Taking University to the Students: Forging Connections and Inclusion Through Regional University Centres (RUCs). *A Practice Report*

Cathy Stone
The University of Newcastle, Australia
Sharron King
University of South Australia, Australia
Chris Ronan
Country Universities Centre, Australia

Abstract

For regional students, going to university frequently involves moving away from important home, family and community connections to forge new connections in unfamiliar environments. This is a daunting prospect discouraging many from considering university as an option. But what if university could come to them, allowing them to stay where they feel most connected, whilst also becoming connected with other students and developing a sense of inclusion within university culture? Recent research with high school students in regional South Australia indicates that the combination of online delivery (increasingly mainstreamed due to COVID-19) and the growing presence of Regional University Centres (RUCs) may provide the opportunity for this to happen. This paper discusses these findings within the context of the challenges for regional students in moving away from their connections. It argues that, instead, important learning connections may be offered within their local communities through the collaboration between universities and RUCs.

Introduction

The disparity between the higher education (HE) participation of metropolitan students compared with those from regional, rural and remote (RRR) areas of Australia is receiving increasing attention from governments at local, state and federal levels. For simplicity, we will use the term "regional" in this paper, instead of RRR, to refer more broadly to all non-metropolitan areas of Australia. Students graduating from regional high schools[1] around Australia have been shown to be less likely to apply to go to university and less likely to accept a university offer. As well, they are more likely to leave university without a qualification than their metropolitan counterparts, particularly for those from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds who are also more likely than high SES students to defer a university offer and less likely to take up their offer later (Commonwealth of Australia, 2019; Halsey, 2018; Polesel, 2009).

The proportion of regional students in the university undergraduate population has remained relatively unchanged for over 20 years, at 19.6 per cent in 2019 (Koshy, 2020) compared with 19.2 per cent in 1997 (Department of Education, 2017). Overall, Year 12 regional students have lower achievement levels than Year 12 metropolitan students and lower rates of transition to

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[1] The term "high school" refers to schools at post-primary level that offer classes at Year 7 and above, also known in the Australian context as "secondary schools".

university (Cardak et al., 2017), leading the Productivity Commission (2019) to conclude that children growing up in regional or remote areas continue to be much less likely to attend university even though they may have the same academic ability as their metropolitan peers.

A research study conducted in 2021 (King et al., 2022) sought to gain more understanding of some of the factors behind this disparity, looking particularly at one state of Australia – South Australia (SA) – in which the HE participation rate for regional students is lower than average. Fewer than 10 per cent of the regional SA population has a bachelor's degree, which is half the national average regional bachelor attainment rate and a quarter of the average metropolitan rate (Commonwealth of Australia, 2019). In this paper, we report on the findings from this research that specifically highlight the crucial role of connections for regional students, demonstrating that home, family and community connections can both help and hinder university participation. Importantly, this research indicated that bringing university closer to students, into their own community, through the presence of a Regional University Centre (RUC) has the potential to build connections that encourage and support university participation and success for more regional students. RUCs, previously known as Regional Study Hubs, are an emerging initiative across Australia that have been funded by the Australian Government since 2018 in response to the persistently lower HE participation rates of regional students. There are currently 26 RUCs located around regional Australia in all states and the Northern Territory, with each managed independently by community boards and open to all post-secondary students living in the local area. They aim to facilitate study in regional communities by providing physical places and essential infrastructure needed when studying remotely, such as dedicated study spaces, high-speed internet, computer facilities, face-to-face academic and wellbeing support, and the opportunity to interact with other students (Department of Education, 2022).

The challenges for HE students who study online, remotely from their university, are well documented and include feelings of isolation, lack of dedicated study times and spaces, problems communicating with teachers and other students, poor course design, and technology issues (Devlin & McKay, 2016; McKay et al., 2021; Moore & Greenland, 2017; Ragusa & Crampton, 2018; Stone, 2019). Across regional Australia, home internet connection is a particular concern with many regional areas experiencing poor and unreliable internet provision (Attree, 2021; Stone & Davis, 2020). Evidence is starting to emerge about the potential of RUCs to mitigate some of these challenges, with studies demonstrating that students using RUCs are "benefiting from opportunities to connect with other students and staff face-to-face" (Crawford, 2021, p. 50) and that RUCs "improve student engagement for regional students facing high first year attrition risk factors" (Davis & Taylor, 2019, p. 88).

