

# FREEDOM, ASPIRATION AND INFORMED CHOICE IN RURAL HIGHER EDUCATION: WHY THEY ARE SAYING 'NO'

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## ABSTRACT

*Using recent discussions of Isaiah Berlin's two concepts of freedom as a starting point, this paper poses and attempts to answer the question, to what extent are those living in rural and remote communities 'free' to pursue their dreams of higher education? What would count as adequate educational opportunity for those embracing regional and rural lifestyles?*

*Freedom conceived as the ability to pursue options (option-freedom) is sensitive to a variety of factors, including the number of options available, the character of those options, and the nature of an actor's access to options (Pettit 2003). Many factors in a rural context compromise the number and character of educational options. Sparse populations restrict the number of programs and courses that can be offered sustainably. Distance education is not always an attractive option for those from low SES backgrounds who lack already-formed academic habits. All too often the local university becomes the only possible provider of face-to-face higher education for rural communities.*

*To treat regional and rural campuses as providers responding to sustainable local demand, assumes that local communities stand ready to articulate their educational requirements. Yet individuals and communities previously excluded from educational opportunity tend not to know what they don't know. The perceived rewards of holding a qualification may be remote to students who are the first members of their family to attend university. Individuals committed to rural lifestyles may be unable or unwilling to relocate in order to reap the full benefits of their educational investments. All of this suggests that rural campuses must act not only as brokers between rural populations and higher education institutions, but as educators of public opinion and shapers of local educational aspirations.*

*This paper explores some creative ways in which small university campuses might interact with local communities to shape aspirations and flexibly deliver sustainable academic programs (face-to-face and through blended learning) for all members of the local populace, from low SES students to rural practitioners seeking local opportunities for continuing professional development. It is argued that regional and rural campuses need to demonstrate critical self-awareness as they responsibly model higher education and its benefits to local populations.*

## INTRODUCTION

In a national study of year 10-13 rural high school students, it was discovered that many contemporary rural youngsters have naturalised the dominating discourse which identifies further education and training as inescapable means to achieving work- and life-style goals under a globalized economy. Most of the students interviewed were looking 'onward and outward', planning to move away from their local rural communities in order to fulfil their aspirations for a better future (Dalley-Trim & Alloway, 2010, p.121). However, the study failed to capture the voices of those rural youngsters who had already left school (2010, p.113). Alston and Kent have suggested that the future for this latter group may be less than rosy. Studies into the employment and educational experiences of rural young people aged 15-19, conducted in 2001 and 2004, led Alston and Kent to conclude that there is a growing number of socially excluded young people in rural areas (Alston & Kent 2003; Alston & Kent 2009), and that "Australia's investment in the human capital potential of rural and remote young people is declining" (Alston & Kent 2009, p.93).

According to the Bradley Report (DEEWR, *Review of Australian Higher Education: Final Report 2008*; hereafter *Review*), despite some improvements in participation rates from 1989 - 2007, three groups remain significantly under-represented in higher education compared with their incidence in the general population. These groups are (a) students from low socio-economic backgrounds; (b) students from regional and remote areas; and (c) Indigenous students (*Review*, pp.27, 29). The Australian Government has set an ambitious target to realise 40% of 25-34 year olds with bachelor's degrees by 2025. Meeting this target will require universities to 'manufacture demand' for higher education amongst these previously under-represented groups (Gale 2009, p.3). Rural and regional campuses potentially offer access to disproportionately high numbers of students from all three disadvantaged groups, making these campuses an ideal vehicle to help universities pursue new equity targets. However, rural and regional campuses will need to display considerable ingenuity and strategic thinking if they are to see a significant increase in enrolments as a result of current government initiatives. Over the next decade, the total number of 15 to 24-year olds outside the state capitals is projected to decline in Victoria, South Australia, Western Australia, and Tasmania, as well as in Hobart and the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) (p.109). This will exert further pressure upon rural campuses that are already facing thin local populations and diseconomies of scale (*Review*, p.13).

