They just give us the shiny picture, but I want to know what it's really like: Insights from regional high schools on perceptions of university outreach in South Australia

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Abstract

Across Australia, students at regional, rural and remote high schools are considerably less likely to go to university than their metropolitan counterparts. One of the ways in which universities try to help to bridge this gap is to organise visits to such schools, with the purpose of familiarising students with the idea of university and encouraging them to consider going on to university after school. These visits range in purpose, from direct marketing to a genuine effort to widen access to university more generally. The key purpose of university visits is not always made explicit to the schools or the students, leading to a mismatch between university intentions and school and student expectations. Recent research with regional high schools in South Australia, using a mixed-methods approach, reveals the impact of this mismatch, with university visits being regarded by students and schools as, at best, disappointing and, at worst, as nothing more than marketing exercises and hence to be treated with suspicion. These research findings are discussed, and recommendations made for ways in which university visits may be more effectively geared towards meeting the needs of students, schools and parents. This paper recommends that universities work more closely with regional schools, parents and communities more broadly, with a greater emphasis on providing useful, practical information about what 'going to university' entails. We argue that, through this, more regional students may consider university as a viable post-school option.

Keywords: *Higher education, regional students, widening participation, university outreach*

Introduction and Background

Australian students attending high schools outside metropolitan areas are less likely to go to university. In fact, they are less than half as likely as those within metropolitan areas (18.5% vs 39.7%) to gain an undergraduate degree or above by the time they are 35 years old (Commonwealth of Australia, 2019). This paper looks specifically at the situation in South

Australia (SA), where, similar to other Australian States, students from high schools outside the capital city metropolitan area are considerably less likely to transition from high school to university. The 2021 census data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2021) show a national average of 31% for undergraduate degree attainment. The rate for non-metropolitan SA is significantly lower than this, at only 10% for most of the state outside metropolitan Adelaide (Commonwealth of Australia, 2019). Research conducted during 2021 (King et al., 2022) sought to identify some of the barriers to university that these students are facing, particularly those who are clearly academically-able and have chosen senior-level subjects that would facilitate their application for admission to university.

Within the Australian high school system, students can choose in their two senior years of high school to study certain subjects that will put them on a pathway to university admission. These subjects will enable them to achieve an Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR). A student's ATAR ranking (between 0 and 99.5) is one of a number of factors that universities consider when selecting students for admission to their degree programs. Therefore, students at all Australian high schools may choose in their two final years (Years 11 and 12) to take what is colloquially known as an 'ATAR path' or 'ATAR stream.' The following section describes the context of the geographic setting for this research: the state of South Australia.

South Australian Context

South Australia differs significantly from the eastern Australian mainland states, i.e., New South Wales (NSW), Victoria and Queensland, all of which have higher undergraduate degree attainment rates than does SA, for both metropolitan and regional students (ABS, 2016). These differences relate to geography, population spread and university locations, all impacting upon opportunities for regional students to attend university.

A very high proportion of the SA population (77%) lives in and around its capital city, Adelaide. This is considerably higher than for other Australian states (SA Government, 2021). For example, in NSW, 64% of the population lives in or around Sydney (NSW Government, 2021). All SA universities are based in metropolitan Adelaide, with very limited university access regionally. One of the SA universities operates two satellite campuses, located in the two largest regional areas of SA. Other universities have a very limited university presence in regional areas, consisting of small, specialised centres, such as medical training hubs, research centres, entrepreneurial innovation hubs and study centres. The distance between towns outside metropolitan Adelaide is also larger when compared to regional areas in the eastern Australian states. The physical distances and low populations in the regions create a dual challenge: a challenge for universities to provide a university presence and a challenge for potential students to access university from their regional communities. These factors helped to shape the focus of the research discussed in this paper.

Focus of the Research

The research project discussed in this paper sought to better understand the influences on ATAR stream students at SA high schools in regional areas of the state (i.e., outside metropolitan Adelaide) which impact their post-school choices and decisions, including whether to apply for admission to university. The broad findings from this research have been outlined and discussed elsewhere in depth (King et al., 2022). This paper focusses specifically on the findings that relate to the impact of visits to regional schools by the metropolitan-based universities in SA. The ways in which students and school staff experienced these visits are explored, as well as the extent to which they were perceived as being helpful to students' decision-making about their post-school options. To situate this research focus in context, an overview of current and relevant research literature is provided below.