Currently, the majority of regional, online students are mature-aged (Crawford & Emery, 2021; Pollard, 2017) with online study being overwhelmingly chosen for the flexibility needed to combine family and work responsibilities with their studies (Hewson, 2018; Stone et al., 2019). Interestingly though, with COVID-19 restrictions having forced so many more students online during 2020-2022, recent research is showing how the flexibility of online learning is being similarly valued by the wider student cohort, with younger students also appreciating the flexibility to choose when, where and how they study (James et al., 2021; Martin, 2020; Savage, 2021). The research on which this paper is based (King et al., 2022) argued that RUCs have the potential to further increase the viability of online study for regional school-leaver students, with implications for both their post-school intentions and HE persistence.

A description of this research follows, including an overview and discussion of the findings that relate to the potential of attracting school-leaver students, as well as mature-aged students. The paper concludes with recommendations for universities, high schools, government funding bodies and RUCs on ways to strengthen connections between universities and students in regional communities around Australia.[2]

About the Research

Using a mixed-methods approach of a student survey, student focus groups and school staff interviews, we undertook research during 2021 at 14 SA regional high schools. In the context of lower rates of regional versus metropolitan students' entry to university, we sought to investigate the influences impacting ATAR-stream[3] students' post-school choices and decisions, including whether university was part of their plans. Ethics approval was granted by the University of South Australia while

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[2] For a more detailed description of the research discussed in this paper, including literature review, aims, methods, findings, conclusions and recommendations, see King et al. (2022).

[3] The Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) is a number between 0.00 and 99.95 that indicates a student's position relative to all the students in their age group. Universities use the ATAR to help them select students for their courses and admission to most tertiary courses is based on a student's ATAR plus any applicable adjustments (University Admissions Centre, 2021). To be eligible for an ATAR, high school students must choose certain courses in their final two years of high school, Years 11 and 12, in which case they are considered to be on an ATAR stream or pathway.

the SA Department for Education identified regional high schools with cohorts of ATAR-stream students which the research team could invite to participate. In total, 14 regional SA high schools participated. Each of these state-funded, public schools agreed to distribute the survey to Year 11 and 12 ATAR-stream students, who were predicted to attain an ATAR sufficient for university entry. Nine of the 14 schools also agreed to participate in one-to-one or small-group interviews with members of school staff (school educators) while eight of them were additionally willing for student focus-group interviews with Year 11 and 12 ATAR-stream students to be conducted.

A total of 198 students participated in the survey. Survey questions sought information about their demographic circumstances (age, gender, year of school, Indigeneity, living circumstances, parents' levels of education and other family members who have been to university); their level of engagement with school (through questions such as, *How often might you miss a day of school for no reason or skip classes?*); their post-school intentions and aspirations for university (through questions such as, *How far do you expect to go with your education?* and, *What do you think you are most likely to do when you finish school?*); and their knowledge of the practicalities of going to university, such as costs, pathways, scholarships and other supports (through questions such as, *If you were to go to university, how much do you think it would cost each year? How much do you know about the following ways of funding your education?* and, *Are you aware that most SA universities offer free courses that help you get into university that do not require an ATAR?*)

The survey explored influences on their decision-making through questions such as: *How much impact do the following people/events have on your decisions about what you want to do after school? How much have you learned from each of the following sources? How far do you think your parents/guardian expect you to go with your education? How many times a year have you travelled to Adelaide [capital city of SA] in the past 5 years?* Answers were chosen from multiple-choice lists with the importance of each determined by a five-point Likert scale. Very few students provided additional comments, even though there was opportunity to do so in a number of places throughout the survey. We collated and quantified the survey data using graphs and charts.

Across the eight schools that had agreed to participate in focus group discussions, 24 focus groups were held with a total of 124 Year 11 and 12 students (84 female/40 male). The facilitators (members of the research team) generated discussion amongst the students about their immediate intentions on leaving school, how and where students found out information about university courses and requirements, who or what influenced their decisions about their futures, what may get in the way of achieving their goals, how much they knew about university, what else they wanted to know, and any other concerns they had. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a total of 26 school educators across nine of the 14 schools. Participants included principals, deputy-principals, career advisors, Year 12 teachers and coordinators. Each was asked for their thoughts and views on how and why Year 11 and 12 students at their schools were making their post-school decisions, including decisions about whether to go to university. Both the student focus group discussions and school educator interviews were audio-recorded in addition to notes being taken by the facilitators. Notes were analysed manually and by using NVivo 12, with recordings checked for clarification and accuracy during the analysis process.

Findings

A detailed description and discussion of the overall findings of this research study has been previously published in the full report on this research project (King et al., 2022). Within this paper we focus specifically on what the data has revealed about the important role that connections play in decision-making about university for these regional students – connections to home, family, friends and community. Within this context, we explore the impact of students' strong sense of connection to their familiar people and places and how this can both help and hinder decisions about university. Other evidence emerging from this data is that situating a tangible connection to university in the form of an RUC, amongst familiar people and places, may also have a considerable impact upon these decisions.

