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The Intersection of Geography, Topography and Mindset: A Nuanced Understanding of Regional, Rural and Remote Students' Tertiary Education Participation in Australia

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Abstract

This paper explores the notion of rurality in Australian tertiary education as part of an investigation into the subtle but distinct differences in participation thinking and patterns among young people in regional, rural and remote communities. Drawing on qualitative data gathered as part of a wider research project for the National Centre for Vocational Education Research, the paper examines whether student participation in tertiary education is shaped by factors more deeply related to a sense of connection to community, the relationality and reflexivity as related to the context, as well as proximity to major tertiary education infrastructure, such as campuses. This analysis of place challenges traditional geographical lenses that emphasise regional, rural and remote—or 'RRR'—location in and of itself. Hence, the paper contributes to a more nuanced understanding of language in relation to RRR location as used in Australian policy, providing insights into the contested nature of the Australian term RRR, the concept of rurality in the wider literature, and concomitantly, investigating the impact of the same on youth participation in Australian tertiary education.

Keywords: *rurality, higher education, access, communities*

Introduction

There is a consensus in the literature on rurality and educational aspiration that people in Australian regional, rural, and remote (RRR) communities with low population density and limited proximity to major university campuses, experience more severe forms of geographic isolation than RRR populations in almost any other industrialised country (Alloway et al. 2004; Alloway & Dalley-Trim, 2010; Burnheim & Harvey, 2016). The existence of this unique disadvantage means that differences in the settings and circumstances in which education decisions are made can be pronounced between urban and RRR settings in Australia (Eversole, 2016).

While there is a partial recognition that *rurality* in Australia covers considerable geographical territory, it is often depicted with reference to the technical language of geography, where "*RRR is used as an umbrella term to characterise non-metropolitan areas across Australia*" (Commonwealth of Australia, 2019, p. 10). However, Brown and Deem (2014) show current

jurisdictional delineations of regions lack nuance, and empirical studies present an informal sub-national view of 'region-regionalism' that is often overlooked by policy actors in Australia. This problem, acknowledged by Alston and Kent (2009), is expanded upon by Robinson (2012, p. 81):

> *Within the Australian context, the trio of terms 'regional', 'rural' and 'remote' are used to characterize portions of the continental interior beyond the densely populated, coastal urban- and peri-urban fringes. Careless use of these terms potentially ignores enormous diversity in population size, resources, social relationships, economic status, and access to services between different localities.*

Another perspective in the research context, is the observed gradient in disadvantage associated with distance from major population centres, nestled alongside intersecting and compounding disadvantage across geography (Corbett, 2015; Gore, et al., 2022). However, Australian education policy in RRR areas continues to grapple with the nature of regional disadvantage and its structure in relation to distance and infrastructure (Halsey, 2018; O'Kane et al., 2023). Research has found that spatial inequality is proving difficult to remedy in RRR areas, with its undesirable effects persisting, often with complex and significant differences in the effect on youth outcomes across areas (Andrews, et al., 2004). Simultaneously, qualitative researchers often neglect the causes driving policy implementation in both urban and RRR areas with little differentiation for region-regionalism (Brown & Deem, 2014). More critically, studies have found that policy implementation across various government levels accompanies a lack of knowledge of the areas it is intended to impact upon (Pape et al., 2016).

This paper investigates the nuances of tertiary education participation in RRR areas of Australia. Specifically, it explores variabilities in how young people in RRR communities are impacted by distance, contributing to the wider literature on contested understandings of rurality in research where distinctions between the rural and urban, and within the rural, are often overstated or underplayed (Lichter & Brown, 2011; Strijker, et al., 202; Woods, 2011). Recent Australian and international research acknowledges this need, stressing the importance of relationality (Cook & Cuervo, 2020) and geographical differences in material and symbolic factors (Hofstede et al., 2022) influencing young people's decision to be leavers or stayers in rural areas.

The paper investigates this in three sections. The first describes low participation in tertiary education in Australian RRR areas and outlines reviews and recommendations from policymakers as how to resolve it. The second discusses educational research that examines differences in the perceptions and thinking of people in urban and RRR areas in relation to tertiary education participation. The third presents and discusses findings from a qualitative study on this issue undertaken as part of a wider research program for a National Centre for Vocational Education Research project. Despite the differences in geographical distance from urban centres and tertiary education provision across RRR areas, the findings highlight similarities in the perceptions about whether to participate in tertiary education by those facing socio-economic disadvantage in these different areas.

