained "lifelong friends" when dealing with social persecution in her town. Despite attracting considerable disparagement as part of being in a "leadership role," making authentic connections during that time extended Pat's sense of connection in her local community which has encouraged her to engage with other pivotal community roles.

4.2.18 Sandy

Approximately 14 years ago, Sandy was living in the city when she decided to relocate to her town to be closer to her family. She identifies that the future of her town is uncertain and that "they have been talking about a lot of things going away from here. Unless they do something or get something in, it will become a ghost town." Sandy has observed "things" – local services and businesses – dwindling in her town and residents out-migrating to other areas, a trend that can only be changed if "something," such as local industry, can be regenerated by "they" or powerful people. Despite local decline, Sandy has a deep appreciation for her town and its social atmosphere:

I love the place, I love it here, and most of the people… And people say,

'hello' that don't know you, it's a friendly town. It is a pity that it is so far

away from things that we really need, work, activities, and shopping. But

other than that, it's really good.

After living most of her life in the city, Sandy "loves" her rural town as it is friendly and has welcomed her as a person, but she is disheartened by the lack of local amenities. She also shared that living in her town has another advantage, as it is a "bit better than a lot of country towns, if you have lived here a long time then you are sort of a local." As "sort of a local," Sandy has also observed social division in her town and shared that "if you don't have the right family name, then you don't get the job. Around here, there is that semi-stigma of not having the right name." She has encountered a local hierarchy and as an incomer, Sandy has encountered some "stigma" that marks her as not having the right name or backing from family tenure and wealth, something that has restricted her access to local opportunities such as employment. It was only after referral to an employer by her local educator that Sandy secured a paid position that is located 85 kilometres from her home. Sandy subsequently identifies that "my community was quite big because I have to travel for work. The town, but then where I work too."

As part of her strategy to build connections and contribute to her local community, Sandy has also been involved in a community group in her town. She described her experience with that group as such: "I was involved in [service club], but I got out of that because of the male chauvinistic attitudes, apparently by a couple of members down there." For Sandy, being part of a local group was a demeaning experience for her as a woman as she had encountered an "attitude that women are just a housewife." When prompted, Sandy described the workings of the service club that she had joined:

> it was always a man's club, and then women were introduced, a few
> members were in the stigma of women should be seen and not heard, and it
> was the men's club. There were a lot that were open to a change. The people
> who had been there a long time were the worst, but they lost a lot of members
> because of that attitude, and it was other younger men that they lost.

In Sandy's experience, a lack of acceptance of women in a local service club also dissuaded younger men from continuing their membership, undermining the capacity and power of the group. Despite her experience, Sandy enjoyed the community activities that she was involved with, sharing that "I have thought of joining in another town, so I can get back into it," an option that is available to her now that her local community extends to her work town. Despite having alternative options, Sandy's first preference is to contribute to the wellbeing of her residential town:

> I would like to get into something that I am passionate about and make a
> difference. I have thought about it several times, if I had the money, because
> there needs to be something here that appeals to teenagers and adults and so
> you don't have to travel to get there.

Sandy has observed that as local amenities decrease, residents in her town are required to engage with more travelling. A lack of financial resources prevents her from exercising her capabilities, including those attained as part of her course, to support residents as well as stimulate the regeneration of her town.

With regard to local educational services, Sandy suggests that the options for residents to continue their education are limited and that "there's none apart from the VET," meaning that she views classroom-based courses in her local region as the only viable education option. Sandy commenced her first course at her local vocational campus in her town that has since closed, and she shared that:

> it used to be good; you used to be able to sit in a classroom and do it, sit in
> a classroom a little bit and the computer the rest of the time with the booklet.
> It was so hard to get in the section on the computer; it was easier to have the
> booklet in front of you. Hard to do it online, especially if English isn't your

main language and there isn't any help for that. You used to be able to enrol

for your course for the 12 months, now you have six months, and you have

to enrol again, it's ridiculous. There were classes here, but then I had to go,

which is a real pain, and do night class, an hour drive there and an hour drive

back.

Attending classes at her local vocational campus and studying by herself was "good," but online delivery, a long journey to class at night, and the administrative routines of Sandy's education provider have detracted from her engaging with and enjoying her course. Sandy also expresses concern with the level of difficulty in engaging with course materials online, including the added challenges for residents in her rural area that have English as an additional language. Before her campus closed, Sandy described her experience of attending lectures when she was unable to travel:

People [who] can't get up there, they are stuck in a room here,

teleconference. It isn't good being stuck there by yourself; it's good if there

is someone else in the room. It is pretty daunting to come out of there at 9

or 10 o'clock, and it is not very well lit and lots of trees and buildings.

For Sandy, who couldn't always "get up there" or travel two hours to attend class, her educational setting has deteriorated from being involved with others in classes to attending lectures in an uncomfortable, solitary situation.

4.2.19 William

William has lived in his town for less than a year. He mentioned that during that time he had made a connection with another resident relating "I've got one friend here." He spoke about what it was like to relocate into his town:

it's just you know, a small town. So, it's gossiping. Everyone knows

everyone. When I rolled up, and everyone figured out where I'd come from

that was the talk of the town for a while, and there's a lot of speculation and

stories floating around and a couple of people that I had to address and have

words with and yeah, but obviously it was just a phase, and it wears off, and

something new or new gossip takes over and now everyone just sort of

leaves me be and that's the way I like it.

Upon arrival, William's experience was that he was highly socially visible in his town which detracted from his initial experience of living there. With the passing of time, William is no longer a social novelty in his town, and he now enjoys less social attention. William also mentioned another part of his community that is adjacent to his town:

the bigger town is just sort of a hub for me because it's sort of the biggest township through here and it's central to anywhere I would head to because it's where all the buses are, so I count that as part of my community.

For William, a nearby place that offers him services has been incorporated into his local community.

In talking about accessing his education provider that is quite some distance from his residential town, William mentioned that he goes into a local vocational campus in a nearby town:

I've never actually set foot into a VET. Oh well, I go to a larger town to register for each module, but that's about it. Because it's all external and my campus is in another town in the state, I've never been there. I've never met my lecturer.

Despite local access, William feels remote from his campus and without a sense of connection to an educational community.

4.2.20 Wynne

Wynne moved into her local area 44 years ago after she married. She knew the area before her relocation, sharing that her "family have been here since about the 1870s." She explains that she "felt I could fit in as I wasn't a stranger; my grandfather had lived at the foot of the Mount, and I had visited here throughout my childhood." Since her in-migration, Wynne has struggled with a sense of isolation and finds it difficult to make social contributions as a highly accomplished woman. She related that "the only community activity I am involved in is as a member of an international service organisation promoting the welfare of women." As a resident in a rural area, Wynne has also previously been involved in national groups – "I was an associate member of the National Council of Women (NCW) and the rural and urban women's advisor" – but she recently decided to resign. She explained that she "declined to continue as I felt that another person could do a better job – I was too isolated and didn't have [a] sufficient network to be more effective." The challenges in generating a community of members with mutual interests as a resident in her rural area made it difficult for Wynne to achieve her aims as a member of the National Council of Women. Wynne would also welcome more opportunities in her local community to contribute according to her capabilities, sharing that "it would give a sense of achievement, and giving something back to the community." For Wynne, an outlet for her to apply her highly developed skills would increase her satisfaction with living in her town.

With regard to her educational endeavours, Wynne shared that, "people in the region appear unaware of studying and uncaring as to whether someone is studying or not," suggesting

that in her rural area, her educational accomplishments and their potential are ignored. A lack of local understanding about her tertiary education contributes to Wynne's lack of social integration as she related that she is "probably excluded due to academic and education endeavours." For Wynne, her academic background and incomer status mean that she experiences being viewed as an outsider in her region. Such experiences contrast with Wynne's educational setting that as part of her blended learning permitted her a sense of belonging to an educational community. She shared that she made "friends with colleagues from University, but they have busy lives in the city, and there is a tendency to be out of sight, out of mind." Upon finishing her course, Wynne's interactions with city colleagues largely ceased.

Wynne also shared that she is committed to generating educational opportunities for local people and she related that she has lobbied for improved delivery of tertiary education in her town. She shared that she "has written to Uni[versities], local government, – standard response, not particularly encouraging (local government hasn't acknowledged correspondence). But [the] Mayor of Mapleton[7] Regional Council did acknowledge her letter. Federal member did follow the letter up with the University and reply." Despite a lack of satisfactory replies, Wynne outlines the urgency for the issue to be addressed:

> We need a tertiary education centre. There are also many healthcare issues that should be addressed – lack of services, government use of funding schemes to ration access to high-quality medical services in the city and redirect people to Pitfield[8] where they have no family or supports and a lower level of services.

Wynne has a sense that government administrators have abandoned her region and its residents, and she has observed the demise of public services which has resulted in local people travelling several hundred kilometres to a larger town to access essential services. Despite identifying some local shortcomings, Wynne recommends that "it is a good place to live if you don't mind going without some things," indicating that being satisfied as a resident in her town means in part coming to terms with a lack of essential services. In talking about her future in her rural area, however, the lack of connection and opportunities to contribute to community has influenced Wynne's opinion about staying:

> if my partner wasn't here, I wouldn't stay as none of our children live here (too qualified for any jobs available) - They would all like to come back here. It is a good life, it is slower, and we have access to beautiful uncrowded beaches, and the natural environment is accessible, varied, and interesting.

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[7] Pseudonym.
[8] Pseudonym.

> The new private school has made all the others lift their game, and children
> now have access to higher quality education.

Despite many services reaching their demise or being relocated, local education that could cater to the needs of her grandchildren has improved. However, without suitable work opportunities, living in the area isn't a viable option for Wynne's adult children, but all of them appreciate life in the area, including the unhurried pace and natural environment. Wynne identified that one of the reasons that local employment opportunities suitable for her adult children are scarce is because the "government has transferred many jobs back to Perois City over the last few years."

Another observation that Wynne has with regard to her town is that the social visibility of residents means that local "people are not numbers but are treated with respect and consideration." Wynne gave an example of the benefits of being socially visible in her town that was related to the passing of her sister-in-law:

> Recently when my partner's sister died. The doctor who treated her
> explained what had happened (he was also the GP of the surviving sister [as]
> the contact person and understood her fragility). Hospital staff were
> informative, allowed us time, provided facilities, and looked out for other
> family members as they arrived.

Familiarity that is part of the local conspicuity in Wynne's town means that individual needs are visible and, in some circumstances, can be sensitively met.

This concludes an overview of the attributes that each contributor ascribed to their local contexts. Presenting each contributor's account of their rural and educational contexts offers a portrait of each contributor as well as their understandings of their local communities and their educational settings. Taken together such details offer a basis for exploring contributors' experiences with their tertiary education and their communities in chapters five and six.

CHAPTER 5 — FINDINGS: TERTIARY EDUCATION EXPERIENCES

Findings that I present in this chapter as well as the next, respond to the central research question of the study: "for persons living in Australian rural areas, what are their experiences of both their tertiary education and their communities?" I present the findings through five themes, with three themes that capture contributors' experiences with their tertiary education presented in this chapter and two themes capturing experiences with their communities presented in the next. A list of the themes and their respective subthemes presented in the chapter is provided in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Themes and Subthemes Generated by the Analysis of Contributors' Tertiary Education Experiences
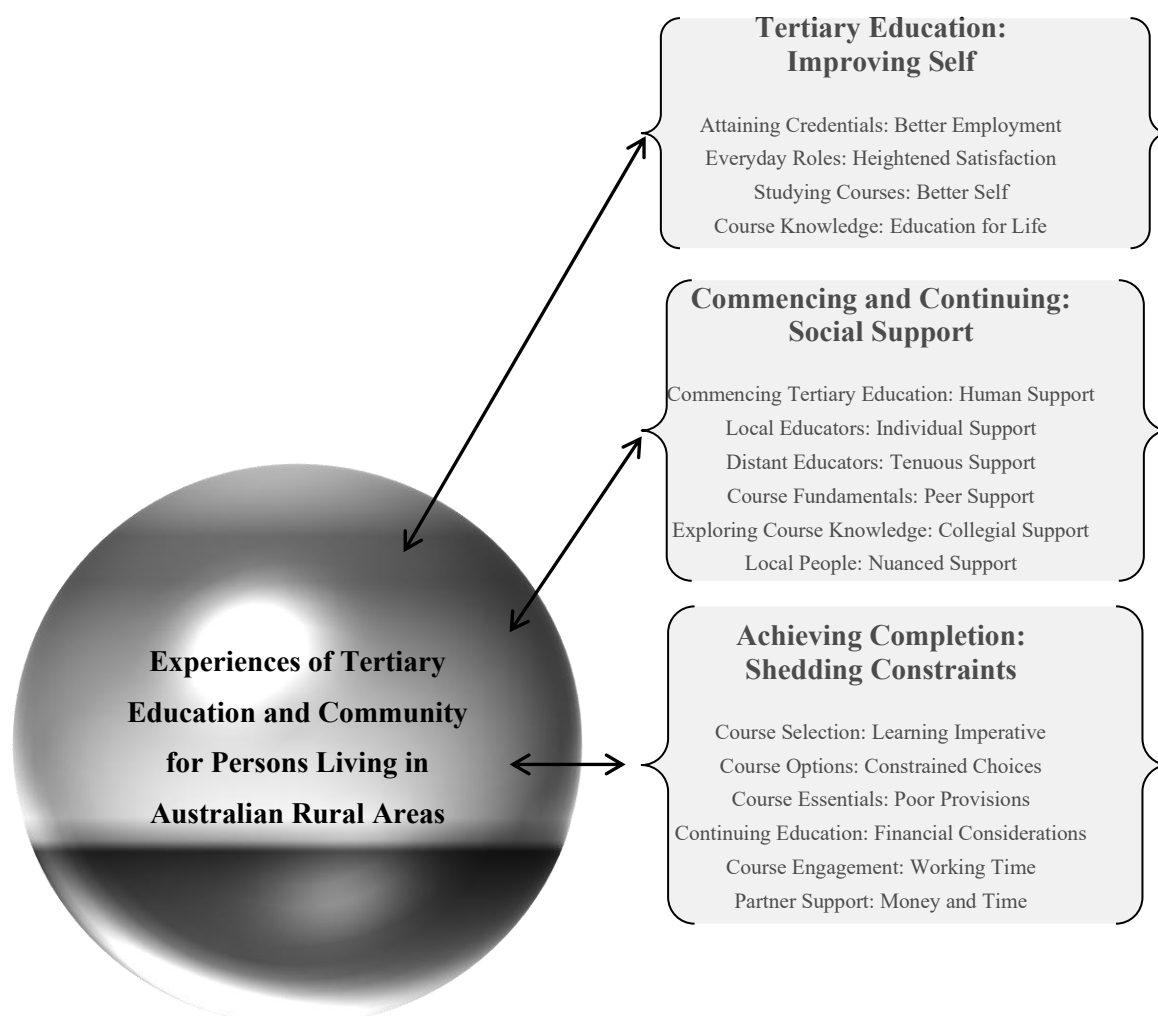
In the first theme, *Tertiary Education: Improving Self*, I describe the meanings of tertiary education for contributors. Next, is the theme *Commencing and Continuing: Social Support*, in which I detail contributors' experiences that enabled them to engage with their

tertiary education. Lastly, in the theme *Achieving Completion: Shedding Constraints* I present contributors' experiences of navigating obstacles to complete their courses. Each theme is comprised of their respective subthemes that feature contributors' voices by including both their selected verbatim abstracts as well as my written analysis. The subthemes provide a rich picture of what each contributor's tertiary education experiences meant for them in their rural contexts. For ease of access, in each subtheme, my written analysis is followed by a discussion of relevant extant literature, and I conclude with an assertion of a knowledge claim.

My discussion of tertiary education experiences draws heavily from the work of Purnell and Cuskelly (1996), as their research is one of the few studies that explore the experiences of persons in their particular rural contexts. Their study gives a nuanced account of the learning experiences in online courses from the perspectives of students in rural areas as well as detailing the local supports and resources that are available to them. Where available, Purnell and Cuskelly's (1996) study is supplemented by my discussion of more contemporary research.

5.1 Tertiary Education: Improving Self

Tertiary Education: Improving Self is a theme that contains four subthemes to present contributors' experiences with tertiary education as self-improvement. Engaging with a tertiary education course was a key event in each contributor's life and my discussion in this theme explores both the anticipated as well as realised improvement for contributors' sense of themselves. For some contributors, engaging with tertiary education meant improving themselves for their futures. Others, whose studies, and lives have progressed since their initial course, are able to offer understandings about the benefits of their course knowledge throughout their lives.

In the first subtheme, *Attaining Credentials: Better Employment*, I portray the resolve of most contributors to engage with a tertiary education course to attain a credential to secure better employment for their futures. I illustrate other experiences of improvement in *Everyday Roles: Heightened Satisfaction*, a subtheme in which I depict some contributors' experiences of satisfaction when applying their course knowledge in both paid and unpaid local roles. Next, in *Studying Courses: Better Self*, I describe some contributors' sense of improved self through the subtle but powerful benefits from their cognitive engagement with their course. Lastly, in *Course Knowledge: Education for Life* I detail some contributors' perspectives about applying their course knowledge in different aspects and stages of their lives.

5.1.1 Attaining Credentials: Better Employment

As the first member of their family to engage with a tertiary education course, most contributors anticipated that attaining a credential was a way to secure better employment. Many viewed the economic conditions in their local regions as precarious and noted that attaining credentials is essential for securing employment, either locally or elsewhere, that could provide better income and conditions for their futures.

Sandy completed high school almost thirty years ago and had the chance to contemplate continuing her education when her children needed less of her care. Sandy explained the outcome that she expected from completing a tertiary education course:

I went back to studying so that I could get a job, oh well, a better job than labouring. And because the kids were older, and I wanted to do something, and you have got to have a degree behind you for most things.

Sandy was motivated for some time to study or continue her education as a way to improve her employment prospects and only required a brief respite from her care duties, namely supporting "older kids," to seize the opportunity to continue her education and realise her employment goals. Sandy "went back to studying" or decided to engage with a tertiary education course because her experience was that her high school education only qualified her for "labouring," which was physically strenuous and unsustainable casual work. She identifies that having "a degree behind" her, or attaining a university credential, is the minimum backing that she needs to secure a "better job" or a position with better income and conditions.

Better employment was Anne's goal, who along with her husband, relied solely on revenue from their farm when their children were young. With the possibility of an adequate income from the family property once every seven years, Anne shared that "the farming income wasn't that great," noting there was a "slim chance" of a "good" and "steady income from the property." When her children began primary school, Anne started working in an entry-level position in her town. Anne's decision to engage with a tertiary education course was motivated by the chance that credential attainment would qualify her for a more secure position in her workplace. After completing her course, Anne was subsequently rewarded with a better-paid position that provided a more stable income, reinforcing her view that there is a direct link between attaining a credential and securing better employment.

Even though Anne and her husband have purchased a local business, Anne has continued to complete other courses to build her credentials. Despite the relatively secure nature of her income, as a long-term resident in her rural area, Anne is aware of the possibility of economic insecurity, and she is vigilant about the likelihood of economic uncertainty unfolding

in her local future. By continuing to attain credentials, Anne is adamant that she will "leave [her] options open for the future" and in her view is pursuing learning that will help secure future income through employment regardless of local economic conditions.

After returning to her rural area recently, Lisa is keen to secure employment in the face of local economic decline. Lisa is planning to enter the workforce full-time when both her children begin primary school. To do so, Lisa has been building on her high school education by simultaneously enrolling in two courses to improve her chances of securing local employment to support herself and her children. She spoke to me about the local positions that she will qualify for in the near future:

> I can either work in an admin[istration] position, or a receptionist position, just a local receptionist, or some part-time work there. I would also like to pick up, what I'm trying to do now. Some education [course units] ... Like to work in the school admin[istration] just in case. With options down the road, that I can, I['m] sort of trying to keep options open. So, I can say, 'Look, I've got these qualifications, it's got to be a major plus.' Sort of, be appealing to an employer. Because it's generally the idea of it all, but it's just mainly to keep my options open, because I don't know what path I really want to go down, and what options are going to be available either. I could say I can [go] here, I can [go] there, I can go there.

Lisa has selected courses according to her knowledge of local positions that will provide an income that will sustain her and her children. To this end, she is focused on improving her chances to sustain local employment "options" by "trying to keep options open," "having options down the road," and contemplating "what options are going to be available." Rather than being certain about her career path or direction, Lisa is focused on increasing the likelihood of securing paid positions with a wide range of local employers "here" or "there." She views that with "these qualifications, it's got to be a major plus" and that her careful selection of units will give her an advantage by "appealing" to local employers. Since agreeing to be interviewed, Lisa has been disappointed in her attempts to secure local employment and has relocated to another rural area to realise her aspirations.

Acquiring a credential for employment purposes featured heavily in Emily's decision to engage with a course. With a high school education, the only work with a steady income that is available to Emily requires physical labour. After separating from her husband several years ago, Emily has chosen to remain in her town to support her children to complete their high school education. In making her decision to engage with a course, Emily had the foresight to time her completion to coincide with her children finishing their high school education and she

is prepared to relocate to the city to support them. She spoke about what engaging in a course means for her:

> I just wanted to do something better with my life. I didn't just want to do the
> same work forever, and I did want to leave and get a better job and make
> some more money. But at the moment, my children live here, so that's where
> I am staying. I am happy working where I am, happy I work here because
> that's where my kids are, but I don't plan on staying here forever. I probably
> want to travel and do something like that in the future. Just to better myself,
> yeah for sure.

Emily's perspective is that attaining a credential is because she "wanted to do something better" with her life that includes a "better job" with "more money" or to secure employment with better income and conditions. She is "happy," or will endure poor work conditions, to remain living close to her children. However, she is intent on improving her future by "bettering herself," such as by building her capabilities through attaining a credential. Her credential will permit Emily the chance to avoid doing "the same work forever" and secure better employment that she views as accessible outside of her local region. Since completing her credential, Emily has relocated to another rural area and secured a better-paid position.

Heidi has had notable success with employment, experiencing continuity in paid positions in the thirty years since she left high school. She attributes her employment success to her willingness to build on her credentials that began with her enrolment in her first certificate course over twenty years ago. Heidi was one of the first in her local region to engage with tertiary education, and with the completion of her most recent course, is one of the few to attain an honours credential as a resident in her rural area. At the time that Heidi spoke to me, she was one of a small pool of local candidates qualified for a profession with high local demand. She related that her initial engagement with tertiary education was motivated by a chance to secure employment, an occurrence that has repeated throughout the years that happened again with her most recent position:

> I got another job because someone was on maternity leave and from there I
> got really interested in my current job; because the job that I wanted, while
> I was there, someone else was doing it, but all I needed was that degree. We
> were nearly doing similar work, so that's what got me interested.

Heidi had a sense that she was "nearly doing similar work" or had comparable capabilities to a work colleague who held an honours degree, nurturing Heidi's sense that she was similarly capable of attaining an honours credential. Her workplace duties stimulated Heidi's "interest" in completing a degree, and she was confident that when she completed an honours course, she would secure the position. Since completing her course, Heidi has entered the position she

wanted, supporting her view that there is a direct and secure link between credential attainment and better employment.

Recently, government funding for Heidi's workplace has been reduced, and she is concerned that this diminishes the opportunities for her and her colleagues to continue to apply their expertise in their region. Heidi considers that she may need to relocate away from what she views as inevitable local decline and identifies the potential of her credential to assist her:

> I think that if you don't have a ticket in something these days that people don't look at you, and unfortunately, I got my education so that we would probably move away because there is nothing here.

Heidi refers to a credential as "a ticket," a reference to the certificate or testamur that is issued upon completion of a course. For Heidi, her credential is "a ticket" that permits her to pass into positions either locally or elsewhere. Emphasised in Heidi's language is that there is "nothing" locally and she is without hope of anything happening to secure the future of her town. Faced with local uncertainty, Heidi is reassured that her credential will attract the notice of "people" or future employers located elsewhere who can offer her better-paid positions.

Heidi's experience with funding changes that are to the detriment of her work has also led her to re-evaluate her statement about her education – "that's it for study for me" – and she is now considering engaging with another course. Her motive is to once more attain a higher credential to secure better employment, as the administrative demands of Heidi's current position have detracted from her ability to provide care for others which she considers the core function of her work. Heidi views that attaining another credential will provide better employment for her by placing her in a position where she can work in alignment with her principles. Since making her contribution to the study, Heidi has manoeuvred into a better position in another rural area with a more certain future.

Experiences in her work placement inspired Dawn to engage with a degree and to do so with the intent of remaining in her town. As a child, Dawn frequently relocated as part of the conditions of her parent's employment. Her childhood experience made Dawn determined to remain in one town for the duration of her children's school years. She did not have the time or inclination to continue her education until all of her children had entered primary school. At that time, Dawn was encouraged by her grandparents' enthusiasm for learning, but uncertain about which course to take. She was assisted with her selection by a visit to her local vocational campus where a career counsellor, whose paid position has since been made redundant, advised Dawn to enrol in a certificate course delivered at her local vocational campus. As part of her

course requirements, Dawn completed a work placement with a health organisation. She related her placement experience that was significant for informing her about a university education:

> … you are working with nurses. So, they would have started on [hospital] wards and then they've gone into this other avenue. There were people there who were dieticians who were doing other things. I thought, 'that piece of paper opens doors and gives you opportunities. It doesn't mean you are going to be a nurse on a ward for the rest of your life. It doesn't mean you're going to be a dietician. It opens doors, and it gives you opportunities,' and I just sat there, and I thought, 'I need to do more because I haven't got enough.'

The chance for Dawn to have workplace interactions with those who have a university degree informed her view that graduates have an "avenue" or broad path to a variety of future employment prospects. Collegial interactions shaped Dawn's ideas about her educational needs, providing her with practical knowledge about the significance of the "piece of paper," and affording an understanding of the different benefits from university and certificate credentials. In becoming familiar with the benefits of a university education for opening "doors" or manoeuvring into alternative positions, Dawn realised she hadn't "got enough" or that completing a certificate course was inadequate to realise her goals. Subsequently, Dawn revised her aspirations, deciding to enrol in a degree after completing her certificate to facilitate "opportunities" for her employment future.

In sum, most contributors viewed attaining a credential from a tertiary education course as essential to securing better employment. Six contributors described their employment aspirations as their primary reason to engage with a credentialed course. Sandy viewed a credential as a way for her to secure better employment, whereas Anne continues to attain credentials to help assure her of future employment options. Lisa engaged with two courses simultaneously to qualify for a range of local employment options, and Emily's course engagement is part of a strategy to secure employment elsewhere for a better future. Likewise, Heidi's attainment of a credential prepared her for relocation away from local adversity that impacts her employment and her town. In contrast, Dawn views a university degree as a foundation that can be built upon to sustain her employment future in her town. With their distinct experiences, Sandy, Anne, Lisa, Emily, Heidi, and Dawn describe a range of benefits that come from deciding to continue their education, most of which are centred on credential attainment to safeguard their chances for better employment for their futures.

Seen here, contributors anticipate a direct link between credential attainment and securing employment in the future, links with previous Australian research that illustrates

metropolitan first-in-family students have similar perspectives (King et al., 2019; O'Shea et al., 2017). In addition, contributors' educational aspirations being shaped by their employment aims also extends what is documented in previous research about the reasons that older adults living in rural areas decide to continue their education (Roberson & Merriam, 2005). Further, tertiary education credentials as security for their future add to research about the motivations of adults to continue their education (Boshier, 1991; Francois, 2014). Contributors' views about uncertain futures in their rural areas, in particular, encouraged their decision to engage with credentialed courses. Regardless of economic conditions, tertiary education credentials offer the promise of qualification for future employment opportunities, either locally or elsewhere.

Some contributors' completion of a credentialed course provides their rural areas with local professionals; however, similar to high school students' experiences in a rural area of Canada, attaining a credential can also be part of an out-migration strategy (Corbett, 2000). Although policymakers anticipated that credential attainment could improve graduates' communities (Social Inclusion Unit, 2009)[9], contributors' relocation post-credential detracts from the chances for them to initiate such improvements. For persons who faced an uncertain future in their rural areas, a prominent reason for engaging with a tertiary education course was related to credential attainment for employment and income security. Sandy, Anne, and Dawn realised such security locally whereas Lisa, Emily and Heidi relocated to realise their employment aspirations. Reading contributors' experiences through the notion of spatiality helps to understand their social construction of tertiary education spaces as empowering. Such spaces are viewed as such as they are a way to overcome local economic constraints. In essence, persons in Australian rural areas are therefore eager to undertake tertiary education and spatial justice hinges on them being employed after that engagement. Overall, tertiary education is valued by persons living in rural areas for its promising role in their future employment chances.

Many contributors were motivated to engage with a tertiary education course in anticipation of gaining a credential that would secure their employment futures, a finding that is similar to previous research. A point of difference here is that contributors' understandings of the poor economic outlook in their rural areas prompted them to continue their education. Further, attaining credentials means prioritising self-improvement despite, or instead of, the intended policy focus to promote education as a way to preserve the future of individuals as well as their local communities in rural areas. Other significant interrelationships between

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[9] While no longer in effect, "social inclusion" policy and funding were powerful mediators in contributors' experiences at the time of data collection.

employment and tertiary education experiences I discuss further in the subthemes *Everyday Roles: Heightened Satisfaction*, *Course Selection: Learning Imperative, Exploring Course Knowledge: Collegial Support*, and *Course Engagement: Working Time* as well as in the theme *Local Residents: Educated Roles*.

5.1.2 Everyday Roles: Heightened Satisfaction

Most contributors had various combinations of demands including care responsibilities, volunteer endeavours, and paid work roles. Engaging in a variety of everyday activities afforded some contributors chances to apply their course knowledge. Being able to exercise their knowledge in their everyday paid and unpaid roles heightened contributors' sense of satisfaction, and in particular, a sense of fulfilment from engagement with both their courses and their roles.

A lack of suitable local employment over a fifteen-year period influenced Jane's decision to delay her engagement with a postgraduate course. There are few local positions that require postgraduate expertise as well as limited demand for Jane's knowledge from her local and national volunteer roles. Jane spoke about her reasons for delaying her postgraduate study:

> I'd identified a course that I knew I was interested in but couldn't justify the expense of the postgraduate [course]. Partly because being [in] a rural area, I couldn't see that would justify being translated as extra wages or an increase in salary or anything that I wasn't already doing.

For Jane, the lack of local demand for postgraduate professionals, along with little chance of exercising her advanced capabilities in an employment role for recognition or reimbursement were disincentives for her to continue her education. She couldn't "justify the expense," but when course funding became available through her severance package, Jane was quick to enrol in the postgraduate course that interested her. Shortly after commencing the course, Jane was offered employment as a coordinator in her town. She compares her experiences of her course before and after securing her new role:

> … doing that course felt like a bit of an escape plan at the time. Since transitioning into this role, it instantly no longer felt like an escape plan, it's shifted the dynamic of the course for me which meant being able to focus on doing this course purely because I really wanted to do the course. But still recognising that it was going to add lots of different skills that I can build on my existing skillset and come out at the other end with not necessarily the means to find alternative employment or anything like that. It was about being able to add to the current role.

Before engaging with her new paid role, Jane's course enrolment was an "escape plan" that would assist her to secure employment, by relocating if necessary. After commencing her new local position, Jane's experience of the "dynamic" of her course or her sense of studying purpose shifted from "purely" enjoying formal learning to one of satisfaction from applying her course knowledge in her employment role. Jane also derives true joy from her employment that arises from the immediacy of being "able to add to the current role" through applying her newly acquired knowledge in her local position, an activity that she anticipates will continue until the completion of her course.

Since her in-migration to her rural area four years ago, Amber has been unable to secure satisfactory employment. She related her difficulties in establishing social connections in her town community without that workplace involvement:

> …without a job, I don't have the team of colleagues, of co-workers, that
> many people might rely on for social interaction during the day. True. I do
> a lot of voluntary work, but for the most part, I'm working by myself; even
> in the small job I do have, I work by myself – it doesn't bring me into contact
> with a team of other people I can work with.

Despite her enthusiasm for her "voluntary work," Amber is without a "team" or frequent collegial interactions and her paid position with a few casual hours is also a solitary role. Without work colleagues, Amber has a lingering sense of being socially disconnected. Her social isolation also prohibits Amber from demonstrating her capabilities to other residents to establish her graduate capabilities as part of her local identity. Amber also spoke to me about her efforts to attain suitable employment in her town:

> I have spent a significant part of the four years I've been here looking for
> employment. I've come to the conclusion it's often not what you know, but
> who you know that gets you a job in the country. It pays to have local
> connections.

After searching for a local position for some years, Amber is exasperated that her employment aspirations are yet to be realised. She attributes her lack of employment success to her lack of "local connections" with other residents. Amber senses that her social disconnection from others eclipses her expertise when applying for positions, hindering her chances of securing local employment. Amber spoke of one social connection that offers her hope: her highly accomplished daughter, who is about to purchase her own business. Amber spoke about the chance to work:

> My adult child said to me, "Mum, I might need a receptionist, somebody to
> fill in, to help the person we've got working in the office now and I thought
> you might be interested in doing that". (Because I'm unemployed). And I

said "Yes. But I'd better go and get some training first, so I can do it well."

So, I'm doing this study one day a week. (However, when I finish this course, I will be looking for employment at any local business, which might need me, not just depending on my adult child.)

Despite her casual position, Amber identifies as being "unemployed," indicating that a secure full-time position is important for her sense of employed identity. To be competent for the employment that her daughter offered her, Amber has enrolled in a certificate course, taking responsibility for "doing it well" or improving her knowledge so that she can capably complete her future work duties. Amber anticipates that after completing her certificate course and working that she will be more eligible to fill other local positions. Presumably, Amber foresees the possibility of securing other employment by making social connections with local employers. In accord with Amber's experience, her social interactions with potential employers while working in her daughter's business will be of greater benefit for securing future positions than her certificate credential, or her satisfactory demonstration of her acquired skills. Regardless of the method that Amber uses to attain a local position, she is "looking" or determined to find ways to satisfactorily apply her skills in her town through "a lot of voluntary work" or any paid roles that are available to her.

After completing her certificate course in the near future, Amber anticipates enrolling in an honours degree in theology that will benefit her local congregation. She also spoke about the benefits of her current course:

I do voluntary work at the church office, so I've got a better understanding of what it means to be in an office and what's expected. So, it actually helps me do the newsletter fortnightly for the Church, the computer, computer skills and different applications, things like that. And changing toner in photocopiers and printers and that sort of thing, safety regulations.

As she engages with her volunteer role, Amber is aided by her course knowledge and has "a better understanding" of a wide range of office tasks. Although she told me that her course provision was poor, being able to apply her course knowledge affords Amber a sense of satisfaction with both her course and her role performance. She also looks forward to broader satisfaction from continuing her university education and applying that knowledge in her desired future role.

Helen has worked as a volunteer in her town for decades, continuing in that role despite caring for her gravely ill partner. After enrolling in her first tertiary education course several years ago, Helen was pleased that she could apply the business skills from her course in her

volunteer role. She often speaks to her former classmates and shares her perspective on the local benefits from the course:

> I know that it's just made a big difference in their businesses and even ones that are just working a normal business it's just made a big difference. I've seen, and even in myself, what I've learnt and how I'm more professional and how responsible you become when you're aware of how to do things properly and that helps with training others.

Helen recognises the skills that she and her classmates attained from their course have broad purposes that apply to local businesses as well as volunteer organisations. The "big difference" that Helen subsequently spoke of post-course is both her and her classmates' "professional" and more "responsible" work performances through applying the skills that they attained as part of a broad curriculum that made her course applicable to a variety of local roles. Helen's experience is that her course is of further local benefit as she can share course knowledge, by "training" other local people through her everyday interactions in her volunteer position. Exercising and applying her course knowledge in her role offers Helen a deep sense of appreciation for her course as well as pride in her performance.

Helen went on to discuss the influence of continuing her education on her performance in other roles:

> I think that anything I take on now, I'm more confident. Like even just managing the carers, and communicating with the agency that provides the care, I think that I'm more aware and more self-confident and I think that's come, that's been the ripple effect in my life, and you know I'm more aware and supportive of my second oldest adult son he was lucky enough to get picked in an apprenticeship.

Since engaging with tertiary education, Helen has noticed a "ripple effect" or the way that her educational achievement has influenced her performance in her other roles. She is more "confident" as she is self-assured when "communicating" with her partner's service providers. Continuing her education has also made Helen aware of the challenges that her apprenticed son is facing. Her understanding gleaned from doing her own formal learning means that Helen can be "supportive" of her son's endeavours. Helen's education has added immeasurably to her sense of satisfaction with her everyday roles.

As seen above, for some contributors, applying their course knowledge in their everyday roles heightened their sense of satisfaction. Three contributors spoke of their satisfying experiences with both their tertiary education and their roles when applying their course knowledge. Securing a paid local position meant that Jane's satisfaction with her course

is heightened as she continues to apply her newly acquired knowledge in her paid role. Amber anticipates exercising her skills through a paid role in her daughter's business and has some satisfaction from applying her course knowledge through her volunteer role. Helen's credential isn't the focus of her volunteer role; nonetheless, she is pleased that applying her course knowledge is of benefit to both local people and her family members. Taken together, course knowledge has a place in contributors' lives by heightening their satisfaction with both their role performance and their course knowledge.

Contributors sincerely appreciate their tertiary education when it permits them to improve their ability in at least one role, substantiating previous research illustrating that adults appreciate immediacy in the application of their course knowledge (Brauer, 2014; Knowles, 1975; van Staden, 2019). Contributors' appreciation of the practical application of their course knowledge in unpaid as well as paid roles extends research by illustrating that service to community features in adults' decisions to continue their education in rural areas (Boshier, 1991; Francois, 2014). For contributors, the subsequent application of their course knowledge in service to local people deepened their appreciation for their education. Contributors' experiences also extend research by illustrating that immediacy of application and relevancy of course knowledge to everyday roles is a source of satisfaction (Knowles, 1975; van Staden, 2019). Further, contributors' experiences highlight that for persons living in rural areas, their course satisfaction is related to engagement with relevant course curricula that imparts knowledge to enhance performance in local social roles. Understood through the lens of spatiality, contributors who occupy both rural and tertiary education spaces construct both as empowering when they can draw on knowledge from their courses to improve their performance in their local roles. As such, persons appreciate their tertiary education for its role in enabling them in their local area. An element of spatial justice for persons living in Australian rural areas therefore is being able to attain course knowledge that can be applied locally. Such application of course knowledge is significant for person's sense of social accomplishment in their rural towns.

Finding an interrelationship between positive role and course experiences for persons living in Australian rural areas is an addition to what is known about persons' views of course knowledge. Highly significant for persons living in rural areas are broad course curriculums that provide knowledge to improve performances in available local roles where the practical application of their course knowledge can be demonstrated. Critical to understanding the tertiary education course experiences of persons living in rural areas, therefore, is the local roles that are available to them. Such roles I discuss further in the themes *Community Engagement:*

Alternative Spaces and *Local Residents: Educated Roles*, that present experiences of pre-and post-credential roles, respectively.

5.1.3 Studying Courses: Better Self

The intent of each contributor when engaging with a tertiary education course was primarily the attainment of a credential to secure better employment for their future. However, as part of the experience of progressing through their courses, some contributors spoke of a highly significant aspect for them: a sense of better self. An experience of a better self for some contributors is credited to experiences of self-development as part of their course engagement.

As a person nearing retirement, Oigle talked about beginning his tertiary education when he attended trade school after completing his high school education. He enjoyed the supportive interactions with his educators as he learnt his trade. Partly due to the encouraging aspects of those early interactions, Oigle has continued to engage with courses throughout his life, most recently engaging with an online course as part of his business endeavours. Oigle spoke about another benefit in that continuing his education "keeps the grey matter stirred up and at my age, that's pretty important. I think it is good to keep fit and active, both mentally and physically." As a person engaged in tertiary education later in life, Oigle's course engagement reassures him that he is exercising his cognitive abilities and his commentary reflects that such exercise is "pretty important" for him. Oigle, like other contributors, uses terms such as "pretty" to modify what he means. In everyday language, such modifiers can be used to either moderate or ironically emphasise the meanings of words (Drynel, 2018; Neuhaus, 2016). The qualifier "pretty" can mean almost important, however, for Oigle as an older person who is concerned about remaining "mentally fit," he uses "pretty" with meiotic irony. Here, Oigle's use of "pretty" is intended as an emphasiser. Hence, he uses the term "pretty important" to denote that his course experience is extremely important to him as a way to maintain his cognitive fitness. For Oigle, such cognitive maintenance is just as important for improving and sustaining his wellbeing as physical exercise.

Improving herself by developing skills for employment was the primary reason that Emily engaged in a tertiary education course. Her adult responsibilities are mostly centred on her children and employment. When I asked, Emily spoke about the personal benefits of engaging with her course:

> I just feel it's healthy if you are using your brain, to study and learning [*sic*].
> It is good. It's interesting. Makes you feel good about yourself when you get
> As, credits and distinctions on your reports as well. That makes you feel
> pretty good about yourself too.

While Emily was prompted to engage with tertiary education to secure benefits from better employment, her view has expanded to embrace her course as "healthy" for its value in improving her personal wellbeing. Formal learning offers Emily an activity that is "interesting" and separate from the obligations in her other roles, permitting her to focus on improving herself. She views her "credit and distinction" grades are tangible proof that reassures her that she is "pretty good." Here, Emily is pleased that she is an accomplished learner, supporting her sense of better self.

Employment and care responsibilities have contributed to Jane's fifteen-year hiatus from tertiary education. After experiencing dissatisfaction with the accreditation practices of a local vocational education and training provider, Jane decided to further her education by re-enrolling at her previous university. Her subsequent engagement with a postgraduate course was Jane's first experience of online delivery. The type of delivery, along with her lengthy absence from formal learning contributed to Jane's uncertainty about her aptitude for postgraduate study. She explained her experience shortly after beginning her course:

> The end of the first unit, getting some half-decent results was a really good
> confidence booster. So, it went very quickly from feeling scary to knowing
> that the work I was putting in was being reflected in the marks I was getting,
> and it became this wonderful opportunity of feeling like I was using bits of
> my brain that I hadn't used in a really long time.

A significant experience for Jane was the "feeling scary "or fear that she had at the start of her course. Her fear was superseded by the "confidence booster" from her "half-decent results," a litotic term that she uses to indicate that her high-quality grades afforded her a sense of better self. She appreciates "her work being reflected in the marks" or that her educator's feedback when grading her course assessments provides recognition for her efforts. Jane's marks reassure her that her concerted effort is appropriate for postgraduate study, and she became confident that she has the capabilities to excel at learning from her course materials. As such, Jane's engagement with her course is an opportune exercise that she had not experienced for some years that permitted her to "use bits of her brain" or exercise her cognitive capacity.

Derek initially engaged in his postgraduate certificate course to develop his skills for his professional role. He spoke about his learning experiences as he progressed through that course:

> I found it was pretty motivating; it was pretty inspiring self-discovery that
> you are on and so to find out who I was, like I say, to find out the gifts and
> talents that you have is quite motivational. And so. it was after the certificate
> I thought, 'I might as well keep going.'

The intent to improve his skills for his role was a "pretty inspiring self-discovery," reflecting Derek's meiotic irony that indicates that rather than a trivial external exercise, his course engagement became a substantial biographical project to understanding self. He experienced development in understanding himself that included being a person with "gifts and talents" or significant aptitude. Derek decided to continue his education by enrolling in a master's degree. Although his course knowledge assists his professional work, he continued his education because he was "pretty" or more "motivated" to do so after experiencing a sense of better self by engaging with a graduate certificate course.

In assuming personal responsibility for her self-development since attending high school twenty-five years ago, Meg has engaged with a range of courses. She is determined to continue her education as a foundation for her self-development so that she can prevail when faced with challenges in her life. Meg spoke to me about the impact of education on her sense of self:

> I know that I can be better than what I am. So, study to me is personal
> development. It's growing, it's giving myself more options in my life. So,
> I've been studying for quite a while, I don't really stop.

Meg expects that her course engagement will provide "personal development" and that she will develop her capabilities and "be better." Emphasised in Meg's language is self-development through her engagement in consecutive courses as "growing" and "giving myself options" or bettering her life chances. Meg's reliance on continuity – to not "stop" – in her engagement with courses is evidence that she is developing herself.

Helen struggled through her first attempt at tertiary education while nursing her gravely ill mother and assumed that her difficulties with her course occurred because she was "no good" at "study" and incapable of formal learning as an adult. Many decades later, Helen persevered with another course, after establishing a deep connection with a supportive local educator and finding at work that she "loved learning." Helen describes what completing her certificate means for her:

> It has just been valuable. I'm more educated than I ever thought I would be,
> but I never thought I was dumb, I just was waysided from a purpose of study,
> and I'm looking to continue studying, not to be a professional student, but
> to actually enhance my self-worth which will enhance… I can, hopefully
> help others.

Initially, Helen's experience of tertiary education was that she was "waysided" or that her path to learning was disrupted. She views that learning rather than credential attainment is the central "purpose" of education. Reflecting on her "valuable" learning experiences during the

completion of her first course, Helen is confident that she has the capacity, and is "looking to continue studying" or has ambitions to continue her education. Being able to demonstrate her learning capacity by completing a course has immeasurably improved Helen's sense of "self-worth." She is not engaging in further courses for their own sake as a "professional student," a label that is often used to denote someone unable to assume adult responsibilities such as securing employment. Instead, Helen has goals for the application of her course knowledge and through her post-course sense of better "self-worth," she intends to utilise her knowledge to benefit other people, a platform that Helen values highly. Helen's initial interactions with local people could include sharing her understanding of being "waysided," and in particular, the way that circumstances rather than aptitude may encourage or restrict learning outcomes.