Literature Review

Considerable efforts have been made in the Australian research literature over the past two decades to identify and understand more clearly the factors inhibiting students in regional areas from going to university at the same rate as their metropolitan peers. Some of the earlier research focused on the aspirations of regional versus metropolitan high school students, with various findings indicating that regional students had lower aspirations regarding university (Alloway et al., 2004; Khoo & Ainley, 2005; Kilpatrick & Abbott-Chapman, 2002). However, there has been a recent shift in this view, with research conducted within the past five years finding that regional high school students aspire to go to university at a similar rate to those at metropolitan high schools; this also appears to hold true for students from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds and those who are first in their families to go to university (Gore et al., 2019; Vernon et al., 2018). There is a strong link between regionality, low SES and being first in family at university (James et al., 2008; Cooper et al., 2017; McLachlan et al., 2013). Average incomes in regional areas are lower than those in metropolitan areas (ABS, 2020) and, as outlined previously, there are fewer people with university qualifications; hence higher proportions of regional populations fall into the Australian Government identified HE equity category of low SES; additionally, those in regional areas of Australia who go to university are more likely to be first in their families to do so, than are those in the capital cities.

However, while aspirations for university may not be so different, realising these aspirations is less likely. Financial issues associated with going to university, having fewer people around them with university experience and the lack of an easily accessible university campus within their locality appear as key barriers in the recent literature (O'Shea et al., 2019; Katersky Barnes et al., 2019; Vernon & Drane, 2021). Undoubtedly, the decision whether to go to university is a complex one for regional high school students (Ronan, 2020). Without concrete opportunities to comprehend, analyse and overcome the potential barriers both practical and emotional, aspirations for university are unlikely to become internalised (Vernon et al., 2018) and are more likely to remain unfulfilled. This situation is not unique to Australia. In the United Kingdom (UK), students from the highest social groupings are five to six times more likely to attend university than those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds (Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2006), while in the United States (US), despite significant widening HE participation measures, "*rates of college attainment continue to differ greatly by family income quartiles and parent educational level*" (Cahalan, 2013, p. 7).

As part of the widening higher education participation agenda within Australia, universities around the country have developed partnerships with high schools, particularly those in low SES and regional areas, using funding from the Commonwealth Government's Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP). These partnerships involve the universities offering and running interventions within schools, with the aim of attracting more students from low SES backgrounds to university (Gale & Parker, 2013). Over the past decade, there has been a wealth of research literature discussing, describing and evaluating such interventions (see for example, Baker, 2021; Fleming & Grace, 2015; Hardie & McKay, 2019; Harwood et al., 2015; Kilpatrick et al., 2019). Traditionally, the purpose of university outreach visits to regional schools has been to encourage more students in regional Australia to consider university as a realistic option and to aspire to attend (Gale et al., 2010; Gale & Parker, 2013). However, with universities depending more and more on generating their own income as government funding diminishes (Ferguson, 2021; Tiffin, 2020), they are under increasing pressure to attract enrolments. There is a risk that what may be intended as outreach for widening participation more broadly can become blurred by a marketing lens (Foster et al., 2016) in response to "*the neoliberal imperative to 'sell' the institution and gain positional advantage*" (Baker, 2021, p. 1).

Recently, there has also been a focus in the research literature on the impact of outreach visits by universities to regional schools (Austin et al., 2020; Fray et al., 2019; Gore et al., 2019; Katersky Barnes et al., 2019; Kilpatrick et al., 2019), stressing the importance of tailoring such visits to local contexts and partnering not only with schools but with the community as a whole to ensure that what is provided by the university is needed and wanted by the community. This makes a great deal of sense, given the known importance of home and community encouragement and support, including from parents, wider family, teachers, friends and other community influences, in increasing the likelihood that aspirations can and will become a reality (Cardak et al., 2017; Koshy et al., 2017; National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, 2017). This literature is particularly relevant to the findings from the research project outlined in this paper, specifically in relation to student and school perceptions of university outreach visits and the ways these visits impacted upon them. The following sections describe and discuss this project and its findings in more detail.