Regional and Remote Higher Education in Australia: The Policy Problem

Students who live in Australia's RRR areas and aspire to attend a tertiary institution experience acute educational disadvantage on several fronts. Accessing a university place or even a specialist vocational training provider, often involves moving away from their local community for most RRR students (Alston & Kent, 2009; Mills & Gale, 2007; Walsh & De Campo, 2010). This entails considerable cost and higher levels of engagement with the tertiary sector even before students enter an institution. The cost of travel and accommodation creates additional barriers for these young people who have been found to have significant existing markers of disadvantage (Cardak et al., 2017; Halsey, 2018). Additionally, the relatively nascent culture of moving to attend university tends to reinforce the disadvantage inherent to geographical remoteness in higher

education (Edwards & van der Brugge, 2013), something which is not starkly apparent in other contexts—see for instance, Lasselle's (2017) comparative work on the higher education expectations of young people in RRR areas in Scotland and Australia.

Compounding these issues is the strong intersection between regionality and socioeconomic status. The Australian Bureau of Statistics 2016 Census indicated that 38.2% of the population living in areas classified as *"Inner Regional"* resided in the lowest socioeconomic status quartile of the national population. Such disadvantage intensifies with distance from metropolitan areas, with over 52.9% of the population in *"Very Remote"* Australia being classified as low socioeconomic status (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018).

These influences combine to amplify the effect of cultural barriers to participation associated with distance in post-school education and training (Bryce & Anderson, 2008; Mills & Gale, 2007). Hillman (2005) finds that when young people from RRR areas do move away from home to access tertiary education, they often face difficulty in maintaining family connections and responsibilities from a distance, placing additional and significant pressures on them.

In response to this challenge, there has been a growing recognition among policymakers that a specific focus on RRR education is required in Australia. The 2018 Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education (the *"Halsey Review"*) identified the problem of low tertiary education participation for those from RRR areas and made substantive recommendations to government (Halsey, 2018). At the heart of these recommendations was the creation of the position of Commissioner of Regional, Rural and Remote Education (subsequently adopted) to address regional education disadvantage and balance the tension between establishing capacity in the regions and creating a strong sense of regional identity for higher education (Shinners, 2022), with a commitment to enabling students to enter tertiary education institutions in major population centres.

Recognition of this need to balance initiatives to encourage student movement out of the regions with increased higher education investment in RRR areas has informed recent policy, including additional educational infrastructure through formation of Regional University Study Hubs, regional education support centres for university students (Regional University Centres Network, 2023). The hubs allow students at different universities to access office and technology infrastructure to support their studies. Further, greater attention on student income support, has led to the introduction of the Tertiary Access Payment, an initial relocation payment of up to $5,000 to all commencing 'on-campus' RRR students (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2020).

Finally, the establishment of the Australian Universities Accord Panel and its current (O'Kane et al., 2023) Review of Australian Higher Education has seen further examination of the potential to address regional educational disadvantage 'in situ', with a notable focus on a proposal to expand the number of the Regional University Study Hubs in its Interim Report (O'Kane et al., 2023). In its final report, the Review proposed expanding the program into a *Regional Study Hubs* program which all tertiary students in a hosting RRR area—not just university students—could access services, with an emphasis on the study hubs as customised solutions to meet local requirements (O'Kane et al., 2024).

Arguably, initiatives such as the study hubs represent an emerging development in Australian higher education policymaking in which 'one size fits all' rural policies designed to encompass the diversity of regional and remote communities' are being refined to reflect the diversity of needs across RRR areas.

Effects of Rurality

Gibson et al. (2021) identify the dissonance between policy framing and the contextual realities of diverse rural locations which diminish the appeal of higher education for local students. Yet

tertiary education equity policy has underplayed the important differences between the urban and regional and within the regional (Productivity Commission, 2022). Drawing on international studies, Corbett (2015) highlights the construct of rurality as both material and symbolic while strongly stressing the impact of socioeconomic status on higher education participation among regional youth. He asserts that education in both regional Australia and the United States still tends to be viewed through a lens of *"traditional rural imaginaries"* (p.9) which he designates as problematic and supporting a *"deficit"* view of rurality *vis-a-vis* the more 'modern' urban context. Therefore, he calls for a more nuanced lens on rurality and its constituent features in relation to its impact on higher education. On the other hand, Cook and Cuervo (2020) remind us that the shifts within the Australian economy with its shrinking opportunities in employment and limited access to tertiary education for regional youth have driven the "*mobility imperative*" (Farrugia, 2016, as cited in Cook & Cuervo, 2020), often leaving the latter with no choice, stemming from the constant 'othering' of the rural.