The Pull of Familiar Connections
Consistent with other research findings (Fray et al., 2020; Gore et al., 2019; Katersky Barnes et al., 2019; Kilpatrick et al., 2019; O'Shea et. al., 2019; Ronan, 2020; Woodroffe et al., 2017) it was difficult for many of the student participants in this research to contemplate moving away from home and community to attend university. Due to the lack of regional universities in SA and the scarcity of regional campuses, almost all students intending to go to university were faced with the prospect of moving to the capital city, Adelaide. While some expressed confidence about this, the focus group discussions revealed that most felt a strong pull towards remaining in their local area and were reluctant or even fearful to leave. A lack of confidence about living in a city, away from their familiar places and people, was expressed. Many indicated they were more worried about living away from home rather than undertaking university level study itself. In the words of one student, "I wouldn't

even know how to move to a city". There was talk in several of the groups about the fear of being alone, feeling lonely, not having friends, and not knowing where they would live. This was particularly the case for students whose entire family and friendship networks were in their local community. Students who had family or friends in Adelaide with whom they could initially live, tended to sound more confident about moving there, even though they too talked about missing family and friends. Looking at the data from staff interviews, most school educators believed that students at their schools did not generally want to move away and leave their friendship groups. This perception was supported by the low transition rates to university amongst students from these schools.

Pressure to Stay and Barriers to Leaving

Community pressure to "stay local" also emerged, particularly for boys in areas with strong regional industries such as farming and fishing. Many of the boys indicated in discussions that it was expected by parents and others in the community that they would stay and learn a trade in order to work in the local industry or on the family farm. Interestingly, many of the boys talked about university as something for girls, rather than boys. This appeared to be influenced at least in part by the limited course offerings in regional areas, such as nursing, teaching and social work, which were perceived as female professions as well as the fact that very few of the fathers had been to university. The survey revealed that fewer than 10 per cent of the students' fathers, compared with 25 per cent of their mothers, had been to university. Generally, there appeared to be more pressure on boys than girls from family, friends and community to leave school and get a job, rather than go on to university.

However, the financial aspects of leaving also played an important role in this. At one of the more geographically isolated schools, most of the male students in the focus group were planning to stay locally and take up a trade. While initially the minority in the group who wanted to go to university were disparaged by the others, it emerged from further discussion that the ones choosing local trades would consider going to university if their families could and would support them financially to do so. These were students who were predicted by their teachers to achieve an ATAR more than sufficient for university entry. The combined factors of the expense involved in going away to university, and the community pressure to "stay local", appeared to have a substantial impact upon the post-school choices and decisions of these academically capable students. Overall, students who were more confident about leaving the area to go to university had parents who would be financially supporting them to do so. Those who could not rely on family financial support were much less certain about their post-school plans, or had decided not to go to university, despite being academically capable of doing so:

> They've always said, if you're going to do that you've got to make the money yourself. That's just how I was brought up. I would just have to come up with the money myself, but I just don't know how long it would take. (Year 12 Student, Focus Group Discussion)

Financial support from family could also be impacted by uncontrollable factors such as "it depends if there's rain" (Year 12 student, Focus Group Discussion). Others talked of the financial implications of going to university for at least three years without a steady income, when they could start earning straight after leaving school by working in the regional industries in their hometowns. School educators also believed that cost was a considerable barrier to HE for many students, with relocation, accommodation and study costs being out of reach for most families in their school community. Due to this concern, some admitted to being reluctant to encourage HE as a pathway for these otherwise capable students.

Potential for Connecting with University Without Leaving Home

Over at least the past decade, there has been increasing availability of online university options. This has accelerated since 2020 due to COVID-19, with both the quantity and quality of online degree offerings growing substantially. As mentioned previously, regional online students have tended to be mature-age students, with relatively few younger students being attracted to online learning. Indeed, in this research, the survey findings in relation to online learning appeared initially to bear this out, with only 6.6 per cent of these Year 11 and 12 students indicating they were considering online university studies as an option. However, later in the survey students were also asked specifically: *Are you aware that there are now a number of Regional University Centres in South Australia where students doing online university courses can go to study, to meet other students, get help from tutors and access books and resources?*

Interestingly and perhaps not surprisingly, 48 per cent of students said they were not aware that RUCs existed. Students were then asked: *If there was a Regional University Centre located near where you live, would you be more likely to consider doing an online university course?*

Having been given this brief explanation, 49 per cent responded that they would be more likely to consider studying online with the support of an RUC – quite a change indeed from the original 6.6 per cent. Focus group discussions similarly reflected

an initial reluctance to consider studying online, even if this meant the possibility of going to university while staying in their community. Their experiences of doing their school studies online during the period where schools were closed due to COVID-19 restrictions had added to their reluctance. For example, "I hate online learning, Covid learning was so bad – why would I do that after school?" Those who had already decided to go to university were intent upon a traditional campus experience, even though they were aware of the emotional and financial challenges involved. However, it was also clear in the focus groups that there were a number of students who had thought or were thinking of taking a degree online, seeing it as a way to stay locally, work locally and study locally. For these students, who may not otherwise have considered it possible for them to go to university, the idea of having an RUC to facilitate this process was an appealing one.

