A Whole-of-Rural-Community Approach to Supporting Education and Career Pathway Choice

Sue Kilpatrick
University of Tasmania
sue.kilpatrick@utas.edu.au

Sarah Fischer
University of Tasmania
sarah.fischer@utas.edu.au

Jessica Woodroffe
University of Tasmania
Jessica.Woodroffe@utas.edu.au

Nicoli Barnes
University of Tasmania
nicoli.barnes@utas.edu.au

Olivia Groves
Curtin University
olivia.groves@curtin.edu.au

Kylie Austin
University of Wollongong
kaustin@uow.edu.au

Abstract

Rural communities and partnerships are critical in career education, promoting pathways into work and further education and training. Families, teachers, and employers all may influence young people and adults who are considering pathway choices. This research aimed to equip these 'key influencers' with the knowledge and confidence to have supportive pathway conversations with rural young people and adults. The focus was not on those needing help with education/career choices, but rather those who influence their decisions. We used a Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR) approach in three communities to address the question: How can a whole of community approach best equip key influencers to inform and support rural student post school pathways?

Community working parties were established to work alongside researchers to select, trial and evaluate of whole community, place-based, coordinated career education interventions, which targeted communities' individual geographic, demographic and employment context. Communities were resourced with a local pathway broker and small budget for interventions. Individual interventions and the overall project approach were evaluated.

Findings suggest that rural community-researcher partnerships can be effective in equipping key influencers with confidence and knowledge to inform and support education/career pathway choices. Community partnerships can take account of community assets and allow for

interventions that address community contexts. Partnerships should foster community ownership to deliver education/career pathway information interventions that are flexible, accessible, sustainable, place-based, and authentic. This paper sets out a model for partnerships that effectively equips key influencers in rural communities to support education/career pathway choices.

Keywords: *careers advice, post-secondary education, rural community education*

Introduction

Education and career pathway decision making in rural, regional, and remote (hereafter 'rural') Australia is crucial for building strong societies and economies in the context of a changing global economy (Napthine et al., 2019; Halsey, 2018). There is a strong mandate in Australia to strengthen rural career education, supported by recent education reviews. Napthine et al. (2019) assert that halving the gap in attainment and participation rates in rural areas would increase Australia's GDP by approximately $AUD25 billion by 2050 and recommends a regionally- based model for career guidance to enable aspiration and improve advice for rural students. Halsey (2018) notes declining rates of transition to university as remoteness increases and a persistent gap in educational attainment of rural students compared to their urban counterparts. Halsey also notes that contextual factors and relationships interact to influence learning and post school pathways of rural students.

The *National Career Education Strategy* (Department of Education and Training, 2019) identifies that rural local communities and partnerships are critical in career education, promoting pathways into work and further education and training. The strategy asserts that communities can contribute to program design and delivery so that programs have authentic, relevant learning experiences that meet local needs and expose people to local employment opportunities and pathways. It argues career education partnerships should: draw on local resources; involve collaboration with families, employers, and the local community; reflect the diversity of employer needs and available pathways; and work in partnership with higher education and vocational education and training (VET) providers to ensure career education places equal value on all pathways.

A whole community approach to supporting pathway choice can be expected to be able to take account of place-based contextual factors and relationships noted by Halsey (2018), Napthine et al. (2019) and Department of Education and Training (2019). The project discussed in this paper therefore addressed the research question: *How can a whole of community approach best equip key influencers to inform and support low SES rural student higher education participation?* Because we are interested in active support of students, our question is about individual and institutional actors, termed influencers, rather than the more passive concept of influences.

The following sections provide background on formation of aspirations in rural areas and how individuals, groups and institutions can influence formation of aspirations and decisions about education and career pathways before discussing the role of communities in pathway decisions.

Aspirations, Attainability, and Influencers of Education Pathways

Aspirations are typically formed in primary and early secondary years, when parents, families and teachers are key influencers (Naylor et al., 2013). Previous research in Australia and elsewhere (Woodroffe et al., 2017) found that schools are charged with most of the responsibility for providing a curriculum that equips students with the necessary skills, knowledge, and attributes to navigate the work environment, but teachers feel ill-equipped to give careers advice. They welcome involvement of other stakeholders in raising their own awareness, as well as students' knowledge. Calabrese (2006) argues that schools alone are "*unable to successfully respond to*

social and economic changes" (p. 176) and rural youth are often not given the information and skills they need at school to make informed choices about future life and work.

An understanding of the attainability of higher education is essential to convert aspiration to expectation and eventual participation for young people; an understanding that is also necessary for older adults (Khattab, 2015; Kilpatrick et al., 2019). There is strong theoretical evidence for pathway and articulation programs in influencing both aspiration and attainability (Naylor et al., 2013).