Research Methods

A mixed-methods approach was taken in this study, using a mix of quantitative (through a student survey) and qualitative (through student focus groups and school staff interviews) data collection. Mixed method design has been described as combining quantitative and qualitative methods to address a research question (Mark, 2015) in which, according to Winchester and Rofe (2010), one method is used to complement the other, providing insights into a research topic from different angles and allowing deeper analysis and cross-checking of results.

The research team received ethical clearance from a SA university and received assistance from the SA Department for Education (DfE) in identifying regional high schools with cohorts of ATAR stream students with whom the research team could engage. The DfE also helped to introduce the project and the research team to the principals and/or other key members of staff at each of the contacted schools. A total of 14 regional SA high schools, all of which were state-funded public schools, agreed to participate. All 14 distributed the survey to Years 11 and 12 ATAR stream students. Nine of these 14 schools agreed to having a member of the research team conduct one-to-one or small group interviews with various members of school staff (referred to subsequently in this report as school educators), while eight of the schools agreed for a research team member to facilitate student focus group interviews with Years 11 and 12 ATAR stream students. All students in the focus groups had completed the survey. The data-gathering at these 14 schools was conducted during the first half of 2021.

Schools

The 14 schools were very diverse, ranging from high schools in larger regional areas with significant Years 11 and 12 cohorts, to what are known in SA as Area Schools, which are generally single schools in small rural communities that enrol students from ages 5 to 18. Some Years 11 and 12 cohorts at these area schools consisted of no more than 10 students, with even fewer taking an ATAR stream. Indeed, at one of the schools there were only two ATAR stream students. The 14 schools were also geographically diverse, located at varying distances from Adelaide.

To provide a clearer picture of this diversity, Table 1 shows the total number of students enrolled at each school in 2021, as well as the distance from Adelaide and from the closest university campus, either a main metropolitan university campus or one of the two regional satellite campuses mentioned previously.

Table 1: *School Enrolment Numbers and Distances from Each School to Adelaide and Nearest University Campus (Regional or Metro)*

School	2021 enrolment	Km to Adelaide	Km to university campus
A	73	249	206
B	272	182	182
C	695	435	3
D	301	294	156
E	91	282	52
F	857	430	7
G	226	271	183
H	696	651	267
I	300	532	148
J	400	387	5
K	46	384	182
L	820	55	55
M	468	259	259
N	46	537	337

The boundaries of this study meant that data were collected at a relatively small number of schools (14) in one Australian state. Therefore, as is usual with studies that rely on significant qualitative data, any wider generalisation of the findings needs to be treated with caution. Nevertheless, the findings are interesting in terms of the perspectives found amongst the students and staff about the value and impact of university outreach visits. The consistency of these perspectives across the sample of schools indicates that further research is warranted to determine whether there may be similar findings across other schools in other states and locations. What follows is a description and discussion of the 14 participating schools.

Student Survey

All 14 schools participated in the survey which formed the quantitative component of the mixed-methods approach, providing answers to the same survey questions from 198 Years 11 and 12 students across each of these schools. The questions used a combination of multiple-choice answers and a 5-point Likert scale. They were designed to seek information about students' demographic circumstances (such as age, gender, year of school, Indigeneity, living circumstances, parents' levels of education, other family members who have been to university); also, their level of engagement with school, through questions such as "*How often might you miss a day of school for no reason or skip classes?*" To better understand their post-school intentions and aspirations for university, they were asked questions such as "*How far do you expect to go with your education?*" and "*What do you think you are most likely to do when you finish school?*" The survey also sought to discover how much they knew about the practicalities of going to university, such as costs, pathways other than ATAR and types of financial and other supports available to them, including scholarships. These types of questions included: "*If you were to go to university, how much do you think it would cost each year?*", "*How much do you know about the following ways of funding your education?*" and "*Are you aware that most SA universities offer free courses that help you get into university that do not require an ATAR?*"

Key influences on their decision-making and sources of information about university were discovered through questions such as *"How much impact do the following people/events have on your decisions about what you want to do after school?"* and *"How much have you learned from each of the following sources?"* To explore the aspirations and expectations that parents/guardians held for these students, the survey asked *"How far do you think your parents/guardian expect you to go with your education?"* Finally, their familiarity with travelling outside their regional communities to Adelaide (where SA universities are located) was explored by asking *"How many times a year have you travelled to Adelaide in the past 5 years?"* While there was opportunity in the survey for additional comments, very few students offered any. However, the answers they chose from the multiple-choice lists and their importance awarded on the Likert scale provided comprehensive data.