This paper poses and attempts to answer the question, to what extent are those living in rural and remote communities 'free' to pursue their dreams of higher education? And, for those who elect to stay in their local communities, what would count as adequate and appropriate educational opportunities? The paper positions these questions using two different styles of discourse: discourse around the notion of option-freedom, plus discourses of social inclusion and social exclusion. The paper suggests some measures that rural and regional university campuses might

take to strengthen rural educational choices in the face of increasing diseconomies of scale.

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF 'RURAL' AND 'REGIONAL'

Atkin (2003, p.507) notes that 'rural' and 'community' are words which "have no real universal meaning, yet there can hardly be anyone who does not have a mental picture of what they mean to them". There exists no common, consistent, explicit definition of 'rural' (Arnold et al. 2005, p.2; Barter 2008), and this creates difficulties when attempting to compare results across educational studies. The problem is compounded by the fact that 'rural' means different things within the North American, European, and Australian contexts (Barter 2008), making it difficult to generalise across studies on an international basis. It is particularly difficult to generalise from the experience of other countries to Australia's distinctive mix of geography and demography, with a huge, sparsely populated landmass and an extraordinary concentration of settlement and population on the coast (Green & Reid 2004, p.257). In Australia in particular there has been a recent history of rural population decline against a backdrop of regional, urban and metropolitan growth (Halsey 2009, p.11). Generalizations are also dangerous since rural people vary enormously in their occupational engagements, educational levels, social attitudes and values, aspirations and expectations (Dalley-Trim & Alloway 2010, p.109). We can't assume that all young people who live outside Australian metropolitan areas experience life similarly (Alloway & Dalley-Trim 2009, p.50). Studies which fail to define the term implicitly reference the 'rural' against a metrocentric backdrop, thereby casting the rural in a negative light, as an area 'in distress' (Barter 2008, p.470). Such 'deficit' models of the rural typically pervade current rural education policy making (Wallace & Boylan 2009, p.23).

Within the Australian context, the trio of terms 'regional', 'rural' and 'remote' are used to characterize portions of the continental interior beyond the densely populated, coastal urban- and peri-urban fringes. Careless use of these terms potentially ignores enormous diversity in population size, resources, social relationships, economic status and access to services between different localities. Hugo (2000, p.2) suggests that the classification rural, remote and regional is confusing for the way it combines two different conceptual elements: urban versus rural, and accessibility versus remoteness. An area can be both urban and remote. Hugo replaces talk of regional, rural and remote with the term 'non-metropolitan' to describe all parts of the country outside of centres with more than 100,000 inhabitants. Reid et al. (2010, p.268) define 'rural' simultaneously as a statistical (based on population numbers), geographical (based on spaces and places) and cultural (involving the interaction of people in communities) term.

This paper cautiously employs the terms 'rural', 'regional' and 'remote' where appropriate to describe the contexts in which tertiary education is being provided to non-metropolitan populations. The discussion here reflects the experience of the authors in delivering tertiary education in the two regional outlets that comprise the

Centre for Regional Engagement of the University of South Australia – the Whyalla campus located on the Eyre Peninsula in the Upper Spencer Gulf region, and the Mount Gambier study centre in the Limestone Coast region in the far south-east of the state. Both Whyalla and Mount Gambier have populations of c. 23,000 people. Whereas the setting of Mount Gambier would count as ‘rural’, Whyalla is more readily classified as non-metropolitan (in Hugo’s sense of the term) and remote. It is hoped that many of the observations made here can be generalised to many tertiary education providers looking to offer courses in sparsely populated regions.