As seen above, some contributors experienced a sense of better self after commencing their courses. Six contributors described their experiences of self-improvement their engagement with courses offered them, including Oigle who has a sense of cognitive fitness that is highly important to him. Emily also expressed a sense of better self through studying a course and viewed her grades as tangible evidence of her improvement. Likewise, Jane became self-assured when her grades reflected her application and effort in her course. Derek's sense of self-improvement arose from his view that his course drew his attention to his aptitude, whereas Meg viewed the continuity in her educational engagement as evidence that she is continuing to develop herself. In overcoming decades of hesitancy about formal learning, Helen views her course completion as an improvement in herself that she can use to assist others. The way that Oigle, Emily, Jane, Derek, Meg, and Helen experienced a sense of improved self varied. Nonetheless, they all identified a sense of better self through their engagement with their tertiary education courses.

Each contributor appreciated their experience of a better self after engaging with a tertiary education course. Experiences of a better self align with research arguing that adults living in rural areas appreciate attaining knowledge for the self (Allison & Eversole, 2008; Garlick & Langworthy, 2008). Variations in contributors' experiences of improving self also substantiate the claim that each adult has a combination of experiences with cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions during their formal learning that generates individual outcomes (Illeris, 2013). As part of engaging with their courses, one such outcome for contributors was the individualised manifestation of self-betterment. Regardless of the details of their self-development, a sense of better self was significant for each contributor and their commitment to their education. Similar to findings in previous research, the complexity in interactions between educational and personal circumstances of each contributor influenced their course experience as well as their sense of self, impacting the decisions of some to

continue both their courses and their formal learning (Illeris, 2013). Contributors' experiences illustrate that, for persons living in rural areas who engage with tertiary education, there are various experiences of better self that prompt them to continue with both their current and future courses. Read through a lens of spatiality, contributors' social construction of 'being engaged' with tertiary education is one of empowerment. Engagement with tertiary education spaces was pivotal in enabling persons to experience an improved sense of identity. For persons living in Australian rural areas, spatial justice includes being able to engage with tertiary education spaces that enable a sense of improvement in themselves as well as their knowledge base. Such personal gains are valuable for inspiring persons to continue their engagement with their tertiary education.

The finding that persons who live in rural areas experience a better self by continuing their education aligns with previous studies. Contributors' experiences of better self add to previous research by highlighting that some persons experience a better self during their courses while living in their rural areas which can inspire them to build on their education. Individualised experiences of persons that are presented here offer an understanding of variations in a sense of better self that inspires a commitment to their education. Some of the most significant experiences for persons who decided to either continue or withdraw from their education while living in their rural area I discuss further in the themes *Commencing and Continuing: Social Support* and *Achieving Completion: Shedding Constraints*.

5.1.4 Course Knowledge: Education for Life

Some contributors had a long-term residency in their rural areas and could reflect on the benefits that their tertiary education has brought to their lives. A lifetime of observing changing employment conditions and addressing unanticipated life events while living in their rural areas meant that some older contributors had strong concerns about the growing emphasis on training for employment purposes in tertiary education curricula. While they had continued their education for employment roles, some contributors had experiences with broad course curriculums decades ago that provided them with the knowledge to navigate their lives.

A demand for evidence of personal competency for employment roles has meant frequent course engagement for Oigle who is nearing retirement but still manages his own local business. Oigle's business operations require him to engage with courses often so that he is up to date with government regulations. He also has a related role in a national volunteer organisation he established to assist newcomers in Australia. As someone who has worked locally and in international settings, Oigle spoke to me about the benefits of frequent educational engagement throughout his life:

…anything that I can learn gives me the qualifications to be able to do my work better and is a benefit to whatever I do, whether it's in my work or whether it's all the groups for which I am a volunteer. No education is a loss as far as I'm concerned. Anything I can learn is a benefit to my information base to be able to do things.

Oigle's lifetime of experiences in different roles in a variety of places means that he embraces the instrumental benefits of his "qualifications" or formal education for diverse purposes. In addition, the knowledge that he has gained from formal learning is a "benefit to whatever" he does and provides him with capabilities for other responsibilities that he cannot foresee. In this way, "no education is a loss," and all learning activities are valuable for Oigle, providing an "information base" or building on his knowledge that assists him and, in turn, others. With his "knowledge base," Oigle continues to enjoy his roles as a local business owner and a national volunteer. In part, because his engagement with a variety of education courses over the years is a foundation for his sense of self-reliance to meet unanticipated challenges.

As part of residing in rural areas for most of her life, Julie has extensive experience with living in precarious economic conditions. She has recently struggled to find sustainable local employment after the funding for her position of twenty years was reduced to the level expected for a new, rather than experienced graduate. In her words, Julie has "many tickets" or a formidable range of credentials that includes a postgraduate degree but has been unable to secure another local position where she can exercise her expertise. As an outlet for her capabilities, Julie is sometimes able to apply her knowledge in local and metropolitan volunteer roles related to her qualifications. She also established her own local business that she continues to manage. Julie spoke to me about the benefits of her tertiary education that she began over thirty years ago:

I put study down as life skills. Knowledge to me is life skills if you've got knowledge you know how to navigate life and there's, within the bachelor degree and going on to master's, there's so many legalities that you actually learn, that unknowingly you actually draw from them in your everyday life. And I think that I know I got that many tickets that one day, I think I'm already using them just in life in general and going through life, and it's rewarding to know that you can actually fall back on some of that information that you have got stored up there to solve a problem that has got nothing to do with that related field. So, you are using common knowledge in unrelated fields, and I find that rewarding too.

Despite being engaged in roles removed from her professional qualification, Julie is enthusiastic about her "study" or tertiary education. The enthusiasm that Julie has is in part due to being able

to "fall back on" or draw on "knowledge" from her courses to address a variety of challenges that she encounters in her everyday life. In addition to what she has learned that aids her employment performance, Julie's language emphasises she has acquired "life skills" or the ability to participate fully in everyday life and navigate unanticipated challenges. Such capabilities have been afforded to her by studying broad course curriculums to attain "tickets" or credentials, the knowledge from which she can purposefully apply in a variety of settings across time. Julie's tertiary education has instilled her with confidence that she has the capabilities necessary for complex undertakings in her roles throughout her life.

Maggie engaged with a university course at the suggestion of her vocational education lecturer, and she has since completed an honours degree and entered a vocation that began with securing a local professional position over a decade ago. She spoke about the benefits of her education:

> I think it helps in all areas of life. Once you get that education, you feel more competent, and I guess the big thing from learning is that you learn, I think before you, before you really get educated, you think you know it all, but once you get an education, once you start learning you realise how much there is to learn. So, that has increased my learning in lots of areas in my life. Yeah, I don't know. It's improved my life financially. I've really enjoyed the learning. I've continued to learn and probably will until the day I die. So, I think it's made a huge difference.

In Maggie's experience, her education has helped her achieve life goals, such as "financial" security as well as giving her a "more competent" sense of self. As part of being "educated," she is aware of the limitations of her knowledge, inspiring her to have a committed approach to continuing her informal learning in everyday life.

For Margaret, her engagement with an undergraduate course over thirty-five years ago was to gain knowledge to meet the multiplicity of challenges throughout her life. Her experience with navigating the complexities of living in her rural area makes Margaret aware that forging an existence in such circumstances requires broad knowledge as well as a diverse range of capabilities. Her tertiary education has contributed to satisfying her needs, and in particular, she has been able to navigate to accomplish her life aspirations. Such aspirations include achievements in both her work and volunteer roles while living in a region that she describes as subject to increasingly precarious economic conditions. As someone who has benefitted from her tertiary education while living in her rural area, Margaret voiced her views about current university courses:

…every other course is very ends-based like you are going to become an artist or you are going to become a doctor. Which is all great, but I'm not sure that it's training or educating our young people necessarily to be great thinkers and that's what I want to study, is to learn how to learn and learn how to think for myself.

As someone who is living in an area that is subject to frequent economic shifts that often disrupt the employment and financial ambitions of local people, Margaret is concerned about "ends-based" courses. Such courses she views as having sweeping instrumental curricula focused too closely on training for particular employment roles that are delivered at the expense of building individual capabilities that can be drawn on throughout the life course. Margaret's experience is that satisfying her career aspirations was assisted by a broad, rather than focused, curriculum in her first degree. In this way, her undergraduate course prepared her to "think for myself" as well as to "learn how to learn" and become a self-directed learner throughout her life.

As someone who has resided in a particular rural town for the majority of her life, Margaret also has an impressive education record as part of a versatile skill set that she has utilised to navigate economic uncertainty in her local region. When she attained her first degree over thirty-five years ago, it was fully funded by the Australian Government. When she began her tertiary education, Margaret was encouraged by her parents to "make the most of herself" or to realise her potential. Shortly after graduation, Margaret also attained a postgraduate credential that qualified her for a professional position. More recently, Margaret completed her second postgraduate course building on her credentials to secure another professional position that keeps her in touch with developments in undergraduate courses. In speaking about learning at university, Margaret compared her early and more recent observations about course curricula:

I think you can train people for a job, and I think a lot of tertiary study has become that or at least people's motivations for tertiary study has [*sic*] become that. I think we have forced that to happen by making [it] so hard for people to afford education that now they have to have an endpoint in mind. Whereas when I went to university, I don't think my endpoint was that at all, my endpoint was to be educated, to be literate in many facets of life, not just for a job.

While Margaret's experience is that her tertiary education has contributed to her ability to traverse local economic conditions to forge several professional careers, she is nonetheless cautious about the present focus on the "endpoint" or instrumental turn in contemporary tertiary education curriculums. In Margaret's view, a tertiary education that is directed towards a "job endpoint" marks an education process that is terminated by employment rather than encouraging learning throughout life. Margaret understands the pressures for education

providers to deliver affordable courses to train local young people for employment purposes. Her experience, however, is that tertiary education has best served her by imparting qualities that assist her to "be literate in many facets of life" so that she can navigate unanticipated events and unexpected challenges while living in her rural area.

As seen above, some contributors who commenced their tertiary education decades earlier appreciate that the knowledge from those courses was applicable throughout their lives. The lengthy life and education experiences of four contributors further illustrate the ways that knowledge from their tertiary education courses continues to benefit them. As a person nearing retirement, Oigle's lifetime of course engagement reassures him that he has the knowledge to address the challenges he encounters in different roles and settings. Julie is profoundly satisfied with the application of her course knowledge in her life through a variety of non-professional roles that are in addition to the profession for which she qualified some years ago. Maggie also completed her education for vocational purposes, but it has helped her in many aspects of her life, including inspiring her to commit to her informal learning. Lastly, the benefits of a broad curriculum from her undergraduate degree have served Margaret for over thirty-five years, and she is concerned that rapid changes in local conditions may undermine the value of instrumental curriculums in employment opportunities for other residents. Shown here, in completing both undergraduate and postgraduate courses, some contributors who engaged with tertiary education courses in previous decades have experienced a multiplicity of benefits by being able to apply their course knowledge throughout their lives.

For contributors, as persons who have lived in rural areas in the decades after attaining their credentials, their course knowledge means skills and capabilities that continue to be of benefit to them. Course knowledge for life builds on and complicates research about the opinions of women and men living in Australian rural areas about the purpose of their education (Dymock, 2007). Specifically, the participants in Dymock's (2007) study relayed the view that education was more than a credentialing or career advancement exercise. Here, at its best, course knowledge had a beneficial role throughout contributors' lives, aligning with previous research which illustrates that tertiary education for persons living in rural areas has purposes apart from career acquisition (Dymock, 2007; Illeris, 2016). Contributors' appreciation of course knowledge as an education for life also builds on and complicates understandings of a particular learning characteristic of adults, namely that they value immediacy in the application of their learning (Knowles, 1975; van Staden, 2019). In particular, persons living in rural areas also appreciate the longevity and multifaceted application of their course knowledge throughout their lives. Drawing on a theory of spatiality helps to illustrate the contributors' social construction of empowerment in the relationship between tertiary education and rural spaces. In particular, for

persons who have occupied both rural and tertiary education spaces for an extended period of time and have served as conduits between them, the long-term benefits of course knowledge in their local area is a foundation for constructing both spaces as empowering. In part, spatial justice for persons living in Australian rural areas involves being able to engage with a tertiary education that can have benefits in their contexts. Being able to draw on their course knowledge to navigate the life course is valuable for persons living in rural areas.

The finding that course knowledge is appreciated as equipping persons to navigate their challenges across their life course extends what is known in research about the views of persons living in rural areas regarding the benefits of tertiary education. In particular, the tertiary education that some residents in rural areas viewed as the most beneficial to pursue are comprehensive courses offering knowledge that assists them to address complexities and challenges as life unfolds. Aspects of the challenges that each person faces as a tertiary-educated resident in their rural areas I discuss further in the subthemes *Rural Professionals: Diverse Opportunities* and *Professional Roles: Local Voices*.

5.2   Commencing and Continuing: Social Support

Starting a course with a view to progressing to completion was a key experience in each contributor's life. With the exception of two contributors, each commenced their tertiary education at a local vocational campus where navigating their courses was marked by a diverse range of interactions with other people who supported their educational ambitions. In the current theme and its subthemes, I capture some contributors' experiences of social support that is prominent for the attainment of their educational goals.

The *Commencing and Continuing: Social Support* theme consists of six subthemes that explore some contributors' experiences of supportive social interactions during their courses. In the first subtheme *Commencing Tertiary Education: Human Support* I explore some contributors' comparative experiences of engaging with their courses through classroom and online delivery. By doing so, I highlight the significance of human interaction for ensuring contributors successfully transitioned into continuing their education. I explore the nuances of human support further in the subtheme *Local Educators: Individual Support* to portray contributors' experiences of interactions with local educators who guided their classes. In contrast, in *Distant Educators: Tenuous Support* I describe some contributors' experiences of online delivery and their weak connections with their educators. Experiences of interactions with others I also describe in *Course Fundamentals: Peer Support*, to provide an understanding of some contributors' sense of connection with their peers in both classroom and online settings. A few contributors worked in positions related to their course content and explained the

significance of collegial interactions throughout their courses that I discuss in the subtheme *Exploring Course Knowledge: Collegial Support*. In the last subtheme, *Local People: Nuanced Support* I depict some experiences of assistance from local people whose support was integral to contributors' completion of their course requirements.

5.2.1 Commencing Tertiary Education: Human Support

Most contributors had commenced tertiary education by attending a class at their local vocational campus. Each spoke highly of the supportive human presence of both local educators and their classmates who assisted them to engage and continue with their courses until completion. Some contributors observed that since they attended their first course, classes at their local vocational campus had been replaced by online courses. Most contributors who had experience with both face-to-face classes and online delivery of tertiary education courses expressed dismay, as they consider that online delivery does not provide the human support that was essential for them to commence and continue their courses until completion.

Recent changes in Dawn's previous workplace meant that her power to assist people was restricted, and she considered a career change so that she could make helping local people a core function of her work. As the first member of her family to engage with education after high school, Dawn was largely unfamiliar with tertiary education. She approached a guidance counsellor, who was employed at Dawn's local vocational campus. At the urging of that counsellor, Dawn enrolled in and completed a certificate course delivered in a class. She has since built on her education, recently completing an honours degree by online and then block mode delivery. Dawn spoke to me as someone who has observed the workings of her local vocational campus for over a decade:

> … there's VET but I know that's changed a lot since I was there, a lot of that's going to online as well, which I think a local campus was always to me… seemed like that between having not studied to return to study or people who hadn't been or had any success at school. It was a way of re-engaging by having, even not education courses, but you know they might have been craft activities or health activities, just to get people in the door and feel comfortable with being in that environment and then finding out what else it had to offer. But I think they're also going more online, which I know for myself if you've gone from study and not being real tech-savvy to suddenly online with no one to support you, that's a huge barrier, I think.

A social environment that supports returning to formal learning is important to Dawn. Her engagement with tertiary education commenced with attending social activities held at her local vocational campus, where she and other local people had an opportunity to "get in the door and

feel comfortable" or socialise with each other as well as become familiar with the campus and its services. Emphasised in Dawn's language is that her local vocational campus was critical for her "re-engagement" with education. Social interactions at her local vocational campus assisted her "return to study" and to overcome her sense of alienation from tertiary education after having a lengthy absence from formal learning. Dawn's concerns are that online courses are provided without considering the social needs of local people, who need a "between" or a scaffold into tertiary education. In particular, Dawn's perspective about "online" delivery is that local people, many of whom have had a lengthy hiatus from education, need a supportive human presence to assist them. Such support is critical to assist local people to become "real tech-savvy" so they can circumnavigate the "huge barrier" of educational technologies to learn from their course materials.

After navigating her life by relying on a layperson's knowledge that was gathered through informal learning in the decades since she finished high school, Dawn commenced her tertiary education by attending her local vocational campus which was familiar and where she was at ease. Her experiences there, including the completion of her course, gave her confidence that she could enrol and complete an online course. She described her experience of beginning classes:

> I went to a classroom, the lecturer was my first lecturer to go back into study and the course made me uncomfortable, some of the things were quite challenging and I suppose that was going from that probably more one-dimensional thinking to I'd have to stretch the mind a bit. But the lecturer was very encouraging, so I think having… and you don't get that online. I wouldn't have got that online, I would've struggled probably, but to have someone there to direct you through 'yep, you're doing your assignments, maybe if you tweak this.' But getting instant feedback, instant encouragement. So, I think that was really good.

By offering her timely reassurance and guidance, Dawn's educator eased her into formal learning. Her educator did so by encouraging Dawn to overcome being "uncomfortable" with meeting the "challenge of stretching her mind" to learn about unfamiliar ideas in her course materials so that she no longer relied on superficial or "one-dimensional thinking." Dawn's experience of being in the classroom has made her aware of the importance of "instant" or synchronous feedback from her educator to learn, support that she views as absent from online courses.

In discussing her experience of attending a course at her local vocational campus, Dawn spoke about learning more than the requisites of her course. Her interactions in a class were

pivotal to developing her confidence in her learning and her course also offered her a chance to observe the work activities that she would perform as a professional person in her rural context. After completing her first course, Dawn was inspired to enrol in an online bachelor's course. In talking about completing that course, she explained the importance of her earlier experience at her local vocational campus:

> I don't think I could have done the jump from no study to university. I don't think that would have worked, but I'd had some success at VET. So then, when I went to uni[versity], that course was online, so I knew I could do... I mean I know VET at the time was very basic and that, but I was told possibly I put too much in and I was given encouragement from the [lecturer] too, 'you can do it.' A computer screen is not going to tell me that, someone marking my assignments at the other end isn't going to know me.

As part of her experience of transitioning into tertiary education at her local vocational campus, social interactions in a class afforded Dawn scaffolding and built her confidence. She was subsequently certain that she was taking a step rather than making a "jump" into university. In light of her experiences with social interaction, Dawn went on to explain how human presence was important for her learning:

> ….so, I think that face to face, yeah, I don't reckon I would've succeeded if I hadn't had that face to face. I wouldn't have had that... we are social beings, I'm obviously a social person, so I think that face to face was invaluable. I would have to hesitate to say that I would have got to where I am now without that VET, I think was very important for me. Because I thought 'I can do it' and then I had a bit of taste of the work and saw other people around me and I thought, 'that's what I have to do.' To go further in this area of work, I have to make the next step. So, I think VET was a very important step.

The "invaluable" presence of her educator or "face-to-face" contact was of particular value as Dawn was encouraged by someone who knew her. In addition, Dawn having a "bit of a taste of the work" by familiarising herself with her anticipated post-course role through interactions at a local work placement inspired Dawn's commitment to continuing her education. Her experience of learning in class at her local vocational campus centring on supportive human interactions reassured Dawn that she would be able to perform her future local role and prepared her to engage with a bachelor's course through online delivery.

It was some time since Pat had left high school, and when her children attended primary school, she had the chance to continue her education at her local vocational campus. She has since completed an undergraduate degree, secured a career of her choosing, and recently studied

at a master's level through online delivery. For her, studying is also self-development as part of her ideas about "further education and furthering yourself." Pat shared her thoughts about realising her self-development by explaining the personal significance of the vocational campus that was located in her previous town:

> …VET I think is great the fact that it's local and for me, in the other town it was a bit of a lifesaver in a sense that it was starting... resuming I guess studying. Getting... Enabling me... Enabling's the word.

After an absence from education, Pat's local vocational campus adjacent to where she lived was an easy way for her to re-engage with formal learning as part of her "self-development." Having an option to study a course nearby was a "lifesaver" as it provided the first step towards Pat's ambition to attain a credential to qualify for her chosen profession. After describing her "enabling" experience, Pat spoke about the changes in tertiary education delivery in her region:

> …face-to-face is decreasing, and that's such a shame. It's such a shame, having that contact, particularly when you're resuming or getting into study for the first time, is really, really important. And having somebody that you can go to, and they can go 'it's ok, it's ok.' Reassure, encourage, direct, is really, really important.

Pat's experience of commencing and completing her first tertiary education course at her local vocational campus was facilitated by "face-to-face" or direct "contact" with the supportive human presence of her educator in the classroom. She laments that such "really, really important" support for "getting into study" or to begin tertiary education is being reduced for local people. Overall, Pat views the human support of an educator that includes a reassuring, encouraging and guiding presence, as essential for overcoming uncertainty and confusion when first engaging with a tertiary education course.

After completing her first tertiary education course at her local vocational campus while her children were at primary school, Anne continued her education there, attaining a diploma credential. She explained her experience with attempting her next course:

> I have also studied two years of my Bachelor of Early Childhood through another university, which I really struggled with. I did that after doing my children's services diploma and I guess I really probably struggled with it just for the fact that to get your head around how everything works and I'm not a person that asks for help that easily, so I guess I struggled a lot with, I guess the system and how it worked and getting back into actually writing essays. So probably more the educational side of it. I had the knowledge, the knowledge was fine, it was just actually, really, in the end, it was the text

and how you wrote it and whether you were referencing correctly and all of
those sorts of issues that I struggled with.

After attaining several credentials at her local vocational campus, Anne was eager to enrol in an
online bachelor's course. Anne was confident that she "had the knowledge" or that she was
learning from her university course materials; however, she was without the scaffolding to assist
her to understand "the system," including the "educational side" or institutional requirements
for a university course. Without such scaffolding that had been previously provided by her
vocational education and training provider during her preceding course, Anne "struggled" to
understand "the system" at university. Labelling her experience as "the system" refers to a term
traditionally used to explain a type of social organisation that exploits, restricts, or represses
individuals that Anne uses to describe her online university course. After two years of
"struggle" to get her "head around" or to try and understand "how everything works" with her
university, Anne chose to withdraw rather than complete her final year. Anne's experience
reflects that while help may have been forthcoming if she had asked, her university was
indifferent to her plight, and she was without a human connection so that she could readily
communicate her difficulties.

As someone who has engaged with local classes and online delivery through both
university and vocational education and training providers over several years, Anne reflected on
the services at her local vocational campus:

We do have a very good VET here now, like a new VET that offers a lot of
courses and things. And I think it also leaves the option open for school
leavers to attend VET if they're not academically ready to go to uni[versity]
or if they don't want to go to uni[versity], there are other options available.
Unfortunately, a lot of them are external, which makes it a little bit more
difficult when you're younger to do it by yourself without support.

Anne appreciates the "new VET" or the housing of her local vocational campus in a new
purpose-built establishment, and she is impressed with the range of courses that are available for
local young people. In her language, Anne emphasises that her local vocational campus is an
"option" or could be a viable education alternative as she understands the dislocation and
expense involved in relocating to continue with education. In discussing "external" or online
courses as a dominant education option for local young people, Anne is cautious, as her
experience of online delivery is "to do it by yourself without support" or human interactions and
that, as a result, it is subsequently "more difficult" to learn.

As seen above, three contributors' experiences are presented in relation to their learning
in both a class at their local vocational campus and their online courses. Each had a lengthy

absence from formal learning before commencing their tertiary education. They spoke of the importance of a supportive human presence at their local vocational campus for their commencement as well as learning during the completion of their first tertiary education course. Such support was also pivotal in preparing contributors to continue building on their education after completing their first course. Dawn highlights that human interactions at her local vocational campus assisted her to continue her education to qualify for local employment in her chosen role. The local vocational campus supported Pat to begin her tertiary education, building her capabilities so that she has been able to progress through her courses to realise her career aspirations. Anne was supported through her initial courses through human interaction and is concerned that her new local vocational campus now offers predominantly online courses. Dawn, Anne, and Pat's experience of course engagement through online delivery after attending local classes cemented their understanding that the presence of a supportive human connection is significant for local people who decide to continue their education.

For contributors, experiences of human support at a local vocational campus meant that they had access to assistance to transition into tertiary education after lengthy absences from formal learning. Contributors who had direct contact with local educators during their courses achieved completion and made the decision to continue engaging with courses, building on their education by engaging with online courses with a view to qualifying for their chosen professions. Their subsequent experiences are that online courses do not afford human contact that assists local people to commence their tertiary education or to learn.

The significance of human support experiences for contributors corroborates previous research showing how human contact is a positive factor in course completion (O'Shea et al., 2017; Stone & Springer, 2019). In addition, contributors' experiences also build on and complicate research by Barber and Netherton (2018) who studied students transitioning from technical and further education to university courses in the Australian metropolitan area of Sydney. Their research illuminates the pivotal role of vocational education teachers in that decision. Similarly, contributors' experiences here illustrate that supportive human connection with a local educator was integral to building confidence and learning capabilities so that they engaged with online courses to continue their education.

With regard to online courses, contributors' experiences with "the system" here align with previous assertions in research. Namely, that human interactions are significant to support the course progression of those who are unfamiliar with "the system" or structural environment of tertiary education (Meldrum, 2016). Further, contributors' experiences here are similar to the difficulties reported by Naylor and Mifsud's (2019) research participants who were from a 'non-

traditional' background and unfamiliar with tertiary education. They subsequently argued that students experience better educational outcomes when their education providers took responsibility and assisted them to navigate structural barriers by making a human connection with them. Previous studies as well as contributors' experiences of human support that I analysed here, illustrate that understanding "the system" associated with tertiary education was assisted by human interaction that was initiated by their education providers.

Human support that featured in contributors' experiences of commencing their tertiary education also extends ideas in previous research about the role of a local campus in providing social support for educational endeavour (Balatti et al., 2006; Stokes et al., 2006). For some persons living in rural areas, human connection, such as social interaction with either local people or educators in classes at a local campus, meant adequate support to commence and complete a course. In addition, such support was a powerful part of preparing contributors to engage with the next course. Here, spatiality helps to make sense of the co-creation of social spaces in rural areas as an essential part of contributors' empowerment to engage with tertiary education. Such social spaces are a fundamental component of tertiary education for persons living in Australian rural areas. Spatial justice in such areas rests on the resources that offer opportunities for the co-creation of local tertiary education spaces. Such spaces that support their tertiary education endeavours are often viewed as essential by persons living in rural areas.

The finding here demonstrates the meanings of human support for persons who commenced and continued their tertiary education as a resident in their rural area, often after a lengthy absence from formal learning. Human support is a topic that is beginning to attract attention in research seeking to support students from diverse backgrounds. Here, supportive human interactions were critical for some persons living in rural areas to transition into tertiary education, complete their course, and continue with the next. The role of social support in the educational endeavours of persons living in rural areas is discussed further in the following subthemes. Contributors' subsequent experiences as tertiary-educated residents who provide a supportive human presence for the educational endeavours of other local people I discuss in the subtheme *Education Knowledge: Essential Roles*.

5.2.2 Local Educators: Individual Support

Educators living in the same regions as contributors were praised highly by them. Contributors spoke of their relationship with their local educators as an essential part of receiving individual support. Such support permitted them to overcome their particular challenges throughout their tertiary education courses.

After completing high school, Helen decided to engage with a certificate course while caring for her gravely ill mother. Her attempt to complete her course was unsuccessful, and Helen did not contemplate engaging with another tertiary education course until many decades later. In the course of attending to her childrens' social activities, Helen befriended a local educator. Helen summarises the discussion that she had with that educator about her previous course:

> …. when it came to the assignments, I just couldn't do them. It was really horrific for me because everyone else passed, and they went on to be presented, and I just failed. And when [lecturer] said to me 'women's education.' I thought 'oh, I was no good' and she said, 'you'd love it.' And it took about 4 months of her talking to me to actually have the courage to say 'ok, I'll give it a go' and because I'd worked in a major hospital, and I loved study... I mean I loved learning things.

The chance for frequent social interactions including "talking" for "months" permitted Helen to build a personal and trusting relationship with a local educator. This was critical for Helen to be able to share her "horrific" previous course experience and overcome her misgivings about her perspective that she "failed" and had "no good" capacity for formal learning. Trusting her educator as a friend who knew her as a person supported Helen and built her "courage" to enrol in a course and embrace her love of learning.

Helen's attendance at her local vocational campus offered her a chance to establish relationships with other local educators. She spoke about the influence of those relationships when making her decision to enrol in another course:

> Then business administration studies were offered, and I was familiar with some of the lecturers and as I said, they really, really went the extra mile. Really did. And they just helped me so much.

The "familiar" and trusting relationships that Helen established with several local educators were critical in her decision to continue her education by enrolling in her next course. When she subsequently engaged with her course, the close relationships Helen had with her educators meant that they went the "extra mile" to support her individual learning needs.

Since beginning her tertiary education at her local vocational campus, Pat has attained an honours credential to qualify for her chosen profession. Before describing her experiences in a classroom with her first educator, Pat lamented that the educator's position in the region has since been made redundant, expressing dismay that her educator is no longer involved with students. Pat shared her observations about her classroom interactions with that local educator:

> She was genuine, you could tell. You could tell she was genuinely interested in peoples' learning. What they wanted to learn as well as the course content and what she had to teach. So, it was a combo job. Also, she was interested in the person, and she really tried to encourage, encourage, and she had an enquiring mind that was pretty evident, and I think she appreciated that in people too. As well as a very human person. I'm not just talking about myself; I'm talking about other people actually more than that. But she realised peoples' fears and worries as well. Particularly related to study and returning to study from... Nearly all of the people were mature-age students as well. Had large gaps of time between school and some form of study. So, she was very patient, very thorough. Always got back… oh, yes, this was the thing too, she always got back to people, and we lived all over the place. We couldn't easily catch up like some people can catch up quite easily say at the campus, but I lived quite remotely. So, she was very good at that following and reassuring. Really, really good.

In talking about her interactions, Pat describes her local educator's performance as a "combo job," meaning that her educator was adept at satisfying a combination of demands in her role, including providing supportive human interactions to each individual as part of her teaching role. The educator's performance included presenting as a "very human person" and "genuine" or having a warm presence as well as an authentic interest in the learning progression of all class members. Her local educator met the complex learning needs of each person in the class, including understanding the "fears and worries" of those people similar to Pat who had extra support needs to continue with a course after "large gaps" or a considerable absence from formal learning. Pat's local educator was accessible and "reassuring" by "following" or keeping in contact with Pat and her progress despite Pat living "remotely" or some distance from her town. Pat's experience was that she needed this level of personal interaction to be supported through her first course and she particularly appreciated that her local educator approached her to ascertain Pat's individual needs for learning support. Pat's overall experience in attending a local class guided by an educator was one of support as an individual that built both her confidence and capabilities.

After she had "grown up in poverty," Maggie became the first member of her family to engage with tertiary education by attending classes at her local vocational campus when she was in her forties. She had good relationships with her local educators, who supported her to complete her first course. Maggie's most recent educational endeavour includes engaging with distance delivery of a philosophy doctorate. She spoke about the initial conversation that she had with an educator at her local vocational campus about her suitability to undertake a

university education after completing a vocational certificate: "one of the VET teachers encouraged me to go to university. She said that if I wanted to go, I would be able to do it." Maggie describes her experience at her local vocational campus as including building a close relationship with her educator, meaning that she had a sense of trust and could rely on her educator's opinion about her capacity. In this way, Maggie knew she would be "able to do it" or engage with a university education.

In sum, each contributor had a lengthy absence from formal learning before commencing their tertiary education. Contributors spoke of the importance of individual support from their educator as they commenced and continued their first tertiary education course as mature-age students at their local vocational campus. Helen overcame her misgivings through her friendship with her local educator, who supported her to continue her education. Individualised interactions with a local educator offered Pat nuanced support so that she could complete her first course and continue her education to realise her career aspirations. The close relationship between Maggie and her educator was pivotal in encouraging Maggie to engage with her university education. Helen, Pat, and Maggie's interactions with their local educators offered them individual support to commence, learn, and continue with their tertiary education.

Interactions with local educators meant warm, close relationships that provided individual support to engage with a course and empowered persons to continue building on their tertiary education. Experiences here are similar to those found in a previous investigation of adult student experiences which Busher et al. (2015) showed appreciate affective support from their educators. In addition, they argued that such support was critical in building the confidence of adults about their formal learning capabilities. As such, adults as students prefer being supported through respectful interactions with educators who could provide clear explanations and modelling of learning practices that empowered them to continue their education (Busher et al., 2015). Previous research, coupled with the findings presented here, illustrates that course experiences supported by an educator's presence in a local region, are significant for persons living in rural areas. Contributors' experiences of individual support extend what is understood about student educator relationships in tertiary education by illustrating the significance of nuanced support from a local educator who understood each person as well as their context. Specifically, an educator who understood them as a person, as well as their circumstances, could offer appropriate individual support for persons living in rural areas. In terms of spatiality, there is a sense of improved social construction of tertiary education space for students in rural areas when their educators live locally. To this end, educators who live locally are perceived as sharing similar social spaces to students, improving the chances of them having shared meanings of their lived experiences. Spatial justice for persons living in Australian rural areas is

having both their local and tertiary education experiences understood by their educators. Such understanding is valued by persons as it offers them a basis for being enabled by their tertiary education as a resident in a rural area.

In addition, the support from local educators demonstrates the significance of those experiences for some persons living in rural areas. In particular, contributors' local educators supported them at course commencement in a way that inspired them to continue their tertiary education. The role of educators in adult learning has received modest attention in research (Busher et al., 2015). As seen here, comprehending the significance of the relationships with local educators for persons living in rural areas is critical to understanding their experiences with continuing their tertiary education. In a related matter, some contributors reported that local educator positions have been made redundant since they completed their initial course, reflecting a new reality: formal educators who provided a human connection by bridging local communities and tertiary education are no longer present in rural areas. Local improvisation to locate replacement educators that support persons' educational endeavours in rural areas I discuss further in the following subthemes as well as in the subtheme *Education Knowledge: Essential Roles*.

5.2.3 Distant Educators: Tenuous Support

Some contributors engaged with online courses that required interacting with educators who were geographically distant from them. When prompted, contributors spoke about ambiguous connections with their distant educators. A significant aspect of some contributors' interactions with their educators throughout their online course was that it was a thin connection offering them tenuous support to learn.

After the inconvenience of relocating and travelling for many years to complete both her undergraduate and first postgraduate course, Margaret welcomed the chance to engage with her next postgraduate course through online delivery. She spoke of her online experience:

> I enjoyed online. I enjoyed some of the teachers. Some of the teachers were awful. Some of them I think were being made to teach stuff while they were trying to do something else. And then I think they didn't teach very well, but [the] ones who were good, were great, and the ones that were ordinary were terrible. Like, it's almost like online learning exaggerates that. Because you're removed from it, because you're so reliant on them doing the right thing, you don't have any recourse. Like, you can't go and knock on their door or anything like that, like you can in a real university. So, you are very

reliant on them, and there's so much online now, and I just wonder about the
quality of it all.

Margaret is adamant that she "enjoyed online and some of the teachers," indicating that despite the distance between them her interactions with some distant educators were enjoyable. She questions the coercive role of her education provider, whereby educators were "being made to teach stuff" that undermined the quality of her course. Seen in her language, Margaret emphasises that her experiences with educators varied significantly and that her interactions ranged from "great" to "terrible." For those experiences that were "terrible," Margaret often had little chance to improve her tenuous connection with her educator to improve her learning experience as she felt socially and physically "removed from it [university]." Margaret contrasts her sense of disconnection during her online course with her experience of a "real university" that could involve authentic learning through human interaction. A lack of direct contact with her distant educators meant that Margaret felt that she was "reliant" on their opinion of her learning without "recourse." For Margaret, despite her educators' lack of familiarity with her and the knowledge she gained as part of her learning progression, she had little choice but to accept their assessment of her. A lack of interaction that could demonstrate her individual learning progression means that Margaret "wondered about the quality of it all" or calls into question the quality of learning from online courses where there are tenuous connections between educators and their students.

Recently, William enrolled in his first certificate course to continue his formal education after leaving high school several decades ago. William's understanding of connection with his educators is moulded by the online delivery of his course, as he has not previously experienced learning in a class as an adult. He explained his interactions with his education provider:

> I've never actually set foot into VET. Oh well, I go to a larger town to register for each module, but that's about it. Because it's all external and my campus is in another town in the State, I've never been there. I've never met my lecturer; I've only spoken to her twice on the phone and a few dozen times on the email, and that's how we converse. So, it's a little bit harder than it probably would [be] if I was in the actual class. But at the same, it's...
> I don't know if it's beneficial or limiting me, but I'm getting through it.

William is resolved to "getting through it" or to learn from his online course. He is determined to complete his course despite feeling removed from his campus that he has "never set foot into." William also describes limited communication between him and his educator, acknowledging that contact arrangements that are part of online delivery mean that "it's a little bit harder" for him to learn. However, without being able to compare his experience to learning

in a classroom, William cannot discern if online delivery is "beneficial or limiting" him, suggesting that he is uncertain about the ways in which his learning support could be improved.

To study a certificate course for her employment needs, Amber has recently enrolled in a course that is delivered online by a vocational campus. She spoke about the interactions that she has had with her educators in the six months previous:

> …there have been three different lecturers since I started last year, so a bit of a turnover, and each one has had to learn the ropes of the VET system, which has taken a lot of time and energy. I get the feeling they are not always supported very well (we are only a small VET), and they have much more to do than there is time to do it. That sometimes makes things difficult for students like me.

Amber's experience is that her education provider does not support their educators to adequately interact with her. Amber ascribes the lack of provider support and poor working conditions as contributing to a high staff turnover that takes "time and energy" away from assisting students. Such characteristics of her education provider Amber attributes to it being under-resourced due to its "small" size. Under such conditions, her educators have struggled to "learn the ropes" or gather a basic understanding of the vocational education and training system. As a consequence, Amber's experience with her educators in her online course is that they do not have the organisational knowledge or time to connect with her to offer adequate learning support, making her course progression more arduous than it needs to be.

Oigle spoke about the challenges that he encounters with his online course and how the role of the distance between students and educators generates obstacles that are yet to be addressed:

> …sometimes I have found that the VET lecturers are not up to the requirements of communicating with students in a timely manner at the beginning of a course. It is far easier for them if the students do come to a lecture theatre at an appointed time, [rather] than to set up all the codes and passwords for each student in an online setting.

In Oigle's experience, educators' being "not up to the requirements of communicating" means that the structure of online delivery undermines the chances for educators to promptly communicate with their students. In comparison to Oigle's experience of attending a "lecture theatre" or a class, online courses also make it more difficult for educators to complete simple administrative tasks with their students.

In sum, each contributor's experience of their sense of supportive connection with their distant educator was tenuous. Four contributors related their perspectives about their

interactions with educators to achieve their learning goals in online courses that at best conveyed tenuous connections. Margaret's completion of an online postgraduate course after experiences in a classroom meant that she was acutely aware of the disconnect between her and her educator, and she subsequently questions educators' understanding of a student's learning progression in online courses. The tenuous connection between William and his educators has been shaped by the de rigueur communication methods of online delivery that he recognises influence his learning experience. Amber's experience is that her educators are not given adequate resources, undermining her chances to connect with them for learning support. Oigle identifies that his educators are often overwhelmed when trying to connect with students in online courses. While each contributor's experiences with their distant educators varied, at best, their connections with their educators were tenuous.

For contributors who engaged with online courses, connecting with their educators through current communication methods meant a tenuous sense of connection that generated uncertainty about learning in online courses. The potential for the immediacy of connection by using information and communication technologies offers an illusion of human connection that in practice is only a shadow of the communication that is needed to support adult learning in rural areas. In related research, it is argued that students express a desire to feel connected to a person, such as their educator, throughout their online courses (Herrmann, 2015; Stone & O'Shea, 2019). Elsewhere, Harrison and Plowright (2019) elaborate on the experiences of connection between students and their educators in the Australian context, concluding that all of the students interviewed desired more personalised communication with their online lecturer. They argue further that without a robust connection with educators, students' sense of learning support is undermined. Contributors' experiences here offer an improved understanding of the tenuous connections that they have with their online educators and some of the ways that it impacts their views about their learning.

In other research by Ragusa and Crampton (2018), it is argued that a lack of social interaction with educators is the most severe barrier to learning through online delivery. Their study built on and complicated understandings of personalised communication to illustrate that irrespective of the type of course, the quality and timeliness of lecturer feedback were identified by students as the most valued form of learning communication. Here, contributors' experiences of tenuous support from distant educators extend previous research by illustrating that for some persons living in Australian rural areas, communication practices in online courses detracted from their sense of connection with their educator. Subsequently, there was a slim chance for contributors to access comprehensive learning support and fewer chances for them to be empowered. For instance, for contributors to benefit from previous recommendations for

chances to be fostered through respectful interactions with educators who can provide clear explanations and model learning practices (Busher et al., 2015). A lens of spatiality assists in explaining how there is a poor construction of social spaces with educators who are subsequently perceived as being socially distant from their students. A lack of adequately shared social spaces as part of tertiary education engagement is often viewed by persons living in Australian rural areas as a source of constraint for their learning. Spatial justice for persons living in such areas includes the chances to be enabled to learn throughout their tertiary education by being able to access shared social spaces. Such spaces a valued by persons as they offer a platform for improved learning experiences.

Contributors' experiences of tenuous support illustrate that the learning experiences of persons living in rural areas who engage with online courses are defined by an inadequate sense of connection with their educators. Understanding contributors' experiences of tenuous connection with distant educators through existing online communication methods illuminate an aspect of online courses that detracts from learning support for persons living in rural areas. To address their challenges, some persons living in rural areas have sought additional social and educational support. Experiences of such support I discuss further in the three subthemes that follow. In addition, in the theme *Achieving Completion: Shedding Constraints*, I describe contributors' experiences in relation to the availability of local resources that influence their course completion. Further, in the subtheme *Education Knowledge: Essential Roles* I review the role of tertiary-educated residents in connecting with local people to encourage and assist them to continue their formal education through online courses.

5.2.4 Course Fundamentals: Peer Support

Each contributor who engaged with either a class or online delivery had experiences with connecting with others who were completing the same course. Some contributors were able to form close relationships with other course attendees, while others struggled to connect or were unfamiliar with their online classmates. One particular aspect of some contributors' experiences was a good connection with their classmates which was fundamental in heightening both their learning and course enjoyment.

After a long absence from formal learning and as the first member of her family to engage with tertiary education, Dawn was very uncertain about her decision to continue her education:

> …when you start something, 'oh, can I do this? Can I do it? I haven't studied
> for 20 years.' So, getting back into it and having people around you too. We
> were in a classroom, so other people... some people hadn't studied for a long

> time either. There was a mix of ages; there were different journeys. So being
> able to talk to other people, share your experience, share your uncertainty,
> your fear, all the rest of it because it was all new.

Dawn's experience of studying a tertiary education course in a class was "all new," reflecting that apart from her experience of "having people around" with whom she could interact there was little about being involved with tertiary education and attending class that seemed familiar. After her initial sense of trepidation, Dawn became more at ease when she could "talk to other people" or interact with her classmates who had "different journeys" or were from diverse backgrounds. Her experience of uncertainty about continuing her education was overcome by "sharing experiences" or interactions with her classmates.

Jane's completion of an undergraduate degree meant that she was familiar with institutional requirements at her university. When considering commencing a postgraduate course while living in her rural area, she was disconcerted by her lack of understanding of the educational technologies in online courses. Jane's understanding of institutional requirements meant that she could prioritise becoming familiar with educational technologies. She spoke about what it was like to begin her postgraduate course online:

> Really scary. So, it had been about 15 years since I'd done a university
> course as an undergrad. It was really scary not knowing, it was partly about
> the technology, so as an undergrad[uate] it was all face-to-face, living on
> campus, very personal delivery. Very hands-on and participating in a course
> that's done entirely online where you never necessarily even get to meet
> your tutors, and course co-ordinators and fellow students was quite scary
> and also about the technology, so that was, that felt a bit scary.

In contrast to her experience of a "personal" and "hands-on" delivery throughout her undergraduate course at a metropolitan campus, Jane's experience of beginning a postgraduate course online was "scary." Her fear stems from a sense of disconnection and isolation from both her educators and classmates. Engaging with an online course without human interaction heightened Jane's fears about her capacity to overcome her learning challenges and overshadowed the possibility for her to anticipate learning at a postgraduate level.

Before engaging in an online degree course, Heidi had experience in classes as both a student and as an educator. She described what an absence of meaningful interactions with classmates meant for her during her online course:

> I didn't enjoy not being part of a study community. Like, I'm so used to
> adult education and helping other students, and I was expecting that for me,
> and I was on my own. And I felt when I was on the forums, I would only

ever go on them if it was part of your assessment thing, I would never get
on and do the chatty thing. I just felt as though people were trying to outdo
each other, and I was sort of resenting it a bit, so then I just put the stuff up
and get off. So, I didn't feel a connection with them at all. Even though a lot
of the external people were from, some of them were from the city anyway.
It's just because they were busy doing other things and part-time work and
whatever and they're just sort of fitting their study in that's why they weren't
attending the uni[versity]. Yeah, there were a few people from all over
Australia, but not too many that I came across, the majority were in this
State.

As an experienced learner and educator, Heidi views human interaction as an essential part of
her learning process. Her online course did not provide her with a "study community" or peer
support to assist her learning, and she was "on her own" and felt isolated throughout her course.
Heidi's experience of interactions with classmates in an online space revolved around a chance
to do the "chatty thing" or engage in written communication online in "forums" where she
observed that her classmates were trying to "outdo each other" or compete rather than co-
operate. She began to resent being coerced to engage with a competitive environment,
heightening her sense of antipathy and isolation. Heidi was also disappointed to find that the
majority of potential peers in her course were from a metropolitan area in her State. Her
disappointment centres on scant chances for her to learn about the application of her course
materials in different contexts by interacting with classmates who were from Australian rural
areas.