A comprehensive literature review spanning 25 years that focussed on key influences on rural Australian school students' aspirations for higher education found home and community had a significant role in shaping aspirations (Fray et al., 2020). Much of the research focused on barriers and enablers including home and community factors, financial capacity, distance to university, emotional cost of relocation, supportive school environments, teacher encouragement and school experiences, and a lack of certainty regarding post-school options. Turner (2020) argues that the role of community influence can be important in Australian students' pathway decisions, but that it is different for each student as other factors including financial resources also influence decisions. International research has similar themes, Rönnlund et al. (2018) find that social, cultural, and financial resources are not only important in Swedish students' decision-making processes, but these resources are more important for rural young people than for their urban peers.

Parents, Family, Teachers, Peers, Employers and Others as Influencers

Peers, parents, family, and teachers influence students' aspirations and pathway choices in Australia and elsewhere (Hallinan & Williams, 1990; Kiuru et al. 2007; Krause et al., 2009). For rural students in Australia and internationally, universities are an important influencer of aspirations, perceptions of attainability and eventual participation in higher education, along with community members, employers, industry, and local media (Katersky Barnes et al., 2019; Hughes & Karp, 2006). Employers play a role in influencing employees and other adults in rural communities to upskill for increasingly sophisticated rural jobs (Houghton et. al., 2023). International research suggests employers are also influential in student pathway decisions (Hughes & Karp, 2006). These key influencers can help motivate students and adults alike through connectedness, positive and reciprocal relationships, and support; all found to be beneficial for students' academic engagement, competence, motivation, and achievement (Guay, et al., 2013; King, 2015; McInerney, 2008; Ricard & Pelletier, 2016).

The Role of Communities

Community members, particularly young people, are impacted by the 'knowledge production' featuring in their social context. It is communities where associations are made about values and norms of education, training, and future work, including education pathways (Corbett, 2007; Harwood et al., 2017; Krause et al., 2009). Harwood et al. (2017) argue "*where we live and who we interact with have a big impact on what we do*" (p. 36). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and people with disability who live in low socioeconomic communities, combined with rural status, experience a compounding disadvantage which further increases the challenge of higher education participation (Cardak et al., 2017).

In Australia, people living in communities and families with limited experience of higher education are less likely to aspire to a university pathway (Cardak et al., 2017), and often struggle to imagine studying at university and working in the kinds of jobs a degree would qualify them to do (Woodroffe et al., 2017). People living in communities with limited experience of higher education have often not been exposed to the navigational capital, or "*skills of maneuvering through social institutions*" (Yosso, 2005, p.80) to negotiate the academic and practical steps to get to university (Abbott-Chapman, 2011; Krause et al., 2009).

Several international studies analyse how rural communities shape young people's options in transitions to post-school education and careers, particularly in relation to students' financial and other resources (Hinton-Smith, 2012; Shah et al., 2015; Shah & Whiteford, 2016). Other factors affecting rural young people's decisions include schools promoting 'learning to leave' (Corbett, 2007; Rosvall, 2020), and gendered socialisation factors such as promotion of male-dominated trades which meant young women were more likely to leave communities for education and career purposes (Bjarnason & Thorlindsson, 2006; Rosvall, 2020). Corbett (2007) finds that rural Canadian youth who have the luxury of flexibility in time to make decisions and have the option to be mobile, are more successful in their educational pursuits.

Education-community Partnerships

Australian schools currently have limited external support in providing career education to their students (Hooley et al., 2015; Woodroffe et al., 2017). Most are not well equipped to create locally relevant programs that facilitate, promote, and enable students to actively understand, negotiate and feel supported in their choice of careers. Partnerships with community can provide students with authentic learning opportunities and expose career pathways (Kilpatrick et al., 2002). Partnerships between schools, universities, VET, industry and community organisations can be effective structures for programs which prepare students and their families for further education and work (Machimana et al., 2020; Santarossa & Woodruff, 2020; Woodroffe et al., 2017). Education-community partnerships can lead to a radical shift in attitudes and practice (Machimana et al., 2020), suggesting university outreach should work in partnership with rural communities to inform student aspirations and reveal practical steps that make higher education attainable (Kilpatrick et al., 2019).

People termed 'boundary crossers' (Kilpatrick et al., 2002) or 'boundary spanners' (Miller, 2008) are key in making education-community partnerships work. They have credibility within multiple community domains, speak the language of all, build trust and dialogue between domains, and provide partnership continuity. Their informal leadership assists communities to develop shared understandings and goals, supporting community participation in shared decision making to facilitate transformation to meet community needs (Barnes et al., 2016; Kilpatrick et al., 2020; Miller, 2008). Success in partnerships is more likely when the boundary crosser is motivated by an underlying community commitment and community is supportive. Boundary crossers' actions can reduce tensions between groups to bring about mutual benefit (Kilpatrick et al., 2002; Miller, 2008).

A people-rich, partnership approach is most effective in informing key influencers of post-school education pathway choice (Fischer et al., 2017). A place-based learning approach takes advantage of geography to create authentic, meaningful, and engaging learning (Gruenewald & Smith, 2008). Taken together, this suggests a whole of community approach to equipping key influencers with an understanding of education and career pathways is likely to be most effective.