## FREEDOM AND CHOICE

In his classic paper on the topic, Isaiah Berlin (1958) revealed the potential complexity of the concept of freedom by distinguishing two different species of freedom: freedom from the interference of others (dubbed ‘negative freedom’), and freedom as a form of self-mastery, involving the capacity to formulate and pursue plans for personal improvement (Berlin’s ‘positive freedom’). Recent philosophical discussions of freedom continue to unpack the hidden complexities in this familiar notion. Some commentators have suggested that Berlin’s distinction fails to bring into focus one further species of freedom appearing in previous political writings – freedom as lack of domination by others (Skinner 2002; Pettit 2003). Pettit, who rejects the claim that non-interference represents a distinct and viable notion of freedom, simplifies social freedom to the two broad species of *option-freedom* and *agent-freedom*, identifying these with theories of freedom as non-limitation, and freedom as non-domination (p.388). Option-freedom reflects two things: the character of the options that are accessible to the agent; plus the nature of the agent’s access to those options (Pettit 2003, p.389). Intuitively, an agent enjoys option-freedom in the event that he or she faces a number of suitably robust options that lie within his or her power to realise. The greater the number of personally realisable options that are accessible to an individual, the more option-freedom that individual enjoys (p.392). Individuals enjoy agency-freedom where their option-freedom is ring-fenced from the arbitrary interference of other people through physical, legal or cultural means (p.395).

Under a discourse of option-freedom, the key question posed above becomes: ‘to what extent do rural, regional and remote dwellers face real, robust options for education and training that will secure the jobs and lifestyles they require, and deliver prosperity for their local communities?’ There are various ways in which rural and remote dwellers apparently experience compromised educational options, beginning with reduced elective options in their high school years (Alloway & Dalley-Trim 2009, p.57). Many aspiring rural youngsters face a stark choice between studying locally or in a metropolitan centre. The second option places considerable financial burden upon their families in meeting the costs of fees, travel and living from home, but secures enhanced course options. By contrast, youngsters studying locally must tailor their career aspirations to the limited number of programs offered through that campus. Freedom inevitably is compromised where individuals face an apparently forced choice between two equally unpalatable options. It is perhaps not

surprising that Alloway and Dalley-Trim describe rural high school students responding “with a sense of personal affront as they contemplated the injustices of the systems to which they were subjected” (Alloway & Dalley-Trim, 2009, p.57). It is worth noting that many metropolitan Australians may be forced by financial necessity to study locally rather than pursue the better tertiary programs in their area of career choice. However, many remote living Australians do not enjoy the choice of pursuing tertiary education in their local areas. For those rural and regional Australians able to access local tertiary provision, program and career options can be unusually restrictive, and in a way that reinforces existing gendered stereotypes, confining females to such traditional ‘female’ careers as nursing, social work and teaching. A campus that cannot provide a reasonable variety of programs runs the risk of, simultaneously, patronising its target population and reinforcing entrenched social stereotypes. The latter is particularly unfortunate if, as Alloway and Dalley-Trim (2009, p.52) suggest, young men and women in rural communities can struggle “to construct aspirations and expectations that can move beyond the gendered culture of the communities within which they live”.

## EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION

In contemporary education literature, questions around higher educational opportunities for non-metropolitan Australians form part of discussions concerning personal empowerment for the disadvantaged, couched in the language of social exclusion. Social inclusion and exclusion for individuals and groups reflects the level of access to the assets and resources critical to well-being and growth (Reimer 2004, p.77; Alston & Kent 2009, p.93). An individual is socially excluded where, through no fault of their own, they are unable to participate in the normal relationships and activities available to the majority of people in society (Hayes et al. 2008, p.4; Alston & Kent 2003, p.7; Alston & Kent 2009, p. 93). The term ‘social exclusion’ derives from the French *les exclus*, denoting those individuals (the disabled, lone parents, the uninsured and unemployed) excluded from the French social insurance system (Hayes et al. 2008, p.1). Variant definitions of social exclusion abound, partly reflecting the differing theoretical directions taken on this topic in framing recent British, European and Australian social policy, as outlined by Hayes et al. (2008). However, common to most definitions are (a) restriction of access to opportunities, and (b) limitations of the capabilities required to capitalize on these (Hayes et al. 2008, p.6).