Student Focus Group Interviews

A total of 124 ATAR stream students (84 female/40 male) participated in the 24 focus group discussions across eight of the 14 participating schools. Seven of the focus groups consisted of Year 11 students only, 14 of Year 12 students only, while three had a combination of Years 11 and 12 together. The size of the focus groups varied between two and seven students, with the majority containing three to four students. These focus groups generated one part of the qualitative student data required for the mixed-methods approach, allowing for in-depth discussion with a small number of students in each group around similar questions raised in the student survey. Discussion focused on issues such as their immediate intentions on leaving school, how and where students found out information about university courses and requirements, who or what influenced their decisions about their futures, what may get in the way of achieving their goals, how much they knew about university, what else they wanted to know, and any other concerns they had. The focus group interviews were audio-recorded and extensive notes were made by the facilitator who was a member of the research team.

Interviews with School Educators

The additional qualitative data collected as part of the mixed-methods approach was gathered at nine of the 14 participating schools through semi-structured interviews with a total of 26 school educators. These included Year 12 coordinators or leaders, principals, deputy-principals, career advisors and Year 12 teachers. The purpose of collecting these data was to gain information about the school context in which students were forming their views and to what extent their views were consistent with those of school educators, and vice versa. Questions aimed to explore school educators' thoughts regarding how and why Years 11 and 12 students at their schools were making their post-school decisions, including decisions about whether to go to university. As with the focus group discussions, interviews were audio-recorded and notes were taken during the interviews.

Table 2 shows the number of participants in both the student focus groups and the school educator interviews at each of the schools (A–K) that participated in these types of data collection. Three schools (L–N) did not participate in either.

Table 2: *Number of Participants in Student Focus Groups and School Educator Interviews*

School	Focus group participants	School educators interviewed
A	4	1
B	18	3
C	14	0
D	21	3
E	5	3
F	32	12
G	12	0
H	18	1
I	0	1
J	0	1
K	0	1
Totals	**124**	**26**

Data Analysis

The data collected from the student survey were collated and quantified using graphs and charts that provided an overview of the proportions and percentages of student responses to each question. While this was very useful in itself, it was complemented by the analysis of the qualitative data from the focus groups and interviews. This analysis was conducted both manually and by using NVivo 12. Consistent with Cresswell's (2012) steps for analysing and interpreting qualitative data, recordings were listened to, along with line-by-line analysis of the notes taken by the facilitators, to identify and investigate emerging themes and to "*catch the complexity*" (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 266) of student and school educator perspectives. The key themes then informed the coding process in NVivo, with further codes being added as new themes emerged. The combination of the quantification of survey responses and the deeper, qualitative analysis of the voices of students and educators provides a detailed and nuanced picture of the participants' experiences and views. This leads us to the key findings from this process of analysis.

Findings

In this paper, we focus specifically on what the data revealed about students' and school educators' experiences and views regarding the visits made by the various SA universities to their schools. We look at the impact of these visits and the extent to which they were perceived as helpful to students' decision-making about whether to consider university as a viable post-school option.

The Impact of University Visits to Schools

From the information provided in focus group discussions and school educator interviews, it appeared that all but one (School I) of the participating schools received outreach visits from one or more SA universities, roughly on an annual basis. Contrary to other research findings about the value of university outreach to schools, in terms of helping students gain a better understanding of university and what it entails (Fray et al., 2019), this study found that very few students and

staff considered these visits helpful. This was revealed in all three data sources of student survey, student focus groups and school educator interviews.

Student Survey. Survey results indicated that university visits had relatively little impact on these ATAR stream students' university aspirations, as Table 3 reveals. When asked in the survey which people have impacted on their decisions about what to do after high school, fewer than half (46%) reported any significant impact (some impact to very strong impact) from "*university students/staff visiting my school.*" Interestingly, friends were ranked as having equal impact; in fact, a slightly higher proportion of students (16%) thought friends had either high or very strong impact compared to university visits (15%). This is a surprising finding, given that other research indicates university visits are more significant (Fleming & Grace, 2015; Harwood et al., 2015). In contrast, parents/guardians, other adult role models and teachers were rated as having considerably higher impact on their post-school intentions. Parents/guardians' impact was nearly twice as strong, rated by 85% of the students as having some to very strong impact, followed by other adult role models at 69%, teachers at 60% and university open days at 52%.