Methodology

Community based participatory action research (CRPR) was applied to select, trial, and evaluate whole of community, place-based, coordinated career education interventions which targeted key influencers in three rural case study sites in two Australian states. CBPR draws on community development principles and involves community members more equitably than traditional methodologies through a collaborative approach (Collins et al. 2018). It aims to build understanding and knowledge, in this case of education and career pathways, and integrate knowledge gained with interventions and changes while also building the capacity of community members (Israel et al., 2012).

Three Australian rural communities in two states were selected as study sites based on: consultation with state departments of education, schools, local government, Regional Development Australia Committees, neighbourhood houses, libraries, local business groups and industry stakeholders; and interest shown by local government and community stakeholders in education and career pathways/partnerships. The rural communities are typical of lifestyle communities which attract population growth, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic (Houghton et. al, 2023). They are either coastal, or in attractive settings, not too far from major population centres. Their populations are older than the Australian average. All communities have an Aboriginal population above the national average. Major industries are typical of rural lifestyle communities: health and social assistance; agriculture, forestry and fishing, tourism and retail were prominent (Houghton et. al, 2023). Rural Community 2, located closest to its state capital has the highest educational attainment relative to its state average, although Year 12 completion is highest in Rural Community 3 which has the best access to Year 11 and 12 schooling (.economyid, nd). Youth unemployment significant makes a contribution to overall unemployment in each community (.economyid, nd). Site populations varied from 6,000 to 38,000 (.economyid, nd). Appendix A compares the communities on several demographic indicators and other characteristics. While the original intention was smaller sites, findings suggest that for education and careers pathway information or advice programs, rural regions centred on towns with a range of services are an appropriate scale.

The communities were embedded in selection/modification of interventions, their delivery and evaluation. The research design was flexible, with ongoing evaluation informing modifications as the project progressed (see Woodroffe et al. (2022) for detailed discussion of how CBPR was applied in this project).

Ethics approvals were obtained from the Ethics Committees of the researchers' universities (University of Tasmania Human Research Ethics Committee, H0018302, University of Wollongong Ethics Committee, 2019401).

Education and career pathway working parties of 10 to 12 members (hereafter: working parties) were established in each community between October and December 2019. Organisations that had assisted in the site selection process were invited to join the working party and/or nominate others active in education and career sectors to be members. Each community was resourced with a part-time locally based pathway broker. Pathway brokers were familiar with the community context and were responsible for coordinating the project within their community. Each community was also resourced with a small budget to be used for interventions, for example, to purchase training, develop resources and/or put on events.

To evaluate the project at levels of the whole community approach in each community and of individual interventions, different quantitative and qualitative tools were used. A mixed method, multi-phase, triangulation design (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998) was chosen. Evaluation was built into the structure of the working party meetings. Notes from working party meetings including researcher reflections and field notes assisted in informing the choice of evaluation techniques. Within the CBPR framework, working party meetings helped legitimise decisions and guide both project activities and the evaluation. It was anticipated that working party members' understanding of local context would increase the likelihood of interventions being successful (Israel et al., 1998). A sequential iterative approach was used for data analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

Initial meetings provided statistical data about the communities such as that provided in Appendix A. They included short surveys and focus group discussion which served to capture 'baseline' evaluation data about relevant existing programs and information sources and provided advice about community understandings and culture to inform selection of interventions. Second meetings discussed interventions that had been successful in informing

key influencers in similar community contexts. Researchers and working party members collaboratively identified and modified one or two interventions to fit each community's context and need, see Appendix A for context and needs and Appendix B for interventions and their aims. COVID-19 disrupted planned delivery, with some interventions to more flexible, online approach. Final evaluation interviews and focus groups were conducted as interventions concluded.

A variety of methods informed the evaluation reported here, including thematically analysed focus groups, interviews, community meetings and field notes as well as simple descriptive statistical analysis of survey data.

Results

Working Parties and Pathway Brokers

All communities established working parties that captured a broad diversity of community key influencers. There were representatives from education, employers and industry, community organisations/services, family/carers, and local government, who collectively had networks reaching across each community. Rural Community 2 working party attracted several 'people who had moved from interstate, who came with experience in marketing, communication and project management. While working party members in all communities reported they were motivated by what they might learn as individuals and what they could do to support other community members, Rural Community 2 working party members were also interested in building connections for themselves and others.

While each working party was supported by a pathway broker, the role was enacted differently. In Rural Community 1, the working party was consulted about a local broker, and it was agreed to advertise locally, but the university employ the broker. Rural Community 2's local government was about to employ a part-time project officer for an employment related project. The university subcontracted the local government to employ the pathway broker a person was jointly selected for both roles. In Rural Community 3 staff from the local university campus responsible for outreach activities jointly took on the role.

Overall, working party members in each community reported that they had started with a 'good' to 'expert' understanding of careers education and pathways and were mostly confident in sharing this knowledge with young people and others. Despite their initial assessment of their own understanding and confidence, at the end of the project working party members reported increased capacity in supporting others to make education and career pathway decisions.