Reimer (2004, p.77), who treats social exclusion as “multi-dimensional, dynamic, multi-levelled, and relational”, identifies four species of social relations which underlie social inclusion and exclusion: market, bureaucratic, associative, and communal. Exclusion can occur with respect to any or all of these types of relationships (p.78). Thus, within the realm of market relations, individuals are likely to experience social exclusion to the extent they lack access to tradable goods and services, possess inadequate information about markets and prices, lack good negotiation skills, and endure low levels of mobility (Reimer 2004, p.79). The demands of one type of relation may conflict with those of another. In particular,

market and associative relations often exist in tension with one another (pp.80, 82). This tension helps to predict ways in which individuals living in rural, regional and remote communities may come to experience social exclusion. For instance, individuals who are well-connected in the local community might be capable of cultivating the close personal and communal relationships needed to compete for jobs in the local economy (Alston & Kent 2003), yet may struggle to master the very different competitive aptitudes that would improve job prospects further afield in a globalised marketplace (Alloway & Dalley-Trim 2009). Likewise, bureaucratization in the form of inflexible regulatory environments for rolling out telecommunications, may lead to poor rates of technology adoption in rural areas (Carson & Cleary 2010, p.1283), resulting in increasing isolation for remote communities who fall on the wrong side of the 'digital divide' between those who possess, and those who lack, access to information and communication technologies (ICTs) (Willis & Tranter 2006; Atkinson et al 2008).

In many cases, social exclusion is a process leading to a spiral of decline for the excluded, whereby "some disadvantages lead to exclusion, which in turn leads to more disadvantage and more social exclusion" (Eurostat Taskforce on Social Exclusion and Poverty Statistics, quoted in Hayes et al. 2003, p.3). For instance, when it comes to the uptake of ICTs, diffusion of technology throughout the social structure is dependent on existing structural social inequalities, with lack of knowledge and skills becoming a potential barrier to technological diffusion (Willis & Tranter 2006, p.48). In their study of the digital divide in the regional city of Albury, Atkinson et al. (2008, p.489) noted that the familiar 'have nots' (the elderly, low-income groups such as female sole parents, people with disabilities, Indigenous people, those with low educational levels) were also likely to become digital 'have nots'. For those who cannot afford a computer and the supporting infrastructure, lack of access to digital databases and reference materials reinforces previous lack of educational attainment. This illustrates how mere access to education cannot guarantee participation and success.

Are rural- and remote-dwelling individuals socially excluded simply by virtue of their geographical positioning? To assume that this is the case in an educational context runs the risk of falling into a 'metrocentric' way of thinking which says that 'rural' is essentially inferior to urban (Heldke 2006), whereas 'urban' equals greater educational opportunities and therefore a better education (Doecke, cited in Yarrow et al. 1999, p.8). The answer to this question depends upon the conception of social exclusion one adopts. Alston and Kent's working definition, whereby "social exclusion refers to the inability of people to participate in key activities in society *through no fault of their own*" (2009, p.93; italics added), would suggest that rural dwellers are socially excluded by virtue of physical isolation beyond their control. However, if we stipulate that social exclusion is caused by the *act* of some individual, group, or institution (Atkinson 1998; cited in Hayes et al. 2008, p.3) then this suggests that social policy more than geographical circumstances becomes a key determining factor in cases of social exclusion. Where a change of policy direction leads to withdrawal of opportunities and social assets previously enjoyed, the

population affected experiences a process of social exclusion. Brennan (2009) describes how moves in recent decades to decentralise and downsize public sector services in Australia diminished the infrastructure supporting curriculum and staff development activities in a rural context. To the extent that the quality of curriculum in rural schools and the quality of ongoing professional development of teaching staff in remote regions becomes compromised, this leads to potential social exclusion as remote students fail to receive vital educational opportunities.

