

Going to University: Rural and Regional Students Perceptions of Studying in Adelaide



A Report Prepared for:
The Cowan Grant

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Executive Summary

Although there have been a number of studies concerning the transition from high school to university, a growing body of research is emerging that highlights and monitors profound changes that are occurring in rural and regional areas Australia wide. These changes have arguably been the result of economic restructuring within an ever-intensifying context of globalisation. Many towns and regional centres have seen a decline in population, services, and employment opportunities. As a strategy to avert or relent to this trend, parents from these communities have been sending their children away from their communities to study and work. With this have come many costs, not all of which are financial. Once away the students face numerous obstacles in adapting to the process of transition. This study aims to explore the anxieties, goals and aspirations of rural and regional students who are considering or are about to make the transition from their local communities to tertiary studies in Adelaide.

The objectives of this project have been:

1. To explore the social and cultural factors that influence the students decision making process.
2. To identify interventions that might assist students and parents in decisions relating to relocation and study in Adelaide.
3. To make recommendations regarding the dissemination of scholarship information and how the process could be enhanced.

To determine rural and regional students' perceptions of moving to, and studying in Adelaide, as well as the barriers that discourage students from studying in Adelaide, a qualitative methodology was employed. The methods of data collection used were interviews and focus groups providing the flexibility to generate a significant quantity of data quickly, as well as being able to explore certain salient issues on a deeper level. In addition to this, the qualitative methodology best captures and highlights the nature of the student's decision-making processes, and the feeling and emotion that surrounds such major life decisions. It also provides the students a 'voice' in the decision making process. Students are able to share their thoughts about the most effective means of delivering services to those currently in or will be in their position.

The study focused on five key regions within South Australia ranging from 80Km to over 600km from Adelaide. The regions were the Barossa Valley (Nuriootpa High), the Mid – North (Port Augusta), Eyre Peninsula (Cleve Area School) South East - Mt Gambier (Tennison Woods College and Mt Gambier High), The Riverland (Loxton High), and the Mid – North (Port Augusta). In these schools focus groups were conducted with Year 12 students and interviews were held with key personnel including: Year 12 co-coordinators, career advisers, Deputy Principals, School Counsellors, Youth Officers, Teachers and Head of the Governing Council (Loxton).

By bringing rural and regional students together to share their hopes and anxieties about the future, the students were provided with an opportunity to share opinions and experiences with their peers and perhaps realise other possibilities for their future.

Recommendations Summary

Dissemination of Information

- Have previous scholarship holders come and talk to students from their school
- Ensure Year 12 Co-ordinators and relevant school staff are fully conversant with all scholarships on offer.
- Advertise scholarships in rural newspapers and stock journals, ICPA newsletter and magazines, Area Principals Association, SPERA (Society for the Provision of Education in Rural Australia) and the Secondary Schools Principals Associations.
- Provide scholarship information at events such as the Eyre Peninsula Field Days.

Liaisons

- Meet with representatives from the Isolated Children's and Parents Network (ICPN) to discuss how they are able to assist in promoting the Cowan Scholarships. The ICPN is also actively lobbying Federal and State Government to change Austudy and Youth Allowance requirements for rural students which, if successful, may result in less students needing to take the gap year and potentially changing their plans for tertiary study.

- Contact the Rural Education Forum Australia (REFA). Their vision is one of 'quality education and training outcomes in rural and remote areas'.

Scholarships

- Ensure information is 'culturally appropriate' and that there is accurate dispersal of information.
- Make scholarship information more accessible by offering seminars, in person or online. High school students can be easily overwhelmed with too much print information. Having someone give a talk on scholarships to students can address this issue.
- Encourage schools to implement more in-house scholarship programs across a wide range of interests. This may ensure a greater uptake of scholarships.
- Many of the scholarships focussing on students facing financial hardship require the student to be eligible for the youth allowance, which has effectively eliminated many students from applying.
- Local government could offer partial scholarships - community building or community sponsorship.
- Scholarship information could be incorporated further into the pastoral care program of country high schools.
- Guidelines should 'not necessarily be on merit or poverty'. An important measure is 'potential' and 'enthusiasm'.
- Centralise the scholarship information for rural students.

Accommodation

- There is a need for more supported options than the current residential colleges.
- Supported (cheaper and possibly residential) accommodation would be good for the first semester, or the first year.
- "It would be good for someone to have a block of units for country kids" (Youth Development Officer). This would provide these kids with new friendship networks and allow them to adjust to the move to Adelaide.

Introduction

Recent economic restructuring has had profound effects for rural and regional areas by exposing domestic markets to global economic forces, which arguably has led to an increase in competition between rural and regional towns and centres to attract capital from domestic and offshore investors (Tonts, 2000). Inherent in this process is the danger of uneven economic prosperity and development between places and regions that are further marginalised by wealthier and politically stronger areas (Tonts, 2000).

A significant negative effect of this has been on young people in rural areas who have already been recognised as being at considerable disadvantage in terms of access to education, as well as training and employment opportunities. In fact, out of the 30% of students that comprise the national cohort of rural students there is only a tertiary participation rate of less than 19% (Alston and Kent 2003). Further, isolated students are approximately 4.5% of the student population, making up only 1.8% of tertiary enrolments. 'The lower higher participation rates of rural and isolated people are an integral component in a cycle of rural disadvantage' (James, Wyn, Baldwin, Hepworth, McInnis & Stephanou 1999: 92). This "should concern all those with an interest in the future development of the intellectual assets and potential of all Australians, regardless of where they live" (James et al, 1999: 4). Of increasing concern is also the gender imbalance occurring between male and female participation rates in tertiary studies (James, Baldwin, Coates, Krause & McInnis, 2004).