Interventions

Each working party identified their community's needs for education and career pathways advice, and the target key influencer groups best placed to address these needs. They selected interventions to improve the knowledge and confidence of target key influencers. Some interventions had to be modified in response to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. Implemented interventions are set out in the Appendix B.

All three communities identified parents/carers/families as the group most in need of upskilling and initially chose adaptations of the *Parents Matter* intervention. Challenges of bushfires and COVID-19 in Rural Community 3 saw the working party modify their parent intervention to *FutureTalk*, targeting Year 12 parents. Rural Community 1 also chose *Warm Connections*, targeting staff and volunteers in community centres and libraries, to better address a high unemployment in its community, despite many local job vacancies. Rural Community 2 also selected the *Growth Industry Preparation Program (GrIPP)* to better equip teachers, staff in community centres and

employment agencies and support services to act as key influencers by exposing the many and varied jobs in local industries.

Surveys of those who participated in interventions agreed participation increased their knowledge of education and career pathways and their confidence in talking to others about pathways. For example, 92% of 27 surveyed Rural Community 1 Careers Expo attendees agreed the event provided them 'with improved knowledge of career options after school', and 96% agreed it 'gave me more confidence about speaking to my children/employees/ students/others about career options after school'. Agreement on the same questions from 9 surveyed after Rural Community 2's Parents Matter online Q&A event was 78% and 89%.

Interviews with intervention participants and stakeholders found similarly positive outcomes. *FutureTalk* participant parents were especially motivated to join the program to assist their Year 12 children navigate post-school options to alleviate the impacts of both the bushfires and COVID. It was a valuable way to learn about post-school options for parents educated overseas. One parent reported a change in her son's perception of her role in his post-school decision making process, from that of outsider to valued contributor. Another felt an extra burden to help her daughter following traumatic events:

> *I did this [program] because my daughter's in Year 12 … I thought I'd help her because we'd also lost our house at the beginning of the year in the fires … She was really struggling so I just thought I'd try and help her any way I could.*

A staff member interviewed about Warm Connections in Rural Community 1 noted benefits to her community centre's clients. When someone comes in for one type of support, they may realise that there are other services they could use, such as education or training:

> *We're quite an active community centre and we provide a lot of resources to communities…Oftentimes… you strike up a conversation and you discover their interests …[for example] a guy that was really tech savvy, self-learned, and so I asked him had he ever explored the idea of making a career out of it and considering further education ….*
> *(Community service staff member)*

Reaching the Target Audience

Evaluation data collected from lead parent and panel volunteers and those who participated in *Parents Matter* and *GrIPP* events in Rural Community 2 strongly suggested working party-selected interventions were well promoted and attracted key influencers in their community, who reported increased knowledge of, and confidence in talking about, careers and education pathways. Coupled with the overall success of the chosen interventions, Rural Community 2 working party's expectations revealed at the start of the project appeared to have been met, that is learning as individuals, and supporting other community members to learn more about education and career pathways.

Support from schools in Rural Community 1 was more limited than anticipated: it was anticipated that the schools would be active members of the working party and promote the project and its interventions through school communications with parents. This was partly due to the impact of COVID-19 and the pressure on schools to move to online learning. Working party members, lead parents and other stakeholders interviewed all noted that a strong school presence was integral to the effectiveness of any program to inform teachers and other key influencers of education and career pathway choice. Concern was expressed at the third working party meeting that the schools' priorities were not aligned with local employment options; schools' limited subject offerings did not meet major industry employment requirements. Limited school engagement reduced access to information channels that would reach and engage parents and may have constrained the project's ability to reach all Rural Community 1 sub-groups.

It was pivotal that we had to work through the school to get these things happening. And because the school was, not disengaged, but just so hard to access because kids weren't there … it was very hard to get hold of anyone or any support from the school at that time. I think that dragged it on a lot longer than it needed to. (Pathway broker)

Community Orientation and Maturity in Working Together

The Rural Community 2 working party, pathway broker and those who volunteered for both *Parents Matter* and the *GrIPP* events highlighted what can be achieved when a group operates with a coherent approach to achieving the goal of informing key influencers of careers and education pathway decisions in their community. The community was generally supportive, including businesses, industries, and other community representatives. As the project progressed, it became apparent that project ownership moved from the university to a shared responsibility, then to the community. In contrast in Rural Community 1, although the pathway broker worked closely with local government, working party and community, the project was driven by the university throughout its duration.

Each community faced unique challenges and opportunities. They varied in the ease with which they worked together internally, and for Rural Communities 1 and 2, with external parties including university researchers and the GrIPP program. Differences appear to be related to the commitment of a trusted local institution, a history of working together internally and with external parties, and skills and expertise of community members who are willing to volunteer to work for the benefit of their community. The planning and delivery of interventions in Rural Community 3 benefited from the skills and networks of the externally orientated working party, while Rural Community 2's intervention benefited from its working party and lead parent group, which included parents who had moved into the community, bringing professional skills and a desire to make a difference in their new home.