Determine to overcome the obstacles to connecting with classmates, Heidi and her
colleague travelled hundreds of kilometres in the hope of networking with other students:
I went to campus once, we drove over there, and it was a two-day course,
and we were the only two people who rocked up, and that was people from
all over for that course. They had two people join in one day from another
rural area who were just catching up, but they weren't actually in that class.
We were the only enrolled ones that rocked up, so I thought, 'well, that was
a waste of time.'
Heidi's need to improve her learning by interacting with her classmates motivated her to make a
considerable effort to visit a regional campus. Despite this, Heidi's attempts to network were a
"waste of time," a trend that she describes as continuing on another campus visit:
….and then the only other time I had to go to campus was last year,
beginning of last year we did a day session, and really it was just to tell us
about what we had to do for our next assignment, and I thought... and the

only person I met in that class was a person who works in another organisation that we say hello to every now and then, but it wasn't really about networking with the others because it was just very quick. You're in, you're out, and yeah, I just found that very frustrating. Yeah, you were definitely a number at uni[versity].

Heidi was frustrated when her campus visit "wasn't about networking," and she felt unsupported in her attempts to connect with her classmates. Her overall experience of human connection in her course was "quick. You're in, you're out." For Heidi, campus attendance was a production line process whereby her need for time to foster relationships with her classmates and educators went unacknowledged and unsupported by her education provider. The provider's lack of response to Heidi's need to learn with others meant that her experience was one of being relegated to "definitely a number" or being less than a person with individual learning needs.

Amber is building on her undergraduate education by engaging with an online certificate course that she studies at her local vocational campus. She explained her course mostly involves interacting with a "computer screen," and Amber stated, "There's very little opportunity for class discussion, sharing ideas etcetera. I think that is one of the most enjoyable parts of getting an education, but it doesn't happen." Despite attending her local vocational campus there is little chance for Amber to engage with others to heighten her enjoyment of her course. Amber's experience is that attending an online course at her current campus is an isolating and lacklustre experience.

As seen above, interactions with peers during their course varied for each contributor. Four contributors explained their chances or lack thereof for interactions with classmates. Engaging with others in a class assisted Dawn to come to terms with transitioning into tertiary education, whereas Jane had a sense of isolation from a human connection in her online course, making commencing her postgraduate studies a frightening experience. Her experiences as both a student and educator in classrooms made Heidi aware of the importance of co-operative peer interactions for learning, and she was frustrated and felt depersonalised when her education provider failed to foster such connections. As a graduate, Amber has previously enjoyed learning with others on campus, an experience that contrasts with her lack of interaction with others when engaging in an online course at her local vocational campus. Each contributor who shared their experiences with classmates viewed interactions with them as a fundamental aspect of learning and enjoying a course.

For contributors, interactions with their classmates are a significant aspect of their course engagement that varies according to the course delivery method. Where possible, an

adequate connection with classmates meant a more enjoyable learning experience throughout their courses. For instance, contributors' experiences of peer support illustrate that interactions with classmates in person affords a sense of connection during a course that provides both affective and learning support. In contrast, contributors' negligible interactions with course attendees in online delivery diminishes their course experience. Contributors' experiences here with peer support build on previous research that argues people who engage with online courses while residing in their rural areas experience a sense of isolation (Purnell & Cuskelly, 1996; Rush, 2014). Here, contributors' experiences in both online and classroom contexts highlight that connection with peer support generates learning enjoyment with isolation detracting from course experiences.

Understandings about the nuances of support experiences are also offered, with contributors noting that an absence of peer support in online courses can contribute to a sense of apprehension about course commencement. Further, contributors' experiences add weight to findings elsewhere that it is important to offer chances for social interactions among peers in courses at every available opportunity (Meldrum, 2016). As an example of such, my academy, James Cook University, has introduced student mentor and support programs that, along with scholarship and preparation initiatives, have significantly boosted retention rates for regional and remote students on campus (National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, 2018).

Contributors' experiences of peer support also extend understandings about the possibilities of peer mentoring or learning, illustrating the ramifications of the presence and absence of peer support for students as persons who live in rural areas. In particular, experiences of connection or isolation during courses are mediated by the chances for interactions with classmates that are an essential part of learning support for persons living in rural areas. Drawing on spatiality helps to explain that the co-creation of social spaces with peers is an essential part of learning during tertiary education. For such purposes, persons living in Australian rural areas are eager to connect with others who are engaged with tertiary education. Spatial justice for persons living in Australian rural areas is centred on providing opportunities for them to share tertiary education spaces. Such spaces are valued for affording chances for social as well as learning support.

The findings here about experiences of interactions with classmates extend what is known in research about peer support for course experiences of persons living in rural areas. The presence or absence of adequate peer interactions during a course is an integral part of having a sense of either connection or disconnection to learning in a course. The experiences of

alternative interaction with a selection of people who could support persons living in rural areas throughout a course I discuss further in both of the following subthemes.

5.2.5 Exploring Course Knowledge: Collegial Support

Some contributors were employed in roles related to their courses. Such involvement with local organisations meant that contributors were positioned to draw on the expertise of experienced and trusted local colleagues to support the comprehension of their course materials. In this way, a few contributors experienced interactions with empathetic colleagues who assisted them to apply their knowledge and progress through their courses.

Before Kate engaged with her course, she had been a health service volunteer for many years. She is studying an online course and spoke to me about the way that she was able to comprehend some of her more complex course materials:

> I did use a few of the nurses at work. When I was struggling with the
> medication calculations, I would get them to go through it with me, that sort
> of stuff. They helped me with care plans and problems like that. They were
> a good resource.

A prior relationship with colleagues in her organisation meant that Kate was comfortable approaching them for learning support. Such access to knowledgeable colleagues was critical for Kate to overcome the "struggle" and to understand problems or assessment topics throughout her course. Kate's experience was that her colleagues were a "good resource" and that they were readily accessible when she required assistance with her course materials.

Educators at Dawn's local vocational campus assisted her by referring her to suitable employment opportunities during her first and subsequent courses, and she was employed for the majority of the time while completing her tertiary education. At the time that Dawn engaged with an online degree course, she was one of the first in her region to do so. She stated who had helped her throughout her courses:

> Work colleagues. I worked in a variety of places while I was studying.
> So…and I did work in the areas that were complementary to my study, so
> people just understood what you were doing, and it was like you were able
> to apply your learning to it as well. So that was really good.

Employment related to the course that she was studying gave Dawn access to "work colleagues" who had completed a similar course and had experience with the practical application of their course knowledge in their rural context. Dawn's experience with colleagues included the chance to interact with people "who just understood what she was doing" and with whom she could share her experiences with studying. Collegial support was significant for Dawn, who did not

always have the benefits of connection with classmates. Dawn also appreciated her colleagues' guidance and felt a sense of pleasure when "applying her learning," or utilising her course knowledge in her work setting which, in turn, inspired her to continue with her course.

When discussing the role of her colleagues to assist with her course progression, Dawn elaborated on her relationship with a particular local colleague who was also continuing her education:

> I had one person who was studying at the same time, and she was my mentor
> right throughout. If I got stuck with something, I'd give her a call she'd say,
> 'come out,' we'd spend 5-10 minutes talking about what was bugging me
> and two hours talking about something else, but I felt heaps better, and she's
> still a valued work colleague, friend of mine now. So definitely, people, I
> worked with. Whether they were supervisors, or you know, fellow workers...
> and there are lots of people out there studying. So even that, just being able
> to bounce off and have the group all together or nut things out together.

Dawn's experience of the enduring close relationship with her "valued work colleague" as a "mentor" and "friend" assisted her throughout her course by providing affective as well as learning support. In addition, Dawn was supported by "fellow workers" and the intellectual stimulation from being able to "nut things out" or frequently meet with a group of local people to discuss ideas, which offered them reassurance to overcome their individual learning obstacles.

In the final year of her online honours course, both Maggie's employment and her colleagues were important to her. She explains the significance of collegial interactions during her honours course:

> I was just very fortunate at the time, in my workplace that there were... and
> my manager had two master's. So, she'd completed two master's and my
> colleague, as you know had done honours. So that was the support that I had,
> so I could see every time I did an essay, they would debrief with me and
> look at different ideas and even proofread some of my work. So, it was quite
> hands-on support. And I worked in a place at that time where the staff were
> very passionate. They were very passionate about social justice and similar
> values. So, I think that made a big difference.

Highly qualified colleagues who aspired to apply their knowledge to benefit others provided Maggie with "hands-on support" or outstanding personal assistance to complete her assessment pieces. Maggie has a sense of "fortune" that she had colleagues who were "passionate" about their work and through collegial interactions exercised their principles related to empowering

others. For Maggie, receiving such support made a "big difference" to her learning. Apart from assisting her to excel in her course comprehension, collegial support also influenced the principles that guide Maggie's application of her course knowledge in the workplace. She spoke about the extent of the knowledge that she had gained with help from her colleagues:

> I know from my own experience when I've been in the city for different training and things that people can be quite surprised about what sort of knowledge you do have. So, I think that I feel that it's really important and it's really important that we get recognised for that sort of professional[ism], and I think it is getting better, but I think to a certain extent there still seems a country cousin. There is not work to the same standard or have the same standard of training and education that city people have. And that's where I think it's important in the mentoring and that and supporting people to give them the opportunity to get qualifications.

Interactions with metropolitan colleagues who were "quite surprised about what sort of knowledge you do have" inform Maggie's understanding of the capabilities she has acquired as a professional who has received local collegial support to work in her rural area. She emphasises twice that it is "really important" that the complexities in working as a rural professional are "recognised," by both other professionals as well as those charged with preparing them to practice in rural areas. Seen in Maggie's language is her view that professional recognition is extremely significant for her. Subsequently, Maggie wants the competencies required to work as a professional in rural areas respected. In contrast, her work is currently depreciated by her metropolitan colleagues, evidenced in the term "country cousin." Such a term means that rural professionals such as Maggie are viewed by their metropolitan colleagues as simple, substandard performers who find the professional activities of such colleagues both novel and bewildering. In resisting such perspectives, Maggie argues that there needs to be improved recognition of the nuances of working as that "sort of professional" or professionals who live and work in rural areas. In addition, she acknowledges that metropolitan curricula do not have a comparable "standard of training and education" or courses to promote the development of rural professionals. Maggie subsequently highlights the learning needs of local people to "get qualifications" or gain credentials and experience for rural practice can be assisted by the support of local professionals. Her understanding of the need for such learning support arises from Maggie's experience that for metropolitan approved course curricula to be applied in rural areas requires both understanding and adaptation by resident professionals. Such professional navigation places greater demands on personal resourcefulness, a process for learners that is best supported by other rural professionals with experience in such matters.

Maggie draws on her own experience to recommend that local people engaged in a course receive both "mentoring" and "support" from qualified local professionals so that they "qualify" or have the capability to work as rural professionals. She expresses that her understanding of professional knowledge applicable to rural contexts has shaped her intention to assist other students:

> When I finished my degree, I determined that I would support as many students as what I could. Because mainly too because I absolutely believe that we need the professional people and that professional standard out in the rural communities. And without that... I just think that people need that support because as you know, it can be quite isolated when you study in a rural area.

Being supported by colleagues to complete her degree was a profound experience for Maggie, shaping her "determination" or resolve to "support many students" or other local people to gain knowledge from their courses as well as their work placements. In her view, "we need professional people" or rural professionals, and the process of developing rural professionalism in local people is best undertaken with "support" from connections with local professionals. In addition, Maggie's perspective is that studying to become a qualified professional who can maintain a "professional standard" may be an isolating experience for people living in her rural area. In Maggie's language, she emphasises that fostering collegial support is essential for residents in her rural area to become "professional people" who can uphold such standards while maintaining a sense of connection to a local community. In her experience, the practice of professionalism in her rural areas is sustained by a good connection with colleagues who can buffer against "isolation" through offering both professional and affective support.

After attending classes, Heidi's experience of an online course was disheartening. Her ideas about getting assistance to gain knowledge from a course include a human connection in a supportive learning community. She shared an example of how a connection with one local person at the time provided interactions that continue to support her learning:

> ...she would leave a message to say that she is doing her placement and 'I'm trying to get these women together that are all studying.' So, she created what they call a network here, and we meet probably every two months. We tried every month, but everyone was just so busy. So, it was anyone studying, anyone who that's already got the degree, we just meet at a hotel and have a long lunch and talk about what our services are and really trying to get some professional development into the area. Like we all met as workers, but then because of where we lived... if I joined a professional organisation and they have all these speakers and lunches, they're always

city-based. So, the purpose of this group is to get a strong group of people together to say, 'well how about you bring some stuff up to us?' Rather than us have to leave our children and families and jobs to go down for a three-hour session in the city which is 4:30 to 7 or something ridiculous. So, they are madly working on trying to get that happen, but we are sort of just stuck at the moment. I think all we are doing at the moment is meeting and having some lunch and having a bit of a chinwag. It's just about the type of work that you do. So that has been really good because that's the only support.

After being invited by her colleague, Heidi joined a "network" where she could have a "chinwag" or relaxed discussions with other local people who had experience with engaging with a course to qualify for a professional position. Being able to engage with a "strong group of people" or have a sense of solidarity with other local professionals through recurrent local meetings supported Heidi, who was unable to attend professional meetings with a "city-based" group. For Heidi, such local meetings became an essential "support" for her course progression as they were focused on the "type of work" or sharing experiences with both tertiary education and work in her rural area. Time constraints for members of the network mean that frequent meetings to share professional expertise have taken over lobbying their metropolitan-based professional organisation for better support. Her network of local colleagues was essential for Heidi to progress through her course and offers her professional development, extending her capabilities so that she can continue to improve as a professional in her rural area.

In sum, for contributors who were engaged with online courses, interaction with colleagues offered them essential support. Four contributors explained that their collegial experiences offered them learning support that was critical for them. Kate and her colleagues had a good relationship before she started a course, and she drew upon them to assist her to comprehend some of the more complicated aspects of her course materials. Being employed in a workplace with other degree holders meant Dawn could interact with colleagues who supported the practical application of her course knowledge. One colleague, in particular, afforded Dawn invaluable emotional and learning support throughout the entire duration of her bachelor's course. Maggie's experience with colleagues at her workplace was that they were inclined to offer comprehensive support with their qualified expertise benefitting her course progression as well as influencing her workplace practices. Former collegial interactions also inspired Maggie to assist other local people to become qualified as rural professionals. Becoming a member of a local professional network comprising current and former students who were qualified rural professionals assisted Heidi throughout her course as well as during her subsequent involvement in the workplace. Each contributor views their collegial interactions as an irreplaceable source of support that assisted them to comprehend their course materials and progress towards both

completion of their courses and the application of their course knowledge as professionals in their rural contexts.

For persons living in rural areas, their experiences of collegial support built on their understanding of their course materials so that they could practice as a professional in their particular rural context. Experience of collegial support is an extension of arguments in research that there are distinct learning and practice communities that provide opportunities for both personal and professional development (Hicks, 2014; Illeris, 2016). For instance, experiences of connection to such communities were significant for persons' attainment of course knowledge as well as the application of that knowledge as professionals in rural areas. In terms of spatiality, contributors' experiences with their colleagues highlight the empowerment that comes from building and sharing collegial spaces. Persons living in Australian rural areas are eager to be connected with others in employment settings who have reached their desired employment outcomes. In part, spatial justice in Australian rural areas centres on chances for persons living there to have sustained interactions with colleagues. Such interactions are valued highly as they enable persons living in rural areas to perform in their professional local roles.

Collegial support was an indispensable resource for persons living in rural areas to gain and then apply their tertiary education as employed professionals. The significant role of such experiences for the exploration and application of course knowledge is in addition to what is known in research about rural professionals (Mellow, 2005; Morrow, 2012). In particular, contributors' experiences as rural professionals hinged on collegial support that prepared them for their roles and supported them as striving professionals. Collegial support is also related to the ideas of Reardon and Brooks (2018), who argue that online courses could not encompass all training needs in the face of diversifying employment that involves human interaction in person. For those engaged with online courses to fill the demand for local professionals in rural areas, collegial support to perform in such positions is a highly significant experience. First, for learning, and again for rural practice after persons progressed through their course to attain local employment while living in their rural area. Other experiences of persons who have attained their credentials and practice as qualified rural professionals I discuss further in *Rural Professionals: Diverse Opportunities*.

5.2.6 Local People: Nuanced Support

Most contributors who engaged with an online course relied on the support of at least one local person with whom they had a prior relationship. In this way, experiences with local people afforded some contributors assistance that was tailored to their learning and affective support needs. For some contributors, their experiences with local people offered them nuanced

support, and in particular, contributors received assistance tailored to their circumstances that was critical to aid their course progression.

Emily is the only contributor to engage with her course through posted materials. She is isolated from the benefits of human connection with her educator and classmates and spoke about local support for her to continue her course:

> …there is nothing better than a good yak with friends, that's what helps you,
> we are humans, we need people to encourage us and help us along our way,
> everyone does. Yeah, and then people encourage you and say you are doing
> a good job, you can do it. That's what your friends do.

Without interactions with an educational community, Emily relies on a "good yak with friends" or support from informal discussions with others. Apart from her friends being the sole source of social recognition of her learning progress, Emily also receives encouragement from them to continue her course.

Given Emily's statement about the importance of friends for her course progression, I was interested in her chances to connect with friends. She explained, "I have friends at work, but we don't go out or anything like that." She also elaborated on her chances to connect with others:

> I don't really have time. The friends that I had when the kids were little, they
> were really important, but because I'm working, I don't have time. I perhaps
> have one good friend, and my neighbour is really friendly, but we don't have
> the time to get together for coffee or anything like that.

For Emily, her care, work, and study commitments mean that despite the friendliness of local people, she doesn't "really have time" for frivolous social interactions. Instead, Emily relies on her work colleagues to provide both friendship and support. She elaborated, saying, "I think it's crazy. I think that everyone is in a similar situation, even mums with little kids don't have the time to make friends." In Emily's experience, friendships are "really important" when navigating challenges in different stages of life, such as motherhood or during more novel activities such as engaging with tertiary education. She views a lack of time to make and sustain friendships, as "crazy," reflecting the insane situation whereby time constraints mean that individuals face their challenges without such support.

While studying her courses, Dawn cared for her children, assisted her husband with his business, and was employed in positions related to her tertiary education. Dawn began her most recent course through online delivery and finished her credential by block mode which involved frequently travelling interstate. She spoke about her support during that time:

I couldn't have done it without my family. My partner... even though I've probably bit his head off a few times, but he stuck by me, but it's a huge commitment from your family I think and your friends. Just to be able to invite you out to something and just you know, do something normal. Because as you would know yourself, there are so many things you do have to say 'no' to, so family and friends definitely.

As part of her commitment to completing her course, Dawn spent a large amount of time separated from her "family and friends." The separation was a strain on her personal relationships, especially with her husband whose head she "bit off" or was subject to her unprovoked anger. Dawn appreciates her husband and others who "stuck by" her and were "committed" to supporting her to the end of her course. One of the ways that she was supported was through encouragement to socialise. Without that encouragement, spending less time in social activities could have contributed to Dawn's sense of isolation as she progressed through her course. In contrast, Dawn describes the support of others who invited her to be involved in "normal" activities. Such involvement was distinct from her engagement with the more unusual activity of tertiary education in her context. Without ample chances for support from local classmates as she had in her previous course, Dawn appreciates that despite her studies taking priority and sometimes having to "say 'no'," her friends ensured that she was supported by engaging with usual local social activities.

Julie completed her first undergraduate course thirty years ago and recently decided to complete another degree through online delivery. After enrolling in her online course, Julie realised that despite her previous studies, she was struggling to understand institutional requirements and educational technologies. She was able to gain the necessary skills to progress through her course until completion by drawing on the support of a local friend who had previously navigated an online course. Julie describes how she overcame her knowledge gaps.

I had to actually get a very good friend to show me, I didn't even know what a learning portfolio was when I first started at university. I didn't know how to access the library on there, there was a lot of things that I did not know and if it wasn't for the help of the good friend I don't know where I would have been. I went down to basic computer skills to a person in the city and they helped me quite a bit, not academically but just my way around the actual website and because I found it very confronting not having... well I did another computer package previously, but apart from that I had very limited knowledge of the computer. So, I went down to the city and [it] helped me quite a bit, my friend helped me quite a bit as well. I think we have sort of helped each [other] over the years, muddle through. But, as far

as ... I don't know... I would never have completed... I don't think I would
have got past first semester if it hadn't been for the options that I could seek
out privately.

While she was prepared to engage "academically" to learn from her course materials, Julie's lack of understanding of institutional requirements and educational technologies was "confronting" and threatened to undermine her course progression. Pivotal for Julie's continuation of her course was the help of a "good friend" or someone that Julie had a close relationship with before she started her course. After being reassured by her friend about the institutional requirements as well as her ability to learn, Julie resolved to overcome her challenges with educational technologies by investing in private tutoring. Bolstered by the support from her friend as well as her tutor, Julie was able to continue her course until completion, an option that she acknowledges is not available to every local person. Since that time, Julie has completed another course at the postgraduate level with her and her friend receiving mutual reassurance as they both "muddle through" to continue their education, inferring that there may be more effective ways for them to learn from their courses.

Julie went on to discuss the significance of her interactions with other local people as she progressed through her online course:

…there are people in the community; they were a big help. I really have
found some lecturers... I send the questions, and I get an answer three or four
days later, and I want the answer straight away. We work it out, but studying
external is very hard, but I'm very lucky that I have a patient partner who is
supportive.

For Julie, engaging in an online course means that she is restricted to asynchronous communication with her lecturers, frustrating her learning progress. To continue her course, she has "big help" or significant assistance from local people. Such assistance includes the chance to discuss course materials with her husband to overcome the barriers to learning presented by the communication platform in her "external" or online course. The chances for synchronous interactions with local people, including her "patient partner," are a critical part of Julie's learning from her course materials, permitting her to "work it out" and expediently progress through her course.

Her residence and employment in her town for most of her life have provided Margaret with "a very wide friendship circle" that exists in addition to "a very understanding partner and family," all of which have assisted her to achieve her educational aspirations. Margaret's most recent postgraduate course was delivered online, and she described the assistance from local people throughout her studies:

I had a lot of people up here who supported me, if not... like not financially
or anything like that but who encouraged me, and they're still close friends
and people in the general arts community up here who always supported me,
and you know I suffered terribly from performance anxiety. And to get over
that hurdle, because I had to get over it, I decided performing in public was
what I had to do over and over and over. And so, people up here helped me
through our actual arts council to be able to afford the venue and play there.
And when I had the concert, I had 130 people came and things like that.
Can't remember if I did it twice even, but. So, I was always given great
support and even from people I knew from my previous career, came to hear
and to support me. So, I was very lucky to get that support.

Becoming an accomplished performer was a critical part of Margaret's course outcome, and she experienced overwhelming support to improve her performance from a "lot of people" living "up here" or across her local region. In addition to being encouraged by local people throughout her online course, her "local arts council" supported Margaret financially. Her lifetime residency, previous careers as well as her local volunteer roles were the basis for connections with "130 people" who gathered to assist Margaret to develop as a performer, an occasion that she views rivals the significance of financial support. Margaret appreciates that she was "lucky" to have the chance to become a proficient performer through the support of local people.

As seen above, contributors experienced a variety of support through their connections with local people. Four contributors explained the distinctive types of local support they received throughout their courses. Opportunities for Emily to connect with work colleagues as friends provide social recognition of her tertiary education as well as encouragement that bolsters her course progression. Dawn was reassured by support from her family and the consideration of her friends, who maintained contact and included her in social activities throughout her course. A good friend of Julie's afforded her essential support to understand the requirements of her education provider when she commenced her course, strengthening Julie's resolve to continue her course, such as by investing in tutoring that assisted her to continue until completion. As a lifelong resident in her town, Margaret's experience was that there was overwhelming support from local people who both afforded and attended her performances, an activity that was instrumental for her to achieve her learning goals. Each contributor who shared their experience of interacting with local people during their course experienced powerful, nuanced support from them that assisted their course progression.

Contributors' experiences of interactions with local people during their course engagement meant that their learning needs were visible as well as generously and appropriately

supported. Experiences of support from local people for tertiary education endeavours are similar to other research illustrating that people living in a rural area meet their everyday challenges through various interactions with others within, rather than outside, of their communities (Cavaye, 2001; Measham et al., 2012). Despite relatively poor educational attainment in many Australian rural areas, the social strength of such areas means that supporting individuals to progress through their courses has been rapidly adopted as an everyday challenge that local people face together.

Experiences of nuanced support from local people also extend research arguing that people living in rural areas are often extensively connected with other residents (Dymock, 2007; Otero, 2016). Contributors' experiences here highlight that their connections with others could inform them about institutional requirements as well as facilitate improved learning. Connections with local people also meant that essential resources were available for persons to engage until course completion.

Experiences of nuanced support here also add to research by Dawborn-Gundlach and Margetts (2018) who investigated the complex social circumstances of mature-age students, illustrating that they did not make new friends that assisted them during the first year of their university studies, perhaps due to the extra constraints on their time. Contributors' experiences here highlight an addition to understanding mature-age students' social support by showing that to achieve course completion, persons living in rural areas engaged with people that they had known for many years. In this way, each contributor's local friends provided essential support for their course progression. Receiving support for tertiary education endeavours while living in their rural areas is therefore afforded by circumstances where persons have a wealth of social connections (Otero, 2016). Specifically, the social wealth or the variety of people living adjacent to a person and to whom they are strongly connected is central to supporting their tertiary education endeavours.

Experiences of support from local people also extend what is known about the circumstances that promote student retention for adults living in rural areas (Australian Department of Education and Training, 2017b; Hodges et al., 2013). Specifically, a person's longstanding connection with other local people often means essential support for them to continue their course until completion. Further, social support as essential for women who contributed here strongly reflects Robison's (2007) findings about the re-entry of women older than "traditional age" who decide to continue a degree or advanced degree while living in a rural area. Similar to her participants, women here, despite substantial barriers and real-world demands, endured their course progression with local support. In addition, in contrast to the

small number of contributors who identified as men, women related that social support in their rural areas was critical for their course completion. With reference to spatiality, contributors' sense of being empowered by their acceptance in their rural social spaces is significant for them and for reaching their tertiary education goals. Being part of the construction of rural social spaces, and in particular, belonging means that persons have access to essential resources for completing their tertiary education. For persons who live in Australian rural areas, spatial justice hinges on being part of rural social spaces that empower them to reach their tertiary education goals. Such spaces are valuable as they offer resources that are often not readily available to persons who do not experience a higher level of acceptance in their rural areas.

Nuanced support experiences for contributors as persons living in rural areas made for timely and appropriate support from local people to meet their course requirements. The significance of subsequent interaction among local people to disseminate tertiary education knowledge after attaining a credential I discuss further in the subtheme *Education Knowledge: Essential Roles*. In addition, in the subtheme *Professional Roles: Local Voices* I explore contributors' experiences of connection with local people that permit them to disseminate local knowledge from rural areas to metropolitan-based decision-makers.

5.3 Achieving Completion: Shedding Constraints

Most contributors' experiences of engaging with a tertiary education course while living in their rural area involved circumnavigating obstacles. Each contributor's access to resources to overcome limitations in their context varied. Locating ways to assuage their constraints as well as generate solutions to continue their education was a key event for many contributors. I capture such experiences in the theme, *Achieving Completion: Shedding Constraints* which describes some contributors' attempts to overcome the restrictions in their circumstances.

Achieving Completion: Shedding Constraints comprises six subthemes that taken together describe some contributors' experiences of shedding their constraints to continue their education. Significant for some contributors was their selection of courses where their learning was optimal so that they could gain course knowledge suitable for their purposes, which I explore in the subthemes *Course Selection: Learning Imperative*. Next, in *Course Options: Constrained Choices* I detail some limitations in the choice of courses that contributors could realistically complete while living in their rural areas. Further, continuing their education while living in their rural areas was influenced by local resources and contributors' experiences of such, I describe in *Course Essentials: Poor Provisions*. Some contributors' financial circumstances heavily influenced their decisions to continue their education that I depict in the subtheme *Continuing Education: Financial Constraints*. Many contributors describe extensive

demands on their time, with the foremost disruption to their course continuation being attributed to employment obligations that I portray in the subtheme *Course Engagement: Working Time*. For some contributors, maintaining their living standards while completing their course and attaining post-credential employment was dependent on the financial support of their partners, and I illustrate their experiences in the subtheme *Partner Support: Money and Time*.

5.3.1 Course Selection: Learning Imperative

Most contributors engaged with a course to secure their futures by attaining credentials to improve their employment prospects. Because each contributor subsequently anticipated that their engagement with a course would help them to realise their aspirations for their future, the quality of their learning experience was important to them. Contributors who had previous experience with formal learning were especially particular in making course selections that enhanced their chances of learning.

The classroom-based course that Helen attended has developed her awareness of the significance of communication for her learning. She reflected on her choice to continue her education by engaging with course units delivered in classes at her local vocational campus rather than through online delivery. During that reflection, Helen described the particular classroom interactions that assisted her to learn:

> I think if I try explaining… because we all perceive things differently depending on our life stories. I just think that you know one paragraph would be read by many ways by the person who reads, and I think my clarification to get it right, to make sure that you're getting what the paragraph says in the right context, with face-to-face, you see the lecturer's expression, you see the body language, you get to ask more questions. Whereas it's online or phone it's very restricted, and you might get off the phone and thinking [*sic*], 'oh, I didn't ask that, and I need to,' and then you email this and then you're reading the paragraph from your lecturer, and I think that's really restrictive because again that can be perceived differently. I think that's where face-to-face communication just outshines.

Helen's preference for classroom learning reflects her confidence in communication through direct contact to assist her to comprehend different perspectives when interpreting her course materials. In Helen's language, she emphasises that one of the best ways for her to learn is "face-to-face" or in a class where she can have ongoing synchronous interactions with her educator. Helen's perspective of electronic communication is that it can be "restrictive" as well as delayed, and is an incomplete way of communicating, making it inadequate for her learning purposes. Subsequently, Helen chose to attend a local class, with access to a range of

communication cues from her educator supporting her formal learning. She stepped outside of the constraints of online courses to secure a quality learning experience.

After completing two years of an online bachelor's course, Anne withdrew and decided to continue her education by re-enrolling with a vocational education and training provider that she had engaged with previously. Similar to her university course, her vocational course is delivered online. She spoke about her experience of learning from her university course materials:

> I found that a lot of what we studied is past tense, it's not the current curriculum, it's... things have changed, a lot. I was also working at the school at the time of doing my uni[versity] study, and so I guess what I found... what I was learning and what I had to write about was irrelevant really in the system to me. I mean nobody really cares what de Bono thought all those years ago. That's my opinion, no one knows who he is even, you know, so I guess didn't have the connection of the relevance to the actual position.

When she engaged with a university course, Anne expected that she would gain competencies that related directly to her employment. Her expectations about "a current curriculum" relate to Anne's belief that her course would train her for work purposes. Instead, her course was "past tense," or discussed the history of the topic, and Anne was dissatisfied that she could not apply her course knowledge in her paid role. Further, Anne's sense of isolation in her online course means that she encountered "nobody" with whom she could interact to explore the workplace applicability of her course materials. Without any chance for human interaction to discuss ideas from her course materials, the curriculum did not prepare Anne for an employment role. Subsequently, Anne was unable to comprehend the "relevance" of the course knowledge for her employment. Her course materials seemed superfluous to Anne's needs and her university course was subsequently such a disappointment that she withdrew to re-engage with an improved learning experience through a vocational course.

Anne spoke about returning to her previous vocational education provider to complete an online course. She stated that "I just find it a lot more personal I guess and my lecturer I have at the moment is very approachable and provides really good feedback." In contrast to her online university course experience, Anne has the benefit of a "personal" or good connection with her vocational educator who is approachable and gives Anne access to "good feedback" or interactions that further her learning. Anne continued by sharing the circumstances that led to her withdrawal from her university course and subsequent re-engagement with vocational education:

I only did two years of it, and then we sold the farm and bought the business, so time just didn't allow me to continue. So... and I wasn't enjoying the study, that sort of study at that time and like I say I found it irrelevant. I didn't have that association, whereas what I'm doing now it's all very relevant to our community too.

A lack of time was a significant part of Anne's reason for withdrawing from her university course. Her withdrawal was also influenced by her experience that a university course was inadequate because "she didn't have that association" or was unable to apply her course knowledge in her local context, making her course experience "irrelevant," dissatisfying, and unenjoyable. She goes on to highlight that the curriculum that she is learning from in her most recent online vocational course is "all very relevant to our community," reflecting that Anne's educator is assisting her to both gain and apply her course knowledge. Interactions arising from a good connection with her educator improve her learning experience by enabling Anne to understand the significance of her course knowledge for her community or context and how to apply it through her local roles.

Before engaging with an online bachelor's course, Dawn began her tertiary education in a class at her local vocational campus. She spoke about a particular occasion in class that inspired her:

...it stimulated me. I can remember sitting; I don't know if we had a guest speaker or something and I was sitting in there, and I was having butterflies in my stomach, and I was thinking 'oh, this is so cool.' Like I was really excited.

Being in a classroom with exposure to educators who performed the professional role that she aspired to was an uplifting experience for Dawn. Although sensations of "butterflies in my stomach" often relate to feelings of anxiety, Dawn's qualifier that "this is so cool" means that she was excited rather than nervous when listening to the guest speaker. Hearing the speaker talk about their experiences in the workplace permitted Dawn to anticipate her future workplace performance. A recent online course experience prompted Dawn to explain her concerns:

How can you go from not studying for 20 years, and 'I want to do something else,' and looking at a computer screen and thinking, 'Is this for me?' I think that would be a completely different experience. I wouldn't have got those butterfly feelings in my stomach looking at a computer screen, I'm sure. As opposed to having someone sitting in front of me telling me what they've done in their work and I'm sitting there and thinking, 'oh my god, that sounds amazing. I want that.'

Dawn's experience of attending a class was that educators sharing their workplace experiences stimulated her enthusiasm throughout her course and prepared her for her future role. She doubted that a "computer screen" or online delivery would offer her comparable inspiration or explain the link between her course materials and her anticipated employment. In Dawn's experience, learning through online delivery lacked quality as it was an isolated examination of her course materials as well as being devoid of human interaction that explained its connection to her future role.

After completing her certificate course at her local vocational campus, Dawn enrolled in an online bachelor's course and struggled to make adequate progress. A chance discussion with a close friend and colleague provided Dawn with another course option with the same curriculum delivered through block mode intensives. At the recommendation of her friend, Dawn deferred her online course to engage with the block mode course. By telling me her story at length, Dawn compares her experiences with different modes of delivery:

> When I first started, I was with Patieville[10] University. So that was all online, so it took me six years to do my first two years of study. So, I started off pretty slow. And I think the majority of the lecturers there were helpful, it was all online and then... so yeah it was OK, but then in my last two years, Montmillon[11] University had [the] last two years where they did it by block mode. So that would mean for about 10 or 11 weekends you'd go up to Montmillon, and that was from a Friday morning until a Monday afternoon so it was four days, so it was virtually two weeks of lectures in four days, and they would fly lecturers up from Milbanke[12] City. So, I found I'm definitely a face to face learner. It was brilliant, so we had only a class of say 15 with these lecturers, and I probably have to say that I really wondered whether I would finish when I was doing it online, because as it gets more complicated and more challenging and then there was [*sic*] the work placements to do. I really was wondering whether I'd ever get through, but when I swapped to Montmillon, and it was only by chance that I found out about that, my grades went up. That face to face learning, I thrived, I loved it, absolutely loved it. Being in a classroom with other people, yes, definitely face-to-face. And it just makes a huge difference to be able to... and this isn't the support I guess, but it's the learning like, if you're doing your readings all you can come in from is your perspective, that's all you can see, but when

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[10] Pseudonym.
[11] Pseudonym.
[12] Pseudonym.

you're in a classroom with other people, you can toss ideas around and have
someone else throw something else in. With the online learning, they... I
think it would have helped more if they... there was a couple of subjects I
can remember that I had the compulsory online discussion boards. It might
have only been worth 10 per cent or something, not much. But at least it got
some discussion going, so that's helpful. Whereas when you're just doing it
by yourself, doing your readings, no interaction with other students or they
tried to encourage it, but it was only the subjects where it had some
percentages added to it that it seemed to be more successful. Yeah, just to
get that different perspective coming in because you really are blinkered and
that's a criticism of everyone, you can only know what you know.

Her participation in online and then block mode delivery of similar courses meant that Dawn
has a profound understanding of the way that different delivery modes influence her learning
and course progression. Her experience with her online course is that it was "OK," but Dawn
doubted that she would achieve completion, explaining in part, her eagerness to attempt a
similar course by engaging with a different delivery mode. Dawn speculates that a lack of
interactions with classmates hindered her capacity to learn in her online course and that coerced
interactions promoted some discussion among course attendees that were helpful. In contrast to
her online experience, when Dawn engaged with block mode intensives in a class with a small
number of others by travelling interstate, she remarks that her experience was "brilliant" and
made her course progression more meaningful. When she attended a class, Dawn was no longer
"blinkered" and was able to gain more knowledge from her course in a more efficacious manner
by interacting with her classmates. Dawn identifies her experiences with her classmates less in
terms of emotional "support" that she encountered when she first began her tertiary education
and more to do with her classmates providing "that different perspective" that improved her
learning.

After completing her honours course, Heidi is adamant that she will not continue her
education through online delivery. As an experienced classroom educator, she explained her
view of online courses:

I also didn't enjoy some of the stuff, I think it's because I'm an adult and
I've worked I felt as though it was stuff I knew. Like, you know it was some
of it was directed at people coming straight out of school, so I get that but,
I'm trying to think of the word... you know when because I used to say it
sometimes when I had older students in my class, patronising. You know
some of it was a bit patronising and I would always apologise to my students

> if I was teaching that, but uni[versity] would never, it was like, 'here's the stuff and whatever.'

Heidi prefers to learn through methods that offer a personalised approach to learning. The "stuff" or Heidi's online course materials were "patronising" as they were designed for school leavers and inappropriate for her learning needs. Because Heidi's individual learning needs were unacknowledged by her education provider part of her course experience was feeling demeaned. She continued by expressing her thoughts about online courses and the details that cemented her opinion:

> I just don't agree with online study. Sometimes, what's to say it was me that submitted my work? You know, it could be anybody. So, they're so stringent on privacy, confidentiality and all this and I mean it could have been someone else that done my degree. Not that I would have, they probably would have got a lot better marks. But I just feel that there could be this ticket being issued to someone and if it's online and how do you know? So, if you have that web contact while they submit some stuff or ask questions, you are sort of getting a bit of a connection. But I mean when they started studies away, how do you give those experiences of other people by reading from a book or some articles online?

Heidi's view is that she stringently opposes the online delivery of tertiary education courses. She holds this view because the extent of depersonalisation in her online course meant that her distinctive way of completing course assessments could be missed by her online educators. Her perspective is that online delivery has a lack of human contact that obscures individual assessment styles, permitting academic dishonesty (such as someone "submitting her work" or someone else completing her course assessment tasks). Heidi is puzzled that while other administrative procedures, and "all this," have received attention from education providers, a fundamental issue - procedures for ascertaining that a student understands the online course materials - have yet to be adequately implemented. Subsequently, inadequate learning quality in online courses discourages Heidi from continuing her formal education.

Through self-deprecating humour, Heidi offers reassurance that her enlistment of another person to complete her course assessment would have meant receiving "better marks" or higher grades. The serious implication from Heidi's observations is that it is likely that people enrolled in her course could easily enlist others to complete their assessments. Heidi then expresses her primary concern that "tickets" or credentials could be issued to people who have not studied the course materials. She expresses that even "web contact" or online interactions that verify the knowledge gained by individuals by their educators was absent throughout her course. Her final criticism of online courses is that educators sharing their workplace

experiences with students is of the utmost importance in a course. "Reading from a book or online articles" in Heidi's view does not impart an equivalent learning experience. From Heidi's perspective, practices in online courses contribute to their poor quality as they lack the integrity necessary to foster learning and assess knowledge acquisition before the issuing of credentials. As the only mode available to Heidi, her wariness of online delivery detracts from her willingness to engage with another course, and she networks with other local professionals to continue her learning.

Lily's previous experience of learning to maintain her competency as an emergency service volunteer has been classroom-based. She reflected on such learning experiences when she considered engaging in a tertiary education course. Lily explained her reasons for selecting classroom delivery:

> …nursing is hands-on, it's about communicating, it's about doing the practical side of caring for people, and you can't get that on a computer screen, you just can't. And you know learning…talking to people and getting their experiences, talking to lecturers who are nurses, who can share their stories and share parts, little bits, and pieces of their life so you get an understanding and a basis of, you know, what you've got to look forward to, it's really, really important and it's really important to me which is why I didn't do the online kind of away study.

It is "important" for Lily that her course builds her "hands-on" or practical capacity for social interactions for her employment role. She has doubts about the function of online delivery, especially the efficacy of a "computer screen" to assist her with the application of her course knowledge in human interactions. Lily's commitment to attending a class for learning has rewarded her with social interactions with her educators. Such interactions include the sharing of "stories" and "bits and pieces" or narratives about an educator's work history that Lily views as preparing and inspiring her to "look forward" or anticipate performing in her future employment role. Lily has chosen to learn in a classroom to improve her learning, something that she views as unavailable to her in "the online kind of away study" or online courses.

The class-based course that Lily attended is the last offered at her local vocational campus, with future courses only offered through online delivery. Lily shared a discussion that she had with her educator about the future online delivery of the course:

> …the lecturer said, 'yeah it's really scary, the group of nurses that will be coming through after us are going to be quite scary. Will they have the proper education that they need or the proper skills to be able to deliver a good job for people?' It's really, really sad, it's really sad what's happened

to VET, I love VET. It's really, really disappointing what has happened with

the education system at the moment, especially with VET and uni[versity].

The discussion that Lily relates as transpiring between her, and her educator indicates that she is concerned about her educator's perception that online delivery is "scary" or a terrifying development that erodes the chances for people to learn and to be safely qualified for a position. Her educator questions the "proper education" or quality of learning that is afforded by online courses to support the practical application of course knowledge. Lily perceives online courses as providing a lesser learning experience. Her satisfaction with attending a class at her local vocational campus means that Lily is both "sad" and "disappointed" that online delivery may be the only option for her to continue her tertiary education in the future.

As seen above, some contributors had commenced their tertiary education in local vocational classes and when considering their next course, chose according to that which would best amplify their learning. Six contributors spoke of different ways that their careful course selection served their aspirations to attain knowledge for their roles and helped them to avoid suboptimal learning outcomes. Helen has commenced and continued her education by attending classes where interactive communication with her educator supports her learning. After two years of studying, Anne withdrew from her online university course, electing to continue her education through an online vocational course where a good relationship with her educator supports the application of her course knowledge in her rural context. After an attempt to complete her second course through online delivery, Dawn returned to classes where her educators and classmates both inspired and supported her to learn. Heidi has completed an online honours course and is deterred from completing another online course, choosing an improved learning experience through liaison with a professional network. Lily's extensive experience with formal learning to satisfy her volunteer responsibilities meant that she chose classroom delivery of her course and is distraught that online courses are becoming the only option. For each contributor who had previous experience with formal learning, the selection of their next course meant prioritising engagement with a high-quality learning experience.

For contributors, as persons living in rural areas who had previous experience with completing a tertiary education course through attending local classes, the selection of their next course meant choosing an option that they viewed would afford them the best learning experience. Experiences with course selection for persons living in rural areas who aspire to build on their tertiary education are largely unexplored in research; however, a person's imperative to learn as driving their course selection that is illustrated here extends previous research (Drury & Charles, 2016; Stone & O'Shea, 2019). For instance, persons living in rural areas are keen to circumvent the learning restrictions in online delivery by deliberately selecting

class-based courses. In addition, when local classes are unavailable, persons living in rural areas may be disinclined to continue their education or seek local vocational education providers that have previously afforded them learning applicable to their rural context.

Persons seeking a good learning experience also align with research arguing that for adults who live in rural areas, good interactions with their educators are significant for them as students, assisting their learning and application of course knowledge in their contexts (Busher et al., 2015; Ellis et al., 2008). Contributors being driven by an imperative to learn also adds to a study conducted in Victoria, Australia that explored experiences of online courses, illuminating that similar to the present study, such courses were not always participants' first choice (Harrison & Plowright, 2019). Here, a significant influence in a person's decisions about both selection and continuation of a course that could afford learning was the clear likelihood of ongoing, individualised interactions with their educators. Course selection experiences related to the imperative to learn highlight that significant for persons living in rural areas is the chance to have an enhanced learning experience. Such experience revolves around connection with either their class-based or online educators who can assist them to gain knowledge to suit their purposes. Seen here contributors' construction of a social space that they can occupy to learn is highly significant for them. Persons are adamant in their desire to ensure that a tertiary education involves building knowledge for themselves as well as others. As residents in Australian rural areas, persons experience spatial injustice when they are denied access to tertiary education courses that promote learning. Such injustice occurs as learning from courses is viewed by persons who live in rural areas as valuable for its role in securing their future.

The finding that better chances to learn are imperative in course selection for persons living in rural areas who are building on their tertiary education illustrates the significance of an enriched learning experience for them. The opportunity for learning and knowledge gain from a course is highly important for persons living in rural areas. The importance of learning is perhaps best understood by referring to the primary intent of most contributors to the study, namely, to secure their employment and futures, making it a high priority for them to build on their capacities during their course. Some of the benefits across the lifespan from gaining course knowledge were discussed in *Course Knowledge: Education for Life* where I noted how formal learning could benefit some persons throughout their lives. Other experiences related to choosing courses according to possibilities for learning experiences I discuss further in the theme *Local Residents: Educated Roles* that explains persons' experiences with post-credential roles in their rural areas.

5.3.2 Course Options: Constrained Choices

Some contributors navigated limited course options to continue their education while living in their rural areas. Contributors expressed that the courses and elective course units that are realistically available to them are restricted. Subsequently, contributors spoke of the constraints with engaging in a course while remaining in their rural areas, while others related the challenges that they encountered with relocating to complete course requirements.

