



Empowering Remote Communities Through Education: The Roxby Downs Early Childhood Pilot Project

Sue Barry

Uni Hub Spencer Gulf, South Australia

Sue.barry@unihubsg.org

Hannah Samson

Uni Hub Spencer Gulf, South Australia

Hannah.samson@unihubsg.org

Abstract

The Roxby Downs Early Childhood Pilot Project was designed to address a critical shortage of qualified early childhood educators in the remote mining town of Roxby Downs, South Australia. This shortage impacts not only early childhood services but also workforce participation and overall community stability. In collaboration with BHP, the Roxby Downs Children's Centre, and CQUniversity, Uni Hub Spencer Gulf developed a blended learning model that allows residents to complete a Certificate III in Early Childhood Education and Care through a combination of flexible online coursework and practical, hands-on training. This initiative helped participants gain qualifications while directly contributing to the needs of their community. The paper explores how workforce shortages in remote areas can be addressed through locally adapted, creative solutions, the value of building strong partnerships between industry and education to create sustainable workforce models and the impact of blended learning in supporting local workforce development and community.

Keywords: *early childhood, remote community, training, industry-education partnership*

Introduction

This article provides an analysis of the positive impact that local tertiary education institutions can have in rural, regional and remote communities, with a focus on early childhood provision. Rural, regional, and remote communities report a lack of qualified childcare workers, impacting childcare availability and broader economic participation (Morris, 2024). Residents of the remote South Australian town of Roxby Downs identified a need for accessible, childcare specific Vocational Education and Training. Facilitated by the Uni Hub Spencer Gulf (Uni Hub), the Roxby Early Childhood Pilot Project (Early Childhood Project) has delivered this. Uni Hub is a community-owned network of five Regional University Study Hubs operating across the north and west of South Australia. Uni Hub Spencer Gulf supports regional students to access Higher Education and delivers tailored projects to address local workforce needs. (King et al, 2022) Uni Hub's 'Grow our Own' strategy connects community to tertiary education and industry; filling workforce gaps in the region and helping people stay in their hometown while pursuing their career and educational goals. Uni Hub staff live in the region and understand firsthand the challenges experienced by the Roxby Downs community. The community is innovative, resilient, and willing to have a go, which is demonstrated throughout this project. The pilot project has supported

participants to gain qualifications while directly contributing to the workforce needs of the community.

Research Context

Early childhood education sets children up for lifelong learning and overall wellbeing, and is crucial for children's future success (Government of South Australia, 2023; Morris, 2024). However, regional, rural and remote communities often lack childcare facilities and qualified educators (Government of South Australia, 2023). Roxby Downs is a remote mining town located 566 km north of Adelaide and is home to 3,976 people (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021). Roxby Downs has a relatively stable population, although experiences annual inflow/outflow, due to the transient nature of a mining workforce (Municipal Council of Roxby Downs, 2023). Over recent years, residents in Roxby Downs reported a critical shortage of qualified Early Childhood Educators (Regional Development Australia Far North, 2024). The Roxby Downs Children's Centre (the Centre) was established in January 2012 as a multifunctional centre. The Centre provides long day care, kindergarten, outside school hour's care and vacation care and is licensed for 170 children; however, it has only been able to accommodate 140, with over 100 children consistently on the waitlist (M. Waters, personal communication, 2024). Lack of qualified staff has impeded the Centre's ability to increase their capacity and meet regulatory staff-to-child ratios (M. Waters, personal communication, 2024). The shortage of early childhood educators has impacted childcare services and overall workforce participation, community stability, and local economic development (BHP, 2023; Regional Development Australia Far North, 2024).

In Figure 1 we show the distance between Roxby Downs and Adelaide, capital city of South Australia. This map shows the vast distances that can perpetuate geographical inequalities affecting communities differently (Cuervo, 2014; Webb et al, 2024).

Figure 2 shows the entry to the community of Roxby Downs, while Figure 3 shows participants working together on course work and stakeholders involved in the project.