Table 3: *How Much Impact do the Following People Have on Your Decision About What you Want to do After High School?*

	No Impact	Low Impact	Some impact	High impact	Very strong impact
Parents/guardians	4%	10%	32%	40%	13%
Role model/other respected adult	10%	22%	40%	26%	3%
Teachers	14%	25%	37%	20%	3%
University open days	26%	19%	32%	20%	2%
Friends	19%	35%	30%	13%	3%
University students/staff visiting my school	28%	26%	31%	13%	2%
Sisters/brothers	35%	29%	24%	11%	1%
Careers adviser	30%	21%	38%	10%	1%

Similarly, Table 3 shows that fewer than half the students reported learning even '*a bit*' from university visits about financial assistance for university (47% '*learned a bit*' through to '*learned a lot*'). Again, more had been learned from parents (64%) and teachers (62%), followed by university websites (59%). Only 18% had learned '*a fair amount*' to '*a lot*' from university visits, compared with 39% from parents and 26% from teachers.

Table 4: *How Much Have you Learned From Each of the Following Sources About the Types of Financial Assistance Available for University (e.g., Scholarships, Grants, Subsides, Loans)?*

	Learned nothing or very little	Learned relatively little	Learned a bit	Learned a fair amount	Learned a lot
My parents	15%	21%	25%	30%	9%
Teachers	17%	22%	36%	21%	5%
University websites	19%	23%	41%	17%	1%
University staff visiting my school	28%	24%	29%	16%	2%
Other family members	21%	33%	30%	13%	4%
Social media	28%	25%	33%	11%	3%
Friends	30%	29%	33%	7%	1%
SATAC websites	31%	29%	32%	6%	2%
Online news	37%	27%	30%	6%	1%
TV, newspapers	46%	24%	22%	8%	1%

Student Focus Groups. As previously mentioned, given the evidence from other research about the value of university visits to regional schools, we were surprised to find the strong negative opinions expressed by students about university visits to their schools. This was widespread, occurring across all focus groups at all schools that universities visited. Comments about these visits ranged from them being simply not memorable; for example, "*I think they have [visited]*" (Year 11 student, School B), to expressions of disappointment and annoyance about what students perceived as "*marketing,*" rather than informing them about the specifics of university life. Typical comments included: "*They come in and do a fun activity with us and then try to sell their uni. How stupid do they think we are? We know it is marketing*" (Year 11 student, School C), and "*They just bring a PowerPoint and talk about how great their uni is*" (Year 12 student, School D).

Across all schools, students spoke of their disappointment at the lack of the practical information they were expecting and hoping for. Instead, they felt they were just hearing that "*university is great, and you should all come, but they don't get into the deep ins and outs of what that means – it isn't very helpful*" (Year 12 student, School F). These types of encounters were experienced as being extremely frustrating:

> When unis come to the school they don't talk about the daily life of students: how they live, eat, travel around the city. They are more focused on telling us to come to open days and how good the uni is. (Year 11 student, School F)

Some students talked about being *forgotten* (Year 11 student, School D) by the Adelaide universities, feeling that the universities are not interested in them and do not understand the realities of their regional lives, such as, "*they don't understand that it's six hours on a straight road to get to Adelaide and we can't just drive backwards and forwards*" (Year 11 student, School D), and "*sometimes they tell us about the open days, but we could never get there so why bother telling us?*" (Year 12 student, School F). A number of students expressed a lack of trust in what they were told by universities; for example, "*they make going to uni sound easy, but we know it isn't*" (Year 11 student, School F). Where possible, students placed more faith in the knowledge of family or friends who had experience of university. In the words of one Year 12 student, "*the unis*

give us the shiny picture, but I just talk to my brother or his friends to find out what going to uni is actually like" (Year 12 student, School E).