Although the project was successful in providing information and confidence to key influencers in Rural Community 1, social and political divides hindered its operation and impact. While Rural Community 3 benefited from a local university campus and Rural Communities 1 and 2 from support from local governments, having a pathway broker employed by a local institution appeared to assist in initiating community engagement with the project. The role of local government as a trusted, respected community institution gave the project credibility in Rural Community 2.

It was apparent that Rural Community 1 needed some support to work collaboratively across all community subgroups. The community has the potential to build capacity in this area. While the intention of the project was to move the weight of ownership and leadership from university to communities, project design was flexible enough to provide an on the ground local pathway broker who was able to work closely with the university to drive the project.

A final indication of the success of the project is that there are plans in all three communities to build on learnings from the project and move forward with some kind of education and career pathway information program for key influencers. There was evidence in Rural Community 1 that the community was prepared to take some ownership of the education and careers space. At the well-attended joint working party-community meeting a recently established local employment agency agreed to apply for funding for a school-community employment coordinator, and businesspeople agreed to revitalise the chamber of commerce so business could present a united voice about education and training for local jobs.

Discussion

The project design which required community and expert researcher input into choice and design of interventions appeared to assist in identifying, reaching, and engaging the target community

influencer audience. In all three communities, the project engaged key influencers who research has shown can play a strong role in influencing career and education pathways (Kilpatrick et al., 2019; Machimana et al., 2020; Turner, 2020). They included families, teachers, employers and others in the community who have conversations with young people and adults considering education and career choices.

Findings indicate that the three communities were very different in how they operated, their resources, and how they approached project partnerships. CBPR proved to be effective for working with the diverse communities to promote whole of community education and career pathways (Woodroffe et al., 2022). Across sites there were overarching themes and practices that provide important insights into the how to implement a whole of community approach, and what is effective for equipping key influencers to support education and career pathway choices. The themes were community ownership, engagement, and inclusion; flexibility, accessibility, and authenticity; and community orientation and maturity.

What Makes for an Effective Whole of Community Approach?

Community Ownership, Engagement and Inclusion. Working parties across all three sites engaged people with a range of the roles suggested in the national career education strategy: government, parents and carers, school leaders and teachers, and employers (Department of Education and Training, 2019). Employers were explicitly included in all communities as representatives of key local industries, rather than employers more generally, consistent with literature about programs that are effective in informing parents, as well as students about careers and employment (Machimana et al., 2020; Santarossa & Woodruff, 2020; Woodroffe et al., 2017). All working parties included community providers of VET and/or adult education. Rural Communities 1 and 2 also included people with roles in sporting and other groups. Rural Community 3 had representation from its Aboriginal community.

The inclusion of, and engagement with, community members who have credibility and visibility, and are well-integrated in their community is a critical part of CBPR (Israel et al., 2012; Woodroffe et al., 2022). Drawing on a diversity of community members' knowledge (Israel et al., 1998) led to improved understanding of local context and experience, fostered local ownership of activities and outputs, and assisted in validation of findings (Dockery, 2020). Key mechanisms which assisted in driving community ownership, engagement and inclusion in the project were local working parties and pathway brokers who acted as community-based incubators, activators and boundary crossers, as discussed below.

Community Working Parties and Brokers. CBPR design emphasises the involvement of community members in projects. The nature and extent of their influence on the governance, design and implementation of research can differ and lead to different forms of ownership (Blumenthal et al., 2013). Community working parties provided local contextual input and played key roles in decisions made throughout project implementation. Each working party captured a broad diversity of key influencers of education and career pathway decisions in their community and had networks reaching across the community. Members were motivated by a shared desire to improve outcomes for their communities. Young people were not included in the working parties because of the focus of this project on key influencers to fill a research gap.

The working parties acted as *incubators*, creating a supportive environment for the development of new ideas and promoting connections with other efforts within the community (Spitzer-Shohat et al., 2020). They assisted in testing ideas, explained secondary data, shared observations of their lived experience, provided insight and input into findings and progress and, most importantly, identified local contextual factors that might enhance or hinder understanding of education and career pathways in their community and how ideas could be translated into programs and participation (Harwood et al., 2017, 2017; Kilpatrick et al., 2019). For example, in two communities, statistical data indicated that there was limited experience of post-school

education. Local knowledge gained from the working parties assisted the researchers in understanding that this was largely attributable to community culture (Kilpatrick et al., 2019; Southgate & Bennett, 2016). The working parties helped to navigate factors such as program delivery format preferences, the social/political divides in Rural Community 1, the invisibility of many jobs in local industries in Rural Community 2, and the siloed approach to career education in Rural Community 3.