Figure 1: Map of South Australia

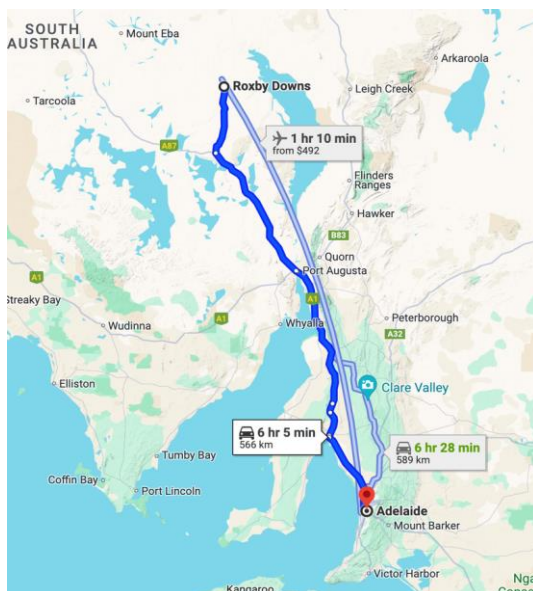


Figure 2: Entry to Roxby Downs



Figure 3: Participants and Stakeholders



A Local Solution

In early 2022 Uni Hub was approached by the Centre and BHP to find a sustainable solution to the childcare crisis. In collaboration with BHP, the Centre, and CQUniversity Australia, Uni Hub developed an initiative to address the crisis. In 2023, the Roxby Downs Early Childhood Pilot Project was launched. The project delivers a blended learning model that enables residents to complete a Certificate III in Early Childhood Education and Care through a combination of flexible, online coursework and practical, local, hands-on training and support.

Key Components of the Approach

Place-based Collaboration

With Uni Hub Spencer Gulf staff living and working in the town since 2021, they were aware of employment challenges experienced at the Centre. Locals wanting to enter the childcare sector shared their frustration at the lack of training providers, costs, and restrictions on subsidies. Through informal conversations, Uni Hub staff gained an understanding of how the childcare shortage was affecting families and the wider community. The reality of these shortages meant many parents were unable to return to work or pursue study. Local industry and workplaces were unable to recruit or retain a stable workforce, with the lack of suitable childcare being cited as the main challenge. These insights shaped the direction of the project, ensuring it addressed the practical needs of the town.

This approach underscores the vital role that Regional University Study Hubs play in supporting local workforce development (King et al., 2022). These Study Hubs are embedded in their communities, allowing them to identify issues early, build trust, and co-create solutions that are relevant and sustainable. RUSHs are well-positioned to drive long-term, community-led growth across regional and remote areas.

Strategic Partnerships

It was crucial to engage a registered training organisation (RTO) to partner with Uni Hub and a partner to support with funding. Uni Hub explored South Australian-based public and private RTOs. However, it proved difficult to secure an RTO willing to deliver to very small cohorts or to students living in a remote location. After looking further afield, Uni Hub connected an existing university partner, CQUniversity Australia to the initiative. Strategic partnerships set the pilot up

for success, with CQUniversity delivering the vocational training, BHP demonstrating commitment through funding, and Uni Hub supporting students.

Persistent Problem Solving

There were complexities and resourcing implications that needed to be overcome, including modification of internal student support processes and reporting systems. Additionally, approvals for accessing subsidised training and compliance reporting for vocational education differ between Queensland and South Australia. Thus, it was necessary for partners in the pilot to meet regularly and find ways to problem solve, keeping an eye on objective of the initiative.

Community Engagement

With funding secured from BHP for the pilot and CQUniversity committed to deliver the training, the next step was to engage with the community to build understanding and interest in the pilot program. A marketing campaign was launched, inviting residents to complete an expression of interest. Each person was contacted and offered an opportunity to attend a 'meet and greet' at the Centre. This was an important step for participants, providing a firsthand opportunity to experience the environment in which they would be training and potentially working. As a result, several participants decided early childhood education was not for them, while many remained enthusiastic.

Information Sharing and Accessible Supports for Participants

The next stage was for participants to meet with the Centre director and Uni Hub project lead, providing an opportunity to understand about each potential student and their motivations. Additionally, it enabled the students to learn about the regulatory environment of the sector, the requirement for 160 hours of unpaid placement, and the study hours needed to complete the qualification. Once the initial screening checks were completed, participants undertook an upfront assessment of needs to determine their eligibility for the course. Uni Hub facilitated group sessions for the testing, providing support to students during the process.