Debates that followed in the wake of Berlin's classic paper can be distilled around the following line of thought. I can be unfree in two distinct ways. Firstly, the options I am presented with can be limited, either intentionally or unintentionally, by the actions of other people. Government policies, and the unthinking actions of others, can determine the circumstances and options I face. Alternatively, I can be unfree, even in the absence of someone standing over me, telling me what to do, if I lack certain forms of self-mastery (Berlin's 'positive freedom') needed to take advantage of the opportunities which present themselves. The thought here is that impediments to freedom come, not just from outside, but sometimes from within the person, in the form of psychological barriers to achieving their goals. In addition to their physical isolation, individuals living in rural and remote communities face psychological and cultural factors that may exclude them from full participation in higher education. Squires (2003, pp.32-33) analyses the components of community isolation as being both physical and psychological in nature. Physical factors influencing isolation relate to issues of location, demographics, access to services, economic capital, and difficulties in travel. Psychological factors determining isolation include locally-held values, attitudes and aspirations; a community's sense of power, history and tradition; and the way these feed into community self-image and social capital. As the *Review* notes, barriers to access for students from regional and remote Australia include "their previous educational attainment, no awareness of the long-term benefits of higher education and, thus, no aspiration to participate" (*Review*, p.27). Atkin (2003) found that the value of tertiary education was not obvious to many rural interviewees. Many believed that they had learnt much more from family and since leaving school, than they had in formal education. Atkin concluded that rural attitudes to education were linked to its value within the local *habitus*, rather than the *habitus* of the dominant (urban-based) group (2003, p.513). The perceived rewards of holding a qualification may seem remote to students who are the first members of their family to attend university, and who face the prospect of working outside of the local community if they hope to secure those rewards. Individuals committed to rural lifestyles may be unable or unwilling to relocate in order to reap the full benefits of their educational investments, giving a further disincentive to engage with higher education.

## **SOCIAL INCLUSION IDEOLOGIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

Gidley et al. (2010: 135) contrast three ideologies potentially underpinning a social inclusion agenda in higher education. These are:

1. a Neoliberal ideology around the notions of economic equity and access;
2. a Social Justice ideology of securing equal rights for all; and
3. a Human Potential ideology speaking to the notion of empowerment through cultural transformation.

A neoliberal agenda advocates a free-market, privatised approach to higher education with funding for research activities concentrated in a small number of elite institutions, thereby allowing small numbers of individuals to excel at the expense of others (Gidley et al. 2010, p.133). Neoliberalism offers the narrowest interpretation of social inclusion, reliant upon a 'trickle down' effect to deliver widening social inclusion as a consequence of economic growth. Educational participation is increased with a view to plugging skills shortages (p.132). Under (2), a social justice ideology paying attention to notions of rights, human dignity and fairness for all, inclusivity is linked with participation, both of previously excluded groups of students; but also participation by universities in their own communities, through university-community partnering on the "engaged" campus (pp.134-135). As Bryden (2007) notes, universities should be more than 'tourists' in the regions they inhabit. Gidley et al. point to fears that this model of higher education provision spreads resources thinly, in a way rendering institutions less globally competitive (p.135). The widest, most inclusive interpretation of social inclusion, that occurring under a human potential ideology, supports broader cultural transformation through maximising the potential of each human being. A human potential ideology attempts to include previously disadvantaged individuals into higher education with a view to embracing what they are and recognizing what they bring to the educational exchange (p.137). The emphasis is upon "psychological and spiritual values of generosity, community and gifting" (p.138). A human potential ideology recommends pedagogies for success, with universities structuring "the student learning experience in ways that open it up and make it possible for students to contribute from whom they are and what they know" (Gale 2009, p.9). One such possible pedagogy for success might be a "funds of knowledge" approach to teaching and learning, which recognizes that all students bring with them valuable understandings that can contribute to the education of others (p.10).

## **NEW DIRECTIONS FOR REGIONAL CAMPUSES**

The preceding discussion suggests that rural, regional and remote campuses will need to exercise considerable ingenuity and flexibility if they are to deliver suitable educational opportunities for previously disadvantaged groups, and make tertiary education attractive to regional and remote populations in a way that will meet the government's equity targets. Below are some suggestions for developing regional campuses in the face of increasing 'diseconomies of scale'.