Working parties acted as internal community *activators* through developing a charter of action for a whole of community approach. They developed expected project outcomes, assisted in development, implementation, and evaluation of interventions, and confirmed the relevance of findings to local context (Woodroffe et al., 2022). The breadth of experience and local contextual understanding in the working parties assisted identify enhancers and hindrances to effectiveness of interventions for key influencers. Overall, the combination of three factors resulted in the selection of interventions that fitted local community contexts and were owned by the community. They (1) identified their community's needs in terms of education and career pathways advice, (2) identified the key influencer groups best placed to address these needs, and (3) selected interventions (*Parents Matter, Warm Connections, GrIPP, FutureTalk*) to improve the knowledge and confidence of key influencers. Working parties were therefore a key mechanism for engaging key influencers, and for the development and implementation of locally relevant activities that worked for that community (Israel et al., 1998).

Working parties, alongside pathway brokers, acted as *boundary crossers* (Kilpatrick et al., 2008; 2002; Miller, 2008), connecting institutions and subgroups within community and connecting researchers with communities. The employment of a locally based pathway broker in each community was critical. Pathway brokers were key to the partnership as well as the whole of community approach, acting as community liaison, organising interventions, meetings and distributing evaluation tools. They joined up groups and key influencers and drew on their own lived experience and knowledge of community to increase project engagement and community ownership. Pathway brokers were integral in creating co-learning processes that facilitated reciprocal transfer of knowledge, skills, capacity, and experience between community and researchers (Israel et al., 2012).

Community trust of pathway brokers was important to an effective CBPR approach (Blumenthal et al., 2013). In Rural Community 1, local tensions affected trust – while not a widely shared view, it nonetheless negatively affected the engagement of some community members. In Rural Community 2, where the pathway broker was employed by local government, the combination of personal knowledge and community trust resulted in high community buy-in and engagement with the interventions. It was evident that having a well-integrated pathway broker is essential to the success of initiatives in a community, and that the broker must be trusted and seen as credible across the sub-groups of their community to successfully play a boundary crosser role (Kilpatrick et al., 2008; Miller, 2008).

While the pathway brokers were key activators and boundary crossers, they were not the only boundary crossers active in the project. Local government played the role of boundary crosser in Rural Community 2 by employing the broker in other work which was synergistic with the project and by developing a shared understanding with the researchers about desired project outcomes. The university was a boundary crosser in Rural Community 3, being credible both within the community and aligned to the researchers, and so able to speak the language of both, and manage expectations of both partners in relation to what the project could achieve.

In line with the CBPR approach, involvement of community members was an essential part of the project. Searching for the right people demands time and commitment; 'don't just target the usual suspects', consider the skills of those who have recently arrived as well as established residents and others with connection to community, for example industry bodies.

Flexibility, Accessibility, Sustainability and Authenticity

This project took place during a global pandemic, where all sites faced considerable challenges including limits on mobility; a move to students learning at home; closure of university campuses; and a significant reduction in industry and community activity. The longer-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in areas such as post-school education and training pathways as well as youth employment foregrounded the importance of the project to the local community setting. It also highlighted the significance of identifying key influencers and supporting communities to best equip themselves for education and career pathways. Finding ways in which this project could continue and adapt to changed external contexts and also be responsive to the local contexts while remaining authentic and relevant, was essential. Three principles, flexibility, accessibility and authenticity, emerged as central to success of the project. They also should be applied in any future programs.

Flexibility. The findings show that COVID-19 provided an opportunity for the sites to think differently and more innovatively about their interventions and to adapt them to what was happening in their community, in relation to both communication about interventions and their delivery format. While many project participants would have preferred face to face meetings and events, all three communities moved to some online activity. By considering community context, researcher-community partnerships built on identified strengths and assets (Blumenthal et al., 2013) which facilitated flexibility. This was exemplified particularly in Rural Community 3 where COVID-19 and bushfires tested the responsiveness of the approach. Flexibility allowed re-targeting and re-design of their intervention. *FutureTalk* was reported to be successful in meeting needs.

Accessibility, Authenticity and Sustainability. Two principles of program design, accessibility, and authenticity, emerged as being central to success of future programs in the sites, and related to sustainability. The online format made interventions more easily accessible for many participants, and the option for recording for later online viewing by those who could not make live sessions was appreciated. Online activity also led to more sustainable outcomes, with websites, social media pages and videos that can still be accessed and added to by the community over time. In enabling a whole of community approach, programs and resources needed to be accessible to targeted participants by being delivered at locations, times and in modes suitable to them. Considering local contextual factors to ensure accessibility to target groups is consistent with the literature which argues that there should be due consideration of proper design as well as the challenges of undertaking project work before a partnership can become effective (Israel et al., 1998).

Rural Community 3 targeted a small group of parents and was successful in engaging with them at an extremely difficult time, with positive feedback being received from parent participants, including regarding delivery mode and timing. Rural Community 2 reached large numbers through online events and resources. The timing of online *Parents Matter* training was negotiated to suit the lead parents in Rural Communities 1 and 2. Due to COVID-19, Rural Community 1 Careers Expo clashed with other community events –also pushed out toward the end of the year, and attendance was unavoidably lower than anticipated.

None of the sites were particularly successful in engaging their Aboriginal populations in interventions, suggesting a future focus on education and careers pathway information programs for key influencers with significant input from Aboriginal communities.