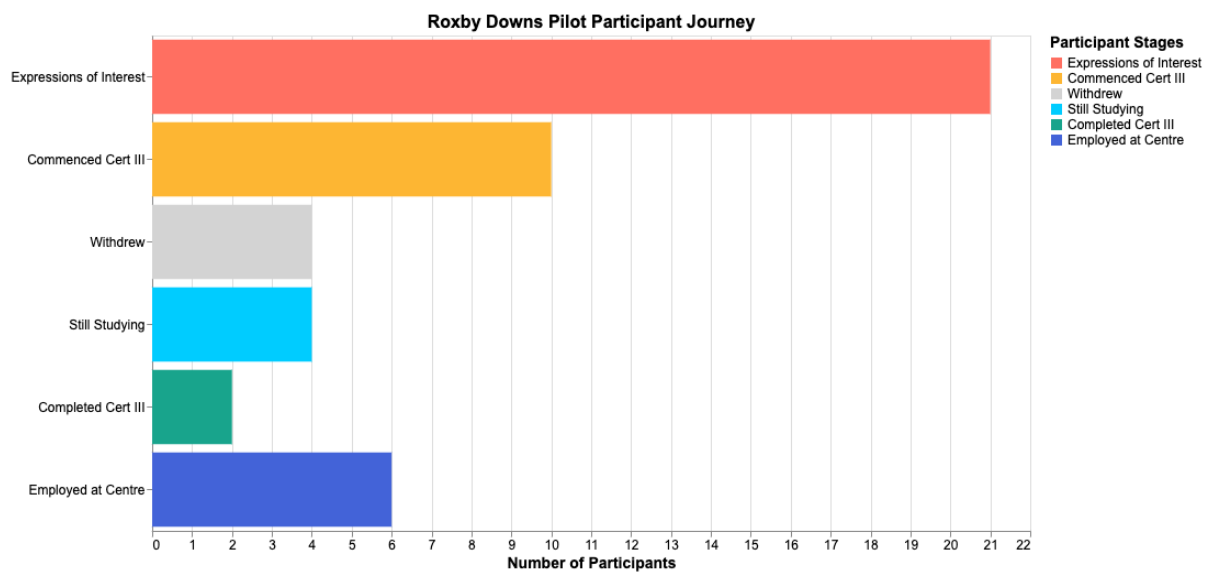
Once enrolments were confirmed, Uni Hub provided face-to-face orientation sessions in collaboration with CQUniversity. These sessions assisted students to navigate the online learning portal, ensure they understood the placement requirements and had the documentation and approvals needed to commence. Students were encouraged to approach the Centre to arrange times for their placement. This was an important experience to improve practical skills in workplace communication, employer interviewing techniques and proactively engaging in the workplace on-boarding process.

Formal student assessments included written assignments, virtual observations and third-party reporting. Weekly face-to-face and online support sessions provided participants with assistance. Regular contact with the Centre enabled check-ins on student progress and early intervention of potential barriers to success. Students were given access to the Roxby Downs Innovation Hub, a community co-working space where they could study, collaborate and support each other.

Outcomes

Of the 21 expressions of interest received, 10 students commenced and four withdrew. Four of the six continuing students have completed their qualification at the time of writing. Figure 4 details student data.

Figure 4: Student Data



Successes

As a result of the success of the project an additional six educators are now employed at the Centre which has contributed to a reduction in wait list numbers from more than 100, down to 76 (M. Waters, personal communication, 2024). Building a local skilled workforce builds aspiration for youth potentially reducing displacement and migration as well as providing career pathways for an existing workforce.

The Centre is now well equipped to facilitate the South Australian Government’s introduction of three-year old pre-school (M. Waters, personal communication, 2024). Furthermore, current staff of the Centre now understand how to access VET training to upskill with support from the Regional University Study Hub to move into leadership and mentor roles and meet the ongoing academic demands of the Early Childhood Educator role. Discussions are underway to continue delivery of the Early Childhood Project with ongoing financial support from BHP.

Lessons Learned

By recognising that local co-design, collaboration and relationships are critical to the success of community-based projects, Uni Hub Spencer Gulf maintained a focus on mutually beneficial outcomes for the community, CQ University, BHP and the Centre. Unforeseen challenges were overcome with a responsive and flexible approach, and by maintaining practical and realistic expectations for the pilot project. The attention paid to each student facilitated a positive, immersive learning experience which will encourage future participation. There is value in starting small and realising that even a small number of local graduates can have a significant impact, particularly in regional, rural and remote communities. Serving as role models, successful local graduates inspire younger generations, demonstrating the value of education and the possibility of building a career locally (Gao et al., 2022).