Since 1991 those students identified as being from rural and isolated areas have been designated as a specific target group within the Higher Education equity policy statement '*A Fair Chance for all*' (James et al, 1999: 4). As such their participation rate in higher education have been closely monitored and 'targeted incentives' have been developed to encourage and increase participation (James et al, 1999). Despite such measures there has been little change in participation rates in tertiary education for those from rural and isolated areas. Further, in rural areas, there is an over-representation of those who have not partaken in tertiary or TAFE studies, as well as much greater unemployment (Alston et al, 2004).

By exploring the goals, anxieties and aspirations of various rural and regional students, as well as those who have a significant role in influencing these aspirations, this report has sought to understand the barriers that can preclude the pursuit of further studies and to make recommendations that can ease these barriers. As Cocklin and Dibden (2005: 165) describe it is “important to ensure that young people’s educational access is not hindered”.



Port Augusta Secondary School



Cleve Area School

Literature Review

The aim of this section of the report is to review current literature that both positions the research aims of identifying barriers that exist for rural and regional students that influence their aspirations for University study, and exploring the perceptions of rural tertiary students studying and living in Adelaide. In addition, an important aspect of the literature review has been to identify similar studies that have focused on listening to the student voice and which may corroborate these research findings as well as illuminate gaps in knowledge. Literature pertaining to aspirations, including 'rurality', schools, and parents will therefore be discussed, followed, first, by barriers including accommodation, finances and Austudy, and concluding with support and transition issues such as the experience of first year University, scholarships, city services, sport and employment.

Rurality

For the purposes of this study, the specific issues relevant to how students and their families see themselves positioned within rural and regional contexts have been explored. Western, McMillan and Durrington's (1998, cited in Alloway, 2004: 25) broad definitions of 'rurality' have relevance to this report. These include the 'descriptive' definition, which comprises the spatial aspect of distance, as well as the 'social structures and cultures of rural residents' which consists of the make-up of the population and various economic activities of an area. Lockie & Bourke (2001) assert that using an urban-rural dichotomy is not useful and categories of urban, regional, rural and remote are more accurate. However, as Lockie and Bourke (2001: 9) allude "rurality is ...a multidimensional concept" reliant on historical associations and cultural symbols and as such is difficult to define.

The relevance of the rurality factor in this report is both how the students view themselves in relation to their immediate surroundings and in relation to the wider world, and in how those charged with information dissemination view them. The students frequently refer to both the spatial aspects of their rurality, as well as the specific social networks or 'culture' which both sets them apart from their urban counterparts and defines them in specific ways. Many rural students have had to face, from an early age, the reality of the necessity to leave their family home and community in order to fulfil their aspirations and also have had to face the emotional

costs involved. This has been acknowledged in various studies including James et al, (1999) and Alloway et al, (2004).

The report, *Generation X-pendable: Young, Rural and Looking for Work* (Alston & Kent, 2001), like this study has also engaged the student voice, particularly exploring the gendered nature of rural opportunities. It identifies that girls leaving to attend higher education in the city constitute 62% whilst boys constitute 39%, due to greater opportunities in the country for the later group. In addition James, et al, (1999) describe how gender ensures experiencing rurality in different ways. This report found most young women were aware of the lack of opportunities that existed for them in country towns, with many comments regarding 'you can only have so many hairdressing salons'. For the girls who stay behind there are limited employment opportunities and most are casual employment with little scope for advancement.

This study is specifically concerned with tertiary studies and as such acknowledges that "universities have a key role to play in Australia's rural and regional development by influencing the socio-economic profile of rural communities" (James et al, 1999: 92).

Rural students make up one of six equity groups first laid out in the report *A Fair Chance for All* (DEET, 1990). Various reports discuss how rural and isolated students are performing. The Centre for the Study of Higher Education at The University of Melbourne produced a report titled *Analysis of Equity Groups in Higher education 1991-2002* (James, Baldwin, Coates, Krause & McInnis, 2004) which comprehensively explored how the different equity groups were performing. Generally students living in rural areas remain "significantly under-represented' in tertiary education" (James et al, 2004: ix). Further, representation in tertiary education from rural males continues to dwindle. So much so that James et al, (2004: 28) recommend that 'rural and isolated males should be given particular attention within the equity policy framework'.

There is on-going concern for the combined effects of low socio-economic status and rural and isolated origins with regards to participation in tertiary education. In addition, the Australian Government has in place the *Higher Education and Equity Program* (HEEP) aimed at assisting equity group students through base payments to universities and on top retention and performance payments. Success of this program may be questionable due to the plateau of rural tertiary student participation.

As James et al, (1999: 92) attest, “the lower higher education participation rates of rural and isolated people are an integral component in a cycle of rural disadvantage”. Cocklin and Dibden (2005: 165) describe in *Sustainability and Change in Rural Australia*, that it is “important to ensure that young people’s educational access is not hindered in any way and is actively facilitated”. However, as the literature indicates significant barriers do exist for rural young people in developing and fulfilling their aspirations for their future. This report both substantiates these findings and recommends how perceived barriers may be addressed.

School Experience

James et al, (1999: 7) argue that “it is the in-school experience which may be uppermost in students’ decision-making processes when it comes to considering going to university”. This report certainly concludes that student’s in-school experiences, with respect to the culturally appropriate dissemination of knowledge, are crucial in facilitating student’s aspirations. In addition, key teachers are pivotal to the students in engaging and promoting options as well as facilitating application processes, accommodation and so forth. This study found the in-school experience also influences the parents’.

Importantly, James et al, (1999) ascertain it was not geographical distance from a tertiary institution that was the crucial factor for students deciding on options for university, rather it was course selection. This finding was borne out by this study as the majority of students stated that course selection was a priority in choosing higher education.