Since completing her undergraduate degree over a decade ago, Jane has anticipated engaging with a postgraduate course. She has considered the courses available for her to continue her education, and when funding from a redundancy package became available, she enrolled in an online course. Jane spoke about her course options:

> Many universities still only offer face-to-face delivery options for education,
> which for us, as working professionals with a small child, in a rural area just
> isn't an option. So that by its very nature, I guess narrowed the options
> available to me.

In considering the courses that are available to residents in her "rural area," Jane concludes that her selection is narrowed or constrained by her need to fulfil her local care and employment responsibilities. Jane's experience with course selection was limited given her preference for "face-to-face delivery." Her course selection was also limited by her avoiding either permanent or temporary relocation that is expected by "many universities" in both online and block mode courses.

When Dawn decided to continue her education by enrolling in a bachelor's course through online delivery, she did so by considering which courses would permit her to remain in her town for the duration so that she could fulfil her care and work responsibilities. Dawn was keen to assist local people through her future role and describes contemplating suitable course options:

> …so, what can you study where you don't have to relocate? Occupational
> therapy and all that you have to travel, so social work was the one that came,
> so that's where my study started and while I was studying, I was working in
> fields that complemented that study.

Her desire to not "relocate" or "travel" and remain in her town for the duration of her course permitted Dawn satisfaction from the application of her course knowledge through her local role. However, her resolve to avoid relocating limited Dawn's course selection. Her ultimate choice was to pursue a qualification to fulfil her ambition to assist local people, rather than qualifying for a vocation that an unfettered choice would allow.

Filling a different position while her co-worker was on extended leave inspired Heidi to continue her education and attain a degree to secure the position permanently. Heidi's first choice of course to qualify for her chosen profession was available to her through online delivery. After beginning her course, Heidi realised that the electives she preferred were unavailable to her. She explained the option to access those course units:

> We had some electives and that I was really keen on one but because you had to do two weeks down in the city and there was no other way you can do it; you can't do that one.

Heidi experienced disappointment when she was unable to complete the elective course units that she was "keen on" and that interested her. Completing the elective would entail relocating to the city away from her care and work responsibilities. Her experience was that online delivery excluded her from learning opportunities, and there was "no other" way to gain knowledge that was important to her and the position she aspired to.

Margaret enrolled in a postgraduate online course and anticipated avoiding the relocation and travel that she had to endure for many years in order to complete her undergraduate and first postgraduate course. She was aware of the compulsory work placement in her course but had assumed that she would be placed locally, rather than near the interstate campus of her provider. She spoke about her work placement experience:

> Going to a foreign State, foreign city, staying in a university accommodation, having to find your way there without a car or you haven't got money or anything like that. Go to a school that you've never heard of, wouldn't have a clue what the suburb is what from what. And then roll up and do prac[tice] teaching was huge. And to be honest, like the thing that I know I made that really clear. You know when they asked you what the opinion of the course is? I said that was a totally unrealistic expectation. But they haven't stopped doing it, because my goddaughter actually did that course and they made her do it too.

Temporary interstate relocation to complete a work placement was a" foreign" experience for Margaret, and she had a profound sense of dislocation as she struggled with few resources at her disposal to navigate and practice in an unfamiliar place. Her expectations about completing an online course did not include anticipating the huge upheaval she withstood to complete the compulsory requirements. Margaret was further disappointed that despite her feedback to course administrators, making it "really clear" that this is an "unrealistic expectation," her request to reconsider that relocation component has been ignored.

Pat has exercised her enthusiasm for learning while living in rural areas which began with her enrolment in a certificate course. She has since built on her credentials, most recently engaging with an online master's course. Pat has since withdrawn from her course and explains her reasons for doing so:

> It would mean that I would have to move to the city to finish the clinical and the research part, I probably would because I would need the support. I'm not going to do that. I'm not going to benefit from doing the actual master's, it's not going to increase my wage, it's not going to give me job security. So, the learning part I really like. The learning was bigger than the piece of paper if that makes any sense. So, I will continue to learn, but I'm finding different ways of doing that.

As someone who has been a resident in rural areas for her entire life, Pat views academic research as an unfamiliar undertaking. Her previous experience with contacting online educators informs Pat's perspective that such arrangements are inadequate to assist her with the unfamiliar tasks required in her research course component. She would "need the support" or direct contact with her educator to complete her course research requirements, necessitating that she "move" or relocate to the city. Pat has considered the benefits of completing her course by temporarily relocating to campus and concluded that "the learning was bigger than the piece of paper," that is her efforts to attain her credential would be onerous and she would not be reimbursed by a better employment opportunity in her town. Despite this, Pat is eager to "continue to learn" but in "different ways" than engaging with online courses. Pat went on to share her thoughts about her course learning experience:

> I did three or four subjects; I can't remember how many, the learning was fabulous, and it was just very stressful. I mean... a part of that was the system too. Literally their computer system, and other things, too. Just, yeah not good. I'll do what I've done over the years anyway; I will just continue to do workshops and intensives and stuff like that as well as other conferences as well as reading. I still... I've got a couple of books I need to, want to read that are up-to-date, relevant stuff for work.

Engaging in a master's level course online, although stressful for Pat was "fabulous" and was a deeply enjoyable learning experience. Added to the challenge of learning from an online course was the obstacle presented by the education provider's "computer system" that was both unfamiliar and unreliable. As a consequence of her online course experience, Pat fulfils her desire to continue learning by engaging in "workshops" and other alternatives that she considers superior to online courses.

Her local area was in a drought when Margaret's nephew completed high school and was preparing to relocate to the city to engage with his first choice of tertiary education course. He began his preparations by engaging with employment in his town to qualify for a government allowance to assist with living costs after his relocation. Margaret shared her nephew's experiences with qualifying for an allowance through securing local employment:

> You had to work for 18 months, but that... why 18 months? That's ridiculous because it puts you out, to get full youth allowance because you can only defer a university position for 12. Then, you had to earn a certain amount, and that's all supposing... what happened to my nephew, he had a job, and he was going along fine, then we had the big downturn up here, and he got put off with quite a few adults who got put off, and he could not find work. So, he had no hope, even though he was searching for work, he had no hope of finding work and of meeting that criteria. And I'm just trying to think what else they do... and then even when they do pay it, they only pay it out midway through the first semester or something, and you've got these poor people and how are they supposed to move?

As someone who had witnessed her nephew's attempt to progress from high school in their rural area to tertiary education in the city, Margaret identifies that the allowance qualification process based on local employment, in particular, is a "ridiculous" and exasperating experience. Margaret's concern is that challenges with qualifying for an allowance could restrict the aspirations of local young people. She is aware of the constraints on course deferment as well as the restricted chances for local young people to generate an employment outcome during the "downturn" or drought. She is particularly outraged that the allowance qualifying process and delayed payment procedures undermine "hope" for local young people, especially those who are "poor" and unable to afford the initial costs when they relocate to the city to continue their education.

Despite the drought undermining his chance to generate enough employment income to qualify for an allowance, Margaret's nephew was determined to continue his education by relocating to the city. Margaret described his subsequent experiences with employment and university:

> ...it's almost impossible, and then my nephew went out to work while he was in the city to try and earn his way through, and he worked. They were looking for a student, this particular organisation, and he went to work there, and then they changed the rules when he got there, and they wanted him to be there every day for five hours, and he said, 'Well this isn't going to work, how am I going to go to lectures?' And then once he came out of that because

he had to work there more and more and more, 'oh no, no, no, we want you to work this many hours now.' He had to stop some of his subjects, and now he's having trouble with youth allowance because they said: 'no, you should've finished your university now.' Oh, dearie me. Very... very, it's very hard on kids coming from the rural communities and going down there and trying to survive. Yeah, we supported him his first year and paid for his college fees the first year otherwise he would never have had that chance.

In describing her nephew's chances of continuing his education without extra financial assistance, Margaret's language emphasises his chance to "survive" the rigours of relocation to continue his education as "almost impossible." As a low-income recipient, her nephew's engagement in employment to afford his living costs was "very hard," undermined his course progression, and threatened to derail his course completion. Margaret's view is that the support of her and her partner gave her nephew a "chance" and made it possible for him to commence and complete his course. She also states that it is difficult for "kids coming from the rural communities" to "survive," suggesting that other rural young people who relocate to study in the city also face significant challenges.

As seen above, some contributors experienced constraints in their initial choice of courses or were challenged by relocation requirements. For Jane, her choice of postgraduate course was limited due to her resolve to remain in her town. Likewise, Dawn reoriented her vocational interests and chose a course that would permit her to remain in her town. While the availability of her course through online delivery suited Heidi, she became aware that her preferred elective course units were inaccessible while living in her rural area. After realising that she would need to relocate to receive sufficient support from her educator to complete the research component of her course, Pat considered her chances of being reimbursed for her investment through better employment were unlikely. She subsequently withdrew from her course and has found alternatives for learning. The challenges that Margaret's nephew faced in relocating to the city to continue his education have been arduous, and without family support, would have overwhelmed his course completion. Each contributor who shared their experience illuminated how course choices and achieving completions were restricted by living in their rural area.

Some contributors expressed that despite online delivery, their options to commence or continue their tertiary education until completion while living in their rural area meant that their course options were restrained. Contributors' constrained choices in their course options align with research that, when taken together, highlight how such restraints are a persistent concern for residents in rural areas (Purnell & Cuskelly, 1996; Stone & O'Shea, 2019). Contributors'

experiences of constrained course options presented here also respond to previous calls to assess local peoples' perspectives about the education that is available to them through online delivery and to ascertain their learning experiences (Townsend & Delves, 2009; Zawacki-Richter, 2009). The present research responds by highlighting contributors as persons who live in Australian rural areas experience constrained choices in their course options, with such constraints including commuting or temporary relocation to complete course requirements. In addition, contributors experience considerable angst associated with making the decision to withdraw from online courses rather than relocate to complete compulsory requirements. Such experiences with constrained choices also extend previous research by detailing the hardships endured when relocating away from a rural area to engage with their first choice of courses (Dawborn-Gundlach & Margetts, 2018; Napthine, 2019). While contributors were determined, similar to research participants in previous studies, they were sometimes unable to navigate restrictions in their courses (Purnell & Cuskelly, 1996; Stone & O'Shea, 2019). Reading contributors' experiences through a lens of spatiality highlights how they faced the dominance of outside construction of their rural areas as spaces whose occupants were underserving of a full range of courses. Persons, though, were often eager to engage in courses and their components that were denied to them as residents in rural areas. Residents in Australian rural areas experience considerable spatial injustice, then, when denied their tertiary education preferences. Such injustice occurs when persons are denied access to courses that they view as valuable for them in their particular rural context.

The findings here illustrate that course choices are limited for persons living in rural areas, aligning with previous research. A point of difference in the present study is that for persons living in rural areas, experiences with selecting from limited course options meant attempting to overcome restrictions by seeking avenues to continue their learning. Some of the benefits offered by those who have subsequently become tertiary-educated persons living in rural areas for the duration of their course I discussed in the *Everyday Roles: Heightened Satisfaction* subtheme. In addition, post-credential experiences in rural areas I discuss further in the theme *Local Residents: Educated Roles*.

5.3.3 Course Essentials: Poor Provisions

After commencing their courses, some contributors struggled to access essential resources to support their learning. Particular difficulties experienced by contributors included issues with securing course essentials, such as accessing adequate internet services as well as textbooks. Some contributors' experiences with poor resources hindered their learning and could be so profound that it contributed to their course withdrawal.

Engaging with an online postgraduate course was initially a scary experience for Jane. Since commencing her course, she has become more confident in her learning and secured employment in her town that is near her and her husband's property. She shared her experience using local infrastructure that supports the online delivery of her course:

> Broadband access is critical. It's been a real eye-opener studying a course solely and wholly online and requiring broadband access which we have, but it's really not that reliable, it's expensive, it's costing us a fortune to access the amount we require where we live.

Relying on local infrastructure to engage with a course was a "real eye-opener" or a novel experience for Jane. She is engaged with an online course designed for technological availabilities in a metropolitan area and local infrastructure prohibits her progress. Jane notes that the service where "we live is costing us a fortune" and is not "reliable" and inadequate for Jane's access to her course materials and she instead relies on the service at her workplace in the nearby town. Jane has subsequently experienced a renewed understanding that it is "critical" when engaging with online courses to have access to an adequate local internet service.

As an avid enthusiast of formal learning, Pat has engaged with online courses for over a decade. Recently, she engaged in a master's course. During her course, Pat realised that she would not be able to complete the research component of her course online and was unwilling to relocate to the city for such purposes. Pat was keen to share her thoughts about online delivery:

> Online is fabulous, don't get me wrong, it's just so flexible, but it's not the be-all and end-all, especially when things go wrong, and they do all the time, as you would know. All the time. And I've had so much, I studied through one university, and a master's through another university. The online system has consistently been for years, terrible, and it's causing so much distress over the years, it's unbelievable. Yeah, it's a biggie, you know it sounds all good on paper and online, but it doesn't necessarily give you everything.

Over a decade of experience has informed Pat about the practical differences between the promise and reality of online courses. Pat appreciates the potential of online delivery which she emphasises in her language as "fabulous" and is her only chance to access suitable courses as a professional working and living in her rural area. However, Pat's experience is that the benefit of course access is tempered by an inefficient and fault ridden online delivery system. In particular, Pat "had so much" experience with "things going wrong, all the time" and was subjected to years of unresolved technological issues with two universities indicating that, for her, such issues are experienced as a "biggie" or persistent and troublesome problem. For Pat, technological issues caused her "so much distress" that it contributed to her decision to

withdraw from her course. Her experience of online delivery is that it "sounds all good on paper but doesn't necessarily give you everything," such as providing the enriched personal learning support that she needed. In Pat's view, online courses do not provide the learning experience that they promise.

Kate is studying her first choice of course through online delivery. She appreciates the chance to study to attain a credential that will qualify her for her chosen profession. Kate explains the provision of her course by her vocational education and training provider like so:

> Their online courses are good. Occasionally you would find the links would
> not be working, and that would be frustrating. But no, it was good, and the
> VET lecturers were most of the time really quick to reply to your email back.
> I did find that some of them were only… worked one or two days a week,
> and that was tricky, getting hold of them could be a week and was hard.

Kate appreciates being able to engage with a course of her choosing, describing mostly "good" experiences, with her online educators being responsive. Detracting from the benefits of studying an online course is a lack of adequate connection to her educators and missing course materials. She finds malfunctioning technologies and delayed communication between her and her educators "frustrating" and "hard," making her course progression arduous.

Without adequate internet service at her home, Amber travels to her local vocational campus to engage with her online course. Her local vocational campus is "only small," a description that she views educational administrators use to justify its underfunding. She shared aspects of her learning experience at her local vocational campus:

> …[it] sometimes makes things difficult for students like me – getting hold
> of the right textbook, trying to find information on the web because the
> course is being re-written and not everything is available, dealing with
> computer dropouts etc.

Amber identifies engaging with her online course at her local vocational campus as "difficult" for her as well as other students. At the heart of such difficulties is a combination of faults in her provider's online delivery system, including poor quality or absent course materials as well as "dropouts" or unreliable internet service. Further, despite her efforts to attend campus, Amber does not have access to an academic library where she can "get hold of the right textbook" or retrieve written materials that are essential for her learning. Amber's experience of online delivery at her local campus is characterised by a poor provision of the resources that are essential for her to progress through her course.

Before withdrawing from her online bachelor's course, Anne had struggled with her provider's online delivery system in an attempt to qualify for her chosen profession. Previously, Anne had engaged in courses at her local vocational campus, completing a diploma course that supported her ambition to work with children. After enduring her bachelor's course for two years, Anne elected to withdraw. She explained her aspirations and the reasons for her withdrawal:

> I believe I had good qualities to become a teacher, but it was just some of the technical sides of things as far as the study that I maybe struggled with, and resources is another difficult problem here like in regional Australia as well. Just getting your hands on texts and textbooks, and you know, just literature in general and then when you do, it's the timeframe to get it here, and by the time it's here your assignments due, so those sorts of issues.

Anne had a history of working with children and strongly believes that she has "good qualities" and is a suitable candidate to become a teacher. However, the "struggle" or anguish that she experienced in her course dissuaded her from completing to qualify. The technical and resource issues that she encountered diminished her learning experience to the extent that she re-evaluated her career direction. Her experiences included a sense of "struggle" without a supportive human connection to assist her learning, including difficulties comprehending the "technical sides" or the university's educational technologies. Anne also clearly states that the location of the closest academic library made it impossible for her to "get hands-on" or attain copies of recommended texts in time to inform the completion of her assessment pieces. Eventually, Anne elected to discontinue her efforts to study an online university course, deciding to continue her education by engaging with an online course at her local vocational campus.

During her master's course, Pat struggled to access recommended learning aides. She spoke about obtaining the reading materials that were essential for her course:

> …we didn't have access like we do to online reading. That was a nightmare. Horrible stuff, it was a nightmare, they supplied us with only a certain amount and because I'm not close to large libraries... That was really... and I had to buy all my textbooks... Oh, that was horrible.

Without Pat "being close to large libraries" or having physical access to an academic library, it was "a nightmare" and deeply stressful for her to find that the essential reading was unavailable to her in her provider's online delivery system. In an attempt to secure the textbooks that were required reading, Pat withstood the "horrible" or distressing experience of affording the purchase of the essential texts for the course.

In sum, as contributors attempted to progress through their courses, some experienced difficulties with accessing essential resources. Experiences of five contributors who were engaged with online delivery highlight the poor provision of course essentials for them while living in their rural areas. After commencing her course, Jane realised the inadequacy of her residential internet service to support the online delivery of her course and relied on the service at her workplace in her town. Issues with educational technologies for over a decade in online courses contributed to Pat's decision to withdraw from her master's course. Kate appreciates being able to engage with a course to qualify for her chosen profession but is often frustrated with some aspects, such as missing course materials and unsuccessful attempts to contact her educators. Without an internet service at home, Amber's effort to attend her local vocational campus was not rewarded with sufficient local resources to support her progression through her online course. Anne's decision to withdraw after completing two years of her online bachelor's course was in part due to a lack of timely access to texts. After finding that she had limited access to online reading in her university's online delivery system, Pat experienced considerable distress as she had to strain her personal resources to afford copies of the recommended texts. Some contributors experienced poor provision of essential resources while engaged in online courses.

For some contributors, as persons who live in rural areas, the meanings of their experiences with available resources to support their course progression centred on poor provision. Such experiences correspond with previous research conducted over two decades ago that argued people living in rural areas who engage with tertiary education courses often have limited access to essential course materials (Purnell & Cuskelly, 1996). Elsewhere, more recent research describes a similar lack of local resources for persons living in rural areas to complete their courses (Park, 2017; Robinson, 2012). Absent resources in rural areas according to Park (2017) and Robinson (2012) include delayed infrastructure development that cannot support online courses designed according to more advanced metropolitan infrastructure that decision-makers assume is universal. Some persons' experiences with inadequate local internet services as well as course essentials while living in rural areas is also an example of spatial injustice, whereby people are deprived of resources due to their rural occupancy (Soja, 1989; Staeheli, 2008). Experiences with poor provision of course essentials also extend what is known in the research literature by illustrating that, despite online delivery systems, students may require access to physical texts to complete courses. Here, experiences highlight the challenges for some persons living in rural areas to access essential texts. Overall, the experiences of persons living in rural areas illustrate poor provision of essential course materials that continues to hinder their course progression.

Of further research interest is that inadequate provision of essential resources to support their tertiary education in their rural areas did not seem to detract from contributors' place dependence (Anton & Lawrence, 2014; Raymond et al., 2010). Experiences here subsequently reinforce Roberson and Merriam's (2005) findings that older students living in rural areas have a positive sense of place dependence and that such a sense even persists for those who live in areas that are deprived. Further, experiences of poor provision of course essentials were a relevant issue in persons' lives, nonetheless, a positive sense of place persists despite contributors reacting negatively to the lack of resources available for them to continue their education. Overall, the findings illustrate the possibility that resources for tertiary education attainment goals are yet to be perceived by persons as an essential part of their lives in rural areas, even though they do powerfully shape their views of tertiary education. Here, a reading of the spatiality helps to explain how rural areas are dominated by outsider construction that denies contributors the resources that could assist them to engage and continue with their tertiary education. While persons living in rural areas are keen to complete their courses, they faced onerous constraints in the resources that were available for them to do so. For persons living in Australian rural areas, such constraints exemplify spatial injustice whereby they are denied essential resources that are more readily available to those who live in metropolitan areas. Such injustice is emphasised when considering that persons view that their tertiary education is highly significant for their capacity to perform in their social roles.

The finding in the present study of poor provision of course essentials is similar to previous studies that have reported that people living in rural areas experience severe limitations in accessing the materials and infrastructures necessary for them to support their tertiary education. Illuminating experiences of poor provision of essential resources for persons living in rural areas to support their learning through online delivery is critical to understanding their chances to engage with tertiary education, learn from their course, and attain course completion. Contrary to what was known, however, negative perceptions about a lack of resources to meet their tertiary education goals did not extend to undermining contributors' sense of place dependence which is important. Access to local resources for tertiary education endeavours is yet to be perceived as essential for doing well and building a successful relationship with learning as integral to a sense of community or place in rural areas. Further understandings of experiences of local resources that assist persons living in rural areas to complete their courses I discuss in the following subthemes.

5.3.4 Continuing Education: Financial Considerations

Each contributor who decided to continue their education did so while mindful of their financial situation. For some contributors' their course engagement was severely restricted by

their financial circumstances, with government subsidies playing a critical role in facilitating their tertiary education engagement. Financial considerations, such as available government funding, were an aspect of each contributor's experience with engaging and progressing through their courses.

Julie has the means to fund her tertiary education, and as the holder of a postgraduate credential and a long-term resident in her town is aware of both a lack of educational attainment and the constrained financial circumstances of the majority of local people. She spoke to me about her current concerns for local people who are considering continuing their education:

> I really do think a lot of adults like the face to face. But unfortunately, the difference between an online subject and a face to face subject is thousands of dollars, and a lot of people can't afford that. And now that they have wound back education funding, I doubt whether we will have a lot of people will be even studying. That was the biggest mistake they've ever made was winding back education funding. I think that everyone has the right to be educated. If that's what they want in life, they deserve to be educated, but I don't know where it's going to come from now.

Speaking from extensive knowledge about local people, Julie's experience is that people living in her local region like "face-to-face" or attending classes. She observes the costs to attend classes are often prohibitive and could prevent local people from continuing their education. Further, Julie indicates that "winding back," or a reduction in government education funding arrangements, will reduce the number of local people who will be able to afford to continue their education. Julie's primary concern as someone who has attained a high-level tertiary qualification is that access to education for adults is a human "right," but due to financial circumstances, many residents in her rural area will not be able to exercise that right and continue their education.

In the thirty years since she left high school, Meg has continued to engage with various types of formal learning. After the birth of her second child, she engaged with her first certificate course at a vocational campus in her region. She explained what encouraged her to continue her education:

> The fact that I didn't have to pay for it, that was a huge help. The fact that I was not getting paid much in the family business… that [government funding] was a help. I wouldn't have been able to do it otherwise. Probably the encouragement of the teacher and lecturer I had at that stage. She was just awesome. So, understanding that I was trying to juggle being a mum as

well as over 100 k[ilometre]'s of travel. So very understanding and encouraging. Yeah, but the money factor was huge, it made it accessible.

In Meg's experience, the "money factor" or government funding was "huge" or critical for her course engagement. She also appreciated the support and "understanding" of her educator who acknowledged that she was trying to "juggle" or balance her caregiving role and the challenge of extensive travel to engage in her course. However, pivotal in Meg's experience was funding support that made her course "accessible" so that she could attend a class where her educator supported her to learn.

After being encouraged by the attainment of her first certificate that was publicly funded, Helen is completing her next credential so that she can work to the benefit of local people by volunteering in her town when she is not caring for her partner. In her volunteer role, Helen has noticed that a recent reduction in education funding has negatively impacted local people. She shared that "it's really, really, sad because it got our clients in, and they could afford it. My lecturer, she only got 4 or 5 people because they just couldn't afford to pay for it and when I did it, there was thirteen of us, and we were all successful." In Helen's view, a lack of funding is undermining the "success" or learning and credential goals of local people who are low-income recipients. Likewise, Helen is on a meagre income and engages with her course units sporadically. She explained that she studies when government funding allows it as "we are on a very, very tight budget with my partner's health," reflecting that her course progression is also affected by fluctuations in government funding.

Margaret and her partner recently provided financial support for her nephew, who relocated to the city to engage with his undergraduate course. Previously, Margaret had also temporarily relocated to the city to engage with her own undergraduate course. Her university education has provided the foundation for three professional careers in her region and subsequently, has allowed her to be in a financial position whereby she could support her nephew to continue his education. Margaret explained the funding arrangements when she began her undergraduate course:

> …at that time, Gough Whitlam had just come in, and university was free for people like me, and I certainly wouldn't have been able to ... we would have never been able to afford university and probably if it was under today's conditions, certainly wouldn't now.

After her involvement in providing for her nephew's education, Margaret understands the barriers that are facing local young people whose course choices are only delivered at a metropolitan campus. Margaret's experience with her nephew has furthered her understanding that "under today's conditions" or as a present-day school leaver in her rural area, she would be

financially excluded from pursuing her university education. Without university being "free" when she attended, Margaret would have been effectively precluded from securing both the employment and income benefits that currently sustain her and her family as well as the capabilities that benefit her local community.

As seen above, engaging with, or progressing through, their course was heavily influenced by some contributors' financial circumstances. Four contributors shared their experience of the role of government funding for local people to continue their education. Julie, who funded her own tertiary education, expresses her concern that recent reductions in government funding will decrease the educational attainment of people who live in her rural area. To continue her education, Meg was required to travel and relied on learning support from her educator, but she views that government funding was pivotal for her engagement in her first course. Helen is eager to continue her education to improve her capacity to serve local people, and she does so through government funding that permits her to engage with a single course unit at a time. Margaret's experience with her own transition into a free university education is that it serves as the foundation of her career progression and financial stability. Her understanding of the financial obstacles that local young people face, informs Margaret's view that she would not be able to attain a tertiary education under today's government funding arrangements. Each contributor who shared their experience with the chances for local people to continue their education viewed financial considerations, and in particular, government funding is essential for engaging with and progressing through tertiary education courses in rural areas.

For contributors as persons living in rural areas, financial considerations such as government funding had an integral role in their decisions to commence or continue their tertiary education. Contributors' experiences with financial considerations align with previous research with Australian adults illustrating that course costs are significant in their decisions to continue their education (Australian Department of Education and Training, 2017a; Purnell & Cuskelly, 1996). In contrast to the present research, O'Shea et al. (2017), in particular, highlights that Australian policies for adult education revolve around an expectation by policymakers that adults should draw upon their internal abilities and determination to succeed with their tertiary education. Such a stance does not take into account the role of substantial financial deprivation in individual circumstances for negating a person's chances to continue their education. Experiences of financial considerations in the present study illuminate some of the challenges that persons living in rural areas face when continuing their education, serving to remind us that good character alone cannot mitigate their financial barriers. Reading contributors' experiences through spatiality highlights that they view the social construction of their rural areas as economically precarious places. As such, despite their ambitions, financial

considerations are often at the forefront of persons' (dis)engagement with their tertiary education. Some persons who live in Australian rural areas, therefore, experience spatial injustice as they endure economic deprivations that undermine their tertiary education goals. Despite tertiary education being valued as a way to escape local economic precarity, persons living in rural areas cannot always fulfil their education ambitions.

Elaborating on previous research, the finding here about the potential for persons living in rural areas to engage with, and progress through, a tertiary education course illustrates the role of financial considerations, including government funding. Similar to previous research, the finding here illustrates that financial considerations, such as access to government or personal funds, were a primary consideration when making decisions about education for persons living in rural areas, including for those who are required to relocate. Some experiences of the course knowledge and credentials of persons living in rural areas being a subsequent benefit to Australians, both locally and afar, I discuss in *Community Roles: Social Satisfaction*. Further, in *Rural Professionals: Diverse Opportunities* I portray some outcomes of public investment in education through the experiences of tertiary-educated persons living in rural areas.

5.3.5 Course Engagement: Working Time

One of the most persistent constraints experienced by some contributors was a lack of time to devote to their formal learning. For instance, most contributors' everyday lives include providing care for at least one person, engaging as a volunteer as well as meeting their employment responsibilities, all of which occur in addition to their study commitments. While online courses permitted most contributors a chance to continue their education, their workplace obligations meant that some contributors experienced particular difficulties with having an adequate amount of time to dedicate to their studies.

After travelling extensively to complete her undergraduate as well as her first postgraduate degree, Margaret anticipated less travel when completing her next postgraduate course through online delivery. While studying her course, Margaret was working full-time and in addition to volunteering, providing care for her elderly father-in-law. She spoke about her schedule during the year of her course: "I had my whole life planned out hour for hour, up 'til sometimes 10 o'clock at night, because if it wasn't, I wouldn't have got through. And I wouldn't like to live just like that again." Margaret's experience of living "just like that" to complete her course involved her being able to "just survive" while fulfilling the concurrent demands of her full-time employment and coursework. As a result, Margaret was strictly organised and had little time for anything extra in her life.

Margaret went on to discuss her brother's situation after he received government assistance to exit his property during a drought. She described the circumstances under which her brother was offered funding to continue his education:

> …they were offered as part of that package, skill development. Culturally, it is a huge shift, and I think you have got to be a certain type of person to adapt to that. The other thing is that they had to earn money. My brother works now, he works 12 to 14 hours a day, so when is he going to go and study? Work is ¾ of an hour drive, there's an hour and a half on top of that. We were terrified that he would fall asleep at the wheel.

In discussing her concern for her brother and the chance for him to continue his education, Margaret first speaks about the need to "adapt" to living in a "culture" that is yet to shift from prioritising employment and is subsequently largely unconcerned with supporting local people to continue their education. She reflects on the possibility that in such an environment only "a certain type of person" and not everyone in her area is able to engage with tertiary education. Margaret goes on to describe that her brother is just managing his demanding employment schedule to earn an income, making it impossible for him to "just live" like Margaret did to complete her course. Her experience is that work commitments with heavy demands on available time contribute to perpetuating a local culture in which residents' engagement in tertiary education is relatively unrecognised and unlikely to be supported.

When she began her doctorate, Maggie's employer at the time provided study leave as part of the conditions of her full-time employment. She qualified for a better paid position and moved into government-funded employment that offered an improved income so that she could support her chronically ill partner. Maggie shared that she subsequently realised that "in this job, I didn't have any study leave, and I wasn't able to continue with my PhD." Maggie's experience was that completing her doctorate hinged on her employer supporting her ambitions by providing adequate leave. Without the provision of study leave by her employer, Maggie was disheartened to withdraw from her candidature.

Although employed in a casual position, Sandy often works the equivalent of full-time hours that is in addition to having sole responsibility for the care of her children. The employment that her first course qualified her for is located 85 kilometres from her home, and when we discussed the amount of travel she undertakes to work, including providing outreach services, Sandy stated, "in 5 months, I had done nearly 6000 kilometres. That wasn't including travel for work that had a petrol allowance, so 7…8000 in 5 months." Sandy's extensive employment-related travel commitments mean that she has struggled to progress through her current online course to qualify for improved employment. She described her view about the

main obstacle to her course completion: "if you are working, you have to give up so many hours of work to study. The amount of work that I was getting I couldn't study." Sandy's course progression is frustrated by a lack of time that she attributes primarily to her employment responsibilities.

Contributors' experiences with course progression were influenced by the amount of time that they could dedicate to their courses. Three contributors related their experiences of dedicating time to studying alongside their workplace obligations. The tight organisation of her time permitted Margaret to complete her course, something that is challenging for her brother whose employment places greater demands on his time. For Maggie, a change in employment that did not have study leave provisions disrupted her candidature leading to her withdrawal. Sandy's course progression was disrupted by her employment that alongside the demands of full-time work hours includes extensive travel obligations. Each contributor viewed workplace obligations as the primary force competing with their course progression.

For some contributors, as persons living in rural areas, time constraints related to their employment threaten their course progression. Contributors' experiences with disruption due to workplace obligations align with both early and more recent research, where participants reported that time constraints related to their employment posed the biggest threat to their course progression (Australian Department of Education and Training, 2017a; Purnell & Cuskelly, 1996). In rural areas, persons' extensive travelling for employment also means they have less time to spend on study commitments. Experiences of a lack of available time resonate with previous research and government reports that such is significant for course progression. Here, workplace obligations presented the greatest challenge to course completion for persons living in rural areas.

Contributors' experiences with the demands of employment differ from previous research that illustrates mature-age students who made adjustments to their work demands in their first year are able to complete their courses (Dawborn-Gundlach & Margetts, 2018). Unlike previous findings, experiences with employment could disrupt course progression in the first as well as subsequent years. In addition, workplace demands were identified as the primary obstruction in achieving educational ambitions, undermining reports which emphasise poor management of family and community commitments as drivers in course withdrawal (Australian Department of Education and Training, 2017a). Further, similar to findings elsewhere some contributors face difficulty with balancing study and employment that sometimes cannot be overcome by personal adjustment (Dawborn-Gundlach & Margetts, 2018). With regard to spatiality, the social construction of economic imperatives that make demands on

contributors' time constrains both the quality and quantity of their tertiary education. However, despite the desire to complete their courses, a lack of time, in particular, often prohibited persons from doing so. In terms of spatial injustice, such experiences may also occur elsewhere such as those spaces occupied by metropolitan residents; nonetheless, tertiary education may be valued for its empowering role by persons regardless of their place of residence.

Other investigators have argued that a lack of available time can reduce course progression for persons living in rural areas (Australian Department of Education and Training, 2017b; Purnell & Cuskelly, 1996). The findings here correspond to previous research and in addition, detail the ways that workplace obligations can disrupt a person's intent to complete their courses. Where a person's circumstances permit them time to engage with a course while employed, there are benefits for both learning and role performance. Some of the benefits of employment while studying I explored in the subthemes *Everyday Roles: Heightened Satisfaction* as well as *Course Knowledge: Collegial Support* and experiences with post-credential roles I discussed in *Local Employees: Gratifying Positions*.

5.3.6 Partner Support: Money and Time

The intimate partners of some contributors provided them with adequate time to study by providing for living costs for both them and their children. The financial support of their partners permitted some contributors to have some respite from their employment responsibilities to complete compulsory course requirements, such as work placements. Experience of financial support from a partner was critical for contributors to maintain their living standards while progressing to course completion.

On several occasions, Heidi's chance to secure improved employment has motivated her to engage with another tertiary education course. Most recently, Heidi was employed full-time when she became familiar with a paid position that inspired her to begin a degree course. Towards the end of her course, Heidi needed respite from paid employment to complete her placements to finish her course. She spoke about the time she needed to achieve course completion:

> I started doing my degree, and I think in 2011, I took the year off to try and just study, and I was lucky because I had my partner to support me. So, I thought, 'I'm just going to continue with this full-time,' and then in 2012, I was offered a position.

Respite from her employment granted by the financial assistance of her partner meant that Heidi could "just study" and engage with her course on a full-time basis to hasten her completion and engagement with a professional position. Being able to complete her course quicker through

financial support helped Heidi to qualify in time to attain the position that had motivated her course engagement. The "luck" or chance for financial support that Heidi received from her partner was significant for both her course completion and subsequent employment.

During her course, Dawn cared for her children and engaged in casual employment that was related to her course. Her workplace was valuable for connecting with colleagues who supported her to both complete her course and apply her newly acquired knowledge in her roles. Dawn's progress to completion of her degree course took a total of eight years which included full-time attendance through block mode for the last two years. Dawn discussed her employment and the role of her partner's support during the last two years of her course:

> … the only time I didn't work is for a couple years when I did full-time at university so that just got a bit hard then because I had three-month placements in the last two years. So, I didn't want to get a job, to be honest, I knew I went for interviews and mentioned that… I know that's why they said that to me… that's why I didn't get the job, and fortunately, my partner was happy to support me. So that was the only time I didn't have an external job was just in that last two years full time and then I managed to get work straight after I'd finished. My last placement, there was a position came up there.

After engaging with her honour's degree course on a full-time basis, Dawn acknowledges that it was "a bit hard" or quite difficult for her to integrate her employment and study. She felt further pressured when considering that she would need time to complete several lengthy work placements. As she had done in the past, Dawn applied for suitable positions, but her need to complete work placements was a deterrent for local employers. In a candid appraisal, Dawn viewed that she was able to complete her course with the "fortune" of financial assistance from her husband. Such assistance permitted her to undertake her work placements and led her to "get to work straight after" or secure employment immediately upon the completion of her course.

At the urging of her grandmother, Lily engaged with a course to become qualified for a position related to her volunteer activities. During her course, Lily's emergency service volunteer role was where she connected with local people, finding that her duties are:

> …really fulfilling for me as a person, even though it's not financially fulfilling. It's actually really as a volunteer they're a fantastic bunch of people that are willing to spend their time and put their life, I won't say life on the line, but it can be dangerous. And willing to do that just to help other

people for no reward whatsoever other than self-satisfaction and that's what
it is.

In the absence of workplace interactions, Lily's volunteer work provides her with "personally fulfilling" connections with a "fantastic bunch," or local people with whom she can make a social contribution that nurtures her sense of "self-satisfaction." Her volunteer work has become even more significant for Lily since she started her course, as her options for local employment that could provide alternative social connections clashed with her class timetable. As part of attaining her credential, Lily has a compulsory work placement that she views as significant, sharing that much "depends on the placement too, you get a good placement, and they like you, and they are willing to offer you a job then you're kind of set." Lily's perspective of the work placement is that "you're kind of set," highlighting its importance for her future employment. She went on to discuss her placement:

I'm in the last semester of my study, so I've got a placement coming up, a
two-week placement, primary care placement but they are finding it very
hard to find places to go, so I might not be able to do that until next year. So,
it's a bit of a shame; I wanted to have this done and dusted by the end of the
year or at least January so that I could register and start looking for work.

Lily is frustrated and disappointed that a delay by her education provider means that she will be unable to be "done and dusted" or able to expediently complete her course to fulfil her employment ambitions. Her urgency to complete her course and enter local employment is driven by her circumstances as a parent with the sole care of three school-aged children. She is aware that living in her rural area means that there is a limited range of options for her placement. Lily is also aware that, in her situation, waiting for a placement and attaining her education is more difficult without the support of a partner, sharing that "I'm not like a lot of these other girls that are really young and living at home or got partners or partners and kids that have got a little bit more support." She continued by describing her circumstances without that support:

I've been living in my car for like 4 weeks, and I'm a normal person in
society, so there's a lot of people out there like me that have got families
living in their cars… I'm struggling to survive like a normal person. I'm
living sub-standardly than I have before and I'm fine with that, like I know
that I've had to make a lot of sacrifices to try and get an education, so not
being able to work or if I want to get a job, I can't afford to pay for petrol to
be able to get to a job, you know it's a vicious circle to even start.

An experience of being a student without adequate financial support has resulted in Lily "struggling to survive like a normal person" and "living sub-standardly" which is far from a suitable existence for her and her children. Her commentary reflects that she has observed other

"families" or local people who live in a similar situation. In her circumstances, Lily is determined to endure her "sacrifice" of adequate housing to continue her education for the purpose of securing future employment. As a student, Lily is resigned to restrictive financial circumstances which means forgoing housing so that she can secure future employment.

As seen above, some contributors received financial support from their intimate partners who assisted them to complete their courses. The experiences of three contributors illustrate that while attaining their credentials to secure employment, financial support or a lack thereof influenced their standard of living while completing their courses. When Dawn needed to complete compulsory work placements, her husband supported her financially. Similarly, Heidi's decision to study full-time to qualify for a local professional position was bolstered by the support of her partner. In contrast, Lily is without the support of a partner, living in dire circumstances while she waits for her education provider to organise her placement so that she can complete her course and qualify for local employment. Each contributor who shared the significance of financial support for the completion of their course views that it is valuable for completing compulsory course requirements.

For some contributors, financial support from a partner meant access to money and time while completing a course for local employment purposes and was critical for those whose course requirements included attending work placements. Apart from research discussing that time and education costs are barriers for persons who wish to continue their education while living in rural areas, little of the research literature examines the potential financial role of partners (cf. Purnell & Cuskelly, 1996). Australian government literature that reports on the retention of adults in tertiary education hints at some of the challenges that adults face, stating that mature-age students, such as persons in the present study "are often required to make difficult choices about their priorities that other students do not have to make" (Australian Department of Education and Training, 2017b, p. 24). Contributors' experiences here show that for persons who live in rural areas there are very real financial constraints that have tangible impacts on their living conditions. In some circumstances, such restraints are mitigated through the financial support of partners whose incomes can support them and offset losses due to educational engagement. Experiences negotiating constraints with money and time for contributors residing in rural areas who completed compulsory work placements illustrate the significance of and need for, adequate financial support. Such support could sustain wellbeing of persons living in rural areas until course completion as a way to expedite their local employment entry. Reading contributors' experiences through spatiality highlights how the social construction of economic imperatives makes demands on their time that are interlaced with the demands from their tertiary education. Persons often engage with such competing

demands by drawing on the resources available to them through private arrangements with their intimate partners. With regard to spatial (in)justice, this scenario may also afflict those who occupy spaces as residents in the metropolitan area. Nonetheless, resources such as adequate time and money to engage with and complete compulsory course components are valued by persons who live in Australian rural areas as essential for securing the benefits that come from attaining a tertiary education.

The finding of contributors' experiences with partners who provide money and time to support their credential attainment is of critical interest in understanding the circumstances facing those engaged with tertiary education while living in a rural area. Partners providing financial assistance add to the literature that discusses barriers and enablers to course completion. Persons' experiences here illuminate that financial support from a partner for themselves and their children is the difference between maintaining or significant deterioration of living standards while completing compulsory course requirements.

Throughout the chapter, the findings discussed in the themes and their respective subthemes respond to the first part of the central research question by presenting experiences of tertiary education for persons living in Australian rural areas. The discussion highlights dominant and rival meanings of tertiary education experiences, portraying the complexity in such experiences for each contributor. Further, in each subtheme, I highlight the spatial (in)justices experienced by persons living in Australian rural areas as it pertains primarily to their tertiary education. In the next chapter, I present findings about experiences of community while living in Australian rural areas, a discussion that extends the conversation here by focusing on tertiary-educated persons' experiences in their communities.

CHAPTER 6   — FINDINGS: COMMUNITY EXPERIENCES

I continue the presentation of the findings in this chapter by detailing two themes and their respective subthemes that capture contributors' experiences with their communities. By doing so, I respond to the second half of the central research question: for persons living in Australian rural areas, what are their experiences of their communities? In the first theme *Community Engagement: Alternate Spaces* I present the meanings of different community experiences for some contributors. In the second theme, *Local Residents: Educated Roles*, I present contributors' experiences with local roles performed by them as tertiary-educated persons living in their rural areas. A further illustration of the arrangement of themes and subthemes that I discuss in this chapter is provided in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Themes and Subthemes Generated from the Analysis of Contributors' Community Experiences

Experiences of Tertiary Education and Community for Persons Living in Australian Rural Areas

**Community Engagement:
Alternate Spaces**

Understanding People: Appreciating Complexity
Town Communities: Variable Acceptance
Student Identity: Underwhelming Response
Town Groups: Dissatisfactory Involvement
Expressing Agency: Genuine Offensive
Community Roles: Social Satisfaction

**Local Residents:
Educated Roles**

Local Employees: Gratifying Positions
Rural Professionals: Diverse Opportunities
Education Knowledge: Essential Roles
Educational Dishonesty: Resolute Opponents
Professional Roles: Local Voices

6.1 Community Engagement: Alternate Spaces

Most contributors expressed a committed involvement with a selection of communities, both locally and afar, and I present their experiences in the theme *Community Engagement: Alternate Spaces*. As part of living in their rural areas, contributors appreciate being acquainted with people from different backgrounds. In addition, each contributor's sense of acceptance in their towns was related to their local as well as their educated identities. Further, contributors' involvement with their town groups rarely generates the satisfaction that they were seeking, and their attempts to influence the direction of such groups were sometimes met with strong local resistance. In response, contributors had either generated or sought alternative community spaces where they could make a contribution of their choosing which afforded them a sense of deep satisfaction and belonging.

The theme *Community Engagement: Alternate Spaces* comprises six subthemes in which I describe some contributors' experiences with their communities. In the subtheme *Understanding People: Appreciating Complexity*, I explore contributors' understanding and appreciation of the complexities in other people that are shaped by their life and course experiences. In *Town Communities: Variable Acceptance*, I examine the significance of contributors' tenure and wealth for their sense of acceptance and belonging in their rural areas. As part of further understanding their sense of acceptance in their rural areas in *Student Identity: Underwhelming Response*, I describe a variety of perceived local responses to contributors' student identities that were often experiences defined as indifferent at best. Some contributors were dissatisfied with their involvement in town groups, a feeling I capture in *Town Groups: Dissatisfactory Involvement*. In *Expressing Agency: Genuine Offensive* (where offensive is defined as actively aggressive and attacking), I discuss the perspectives of some contributors about encountering local resistance to their attempts to utilise their knowledge in their town groups. I also discuss contributors' different experiences of satisfaction in their community roles, both locally and elsewhere in the final subtheme *Community Roles: Social Satisfaction*.

6.1.1 Understanding People: Appreciating Complexity

Some contributors spoke about experiences that shaped their understanding of other people. Events in their lives, as well as their social interactions during and after their courses, informed contributors' understanding of both themselves and others. Contributors' experiences, including gaining knowledge from their courses, led them to consider the complex identities of other people.

Before she began her tertiary education, Maggie was empathetic to the misfortune and suffering of others and none more so than her chronically ill husband. When the opportunity presented itself, Maggie decided to continue her education. She discussed events in her life that inspired her to qualify for her chosen career:

> ... I lost a brother to suicide, and I think there was some motivation from that. I think I grew up in poverty, so I sort of had a good understanding of disadvantage and how difficult it is for people. So, there was that motivation to work in that field.