Discussion

All students participating in the focus groups were academically capable of university study, being predicted by their schools to achieve ATARs sufficient for university entry. The focus group discussions revealed that for almost all participants, the pull of local connections was very strong. The minority who were assured of financial support from their families and/or other practical support such as accommodation with family/friends in the city, were more likely to be seriously contemplating relocating in order to go to university, despite the challenges involved. However, for students without this support and/or under other pressures to stay and work locally, university was a much less likely option.

This finding was consistent with other research that has highlighted the challenges experienced by students and their families, financially, emotionally and psychologically, when faced with a lack of access to a university in their local area. Difficult decisions then have to be made by these students about leaving or staying, with cost often being a key determining factor, particularly for lower-income families. Such barriers can be insurmountable, even when university aspirations may be high and where parents and families are supportive (Patfield, et al., 2021).

We contend that the growing presence of RUCs offers a real potential for change in this regard. Having an RUC within local communities has been shown to be a positive catalyst in the decision-making of regional students as to whether to undertake university study (Delahunty, 2022, p. 30), with students praising the practical and emotional support these centres offer. Student engagement and sense of "belonging" at university increase in association with attending an RUC, along with improvements in academic results, confidence, motivation and intentions to persist with their studies (Davis & Taylor, 2019; Delahunty, 2022; Stone et. al, 2022). The dedicated study space, high speed internet, access to computers and the face-to-face contact with staff and other students have all been named by regional students as being central to a positive online study experience (Crawford, 2021).

Such evidence indicates that building connections more strongly between schools, universities and RUCs could increasingly play a central role in widening the HE participation of younger regional students, including those leaving high school. Due to the COVID-19 restrictions on face-to-face teaching in Australian high schools during 2020-2021, school leavers are now much more familiar with the concept of online learning. However, very few of the school-leaver students in our research were initially prepared to consider online university study. This was until the concept of RUCs was explained to them, after which almost half were prepared to consider it as an option. This finding suggests that greater awareness of RUCs amongst the regional high school population could provide the opportunity for more school-leavers, including those from backgrounds historically underrepresented in HE, to consider university as a post-school option.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Universities and RUCs need to collaborate actively and purposefully to bring university to regional students, via the combination of online delivery and the physical places and spaces of RUCs. As other research has shown, this is already proving to be successful for mature-age students, particularly women. There is an opportunity now to widen participation further, making university possible for the many regional high school leavers who would not otherwise be in a position, financially or socially, to view university study as a realistic and achievable option. Studying online with the support of an RUC can enable such students to maintain their home, family and community connections, including engaging in local paid work, whilst also undertaking a university degree potentially from any university around the country, hence also broadening their degree options. This has implications not only for individual students but also for regional communities and economies more broadly, with evidence indicating that students who stay in their regional areas while studying and gaining qualifications are more likely to find themselves locally employed in their chosen career (Halsey, 2018): a boon for both the individual who wants to stay, as well as for the local workforce and economy, which retains qualified professionals who know and understand the local area and local needs.

We therefore recommend that Australian universities build closer connections with RUCs to raise awareness across high schools and the broader local community of the potential for regional study through online study options with the support of an RUC. Close collaboration between universities and RUCs on what each can offer to students would also maximise and better coordinate the support available and ensure a more inclusive and holistic student experience. Collaborative, not competitive, relationships between universities and RUCs are crucial in serving the best interests of regional students. In the interests of building such collaborative relationships we also recommend that governments at federal, state and local levels maintain and increase support for RUCs, through funding models that do not place universities and RUCs in a position of competing for funding within a local area, but rather recognise the distinct value of each in making HE available, accessible and manageable for students.

The importance of these spaces and places to the growth of HE access, participation and success for regional students should not be underestimated. Through the presence of a physical study space, essential learning infrastructure, staff support and interaction with other students, RUCs can provide the opportunity for regional students to connect meaningfully with university without having to leave the local connections that they depend upon for their economic and social stability. There are also broader, longer-term benefits for regional areas, with those who study locally being more likely to stay locally, using their qualifications to enrich the social and economic fabric of regional Australia.

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