The report *Factors Impacting on Student Aspirations and Expectations in Regional Australia* (Alloway et al, 2004) highlights the positive step in South Australian secondary schools with the introduction of Year 13 allowing students to undertake their South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE) over a three-year period, as well as the many TAFE courses on offer as well as Vocational Education and Training (VET). Alloway et al, (2004) see this as offering a ‘second chance’ to students to improve their TER score, and to allow students to work part-time and save for tertiary studies. Certainly these findings back up our research in both the positive nature of the opportunity as well as the fact that it has been embraced by a wide range of students at the 6 schools visited in rural and regional areas. A positive finding of the Alloway et al, (2004) report referred to programs designed for schools to allow students the opportunity of “re-visioning their futures” through various field

trips which sought to blend “recreation and pleasure”. In addition, various educational and career expos were presented as useful. However, our report found such endeavours targeted either at the wrong year level or the level of information presented was too broad and opportunities for asking tailored questions were minimal.

The student voice, in this study, certainly provided much greater insights into what it means to grow up in a rural area and how that impacts on their way thinking and future aspirations. Further is the pivotal role that the school and key people within that structure who have the role of both taking the students out into the world and bringing the outside world into the students lives. This process of information dissemination is explored throughout this study.

The notion of attempting to pin down an appropriate intervention time to instil enthusiasm in students for further education can be viewed as problematic as a raft of factors coalesce to connect students with these aspirations. As this report highlights key people who influence student’s outlook and decision making processes must also be targeted for intervention (also James et al, 1999).

Barriers

The main issues for rural and regional students in moving to the city for tertiary education are finances, finding suitable accommodation, travel arrangements back home, managing life skills and finances, orientation to university and managing academic skills.

Austudy/Youth Allowance

The Human Rights & Equal Opportunities Commission Report (HREOC, 1999), *Bush Talks*, has relevance to this study as it engaged specifically with the communities of rural areas in order to determine the various challenges they face. Most notably for this study is the stress placed on families of the Austudy and Youth Allowance requirements. There were many studies (James et al, 1999; Alloway, et al, 2004; Cocklin & Dibden, 2005), which also came to similar conclusions. Notably Cocklin & Dibden (2005: 165) state that ‘[o]ne of the main causes of the decline in the proportion of rural students accessing tertiary education has been the lack of eligibility of many rural young people to tertiary allowances’. Godden’s (2005) study

of *Regional Tertiary Students and Youth Allowance* further highlights these significant issues and makes a raft of recommendations for positive change. The financial barrier associated with Youth Allowance has also been corroborated by this current research as expressed by students, teachers and parents.

Accommodation

Another significant barrier to rural students is accommodation. Although various research reports note this as a barrier, this study delves more closely into various accommodation models that students are seeking. MacIntyre's (2003) article *New Models of Student Housing and Their Impact on Local Communities* delves into the dedicated student housing market that universities have become involved with as a means of attracting students and the role this can play in urban regeneration. Most pertinent for this study is MacIntyre's (2003: 110) mention of the value of "residential halls that catered for every student [and] allowed for a combination of pastoral care and some tutorial-based supplementation of the formal teaching". However, when mentioning other current models of student accommodation pastoral care is not referred to. In this study the importance of the residential college model to the welfare of students and also contributing to piece of mind for the parents was a key finding.

Support/Transition Issues

This research has been specifically targeted towards understanding the barriers that are involved in precluding students from studying in Adelaide, as well as, once here, their perceptions of living and studying in Adelaide. This, then, sets this study apart from other studies of both rural student barriers and transition issues involved once studying in Adelaide.

Scholarships

Importantly, James et al, (2003) corroborate the effect socio-economic circumstances have on lower education participation rates as being more important than geographical distance from tertiary centres. One of the objectives of this report has been to address the access and motivation for students applying for scholarships for tertiary education. A small body of research exists which specifically addresses scholarships for regional students. Godden (2005) discusses the necessity for an increase in scholarships for rural students by local governments, university initiatives, and suggests that the Federal government subsidise residential accommodation. As

well Godden (2005) recommends scholarship deferment as an option, lump-sum scholarship payments for students, and ensure scholarships are not counted as income, thereby reducing students' ability to earn an income. Godden (2005) does not discuss either the culture of scholarships within schools or how information is disseminated, which this current study addresses.

Transition Issues for Students

There is a growing body of research documenting the transition from secondary to tertiary education and more importantly, transition issues for rural students (Alloway et al, 2004; Krause, Hartley, James & McInnis, 2005). Although Tranter's (2003), *Fish out of Water* report focused on the metropolitan area its focus was on disadvantaged schools that had very low participation rates in tertiary education. The most significant findings that relate to this study are the combined effects of school culture and parental influence that serve to provide barriers for students choosing to continue with education. The culture of the campus where the student studies also has a significant effect on the student's sense of belonging (Tranter, 2003).

Kantanis' (2000) study *The role of social transition in students' adjustment to the first-year of university* asserts that "the first-year university experience of a significant number of students is neither satisfying (in terms of personal fulfilment) nor successful (if academic achievement is the measure)". The transition process is particularly important as "...one third of students drop out in the first year of university". Kantanis (2000) argues that students' needs must be fully explored in order for their university experience to be fulfilling. In addition Kantanis (2000) argues that, although some headway is being made to address the transition process, these measures are not engaging academic staff who are the main point of contact for rural and regional students.

Tindle's (1995) study *On Becoming an Undergraduate: Transition to University* covers many similar issues, but most pertinent to this study is the finding that changes to certain lifestyle factors have a bearing on successful transition to university. These relate to "changes in physical activity, recreational involvement and total health care" whereby some students were going from considerable "competitive team competition" to no sport at all (Tindle, 1995: 48). This finding is relevant to this

study as the importance of sport and the associated social life to rural and regional students was considerable.