Authentic Place-based Learning. In addition to events and resources being easily accessible, trust and authentic connections are essential (Department of Education and Training, 2019). Rural Community 1's videos and Careers Expo, Rural Community 2's Parents Matter online Q&A and GrIPP panel sessions, and Rural Community 3's FutureTalk program evidenced the import of using community members and local practitioners to ensure a credible, trusted

messenger was delivering information, supporting the successful uptake of knowledge. The local government in Rural Community 2 and university campus in Rural Community 3 provided 'credibility' to the project and interventions by employing brokers, increasing trust and community willingness to engage. Engagement of local institutions and community members who were prepared to be on panels, appear in videos and plan and run community events also increased community ownership, increasing sustainability by leaving a legacy of people with capacity and willingness to take part in future education and career pathway interventions for key influencers.

Working party members with relevant local knowledge assisted in ensuring authenticity of interventions. Industry representation on working parties assisted in engaging local industry in interventions. While the researchers brought resources to the communities, local people, particularly working party members, also had external links that were drawn upon.

These findings reinforce the importance of community connectedness to research (Blumenthal et al., 2013; Israel et al., 1998), engagement of industry (Machimana et al., 2020; Santarossa & Woodruff, 2020; Woodroffe et al., 2017), and a bottom-up approach to the selection of interventions. The findings also link to literature around place-based learning which takes advantage of geography to create authentic, meaningful, and engaging personalised learning for students (Gruenewald & Smith, 2008).

Local ownership of activities and outputs, and sustainability was fostered through the CBPR approach, and assisted in validation of the project findings (Dockery, 2020). CBPR also provided a model for the ways in which communities can work together using a local and regional lens that can be adapted to context and need and can be used to inform education and career pathways (Department of Education and Training, 2019).

Those working with communities should be mindful of community culture, community maturity to work together across community sectors, and capacity to engage with external parties, such as universities (Kilpatrick et al., 2008; Sporn, 1996). The model (Figure 1 below) was developed through the project and is intended to assist communities wanting to work in partnerships to equip key influencers to support education and career pathway choice.

Figure 1: *Model to Equip Rural Community key Influencers to Support Education and Career Pathway Choice*

Establishment

1. **Involve key local stakeholders early.** Include schools and other local education, training and adult learning providers. Consider including regional universities and state education departments.
2. **Set up a working party or similar of key internal and external stakeholders.** Include local industry/employers, local government, families, equity groups, sports clubs, non-government organisations and community groups with an interest in young people, education and skills. Ensure the working party has wide-reaching networks into all sectors community.
3. **Appoint a dedicated local 'pathway broker'.** Have that resource employed by a trusted, credible local institution to drive the program to ensure external and internal interventions and programs are coordinated.

Identify target audience and design interventions

4. **Consider community needs.** Examine statistical data, local knowledge about changes to the internal and external environment and local understanding of contextual factors that are constraints and enhancers to local people's education and career pathway choices.
5. **Develop shared understanding of community needs and set goals.** If your community does not have a shared understanding of education and career pathways, think about how the pathway broker and others can act as boundary crossers to develop common understandings. Set goals for key influencers' pathways knowledge confidence.
6. **Consider who are key influencers in the community.** Which key influencers should be targeted to meet your goal, and the types of interventions that may work for your community.
7. **Draw on skills, resources and networks.** Include working party members and other relevant people inside and outside the community in selecting, designing, or adapting programs from elsewhere. Consider skills of people who may have arrived recently as well as established residents. Translate programs to local context.
8. **Interventions should be authentic and place-based.** They should be delivered by people who are part of or understand the community; be welcoming, accessible in time, place, delivery format. Ensure opportunities for questions and give feedback. Online resources are accessible beyond the intervention.
9. **How interventions and programs are promoted matters.** Word of mouth is particularly effective. Use working party's networks – make sure all sections of the community are covered through diversity of communication.

Sustainability

10. **Any program of interventions must be flexible and responsive to internal or external change.**
11. **Monitor and evaluate the interventions and your overall progress.** Involve the working party. Make changes according to evaluation results.
12. **Shared ownership.** Does ownership need to gradually move from external to internal parties? A sustainable model has community ownership, is a partnership between community and relevant external parties, driven from the community, resourced on an ongoing basis, and monitored to anticipate future needs.
13. **The working party should be engaged at key stages of any program.**
    a) Identify community's needs in terms of education and career pathways knowledge
    b) Identify key influencer groups best placed to address these needs.
    c) Select interventions to improve key influencers' knowledge and confidence.

Conclusion

This project generates new knowledge of how key influencers can work within communities to shape their own localised context and impact the pathways of rural students. Findings support the principles of community-based partnership approaches, as well as supporting the importance of career education which recognises and draws on local context. Specifically, many local stakeholders bring expert knowledge, partnerships should build on strengths and assets, and communities are more likely to engage with initiatives which consider local context because they are seen to be relevant (Blumenthal et al., 2013; Israel et al., 1998; Department of Education and Training, 2019).