In summary, students generally felt that university visits were not giving them what they wanted and needed on specifics, such as scholarships and grants, their availability and application requirements and procedures; how ATARs worked and whether universities took anything else into account when selecting students; a day in the life of a student, such as what lectures are like, what resources they would need, assignments and assessments; living in Adelaide, finding accommodation, getting around, finding part-time work; if and how they could change courses; course information and outlines; and possibilities for remote or online attendance. Students expressed a keen awareness of their lack of knowledge about these realities and practicalities of going to university. They often did not know what questions they should be asking, and they were frustrated that the university staff who visited did not anticipate their questions and tell them what they needed to know. To these students, this was far more important than being given the "*shiny picture.*"

   School Educator Interviews. Similarly, comments from the school educators were surprisingly negative. At one school, they commented that the visits happen too late, when students have already "*closed off their minds*" to the idea of university (School D). Educators at another school talked about visits being inconsistent, poor communication from the university to the school, and one-off visits being discouraging for students, with university staff doing an activity with students rather than providing practical day-to-day information to build their confidence (School F). At this school, the educators also appeared to share some of the students' perspectives about the marketing focus of university visits. They saw this as being counter-productive, alienating not only students but also parents:

> *Uni reps go on their sales rants, and the parents just switch off. Parents don't want to know uni-specific information; they want general information about the transition. (School F educator)*

Another talked about being "*sick of marketing people*" from universities, commenting that staff at their school prefer to "*leave the universities out of it*" and, instead, organise their own university information sessions, using previous high school students who are now at university and who could be much more focused on the practicalities.

Not all school educators were as negative. For example, educators at School J regarded university visits as useful in bringing the idea of university to the attention of both students and parents. However, they too indicated that they would like to see a more practical focus, with more emphasis on information from student mentors who can talk about their own experiences, and information from university staff with an understanding of the various support options, particularly sources of financial support and how these can be accessed.

The Impact of School-Organised Visits to Universities

In contrast to the largely negative perceptions of university visits to schools, the students across five of the eight schools, at which student focus groups took place, talked far more positively about visits *to* universities. These five schools each organised visits to university campuses in Adelaide, usually as an annual event for students in Years 9 or 10, prior to their selecting their subjects for Years 11/12 and deciding whether to take an ATAR stream. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, these had not taken place during 2020 or 2021; however, many of the current Years 11 and 12 students had been able to participate in them when they were in Years 9/10. Those who had done so talked of how valuable they had found these visits, not only in terms of visiting university and TAFE (Technical and Further Education) campuses (Year 12 focus group, School A), but also to have experienced taking public transport and participating in other "*city*" activities (Year 11 focus group, School E). This included eating at restaurants, as well as attending a large

sporting event – highlights for students in regions without restaurants and sporting stadiums (Year 12 focus group, School G).
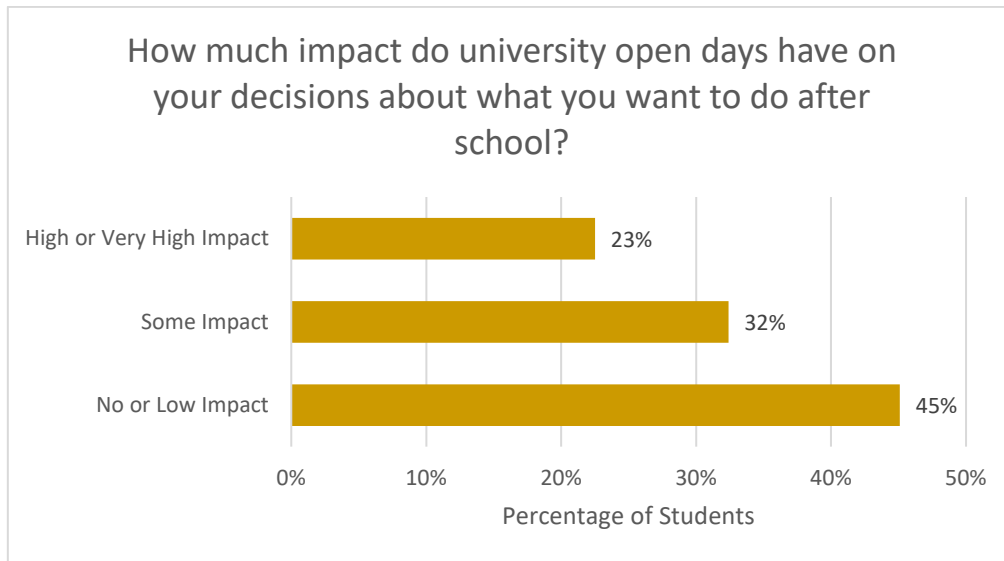
School educators and students talked of ways in which expenses for students had been deliberately kept as low as possible; for example, by the school encouraging students to stay with family or friends in Adelaide, where this was possible, and choosing low-cost accommodation options where not (Years 11 and 12 focus groups, Schools E and G). Students spoke about their enjoyment of these visits, and how much they had learnt about university and city life; they also recalled being given information about the range of programs they could study and accommodation options (Year 11 focus group, School B). Having the opportunity to visit universities in the city appeared to have significantly increased their knowledge and understanding of what university was, what it looked like and how it worked.