In the Federal Government's report *The First Year Experience in Australian Universities: Findings from a Decade of National Studies* (2005) of most relevance to this study is the in-depth analysis of students from equity groups and the highlighted need for institutional support to meet their specific needs. The Department of Education, Science and Training conducted a review of equity groups

Evans' (2000) report *Planning for the Transition to Tertiary Study: A Literature Review* highlights the concern with "deferment act[ing] as a filter, diverting female non-metropolitan students from entering higher education". Further, Evans notes that when students have specific "goals for tertiary study" they have greater chance of success.

Various programs are being implemented in universities specifically targeting equity groups, particularly rural and isolated students. A report of one such program, *Smooth Start* at the University of Adelaide has reiterated the importance of targeted and systematic transition programs for first year students. These programs included matching students with mentors and hosting specific social functions. The two other Adelaide-based universities now have transition officers, which only further highlights the importance of this issue. This finding certainly corroborates this research.

Methodology

To acquire the maximum amount of information from these studies we utilized qualitative methods of data collection. Our primary source of data collection was focus groups. A key benefit of using focus groups is that they allow researchers to find out why an issue is of concern to the participants, as well as what is salient about it (Morgan, 1997).

To examine the barriers rural and regional students face in pursuing higher education and relocating to Adelaide we held focus groups with year 12 students at six rural and regional South Australian schools. The participating schools were:

- Cleve Area School, Cleve
- Loxton High School, Loxton
- Mount Gambier High School, Mount Gambier
- Tennison Woods College, Mount Gambier
- Nuriootpa High School, Nuriootpa
- Port Augusta Secondary School, Port Augusta

These schools were selected as they represent five of the major regions in the State (Eyre Peninsula, Riverland, Limestone Coast, Barossa Valley, and Mid-North), as well as varying rural town sizes: from the small town of Cleve to the regional city of Mount Gambier.

In addition to focus groups, we arranged interviews with key informants who had a special interest or influence in our field of study. These informants included representatives from transition programs at the universities and residential colleges; members from organizations such as the Isolated Children's Parent's Association and the Outback Areas Community Development Trust; and members of the local school community in the rural and regional towns including teachers, counsellors, and year 12 co-ordinators. We also conducted structured interviews with those students interested in contributing to the study, but who were unable to attend the arranged focus group times.

Findings

Rural Town Culture

For the students involved in this study, living in a rural town meant different things to each individual. The community was often perceived as secure and friendly, a place where everyone knows everyone.

“You get to know everyone... it's not that big... you can walk around and at least know who everyone is and know of everyone, it's pretty secured because you know everyone.” (Male Student)

However, there was a flip side to this. Because everyone knows everyone, everyone knows everyone's business, leading to an increase in gossip and a loss of privacy.

"Knowing everyone can be a bad thing because everyone knows everything about you... if you have a bad background it might stick with you so when you grow up and stuff you've always got that or if you do something wrong and you get in trouble you've always got that thing of you're the wrong person and everyone knows." (Female Student)

This was a view that was not only held by the students. Various stakeholders within rural communities also shared this ambivalent view.

"There is a narrow focus of the town, people are 'labelled' and have long memories...there's a lack of anonymity...lack of different cultures in the community. The kids are just not exposed to that." (School Counsellor)

The very nature of the culture of a small town can also work against student's aspirations as it is such a comfortable way of life.

"It's easy to be here... it's comfortable which inhibits people from taking risks." (Head of a Governing Council)

The biggest problems were seen as:

"[There are a] lack of options... a lack of motivation to be someone better than they are." (Youth Development Officer)

As with the Alston and Kent (2001) 'Generation X-pendable: Young, Rural and Looking for Work An Examination of Young People's Perceptions of Employment opportunities in Rural Area' study, we found little youth based activities available in rural communities other than sport. To participate in activities other than sport, rural students usually had to travel to another larger town to find 'something to do' or would entertain themselves locally.

"We've got a limited sort of area for social life, there's not a lot really other than sports." (Female Student)

However, it is important to note how important local sport is to rural communities as it forms the backbone of their social life as well as contributing to a more 'well-rounded person'.

"There are heaps of advantages with sport here coz there are all associations so if you want to play basketball there is an association so you just sort of make your way into a group whereas other towns you have to make your own teams" (Female Student)

"It's not the hardest thing to get a really high TER if you're doing nothing else and spend all your time studying, whereas if you have a job, if you have sporting commitments, you come out of it as a more well rounded person" (Female Student)

Also the students recognised the importance of keeping up their sport once moving to Adelaide in order to develop social connections.

"Straight away one of the first things I will do will be to join a footie team. Adelaide Uni has a footie team. Me and my mate will go and play for them straight away I think that is the best way to get out and meet people." (Male Student)

"I think going with the Uni netball team you are going to meet more people who will be around you instead of just playing with inter town teams where you probably won't have anyone in the same team." (Female Student)

In addition to this, as also confirmed in the Alston & Kent (2001) study, we found a noticeable gender difference in the way students perceived their town and subsequently their aspirations for future endeavours.