The untimely passing of her brother, her husband's poor health, and intimate knowledge of growing up "in poverty" reassured Maggie that she has a "good understanding of disadvantage" and is familiar with some of the difficulties that people face in their lives. Events in her own life, thus, "motivated" Maggie to build on her understanding and life experiences by pursuing a tertiary education that would qualify her to enter a career to support people who are experiencing challenging life events.

Helen's volunteer work has helped her to understand the ways that people can be supported to overcome their challenges. She spoke about the chance to develop her awareness of the needs of others through her lengthy service to her local community:

> I was a volunteer with another organisation for 9 years... more than 9 years... 11 years. That was really rewarding and that was like this community and close by community branches got together and fundraise and do things. I had a volunteering heart after that.

Helen describes volunteering both locally and in an adjacent community as being "rewarding." Part of that reward was engaging with people from different communities to work towards a common purpose, but significant for Helen was that she had developed a "volunteering heart." When prompted, Helen went on to explain what a "volunteering heart" means for her: "That you volunteer to help enhance the best possible outcome for who you work for. Yeah, that's what I mean by heart." Developing a "volunteering heart" through her volunteer service is central to Helen's understanding of the way that she can assist other people. Helen's experiences have shaped her opinion that she can best support people by comprehending their own ideas about their needs, rather than imposing externally defined goals upon them. She spoke further about developing such an approach to helping people after observing the behaviour of other volunteers:

> I think that... people work, volunteer for their own devices and I don't like that. I just saw a lot of that in the warehouse that people were only there to get the best of the clothes and the best of this and the best of that, and they

weren't volunteering for the right reasons then, who were they volunteering

for?

Helen's experience of working with some volunteers was that she was repulsed by their focus on "their own devices" or activities to benefit themselves rather than meeting the needs of others. Her perspective is that overlooking others is not the "right reason[s]" to be volunteering. She spoke about witnessing the same concern with another volunteer activity:

> …And same with telephone counselling. They did the telephone counselling, and then it was just more people on the telephone telling other people that are ringing what they want them to do, instead of helping the client on the phone who is asking for help, helping them come to the help that they want for themselves…their own that they want within them. I saw a lot of that, that sort of attitude.

Helen is aware that volunteers being unable to comprehend the needs of others is especially unhelpful for people who sought assistance through telephone counselling. In Helen's view, previous poor examples of volunteering have informed her goal to provide the best possible outcome for those she could support by understanding their views about their needs.

Almost a decade ago while still living in the city, Amber commenced volunteer work as a telephone counsellor. After relocating to her rural town, Amber has to travel several hours to engage in volunteer work. She used to volunteer every week, but as a low-income recipient, she has had to curtail her volunteering by attending only two or three times per month. Amber shared her reasons for spending some of her meagre income to cover her travel expenses so that she can volunteer:

> I've learned a lot about people, and a lot about life outside of my own narrow experience. I've learned to be a better listener, and not to always want to put my opinion on everything. I think I am more compassionate, less judgmental, and more assertive now than I used to be. I have more patience and am more aware of how my body reflects my feelings. I'm learning to be more tactful, to accept criticism – in short, I'm learning the pastoral skills I lacked. Add to this the self-esteem factor: the knowledge that even though I'm on social security benefits, I am making a positive contribution to society. It makes me feel good that other people's lives are somehow better because I am able to listen to them. And it's a really good feeling to go home after a potential suicide call, thinking, 'I saved someone's life tonight!'

Seen here, Amber experiences a sense of deep satisfaction from volunteering to assist others during a critical juncture in their lives. In her volunteer role, Amber has developed an improved understanding of other people as well as herself. She is pleased that she has developed an

extensive range of "pastoral skills" that aid her profound interest in giving emotional, social, and spiritual support to others. Amber also appreciates the "self-esteem factor" which she describes as a positive sense of self from making a social contribution of her choosing, despite her low income.

After completing her honours credential, Heidi secured a professional position in her local region that fits with her care responsibilities. She reflected on the benefits of completing her course and shared the way that her course knowledge assists her in her everyday life:

> I think the study has helped me more in my personal life, than my work life I think at this point because I mean I've only finished the degree recently, I don't know where it's going to take me, but it's made me look at how I interact with people. My empathy, I was either black or white. Now it's like 'well there's a reason why that person's probably doing that.' So, I've really looked at myself and questioned some of the people's around me behaviours as well.

Even though Heidi's ambition was to secure employment upon course completion, she emphasises that the greatest benefit from "the study" or her course knowledge so far is that it has bolstered her "personal life" or interactions with others. Before engaging with tertiary education, Heidi's perspective about others was "black and white" or based on a sharply divided judgement that people were either good or bad. As she describes, she "looked at myself," applying her course knowledge to reflect on herself as well as to understand the "behaviours" of others. As a result of her course, Heidi understands during her interactions with others, rather than people simply being good or bad, there is a multitude of possible explanations for the way that people behave.

The knowledge from her course has altered the quality of Dawn's social interactions as she has come to understand people's behaviour as a function of their circumstances. She has also observed that her knowledge has "rubbed off," or informed her children's understanding, of people's behaviour. Dawn described the role of her course in developing her understanding of others that has influenced her interactions with friends:

> …this is part of your study[ing] as well, and this is a change I've noted in myself, that we look deeper and I'm not saying I'm an expert on it, but we don't see... especially what you see in the media. You see this one view, but you sort of think, 'No, what else is going on?' And so, I guess that's in my friendship circle now that I probably gravitate towards more, that 'let's have a look, what else is going on around it.' Whereas my friends even that I'm still am friends with that I had before haven't got that... they can be very, it

frustrates me sometimes... very one-directional, one dimension and black and white. So, I guess that's where my friends are... I don't know... And I don't want that to come across as being snobby or something, but it's just a depth and I think that's come from my study as well as I've got more inquisitive myself.

Dawn's "study[ing]" or her course knowledge has "changed" her, piquing her curiosity about the nuances of people who are depicted in the popular "media." Further, in identifying the friends that she "gravitates" or is drawn to since engaging with her course, Dawn is careful to articulate that she isn't "snobby" or disdainful of her friends who have a different understanding of other people. However, she is "frustrated" by "one-dimension[al]" views of people and prefers to relate to friends who can also recognise the nuances of human complexity. Further to this, Dawn is sometimes "frustrated" by being unable to share the "depth" of her knowledge with her friends who have "black and white" thinking or little understanding of the complex functioning of other people. She subsequently enjoys interactions with friends who likewise can comprehend a multitude of influences on the behaviours of others. Dawn's experience since her course is that she can now understand the manifestation of grey areas of human behaviour that do not readily conform to dichotomised "black and white" categories.

There is a connection between Anne's care-intensive volunteer role and her course. As she has continued with both activities, Anne has been able to share her insights from her caring experiences and course knowledge through her extensive social connections with local people. She described her role in improving the social relationships among people in her local community:

I've actually built relationships with indigenous people, and I still see a lot of the children that we've had on a regular basis [and] they still ask whether we can have them for respite. I think we've also changed a lot of our friend's views on some things as well. So, they're not, I don't want to use the word 'racist,' but I've broadened their outlook on things and even my own children have benefitted from it because they can understand now that it's not that child's fault that they're in the place that they're in. Some of our social problems here is [*sic*] the biggest issue that our community faces.

Anne identifies local "social problems," and in particular, the social divide in her town that is generated by a clash between different cultures as the most pressing local challenge. Volunteering to assist indigenous peoples has given Anne an opportunity to build social connections with them and further her understanding of their circumstances. She is pleased to share the knowledge that she has gained with her children and to "broaden the outlook," or

inform the perspectives of her family and friends so that they understand the complex circumstances of local First Nations' Peoples.

Due to their life and course experiences, some contributors have an improved appreciation of the circumstances of other people. Six contributors spoke about experiences that informed their understandings of others. Maggie attributed her life experiences as shaping her understanding of the difficulties that others may face, inspiring her to enrol in a course that will qualify her to assist others. Over a decade of volunteer work has influenced the development of Helen's perspective that supporting a person is best centred on the details in their view about the assistance they need. In her volunteer role, Amber has developed a better understanding of herself as well as the needs of others. Heidi directly attributes her course knowledge as improving her understanding of the complex motives for her behaviour as well as that of others. Since engaging with tertiary education, Dawn is wary of accepting simplistic depictions of people from media sources and, in addition, prefers to relate to her friends who can understand the complex identities of others. In her volunteer role that is related to her course, Anne has developed an improved appreciation of First Nations' Peoples and their circumstances that she has shared with her family and friends. A dominant experience for each contributor was that their appreciation of the complex functioning of people and their circumstances was informed by their courses and their lives as well as chances to closely interact with and observe others.

For persons living in rural areas while engaging with their tertiary education courses, knowledge from their lives and their courses assisted them in developing an improved understanding of themselves as well as others. Contributors' experiences of appreciating others align with previous research by Nixon (2010) and Solbrekke and Sugrue (2020) who proposed that engaging with tertiary education can sustain a mode of understanding other people, beginning with recognising the self that assists with understanding others. Contributors' experiences add to Nixon's (2010) and Solbrekke and Sugrue's (2020) research by showing that tertiary-educated persons living in rural areas often concurrently drew upon their experiences in their contexts as well as their courses to understand both themselves and others. Sometimes a contributor's experience of understanding others arose from a better understanding of their lives due to their course materials. For others, their comprehension of other people was often also informed by opportunities for close observations of residents that provided them with chances to develop an improved understanding of the circumstances of individuals.

Persons experiencing an appreciation of the complexities of others extend research about the social behaviour among local people in rural towns where there is little privacy or a demonstration of local conspicuity (Cheers et al., 2007). Specifically, experiences of being

conspicuous in a rural town may afford local people the chance for sustained social observations that permits them an intimate understanding of the complexities of others. For instance, contributors' experiences as persons living in rural areas highlight the role that social visibility, when combined with their tertiary education and reflection on themselves, can have for an improved understanding of others. Understood through a lens of spatiality, the particulars in the social construction of rural spaces permit contributors a chance to become profoundly aware of other local people. As either students or tertiary-educated persons, contributors were eager to understand the ways in which others are marginalised or empowered by their circumstances. In this way, persons who live in Australian rural areas embraced an opportunity to comprehend the spatial (in)justices that confronted others as well as themselves. Such comprehension was valuable for empowering persons living in rural areas as they exercised their course knowledge through their roles.

Experiences of interactions between their courses and their lives in rural contexts, including chances to observe the behaviour of local people, adds to research about the complex roles of such for recognising self and others in rural areas. Contributors' experiences of understanding people add to a small amount of research about the benefits of tertiary education for understanding the complex functioning of others. In particular, contributors' experiences highlight the role of tertiary education as well as the power of social visibility and connectivity in rural areas to offer chances for a deeper understanding of others. Subsequent experiences related to promoting interactions for deeper understandings among persons I discuss further in *Community Roles: Social Satisfaction*.

6.1.2 Town Communities: Variable Acceptance

With the exception of three persons who continue to live adjacent to their place of birth, the majority of contributors had in-migrated to their rural area. Most incomers had extensive experience of interacting with residents and described their sense of acceptance in comparison to "locals" who have a history of familial tenure in their town. Ideas of contributors as incomers were that acceptance in town communities is dominated by local tenure and personal wealth whereas locals cited their social connection as pivotal to their acceptance.

After living most of her life in the area where both she and her parents were born, Margaret describes having "a very wide friendship circle" in her town that includes a number of friends from diverse backgrounds. She spoke at length about the personal significance of having a relationship with many different local people throughout her life:

…I have so much history here and it's just being able to live in a wider group

of people. And the thing I love about living in the country, which I really

noticed when I went down [to] town to live with my second family, I call them. And when they had major events in their lives, that their lives were so narrow in the city compared to us, and even down to the type of people that they mixed with. They tend to live in suburbs and if you live in a particular suburb all the people around you probably have approximately the same amount of money as you. Probably the same cultural background as you. Whereas in the country, I don't think that happens. I think that particularly in Novaton[13], I think in Novaton, it happens a bit more, but in Catmarie[14] down our little street where I live, we have, well we have a retired person, we have someone that works in the vineyards, we have an Afghani family living here, you know it's all a big mixture of what people do. And we choose… like we would for instance, never ever live in the estate because I would see that almost as being like living in the city where you live in one of the suburbs where everybody is the same as you and that does not appeal to me at all. I like that mixture of people and we both grew up with people who came from Italy, and Greece, and Croatia and I just really enjoy that. I enjoy that cultural thing ... so and that wider community... That wider relationship with these people. Yes, it gives a sense of belonging and I do know I belong here like it's the same as my church, I remember at one stage I was... I remember I was having a reflection on what our church means to us, and I said, 'Well if nothing else I can walk in that door and have a huge sense of these are the people I belong with.' And a lot of them I've grown up with like they've been adults around me for my entire life and I don't have to explain myself or be anybody else, except myself, you know? And they're people that expect the best of me but also expect other parts of me that might not be very good and that's important.

As someone who has travelled extensively "down [to] town," or to the city to complete two of her university courses, Margaret is able to frame her experiences of living in the "country" or her town as an opportunity to form "wider" social connections. Such connections for Margaret and her husband include forming deep networks with people from backgrounds and occupations that differ from their own. Such connections fortify Margaret's sense of belonging in her town community. Subsequently, the chance to live in an "estate," or a new housing development that is socially homogenous, is unappealing to Margaret. Seen in her language is that such living arrangements may narrow the diversity in her social relationships that are integral to her sense

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[13] Pseudonym.
[14] Pseudonym.

of belonging in her town community. An "important" foundation in such belonging is Margaret's experience of having all "parts" of her being unconditionally accepted by local people who have known her for her entire life which has, in turn, bolstered her capacity for accepting others from diverse backgrounds.

Lily was a young child when she relocated to her mother's birth town after her parents divorced. She has continued to live in her town, except for a temporary relocation some years ago when her former husband secured employment in another rural town. The relocation was Lily's first experience of being an incomer or living in a rural town where she didn't have a history of familial residency. Lily described what it was like to be local and then described her experiences as an incomer:

> It's just a feeling of acceptance, I think. It's more... it's not necessarily gaining anything from it, essentially, it's not like some kind of private club or some strange masonic hall or something, and you get to wear a Viking hat. It's just feeling like you can be included and feeling like you are... you're part of the crowd. You know when you are being ostracised, you know when... even if you've done nothing wrong, you know that feeling, that kind of cold shoulder feeling and small communities do have that and that's probably the most remote that I've ever lived, is there away from my family. Up here where I am, I've got a lot of family around me, so that's not so bad. But that definitely... it was definitely... after 2 ½ years I'd had enough... after 2 years I'd had enough, and I said: 'we need to make a process to actually get back here again.' Because I didn't want to live there anymore, it was just... It's quite draining when you don't have family support.

Lily describes living in the town where her family has tenure as an experience of belonging because others welcome her presence as a person. As an incomer to another rural town, Lily describes her experience of a "cold shoulder" or residents greeting her with a persistently icy reception that continued during the two years of her residency. A sense of ostracism "drained," or exhausted Lily, and she was eager to return to her hometown where her family could support her.

Over thirty-five years ago, Heidi was a teenager when she relocated to her town with her parents. Since that time, Heidi has been heavily involved in community activities in her town. She hinted at the social complexity that influences her sense of connection with other residents: "the other stuff that sometimes goes on in the community and you feel that your network is just shrinking." Given her statement as part of explaining her involvement with community activities, I asked Heidi to elaborate on her experiences in her town:

> …I feel that if you... and people say it happens in every community, but if you don't have the right name or don't be seen to be… to have money I find a lot of people here can be quite dismissive of you as a person or as a community member and that can be quite hurtful. So, yeah and because they're born and bred here, they feel as they have got the rights to... it's their way or the highway type of thing. It is a bit of a joke here about how many years you've been here and you're still not a local.

Heidi indicates that as a resident, her lack of tenure and wealth means that those with familial tenure are indifferent to her and may simply be "dismissive" of her. She indicates that any challenges to such established social practices in her town are met by a feeling of "their way or the highway," meaning that there is little opportunity to offer alternatives to practices that are shaped by the views of "locals." After living in her town for more than three decades, Heidi frames her experience of community in her town as "a bit of a joke," meaning that what she experiences is a ridiculously inadequate and laughable experience of community where she is treated as being less than a person due to her incomer status. Such treatment contrasts with Heidi's preference to be recognised as a person who is part of the community.

As a teenager, Meg relocated with her parents from another town in her local region. Since her arrival over thirty years ago, Meg struggles to feel that she "was good enough to be here." Her experience of living in her town is "that feeling of still not really belonging, it just carries through" and that, "I don't even know if I would even call [here] my community because I don't really feel like I have, I don't feel connected here." Meg's lack of belonging and feeling disconnected as an incomer contrast with her description of the benefits of being identified as what she terms a "localite":

> …to be a localite and to be considered to be full-blood localite, that to me… it's… I suppose it's the tradition, it's the roots of being 'my family have been here for that long, and they've been, my mum's been to that school, and my grandpa went to that school.' And everybody knows everybody and so then I look at people who I know have been there generations, have been here and they're accepted no matter what, no matter what they do, no matter if they've had a drug problem, they are still accepted and they're still viable in the community. Whereas if somebody comes in and they haven't done anything wrong and they've kept to the law or they've been a great role model to the community, if they haven't been here forever, yeah, that difference of I suppose if you've been here forever or not been here you not accepted, no matter what you do.

Meg frames her experiences of her town community as an incomer through first describing a "full- blood localite" or a person who is born into the town where their family has intergenerational tenure. Meg uses the term "full-blood localite" with demonymic connotation to emphasise her perspective that some residents, living adjacent to their place of birth as part of a tenured family, belong unreservedly to the community in the town. In Meg's experience, the acceptance of a person as a "full-blood localite" is a "tradition" or local custom that transcends their displays of aberrant social behaviour, adding to her sense of frustration with being devalued as an incomer. She expresses that family tenure in her town bestows a value to "localites" as "viable" which imbues them with the quality of being the lifeblood or essential to the town. In contrast, Meg's experience of acceptance as an incomer is that no matter how exemplary her behaviour or local contribution, she will not be accepted in her town as having a similar value. Her experience is that she cannot ever possibly hope to achieve the same status, and therefore, the same sense of belonging that a local has in her town.

As someone who relocated to her husband's town where his family has local tenure, Emily offers her observations about a lack of wealth on the local status of her former in-laws:

> …they should have a road named after them, the family was relied on in the community and well respected, but because they weren't affluent and didn't have prestige behind them it hasn't happened. They talk highly of them in the community, they have a good reputation, but they are not the pillars of the community.

In discussing the position of her former in-laws, Emily relates that the family's exemplary service and high regard in her town were not enough for them to be awarded a local tribute. Emily's perspective is that a lack of "prestige" or wealth meant that her former in-laws could not demonstrate their financial support for their town. Such circumstances undermined their local acceptance and status as community "pillars" or as a family who has the necessary influence to bolster the community.

After relocating to her husband's town over thirty years ago, Julie has many accomplishments as a parent, community volunteer, employee, and business owner. After years of being involved with community activities, she described her sense of living in her town:

> …when you haven't had the luxury of being born within that community, and I think it doesn't matter how much would be done in the community, or how many runs on the board you've got within a community, I think there's always that stigma of 'you're not a local person' and I find that very jilting.

As someone married to a "local," Julie can compare her experience of her town with that of her husband. Her perspective is that someone who is born in her town enjoys "luxury" or great

comfort from belonging that is inaccessible to incomers such as herself. For instance, despite Julie's involvement in town activities and the amount she has "done" as one of a team of people working together, her efforts to put "runs on the board" – attempts to generate benefits for the town – are unacknowledged. A lack of recognition for her community roles after thirty years of residency in her town is because, as Julie recognises, she is viewed as an incomer, an identity that is mutually exclusive of "a local person." Julie senses that her incomer status is a "stigma," an enduring social mark that prevents her from an acceptance that is only reserved for "locals." After over three decades of being treated as an incomer, Julie's experience of living in her town is "jilting" in that she senses an abrupt and lingering disconnect between her and the town community.

Julie offered me her profound understanding of what it means to be accepted in her community as a local. She was particular to illustrate the influence of a local person with familial tenure either with or without wealth:

> I think old name and old money bring benefits in a small community but once that money's [*sic*] dropped off, I don't think the old name is the benefit. I think it depends on the money circumstance. So, I think if you have an old name, you are supposed to live by the creed, by the old money, old town creed, but I think that if something's gone amiss, like if you're the laird of the manor and there's no money for repairs and the place was falling down around your ears, then that would be looked upon and frowned upon within the community. So, therefore, I think your name would be looked upon and frowned upon as well, or if you're a gambler, or a drinker or something like that.

In Julie's experience, the influence of locals is accepted in community decisions as a "benefit" because it is part of the town "creed" or a set of local beliefs and principles that promote the value of family tenure and wealth. Having an "old name," or family tenure, is not only significant but maintenance of inherited family wealth or "old money" is also essential to maintain influence in the town community. In Julie's experience, according to the local "creed," such influence is diminished by socially aberrant behaviour or lack of wealth, both of which negate the local power of family tenure.

After describing the attributes necessary to assert local influence, Julie continued by describing the "creed" or expectations about community responsibilities for a local, particularly the ethical dimension:

> …and old money then creates old name and there is a certain... I don't know a certain standard that they are supposed to be setting within the community.

I do say, supposedly very loosely, because some of their ethical and moral

backgrounds aren't really what old money used to be.

For Julie, wealth and family tenure in her town means that a person is influential. Part of the benefit for the town is that "old money" equates with locals who have influence and are expected to take action to assist the town. To this end, each local is obligated to establish a level of performance in their roles that demonstrates excellence as the standard or norm for community-minded behaviour. Julie remarks that the "standard" of behaviour by locals, including their treatment of newer residents, is in disarray. However, in Julie's experience, despite a lack of standard "setting" by locals or deterioration in their community behaviours, she has observed that their influence persists:

If you're old school or old money your opinion is valued but if you might be

down that ladder a little bit, it's not worth your breath even to open your

mouth.

Julie's perspective is that locals as well as incomers who are from the "old school" and who adhere to the traditional practices of deferring to the influence of locals, permit the perpetuation of the current social arrangements in her community. Such arrangements include upholding the idea that the opinions and influence of locals have intrinsic value for building community. For Julie as an incomer, the value of her ideas is "down that ladder," meaning that they rank as less than that of a local person and her opinion and influence are therefore dismissed.

In sum, each contributor's experience of acceptance in a town community varied, with either their own or their families' tenure being a central aspect in their sense of belonging. Six contributors spoke about being either a local or an incomer. Margaret's lifetime experience in her town includes interacting with local people from a variety of backgrounds, reinforcing her sense of belonging and complete acceptance as a person in her town community. Lily has experience with being included while living in her mother's birth town as well as residing in another town where a lack of social acceptance left her exhausted. Heidi relocated into her town over thirty years ago and is still experiencing a lack of acceptance in her town community. Emily married into a tenured local family who due to their lack of wealth is not celebrated in their town community. Julie's long-term status as an incomer informs her observations about how her treatment contrasts with that of locals with tenure and wealth whose influence is welcomed in the town. Each contributor shared that the experience of belonging in a town community was related to social acceptance afforded by combinations of tenure and wealth.

Some research attention has been directed toward understanding acceptance in rural towns, and contributors' experiences of variable acceptance in town communities align with previous research. For instance, both Crow et al. (2001) and Milbourne (2007) propose that

persons living in rural areas are credited with an insider status according to their tenure and that of their families, with incomers who move into a town being treated as outsiders. In related research, Luhrs (2016) and Pritchard and McManus (2000) have reviewed an aspect of wealth in rural areas, namely property ownership, and proposed that it is a key attribute of insider status, a finding that is echoed here. In addition, contributors' experiences of variable acceptance impacting their sense of belonging extend research knowledge about town communities. Experiences illustrate that while the designation of either an insider or outsider status lingers, there are gradations within each status that are influenced by key attributes. Such attributes have different impacts in each rural context and are identified by contributors as length of local tenure, displays of wealth, social behaviours, and connections with other residents.

Another notion that is supported by the experiences of contributors is research which shows that each person's experience of community allowed for a sense of empowerment through being with other people (Elias, 2008). Further, she details that a sense of community was especially enhanced when connecting with others from diverse backgrounds. Contributors' experiences here show that locals experience greater acceptance and a heightened sense of belonging in a town community when they connect with others who are somehow different. In contrast, incomers, despite their diverse relationships, had a weaker sense of connection with locals and therefore a lower sense of acceptance, especially when they and their community contributions were pointedly overlooked. A lens of spatiality helps to explain the social construction of either acceptance or rejection of persons in rural town spaces. Persons as students or tertiary-educated persons preferred to be accepted in their town communities; however, such acceptance was often reserved for those deemed to be locals. Experiences of (dis)connection from/to town communities for residents highlight the ways that spatial (in)justice may have a localised manifestation in rural areas. A sense of belonging in town communities is valued highly in Australian rural areas as it offers extensive social and economic benefits that cannot be easily secured from outside sources.

The findings of experiences of variable acceptance in town communities assist in understanding their subtleties for persons living in rural areas, a topic that has received some consideration in previous research. The point of departure from other research here is that experiences of acceptance and belonging in town communities are associated with combinations of wealth, tenure, social behaviours, connection with a variety of residents as well as acceptance by locals. As such, in alignment with previous research, for locals as insiders, there is a community of place in rural towns (Hunziker et al., 2007; Pretty et al., 2003; Raymond et al., 2010). Whereas in contrast, incomers as outsiders may experience more so a collective co-existence in a society of place rather than a sense of belonging to a town community. Further,

although there is often a research focus on a sharp dichotomy between insider and outsider status, the qualities of experiences according to status vary on a continuum. For instance, outsiders receive a designation of "almost local" after decades of tenure or insiders are ostracised if they are a local without wealth. Experiences that exemplify such a continuum include variation in acceptance and belonging including the overt rejection of outsider actions and softer social disapproval for insiders who were without wealth. Other aspects of experiences with communities for persons living in rural areas I discuss further in the coming subthemes, with the subtheme *Community Roles: Social Satisfaction*, in particular, focusing on the locations and experience of community for persons living in rural areas who engage with tertiary education.

6.1.3 Student Identity: Underwhelming Response

Some contributors who engage with their courses through distance education expressed that the reaction of residents to their student identity was underwhelming. The reactions from residents in response to student activities ranged from some encouragement to disinterest or even ostracism in their towns, meaning that some contributors were disinclined to promote their student identity. A dominant experience for some contributors was that the responses of residents to their identity as a student was toleration at best.

To complete her certificate course, Sandy travelled to campus in two different towns in her local region. Her experience with reactions to her student identity differs in the regional towns that she visits. Sandy describes her perspective about the responses from residents to her student identity like so: "some people are like really encouraging, but some aren't. There are not many students here, but in other towns where there is [*sic*] more students, they are used to it." As a student in her town, Sandy has encountered less encouragement than the more supportive responses from people living in nearby towns that have a campus and where residents are more familiar with student activities.

Emily is without a local role in which she can demonstrate the skills that she has gained from her course. I asked her about the responses of residents to her student status, and she explained, "Most people see me as a worker, but studying means you are trying to better yourself and people are usually encouraging." Due to her understanding of different values that are attributed to local identities, Emily is keen to be associated with a "worker" identity as she views her physical labour is recognised locally as valuable. Emily acknowledges that residents "usually" encourage a person who is "studying" or continuing their education when the potential local improvement from course attainment is clear. Emily is studying to qualify for a

position located elsewhere, and as there is a risk that revealing her student status may be met with discouragement, she subsequently promotes her worker identity.

As a long-term resident with a postgraduate credential who is active in the town community, Julie explained the general attitude of residents towards her tertiary education thusly:

> I think most people around here don't understand much about study except the earn or learn program, they know that some people have to do 5 hours of study a week, so it's associated with being on the dole. A university education, I would have thought would guarantee that you don't get invited to be on any committees because they wouldn't want anyone who is smarter to come in and question what they are doing.

Julie's experience is that "most people around here" in her town are generally unfamiliar with "study" or the activities and lives of students. One exception for Julie is that residents are aware of the "earn or learn program," whereby individuals receiving government subsistence are coerced into certificate level courses. Such a coercive education strategy for unemployed people has degraded the local value of student identity. Julie then turns her focus to local opportunities to increase residents' understanding about the benefits of tertiary education, and she is adamant that a university credential "guarantees" or ensures that she is excluded from "committees" or community groups in her town. She sees that her exclusion stems from being "smarter" and having a perceived increase in her overall intelligence that could be used to challenge residents who influence local decisions to disproportionally benefit themselves.

Wynne completed her doctorate while living in her town by frequently travelling to her metropolitan campus. Before candidature, Wynne resided on a property with her husband. She has since relocated into her town and considers the entire region to be her community. Wynne shared the reaction of residents to her student activities: "people in the region appear unaware of studying and uncaring as to whether someone is studying or not." In her experiences with other residents, Wynne's language highlights that they are largely uninformed about tertiary education and cannot understand the significance of her doctoral studies. During the time that Wynne has been engaged with tertiary education, she has observed little progress in residents' understandings of the possible local benefits from tertiary-educated residents. Further, she related that she is "probably excluded due to academic and education endeavours" and that she is ostracised in her town because of her tertiary education.

In sum, while living in their rural areas, four contributors related that their student identity meant an underwhelming response from other residents. While they sometimes received

encouragement when disclosing their student status, contributors also risked being ostracised in their towns. As someone who has experienced responses from residents in three towns in her region, Sandy's experience is defined by better acceptance in other towns with a campus and more students. Emily prefers to promote her identity as a worker rather than as a student as she views that being a worker means that she is more of a local asset. In Julie's town, people are largely unfamiliar with the nuances of students' activities, and her perspective is that the knowledge she has gained from her tertiary education is a threat to the influence of powerful residents. Residents in Wynne's town are uninformed about the local benefits from tertiary education and her perspective is that her doctoral credential plays a part in her local ostracism. Experiences of some contributors with their student identity are that the responses of residents who are largely unfamiliar with tertiary education are underwhelming.

There is some ambiguity in reactions to a student identity for persons living in rural areas, with most experiencing an underwhelming response to their student identities. Similar to previous research findings, students living in towns without a campus were most likely to be treated as though their studies were superfluous to local needs (Bruning et al., 2006; Johnston, 2010). Contributors' experiences complicate previous assertions in research that people living in rural areas value the individual education of others for the benefit in local contexts (Dymock, 2007). The experiences here do complicate previous assertions, by showing that students felt that they are perceived as having little local value. An underwhelming response about them as students means that some persons are reluctant or cannot find a niche to promote themselves and their knowledge. Such a lack of integration means that similar to previous research, persons living in rural areas view their student identity as peripheral to their locally established adult identities, such as being a "worker" (O'Shea et al., 2017). For persons who did promote their identity as a student or tertiary-educated person, their experience of ostracism was similar to Redpath's (2004) finding that tertiary-educated women in rural areas struggle with local acceptance. The barriers that tertiary-educated persons could face in their towns were also illuminated by Evans et al. (2016) who argue that those residents who seek knowledge from a tertiary education course may be viewed as distrusting the knowledge of other local people. In a similar way here, tertiary-educated persons were often viewed with mistrust and consequently encounter a lack of acceptance in their town, especially when they are perceived as disrupting established local social hierarchies that, usually, disproportionately benefit some powerful local people. Reading contributor experiences through spatiality highlights that they experienced the construction of social spaces in their rural areas as promoting an ambiguous acceptance of students. Persons preferred that their student status and their social contributions through such identity be recognised, accepted, and valued in their rural areas. Consequently, for persons living in Australian rural areas, local ambiguity towards their student identity generates a sense

of injustice in such spaces. For students, acceptance in rural spaces is particularly valuable for them to access resources and for them to integrate their course knowledge into local spaces.

For persons living in rural areas, variations in their experiences as either students or tertiary-educated persons highlight the role of local (un)familiarity with tertiary education as a driver in their sense of acceptance. An improved understanding of experiences of acceptance for students and tertiary-educated persons living in rural areas highlights the impact of their social environment on their experiences of community and for continuing their education. Experiences of persons who encourage and support other local people with tertiary education I discuss further in *Education Knowledge: Essential Roles*.

6.1.4 Town Groups: Dissatisfactory Involvement

Most contributors have been involved in committees, churches, and clubs in their towns. Some contributors struggle to influence such groups, an action that could contribute to shaping their local futures. Subsequently, some contributors' experiences of involvement in their town groups meant marked dissatisfaction.

Since relocating to her town four years ago, Amber has struggled to settle into a local congregation. Previously, she enjoyed being part of a city congregation and is a lay preacher as well as a member of the State governing council of her church. Amber spoke about her role in her local congregation:

> I don't represent my congregation on the State governing council. I find that frustrating: I hear these wonderful things, but I can't see them being implemented in any great respect in my local church.

As someone elected in a metropolitan area to the State governing council of her church, Amber is frustrated that she is unable to influence her local congregation by "implementing wonderful" ideas that she hears at governing council meetings. She continued by speaking about her chances to realise her ambitions to become a local lay preacher: "I think it would be a really good thing to be able to offer leadership in that way, but I can't. One, I'm new to the congregation, so I'm not in a leadership position." As someone who has resided in her town for some years, Amber is aware that she is still "new" or that residents considered her to be a recent arrival. Her status means that she will not be considered for a "leadership position" in her congregation, frustrating her chances to have greater local influence.

Julie has an extensive layperson's knowledge of her local region, including over thirty years of experience working with the community groups in her town. She explained her sense of community belonging:

> I think I live within the community, but I think there is a difference in living
> within the community, and really living within the community, like I always
> see myself as the outsider looking in. I am still that big-mouthed bitch that
> is not from here and always will be.

After many decades of living in her town, Julie's experience is that she is an "outsider" in her town community. She is not "really" living "within" or having an authentic experience of community, with other residents in her town. Instead, her experience is that she is perceived as a "big-mouthed bitch that is not from here" or an abhorrent woman who is not a local and whose opinion can therefore be dismissed. Julie explained the outcomes from her efforts to become part of the town community:

> Like I said, I've always made an effort to be involved within the community,
> but the red flags just keep coming up. And I really hate going to a meeting
> or going to propose a new idea and you're putting your views across and no
> one else wants to agree with you, but as you walk out the door, 'Oh, I agree
> with that.' I just feel that's so useless then, what can you do with that? But
> that's the mentality within [the] community. So, I don't see myself as living
> within the community. I see myself as living within the outskirts of the
> community. And I'm happy with that. I'm happy with that, and my partner
> said to me 'did you get an award at the club the other week?' and I said, 'yes
> I did' and he said, 'what would that be?' and I said, 'C. U. N. T. of the year,'
> and he said, 'you would love that though, wouldn't you?' And the truth be
> known, I truly would, because in each community we don't need the court
> jester anymore, we need someone who is going to open their big mouth and
> keep equity within the community. Equity and fairness and that's all I think
> you can expect from the community.

Despite her efforts to be involved with decisions about her town community, Julie has seen "red flags" or warning signs when observing the social behaviour of people when she has proposed new directions. In particular, she is dissatisfied that local people conform to other ideas in public forums while privately wanting to explore her proposals. Julie has accepted that she is on the "outskirts" or an outsider in her town community, partly because it permits her to have a powerful role that she terms "C.U.N.T of the year." Such a position permits her to wield some transitory feminine power in a solitary political role that disrupts "court" or powerful town groups that she sees as being led by "old rams," or older, local men. She also views her local role as infiltrating community groups to be a vocal advocate for "equitable and fair" treatment of local people. Despite her efforts, Julie is yet able to promote more "equity and fairness" in the distribution of community benefits to town members.

Given her ongoing frustration, I asked Julie about her reasons for continuing to be involved with community groups in her town, and she stated that there is a need for an "educated voice." After I prompted her, Julie elaborated, "A voice or an educated voice is someone interested in the community." For Julie, the education or knowledge that is required for a local resident to be involved in community groups is a focus on developing the town community, and in particular, the project of fostering healthy interaction amongst local people. In contrast, Julie's experience of local people's involvement in community groups is that their attention is often focused on personal interests that are separate from generating benefits for the town community. Julie then went on to explain why an "educated voice" is essential:

> I think we need to have a proper and educated public voice, and if we don't have that within the community, I just don't think there's any direction from the community. We might as well go back to the dictatorship with a lot of small communities, so that's why, so, I put myself involved really.

As a local resident who is interested in the future and power of community in her town, Julie views her involvement as part of her civic responsibility. She is adamant that the direction of her town will be decided through "dictatorship" or tyrannical means by a select few if the "educated public voice" of a variety of residents does not power local decision-making. Despite her frustrations with a lack of progress, Julie's commitment to her town community continues to motivate her to be "involved" and appoint herself to local groups.

After Julie explained her self-appointment to membership in town groups, I asked her about the chances that her involvement will influence the decisions that shape the future of her town:

> I've never had the luxury of driving the train. I think I've always been the passenger. I've never had the luxury of driving the train but, there are a lot of people in the community that would like to drive the train, but once they get behind the wheel they don't want to relinquish. But then you get other people that are just quite happy to fall into line to assist with what the community needs. But I really can't say what it is like to drive the train.

In discussing her experiences with influencing groups in her town, Julie refers to the "luxury" rather than an everyday experience of "driving the train" or the opportunity to lead town groups. "Driving a train" indicates that Julie's experience of leadership of groups in her town is that it is determined by the ideas of powerful locals, rather than refocusing and guiding town decisions. Due to such pre-determination, Julie's perspective is that the "train drivers" or leaders are reluctant to renounce their positions, as it is prestigious and without the work that is required to forge a new direction for the future. She finds that other members of committees are "quite happy" or content to "fall in line" or modify their involvement so that their civic behaviour

conforms to the expectations set by dominant local people. Julie's experience is that as an incomer, she is excluded from guiding formal groups and would only be given the chance to do so if she adheres to established rules and pre-determined courses of action. I queried Julie further about the chances to join formal groups to influence the decisions that determine the direction of her town:

> I think that the decision-making or to get on board with the decision-making process within the community is very difficult. I suppose my reply to you would be 'let me know and we will both be aware.' But I think that it's a lot of, like old rams head-butting, you don't get anything from this community unless you rock the boat, which is sad.

Julie again articulates her sense of the power of a select few local people who determine a set charter in community groups, describing that people "get on board" rather than take a new direction in town groups. By doing so, residents embark on a public conveyance whereby they are passengers observing the decision scenery, rather than drivers of new directions for the future. After thirty years of residency, Julie is yet to be "aware" of a way to calmly influence the future direction of her town. She suggests that "rocking the boat" or upsetting people is the only way to try and achieve a change of direction in town groups, an action that is, in her view, analogous to "old rams head-butting" or masculine power strategies that involve significant interpersonal clashes. As a result, she is dismayed that such action is required to change the direction of her town.

Despite living in her town for over thirty-five years, Heidi has experienced little social acceptance in her town community. As the years have passed, her lack of local acceptance has eroded Heidi's sense of being a "staunch" supporter of her town community and she now feels that she is "anti-local" and opposed to being socially engaged in her town. Further, less acceptance in her town has restricted Heidi's chances for local employment and her current paid position is located 65 kilometres away in another town in her local region. She finds that travel is debilitating but enjoys the town community surrounding her workplace where she has established a new network of friends. I asked Heidi what it would mean for her to be better accepted so that her opinions about decisions for the future of her residential town were more influential:

> I think it gives you more of a sense of belonging and ownership in your community and it makes you feel like you're part of something, whereas at the moment, I think the whole community is disengaged. We're all working in these little silos, and I don't think we're working together as a community, and I don't think it's going to get any better. Because, even working for the organisation that I work for, you're working for your community members,

> but people from other organisations aren't prepared to work together because they're worried about their funding. And it's just a nightmare and you look back and you go why? What ... who's this benefitting? It's about the community members.

The chance to have her opinion heard and accepted is significant for Heidi's sense of "belonging and ownership" in her town community, with some input over the future direction of her town bolstering her sense of social acceptance. She sees that her "whole community is disengaged" or that her local region is comprised of disconnected groups and individuals. Heidi experiences community disengagement most profoundly in her employment where she notices that different community organisations are working in "silos" due to State funding arrangements. Such arrangements promote conflicting priorities for community organisations and generate community dysfunction. In Heidi's view, organisations are careful to follow funding guidelines, but it is at the expense of sharing resources that support healthy interactions amongst local people. Heidi is frustrated by such arrangements as she views that the core function of her organisation is working to serve the needs of "community members" or persons living in her region. For Heidi, in "looking back" or reflecting on her role, she only sees a "nightmare" where, despite her effort, she is tormented by the disintegration of a sense of community across the local region. It is an ordeal for her to continue to attempt to fulfil her sense of responsibility in providing benefits for residents when both she and her colleagues cannot gain enough influence to realise better community outcomes. Along with her sense of frustration, Heidi is deeply exasperated that arrangements to fund local organisations continue at the expense of affording a full range of benefits to community members.

Anne and her children continue to live in the same birth town where she is heavily engaged with community groups. She explained her reasons for her commitment:

> I care about our community, I guess, and I care about where it's going. I've got children growing up here as well. I guess it's just a passion. If people don't put their hands up to be involved in things, well maybe they won't happen. But I do also find that it is a lot of the same people that [participate] in the extra groups and things.

As a lifetime resident, Anne "cares" deeply about and has a "passion" for her town community. Her enthusiasm and concern for the future are further inspired by her children's local residency. She is aware that she is one of the people who does "extra" and that it is essential that she "put her hand up" or volunteer to secure a future for her town.

Anne has had a variety of experiences with volunteering in her town and mentioned a dissatisfactory experience with the committee that governs the local hospital and medical services:

> I've been on the hospital board for a short period of time because I guess I found the hospital board to be a little bit premeditated for my liking. Some of the decisions had already been made and it was just, yeah, it just sort of wasn't getting the satisfaction... it wasn't what I thought it was going to be.

In making determinations as part of the "hospital board," Anne's experience was that the decision-making operated in a way that dissatisfied her. Anne's view was that the decisions were "premeditated" and had been made before she was able to give her input, resulting in her quick withdrawal. Anne went on to describe the details that featured in her decision:

> Some of the time I felt that it had already had [*sic*] been decided that's what would happen and then they would just need to get the board's approval. I think because they had a lot of staff on the board, sometimes it was an internal... you felt that it had already been decided on internally, and you were just there to shake or nod, but if you nodded it was too bad anyway because it would have happened regardless.

In discussing her influence in her role, Anne's view is that her input was severely limited, as the decisions were made prior to official meetings. To this effect, Anne describes "internal" decisions by staff that despite being part of the leadership team positioned her and her influence as external to the dominant decision-making group. She was limited to a "shake or nod" that was only a gesture towards, rather than a definitive influence in, finalising local decisions about the future.

Despite her interest in volunteering and the future of her town, Anne went on to mention that she is strongly dissuaded from considering a position within local government. Anne's perspective about the political representatives in her town is that they "aren't looking at things as a whole sometimes, and maybe rowing their own boat a little bit too much." When prompted, Anne elaborated on her ideas:

> I guess maybe being on some committees and groups as such, but maybe they're not there for the bigger picture, they are there for their own personal cause. Sometimes they are there for the wrong reasons if that makes sense? They are looking at their own personal views on things and not the wider perspective on the situation perhaps as they should be.

In her extensive experience of group membership in her town, Anne has observed that some people who are involved in committees or local government are "rowing their own boat" and are involved for a "personal cause," such as being motivated by actions to benefit themselves. In

Anne's view, members of town groups are sometimes focused on personal benefits above the interests of the public or residents. Her preference is to reflect on the "bigger picture" or make decisions that consider benefits for the people in her town as a whole.

As someone who has lived in her birth town for most of her life, Margaret is committed to her local community. However, she is wary of joining existing groups in her town and I asked her about the reasons for her reluctance. She explained that many groups are:

> Full of egos. Probably because it's to do with meetings and probably because it's to do with people's unbending ideologies. I just... and the other thing is stuff like, [Service Clubs] and everything, the whole concept around dinner meetings. And I just, I've had to go to a couple of [Service Club] meetings because of various people I've known who've got exchanges and stuff and also got invited to a changeover dinner. What's a changeover dinner? Oh, we sit there, and we get bored endlessly while they go through all this protocol and it's like "oh no, this is not me."

In Margaret's experience, town group gatherings are not a priority for her. Local meetings can be primarily self-serving, self-aggrandising, and concerned with members displaying meeting conventions that she finds "endlessly boring" and deeply uninteresting. I asked her to elaborate on her experience with "unbending ideologies" in town groups:

> It's sort of like, 'you have to think this way to be involved.' And inflexible thinking and whatever the leadership says is what goes type thing. I don't know whether I think that about all service clubs, but certainly sporting clubs' mantra. And I know in our organisation our sport runs the workplace. They are so strong, it's paramount. There was an incident where they had to make re-arrangements because work has to conform to national guidelines. It is so endemic in the community, that... this is a farming community... and they have stopped working towards increasing farming knowledge so that they can concentrate on sport, it was deemed as more important. It was a leader's decision, you can go to meetings if you want to, you are not excluded.

Margaret's view is that local people, while not physically banned, can be ideologically "excluded" by being required to conform to the thinking of leadership to continue their group involvement. Within some service and sporting clubs specifically, Margaret views that conforming to the "mantra" or leadership ideas is a "paramount" concern for members and is placed above furthering local interests. Margaret has witnessed compliance with local leaders with growing exasperation, as their decisions may be of detriment to the future of her region. Her view is that while people such as herself are not blatantly "excluded" from meetings, there

are hidden constraints in local decision-making. Such constraints mean that Margaret is restricted to compliance rather than contributing novel ideas to the established groups in her town and she subsequently avoids them.