School educators also talked of visits to city universities as being useful and effective, boosting the confidence of students who were thinking of university and perhaps raising aspirations for university. One felt it was "*the best thing teachers could do*" (School E) to encourage students' university aspirations. Even those educators at schools that did not routinely arrange such visits spoke highly of the impact they could have; for example, on students' anxieties about moving away, with one commenting that "*students are scared to navigate the city; they won't admit it, but they are*" (School F).

Organising these types of visits could be problematic, however, due to the distances involved and the financial cost, which impacted on school and/or student/parent finances. For these reasons, only five out of the eight schools (where student focus groups were conducted) were able to arrange them. School educators at Schools I and J pointed out that there were no school financial resources allocated for taking students to Adelaide campuses, while school H had previously organised visits to Adelaide for Year 9 students but had ceased these prior to 2020 due to cost. School F educators mentioned that these visits were given priority as some of their students had never been to Adelaide and needed to feel more confident about going there for university. However, they also pointed out that organising school trips was expensive and difficult, given that "*Adelaide is six hours away.*" Without specific funding for such excursions, it appears that, unless parents are able to pay expenses, most government schools would be unable to fund the travel, accommodation and other expenses required.

At schools which did not organise such visits, students were often notified of the dates of university open days. However, it was up to individual students to make their own way there and, as a result, many would be unable to attend. Relatively few students in the focus group discussions indicated that they had attended any open days in person. However, Figure 1 shows that 55% of survey respondents rated open days (held virtually/online during 2020/2021, due to COVID-19 restrictions) as having at least some impact on their decision-making regarding post-school options, with 23% reporting high to very high impact. Although we did not collect data specifically on how many had attended a virtual open day, it is perhaps likely that more students were able to attend online than if they had been held face-to-face on campus, given the distances to universities and the costs involved.

Figure 1: *How Much Impact do University Open Days Have on Your Decisions About What you Want to do After School?*

How much impact do university open days have on your decisions about what you want to do after school?

Impact Level	Percentage
High or Very High Impact	23%
Some Impact	32%
No or Low Impact	45%

Percentage of Students (x-axis: 0% to 50%)

Other Key Impacts

As previously shown in Tables 3 and 4, parents/guardians/family had the strongest impact on student decision-making about what path to pursue after high school and they were also the most important sources of information about financial assistance available for university. Focus group discussions revealed similar views, with students indicating they received a great deal of support from within their home environment regarding their plans for university. Comments included: "*They want what's best for you and if, like, you're capable of going to uni, then they're like, 'you go to uni'*", (Year 12 student, School B). However, those whose parents had not been to university indicated that their parents did not have the knowledge or information to help them understand what university was like; nor in many cases were they able to help them financially, despite being supportive in principle.

Siblings at university, or friends' siblings at university, were regarded as trustworthy sources of information: "*If I want honest advice about uni, I am going to go to my friend's sister. She'll tell me what I need to know*" (Year 12 student, School E). Other extended family members were mentioned as having influenced students' decision to go to university and to follow particular career directions. Several mentioned aunts who had been to university and had encouraged them to aspire to go (Years 11 and 12 students, Schools B and H); one spoke of the inspiration of her late grandmother, a nurse, who had been very active and well known in the local community (Year 11 student, School B), while another spoke of his grandfather, a medical practitioner, who had influenced him greatly (Year 12 student, School B). A number of other students spoke of family members whose own careers had inspired interest in a particular career path for themselves (Years 11 and 12 students, Schools A, B and H).