"Its kind of hard because it seems that more girls go away to university so there's a bit of an imbalance, there's more males around." (Female Student)

"Bugger all job opportunities around here for girls... There are that many hairdressers it is not funny. That's all you can do here. Hairdressing and massage...Lots of apprenticeships for guys, they can just do a trade." (Female Student)

“More girls than guys want to go to Uni, they [male students from the country] really hate the idea of living in town.” (Male Student)

“[Here it is] less stressful and not as much traffic. I would much rather live in the country than the city.” (Male Student)

“I found in our country town that it is only girls who come to uni, guys all drop out, they go off and get an apprenticeship or they drop out, get a job, or they’ll finish their year 12 only to get there SACE then they’ll just go and get a job or apprenticeship.” (Female Student)

Financial Barriers

The most frequent response that was given by rural students as to the largest barrier they faced in deciding whether or not to pursue a tertiary education in Adelaide was finances. For many of these students, their parent’s financial position placed them in the ‘middle’ and rendered them, in most cases, unable to receive government assistance.

“It’s really hard if your parents aren’t on a high income, or they aren’t low enough for you to get Youth Allowance and you haven’t taken a year off so you haven’t got the \$16.000-17.000 and then you have to find somewhere to live and somewhere to work to pay for your rent and then you have to do uni...And all your friends that live in the city get home [from university] and their mums cook their meals for them and then when you come home, and you’re tired you have to cook dinner and then do your own dishes...it makes you grow up fast, but it takes a hard toll. You have to think more... you get annoyed at them when they get everything hand fed...yeah.” (Female Student)

“If your parents are right in the middle and don’t quite meet either side it’s really difficult.” (Female Student)

Primarily, it was the material cost of relocating to take up study opportunities that was identified as the main barrier. There was considerable concern from the students as to the impact that their parents would face if they were unable to get Government assistance. As cited in Alloway et al, (2004), the challenge of finding sufficient material resources to support student's aspirations is a prominent concern in regional areas.

"Part of it is looking for the right accommodation. I mean mine is quite expensive so my parents do support me but I don't get any rent assistance or anything. It's really difficult, I can't get rent assistance because you have to live out of home for 18 months I think and that's the time when you're just getting settled in." (Female Student)

"I have friends who are at colleges and things and that's kinda upwards of \$300 a week for full board and all the merry things which is really great but I think that you have to be parent supported to get that kind of thing to work." (Male Student)

"We should get the living away from home allowance, we have to start again and we can't afford it. That's why half of us don't look." (Female Student)

Austudy

The present requirements for Austudy and youth allowance were both controversial and prohibitive to many prospective students.

"It's totally irrelevant, but just because your parents are rich, it doesn't mean that they give you anything. Like land assets..." (Female Student)

"Full time work is hard. My brother tried working last year to get Austudy and he couldn't get a full time job, he was struggling to get all the hours. He would ring up and see if anybody was away, he only just got the \$18,000 in time." (Female Student)

"You have to spend most of the money before you get there... you are only supposed to have \$2,500 in your bank account. \$2,500 is not a lot out of \$18,000. The \$2,500 does not get you anywhere and Austudy doesn't kick in

for a few months and you are kind of living on nothing for a couple of months.”
(Male Student)

Planning ahead appeared to be very strategic with students aware of many of the financial constraints placed on them. For example, many students in Port Augusta were aware that they will not receive a living away from home allowance if they choose to live and study in Whyalla because it is too close, so it works out better for these students to stay living in Port Augusta and have a part time job there.

Gap Year

We found that many students were opting to take a ‘gap year’ from their studies. There were two main reasons for this. First, students cited the need to relax from the stresses of year 12 before deciding to map out their futures.

“I’m only just 17 and I feel to young” (Female Student)

“When you don’t really know what you’re doing, you get that extra year to think about it” (Male Student)

“You get a year when all the stress from yr 12 is over you just have no stress for a whole year before going to uni, whereas if you go straight from school to uni you’ve got all your stress, you’ve got to find a place to live...you just want to settle down before you start studying again.” (Female Student)

“It’s such a big move from a country town like...to Adelaide; you might have some family up there but not your parents... moving up there is a big deal. Without the kind of social support you need that year to organise yourself.”
(Male Student)

“For me taking a break would be good because you have all these stress of going to uni in Adelaide and moving to Adelaide. It would be good to take a year off just to work and not worry. Year 12 is stressful. You want a bit of a break before going on to uni.” (Male Student)

The second key reason identified was to take time to obtain the amount of money required to be eligible for Government Assistance. This in most cases proved

challenging as employment opportunities in some of the smaller towns were lacking or when work was available it was usually seasonal in nature.

“I am deferring to not just get the \$18,000, but I also need it so I can spend it when I get to Adelaide.” (Male Student)

As previously stated, the most frequently perceived barrier for these students was that of having the financial means to achieve their aspiration of obtaining further education. This response was widely held not just by the students themselves but also other community members such as teachers, councillors, careers guidance councillors, community development officers, social workers and parents.

For most, this barrier was significant enough to rule out any genuine consideration of pursuing further education in Adelaide. It was felt by students that to undertake study in Adelaide was effectively forcing the hand of their parents to endure a hardship that held no promises and was relatively untried.

For some students who were adamant about wanting to leave their towns to pursue a tertiary education, the costs did not outweigh the benefits and potential opportunities that they believe a tertiary education can provide. In this way, the weighing up of the costs was the result of careful consideration of the material costs and available resources.

Of increasing concern is the number of rural students taking the gap year, with the intention of undertaking tertiary studies, who subsequently do not return to studies (Godden, 2003). As Godden (2003: 6) states this sees young people ‘potentially wasting an opportunity and restricting their personal and community opportunities’. Information supplied by Bob Cowan (2006) concerning a study conducted by John Bannon of St Mark’s College suggests that a significant number of rural students who take the gap year do not return to tertiary studies compared to their metropolitan counterparts.

Accommodation

One of the most significant barriers as sighted by key stakeholders, community members, and the students themselves was that of accommodation.