*The 'one-room' campus.* The *Review* (2008, p.111) suggests that in the future, Australia may need fewer university campuses in regional areas and more 'higher education service points' to be opened or closed in response to specific educational needs. The model here would be the 'one-room campus', where a regional centre operates a room or small suite of rooms using ICTs for external or blended learning delivery across a number of rural towns and remote centres. Whilst optimists see the virtual classroom as successfully providing a "participatory, real time, interactive teaching and learning environment" that represents an improvement upon print-based distance learning courses (Lonie & Andrews 2009), others would see blended learning modalities relying upon information technologies as offering a less than ideal learning experience (Barter 2008, p. 457; Alloway & Dalley-Trim 2009, p.57; Alston & Kent 2009, p.102). There is considerable anecdotal and survey evidence to suggest that students find it difficult to succeed and stay motivated through external course delivery (Ellis et al. 2008, p.77), and often drop this option in favour of more limited face-to-face tuition options (Ellis et al. 2008, p.77; Barter 2009, p.475). Some aspects of the classroom are beyond the scope of the platform to reproduce. The informal feedback conveyed through non-verbal aspects of communication - including facial expressions, physical gestures, stance and vocal intonations of students and facilitators - can be lost or diminished (Lonie & Andrews 2009, p.9). The authors speculate that the electronic platform offers an especially unattractive option for those students of low socio-economic status (low SES) accessing higher education by non-traditional means, who lack the already-formed academic habits of traditional high school graduates. To ensure greater success for one-room classrooms, it would be desirable to follow each remote-delivered lecture with a face-to-face tutorial allowing instructors to test and confirm students' understanding of lectures, plus students' skills in extracting information and meaning from print-based course materials. Special one-on-one tutorials could be conducted to encourage students to develop independent study skills.

*Flexible programming.* Meeting the needs of local populations requires flexibility in program development. Metropolitan universities which hope to recruit well on their regional campuses must respond flexibly to changes in demand in the local market, and cannot take the lazy option of offering a subset of their metropolitan programs to what they imagine to be a 'captive' rural or regional population. Within a small community, the local market for a particular course may be exhausted in just a few years, and only renew itself as another generation of young people graduate high school, or as the local population profile changes through inward migration. It is reasonable to anticipate a faster turn-around of courses in small communities, and a need to rotate program offerings on a short cycle. To make this work, metropolitan universities must offer their regional campuses discretion and flexibility in meeting validation procedures for new academic programs. Regional and rural campuses should also consider offering short-courses including summer schools (Ellis & Sawyer 2009) and short intensive programs to service particular local learning needs.

*Scholarships and special support.* The *Review* suggested that "many students from under-represented groups require significant additional support to undertake their

studies successfully" (Review 2008, p.36). Alston and Kent (2003, p.13) note that the academic performance of rural tertiary students may be compromised by the need to work long hours to help with educational costs. This in turn makes it difficult for rural students to excel at their studies and gain honours and scholarships. Regional campuses with high enrolments of rural students looking to establish higher degree programs would be well advised to offer discretionary scholarships to promising students with less than impeccable academic records, with a view to encouraging these students to tackle honours and make the progression to higher degrees.

*The regional campus as a shaper of educational demand.* Metrocentrism indicates a 'one-size-fits-all' mentality, derived from an understanding of what suits the interests of the (metro) centre, rather than the periphery. In many studies of rural educational disadvantage, metrocentrism describes the tendency of institutions, governments and policy makers to assume that policy servicing the needs of metropolitan populations necessarily serves the needs of the nation as a whole (Wallace & Boylan 2009). Broadly speaking, theorists of the rural have sought to counter metrocentrism by adopting either or both of two strategies: firstly, denying that the metropolitan viewpoint validly models the experiences of rural and remote living communities; and secondly, celebrating the forms of knowledge contained in the rural perspective. There is a tendency to respond to myths belittling the rural by 'valorising' rural attitudes and know-how. Rural attitudes should be accepted for what they are, and not satirized and belittled by contrast with metropolitan attitudes and practices. Yet despite these worthy efforts, theorists looking to ameliorate educational disadvantage should not lose sight of the fact that there may exist some real knowledge gaps within rural communities around the promise and possibilities of higher education.

To treat regional and rural campuses as providers responding to sustainable local demand, assumes that local communities stand poised to articulate their educational requirements. Yet individuals and communities previously excluded from educational opportunity tend not to know what they don't know. The small scale of rural economies limits the capacity of rural youngsters to form career aspirations as they see only a limited range of careers modelled within their communities (Alloway & Dalley-Trim, 2009, p.56). The limited choice of subject electives offered to rural students in their secondary education (Alloway & Dalley-Trim 2009; Ellis et al. 2010, p.19) exacerbates this trend. For these and various reasons outlined on page 6 above, it is clear that some populations may require educating to what a university might provide, and the real benefits that education can bring to their communities. All of this suggests that rural campuses must act not only as brokers between rural populations and higher education institutions, but as educators of public opinion and shapers of local educational aspirations. Here regional university campuses would be well-advised to follow the lead of rural community schools in modelling academic possibilities to the local population. Through becoming a real, engaged presence in the local community, rather than a 'tourist' or 'squatter' offering metropolitan courses in the outback, regional campuses can help to shape the local *habitus* and thereby help create demand for educational opportunities.