We note that the findings are drawn from only three study sites in rural Australia. The model and other findings should be tested in other communities in Australia and internationally, we suggest through a community based participatory research approach. Further research is needed regarding education and careers pathway information programs for key influencers of Aboriginal populations, with significant input from Aboriginal communities.

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Appendix A

Case Study Community Demographic Indicators and Other Characteristics

	Community 1	Community 2	Community 3
Approximate population	6,000	17,500	38,000
Index of Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage	890-900	960-970	960-970
Youth unemployment	15% (state 15.7%)	15% (state 15.7%)	13% (state 13.6%)
Age	40% over 65 years	20% over 65 years	33% over 65 years
Cultural identity	4% Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander; 90% Aust born	9% Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander; 75% Aust born	7.5% Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander; 75% Aust born
Educational attainment	10.5% Bachelor Degree + 28.5% Year 12 education	15.5% Bachelor Degree + 38.5% Year 12 education	9% Bachelor Degree + 46.5% Year 12 education
Major industries	Agriculture, forestry & fishing; retail, health & social assistance; mining; tourism	Agriculture, forestry & fishing; health care and social assistance; construction; retail	Aged care; disability and health services; tourism
Description	Rural, mixed rural-residential, and holiday homes. Rapid growth in response to tourism. Two major service centres. 200-250km from state capital.	Semi rural area with small towns ranging from 40-95km from state capital. Limited post schooling options; university and TAFE in state capital. Significant population who have moved from interstate	Regional Service centre with 280km from state capital. Severely affected by bushfires and COVID. Many displaced through home and business loss, disrupted schooling. Community in significant stress
Education Facilities	1 trade training centre, 2 combined primary-high schools, very limited vocational or other post Year 10 options	1 trade training centre, 1 high school, 2 combined primary-high schools, 5 primary schools	Small university campus, university rural clinical school, 7 high schools, 12 primary schools

Source: .economyid (nd)

Appendix B

Implemented Interventions for Key Influencers

Interventions	Description
Parents Matter	Aim: Train parents and others to organise events/activities to familiarise other key influencers with career pathways and education pathways. • Volunteer parents/carers/community members ('lead parents') recruited to lead and facilitate community-based learning for key influencers. • Lead parents undertake accredited place-based training (VET units). • Lead parents meet 2-3 times (some online due to COVID) to increase understanding of post-year 10 education and career options and plan, and subsequently deliver, interventions. (Douglas et al., 2020)
	Community variations of Parents Matter:
Rural Community 1	Produced **videos** from interviews of 12 people from local industries, businesses and education providers focusing on: advice for school leavers, post-Year 10 options, career pathways, local careers and choices. Videos published on a YouTube channel and launched at a Careers Expo. Videos uploaded by local government, neighbourhood houses, online access centre, and schools. **Careers Expo** for key influencers held in Trade Training Centre, with employer/industry, school, and post-school education provider stalls and the videos, attended by parents and other community key influencers.
Rural Community 2	**Facebook page** hosted by local government with information, resources and videos about education and career pathways. **Online question and answer (Q&A) session** with education and industry panelists, live-streamed on Facebook. Online format in response to COVID.
FutureTalk Rural Community 3	Aim: to assist parents/supporters to engage with information relevant to their Year 12 child in the context of COVID-19 restrictions, and encourage career conversations about their child's post-school options. • Five informal, online interactive workshops and weekly emails. Parents/supporters of students involved in local university campus's university preparation program for Year 12 students invited to participate. **Workshops:** covered world of work; education in the 21st Century; post high-school options and pathways; student-led education and career stories; and local education and career opportunities. Evening workshops of 1-1.5 hours accommodated working parents. University staff delivered workshops, alongside guest presenters, including local registered training organisations, employers, current and previous students, a parent of a previous Year 12 student and school career advisers. **Emails:** highlighted discussions children were having in University Preparation Program that week, offered conversation starters around careers and provided links to resources.

Interventions	Description
Warm Connections Rural Community 1	Aim: to provide a general introduction to VET and higher education pathways for the relatively large number of rural adults not currently in education or training, through local community organisations and sites. **Workshop** for library, neighbourhood house and other community organisations staff and volunteers who were trained to become a front line, contact point for locals interested in vocational education and training, or higher education. **Promotional stands and video displays** set up in the library, neighbourhood house and other community organisations. Stands display course information guides and brochures. (Douglas et al., 2020)
GrIPP Rural Community 2	One-day program to raise teacher, parent and other key influencer awareness of skills shortages and career opportunities within the community and around the State. **Site tour**: industries showcase the workforce and future career opportunities to parents/families, teachers, and other community members (because of COVID, replaced by virtual tour). **Work readiness learning**: Following tour, participants attend workshop that builds confidence and understanding of workplace expectations. Industry mentors assist connection with workplaces and industries (because of COVID, was interactive live streamed workshop including Industry Q&A Panel session, also recorded, and uploaded). (Beacon Foundation, n.d.)