This issue was the contributory factor increasing the pressure on already financially strained families further, as well as creating anxiety for parents, not knowing whether or not their children had a 'stable' living environment. Parents needed to know what the expenses were going to be, whether or not their children would be safe, and what the benefits of moving to Adelaide to pursue further education would be.

"We're concerned... of course we're concerned... we're concerned about what the expense will be... what the benefits [of going to university in Adelaide] will be... we need reassurance that our kids are gonna be alright"
(Year 12 Teacher)

Often for those not living in a residential college, employment was a necessity to pay for living expenses. In cases where Government assistance was granted, students reported that the amounts they received were not enough to sustain and maintain the expenses required for living let alone studying at university added on top. To combat this, students either would go it alone or would ask parents for allowances to keep them going. This in turn had the effect of diminishing the student's feelings of independence and increased feelings of guilt by laying additional financial burdens upon their families.

Anecdotally a story was conveyed to us from a parent about his son when he travelled down to Adelaide to pursue further education at university. The son encountered feelings of isolation being housed away from other rural students and away from family. The added pressures of having to pay bills, required texts for university, food, and lack of money to go out with friends took their toll. As a result, the student gave up university and moved back home.

This was not the only anecdotal account of this type of situation. There were many parents and even fellow students who had direct contact with or had heard about someone who had, or were currently experiencing this. In the best-case scenarios, students who managed to gain employment decided to leave university and continue working in their jobs.

For those students not moving into one of the residential colleges or moving in with immediate or extended family members, life is particularly difficult. Quite often the students are housed in locations away from other rural students thus impacting upon their social networks. Social networks were an integral part of the accommodation issue.

“Works best when students come to the city as a group and find accommodation together.” (Learning Connection Counsellor)

“Country kids really need to live in residential accommodation’. They are ‘isolated’ and they ‘don’t have the networks” (Head of Governing Council Loxton)

“Some students have already planned to get a shared house together” (Yr 12 Coordinator)

In addition to the need to create and maintain social networks, one of the primary concerns related to accommodation was with creating a stable environment where students can ‘find their feet’.

“[There is a] need for university to provide supported residential college accommodation for first year or first semester” (Head of Governing Council)

“I’ve thought about going to college for first year and then moving out, just sort of settling in to the new environment. One of my friends just moved out into a flat and she had a lot of trouble because she had to learn how to do assignments at uni and then she was having to do her own washing, cook tea and pay bills” (Female Student)

Residential Colleges

Quite often there was a misconception about the costs of attending a residential college. Few students and their parents expressed desires to attend them. For those that did, quite often they knew someone, or knew of someone, that had attended a residential college. For those parents who had compared the cost of private rental vs.

the residential colleges, the residential colleges were preferred as cost wise they were very similar.

“My parents and I sat down and looked at all the expenses and we worked out that college is economical.” (Male Student)

“When you rent, you have to worry about stuff like the power. I guess that is a positive about living in a residential college.” (Female Student)

For a weekly fee, all the students living expenses are covered and students are not locked into a contract with a landlord and do not lose a bond as a result of breaking the contract early. Perhaps the college's greatest appeal for these parents and students were the social activities and the range of support services that the colleges themselves provide their boarders. These services allowed parents feel that their children were safe, being feed, and had opportunities to make friends as well as having education resources available to help their children with their studies.

“They have impressive programs” (Year 12 Teacher)

Anxieties of Transition

Understandably, contemplating the move from a country town to a much larger city such as Adelaide can be the cause of many anxieties for both students and their parents. In our study we found that the 'scary' thought of leaving the familiar was made up of many different components.

“I'd be scared of getting homesick moving up there.” (Female Student)

“I'm scared of getting mugged.” (Female Student)

“I have trouble with the unfamiliar so I think Adelaide is a bit daunting for me.” (Female Student)

Although as one student declared about leaving the familiar, it really depends on the individual. For those who 'dread' the move it is important that the support services are in place to allow them to adjust to their new home.

“Some people look forward to it and some people dread it.” (Female Student)

“Country kids need to know that this can become home” (Learning Connection Counsellor)

One of the main anxieties we encountered was that of being able to return home to visit family and friends. Students were very aware of the need for support networks, but were also realistic about the cost of returning home, and the consequences of having employment in the city.

“Support is not there, family, friends and loved ones are back here... you are completely alone... if you are doing Uni in Adelaide you are probably going to have a job so there will be huge periods of time when we won't see anyone [from home].” (Male Student)

“Transport is particularly difficult considering the time ...you have your multi-trip for the city but then you have the fat one for the country, it's for four hours and they are \$20 each.” (Female Student)

“The buses are expensive [rural and regional]... they take the long route and visit pretty much every town from Adelaide... its a lot of time to be on a bus...its hard to get back to your family.” (Female Student)

In addition to those anxieties already mentioned, a significant barrier to transition can be directly related to the parent's anxieties about the move. It is therefore important to meet the needs of the parents to aid the transition process

“Fears and anxieties of parents can stop the kids coming down” (Learning Connection Counsellor)

“Parents need to know the long term benefits [of tertiary education]; be able to express their anxieties and need to be able to be reassured” (Learning Connection Counsellor)

Key Influences in Pursuing Tertiary Education

Significantly this study found there were various key influences on whether or not students were enthusiastic about tertiary education opportunities in Adelaide. Although most students described their parents as being the key influence a significant factor was the culture of the school and whether or not there was a positive culture of learning and recognition of that achievement at the school. Other key influences from school were the Year 12 Co-ordinator and/or School Counsellor. The other important influences were the student's peers and importantly their sporting club.