*Local knowledges and local course content.* In 2007, only 12% of all students enrolled in higher education in the public universities in Australia were located in regional and remote areas (*Review*, p.110). The *Review* proposes raising this to 20% by 2020. Meeting this target would serve the interests of the nation, in upskilling the workforce to improve national economic growth and competitiveness. However, it is important to note that what is in the interests of the nation and what serves the interests of rural, regional and remote populations may not coincide. Where the skills taught in school are disconnected from rural or non-urban remote life, youth conclude that they can only use the skills they are learning in urban places, encouraging them to shift their aspirations towards a metropolitan life (Shamala & MacTavish 2009, p.3). Atkin (2003) queries the value in a rural context of post-16 training and lifelong learning, since reskilling for jobs that do not exist in the rural context promotes outmigration and therefore poses a threat to the stability and sustainability of rural life (p.509). Programs offered on regionally-based campuses must be contextually appropriate if these are to service the social needs of local communities. Rural campuses and colleges should be striving to do something more than deliver an urban curriculum in the countryside (Atkin 2003, p.516).

In the recent rural education literature, much has been made of the notion of place-based education (White & Reid 2008; Lock et al. 2009; Shamala & MacTavish 2009; Reid et al. 2010).

Place-based education theorises the notion of *rural social space* as a form of 'practiced place' - "the set of relationships, actions and meanings that are produced in and through the daily practice of people in a particular place and time" (Reid et al. 2010, p.269). Adopting a "funds of knowledge" pedagogy in a rural context means that rural tertiary students would not simply contribute from whom they are and what they know, but also from *where they know*. Heldke (2006) points to the metrocentric prejudice in modern western societies which denies that living in a small town or in the country requires any particular or desirable forms of knowledge (2006, pp.152, 158). By insisting upon the importance of the place-based, situated knowledge that rural students bring to the classroom, a curriculum that incorporates place-based education provides an antidote to this prejudice. And because local students are now 'expert' in a type of knowledge that informs the learning experience (Gale 2009, p.11), they become positioned for academic 'success'.

One obvious way to apply the notion of place-based education in a higher education context, is to draw upon the prior experiential learning (Hamer 2010) of rural dwellers. Halsey (2009, p.13) argues the value of exploring links between the notion of sustainability and rural education, as a way of counter-influencing the continuing marginalisation of rural education. Using the educational curriculum to explore such important issues of sustainability as water conservation and use in a drying continent promises to provide benefits to the nation as a whole. Australia's primary agriculture producers and their communities are living at the sharp end of climate change. The strategies they adopt to survive constitute 'mini-experiments' in what can be done on a wider national basis to sustainably utilise dwindling water

supplies. This is one area in which rural place-based knowledge provides a form of understanding that can benefit all parts of the nation. One recent research project in Australia (Brown & Schulz, 2009; Golding & Angwin, 2009; Golding & Campbell, 2009; Golding et al. 2009) has investigated this form of place-based rural learning by exploring what and how adults learn in responding to changes in water availability in the southern Murray-Darling Basin. The team rationale for exploring the issue of adult learning around water in a rural context is that “knowledge of how and what adults learn about deciding what to change, what to save, and what to lose, is most likely to be found in those water and climate-sensitive communities” (Golding & Campbell 2009, p.433). Rural university campuses that can tap into the environmental science expertise existing on their metropolitan campuses are better positioned than rural schools to explore the significance of place-based knowledge for environmental sustainability.