As seen above, some contributors experienced dissatisfaction with their involvement in their towns. Four contributors who had various periods of residency spoke about their experiences of being involved with an assortment of groups in their towns. After four years living in her town, Amber has struggled to settle into her local congregation, and as a new resident, is prohibited from a leadership role. Julie arrived in her town over thirty years ago and has had little chance to engage in leadership. Having influence that permits her to assist people in her local community is important for Heidi's sense of belonging; however, her lack of adequate acceptance in her town and lack of autonomy to build community in her paid position is a constant source of frustration and distress. Living in her birth town means that Anne has had the opportunity to contribute to her town by attending committee meetings but finds that decisions are often predetermined by a select few. Margaret is deeply interested in shaping the future of her region but finds that some local meetings are self-indulgent as well as focused more on the tedium of convention, requiring members have a staid intellectual approach that includes conforming to the views of leaders. The dominant experiences from their involvement with groups in their towns for some contributors related to a sense of dissatisfaction.

For persons living in rural areas as both incomers or locals and who were either previously or currently engaged with a tertiary education course, their experiences of involvement with community groups in their towns meant dissatisfaction. Previous research has called for understanding social wellbeing in rural towns by capturing the social contributions that are able to be made by their residents (Edwards et al., 2012). The current study highlights contributors' significant dissatisfaction with their local involvement, drawing into question the social wellbeing of their towns. Further, experiences of dissatisfactory involvement here highlight that those with a tertiary education were largely uninfluential in town groups that make powerful decisions about the allocation of resources as well as the future direction of the town. Experiences of dissatisfactory involvement in the present study also align with previous research, showing that informal institutions heavily restrict the agency of individuals in social groups in rural towns (Liepins, 2000; Pini & Haslam McKenzie, 2006).

Previous research has also proposed that participation in groups in rural areas is often motivated by extreme viewpoints and is an unnatural rather than natural process (Shortall, 2008). Experiences here illustrate that, often, tertiary-educated persons' ideas did not align with the dominant processes and extreme views in town groups. Such views, contributors often

perceived as fixed as well as highly self-serving, and they were subsequently motivated to withdraw their efforts. Contributors' subsequent withdrawal from town groups is similar to findings in previous research. In particular, contributors' experiences here align with Chenoweth and Lawrence's (2010), Shortall's (2004, 2006), and Pini's (2006) argument that women who cannot adequately access decision-making processes, may practice abstention whereby they withdraw their social presence in their towns as a form of nonviolent resistance.

Experiences with involvement in town groups also highlight that while incomers sustained their efforts in the face of mistrust and a restriction of their agency in town groups, locals, in contrast. withdrew from groups when they were unable to act according to their principles. Such differences arise, perhaps, because locals have deeper social networks and greater options than incomers for local group membership. Further, locals may have a better tacit understanding of the consequences of contravening social restrictions in their towns, realising that it is better to withdraw than continue with the hope that the group will change and accept them and their ideas. Overall, the dissatisfactory involvement of tertiary-educated persons shows that they had little opportunity to present their knowledge to influence the decisions of community groups in their towns. Here, spatiality helps to explain the construction of rural town groups as social spaces that can be unwelcoming. Persons' lack of acceptance of both themselves and their social contribution as students or tertiary-educated persons with short-term tenure undermined their sense of being meaningfully included in their rural towns. For persons living in Australian rural areas, spatial (in)justice may be an experience that dominates their interactions within their towns. Being accepted as students and tertiary-educated persons could offer resources and support that residents can draw upon as well as spaces where they can contribute their expertise.

The finding of dissatisfactory involvement for tertiary-educated persons living in rural areas affords us an understanding of how they, as either locals or incomers, go about making their social contribution to community groups in their towns. The finding of restrictions in opportunities for tertiary-educated persons to contribute to their town groups is an addition to what is known in research and aligns with previous understandings of restrictions in the agency of individuals living in rural areas. I present further discussion about incomers attempting to influence the direction of town groups in the next subtheme *Expressing Agency: Genuine Offensive*. Other experiences of persons living in rural areas and contributing to their communities, both locally and afar, I discuss in the subtheme *Community Roles: Social Satisfaction*. Last, indirect contributions to town societies and education endeavours I explore in *Local Residents: Educated Roles*.

6.1.5 Expressing Agency: Genuine Offensive

Some contributors who were incomers to their rural areas attempted to alter the course of community development. Their attempts to change the directions of their town groups to align with their principles and knowledge were met with a strong offensive by some of the other residents. Some contributors' experiences as incomers to their rural areas and their expressions of agency (to shape group outcomes to better align with a representation of their personal values) meant that they were subject to severe personal attacks.

After living in her local region for over 15 years, Sandy's opinion about her town is that it is a "bit better than a lot of country towns, if you have lived here a long time then you are sort of a local." Being "sort of a local" in her "country" or rural town means that Sandy is perceived as having a somewhat similar status to other residents living adjacent to their place of birth. She went on to express what living in her town means to her:

> I love the place, I love it here and most of the people, and people say 'hello'
> that don't know you, it's a friendly town. It is a pity that it is so far away
> from things that we really need, work, activities, and shopping. But other
> than that, it's really good. It is only when you get involved in things that the
> claws can come out, so don't be associated with anything that might put
> people's noses out of joint.

In describing her experiences, Sandy emphasises that despite the lack of essential services in her town she "loves the place," a view that she holds because residents are friendly towards her. She also cautions that despite it being a "friendly town," her experience is that it is possible to be involved in activities in her town that "put people's noses out of joint," or upset residents, by displacing them from their positions. Involvement in such activities means that the "claws can come out" or that there is retaliatory action by residents.

Heidi has been involved with a sporting club since arriving in her town over thirty years ago. She has worked to promote a sense of belonging for members at her club, whereby duties and benefits are shared equally. Maintaining such equilibrium has become increasingly difficult for Heidi, with her recent club experiences altering her views about her town community. She shared her perspective that some local people have "that mentality of some of the community stuff that you're involved in that people don't want to try and fix things because they don't want to be seen to be making trouble, even though it's OK to upset others." The "mentality" or habitual way of thinking that Heidi has experienced in the town community is that "fixing things," or her efforts to improve the equitable distribution of benefits among sporting club members, means being perceived as "making trouble" by contravening local norms. Heidi has a sense that her actions to "try and fix things" with attempts to disrupt the "mentality" or local

attitude, whereby the comfort and privilege of some local people are maintained at the expense of distressing many other less powerful residents, are frustratingly ineffective. Heidi continues by describing the details of her sporting club experience:

> …people were coming on the committee for the wrong reason, I think. All of a sudden, like we were trying to change the way things were done but they didn't like it and 'let's go back this way' and it just seemed 'oh hang a minute, who's this benefitting? Your child? Or the whole sports community?' So, then I ended up walking away and then it's just really nasty because the more you questioned what they were doing wrong, the more you were seen as the troublemakers. So much so that they labelled us at the last AGM, 'you in the back row, you're just trouble, how about getting up and doing the committee.' So, we have and we're still trouble.

As a member of her club, Heidi was determined to provide benefits for all members of her sporting community by ensuring that the club operations were conducted according to her understanding of lawful operations. Her ideas about legitimate and equitable arrangements clashed with those of other community members whose reasons for continuing their involvement included "benefitting" or realising a personal gain. By "walking away," Heidi elected to cease her involvement with the club that was providing disproportionate benefits to a select few; however, the aftermath was "really nasty." Specifically, Heidi was discredited through hostile remarks that publicised her as a "troublemaker" or someone who constantly causes problems. She went on to explain her experience after she decided to continue her involvement with the club:

> Like, you can't win but it's just my determination, I'm not getting flogged yet again. I want to prove a point that, our policies and stuff aren't up to speed. So, that was the whole purpose of this other stuff, of this stupid stuff, that's why we were trying to change it, to make ourselves legal, but we were being hounded for that. And now, well there's a few of us that are tarnished in the town, so I feel like all that hard work I've done with my personal life and study life can be sort of tarnished with the attitudes of some of these people that are quite influential in the town, that don't have the full story. And that's quite hurtful.

Heidi is determined to improve equity in the sporting community but realises that there is a chance that she will be "flogged again" or sustain additional social losses including restrictions on her access to other local social resources if she acts according to her principles. As she foretold, she was "hounded" or relentlessly attacked by members, culminating in her experiencing social stigma in her town. Subsequently, Heidi has suffered being "tarnished" or having her local reputation damaged after challenging those who are in privileged positions. She

considers that influential residents have sullied her status because they don't have the "full story" or have less than a complete account of the necessary requirements for running a community club. Heidi's experience is that it was "quite hurtful" that her expressions of agency intended to benefit her entire sporting community were met with distressing and enduring personal attacks by other members.

In the thirty years since her relocation, Pat has been involved with groups in her town. With experience living in two different rural areas, and a tertiary education that began with studying community group procedures, Pat spoke about her understanding of town groups by beginning with her experience in her church:

> I had a leadership role in a church… and numerous leadership roles, and oh, dear me I got really targeted, it was just really bad, really, really bad. So, it's not just in sporting clubs. And I made some lifelong friends with some of the people in that church who came in to solve some of the issues. So, it's more about honest and direct and not manipulative and two-faced which is what was going on. Say what you mean and mean what you say and if you can't same something constructive or helpful then don't say anything. I've got to say, 'I'm getting better at that.' I've had people come and say, 'oh you're so nice,' and I said 'actually, I don't do nice, I do my job to the best of my ability, but I really don't do nice. So, if you know I'm saying something, I'm not being nice, I'm being genuine.' It's much more helpful. Respectful and honest about what you think.

Involvement in a "leadership role" in her church was an extremely unpleasant experience for Pat when she became the object of ridicule and criticism. She acknowledges that similar experiences with being "targeted" may also occur in other town groups such as sporting clubs. Pat drew support from some local people, and subsequently she "made lifelong friends" as well as learnt principles of "genuine communication" such as "respect and honesty" that are "constructive" or the most beneficial for human relationships. She spoke about the chances for such communication in her rural area:

> The other thing too that I find in rural communities, that interconnectedness between our identity, our image and sometimes people aren't honest and direct because they are frightened of other people's position or role in [the] community. They have to work with them, or their partner has to work with them so there's a hierarchy as such with the fact that they have to do business with each other.

While Pat is in the position where she isn't obligated to "do nice" or ingratiate herself with others, she understands that "interconnectedness" or power dynamics in relationships among

residents in her rural area stifles the chances for "genuine communication." Her experience is that local people are aware of a "hierarchy" and the social power attached to the "identity" of each resident as well as being "frightened" of those who are in more powerful positions. Such hierarchy in Pat's rural area restricts the chances for those who are less powerful to fully express themselves in public.

In speaking about 35 years of experience in town groups, Julie spoke about the social pressure to stay silent in the presence of powerful local people who use their position to take advantage of community resources. She assures me that "personally, I don't wake up and think, 'I hope I can please the townspeople today'" suggesting that she is somewhat impervious to the pressure from local social norms. However, Julie spoke to me about the experiences of some local people who are profoundly affected by personal attacks by other residents:

> I have seen it effect [*sic*] a lot of people within the community to the fact
> where they are at the stage where they are nervous wrecks because they have
> been victimised. If you start to speak up about community, then some people
> are ostracised. We have incidents where girls have been treated that unfairly
> that they have resorted to self-harm.

Julie has witnessed the effects of "speaking up" and raising the issue of prioritising "community" or relationships among people living in her town. In some instances, local people have voiced their opposition to community profiteering by others, and in particular, confronted those securing a disproportionate amount of community resources. Julie mentions that subsequently, local people who have voiced their opposition to community profiteering were "victimised" by being ostracised as well as being singled out for further ill-treatment. On more than one occasion, Julie has witnessed local people subsequently becoming "nervous wrecks," suffering from such severe stress that their mental health has deteriorated, culminating in acts of intentional and severe self-injury. Her experience is that there are severe penalties for publicly challenging social arrangements that privilege some community beneficiaries in her town.

In sum, as part of their involvement in town groups, some contributors as incomers received or witnessed personal attacks on residents who attempted to change existing local arrangements. Four contributors had experiences with trying to extend the community benefits bestowed by town groups. Sandy perceives her town as friendly but recognises that people can be attacked if their actions displace the power of locals. Heidi's lengthy service in her sporting club ceased when she could no longer influence the equitable provision of benefits to club members, but she continues to attract persecution in her town. As a leader in her church, Pat was humiliated and learnt how the social hierarchy in her town complicates genuine communication that could enhance personal relationships and community input. Julie has

witnessed the persecution of local people after they have spoken out against community profiteering that has severely damaged their mental health. Sandy, Pat, Heidi, and Julie's experiences in town groups illustrate that expressing agency can be met with devastating personal attacks.

Some persons as incomers to their rural towns faced and witnessed personal attacks when attempts were made to introduce new ideas into community groups in their towns. Contributors' experiences of expressing individual agency as tertiary-educated persons were met by a genuine offensive from other residents in town groups. Such experiences are an example of what is argued as the nature of informal social mechanisms that serve to enforce social norms in rural areas (Helmke & Levitsky, 2004; Lowndes et al., 2006). Experiences of a genuine offensive against social displays of agency also prompt questions about whether incomers, whose numbers are increasing in rural areas due to population re-arrangements, can safely offer input that could benefit their towns (Besser, 2013; Hoggart & Paniagua, 2001). Contributors' experiences highlight that information from incomers may be obstructed from shaping the direction of town groups.

Contributors who reported personal attacks were incomers, perhaps because locals withdraw from groups when they sense that their efforts are either unwelcome or undervalued. Further, as insiders, locals and their ideas could attract greater respect from other powerful residents. Such experiences of personal attacks that serve as a mechanism to maintain social norms suggest the possible barriers to presenting novel information into town groups, such as ideas from course knowledge. Reading contributors' experiences through spatiality highlights how the social construction of some rural spaces constrains the contributions of both students and tertiary-educated persons. While persons were keen to exercise their agency in their rural towns, dominant social aspects in their towns prevented them from doing so. Such examples from rural towns highlight the ways in which spatial injustice may be generated within rural areas. For persons, being unable to exercise the capacities that they have developed undermines the power of their tertiary education.

Previous research has focused on the social mechanisms in rural towns and the ways social norms stifle expressions of individual agency. The finding here about experiences of a genuine offensive stemming from the actions of powerful residents shows similar experiences in town groups for some persons as tertiary-educated residents who are incomers. In the next subtheme, I discuss two connected experiences for tertiary-educated persons living in rural areas, a) the flourishing introduction of novel ideas, and b) initiating the formation of new community groups.

6.1.6 Community Roles: Social Satisfaction

Most contributors were carers, volunteers, and employees, leaving them little time to socialise with family and friends. Despite their time constraints, some contributors were profoundly committed to their unpaid community roles both locally and elsewhere. Regardless of the location, contributing to community groups to assist the wellbeing of others was a source of deep satisfaction for some contributors. It may seem that experiences of social satisfaction with community roles contradict the findings presented in the theme *Town Groups: Dissatisfactory Involvement*. However, the discussion about community roles highlights the complex differences between the social spaces of town groups and local communities for individuals living in rural areas.

After relocating to her town for employment purposes related to her credential, Maggie decided to form a book club in a larger town located nearby. She spoke about what the formation of the group means for her:

> … the book club has been really important for me because it's just a bit of
> intellectual stimulation. I think often in the rural areas it's difficult. I work
> in a multidisciplinary team, and we don't have a lot of… I suppose academic
> friends live close by so that's just a bit of an opportunity I think to be with
> some like-minded people.

For Maggie, establishing a club has created a space where she can frequently interact with other residents who have similar interests. Maggie described the interaction among club members:

> [The club] is an opportunity to mix with people that are interested in history,
> politics, geography, and they are diverse... from different backgrounds. I
> enjoy socialising with people from different backgrounds whereas in the
> smaller communities, in my community it is pretty much Anglo-Saxon.

In her experience of a local community, Maggie enjoys social interactions with people from a wide variety of backgrounds and she initiated the book club so that she could form social connections with people. Her role in bringing people together to discuss a broad range of interests adds immeasurably to Maggie's enjoyment of her local community.

After completing her most recent postgraduate credential to qualify for her vocation, Margaret was inspired to form a community group in a nearby town where she could apply her expertise further. She spoke about her experience of the group at the outset and how it has evolved:

> I was initially doing it for me, and then it didn't end up like that. Like it
> ended up being me teaching again because sometimes like, you knock off

work to carry bricks and I had to expect that if I was going to keep going with it that, that's what it was. Because it ended up being completely different to what I started in the first place. But I see that as a service to the community and I don't charge for it or anything like that, they pay me a little bit of money each term for resources. But apart from that, I don't expect any money for that because I see that as part, one of my roles, but also it gives me greater freedom, if I am not paid, I can run it how I want.

To begin with, Margaret's decision to form the group was inspired by the chance for her to exercise her expertise outside of her employment which she thought would be like "knocking off work to carry bricks" or very similar to her experience of paid work. Margaret was gratified, however, that "one of my roles" or her involvement with her community group has become a "service" that she offers rather than a duty that she is obligated to complete. By engaging in an unpaid role in her local community, Margaret experiences being liberated, enjoying her role with an autonomy that is removed from her previous experience of paid obligation.

In discussing her roles in community groups, Pat began by explaining her engagement with tertiary education over thirty years ago as a resident near her previous town:

I did a whole lot of VET. Really relevant stuff, it was in group formation, meetings. I did all sorts of random stuff. I can't remember half the stuff and I haven't even got it on my resume it was so long ago and not relevant [now], but it was actually good information, timely and enabled me to get involved with a whole range of community groups, with confidence, with a bit of confidence. So that was a really good foundation actually.

Pat's experience of engaging with vocational education and training courses was that they were "really relevant stuff" or that her formal learning in a class assisted the practical application of her course materials in her community. In particular, her course materials were relevant to the procedures in community groups, giving Pat a "foundation" so that she had "a bit of confidence" and was reassured about her capabilities as a member in formal groups. She was bolstered by her course to become involved with various or "a range of community groups." Since this fledgling start, Pat has built on her capabilities and was recently able to lead the formation of her own community group in her local region. Pat reflects on her experiences with the group that she has initiated:

The beautiful thing is it is literally people from around the region. Every town has got representative people, in the club and the committee. So, it's really cool, and our work background is all completely different which is really good. So, the... and because we only see each other pretty much once a month or a bit more often, it's interesting in getting to know each other.

Directing the establishment of the club has offered Pat a deep sense of pleasure and excitement. She is delighted that her club has attracted "representative people" or consists of members from the towns in her local region, offering a chance for people to form new social connections that are not readily available to them in their everyday lives. Pat experiences enjoyment and satisfaction from generating social interactions that build both her own and others' sense of social connection in the region.

Julie travels for several hours to engage with her volunteer work in the city. She explained her reasons for taking the time and affording the expenses to engage with her volunteer role:

> Soup kitchen I do because I feel the need. I'm probably lucky, financially I'm in the situation that I can tick off every now and then and help someone. My [adult] child does it so that is why I sort of go down there and help out. I just find it rewarding. The organisations down there, the people are so welcoming, and they are really appreciative that I go down and help, they can't believe that I go so far to help them out.

Volunteering to assist others, Julie's language highlights as a "need" and is an essential part of her life. She refers to being fortunate in that she can "tick off" - a colloquial term that refers to allowing a convict to leave prison with restrictions after serving part of their sentence - that Julie uses to describe a temporary release from her everyday responsibilities. Being able to "tick off" permits Julie to leave the confines of her town to engage with her volunteer role. She has a sense that the volunteer organisation deeply appreciates her assistance and recognises the distance that she travels to volunteer. I asked Julie further about opportunities for her to volunteer locally and she said that "I think you get to a stage when you put your hand up to offer so many times and your hand keeps getting smacked." Evidenced here, Julie has experienced persistent rejection when she has offered to volunteer in her town community. She continued by defending her involvement with volunteer activities that are a considerable distance from her town community:

> I justify within myself that I'm still doing the right thing, because I'm still going to volunteer within organisations, but I'm just unfortunately not doing it within the community. But at the moment I would say that interest-wise within this community, there is not a lot that I would put my hand up to do, because there is nothing there to help with.

Julie would like to do more for her community and regrets that she cannot offer greater assistance to residents as she struggles "interest-wise" to find local volunteer organisations that need her attention and involvement. In contrast to her town community, Julie views that volunteering in the city satisfies her need to contribute and is the "right thing" or ethical

behaviour on her part as even though it doesn't assist local people, it does assist some people who are most in need. While Julie is invested in her town community, there is a distinct lack of options for her to provide assistance to local residents.

While living on a property outside of her town, Jane's activities were integral to forming a supportive community for new parents in her State. She shared her experience that led her to initiate a group after the birth of her first child:

> …our daughter was two months prem[ature] and at the time, as a rural person who'd had that experience, coming back home after a stint in the neonatal unit, even though we were surrounded by our geographic community, we felt quite isolated because of our experience. There was nothing established at the time in State that we were aware of, or certainly could readily access. So, within the 12 months, a couple of us had identified that the foundation at the national level was looking to roll out their program across the rest of Australia. So, it was a combination of timing and personal experience. That we felt we could contribute to other families but in hindsight that was probably mostly about us working our way through our experiences also.

The premature birth of her child was not an experience shared by other people living in Jane's "geographical" or local community and she felt emotionally isolated. Her sense of isolation from local people prompted her to forge ahead and join with others across the State to initiate the formation of a support group. Jane initially viewed her involvement as assisting other families but also attained satisfaction from the chance to share her experiences with a supportive parenting community.

After a lifetime of volunteering and working both nationally and internationally, Oigle has interacted with people from a variety of backgrounds. He spoke of what it meant for him to relate to others through his various roles:

> …there is a treasure trove of life principles and things like that which I have learnt from people coming from all different kinds of cultures. Whether it is on a spiritual or personal basis or a community basis, I have learnt so much from different societies and cultures. I think that's the biggest treasure, the biggest life lesson, I've been very, very lucky.

Oigle sees his experiences with people from diverse backgrounds as a chance to learn and build a collection of "life principles." He refers to such as a "treasure trove" that has provided him with a valuable understanding of features of life, including aspects of "spiritual, personal," and

"community" matters. He views chances to share his understandings with other people as an experience of fortune that has immense value in his life.

As someone who has a deep appreciation for the chance to live overseas and interact with people from "different cultures," Oigle is also deeply interested in assisting people who are new to or considering, residency in Australia. He spoke about the work that he had recently undertaken to initiate the formation of a national group that assists new migrants:

> …[I] decided it would be a good idea to explore the opportunity to actually set up our incorporated body. I volunteered to do that and wrote a constitution which was accepted by the group and then got ourselves incorporated and then registered with the Australian Tax Office and the Charities and Not for Profits Commission. Now we have profit public benevolent institution status, [and] tax-deductibility status as a deductible gift recipient.

As someone who is obligated to provide evidence of competency for business purposes, Oigle's current knowledge from his courses has provided him with the expertise to bring a "good idea" to fruition. He has done so by establishing a formal group of people to realise a desire to assist newcomers to Australia. As a result of this work, Oigle has derived a strong sense of satisfaction from using his competencies.

As seen above, contributors made considerable efforts to contribute as volunteers either locally or elsewhere. Six contributors who had either initiated or joined supportive community groups spoke about the satisfaction derived from making a social contribution through those groups. To fulfil her need for a variety of connections in her local community, Maggie has formed and enjoys attending a book club where residents from diverse backgrounds can meet and interact. After qualifying for her vocation, Margaret formed a community group where her role offers her greater satisfaction than her employment. Pat's completion of vocational education and training courses bolstered her confidence for joining community groups, culminating in her initiating a sporting club for people living in her local region. For Julie, volunteering is an essential part of life and without a satisfactory local role, she affords the time and expense to volunteer in the city. Without the connection to a suitable local parent group, Jane felt isolated and established a support group that attracted members across the State. After living overseas and appreciating people from different cultures, Oigle has been devoted to initiating and expanding a group that assists people who are new to Australia. Their town communities do not always provide what persons living in rural areas need and some are motivated and subsequently experience satisfaction from initiating community groups, both locally and elsewhere.

Experiences of social satisfaction that came from roles in their communities for some tertiary-educated persons living in rural areas occurred when they drew on knowledge from their courses as well as their other capabilities, to instigate and contribute to community groups. Some contributors' experiences support an argument that frequent social interactions in locations adjacent to a person's residence help to incorporate those places into their sense of local community (Smailes, 1995). Similar to previous research, such incorporation means that some persons have a community of place which, in addition to their towns, can consist of parts or even the entirety of their local region (Smailes, 1995). Contributors' experiences here also highlight that in alignment with previous research there are geographically indeterminate communities where tertiary-educated persons formed connections with other people (Pretty et al., 2003; Raymond et al., 2010). As an addition to previous research, contributors' experiences also show some of the ways that residents adapt to everyday living in their particular landscape is by fostering supportive social and cultural practices that could deepen their sense of place (Giardiello & Cuervo, 2018; Soini et al., 2012). Contributors' subsequent experiences of social satisfaction in their community roles highlights how, for them, the foremost concern in such communities is shared interests related to generating mutual support among members.

Selecting and generating community activities in a range of locations that afforded them social satisfaction informs the ways in which tertiary-educated persons living in rural areas build on their renewed understandings and appreciation for people and community. Contributors' experiences with their communities expand on a previous proposition that educational attainment for persons living in rural areas profoundly benefits their communities (Black et al., 2000; McIntosh et al., 2008). The experiences with community roles detailed here show the social strengths or beneficial social qualities possessed by tertiary-educated persons who, along with their observations of local people, can apply their course knowledge to understand the complex functioning of others. Such understanding is at the foundation of their generation of connections and co-operation in community groups, both within as well as outside of their rural areas.

In contrast to some of their experiences of town groups, the community groups that tertiary-educated persons living in rural areas create or build upon affords them a sustained sense of belonging. Experiences of community for tertiary-educated persons living in rural areas are also similar to those in previous research that identified a person's sense of belonging to a community is sustained when people can make a social contribution of their choosing (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Talò et al., 2014).

Tertiary-educated persons' experiences of generating and contributing to communities that offer benefits both locally and elsewhere add to the argument offered by Shortall (2008) about civic engagement in rural areas. She proposes that civic engagement or volunteering in a community may or may not be about a personal benefit in terms of a measured reward for the individual, but such engagement nonetheless benefits entire communities, in this case around the globe. Social contributions, such as community generation and extension afforded by tertiary-educated persons, offer both community as well as social benefits and sometimes bestow a personal benefit on the initiator. Such personal benefit may occur when a measured reward, such as financial recompense, is not forthcoming for the tertiary-educated person. As such, contributors experience deeper satisfaction from a range of intrinsic rewards from their voluntary community involvement.

A sense of belonging for contributors, as tertiary-educated persons, has been heightened through involvement with people in communities that were generated by them. Similar to previous research, in such communities contributors were provided with a safe public space where differences and accomplishments could be recognised as well as valued (Arnason, 1995; Nixon, 2010). The generation of such spaces by contributors is significant because as identified in previous research they permit the safe expression of their differences, such as espousing knowledge from a tertiary education course (Black et al., 2000; Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, 2018). An experience of recognition of them and their knowledge in a range of communities for tertiary-educated persons living in rural areas is similar to previous arguments that adults appreciate social spaces in which they can express their intellectual and social differences (Boshier, 1991; O'Shea et al., 2017).

Researchers have investigated the nuanced meanings of "community" for persons living in rural areas, proposing ways to understand the social interactions among people in particular landscapes and the potential benefits from tertiary education for their communities (Anton & Lawrence, 2014; Black et al., 2000; Dymock, 2007; Raymond et al., 2010). Tertiary-educated persons' experiences of social satisfaction in community roles here highlight that critical to understanding experiences of living in rural areas is understanding the variety and geographic extent of their communities. Such understanding includes the previously undocumented ways that experiences of community activities for tertiary-educated persons living in rural areas support others in a wide variety of locations. In terms of spatiality, contributors' experiences highlight the ways in which they are able to contribute to the social construction of particular community spaces. Being able to establish and build such spaces was empowering for students and tertiary-educated persons as residents in rural areas. For persons living in Australian rural areas, the space to draw on both their lived experience and course knowledge permitted them a

sense of spatial justice. A sense of belonging underpinned by both being valued for themselves and their knowledge is valued highly by students and tertiary-educated persons living in rural areas.

In the present study, I highlight the significance of the involvement of tertiary-educated persons in community groups. Inspiration to generate feelings of community arises from both contributors' experiences of ambiguity regarding their tertiary-educated identity and repression of their social contribution in their towns. Such circumstances, along with their appreciation and desire to understand the complexities of other people's lives and the human condition, including identifying similarities between themselves and others culminates in tertiary-educated persons making specialised community contributions. Such contributions to generating and expanding community groups are of personal benefit for some tertiary-educated persons living in rural areas as well as of benefit for other people both locally and elsewhere who connect with those communities. Previously in the subthemes *Course Fundamentals: Peer Support, Exploring Course Knowledge: Collegial Support* and *Local People: Nuanced Support* I explored the benefits from the generation of learning support communities. Other post-credential roles where contributors maintain and extend their learning as well as that of persons in their local communities, I discuss further in *Education Knowledge: Essential Roles* and *Local Residents: Educated Voices*.

6.2 Local Residents: Educated Roles

Some contributors who had completed their courses engaged with both paid and unpaid roles as residents in their rural areas. Each contributor who had gained a credential applied their knowledge in multiple roles to the benefit of local people as well as others with whom they were not socially connected. Experiences in such roles I capture in the theme *Local Residents: Educated Roles*.

Local Residents: Educated Roles contains five subthemes in which I describe some contributors' experiences of their roles as tertiary-educated residents in rural areas. Most contributors expressed deep satisfaction about the roles that their education had qualified them for and that they secured through their local connections, something that I explore in the subtheme *Local Employees: Gratifying Positions*. In the subtheme *Rural Professionals: Diverse Opportunities*, I detail some contributors' understandings of the paid roles that are available to them as a resident in their rural areas. Another role that was significant for contributors who had attained their credentials was their chance to support and guide other local people to continue their education that I describe in *Education Knowledge: Essential Roles*. In the subtheme *Educational Dishonesty: Resolute Opponents* I portray dubious practices by education providers

as witnessed by some contributors as well as their roles in opposing such practices. *Professional Roles: Local Voices* is a subtheme in which I describe contributors' experiences of exercising their voices to inform metropolitan decision-makers to shape the future of their rural areas.

6.2.1 Local Employees: Gratifying Positions

Most contributors had engaged with a tertiary education course to improve their employment prospects. Some who had attained their credential had secured better employment through their connections with local people. After contributors were successfully referred to a paid position, the opportunity to exercise their capabilities in a qualified role was a deeply gratifying experience for them.

While Sandy was engaged with a course at her local vocational campus to "get a better job" by improving her employment prospects, her local educator referred her to a position relevant to her credential. Sandy subsequently secured a paid role in a local town and spoke to me about the rewards of her employment: "the clients are satisfying. You have your favourites. No matter I can go and see them, and they are like, "Hello. What are you doing? Are you going to be there?" Sandy enjoys working with local people, some of whom anticipate her assisting them and are pleased to note her arrival at her workplace. She continued by sharing her views about both rewarding and disruptive experiences in her work: "I really love my job, love the clients, so just not some of the administration that goes on there." Again, Sandy emphasises here that the people for whom she provides services are important to her but accentuates that the administration of her organisation detracts from her experiences of working with people.

Dawn decided to continue her education to pursue a role "to be able to help people" in her region. After beginning her tertiary education at her local vocational campus over a decade ago, the educators at Dawn's local vocational campus have been a source of information about suitable local positions. After attaining her honours credential, Dawn has entered a position that she is qualified for, and shared what her role means to her:

> I'm thinking 'I've achieved what I wanted to do, that I'm giving to my community in my work.' And I love my work, I do, I'm very passionate about my work, l love work, but that's my avenue, that's what I wanted to do, I wanted to give to my community, and I've combined it with my work. So, if I was to commit to something outside of work, I think I do need to be a little bit more selfish and think, 'well this is for me, this is to sustain me.' So, I guess so that I can continue to give in my work because, in my role of work, you are giving of yourself anyway. You know there's part of you going into that, it's not a process that I've done that tick, tick, tick.

Working in local employment that accords with her qualifications is profoundly satisfying for Dawn, as she can "give to her community," making her employment an opportunity to bolster her local community. In her language is an emphasis on her paid position as her "avenue," a broad and sophisticated form of work that is "right up her alley" and suited to her interests. Dawn is passionate about her work, and she is willing to suffer the rigours of a "giving of herself" or emotional exertion to achieve her goal of "being able to help people." For Dawn, any future community roles that she would perform would need to sustain her and offer her a chance to recuperate from the emotional toll of her employment. Dawn's view of her paid role is one of deeply meaningful interactions with people that she contrasts to "tick, tick, tick" or going through the motions of administrative procedures. When contributing to her local community, Dawn's emotional effort is integral to her sense of gratification.

Since attaining a credential while working for another organisation, Maggie has secured another position. She spoke about the circumstances that led to her most recent successful application:

> … it was through somebody who knew me, and they came asked [me] to apply for it because they believed that I would be suited to the position. It was the previous worker who was here, so I applied for it and went through the usual processes and got it.

As one of the few qualified residents in her area, Maggie's predecessor knew her and approached her to apply for the position. Maggie was well informed about the responsibilities of her current position before her application, and she described her experience of that role:

> It is an opportunity to work with people and support them. I think I actually do find that people that I work with on a case management basis and that, that you can actually... I mean it's a bit of a cliché but empower people. You can make some fairly positive changes in their lives, and I have in my time, there have been people that have been able to change their lives, improve their lives in a small way and our kind of work does help.

The employment that Maggie was referred to and that her credential qualifies her for, she views as an opportunity for her to "empower people" so that others are better able to navigate their everyday challenges. In her position, Maggie has experienced being effective in supporting others to "improve their lives in a small way" and her perspective is that in her role she is making modest improvements that enhance people's lives. Although she suggests that "empowerment" has become somewhat of a cliché, Maggie is satisfied that her "kind of work does help" and that as part of her vocation she can assist others.

Fulfilling a lifelong ambition to achieve a particular vocation was Pat's motive for completing her degree through online delivery, an experience that she "absolutely hated." She assured me, however, that since attaining her credential, "the job I'm doing now is the type of job that I've always wanted. So, I'm very, very happy." Pat was delighted to secure her role that assists local people and shared the way that she attained her position:

> I had a conversation with my current employer. I am very fortunate, they wanted to employ me, and I wanted to work for them – I didn't apply, no interview. I had worked for another organisation, and that work involved working closely with my current employer in that role.

Pat sees herself as extremely fortunate that a discussion with an employer was enough for her to secure the "type of job she's always wanted" in her location. In addition to her credential, Pat views a prior chance to demonstrate expertise through a role "with another organisation" as essential for her to secure her current position.

Meg spent many hours volunteering when her children were younger while she was completing her vocational education certificate. She sought employment when her children were older but was rejected by local businesses. At that time, Meg's mother was working with an organisation where a casual position became available, and she encouraged Meg to apply. Meg spoke at length about attending the interview and securing employment (that led to a professional full-time position):

> … the boss at that stage got me in for an interview, looked at my resume and went, 'why aren't you hired, why hasn't somebody snapped you up? You've got so much in this resume and so many skills.' And I said, 'because nobody would give me a go.' And it's who you know a lot in the smaller country towns. So, because I wasn't... even though a lot of people knew me, for my teaching, for going to school here. I used to work here when I was younger, there was all these reasons that people knew me that could have hired me but because I wasn't in the crowd of living here forever and creating that great family name, I was still basically an unknown to them. And so, to get a job anywhere I just kept getting, 'no, no, no, no, no' and then presented it [my resume] and she just went, 'you are going to start working for me. I'm going to give you a go.' And I never looked back from that, but I had also done study in a certificate III and was actually still doing it at that stage, so I had all these skills behind me. It just was really hard to give me a go from not having a job, because I had never done this work, so it was just like, 'you need experience,' 'well give me experience, give me the job, and let me show you I can do it.' So, it was this, catch 22, if you don't [do] have the

experience, you get the job, but if you don't have the job then you can't get the experience. So yes, she gave me experience, and I'm so grateful and even tell her now, we've been friends and when I go there that is sometimes who I stay with. Been friends for years and I've kept saying to her that, 'you were the one who believed in me and gave me the chance.'

For Meg, living in an area without a "great family name," meant that she relied on her connection with her mother to receive the chance to be interviewed for a position. She then gained experience in the workplace which led to her successful application for her full-time position. Meg is "grateful" that her mother's employer gave her a chance to exercise her skills and she has been further gratified that she has been able to build a career in her local community.

Margaret has had several professional careers while living in her rural area, each of which has been directly related to her most recently attained credential. After deciding to pursue a career that had piqued her interest in high school, Margaret completed her most recent course through online delivery and has secured a rewarding local teaching position. When prompted, she told a full and comprehensive story about the events that led to her securing her employment:

I'd finished my degree, and I felt like 'what am I going to do now?' because I'd just been told by every primary school that I'd ever worked for up here that I wasn't going to get a job in the primary school sector. So, I was driving home this particular day, and I said: 'Oh god, please let me know what I was meant to be doing.' And I got home, and two students who arrived on separate occasions walked in the door and said: 'oh, the music teacher's gone again.' They had trouble keeping a music teacher at high school. And I said 'really?' and then one of them said to me 'you should come and be our music teacher.' And so, I said. '…oh? Oh, maybe I should.'

After completing her credential, Margaret wondered, "what am I going to do now?" and had a sense of uncertainty about her career direction after being informed by local employers that she "wasn't going to get a job." Margaret's connection with local high school students in her private practice was a beginning in assisting her to secure a qualified local position, showing the significance of local connections for acquiring employment in her preferred position. She went on to describe her next steps toward employment:

And so, I talked to the principal at primary who I... I worked [with] at primary school and really, she was my role model really, she was an amazing person. On how to lead a school, she really turned that school around, and I went and spoke to her, and I said: 'well, what do you think?' And she said,

> 'well, where have you heard it from' and I said, 'From a couple of my
> students, I haven't heard it just once, I've heard it two or three times now'
> and she said, 'don't muck around, go straight to the principal.' And she said,
> 'ring up, find out.' And so, I rang up. The problem was that he didn't know.
> When he answered the phone, I thought this was a bit rude actually, when
> he answered the phone, he had me on speakerphone and I don't know who
> else was in the room and he eventually picked the phone up and he said,
> 'how do you know this?' And I said, 'well I've had a couple of students
> come and see me who I teach them, and they said they are losing their music
> teacher' and he said, 'oh, I don't know about this.' And he went and
> questioned the music teacher and found out that, oh anyway, they found out
> that that might have been the case, so he rang up again and said, 'yes, if
> you'd like to come over and look at the job, that would be good and see what
> we've got to offer and what you've got to offer.' And I went, 'oh, OK.'
> Because this was the end of the year and trying to get people at the end of
> the year like that is quite difficult. So, then I thought, I was terrified and
> thought 'oh my god, what have I just done?' So, I rang up the person who
> works at [the] high school, because I knew her personally and I said, 'during
> this interview, what would you ask them?' Because she had worked there
> too, 'what would you ask them? What type of questions? What should I be
> looking for?' And she gave me a bit of time and ideas.

In addition to gaining access to knowledge about suitable employment through her social connections, Margaret also elected to connect with her "role model," a previous employer who could provide support and advice about the best way to approach applying for paid positions. She received and acted on her role model's advice to not "muck around" and to engage purposefully with her potential employer. Margaret was "terrified" and hesitant about approaching her future employer and contacted another friend who was employed at her potential workplace because Margaret "knew her personally" and trusted her support. Her social connection afforded "time and ideas" that supported Margaret to engage with her potential employer. However, Margaret's initial attempt to secure her preferred position was thwarted:

> Half an hour before the interview, they rang up and cancelled and I found
> out afterwards that the music teacher had changed her mind. They'd had
> counselling and she'd changed her mind and so, I went, 'oh, where does that
> leave me?' A week later, I get a phone call from [Friend] saying, 'how did
> your interview go?' I said, 'you'd never guess, they cancelled half an hour
> before like it's really, really weird' and she said 'how would you like to
> come and work for us? We've just had someone pull out of the job from

Perois City.' And I said, 'are you for real?' and she goes, 'yes.' And so, I
went over there. She said, 'I won't be here but [Principal] will be, come over
and talk to him.' So, I went over there and after accepting the job, he said:
'you can't accept the job until you've had your talk with me etcetera.' Oh,
not… that's right. I went over, and he said, 'you can't accept it until you go
and talk about it with family, blah, blah, blah.' So, I then accepted the job,
and later that day a high school rang me up and said, 'are you still interested
in this job' and I said I've just accepted a job, and the teacher did leave. So,
it's a really funny, what do they call it? Swings and roundabouts. But that's
how I ended up over there.

In describing the attainment of her preferred position, Margaret's language to describe the
circumstances of her employment also includes "swings and roundabouts," or that she
experienced equalising after an unproductive approach to one potential employer was balanced
by her attaining another suitable position. The "balance" in her employment outcomes was
sustained by Margaret's extensive social connections in her local community that assisted her to
secure her desired position where she experiences greater satisfaction than in her previous
career.

As seen above, after attaining their credentials some contributors had secured local
employment in their preferred professional positions through connections with local people.
Five contributors spoke about their experiences with working in positions that they were
referred to and for which they are qualified. Despite administrative procedures detracting from
her work outcomes, Sandy enjoys working with local people in a job that she was referred to by
her local educator. After her local educators referred her to paid positions, Dawn is dedicated to
giving to her local community by providing emotional support to residents through her current
employment. Maggie's predecessor contacted her as a suitable applicant for her current
position, where she attains satisfaction from empowering people. Pat is pleased to be working in
the type of job that she has always wanted that was secured through her previous connection
with her employer. Securing her position through her connections means that Margaret is
engaged with a career that she has considered since high school. Each of the experiences of
employment for Dawn, Maggie, Pat, and Margaret demonstrate a sense of gratification possible,
in part, because of the qualified positions that they secured through their social connections.

For some persons living in rural areas, their experiences of performance in their post-
credential employment that they secured through their local connections made for a profoundly
satisfying experience. Experiences of gratification in post-credential roles in rural areas are
neglected in research but have received some attention in policy documents. In particular, the

Social Inclusion Unit (2009) released a report promoting policy and funding for adults to continue their education, as individual educational endeavour was anticipated by policymakers to generate employment outcomes that would improve social wellbeing. Contributors' experiences in the present study highlight that their social wellbeing, in terms of their rich social connections, preceded their credentials and assisted them into post-credential employment. Read through a lens of spatiality, the analysis highlights how contributors could add to the construction of social spaces associated with local employment. Contributing to local employment spaces became an empowering space for persons who were often highly motivated to be included in workplaces. For persons living in Australian rural areas, spatial (in)justice hinges on securing employment. Fulfilling their employment ambitions as tertiary-educated persons cemented a sense of being valued residents in their rural areas.

The primary finding of experiences with gratifying positions for persons living in rural areas as tertiary-educated employees is that their social connections permitted them to attain qualified positions and make their contribution to the social wellbeing of others and their communities. Referral for employment opportunities made for occasions of great satisfaction for persons and such an insight is an addition to what is known in research about tertiary-educated residents' employment in rural areas. Other experiences of post-credential employment I discuss further in the next subtheme.

6.2.2 Rural Professionals: Diverse Opportunities

Some contributors had experiences with professional positions in their rural areas and some were qualified for professional roles for which there is sometimes a high local demand along with a small pool of suitable local candidates. As such, contributors' professional roles allowed for experiences that both required and facilitated the development of a diverse range of skills. Each contributor offered insight into the demands of diverse types of opportunities for skill development that improved contributions to their communities.

Since relocating to her daughter's town, Amber has been able to closely observe a good quality of life for both her daughter and grandchildren and is pleased that they are living in their rural area. Amber spoke about the professional benefits for her graduate daughter:

> My adult child left the city maybe ten years ago, partly because this is where their partner-to-be lived, but also because they managed to obtain employment here in their profession (as a civil engineer). It was a real bonus for them because they have been able to do much more interesting work here, mainly due to the large variety of tasks they are required to tackle, which in Perois City would only have been given to more senior

professionals in the company. Now their boss is on the verge of retiring and they will be taking over the company. Not bad for a 34-year-old (woman), hey!

Amber has witnessed her daughter's progression and meteoric rise as a professional in her rural area. In particular, her daughter's role in her town was a "real bonus" for her professional progression, offering interesting work with a variety of tasks due to the scarcity of local professionals. Amber is delighted that her relatively young daughter will soon be managing her own "company." Her experience shows that there is a range of entrepreneurial opportunities that enhance skill development in rural areas.

After her course enrolment, Jane was offered local employment that was relevant to her postgraduate course. Her previous local position was a public service role that she secured as a graduate. Jane detailed her experiences with local professional roles:

Being a professional in a rural community… In many ways, it gives you opportunities to do things that you wouldn't necessarily get if you were working in say, Main Street, in the city. Partly through opportunity and partly through necessity there's not often a fallback, like you're it. It gives you the means to contribute to your community in ways you wouldn't necessarily otherwise be able to. And in doing so, you also pick up a range of skills that you wouldn't otherwise have the opportunity to do so.

In describing what her professional experience means, Jane refers to her "range of skills" that she has developed while working in her "community" and that such "opportunity" has, in turn, meant that her local contribution is improved in "ways" that wouldn't necessarily occur elsewhere. In particular, Jane sees her professional role as brimming with opportunities that are not available to her metropolitan counterparts, who she views as having a comparatively dull professional experience on "Main Street, in the city." Jane's experience with rural professional opportunities is centred on their complexity which drives a necessity to develop diverse skills to navigate rural workplaces. Such necessity arises primarily because, in Jane's view, there is no "fallback" such as an alternative plan or person to enact workplace solutions. Through either opportunity or necessity, Jane is pleased that she can "contribute to her community" and is rewarded by extensive skill development in her employment.

Since qualifying for her professional position located in her town, Dawn has secured employment in a role to establish a new public service for local people. She explained what it is like to conform to metropolitan guidelines while working as a professional in her rural area:

I've just been having a bit of a tussle with work lately that my role was developed to focus on rural, but it still seems to be that funny fit between

working with the metropolitan-based organisation and trying to deliver to a community and I'm very passionate about this role and trying to establish this organisation and just the conflicts there. So, I'm very passionate about the area I'm working with… in trying to bring services to isolated people that have experienced trauma.