"Family role models are tremendously important, if they have an older brother or sister, family friend, uncle or aunty who has done it before that can be very very powerful. We market very hard here to try and get kids to aim high and we say that that's part of it, but yeah I think family is still one of the biggest things. Also of course if friends are going down that's a big incentive for them to go down too" (Year 12 Co-ordinator)

Scholarships

We found that the key issue in promoting scholarships is in the dissemination of information. Information was sometimes perceived as ambiguous and vague. The critical role of Year 12 co-ordinator cannot be stressed enough as although one school seemed exemplary in most areas, year 12 students still expressed frustration at the inadequate information dispersal of career and scholarship information. The students felt they would benefit from extra nurturing and up to date information rather than such comments as:

"You're a big girl now, you find out about it" (Female Student)

On the other hand, a co-ordinator can help to promote scholarship opportunities that are available.

"We have a home group lesson in the morning and she [the teacher] spends lots of time talking to us about different options like accommodation... about

scholarships... she's helping us all get through, really individual as well, she will talk to us individually it is that sort of thing that supports us, that helps us. If I did not have [my teacher] supporting me, I wouldn't know about mining engineering" (Male student)

"We just need a teacher we can take seriously that has guidance on the best way to get there" (Female Student)

"Year level co-ordinators are usually the first port of call so if you're looking for someone to give scholarship information to not the principal, not the deputy principal, but the year 12 co-ordinator, you've got to actually target these things, especially in a big school" (Year 12 Co-ordinator)

The vast majority of students spoken to were simply unaware of scholarships. They didn't know so many existed and had no idea where to look. The most common place these students found their scholarship information was on the universities websites. However, even then it was reported that the searches were extremely difficult and often resulted in the students giving up.

"Something directly on scholarships would be good. I know of one of the uni's does actually put out a book about scholarships but I don't think they all do or it's buried on their website." (Year 12 Co-ordinator)

"I reckon there should be packs for our school counsellor or whatever so you can go to them like if I'm interested in Uni then I could go to the school counsellor and ask them about some of the scholarships and stuff like that" (Female Student)

The timing of the information was another important factor. Students reported being flooded with information in years 10 and 11 respectively and slowly tapering off in years 12 and 13, and did not understand why this occurred. To them, it made more sense to receive this information closer to the completion of their year 12 or 13. If they did want to receive this information in year 12 or 13 students often had to go and ask specifically for it. This contributed to difficulty with some students not willing to take this initiative, or in other cases the information not being available to pass on.

“They said at that meeting a few months ago that there are so many [scholarships] that don’t get taken because people just don’t know about them.” (Female student)

“I don’t really understand them, that’s something that I don’t think I got enough information about.” (Female Student)

“Not through the school, Mum just knew about it. I don’t know how, it’s the Australian Government Nurses one, it was in the paper.” (Female student)

“And like how to apply for scholarships, what’s offered when you have that scholarship, like coz we wouldn’t even know half of the scholarships available.” (Female Student)

While these quotes provide the students perspectives, for schools the inadequate promotion of scholarships, or overwhelming amount of print material was also a source of frustration.

“I think, key point, forms have got to be brief and non-intimidating, that’s just absolutely essential, once a form gets more than a one side of A4 I think you’ve pretty much lost most kids these days” (Year 12 Co-ordinator)

“Scholarship application forms need to be brief and non-intimidating” (Year 12 Co-ordinator)

“I think also generally, but particularly country people, prefer a personal connection because that’s the way communities work” (Year 12 Co-ordinator)

Another important issue to remember is that most of the students who responded were working while attending high school to try and save money for accommodation and to meet the Austudy requirements. The criteria for obtaining many of the scholarships either favours outstanding academic achievement or being of low socio-economic status.

For families ‘in the middle’ it was especially difficult because either they (the parents) earned too much which pushed their child outside of the group eligible for government

assistance, or it increased the financial strain on the family's resources to a point where funding the required expenses could become unfeasible.

"The problem with a lot of the scholarships is our parents earn too much, and on paper they do but when you've got other siblings at uni or other financial trouble, they don't actually earn too much. You still need that money but you can't get access to it because they earn too much." (Female Student)

"I think that if you have plans and dreams and that for the future that they could take that into account if you can show that you're trying to work hard, references can say that you work really hard and have a good work ethic and your report can say you got B's but you worked really hard." (Female student)



Loxton High School



Tennison Woods College

Recommendations

Key recommendations for the Cowan Grant, including key strategies to encourage more students to apply for scholarships, are listed first, followed by other recommendations that have resulted from this study.

Information Dissemination

A key finding from the study has been the *ad hoc* way information about scholarships is made available to students. This is an important area that needs to be addressed.

- Have previous scholarship holders come and talk to students from their school about the scholarship process, their tertiary studies and their living experiences in Adelaide.
- Ensure Year 12 Co-ordinators and relevant school staff are fully conversant with all scholarships on offer. It is important to consider the most effective presentation of scholarship information, whether in a booklet form or a CD-Rom with all the students having a copy. This can be backed up with a personal presentation where possible as well as a centralised scholarship website (refer to liaisons). Year 12 co-ordinators must also be aware of career choices for students and it may be worth having discussions with DECS on the best way to keep them informed. It is worth exploring the possibilities of

whether DECS could fund joint trips to the city for year 12 co-ordinators or even be partially funded by scholarship providers.

- Advertise scholarships in rural newspapers, regional radio and stock journals, ICPA newsletter and magazines, Area Principals Association, SPERA (Society for the Provision of Education in Rural Australia) and the Secondary Schools Principals Associations.
- Provide scholarship information at events such as the Eyre Peninsula Field Days which target the whole community, not just students.

