



Australian and International Journal of Rural Education

La Trobe University's Regional Higher Education Pathways Program

Dr Belinda D'Angelo

La Trobe University Bundoora

b.dangelo@latrobe.edu.au

Cherie Dyde

La Trobe University Wodonga

c.dyde@latrobe.edu.au

Abstract

Nuanced support for regional secondary school students can be a key to their consideration of university as an option in their educational journey. Reports, studies and teachers on-the-ground continue to call for tools and resources to boost students' decision-making about their futures. La Trobe University's Regional Higher Education Pathways Program takes an evidence-based approach to developing learner confidence and pastoral support for senior secondary students in Albury-Wodonga and Shepparton. As part of the program, students participate in regular, timetabled in-school sessions that cover topics from exam revision and literacy to wellbeing and mental health. The overall foci of the program are building learner confidence ('I can do university') and demystifying higher education through connection to the university environment ('I can see myself at university').

Keywords: *regional, pathways, higher education, achievement, learner confidence, support*

La Trobe University's Regional Higher Education Pathways Program

La Trobe University's Regional Higher Education Pathways Program (Pathways Program) has been delivered in low ICSEA (Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage) schools across the Albury-Wodonga and Shepparton regions since 2017 and 2019 respectively. Given rural, regional and remote students are less likely to go on to higher education than their metropolitan peers (Naphthine et al., 2019), coupled with workforce shortages that face regional Victoria (Victorian Skills Authority, 2022), the Pathways Program views its role in the community as twofold: the first, to guide and support students in their final year of secondary school (Year 12) to develop the skills and confidence necessary to become independent learners; the second, to increase further education attainment in regional areas to boost the economic outcomes of local communities.

Students are invited to opt-in to the program, which consists of literacy and academic skill development delivered by trained university students and staff via in-school sessions. The sessions commence in the final term of Year 11 and continue on a fortnightly basis throughout the Year 12 academic year. In addition to the timetabled sessions, participating students are also provided additional group and one-on-one support tailored to their needs. For instance, students can attend optional online wellbeing, literacy, numeracy and other study skills sessions, as well as access a Microsoft Teams page where they can ask questions related to their schoolwork, find study materials and make suggestions for ad-hoc workshops. There is a pastoral element to supporting students throughout Year 12 and after the exam period. The Pathways Program team

assists students with navigating their respective state Tertiary Admissions Centre's offer process and supports them in the transition from school to post-secondary life.

Best-practice approaches underlie all facets of the Pathways Program including its structure. The Pathways Program sessions are embedded into students' existing school study periods (i.e., periods in a student's timetable where there are no scheduled classes, but students are required to remain at school). This timetabled approach encourages students to view the sessions as meaningful learning, rather than an extra-curricular incursion which can be seen as 'not real work', that could lead to disengagement. Secondly, the inclusion of the program in students' timetables also allows for consistency and thematic scaffolding as well as targeting specific sessions during key times of the year for example, exam revision ahead of final exams in October.

Given prior achievement is a key predictor of further study aspiration (Vernon et al. 2018; Gore et al. 2015, Gore et al. 2019), the Pathways Program has been designed to build capacity for achievement. Results from the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy show that achievement of rural, regional, and remote students begins to lag as early as the Junior Years of school and persists through the Middle Years (Halsey, 2018). This trend is also reflected in Year 12 completion rates where in 2021, 82.1% of metropolitan students completed Year 12, while their inner regional, outer regional and remote/very remote counterparts were behind at 71%, 74.4% and 63.2% respectively (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, n.d.). Further, subject study scores that form part of the completion of the Victorian Certificate of Education have been declining in rural/regional government and non-government since 2015 and are consistently lower than the state-wide average. In recognition of this disparity and that parts of the curriculum are under-served in regional schools (Burnheim & Harvey, 2016) as well as teacher shortages that leave little room for the creation nuanced lesson plans to meet the needs of their cohorts (Cuervo & Acquaro 2018), the Pathways Program provides targeted support, complementing the Year 12 curriculum.

The inclusion of trained university students from the local regional campus to deliver the sessions was deliberate. In addition to developing learner confidence through study skills development, the Pathways Program students have access to a peer from their community that has moved on to university. This allows students to 'see themselves' in the student and ask questions that will receive a nuanced response. Beyond this, the program reflects on statistics that show rural, regional, and remote students are likely to have families with little higher education experiences (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022) and could therefore lack the access to timely information at home. A large part of the program is providing this connection to a mostly foreign concept to some students and building their cultural capital of the university environment. To this end, the Pathways Program gives participating students the opportunity to experience life as a university student and learning about the support services available to them should they chose university after secondary school. For instance, after students have completed the Year 11 component of the program, they are invited to an on-campus enrichment experience, La Trobe University Snapshot, to participate in activities that prepare them for the academic and wellbeing pressures of Year 12.

Since its inception, 346 students have completed the Pathways Program, with 70% of participants accepting university offers. Both the life outcomes (higher weekly earnings, higher rate of employment, higher full-time workforce participation) for students, and the economies of their local areas, stand to benefit from the tailored support offered by the Pathways Program and we look forward to continuing to innovate the program with regional schools to ensure we meet the needs of our students and communities.

References

- Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2022, May). *Education and work, Australia*.
<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/education/education-and-work-australia/latest-release>.
- Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority. (n.d). *Year 12 certification rates*..
<https://www.acara.edu.au/reporting/national-report-on-schooling-in-australia/national-report-on-schooling-in-australia-data-portal/year-12-certification-rates>
- Burnheim, C., & Harvey, A. (2016). Far from the studying crowd? Regional and remote students in higher education. In A. Harvey, C. Burnheim, & M. Brett (Eds.), *Student equity in Australian higher education*, (pp. 143–162). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-0315-8_9
- Cuervo, H., & Acquaro, D. (2018). Exploring metropolitan university pre-service teacher motivations and barriers to teaching in rural schools. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, 46(4), 384–398. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1359866X.2018.1438586>
- Fuller, C. (2014). Social capital and the role of trust in aspirations for higher education. *Educational Review*, 66(2), 131–147. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2013.768956>
- Gore, J., Fray, L., Patfield, S., & Harris, J. (2019). *Community influence on university aspirations: Does it take a village?* National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education.
https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Gore_Newcastle_FINAL.pdf
- Gore, J., Holmes, K., Smith, M., Southgate, E., & Albright, J. (2015). Socioeconomic status and the career aspirations of Australian school students: Testing enduring assumptions. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 42, 155–177. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-015-0172-5>
- Halsey, J. (2018). *Independent review into regional, rural and remote education. Final report*. Department of Education and Training. <https://www.dese.gov.au/quality-schools-package/resources/independent-review-regional-rural-and-remote-education-final-report>
- Napthine, D., Graham, C., Lee, P., & Wills, M. (2019). *National regional, rural and remote tertiary education strategy – Final report*. <https://www.dese.gov.au/access-and-participation/resources/national-regional-rural-and-remote-tertiary-education-strategy-final-report>
- Victorian Skills Authority. (2022). *State of the Victorian labour market: Victoria skills plan 2022*. Victorian Government Department of Education and Training.
https://content.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2022-09/State_of_Victorian_Labour_Market.pdf
- Vernon, L., Watson, S.J., & Taggart, A. (2018). University aspirational pathways for metropolitan and regional students: Implications for supporting school-university outreach partnerships. *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*, 28(1), 87–103.
<https://journal.spera.asn.au/index.php/AIJRE/article/view/167/129>