As a rural professional, Dawn is experiencing a "tussle" or vigorous struggle with the "funny fit" or what may be identified as trying to comply with ideas from her "metropolitan-based organisation" that delivers services to her rural area. Dawn is "very passionate" about her professional role, making her willing to endure the "conflicts" generated by implementing metropolitan ideas into rural practices. She withstands such challenges so that she can fulfil the intention of her role and provide support to alleviate the "trauma" of local people who have been "isolated" in their rural areas.

As an adjunct to her professional role, Pat has identified that some professionals may expose people to improper behaviour and that those living in rural areas may find it especially difficult to call attention to conduct that is contrary to professional standards. Pat publicising concerns about such issues meant that she was invited to participate in a national task force related to practices in her profession. She explained the ideas behind her campaign to assist people in Australian society:

> … it's about the potential to protect and deter and I think it would a bit…
> Certain behaviours by a minority… and for people to have a place to go.
> And certainly, living in a rural community I know how difficult it is to make
> a complaint and how difficult that is. So, it's just really a good thing to do
> and to raise it as an issue. Again, it's about talking about it and raising of
> awareness. So, my involvement started very informally with me just talking
> to local pollies. So then, I went 'OK' and kept going and then they invited
> me to be on it. I'm not naïve as to think that it will protect everybody,
> because it won't. I'm not that naïve. And I certainly know from experience
> that relying on employing organisations is not sufficient.

After qualifying and entering her professional position, Pat is dedicated to "protecting" people and "deterring" unscrupulous professionals who may prey upon them. Further, her local knowledge also informs Pat's understanding of the power differential between residents and authority figures, evidenced by professionals living in rural towns making official complaints by clients "difficult." Pat's dedication is evident in her "formal" approach to "pollies" or political representatives which culminated in her being invited to join the national task force. She is pleased to be involved in generating redress processes for complaints against unscrupulous professionals. Although Pat is dedicated to ensuring that people in Australia "have a place to

go" and do not have to rely on employer "organisations" to have access to an outstanding and supportive complaints process, she is realistic about potential outcomes. Pat is not "naïve" and has a sophisticated understanding that her efforts cannot possibly achieve protection for everyone. Since speaking with me about the diversity in opportunities for her skill development, Pat's task force has succeeded in implementing protocols to protect vulnerable people.

In sum, after attaining their credential and securing their roles as rural professionals, some contributors had experiences with diverse opportunities in their paid positions. Four contributors spoke about their observations of the demands of professional positions in rural areas. Living in the same rural town in which her daughter has lived and worked for the past decade, Amber has witnessed her daughter's quick, professional progression that will shortly culminate in the management of her own business. As a professional in her town, Jane is focused on assisting her local community in her paid role that she views, by both necessity and design, as giving her more opportunities for development than her metropolitan counterparts. Dawn is passionate about her local role which was designed for metropolitan conditions and is reworking practices so that she fulfils her aim to offer services to local people. As part of her professional role, Pat has successfully lobbied for the protection of vulnerable people in Australian society through her appointment to a national task force. Some contributors' experiences performing professional roles in their local community have both afforded and demanded their engagement with a variety of opportunities. Understood through a lens of spatiality, contributors' experiences as rural professionals highlight the ways in which they can contribute to the construction of their professional spaces. Persons were eager to contribute as rural professionals to decisions made in metropolitan areas. For persons living in Australian rural areas, contributing as rural professionals works toward spatial justice for such areas as they liaise with administrators who are often located in the metropolitan areas. Such liaison is invaluable for improving local conditions through influencing the decisions that affect their rural areas and peoples the most.

Experiences of performances in post-credential professional roles for some persons living in rural areas meant utilising an array of knowledge and skills, providing opportunities for career advancement and satisfaction. Contributors' observations about diverse opportunities in their local professional positions support previous research by Allison and Eversole (2008) and Cook (2008) who argue that adults living in rural areas appreciate attaining course knowledge that allows them to respond to complex local demands. In the present study, persons appreciate applying such knowledge as well as other skills in their local contexts. Further, the experiences of persons in the present study illustrate that a valuable part of performing as a rural professional is both applying and extending their knowledge in their employment in a way that

is mindful of their particular context. Such diverse experiences of professional roles in rural areas substantiate research by Howley and Howley (2014) who argue that there is a necessity for rural professionals to generate alternative ideas and options for real-time practices to solve novel dilemmas within local contexts.

6.2.3 Education Knowledge: Essential Roles

Most contributors had encountered local people who were uninformed about tertiary education. In light of this, some contributors played essential roles in taking responsibility for guiding other residents to continue their education as well as learn from their courses. Contributors' knowledge about tertiary education was essential for assisting other local people to continue their education.

While she was completing her degree and securing a paid position, Dawn's children entered high school. Dawn's experience of engaging with tertiary education while living in her rural area gave her insight into the challenges for young people to select a course for securing their future employment. Such challenges include limited exposure to the knowledge of other tertiary-educated people, either in local workplaces or by visiting a university campus located elsewhere. Dawn related the approach that she has subsequently taken when speaking to her children about continuing their education:

> I'm encouraging my kids to go to university. It doesn't matter if you don't
> know what you want to do. Go and find out what's out there, because staying
> here in this region you're not going to know what's out there. Go to the city,
> do some study, meet people who are in a similar situation and explore and
> use it as time to work out what you want to do, you don't have to have a
> particular goal but get that building block, because you can build on that,
> and it will... you don't know where it will take you. I probably railroaded
> them to go into further education. Maybe uni[versity]'s not the thing, but go
> out and explore it, meet other people.

Dawn views that communicating with people who are familiar with the employment impact of credentials is a way for people living in rural areas to be informed about the relationship between tertiary education and employment. She is determined, perhaps forceful, in "railroading" or coercing her children into university. Dawn views that there is a lack of local knowledge about potential employment outcomes from university courses. To fill that gap, she anticipates that her childrens' interactions with other people in a university setting will develop their understanding of employment options that are available and suitable for them. Dawn is offering her knowledge about tertiary education by informing her children that one of the most important aspects of their education is the chance for them to "go and find what's out there" or

become aware of the options that are available to them. Such awareness in Dawn's perspective cannot be developed solely by interacting with others in her rural area. Her view is that current career trajectories are increasingly uncertain, and Dawn acknowledges that this uncertainty also applies to a tertiary education as "you don't know where it will take you." Such an approach means deciding on a career during, rather than before, enrolling in a course. In this way, Dawn does not view decisions about career aspirations as critical before course enrolment, particularly as her own experience is that workplace demands evolve quickly and may be met by securing postgraduate credentials. Overall, Dawn's perspective that she shared with her children is that postgraduate credentials are the best way to navigate into future employment opportunities. Subsequently, she has a significant and solitary role in assisting her children to understand the role of tertiary education.

With extensive course experience, on and off campus, as both an undergraduate and postgraduate, Margaret's role in her local community includes being called upon by local young people who are considering continuing their education. She shared that:

> …whenever someone's going to a university or a college, they always ring me up and say 'oh, what do you think about this?', because I've been to so many different places and done it so many different ways.

As someone with a variety of course experiences, Margaret is confident that she can assist other local people living in her rural area to understand "different places" and "different ways" that they can continue their education before they finalise their course enrolment.

Although William has only been engaged with his tertiary education course for approximately a year, his familiarity with the process of continuing education, after a long hiatus from formal learning, has proven a boon for at least one person in his local community. He spoke about his actions on behalf of a friend, who after years of uncertainty about her education options, he assisted to engage with a suitable course:

> I went back and got as much information as I could and sent that to her. And then I rang and did some more checking and got hold of the campus and she got a pathway. What's it called? The employment pathway adviser or something to that effect and she went and had a meeting with him, now she's about to do her 5-month free course to just get her in the basics and then she will be offered a certificate in community and something or rather. So, what 3 days of me doing a little bit of work.

Since engaging with his own course, William has gained the confidence and skill to explore tertiary education options and find ways for others to continue their education. His knowledge along with a preparedness to assist someone who is unfamiliar with accessing "the basics," or

without an understanding of how to obtain course information, was instrumental in helping his friend to continue her education. He is pleased with the outcome for his friend who can continue her education after what he considers a "little bit of work" on his behalf due to him being familiar and at ease with contacting education providers.

When Pat began her tertiary education by classroom delivery in another town, her local educators, whose positions have since been made redundant due to the expansion of online delivery, supported Pat to enjoy developing her formal learning capabilities. After completing some courses in a local classroom, Pat enrolled in the online delivery of a bachelor's degree. She shared that "doing a degree was absolutely to get the job I wanted, there's no two ways about that because most of it I hated." In describing her experience of online delivery, Pat wants to be clear that while she "hated" her online course, she knew that she had to complete the degree to enter her vocation. After securing the job that she always wanted and despite her online course experience, Pat encourages other local people to continue their education through the means that are available to them:

> Talking to people, and I never squelch, even though people say, 'I really want to do what you do.' They're usually in the middle of a crisis or something, but it's not the right time right now. But I never squelch no matter who it is. I say to them 'get some information, Sort out... things need to be very stable, or stable as they can be,' and I give them some directions and suggestions and say, 'get some information and find out and be realistic about cost and time everything else you've got on your plate.' But it doesn't matter who it is I never try and dissuade someone with being involved.

In discussions with local people about their chances to engage in a course, Pat, regardless of their circumstances, does not "squelch" or quash their ambitions and is adamant in her resolve to encourage others. Her advice includes illuminating what each person has on "their plate" or what they are already coping with and offering them advice to organise the complexities in their lives to ensure that they have "stable" circumstances. Such advice, Pat hopes, will give each person the best chance of progressing through their course to achieve completion. The sense of delight that Pat experiences as part of her guiding role are evidenced in her experiences with one local person in particular:

> One person, I really encouraged to do it, oh my goodness they're... yes, their work, they're in a leadership role, they're amazing. And I'm just not ambitious at all, but they're quite ambitious, so they're probably going to go far. I think it's just by talking to people and giving them active information for them to follow up on.

As she considers the position of her former advisee, Pat is in awe of their progress after she offered them firm encouragement to begin achieving their education goals. She emphasises her view that local people need "active information" or tasks that they can accomplish to engage with and continue their education according to their circumstances, and that this is achieved best by talking to people in person. Pat is sincerely pleased that her discussions and strategizing with local people about their education futures have manifested in an extraordinary outcome for at least one person in her local community.

A friend assisted Julie to complete her tertiary education courses to attain undergraduate and postgraduate credentials. Since then, Julie has strengthened her connection with another local person who is attempting her first tertiary education course. She spoke about her shift from advisee to adviser as she assists a local woman to understand and access educational technologies to complete her online course:

> I have a girl that I know at the moment, she is tackling university, and I would fear to say that if it wasn't the input that I have with her I don't think she would pass, she wouldn't have got very far either, because it's just so daunting when you are not used to navigating around the sites. And you can email the lecturers they might not get back [to you] for two or three days, but [by] that time you're that frustrated that you feel [like] pulling your hair out. So, I think that it is very hard, and if you haven't got the financial gains and [can't] really afford to go out and seek help to learn what you have to learn just to navigate some of these sites, I would think you give up; you would enrol and give up quite easily.

After her own experience with "sites" or educational technologies, Julie empathises with the process of becoming familiar with online courses, something she describes as "tackling university," that is, a difficult educational activity that requires a determined effort. Julie's view is that the struggle at the start of a course can be discouraging and worrying, to the point of "feeling [like] pulling your hair out," which is made worse by a lack of communication with educators. Her perspective is that options for practical learning assistance in person require paid options and that some local people do not have the income to afford such learning support. As seen here, Julie's perspective is that local people may "enrol and give up quite easily" and subsequently abandon their education. Nonetheless, with empathy and "input" or efforts to help, Julie has been able to offer learning support that encourages a local woman to continue her university course.

As part of her cadetship, Kate engages with her course through online delivery at her local vocational campus. She spoke of her actions to improve both her learning and that of other people after she had started her course:

> Training and studying on your own is quite tricky; I'm several hours from the nearest other applicants, that I study with. So that was tricky, but we did eventually… did start ringing each other and bouncing ideas.

At the beginning of her course, Kate experienced a sense of isolation that she views as making learning from her course "tricky" or unnecessarily difficult. She realised that several hours of travel between her and her classmates also made it difficult to be "with" them and learn. Kate and her classmates came together through her initiating telephone calls so that they could "bounce ideas" or discuss their course materials and improve their learning. She spoke further about what it was like to connect with other people to share their learning experiences:

> That was good. I mean I did find others are reluctant to give away information. It's very competitive still. I don't know whether, I suppose it was a bit like year 12, brainstorming. No one really gave away what they were writing about.

While it was beneficial for Kate to organise connections with others, some of her classmates focused on rivalry or a "competitive" approach during such interactions that restricted the knowledge that they were willing to share. In light of this, I asked Kate about her thoughts on future opportunities to continue discussions with other people studying the same course:

> That would be great. Like we had only four workshops with our VET, so I know it's probably not possible because we're dealing with the whole of the State, but if there could have been one or two others and we got together and talked more about these assignments, [it] would have been good. Because they just sort of turn up in your email and it's like, 'just go for it.'

While finding that people in her course had an unwillingness to share information, Kate views that such connections were successful, and she is enthusiastic in suggesting people come together to enhance their learning from the course materials. However, Kate is doubtful about the possibilities for such interactions in the future. She sees it as very beneficial but "probably not possible" due to her classmates being located across the State. Nonetheless, to enhance learning, the reason that prompted her to make contact in the first instance, Kate sees that there is an ongoing need for other people in her course to be in contact with one another in the future. In particular, she views discussions among classmates about course assessment materials would offer them reassurance in the face of a "just go for it" approach whereby assessment materials are allocated without further explanation.

As seen above, some contributors with practical knowledge of tertiary education, guided local people to continue their education. Six contributors who had shared their knowledge about tertiary education with local people related their perspectives about such interactions. Dawn's experience with tertiary education has led her to recommend the completion of a university course in the city to her children as a way for them to explore their employment options. With an extensive experience of different delivery methods for both her undergraduate and postgraduate courses, Margaret is confident in informing other local people about the options for continuing their education. After many years of absence, William's friend was able to continue her education after he spent a few days locating a suitable course option for her. Pat encounters local people with considerable complexity in their lives who want to continue their education, and she encourages them by suggesting manageable steps so that they are prepared to progress through their courses. Julie is aware of how intimidating online courses can be, and she is steadfast in providing support for a local person who is navigating their first tertiary education course. Kate initiated contact with other people living in her local region who were enrolled in her course, and she finds that while the interactions were somewhat competitive, discussion among classmates was beneficial for learning and progression throughout the course. As seen here, as local persons with experience engaging in tertiary education courses, some contributors had essential roles in assisting other local people to continue their education.

The roles of some tertiary-educated persons living in rural areas included essential support for local people to commence their tertiary education. The supportive role of tertiary-educated persons for the educational endeavour of other local people living in rural areas is absent from the research literature. Contributors' experiences of having roles that allow for the dissemination of education knowledge illustrate the support necessary for local people to continue their education. Such support includes providing assistance to become familiar with technological as well as institutional requirements so that local people could engage with a course and learn from their course materials.

Contributors' experiences of having essential roles in providing knowledge to local people are similar to that reported about peer mentoring on campus at James Cook University by Nelson et al. (2018). They advise that one of the most critical aspects of such interactions was that "first-in-family" who were often from marginalised backgrounds were assisted by their peers to navigate the "structural environment" of tertiary education, referred to as "the system" by contributors to the present study. "The system" or "structural environment" consists of both educational technologies and institutional requirements that are often unfamiliar, yet integral to demonstrating comprehension of course materials (Nelson et al., 2018, p. 12). Contributors'

experiences show that their essential roles as tertiary-educated residents in rural areas centre on both their knowledge of "the system" and their willingness to provide individualised support for other residents pursuing tertiary education. The experiences detailed here add that some tertiary-education persons living in rural areas that have navigated "the system" play a part in instigating informal peer arrangements that assist others to learn from the course materials (Brindley, 2014; Illeris, 2016). In this way, tertiary-educated persons living in rural areas have an essential role whereby they use their own knowledge of tertiary education to promote education and learning for other residents.

The finding in the present study about the essential roles of tertiary-educated persons living in rural areas to provide knowledge that furthers the educational endeavours of local people also extends the work of Arnason (1995) and Nixon (2010). They argue that each person appreciates having their differences recognised and accomplishments valued. Contributors' roles providing essential knowledge about options to continue education became a platform of their choosing through which their social contributions were both recognised and valued by others in their local communities. Understood through a lens of spatiality, contributors could be seen to construct social spaces that empower others to continue with their tertiary education. As such, engagement with tertiary education until course completion is often enabled by other residents who have previously attained a credential. A significant part of spatial justice for persons living in Australian rural areas is adequate social and learning support to engage with, and complete, their tertiary education courses. Such support is highly prized by persons living in rural areas and they report that it is critical for them to fulfil their educational ambitions.

There is little acknowledgement in research of the part that tertiary-educated residents play in encouraging other local people to promote educational endeavour in the rural areas in which they live. The findings here speak to this, suggesting that tertiary-educated persons living in rural areas are instrumental in engaging and sustaining other local people in tertiary education. Other experiences related to educational ambassadorship in rural areas I discuss in the next subtheme.

6.2.4 Educational Dishonesty: Resolute Opponents

Some contributors who had completed previous tertiary education courses shared their concerns about education providers who awarded credentials without adequately assessing if skills or knowledge had been gained from a course. Contributors viewed such practices as dishonest and undermined the value and power of their credentials to shape their futures. For some contributors, encountering academic dishonesty meant engaging in roles to resolutely oppose such practices.

After receiving funding to continue her education as part of a redundancy package, Jane decided to engage with a postgraduate course via online delivery offered by a university. She had first considered her options for continuing her education over fifteen years ago when she attained employment in her rural area after completing her undergraduate degree at a metropolitan campus. At that time, Jane engaged with a vocational education provider to gain skills to improve her workplace performance. More recently, Jane pursued formal certification of her employment skills through the same vocational education provider as part of a redundancy package. She spoke at length about her experiences with that provider:

> …there were two courses that I'd been involved with. One was wanting to develop my professional skills at the time when I first lived here, and that was an external course, and one was through my previous employment role. In a professional sense, we were offered the opportunity to gain some accredited... some VET competencies through the recognition for prior learning system that they have. So, first with the remote course, you were sent a book with some various exercises to work through, and it felt very much like you were just needing to regurgitate what was in the book. There was no personal service, so you were assigned a tutor but you either didn't get responses or they were very cut and pasted. So, I didn't actually finish that course; I didn't feel like it was worth my time and money continuing with that. The recognition for prior learning service, there was a whole batch of us across the State in my previous role that went through the same process. They were looking to assess where people's various levels were in light of the impending restructure that was happening or about to happen at that time. So as part of that process, people were granted individual interviews, you brought in your paperwork where you had it, you talked to the person about what your skills were, they helped aligned them with the national competencies at the time and then you came out with a piece of paper at the end. A couple of us who unfortunately for VET were coincidentally were university graduates, so we were familiar with a quite rigorous academic system. We're actually sent our certificates before we'd even had our interview or submitted any paperwork from our end, which really smacked of just a rubber-stamping exercise and instantly that lost all credibility in our eyes as to the process. So, they were my experiences, and it just has never reflected very well on them since.

As a graduate, Jane could rely on her previous course experience to assess the practices of her vocational education and training provider. In a similar way to her engagement with a university

course, Jane anticipated that by completing a vocational course she would gain "professional skills" and improve her performance in her paid role. Her subsequent experience of "regurgitating" course materials or in Jane's view, the abhorrent practice of rote learning was "not worth my time or money" and offered a poor chance to add to her knowledge and skills. Her view was reinforced by the lack of "personal service" or an absence of nuanced human interaction from her provider, such as communication that provided adequate learning support. More recently, as Jane progressed through the redundancy transition process, she was able to contrast the "rigorous academic system" at her previous university to gain a "piece of paper at the end" or attain her credential, with her questionable experiences at her vocational education and training provider. By using her undergraduate experience as a reference, Jane recognised questionable "rubber-stamping" or careless credentialing practices by her vocational education and training provider that included the issuing of her credential without adequate assessment. Jane's communication with her colleagues showed similar experiences, strengthening her view about the weak value of a credential issued by that vocational education and training provider. She wanted to learn for employment purposes by building on her knowledge and subsequently did so by avoiding educational dishonesty, seeking a course whereby she was required to demonstrate her learning before the issue of her credential. To achieve such ends, Jane continued her education by enrolling in a postgraduate course with her previous university.

Heidi has spent many years attaining her credentials through classroom and online delivery, and through her workplace interactions, observed that other local people have attained similar vocational credentials. She shared her thoughts about the quality of their courses and her perspective on recently established education providers:

> Another thing that annoys me is all these little training organisations that pop up everywhere that are just doing ticks and flicks. And I've even written to the newspaper to say if you want a good story, why don't you get your journalists to look into this, I got no response. I did the same with the radio. As a worker, I was getting so frustrated with having some people come in with, 'oh yeah, I've done my certificate.' This woman enrolled who could hardly use a computer, 'I went down to the city and got it in 4 days.' I said, 'do you know what this is? So, do you know what this is?' 'No'. And it just used to get up my nose to think. I've done all this hard work, but other people are getting issued these tickets that have no value really. Because it was devaluing my education and that I found really frustrating.

Heidi has "worked hard" to attain her "tickets" or credentials and is "frustrated" to encounter local people without fundamental skills who have similar credentials. Subsequently, the dishonest practices of some education providers "get up her nose" or continue to irritate and

annoy her, as such practices devalue her efforts to build on her education. As a consequence, Heidi views the proliferation of education providers with limited services as "little training organisations." She also views that such providers are focused on "ticks and flicks" a term with economic connotations originating in the Australian banking industry that Heidi uses to highlight her perspective that some education providers are focused on administering to students for financial gain. In particular, she perceives that some education providers are primarily concerned with issuing credentials and dismissing the student as quickly as possible to maximise enrolments and course fee payments. Prioritising financial gain from enrolments contrasts with principles such as ensuring competency and learning for students.

As a long-term resident in her rural area, Julie has engaged with both classroom and online delivery to attain her master's degree. In her business, Julie frequently encounters local people with credentials that she recognises as being attributed to them despite a lack of attendance or even enrolment in a course. She spoke of the role of contractors of government employment services in sponsoring such practices:

> I knew of an unemployed man, who was supposedly signed off on having a
> white card and a forklift licence, he had never been to a course. And within
> the business community, not only here, but even interstate, it's the same
> thing. And it's sad when it's the same organisation.

The practice of "signing off" was intended to lead Julie to falsely believe that the issue of credentials was legitimate and that the credential holder was knowledgeable about workplace safety. The "unemployed man" was forthright in disclosing that, despite the contractor issuing his credentials, he had not attended a course. Julie has communicated with other business owners about such practices, and they have confirmed that credentialing without adequate training or assessment is widespread. Such practices potentially impact workplace safety in both Julie's local region as well as other interstate regions where she does business. Julie views such dishonest accreditation as "sad," an expression of her contempt for monitoring bodies that are yet to fulfil their responsibilities to curb blatant negligent practices by national government contractors. She continued by describing the most recent incident of dishonest accreditation that she has encountered. As someone who is extensively experienced with education matters, Julie went on to describe being approached by a former local person for support in dealing with a national contractor of government employment services that issues credentials. The person that Julie knew had relocated out of the area and had decided to continue their education by enrolling in a certificate course with an education provider in her new town. Julie's acquaintance was informed by her prospective education provider after relocation that her national student identification number had already been recorded as completing that course with the contractor in her previous town. Julie began by describing the motive of the contractor of

government employment services to fraudulently record the completion of a course, as an education provider, and went on to illustrate their accreditation practices by discussing her acquaintance's situation:

> It's a monetary reward, as long as they sign off that this person's had training. I know of another girl that moved interstate, she rang me up, and she said: 'I don't know, but something funny's going on because I applied to do an early childhood development course through interstate, they accepted me and filled in my forms and everything and then they told me I can't do it because the money had already been spent in that area on me.' According to her [potential educator provider], she had a Cert III in Childhood Development, at the learning centre here. So, I told her 'You know what I would be doing; I would be ringing the learning centre and demanding that certificate.' She said, 'but, I haven't done it, I want to do it.' I said, 'No, [they say] you've done it [and] because they have said you've done it, and paid for that training now, you ring up and get a copy of that certificate.' She said, 'can you ring up for me,' and I said, 'I can ring up for you.' So, I rang up [the contractor of employment services in our town], and I say that 'I wanted to know why according to the job search provider has this girl done a certificate III.' And they [the contractor] rang me back and said that 'they can't discuss it with me as I have no legal right to that information.' So, I said, 'I will get permission from the girl to be her legal guardian.' They said 'no, no, no, I can't discuss it,' and then I got another phone call saying from another person 'it is not any of my business, don't bother ringing up anymore.' So, my next venture will be investigating that, very seriously.

Julie's acquaintance had "applied to do an early childhood development course" with an interstate education provider and was informed that she had completed the course with the contractor of national employment services in Julie's town where she had lived previously. After her acquaintance contacted her for advice, Julie took responsibility for guiding her to "demand that certificate" as a step toward showing that the contractor had engaged in a fraudulent practice. Seen here, Julie, as the holder of a postgraduate credential and local business owner, is confronting what she views as a lack of integrity in training and assessment practices by contractors of government employment services. She is "seriously" determined to assist local people by "investigating" or attempting to expose and prevent local threats to educational integrity.

As seen above, some contributors purposefully opposed educational dishonesty. Three contributors spoke about experiences with dishonest accreditation that was marked by the practice of credentialing local people without adequate training or assessment. Jane experienced inadequate vocational training and assessment on two separate occasions that motivated her to avoid dishonest accreditation by engaging with a university education provider. After observing dubious credentialing practices by some education providers, Heidi is aggravated as they devalue her credentials, and she is frustrated in her attempts to disrupt such practices. As a local business owner with a postgraduate credential, Julie encounters dishonest accreditation by government contractors of employment services, taking her role in opposing such practices seriously. Seen here, Jane, Heidi, and Julie have experience with educational dishonesty and have had roles in resolutely opposing such practices.

Some persons living in rural areas with previous experience of tertiary education courses delivered in a classroom had initiated attempts to disrupt the practices related to educational dishonesty by education providers. The role of tertiary-educated persons living in rural areas to promote educational integrity is unaddressed in the research literature. Contributors' experiences of being resolute opponents of educational dishonesty add to prior research warning about the possibility of dishonest accreditation in distance delivery methods as well as the potential difference between the perceived quality of distance learning and its real "quality" (Latchem, 2014; Twyford et al., 2009). Experiences detailed here also illuminate how funding arrangements tied to completion rates may encourage dishonest accreditation which undermines course quality regardless of delivery method. Similar reports are highlighted in a South Australian review which states that "worthless qualifications have proliferated, driven by incentives and exploited by fraudulent for-profit enterprises" (Quiggin, 2018, p. 2). Such practices have on more than one occasion prompted the Australian Government to take successful legal action (Branley & Taylor, 2016, April 16; Letts, 2019, September 20). Despite, educational dishonesty being highly conspicuous in rural areas; persons living there were often frustrated as they found few opportunities to redress it. With reference to spatiality, contributors' experiences with educational dishonesty highlight some of the ways that tertiary education spaces are subject to tension in rural areas. For instance, persons living in Australian rural areas are keen to engage with learning throughout their courses and were empowered by their previous tertiary education experiences to develop their capacities by engaging with future courses. However, persons sometimes encountered credentialling as a priority of some education providers and sought to change this emphasis regardless of where this (spatial) injustice occurred. The benefits of tertiary education for persons in rural areas were perceived as too valuable to be sullied by unscrupulous providers that are contributing to its demise.

Previous research about distance education has cautioned that the emphasis on methods for delivering education has overshadowed considerations about the quality of learning. A method focus overlooks the potential for educational dishonesty, supporting previous suggestions that research is urgently required to understand the quality of tertiary education outcomes (Evans & Haughey, 2014; Zawacki-Richter, 2009). Here, experiences of opposition to educational dishonesty add to what is known in research about the roles of tertiary-educated persons living in rural areas.

6.2.5 Professional Roles: Local Voices

Some contributors who were long-term residents in their rural areas had attained their credentials and secured a local professional role. While pleased with the aspects of the vocations that their qualification afforded them, many also spoke about a sense of responsibility to utilise their professional roles as a conduit to communicate the perspectives of local people to metropolitan decision-makers. In this way, as part of their professional roles, some contributors were dedicated to representing local voices.

Returning to his childhood town to secure his position as a senior school leader, Derek is supported by frequent visits from both Commonwealth and State Members of Parliament who seek to understand local issues. He related what it was like to have that contact:

> I think it is great that they have, you know have made it... it's probably about who they are, but also, it's probably set up through government avenues that they need to make sure that they are available and welcoming and understanding. That's what that position is. So, it makes me feel comfortable that it is not just me in the job, it's one of the things that does comfort me to some extent that they are there and that they will listen to the real issues that we've got.

In his experience of interacting with visiting Members, Derek generously attributes their consultative approach as a personal attribute in addition to being part of "government avenues." In particular, the "available and welcoming" attitude of Members of Parliament is both one of their qualities and part of their role. Regardless of the origin of the Members' behaviour, Derek has a sense of support and "comfort" because of their understanding approach, especially as his position is without local peer support. Derek senses that he can rely on his political representatives to listen to the "real issues that we've got" or voice local concerns that matter to him rather than simply discuss political rhetoric. As a tertiary-educated professional in his rural area, he has a position that permits frank conversations with Members of Parliament.

As a local resident for most of her life, Margaret has recently engaged with Parliamentary Members to request amendments to government subsistence for local young people who complete their high school education while living in rural areas. Since Margaret spoke with me, the government has made beneficial changes to subsistence programs that support young people who are required to relocate to the city to continue their education. Around the time that she spoke with me, Margaret had discussed such issues with two Members, who had visited her local region, and who she views as willing "to listen to what we want rather than tell us what we need." For Margaret other discussions with political representatives have often been an experience of being commanded rather than consulted. She elaborated on her experience of trying to influence metropolitan decisions about rural matters:

> It's so frustrating, I think up here. It's like... Particularly in this State I find, it's like once you get outside of that hour drive from the city that no one really cares. And one of the things that I'm still quite passionate about and when I get passionate about something I can get quite, well as you do as you suppose, quite emotional and vocal about what happens.

Foremost in Margaret's sense of frustration is being subjected to substantial decisions by uninformed metropolitan decision-makers. Margaret's perspective is that "no one really cares" about "those outside of the hour drive," from the city centre including rural areas and their people. She is enthusiastic about her local region and becomes "quite emotional and vocal" with intense sentiment driving her to use her voice to protect the future of her rural area. She shared a particular event during a drought that evoked this "passion":

> This area was really starting to go down the tubes. The government pulled people out of close-by offices and put them closer to the metropolitan area and made that the centre because it's closer to the city. And I just was absolutely outraged; I could not believe that they did that at the same time, because taking those people out of those jobs, taking families out. You're removing a whole subset of a certain type of person, usually, an educated person, who those type of people do lend voice or help to lend voice to what's happening up here. Removing these types of people from our community means we get heard less often. And our voice is less strong and less able to be heard because we are less articulate.

After an extended period of adverse weather, Margaret observed that her local region was starting to "go down the tubes" or enter irreversible decline. Around that time, Margaret was "outraged" to observe that State funding for local positions was reallocated to a region closer to the city. She was infuriated because it was implausible that such funding rearrangements could alleviate local decline. In particular, in Margaret's perspective, "pulling people out" in this way removed "a whole subset of a certain type of person" who she views as an essential part of the

future of her local region. Specifically, certain "types" of people are essential for attempts to influence decision-making in Margaret's local context. Disconcertingly, the State removed "an educated person," such as resident professionals, with close ties to metropolitan administrators. Such "types" of people, Margaret sees as a significant part of her community. In particular, local professional people understand the complex aspects of her region and "can help to lend voice" or expediently "articulate" and amplify local issues into language that is recognised by the metropolitan decision-makers with whom they are connected.

As part of performing her professional roles in her town for the past fifteen years, Jane spends time communicating with other residents in person. She offered her ideas on what it means for others to be able to communicate with her as a local person in her role:

> Having access to people that they know, there's a face to the name. So, you're not a random 1800 number that's going to put you on hold for 3 hours. It also means that you can advocate for your rural communities and rural people, in that two-way thinking I guess so rather than things coming, being inflicted from above, you're able to quite often influence those processes so that the rural voice is heard a bit better.

In Jane's experience as a professional, local people appreciate a direct and personalised service. In her paid position, Jane is not a "random" person, and her local presence means she is a stable personal contact who "doesn't put you on hold" and can offer immediate and individualised assistance. She also highlights that her communication with local people offers her an opportunity to understand "two-way thinking" that includes both the challenges that local people face and the legislative requirements that apply in her area. With such understanding, Jane can "advocate" for local people by informing metropolitan administrators about the support they need. Jane views that as part of her role, she is a local advocate who ensures that "the rural voice is heard a bit better" by way of her relationship with metropolitan decision-makers. She perceives that she mediates the process of things "coming, being inflicted from above," that is, she can challenge the imposition of metropolitan decisions that are "above" or out of the reach of most local people.

As a local resident for over thirty years and an employee with educational services for almost a decade, Meg has witnessed substantial changes in the delivery of her tertiary education in her local region, including the closure of a local vocational campus. She shared her thoughts about accessing tertiary education in her town:

> I know what we used to have here and what we've lost from here. It's just widening [of] the gap between the people who are less fortunate to the people who have the money to travel to be able to go and continue their

studies, or people who are computer illiterate, to people who can get on a computer and whiz-bang and they have done what they need to do.

After observing changes in the delivery of tertiary education, Meg views the expansion of online delivery as growing at the expense of local classes. She highlights that "what we've lost from here" is learning services that detract from the lives of local people and their communities. Meg argues that the immediate harm of online delivery is a "widening [of] the gap" or, the generation of a social divide in her town that privileges those who "have money to continue their studies." Meg is also distressed by the growing local divide between those who are "computer literate" and can "whiz-bang" or navigate online delivery and influence their future direction by continuing their education. She compares this group to those who are digitally illiterate and are subsequently prohibited from shaping their educational futures. Meg continued by describing her attempt to voice her concerns about the changes in local education services and her thoughts about her influence:

> Even as a staff member, we have really no say in it. We can say what we think but apart from the fact that we're gagged to be able to say anything out in the public because we've got to watch what we say. But, even if we were, like we have spoken to the directors, the CEOs, and put our concerns out there as to what's happening with this area and what's happened to the programs, and disadvantaged people here … in the town, because if they don't have the funds to go anywhere, then they can't get an education. Like I said unless it is online, and they can handle that. And they listen, but nothing happens, because it all comes down to dollar values and we're a number, and that's all we are. They can say, 'Yes, yes, we understand your concern. Yes, yes, we can see what you are saying, and we can understand where you are coming from.' But at the end of the day, it's dollars, it bums on seats, and even still bums on seats don't really matter, because we had some very successful programs run here and they just canned it without really any... they never came and talked to us about it. It just happened, 'no, it is not being run anymore.' No reasons. Yeah, so even as a staff member we have no say in what was happening.

An experience that Meg had, as an employee trying to persuade metropolitan decision-makers was that "we have really no say in it" and she was "gagged" or silenced as part of her paid role, including being prohibited from community discussions about education services. Subsequently, she was unable to either advocate for or inform, local people about the future of local education. Even though Meg perceives that metropolitan decision-makers listened to her and heard the words that she spoke, her attempts to initiate change were frustrated. Her perspective is that she was ignored because at "the end of the day" (there is little light), or that despite her efforts, the

view of metropolitan administrators is that "disadvantaged" residents were "just a number." Subsequently, Meg felt powerless and uninformed about the services that would be offered in her town by her employer.

At the time that she spoke to me, Meg expressed that despite previously being highly involved and connected in her local community, she didn't currently, "feel connected or want to be involved in anything." Subsequently, I was interested in understanding if Meg's experiences of the demise of local education services had influenced her ideas, and asked what it would mean for her opinion to have some influence in the direction of her organisation:

> Oh, it would be awesome. It would be... so many times in this position, even though they've said, 'you are playing an important part of being here and being a staff member and bringing so much greatness out there into the community and being the face of the organisation and that sort of stuff,' we don't feel valued. We don't feel valued at all. So that would be awesome if they actually showed us that they cared about what we were thinking and our opinions and would trust that we know what's happening with our community and we know what our community needs. I mean, because what they don't take into consideration is that we talk to our community, so we're like this go-between and they don't see that as being valuable to them, which really is so valuable to them because not only [is] the organisation reputation going downhill so quickly, we could have helped save that, and [we] know its dollars but work with us. What can we do? How we can do something different? How can we keep offering and still help those people that need it? Surely, there's something they could have done.

Having influence in the direction of her organisation is exceptionally significant for Meg. She finds the contradiction between organisational statements and practices specifically related to caring about her "value" as an employee, both patronising and demeaning. In particular, Meg is frustrated that despite being told that she is "bringing so much greatness out there into the community" there is only a superficial appreciation for the nuances of her community relationship. Such superficiality obscures the power that her community knowledge and connection could have in influencing the direction and "dollars" or finances of her organisation. Her pleading for co-operation and local knowledge to stop the demise of the education organisation is to no avail. Subsequently, Meg's experience of trying to sustain education services out of concern for both her community and her employer has been one of bitter defeat.

After living in her town for over two decades, Kate has secured a local professional position. In her role, Kate learnt that the local doctor was leaving her town and she knew that

other doctors had also left the region, meaning that residents may have to travel hundreds of kilometres to attend a doctor's appointment. Kate shared that she had organised a meeting so that metropolitan decision-makers could hear the views of local people:

> I was one of the ones that rang the council and said, 'I was really concerned about this.' And the council got on to the rural doctor's organisation; I don't know what they're called. And held a town meeting to ask questions and to introduce the doctors that were coming and of course, I was there as an emergency services worker at the time. We were there in our show of colour, and we weren't allowed to ask questions or say anything. We had our lips quietened.

In her experience, Kate perceives local government or "the council" as the primary place of power to influence metropolitan decisions, an idea that was realised when the council intervened to organise a meeting about doctor shortages on behalf of local people. Kate is pleased that action was taken but was unable to publicly discuss her private concerns. In her professional role, both she and her colleagues "had our lips quietened" or voices silenced by their organisation. Kate and her colleagues were willing to utilise other forms of communication. By attending the meeting with a" show of colour" or wearing their employee uniforms, Kate and her colleagues gained satisfaction through communicating an ingenious depiction of solidarity with their local community.

In sum, as part of their professional positions in their rural areas, some contributors with lengthy local tenure embraced opportunities to voice local concerns so that they are heard by metropolitan decision-makers. Five contributors expressed their opinions as part of their experiences related to their professional roles. In his role, Derek has frequent visits from State and Commonwealth Members of Parliament with whom he discusses the challenges that his local community is facing. Margaret has had satisfactory direct contact with two Members of Parliament to effect changes in government subsistence for rural young people. She is also outraged that the State has withdrawn funding for professional roles in rural areas that usually amplify local concerns. In her professional roles, Jane has had the satisfaction of articulating local concerns and influencing metropolitan decisions to benefit local people. With a good understanding of the educational needs of local people, Meg's attempts to influence education services have been fruitless and disheartening. In contrast, not all experiences were negative, with knowledge from her professional role alerting Kate to a critical issue in her community and her careful actions leading to it being addressed. While her voice and that of her colleagues were silenced, they were able to act in concert so that local concerns were communicated to metropolitan administrators. Some contributors' experiences of their professional roles include

willing and adept attempts to exercise their voices in metropolitan scenarios for the benefit of people living in rural areas.

For tertiary-educated persons with long-term tenure in their rural areas, their employment in a professional role meant a chance to voice local concerns to metropolitan decision-makers. The significance of the role of tertiary-educated persons in voicing local objectives illuminates one of the ways that other local people and communities benefit from the education of residents in rural areas (Dymock, 2007). In contrast to other findings that tertiary education may generate a brain-drain in rural areas, whereby the best and brightest relocate to continue their education, contributors' experiences in the present study detail their attempts to further local interests (Corcoran et al., 2010; Olfert & Partridge, 2010). Contributors attempt to do so by lending a powerful voice to the communication of local concerns in the language used by metropolitan decision-makers. As tertiary-educated persons, contributors' experiences of achieving local objectives centred on directly petitioning such decision-makers, rather than, as suggested in previous research, advocating for the exchange of information with persons in other rural areas (Amin, 1999; Shucksmith, 2010). The experience of tertiary-educated persons who are employed in their profession and have long-term tenure in their rural areas is that they use their voices to promote local interests.

As part of their use of voice, resident tertiary-educated professionals engaged in political participation that includes discussing local issues with government representatives. Contributors' experiences add to research conducted in a Victorian rural area detailing that long-term tenure in that setting was associated with a sense of comfort and safety that imbued people with a platform to voice their opinions (Cuervo & Cook, 2018). Contributors' experiences here also echo research by Miranti and Evans (2019) who investigated differences in aspects of engagement in Australian regional cities. They illustrate that regardless of a person's gender or their sense of trusting others, a higher sense of community coupled with improved educational attainment increases the likelihood of political participation. Likewise, in the present study, engagement with those who made decisions that impacted local people was initiated by tertiary-educated persons with a strong sense of local responsibility that was shaped by their tenure.

The experiences of resident tertiary-educated professionals extend previous research that offers little understanding about the interaction between tenure and access to decision-making for a sense of place (Anton & Lawrence, 2014; Giardiello & Cuervo, 2018; McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Raymond et al., 2010; Soini et al., 2012; Talò et al., 2014). Contributors' experiences show that for some persons who live in Australian rural areas, their tenure-inspired

political participation heavily contributes to their sense of place. For instance, for tertiary-educated persons who are long-term residents, their experiences of chances to participate politically impact their sense of belonging to that place. In particular, rewarding political participation that is shaped by tenure, and for the purposes of sustaining and improving local conditions, is a dimension of social and cultural practices that enhances residents' sense of place in their rural areas.

Contributors' experiences also add to Nixon's (2010) and Solbrekke & Sugrue's (2020) argument that tertiary education is a constituent element of a flourishing public sphere by showing that tertiary-educated persons employed in professional roles in rural areas engage with public decision-making. Broadly, the experiences of contributors reflect previous research that has illuminated the role of tertiary education for civic engagement, such as tertiary-educated persons' roles in governing assemblies (McMahon, 2009). Research about the role of tertiary-educated persons in governing assemblies is extended here by showing that persons who engage with critical decisions are required to liaise with decision-makers located outside rather than within their local region. They did so as persons who were long-term residents, tertiary-educated, and employed in the professions for which they were qualified.

The significance of lengthy local tenure is similar to research proposing that leaders in rural towns were enlisted from long-term residents (Davies, 2009; Epps & Sorensen, 1996). A point of difference here is that while tertiary-educated persons with longstanding residency were selected for professional positions in their rural areas and were agents who liaised with decision-makers to advocate for local concerns, they were not elected leaders in their town groups. Such experiences support proposals in research that non-elected leaders are agents best positioned to challenge government actions and decisions so they meet local needs (Beer, 2014; Herbert-Cheshire, 2003). Experiences here extend such proposals by highlighting that occupying professional positions assisted the advocacy of non-elected leaders.

Contributors voicing local concerns also respond to calls by Beer (2014) for an improved understanding of the ways in which rural citizenship is mobilised. In particular, the exercise of voice by tertiary-educated persons as employed professionals challenges social and political structures in a way that epitomises the sophisticated mobilisation of educated rural citizenship (Woods, 2006). Specifically, tertiary-educated persons who are long-term residents and employed in professional positions secured resources for their rural areas through rural citizenship practices (Scott, 2013; Webster, 2004). Further, tertiary-educated persons with longstanding residency were most likely to exercise their voice, aligning with Robison's (2007) research about older women who engaged with tertiary education in the rural areas of North

America. She advises that in addition to being essential for course completion, social support was similarly critical for older womens' sense of empowerment and finding their voices in public arenas. In addition, contributors' experiences here support Lear's (2013) finding that older women living in her rural area embraced opportunities to improve both themselves and their communities. Apart from the roles of both social support experiences and local opportunities, the findings here highlight that women often had considerable collegial support as rural professionals, providing them with additional social resources so they can exercise their voices. A lens of spatiality helps to explain how contributors could add to the construction of social spaces within their rural areas. Tertiary-educated persons, as resident rural professionals, desired using their voices to improve the circumstances in their rural areas. Such actions sought to redress spatial injustice in Australian rural areas through a voicing of local concerns to metropolitan-based administrators, a process that is invaluable for recognition and redress of local concerns.

A decision by a person living in their rural area to attain a tertiary education where educational attainment is usually reported as poor may therefore mean that apart from a willingness, they have the resources to bypass local social conventions. Continuing to live in their rural area as a tertiary-educated person who is a rural professional means dwelling in an idiosyncratic nexus where a person may elect to be both detached from their town groups and deeply involved with their communities. Such communities, both locally and afar, afford tertiary-educated persons' social support. This ingeniously sculpted social space circumvents the harsh mechanisms that typically enforce local social norms for residents, permitting the formation of a rich social expression of the person and their agential qualities. To this end, both rural professionalism and long-term tenure afforded tertiary-educated persons an intimate understanding of rural areas. Such circumstances offered them a sense of belonging in community and place, with social support providing impetus to initiate local development. Moreover, in their social spaces, tertiary-educated persons were largely unfettered by either social convention or the public administrative functions that have engulfed and stymied leadership in their town groups. Although there has been some encroachment upon the power in their niche through silencing that is stipulated by their professional employment, tertiary-educated persons often choose to persevere to bring fertile expressions of local concerns to the attention of those at the highest executive level.

The findings discussed here respond to the second half of the central research question by presenting experiences of communities for persons living in Australian rural areas. In each subtheme, I shed light on the spatial (in)justices experienced by persons living in Australian rural areas, primarily as it pertains to their communities. Taken together, such findings highlight

understandings of dominant and divergent experiences for contributors, portraying their complexity for persons living in Australian rural areas.