*The symbolic importance of the regional campus.* It is often noted that local school carries a special symbolic and cultural importance for many small and remote communities, with the rural school serving as the largest local employer, and the locus of most community and cultural events (Wright 2003; Wallin & Sackney 2003, p.11). Ideally, regional university campuses could carry symbolic importance for the communities in which they are embedded. For this reason, the local university should do more than offer a few undergraduate courses. It needs to become a locus for aspects of community life, including teacher education and continuing professional development. Smaller community-based initiatives can also have a positive impact upon local community learning, and help to embed the campus within the local community. Rural and regional campuses tend to enjoy greater space than their metropolitan equivalents, and this space can be used for the benefit of the community. Even a simple on-campus project such as a community eco-garden, provides community learning opportunities around the notions of sustainability and good nutrition. In such a case, what knowledge can do for an individual and a community is *modelled* as well as conveyed to the local population, in a way that helps to create local demand for further learning opportunities.

*Supporting teacher education.* A perennial theme in the rural education literature is the problem of attracting, preparing and retaining quality teachers in rural localities (Boylan & McSwann 1998; Yarrow et al. 1999; Green & Reid 2004; Arnold et al. 2005; Barter 2008; White & Reid 2008; Lock et al. 2009; Reid et al. 2010; Campbell & Yates 2011). As a result, considerable thought has been given to ways in which teacher education might better prepare graduates for the special social and cultural demands of teaching in rural communities (Yarrow et al. 1999; Green & Reid 2004; White & Reid 2008). A 2005 national teacher survey reported by Panizzon and Pegg (2007) indicated that the location in which a teacher undertakes their preservice training can influence where they subsequently seek employment. Thus, approximately 73% of teachers who lived in rural centres while completing their teacher education course went on to work in provincial or remote area schools. Regional universities can make an important contribution in preparing future teachers who are more likely to seek employment in schools located in rural and regional areas of Australia

(Panizzon & Pegg 2007, p.14). Even those regional campuses that are not actively engaged in providing teacher education programs can provide logistic support in organising the rural practicums needed to encourage the rural teachers of the future, and help build links between potential teachers and community members that could help retain good qualified teaching staff in rural schools. Taking such an initiative would help to develop further good will towards the university within the local community.

*Supporting on-going professional development.* Professionals working in a regional and rural context lack the infrastructure to pursue continuing professional development (Brennan 2009). Professional isolation in a rural context can lead to weak professional communities, which perpetuate ineffective practices (Arnold et al. 2005, p.18). Many rural-based professionals regret the lack of access to their professional peers (Brennan 2009, p.9); and this may be a contributory factor in the struggle to retain good teachers in rural schools. Academics working upon rural campuses might provide leadership in this area by co-ordinating contacts between rural professionals in their own professional or discipline area, providing infrequent professional development seminars and perhaps an on-line discussion board to allow professionals to assist one another in reflecting upon their professional practice. On a more formal basis, campuses might offer accreditation for professionals by offering qualifications that exploit experiential learning. One example of this is intensively taught Graduate Certificate in Business offered on the Cradle Coast Campus of the University of Tasmania. (See <http://www.utas.edu.au/ird/graduate-certificate-in-business>). This qualification allows students to put their own work or life experiences into action by drawing upon their own career or life milestones to use towards assessment in certain units.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has grappled with the notion of rural educational disadvantage from two theoretical positions: diminished educational opportunities and options compared with urban dwellers; and the perspective of social exclusion. Whereas the discourse of option-freedom describes the educational constraints under which rural dwellers operate, the discourse of social exclusion describes the character of their access to educational options. In so doing, these discourses offer different yet complimentary perspectives upon the issue of educational disadvantage for rural, regional and remote tertiary students.

Although there is no magic bullet to solve the problem of higher educational provision in sparsely populated regions, this paper has offered some positive steps that self-critical rural and regional campuses can take to enhance the educational opportunities and prospects of non-metropolitan Australians. As Ellis et al. (2008, p.77) discovered in a survey of students at Mount Gambier, many regional students would not study at all, if they could not study locally. This means that students serviced on local campuses represent a gain to their universities and to the higher education system as a whole. Thus, adopting some subset of the measures proposed

here should go some way towards meeting current equity targets for Australian higher education.

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