Liaisons

- Meet with representatives from the Isolated Children's and Parents Network (ICPN) to discuss how they are able to assist in promoting the Cowan Scholarships. This organisation aims to 'provide equality of access to education for all students who live in rural and remote communities' and was formed in 1971 in Bourke under conditions of rural depression. In South Australia there are 125 member families belonging to one of 8 branches. There is a state publication as well as a quarterly national magazine. The next state conference is due to be held in Parachilna on March 23, 2007 and it would be worth ensuring details of the Cowan scholarship are made known to the delegates. Importantly this group has been lobbying both the State and Federal Government to change both Austudy and youth allowance requirements for rural students. The current State Secretary is Sharon Nutt. Her contact details are: Ph. 08 8648 4714, E-mail. edeowiestn@bigpond.com
- The Governing Council from Loxton High School has also been very active in lobbying the Federal and State Government over Austudy and Youth Allowance for rural students. Contact details: Richard Saunders, Head of Governing Council, Loxton high School : (08) 8584 7339
- Contact the Rural Education Forum Australia (REFA). Their vision is one of 'quality education and training outcomes in rural and remote areas, so that individuals, families and communities can develop their full potential in the social, economic, political and cultural life of the nation' (Halsey, 2003: 23). This group is based at Flinders University and the contact person is John Halsey, John.halsey@flinders.edu.au

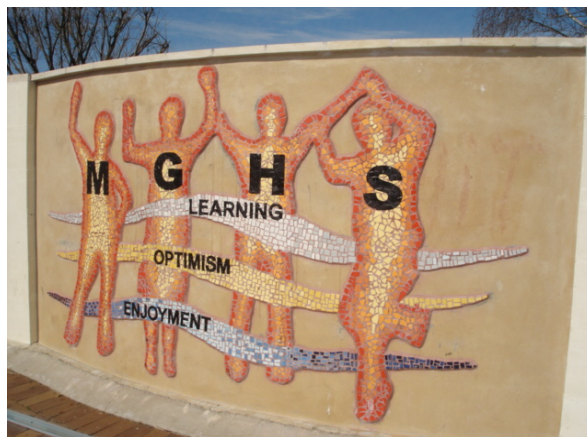
Scholarships

- Ensure information is 'culturally appropriate'.
- Ensure accurate dispersal of information.
- Make scholarship information more accessible by offering seminars, in person or online. High school students can be easily overwhelmed with too much print information. Having someone give a talk on scholarships to students can address this issue.
- Streamline application forms.
- Encourage schools to implement more in-house scholarship programs across a wide range of interests. This may ensure a greater uptake of tertiary scholarships.
- Encourage more local businesses and community groups to support in-school scholarships.
- Many of the scholarships focussing on students facing financial hardship require the student to be eligible for the youth allowance which has effectively eliminated many students from applying
- Local government could offer partial scholarships - community building or community sponsorship
- Scholarship information could be incorporated further into the pastoral care program of country high schools. For this to happen information needs to be delivered to the year 12 co-ordinator.
- Guidelines should 'not necessarily be on merit or poverty'. An important measure is 'potential' and 'enthusiasm'. Need to get the schools involved in the process. Develop other criteria for measuring students 'passion and drive'. For example the school reference could be considered as a measure for a students drive and capabilities.
- Centralise the scholarship information for rural students. Currently the website www.myfuture.edu.au lists over 60 scholarships available for rural students but this fact was not known by both students and year 12 co-ordinators.

Accommodation

The following section relates to one of this studies findings with accommodation in Adelaide perceived as a significant barrier to taking on tertiary studies, particularly with respect to parents anxieties.

- There is a need for more supported options than the current residential colleges.
- Supported (cheaper and possibly residential) accommodation would be good for the first semester, or the first year.
- 'It would be good for someone to have a block of units for country kids'. This would provide these kids with new friendship networks and allow them to adjust to the move to the City.
- Loxton High School is considering buying a group of flats to make renting in Adelaide cheaper, and to make further study more accessible. This accommodation would include house parents and be financially supported by the local community. This is an option that may be considered by other country communities, or something that Adelaide City Council or another government organisation could support through community partnerships.



Mount Gambier High School



Nurioopta High School

Future Research: Where to From Here

- Continue lobbying the Federal Government to reduce the costs associated with tertiary study for rural students. Instigate meetings with key personnel in the Department of Education to discuss how the role of the pastoral care/Year 12 Co-coordinator or counsellor can be bolstered to ensure that the right support and information is made available to students. This would positively influence the aspirations of the students, but requires adequate funding.
- Investigating the feasibility of the Commonwealth Government introducing a one-off payment to students from rural and isolated areas that have enrolled in a tertiary or TAFE course a certain distance from their home. This payment could be divided in two parts – first when the students begin their course and the balance after the university census date. This may be an added incentive for students to begin tertiary studies and not defer. This could be an interim measure until the Government fully investigates other alternatives for rural students and the Austudy requirements.
- The *Analysis of Equity Groups in Higher Education 1991-2002* report flagged the possibility of “universities being rewarded for raising the higher education access rates of particular schools within their student catchment areas “ thus influencing how tertiary equity programs address “competitive selection methods” (James et al, 2003). This potential reward is worth further investigation and lobbying for.
- Support is needed for rural high schools to collect detailed data from year 12 students once they leave school in order to more accurately assess how their aspirations have eventuated, and also to provide information to current students on the post-secondary experiences of past students from the same area .
- Funding could be provided for a longitudinal study focusing on a particular year 10 class from a rural area and traces the development in their aspirations over a five year period as well as how various barriers affect their plans for the future.
- Of increasing significance is the gender imbalance between girls and boys undertaking tertiary studies. This has significance for on-going targeting of scholarships and requires further investigation.
- Analysis of which schools are taking up rural scholarships is required and specific targeting to those schools with poor (or no) uptake of scholarships.

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Students from Port Augusta Secondary School

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