CHAPTER 7   — CONCLUSION

Here, I conclude the thesis by first presenting a summary of the findings. The summary is followed by an outline of both the implications and limitations of the study. I then make suggestions for further research and provide a final reflection about the thesis. First, to briefly recap the details of the study, in the introductory chapter I stated that the aim of the research is to explore the meanings of tertiary education and community experiences for persons living in Australian rural areas. To offer a foundation for an exploratory study of such experiences, a complex and under-researched topic, I provided a literature review in the second chapter. In the third chapter, I describe the methodology for the study, including the sequence of research activities that I engaged in to inform the findings, including conducting an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. In the first of the findings' chapters, I present each contributor's understandings of their particular rural and educational contexts, and in the second I present their experiences of tertiary education, while in the third I present their community experiences. Next, I discuss a more detailed summary of findings about experiences of tertiary education and communities for persons living in Australian rural areas.

7.1 Summary of Findings

In response to the research question in the study – for persons living in Australian rural areas, what are their experiences of their tertiary education and their communities? – I presented the meanings of such experiences for each of twenty persons as part of their rural contexts by conducting an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of the experiential data in each of their interview transcripts. Through the analysis, I collated findings about experiences into five themes and twenty-seven subthemes which are summarised below.

In the theme *Tertiary Education: Improving Self*, I explored each person's experiences of anticipating or realising their tertiary education ambitions in their rural area as a result of a desire to self-improve. Many persons expressed that even before engaging with their first tertiary education course that they had anticipated attaining a credential would facilitate improvement in their lives, and in particular, bolster their employment prospects. After their course engagement, some persons had a sense of satisfaction from their improved performance in their roles, while others experienced a sense of improved self from the cognitive exercise of studying their courses. For some older persons, a sense of improved self has persisted as they have applied their course knowledge to navigate their lives in the decades since attaining their first credential. Overall, while securing employment may have initially motivated persons living in Australian rural areas to engage with a tertiary education course, a multifaceted sense of improvement in self often inspired them to continue building on their education.

In *Commencing and Continuing: Social Support* I presented the meanings of an array of social support available for persons living in rural areas, for the purposes of both commencing their tertiary education and continuing until completion. For instance, persons' experiences with commencing their tertiary education often centred on being enabled by support from local people. Such experiences also included individual support by local educators who encouraged persons to engage with their first course until completion, just as they instilled confidence so that persons could continue building on their credentials. In contrast, persons' connections with distant educators through the communication methods in online delivery meant a sense of tenuous support that made some doubt the quality of their learning. Also fundamental to variations in perceived quality of learning experiences for persons during their courses was the presence or absence of peer support, with a greater connection to peers improving persons' perceptions about the quality of their learning experiences. Another significant aspect of learning from exploring course knowledge was experiences of collegial support, whereby local people as rural professionals, supported persons as students to learn and apply their course knowledge in their particular context. Connections with other local people also meant nuanced, individualised support that was an essential boon for persons living in rural areas to progress through their tertiary education and enter their professional roles. For persons living in Australian rural areas, social support from local people was an essential form of assistance for them to both commence and complete their tertiary education courses.

In the theme *Achieving Completion: Shedding Constraints*, I explored each person's experiences of attaining their credential while living in their rural area which for them meant locating ways to generate solutions for overcoming learning obstacles. Part of overcoming limitations in their context was selecting courses to secure the best learning experience. Further, course options were considerably constrained in comparison to the choices available in metropolitan settings, and persons living in rural areas adjusted their educational ambitions accordingly. In addition, persons living in rural areas experienced poor provision of essential resources that hindered their course progression. In attempts to continue until course completion, persons living in rural areas experiences of non-educational responsibilities and especially those related to employment were most often reported as slowing their progress or necessitating their course withdrawal. Some women argued that completing their courses, and in particular, engaging in their compulsory work placements, occurred only with their partner's financial support. Attempting to shed such substantial constraints throughout their courses was a significant part of persons' engagement with tertiary education in rural areas.

Community Engagement: Alternate Spaces is a theme in which I detailed experiences of community in both geographic locations and social spaces for persons living in rural areas. As part of their community experiences, tertiary-educated persons living in rural areas appreciated engaging with others from diverse backgrounds. Such engagement as well as their course knowledge subsequently improved their recognition of the complexities that are part of human lives. In addition, for persons living in rural areas their experience of belonging in their town communities varied, being shaped by both their familial tenure and wealth as well as their sense of connection with other local residents. Further, persons' local experiences related to their student identity were often driven by a sense of unfamiliarity. Students subsequently had a sense of being mistrusted and were underwhelmed by local responses to their tertiary education endeavours. Moreover, tertiary-educated persons often experienced dissatisfaction with their involvement in their town groups as they were often rigorously constrained by local social customs that are part of town societies. For instance, some tertiary-educated persons who had previously relocated into their rural towns experienced personal attacks from local residents when they expressed their agency in town groups, described here by persons as a genuine offensive. In contrast, tertiary-educated persons living in rural areas gained deep satisfaction from occupying alternate community roles, including establishing and expanding community groups, both locally and afar. For tertiary-educated persons living in Australian rural areas, generating such community spaces meant a complicated sense of belonging in their rural areas that was bolstered by their chosen groups accepting and appreciating their contributions.

In the theme *Local Residents: Educated Roles* I described the roles performed by tertiary-educated persons living in Australian rural areas. Foremost, with assistance from their social connections', contributors were gratified to have secured local employment in professional positions. Subsequently performing as rural professionals meant both diverse demands and rewards for persons as part of their local employment. In addition, tertiary-educated persons also provided essential knowledge to other local people that helped them commence and continue their own tertiary education. Further, tertiary-educated persons who were classroom educated drew on their educational experiences to review education provider practices in their rural areas that were related to educational dishonesty, taking action to resolutely oppose such practices. Significantly, as part of their roles as tertiary-educated residents employed as professionals, persons with long-term tenure in their rural areas also voiced local concerns to metropolitan decision-makers. Subsequently, tertiary-educated persons living in Australian rural areas, viewed that their performance in their professional and community roles differed considerably from their metropolitan equivalents. In particular, professional roles in rural areas entailed having greater community opportunities and

responsibilities, such as tertiary-educated persons gathering knowledge from their extensive local connections that they then championed in metropolitan-based decisions.

The presentation of five experiential themes in the study provides a rich, contextualised account of the meanings of tertiary education and community experiences for each of a small number of persons living in a selection of Australian rural areas. Such themes are grounded in the experiential claims about their experiences that each person contributed to the study in their everyday language. Analysis of such language through the conduct of an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to form the findings enriches knowledge about tertiary education and communities for persons living in Australian rural areas. In addition to serving people and their communities in such areas by recording their experiences in their own voices, preliminary findings were disseminated to a wide audience (Marchant, 2013a, 2015b, 2015c). Future dissemination of the findings in the thesis could offer a platform for future investigations to assist persons living in rural areas to secure benefits from both their community efforts and educational endeavours.

7.2 Implications of the Study

I argue that the study has implications for tertiary education in rural areas, First, in terms of recording the voices of those who have engaged with courses in rural areas that are largely unheard of to inform future education research, practice and administration. In this way, the research is a potential resource for people in their roles as learners, community members, education practitioners, administrators, policymakers, and scholars. The next implication relates to the dissemination of the study that I discuss further below and could inform a wide audience about the complex circumstances for students and tertiary-educated persons living in Australian rural areas. As such, the findings could provide a platform for future research that can both assist in shaping existing practices for newly established regional university centres as well as inform new tertiary education initiatives for persons living in Australian rural areas. Accordingly, the present and future dissemination of findings from the study is intended to aid those whose objectives are to promote tertiary education attainment.

Importantly, the findings in the study have permitted contributors to articulate their experiences, with the presentation of the meanings of those experiences grounded in their exact words. In particular, the study illustrates that for persons living in Australian rural areas, their experiences meant anticipating gaining knowledge from tertiary education to benefit themselves which, in turn, also benefitted all of their communities. Contributors to the study, many of whom lived in marginalised regions, experienced drawing on and strengthening their social connections in order to face collective human predicaments. In this way, they built social wealth

for their communities as well as for Australian society. Experiences of persons who contributed to the study illustrate that they would be served by a focus on supporting their imaginative social capacities through adequate resourcing and appropriate policies. Such action could aid them to assist other local persons with their tertiary education as well as address challenges to the future of their communities. Furthermore, while adding to an understanding of the nuances of tertiary education and community experiences in rural contexts, the study also serves people living in rural areas by providing a platform for future research to explain why and how their particular endeavours are realised.

The broad value of the findings from the study is that previously undocumented experiences of persons living in Australian rural areas have been recorded as a foundation for further research that could support them. For instance, the accounts in the findings serve persons living in rural areas by presenting some of the complex and under-researched issues that are relevant for them from their perspectives to audiences that are external to their communities. As such, the study contributes to a re-appraisal of what is considered known through assumptions and opinions about persons and their activities in rural areas. I afford such re-appraisal of understandings about rural areas and their peoples by offering a glimpse into the complexities that exist in their everyday experiences. Such insight includes persons' views about their roles that are essential to building educational attainment in their rural contexts as well as activities that cultivate social wealth that they perceive as a fundamental strength of all their communities. Presenting the ways that the experiences of persons, including their tertiary education endeavours, are interwoven with their communities, highlights potential lines of inquiry that if pursued in research, may support residents in rural areas to realise their future endeavours. Further, in this way, tertiary education may improve persons' lives in rural areas as well as the wellbeing of both their geographically determinate and indeterminate communities.

Throughout the study, I add to understandings of spatiality in Australian rural areas by presenting some of the meanings persons as residents attribute to both their tertiary education and their communities. As part of extending such understandings, I describe the socially-valued resources that are available to persons occupying such spaces and detail the ways in which they can and cannot utilise such resources as residents in Australian rural areas. For example, I analyse the opportunities for persons living in Australian rural areas to exercise their course knowledge and the ways that they have been enabled and/or restricted in doing so within an assortment of social spaces. As such, the analysis highlights the spatial (in)justices experienced by persons living in Australian rural areas who often perceive that dominant meanings generated outside of their rural spaces, and to which they are denied access, negatively impacts the allocation of their resources. Based on such understandings I describe the ways in which

residents in Australian rural areas engage with a complex array of spatialities that constrain and/or empower them. I detail that (in)adequate resources, including (dis)empowering influences from various communities, are significant in the experiences of educational endeavours for persons living in Australian rural areas. Further, such resources and influence from tertiary education spaces impact persons' experiences within their communities. While acceptance of influences in their lives from existing social structures, such as public administration or rural societies varied, residents as students or tertiary-educated persons often held alternative views and attempted to contest existing structures. Persons did so by drawing on both their lived experiences in their rural contexts and their course knowledge to recognise the harm from marginalisation for themselves and/or others. Such perspectives inspired persons living in Australian rural areas to instigate changes, such as initiating and building alternative supportive community spaces, including those that assist educational undertakings.

With regard to the dissemination of the research, I have presented and published background reviews that informed the aim of the study and preliminary findings to both academic and community audiences, seeking both written and oral feedback (Marchant et al., 2016; Marchant & Taylor, 2015). Such dissemination was invaluable throughout the research, serving to develop my understandings of experiences as well as share my new scholarly knowledge. The dissemination also enlightened me about the ways that my understandings resonated with the experiences of others who had engaged in, taught, or administered tertiary education courses in rural areas, both locally and in international contexts. In contrast, I sometimes also found that the assumptions made about persons living in Australian rural areas and the circumstances of their course experiences were unsettling, as they were deeply removed from what persons living in rural areas had shared with me. However, while becoming aware of misconceptions about the experiences of persons who live in rural areas, I was encouraged by also being able to inform discussions about the nuances of persons' experiences in rural contexts from their perspectives. To this end, some of the preliminary findings and background research have been published in peer-reviewed journals and have been referenced by other researchers concerned with tertiary education and residents' communities in rural areas (cf. Ellis, 2015; Hughes, 2011; Lear & Ellis, 2018; Mosse & Bottrell, 2015; Prechotko, 2020). In addition, the study has influenced thoughts about the structures of rural communities, including avenues for their improvement (Lavery, 2015) as well as informing overseas policymakers about rural resilience (AgResearch, 2015). In addition, one article *A Rural PhD Candidate and the Grace of Community* (Marchant & Taylor, 2014) is part of the selected works of the Australian Council for Educational Research (2021) that promotes research as the basis for improving learning across the life course. As a personal implication from the research, I am also

reassured that ideas from my study are informing both practitioners and researchers concerned with improvement in Australian rural areas.

During the conduct of the study, the Australian Government accepted recommendations from the Halsey (2018) review into rural, regional, and remote education that includes a recommendation to establish a national focus on education for people living in Australian rural areas. Included in recommendations elsewhere is the need for a widespread commitment to improving student support in rural, remote, and regional areas (Napthine, 2019). The findings in the study offer support for such endeavours by offering a platform for the future generation of knowledge to fulfil such recommendations. In particular, the research provides a steppingstone for a broader national focus on education, training and research that enhances student opportunities, support, and outcomes for persons living in Australian rural areas. Further, it is worth noting that the Australian Government has recently extended funding for "regional study hubs" and more recently "regional university centres" that are "community-owned" establishments supporting the educational endeavours of some people who live in rural areas (Australian Department of Education and Training, 2019; Birmingham, 2017, p. 21). It is my sincere hope that the study may have a role in informing research to support the practices of such establishments.

7.3   Limitations of the Study

The limitations of the study include a number of methodological constraints, such as restrictions on the size and geographic locations of the contributor population. Further, as I detailed in the methodology chapter, persons were chosen to contribute to the study based on their tertiary education experiences as residents in Australian rural areas. Such delimitation subsequently means that perspectives from persons who performed other roles of potential research interest for the study, such as those employed in community and educational administration for rural areas are largely absent. While such administrators were not part of the study's design, except where a contributor was coincidentally engaged with one of these roles, enlisting voices from this cohort in future studies could help to paint a richer picture of experiences with tertiary education in rural areas. I discuss additional methodological limitations below.

A potentially significant limitation of the study is that Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, as the method that informs the findings, relies on textual analysis, and in particular, analysis of interview transcripts. Such transcripts, while a rich source of text about experiences, do not capture all of the details that are communicated verbally (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). For instance, while spoken language conveys an experience, some of the meanings of

experiences may escape when such language is converted to text. In addition, both spoken and written language may be inadequate to convey the nuanced subjective qualities that constitute the way that a person understands their experiences (Makkreel & Rodi, 1985). Further, emerging variations that are part of growing diversification in everyday language in the Australian context may not have been captured in the research. Presenting an account of what contributors' experiences meant for them in their everyday language as text may therefore have omitted to capture the original intent of each contributor. Despite such limitations, contributors were provided with their interview transcripts, and each approved them as capturing the essence of their beliefs. As such, I argue that the findings present at least some of the meanings of experiences as intended to be conveyed by contributors.

With regard to the methodological constraints, I maintain that an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis has been an appropriate method to generate findings about tertiary education and community experiences for persons living in rural areas. Further, an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis permitted me to prioritise the experiential claims of each contributor to inform about the features that they attributed to their experiences in their particular context. Subsequently, the analysis provides rich, contextualised understandings of the meanings of tertiary education and community experiences for a small number of persons living in a selection of rural areas in Australia.

7.4 Further Research

As I discussed in the limitations of the study, further research is needed that includes enlisting a selection of persons to understand the complexities for both tertiary education and community administrators in rural areas to support improved practices. Such research may include investigations in rural areas with different socio-economic statuses to capture support needs in different contexts. In addition, given tertiary-educated persons' difficulties with their town-based community groups, further research that understand the workings of such groups and their relationship to community wellbeing in rural areas is warranted. Further, research that investigates the role of tertiary education in residents' multidimensional sense of place in their rural areas is needed. Additional research is also required to afford insight into the ways that quality learning experiences can be promoted that is informed, as a matter of some urgency, by a range of perspectives, including educators, community groups, employers, and students in rural areas. As part of further research, recruiting persons who are tertiary-educated professionals' resident in rural areas, in particular, may assist researchers to understand the requirements of such positions.

A pressing research issue that was raised by some contributors is related to their concern for other local people, many of whom they perceive as facing insurmountable barriers to continuing their education. Engaging with persons living in rural areas who have a basic education may illuminate the circumstances that prevent further educational engagement. In addition, an understanding of the tertiary education experiences of school leavers in rural areas, or those who relocate for the purpose of continuing their education, could show which experiences contribute to either their course completion or attrition. Related to this is a need for further research to understand the nuances of course attrition, by engaging with persons who do not reach completion. Such studies could involve persons living in rural areas as well as those with rural origins who are living elsewhere, with a view to comprehending the barriers to their completion. Further, given the disproportionate number of contributors who identified as women, studies that understand the experiences of other genders are required. In addition, given the number of contributors in the study with serious health issues, research is required that investigates the particular support needs that assist individuals with a health impairment to reach their educational goals while living in rural areas. It may also be valuable to pursue further research with regard to mature-age students in rural areas, building on the study by seeking their views on their educational support, outcomes, and opportunities.

In the study, I have explored each person's experiences of the connection between their course completion and community interactions. With regard to promoting support in local communities, research is needed to understand how to assist the formation of local learning communities in rural areas. In particular, the conduct of research is needed to promote personal knowledge gain from both local learning communities and local communities of practice that are formed to support persons to first complete their credentials and to then practice as rural professionals. In some cases, the benefits from such groups for rural areas seem to be optimised where there are community of learning groups that have both studying and practicing members in a particular rural context. The convening of such groups promotes a sense of collegiality between students and practising professionals in rural areas, providing another opportunity for exploratory research.

A more comprehensive understanding of the workings of both town societies and their formal groups may be beneficial for people living in Australian rural areas. Investigating residents' views about the roles and objectives of such groups and how they can be supported to cater to the needs of their diversifying populations may have a role in building social wellbeing and residents' sense of place that enhances community life in rural areas. Such research may also point to improved ways to integrate a wider range of local knowledge into decisions about the future direction of rural towns. Such integration of knowledge could include the course

knowledge of residents as well as the knowledge that could be included by forging connections with residents who may be currently absent from such forums.

The recommendations here would extend the study by enriching research that can support persons living in Australian rural areas to achieve their educational endeavours and use their knowledge to further the interests of all their communities. Further research could also support, tertiary-educated persons living in rural areas to continue making their considerable contribution to Australian society.

7.5 Final Reflection

For many of the years that I engaged in doctoral research, I have been privileged to be accompanied by the narrative accounts of persons who generously contributed their time and effort to the study. Their generosity means that my understanding of tertiary education and the communities of persons living in Australian rural areas has been extended considerably. As someone who has lived in rural areas for most of my life, many contributors' descriptions about experiences in their lives were familiar to me. However, many times I was surprised by just how removed their experiences were from my own understandings of everyday rural happenings. During the research, I was often buoyed by the resourcefulness of the persons who spoke to me, however, sometimes their accounts of their circumstances portrayed overwhelming challenges and deep spatial injustice that left me profoundly saddened. My experience was also coloured by considerable frustration that I could not assist contributors further with access to resources that would permit them to realise their endeavours. Nonetheless, each contributor continues to be a substantial inspiration to me as I anticipate my next venture.

My experience of doctoral candidature as a person living in my rural area has challenged me as well as people in my local and academic communities whose collaboration and support provided a social haven for me as a resident rural researcher. The resultant thesis is an important work for us as scholars located in rural as well as metropolitan areas who are concerned with education. As a community of scholars, we can draw on the findings to assist persons living in Australian rural areas to reach their educational goals.

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Appendix A: **Information Sheet**

PROJECT TITLE: The Experiences of Adult Students Living in Rural Communities

This is an invitation for you to take part in a research project about the experiences of adult students. In particular, I am interested in your social involvement within your community and society. Your social involvement may include the people or groups you enjoy spending time with including activities such as sports, hobbies and celebrations, and other groups that you are a part of, such as work, volunteer and community organisations. It may also include activities in other areas that you like to be involved in such as social events that are out of town.

The study is being conducted by Jillian Marchant and will contribute to her research degree (PhD) at James Cook University.

Chapter 1   If you agree to be involved in the study, I will ask you to allow me to interview you. The interview, with your consent, will be audio recorded and professionally transcribed. I will provide you with a copy of the transcript for you to comment on, or correct. The interview should only take approximately 1 hour of your time. The interview will be conducted at your local TAFE SA Campus, or where distance is a consideration, through an electronic means such as Skype. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary and you can stop taking part in the study at any time without explanation or prejudice. You may also withdraw any unprocessed data from the study.

Your responses and contact details will be strictly confidential. The data from the study will be used in research publications and public presentations. You will not be identified in any way in these publications. Please be aware that agreeing to participate and allowing me to use the data for my thesis will give me the right to use the data for a minimum of five years following the completion of the doctoral thesis.

If you have any questions about the study, please contact either Jillian Marchant or Dr Pauline Taylor.

Principal Investigator: Jillian Marchant	Supervisor: Dr Pauline Taylor
School of Education	School of Education
James Cook University	James Cook University
Phone:	Phone:
Email: jillian.marchant@my.jcu.edu.au	Email: pauline taylor1@jcu.edu.au

If you have any concerns regarding the ethical conduct of the study, please contact:

Human Ethics, Research Office

James Cook University, Townsville, Qld, 4811

Phone: (07) 4781 5011 (ethics@jcu.edu.au)

Appendix B: **Consent Form**

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Appendix C: **Education Provider: Letter of Support**

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Appendix D: **Invitation to Contribute to the Study**

An invitation to tell your story

You are invited to tell your story to Jillian Marchant, PhD student from James Cook University who is undertaking some research in this area. In particular, she is keen to know about your social involvement in your community.

Your social involvement may include the people or groups you enjoy spending time with including activities such as sports, hobbies and celebrations, and other groups that you are a part of, such as work, volunteer and community organisations. It may also include activities in other areas that you like to be involved in such as social events that are out of town.

Your story would contribute to a study into the experiences of adult students in South Australia as part of Jillian Marchant's PhD research degree at James Cook University. The information you provide will remain strictly confidential and your details will not be identified in any publications.

If you would like to tell your story or if you have any questions about the study, please contact Jillian Marchant at jillian.marchant@my.jcu.edu.au.

This study has been approved by the James Cook University Human Research Ethics Committee, and will be conducted in accordance with the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHRMC) "National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research" (2007).

Jillian Marchant
PhD Candidate

Email: jillian. marchant@my. jcu. edu. au   **James Cook University**
http://au. linkedin. com/in/jillianmarchantida60102010

<center>Appendix E: **Semi-structured Interview Pro-forma**</center>

Community - So, I wonder if you can talk to me about your background, perhaps, to start with how long have you lived here.

Can you tell about any family that are here? Can you tell me about your friends that are here?

Can you tell me what brought you here? Just so I understand, when we talk about community, can you tell me what that is for you?

Can you tell me about any activities that you are involved within the community? Can you tell me the reasons for being involved in these activities?

Are there other activities that you would like to be involved in here? What would those activities offer you?

Are there any other activities that should be in the community? Can you tell me about your influence in activities? Can you tell me what it would mean for you to have more influence in activities?

Are there any community organisations that you are involved in? Can you tell me why you decided to join this organisation? What is your role in these organisations?

Are there other community organisations that you know of? Consider joining? Why/Not?

Value - Can you tell me how you feel about living here? What advice would you have for someone who was thinking of moving here? Can you tell me why you stay here?

Outside Community

Are you involved in activities that are not in the community? Can you tell me your reasons for being involved in these activities? What do the activities offer you?

Are you involved in organisations that are outside of the community? Can you tell me your reasons for being involved in these organisations? Can you tell me your role in these organisations? What do the organisations offer you?

Effects – Can you tell me if there are activities that you would like not to be involved in?

Are there any organisations that you would not like to be involved with?

Study Reflection - Obviously, you have done a bit of study, can you tell me your reasons for studying?

Personal goals, work, family, community involvement? Can you tell me what it was like to get back into study? Can you tell me about education in your community? Do you have enough say in the education that is offered to you? What would it mean for you to have more say about education in the community?

Do you think that study has helped you? Do you think that you will do further study? Can you tell me about other things that have helped you reach your goals?

Social background

Age Living Arrangements Employment Approximate Income

I have asked all my questions… do you have any questions or comments for me?

Appendix F: **Analytic Memos and Research Journal Entries**

Thematic Development: Frustrated Unknowns

Julie Interview: Notes

Julie: resistance to "second agenda" in the town

Defined "second agenda" as community decisions made by "old money" that in practice benefit private organisations

Relates to Anne "rowing own boat"

Resistance to "second agenda" acts of agency met with ostracism and persecution by other townspeople.

Julie Interview: Summary

The "second agenda" undermines a sense of community in the town for Julie as her resistance/use of voice makes her an outsider. She experiences frustration in being unable to contribute her ideas that permit her a sense of belonging and ownership in the future direction of her town.

Heidi Transcript: Discussion

Those who question the informal institutions in town society are troublemakers. Heidi's experiences points to institutions being preserved above community wellbeing, even if these institutions are used for the purpose of blatant community profiteering.

"who's this benefitting? Your child? Or the whole sport community?" So then I ended up walking away and then it's just really nasty because the more you questioned what they were doing wrong, the more you were seen as the troublemakers"

people don't want to try and fix things, because they don't want to be seen to be making trouble, even though its OK to upset others,

Potential Knowledge Claim: Frustrated Unknowns

Amber: frustration, leadership in the State but not permitted leadership in her town

I don't represent my congregation on the State governing council. I find that frustrating: I hear these wonderful things but I can't see them being implemented in any great respect in my local church

Anne: unnecessary, involved in some groups where decisions are pre-determined her input is unnecessary.

Some of the time I felt that it had already had been decided that's what would happen and then they would just need to get the board's approval. I think because they had a lot of staff on the

board, sometimes it was an internal... you felt that it had already been decided on internally and you were just there to shake or nod, but if you nodded it was too bad anyway because it would have happened regardless.

Julie: Strident Voice, doesn't shy away from expressing her opinion but "lives outside of community" – enjoys exercising voice from her position but is largely isolated from influencing community direction

in each community we don't need the court jester anymore, we need someone who is going to open their big mouth and keep equity within the community

Margaret: Limited, engagement in community groups often requires unbending ideology

It's sort of like, "you have to think this way to be involved". And inflexible thinking and whatever the leadership says is what goes type thing.

Experiential Facets of Themes: Verbatim Extracts

"second agenda" "rowing own boat" "troublemakers" "unbending ideology"

Experience of interacting with groups in town society rather than community groups.

Emergent Theme

Frustrated Unknowns: Experiences of town society

Appendix G: **Initial Noting and Descriptive Labelling in NVivo**

Sporting Involvement
Social Support
Rural Social Structures
Friends
Employment
Education Restriction
Education Facilitation
Education
Community
Access to Decisions
Access to Decision Making Structures
Coding Density

Time

Social Inclusion Process

Social Inclusion

Meaning of Social Inclusion

Because, I have always loved, I love my community work. I was involved in the CFS at one stage, briefly, but just couldn't, couldn't make the callouts because I was going to work, or having to sleep before going to work, because I had to work that night. It just wasn't, I just could fit it in, into my routine, it was just too hard, and then with studying as well, I study part time as well. I just couldn't fit it all in. And then like, yeah, just sort of, unfortunately just a bit too much on my plate.

I always want to do something with the community and I love what they do. I went to see them to join and talked to the leader, he was very welcoming, but I just found it was a cliquey little group, it wasn't the leader, it was the narrow minded group, and I just didn't feel comfortable.

They do need to learn to welcome people and not just the people that have been there years and years, they need to accept new blood. A lot of them are related and in it together, when you're new blood it's very hard.

I wanted to feel satisfaction; I probably wasn't in it long enough. Surely once I had got my training then all personal outcomes, the teamwork and satisfaction it all comes later. It's a long process.

Appendix H: **Initial Noting and Descriptive Labelling in Text**

Notes	Julie Transcript	Descriptive Label
Making the best of residency	Oh look, if my partner said "look, we're moving", then I would be home and packed up in 10 minutes and out the door, without a doubt. But I have come to the realisation that the only way out is in a little pine box and I am not really sure how I feel about that. So, I'm sort of thinking, "well I might as well make the best of what I've got while I am here". And I think I live within the community, but I think there is a difference in living within the community and, really living within the community, like I always see myself as the outsider looking in. I am still that big mouthed bitch	"Pragmatic"
Always an outsider because an incomer	that is not from here and always will be. Like I said, I've always made an effort to be involved within the community, but the red flags just keep coming up. And I really hate going to a meeting or going to propose a new idea and your putting your views across and no one else wants to agree with you, but as you walk out the door, "oh, I agree with that". I just feel that's so useless then, what can you do with that? But that's the	"Ostracised" Quote
Exercises voice but unsupported in community groups	mentality within community. So, I don't see myself as living within the community. *I see myself as living within the outskirts of the community. And I'm happy with that. I'm happy with that,* and my partner said to me did "you get an award at the club the other week?" and I said "yes I did" and he said "what would that be?" and "I said C. U. N. T. of the year", and he said "you would love that though, wouldn't you?" . And the	"Sotto Voce" *Surprise* "Strident Voice" Quote
Using voice to ensure equity among people in a community	truth be known, I truly would, because in each community we don't need the court jester anymore, we need someone who is going to open their big mouth and keep equity within the community. Equity and fairness and that's all I think you can expect from the community.	

Native

Financial Resources → Privileged

Connection - relational assets

roublemaker   Denizen   Social Status

                     Youth ▶ Marginalised

                     Illiterate

Social Participation

Civic Engagement   Aspirant   Social Intentions   Social Presence

stance ▶ Abstention Abstainer

                     Engagement

                     Installation

Sponsor   Invitation   Social Involution

                     Involvement

                     Introduction ▶

                                      Social Visibility

Governing Assemblies   Self Interest   Empowerment

Friendships   Social Connections

Silence ▶ Social Closure

                     Location

Sexism ▶ Gender Relations   Social Influences

Organisations in Community   Confinement

Social Withdrawal   Rural

Civic Deficit   Residents   Regions ◀ Findings

Social Gift Network   Social Outcomes

Appendix J: **Connecting Emergent Themes**

Contributor	Verbatim Extracts	Emergent Themes
Key Event: Credential Attainment		
Heidi	I got another job because someone was on maternity leave and from there I got really interested in my current job; because the job that I wanted, while I was there, someone else was doing it, but all I needed was that degree. We were nearly doing similar work, so that's what got me interested.	Employment (Current Position)
	I think that if you don't have a ticket in something these days that people don't look at you, and unfortunately, I got my education so that we would probably move away because there is nothing here.	Employment (Alternate Position)
	That's it for study for me (unless a more suitable position arises).	Employment (Future Positions)
Key Role: Volunteering in Community		
Anne	I care about our community, I guess, and I care about where it's going. I've got children growing up here as well. I guess it's just a passion if people don't put their hands up to be involved in things, well maybe they won't happen. But I do also find that it is a lot of the same people that [participate] in the extra groups and things.	Volunteering (Community Care)
	Some of the time I felt that it had already had been decided that's what would happen and then they would just need to get the board's approval. I think because they had a lot of staff on the board, sometimes it was an internal... you felt that it had already been decided on internally and you were just there to shake or nod, but if you nodded it was too bad anyway because it would have happened regardless.	Volunteering (Dissatisfactory Experience)
	I guess maybe being on some committees and groups as such, but maybe they're not there for the bigger picture, they are there for their own personal cause. Sometimes they are there for the wrong reasons if that makes sense? They are looking at their own personal views on things and not the wider perspective on the situation perhaps as they should be.	Volunteering (Community Profiteering)

Appendix K: **Patterns Across Cases**

Subtheme: Community Group		
Contributor	**Verbatim Extracts**	**Emergent Themes**
Amber	I don't represent my congregation on the State governing council. I find that frustrating: I hear these wonderful things but I can't see them being implemented in any great respect in my local church	Frustrated
Anne	Some of the time I felt that it had already had been decided that's what would happen and then they would just need to get the board's approval. I think because they had a lot of staff on the board, sometimes it was an internal... you felt that it had already been decided on internally and you were just there to shake or nod, but if you nodded it was too bad anyway because it would have happened regardless.	Unnecessary
	That maybe people aren't looking at things as a whole sometimes and maybe rowing their own boat a little bit too much	Restricted
Heidi	"who's this benefitting? Your child? Or the whole sport community?" So then I ended up walking away and then it's just really nasty because the more you questioned what they were doing wrong, the more you were seen as the troublemakers	Troublemaking
	people don't want to try and fix things, because they don't want to be seen to be making trouble, even though its OK to upset others,	Outside
Julie	in each community we don't need the court jester anymore, we need someone who is going to open their big mouth and keep equity within the community	Strident Voice
	I have seen it effect lot of people within the community to the fact where they are at the stage where they are nervous wrecks because they have been victimised. If you start to speak up about community, then some people are ostracised. We have incidents where girls have been treated that unfairly that they have resorted to self-harm.	Ostracised
Margaret	Unbending ideology - It's sort of like, "you have to think this way to be involved". And inflexible thinking and whatever the leadership says is what goes type thing.	Conforming
Wynne	I have been a board member and I attend monthly meetings of the board and the club. We are involved in fundraising activities (film nights, women's events etc.) and each year we hold the International Women's Day breakfast with an inspirational speaker with international experience from outside the community and we present awards to high achieving women from the region who have contributed to their communities. I need the social interaction	Limited

Appendix L: **Development of Subthemes and a Theme**

Emergent Theme	Subtheme Experiential Aspects	Theme Knowledge Claim
Frustrated	Genuine Offensive*	Community Engagement: Alternate Spaces*
Ostracised		
Unnecessary		
Restricted		
Troublemaking		
Outside		
Strident Voice		
Conforming		
Limited		
Ambiguous	Underwhelming Response*	
Unidentified		
Indifferent		
Excluded		
Uninvited		
Irrelevant		
Dissatisfied		

* Labels for subthemes and themes were finalised during the written analysis of contributors' verbatim extracts.

Appendix M: **Finalised Themes and Subthemes**

Subthemes	Themes
Attaining Credentials: Better Employment	Tertiary Education: Improving Self
Everyday Roles: Heightened Satisfaction	
Studying Courses: Better Self	
Course Knowledge: Education for Life	
Commencing Tertiary Education: Human Support	Commencing and Continuing: Social Support
Local Educators: Individual Support	
Distant Educators: Tenuous Support	
Course Fundamentals: Peer Support	
Exploring Course Knowledge: Collegial Support	
Local People: Nuanced Support	
Course Selection: Learning Imperative	Achieving Completion: Shedding Constraints
Course Options: Constrained Choices	
Course Essentials: Poor Provisions	
Continuing Education: Financial Considerations	
Course Engagement: Working Time	
Partner Support: Money and Time	
Understanding People: Appreciating Complexity	Community Engagement: Alternative Spaces
Town Communities: Variable Acceptance	
Student Identity: Underwhelming Response	
Town Groups: Dissatisfactory Involvement	
Expressing Agency: Genuine Offensive	
Community Roles: Social Satisfaction	
Local Employees: Gratifying Positions	Local Residents: Educated Roles
Rural Professionals: Diverse Opportunities	
Education Knowledge: Essential Roles	
Educational Dishonesty: Resolute Opponents	
Professional Roles: Local Voices	

Appendix N: **Finalised Themes and Subthemes Schematic**

**Tertiary Education:
Improving Self**

Attaining Credentials: Better Employment
Everyday Roles: Heightened Satisfaction
Studying Courses: Better Self
Course Knowledge: Education for Life

**Commencing and Continuing:
Social Support**

Commencing Tertiary Education: Human Support
Local Educators: Individual Support
Distant Educators: Tenuous Support
Course Fundamentals: Peer Support
Exploring Course Knowledge: Collegial Support
Local People: Nuanced Support

**Achieving Completion:
Shedding Constraints**

Course Selection: Learning Imperative
Course Options: Constrained Choices
Course Essentials: Poor Provisions
Continuing Education: Financial Considerations
Course Engagement: Working Time
Partner Support: Money and Time

**Community Engagement:
Alternate Spaces**

Understanding People: Appreciating Complexity
Town Communities: Variable Acceptance
Student Identity: Underwhelming Response
Town Groups: Dissatisfactory Involvement
Expressing Agency: Genuine Offensive
Community Roles: Social Satisfaction

**Local Residents:
Educated Roles**

Local Employees: Gratifying Positions
Rural Professionals: Diverse Opportunities
Education Knowledge: Essential Roles
Educational Dishonesty: Resolute Opponents
Professional Roles: Local Voices

Experiences of Tertiary Education and Community for Persons Living in Australian Rural Areas

Appendix O: **The Sequence of Data Analysis**

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│   Descriptive Labels: Exploratory Comments   │
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          ┌─────────────────────┐
          │   Emergent Themes    │
          └─────────────────────┘
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      ┌───────────────────────────────┐
      │   Allocation of Emergent Themes │
      └───────────────────────────────┘
            ↕                   ↕
┌──────────────────────┐  ┌──────────────────────┐
│ Tertiary Education   │  │ Community Experiences │
│ Experiences          │  │                       │
└──────────────────────┘  └──────────────────────┘
      ↓         ↓               ↓          ↓
┌──────────┐ ┌──────────┐ ┌──────────┐ ┌──────────┐
│Key Roles │ │Key Events│ │Key Roles │ │Key Events│
└──────────┘ └──────────┘ └──────────┘ └──────────┘
      ↓         ↓               ↓          ↓
┌─────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│  Connecting Emergent Themes for Each Contributor │
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┌─────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│  Identify Patterns across Cases for All Contributors │
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│               Written Analysis               │
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│         Finalised Subthemes and Themes        │
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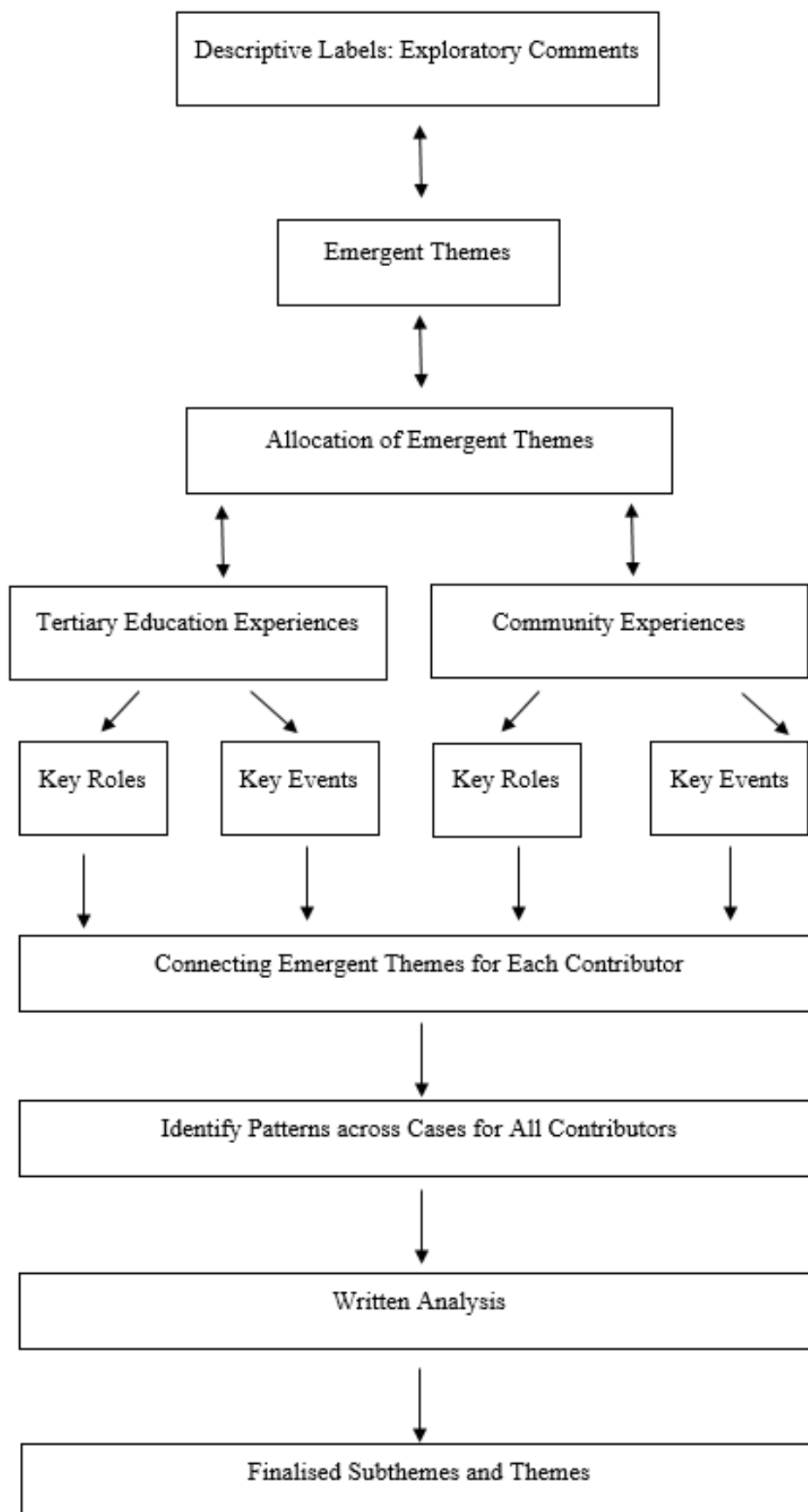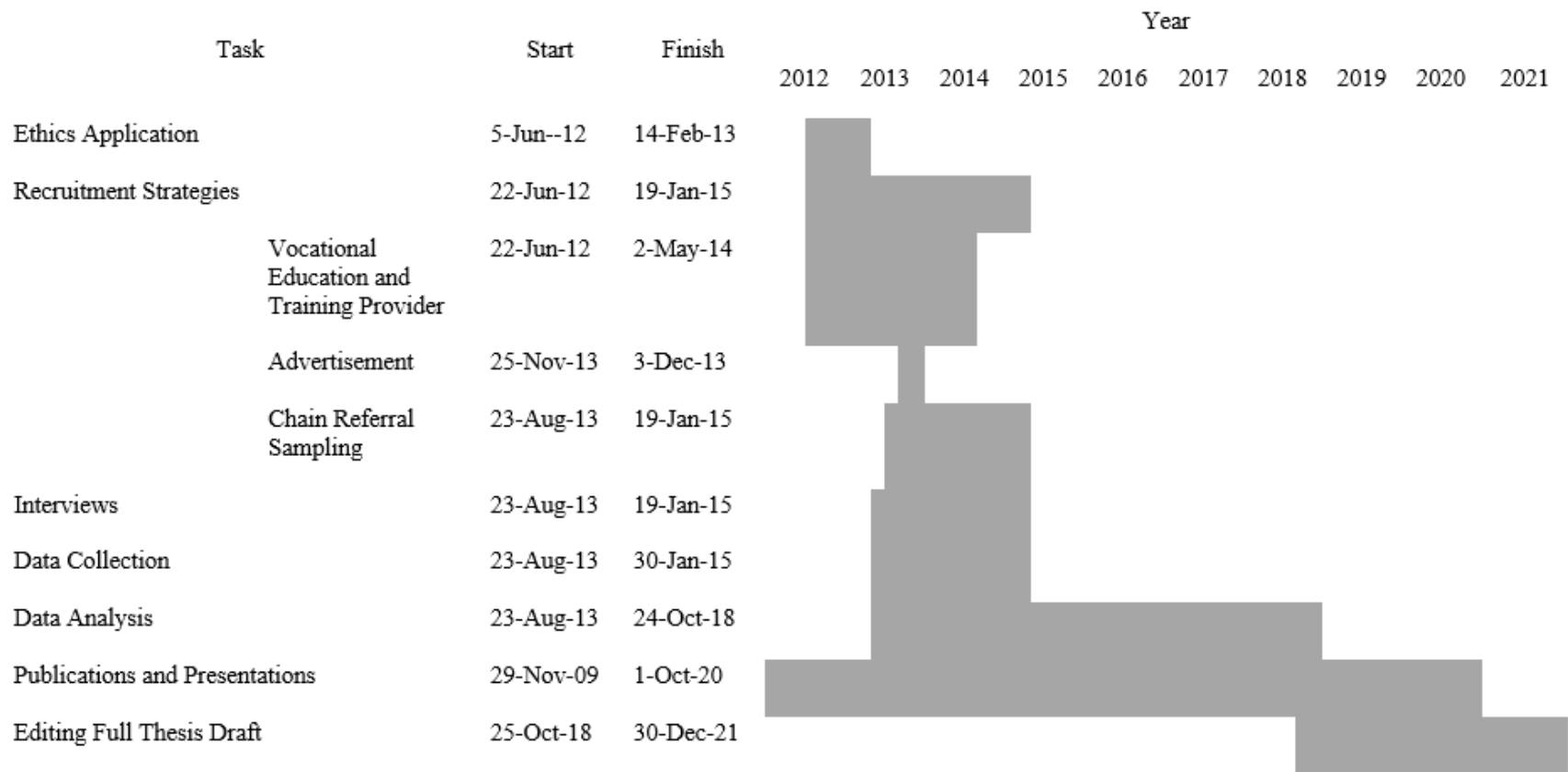
Appendix P: **Gantt Chart Displaying Methodology, Publications, and Write-up**

Task		Start	Finish
Ethics Application		5-Jun--12	14-Feb-13
Recruitment Strategies		22-Jun-12	19-Jan-15
	Vocational Education and Training Provider	22-Jun-12	2-May-14
	Advertisement	25-Nov-13	3-Dec-13
	Chain Referral Sampling	23-Aug-13	19-Jan-15
Interviews		23-Aug-13	19-Jan-15
Data Collection		23-Aug-13	30-Jan-15
Data Analysis		23-Aug-13	24-Oct-18
Publications and Presentations		29-Nov-09	1-Oct-20
Editing Full Thesis Draft		25-Oct-18	30-Dec-21

Year: 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021