School educators also believed that "*parental influence is key*" (School F) in terms of influence on students' post-school choices. They saw this influence as being potentially both positive and negative. On the one hand, parents want their children to go to university, but, as many cannot afford this, they are seen to be discouraging (School F). Some teachers mentioned trying to "*fill this gap*" (School D) by providing more encouragement for university but were aware they do not have the same level of influence. It was mentioned that the idea of sending their child to a residential college was appealing to parents, but for most they are prohibitively expensive (School D). One teacher talked about parents being "*disengaged*" from students and their futures (School D), while another said that, without supportive parents, students "*will not go to*

university" (School F). For students without university-educated parents, a number of school educators reported that it was a significant challenge to convince parents to support their children's university aspirations (Schools B, F and J). When no-one in the family had been to university before, these school educators believed a low value was placed on higher education.

Summary

Results from the student survey, student focus groups and school educator interviews revealed that university visits to schools, in their current format, were not regarded as being particularly helpful to students' decision-making about university as a viable post-school option. Students and school educators alike regarded them largely as marketing exercises for the universities, rather than of practical help to students; as such, they placed little trust in the information received. A strong desire was expressed amongst students in the focus groups to know more about the practicalities of university. Along with their concerns about understanding course requirements, assessments, and other study-related concerns, they talked of needing more information about scholarships, relocation, accommodation and living costs, getting used to living in a city, finding their way around, and knowing how and where to look for accommodation and/or part-time jobs. They were disappointed that the university visits did not seem to provide them with this type of information and were left feeling cynical and doubting that universities cared about regional students.

Students turned instead to families and teachers for information and advice. They regarded their families as the most important source for this guidance, even though they were aware that family members did not necessarily have the information they needed. Teachers were seen by students as the next most valuable source of information; however, the school educators in this study were frustrated by what they saw as the lack of practical information provided by university visits, not only about course options but also the "*ins and outs*" of scholarships, financial support, and city life. They wanted to be able to help students with the correct information, but struggled at times to find this themselves. In the words of one school educator, "*Do we just Google university grants and scholarships? Where do we find that? I am sick of looking*" (School F).

These findings reinforce the recent focus in the research literature (Austin et al., 2020; Fischer et al., 2019; Kilpatrick et al., 2019) on the importance of university outreach programs focusing more attention on partnering with parents, schools and communities, to develop more comprehensive and tailored outreach strategies that promote conversations about university within schools, homes and families, which in turn nurtures university aspirations (Vernon & Drane, 2021). This clearly requires universities to redesign and improve outreach visits to schools, making them more relevant to student needs and providing them with necessary information about university itself, including courses, pathways, accommodation options, financial support and so on. It is interesting to note that the visits to cities and university campuses that were arranged by five of the schools were regarded as helpful and informative by both students and staff. Similarly, attending university open days was rated in the survey as an important source of information by more than half the students. However, not all schools are able to offer visits to universities, nor can all students afford to go independently to university open days. Universities visiting schools is a more realistic way to bring information to all students, although both students and staff were very clear that this needs to be done in ways that are practical and relevant, and certainly not as a marketing activity.

Conclusion

With students' homes and families being the key influences on their decision-making, it is vital that not only high school students themselves, but also those close to them, are better informed about the practicalities of going to university, such as career opportunities, courses, pathways,

financial realities, accommodation and scholarships. As can be seen from the literature review, barriers to higher education for regional students are well documented, including those related to cost, family finances and the complexities involved in leaving home. Parents, families and teachers all need to be in a stronger position to guide and support student decision-making with correct information about ways to manage and alleviate such barriers. Indeed, for the students in this study, families, followed by teachers, are reported as playing the most important role in influencing and supporting them in their university aspirations. Working with these key influencers alongside students can therefore assist with the dissemination of correct information.

We therefore recommend that universities seek the input of regional schools, students, parents and other community stakeholders, where relevant, to determine how university visits to schools can be tailored more towards the needs of the local community, with the aim of demystifying university in general and ensuring that students, parents, and schools are proactively directed to accurate and easy-to-access information about costs, financial support, scholarships and other practicalities of going to university. Given the high value placed by students and educators on school visits to the city universities, we also recommend that universities work closely with schools to help make these visits a reality for more students, whether through assisting with funding directly and/or partnering with schools to advocate for dedicated DfE funding for this purpose. Additionally, we recommend the continuation of virtual/online open days for those unable to physically attend in person.

Through building partnerships between universities and communities, the aspirations of high school students, their parents and their schools are more likely to be nurtured and barriers may be identified and ameliorated, ultimately leading to a further widening of higher education participation for students at regional high schools.

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