Capacity Building in Regional, Rural and Remote Communities

Building the capacity of an existing workforce and creating pathways for individuals, contributes to the retention of knowledge and skills in regional, rural and remote communities. This initiative recognises the importance of major employers in regional and remote areas and seeks to create place-based solutions for growing local workforces (Kilpatrick et al., 2023).

Considerations for Policymakers in Supporting Regional, Rural and Remote Communities Through Regional University Study Hubs

The initial success of the pilot project suggests that it could be replicated and tailored to the needs of other regional, rural and remote communities, enabling expansion of the catchment area for delivery in the future. Ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the Roxby Downs Early Childhood project will be undertaken to facilitate continuous improvement.

Conclusion

High-quality early childhood education is crucial for fostering lifelong learning, wellbeing and success for individual children and their wider community (Government of South Australia, 2023). Although Halsey noted the need to examine access to training providers in regional, rural and remote locations (Halsey, 2018), these communities still experience inequity of access to educational opportunities (Morris, 2024). The community of Roxby Downs identified a need to increase the number of qualified early childhood educators (Regional Development Australia Far North, 2023). By developing a collaborative, place-based approach, the Early Childhood project delivered practical and significant positive outcomes for the Centre and for the broader Roxby Downs community. Uni Hub's facilitation of this project, building a mutually beneficial collaboration with BHP, the Centre, and CQUniversity, has led to increased early childhood education places in Roxby Downs, benefitting children and their parents while simultaneously addressing critical workforce needs.

References

- Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2021). Roxby Downs quick stats. <https://abs.gov.au/census/find-census-data/quickstats/2021/LGA46970>
- BHP. (2023). *Inquiry into early childhood education and care: BHP submission*. https://www.pc.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0019/360451/sub136-childhood.pdf
- Cuervo, H. (2014). Critical reflections on youth and equality in the rural context. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 17(4), 544-557. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2013.844781>
- Halsey, J. (2018). *Independent review into regional, rural and remote education: Final report*. <https://www.education.gov.au/recurrent-funding-schools/resources/independent-review-regional-rural-and-remote-education-final-report>
- Gao, C., Dollinger, M., D'Angelo, B. & Harvey, A. (2022). Leveraging local knowledge exploring how to support regional, rural, and remote students' career development. *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*, 32(1), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.47381/aijre.v32i1.298>
- Government of South Australia. (2023). *Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care*. https://www.royalcommissionecec.sa.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0009/937332/RCECEC-Final-Report.pdf
- Kilpatrick, S., Fischer, S., Woodroffe, J., Barnes, N., Groves, O., & Austin, K. (2023). A whole-of-rural-community approach to supporting education and career pathway choice. *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*, 33(3), 82–102. <https://doi.org/10.47381/aijre.v33i3.697>

- King, S., Stone, C., & Ronan, C. (2022). *Investigating transitions to university from regional South Australian high schools [final report]*. ACSES. https://www.acses.edu.au/app/uploads/2022/02/King_UniSA_Final_2022.pdf
- Morris, A. (2024). Inequality and education in Australia. *The Economic and Labour Relations Review*, 35(2), 221–242. <https://doi.org/10.1017/elr.2024.18>
- Municipal Council of Roxby Downs. (2023). *2022 – 2023 Annual Report*. https://www.roxydowns.sa.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0028/1513639/Annual-Report-2022-2023-FINALWebsite.pdf
- Regional Development Australia Far North. (2024). *RDA Far North Childcare Services Development Report*. <https://rdafn.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/RDA-Far-North-Childcare-Report-2024.pdf>
- Webb, S., Lahiri-Roy, R., Knight, E., & Koshy, P. (2024). The Intersection of geography, topography and mindset: A nuanced understanding of regional, rural and remote students' tertiary participation in Australia. *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*, 34(3), 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.47381/aijre.v34i3.727>



Except where otherwise noted, content in this journal is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International Licence](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). As an open access journal, articles are free to use with proper attribution. ISSN 1839-7387