International research has identified that differences in post-compulsory education pathways have repercussions for people's labour market outcomes (Dickerson et al., 2022; OECD, 2021), to the extent that these different pathways in post-school participation, that is, university versus vocational education, both reflect and reinforce social class differences and social immobility across geographical contexts (Bjarnason & Edvardsson, 2017; Donnelly & Gamsu, 2018; Hillman & Weichman, 2016). In Australia, it has been shown to be more complex with educational qualification and occupational groups playing a part in differences in participation rates between regional and metropolitan labour markets (Mallik et al., 2014). Furthermore, even though vocational education may act as a safety net against unemployment for lower-status social groups (Iannelli, 2013; Reay et al., 2011; Thompson & Simmons, 2013), it is not universally available outside metropolitan areas. Meanwhile, Corbett (2015) outlines that in Australia there is a *"fairly linear relationship between community size and educational performance, while in Canada and several other countries, mid-sized communities often perform well relative to large cities in some subject areas."* (p.10).

Mills and Gale (2007) highlight how geographical isolation leads to high levels of chronic unemployment and resultant poverty in a remote ex-mining town in Australia, restricting young people's opportunities in education and employment. This leaves young people with little understanding of, or access to, alternatives beyond what is presented in their community. Following Corbett's (2000) work in Nova Scotia, Mills and Gale (2007) observe that young people from middle class and professional backgrounds displaying academic potential are typically encouraged to leave the rural district. They describe an "*inheritance*", whereby a parental and community history of low educational attainment, followed by long-term unemployment and economic marginalisation, creates cultural assumptions that discourages young people from low socioeconomic backgrounds from leaving the area. This sentiment echoes Cook and Cuervo's (2020) analysis of the mobility imperative for regional youth and Bloomfield et al.'s (2019) concept of "*hesitant hope*" in the context of young people's access to alternative learning in RRR areas in Australia.

This notion of inheritance is also present in the work of Heath et al. (2008) in the United Kingdom. Without the possibility of 'disruption', as described by Granovetter (1983), young people's choices tend to reproduce the status quo, and in isolated regional communities, where poverty prevents physical exit (Mills & Gale, 2007), the possibility of disruptive encounters with cultural 'others' (Broadbent & Cacciattolo, 2013) is extremely limited. While Mills and Gale (2007) describe an extreme situation in the Australian context, the factors identified above exist more frequently in rural than in urban areas and contribute to the lower levels of interest in university study among young people in rural areas (Cardak et al., 2017; Mitchell Institute, 2015).

Such studies are a reminder that the affective aspects of im/mobility, and the imagined lives/futures/possibilities that contribute to it, may be as powerful in shaping young people's

post-school choices as the experience of im/mobility itself. The issue may be less whether young people are, more or less, geographically mobile, but whether their geographic im/mobility affects "*their capacity to imagine certain possibilities as being desirable*" (Sellar & Gale, 2011, p.121). However, as Cuervo and Wyn (2012) argue, "*educational institutions are built on the idea of standard temporal and spatial patterns*" (p. 73), including standardised and normative ideas of the nature of the places in which education should take place and to which it should enable young people to move or progress.

Arguably, this standardising framing has driven quantitative collections and research in Australia. This focus has been aided by the large volume of data generated relating to the post-school trajectories of young people derived from government-funded and initiated surveys and reports such as the OnTrack Survey of Victorian Year 12 leavers and the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) data (National Centre for Vocational Education Research, 2024). As a result, analyses using these data sources can be more descriptive than analytical. Large-scale surveys often lack the depth and texture of qualitative data on young people's decisions to remain in regional areas despite the valorisation of metropolitan imperatives (Farrugia, 2016, as cited in Cook & Cuervo, 2020). This also serves to limit attention to more material or 'objective' factors, such as housing and work, as opposed to symbolic or 'subjective' factors such attachment to place (Hoefstede et al., 2022). Using a qualitative study drawing on data from studies of young adults from rural areas in three European nations, Hoefstede and colleagues signpost the "*the role of symbolic factors in staying (e.g., Boccagni & Baldassar, 2015), such as 'symbolic place'*" (Hoefstede et al., 2022, p.148).

This article seeks to explore these symbolic and material factors to address such gaps in the literature in Australia.

Evidence from a Qualitative Study

The analysis draws on qualitative data collected from a three-year research program, *Geographical Dimensions of Social Inclusion and Vocational Education and Training in Australia*, undertaken for the National Centre for Vocational Education Research, which examined the intersection of geography, social inclusion, and vocational education in Australia. This work was given ethics clearance by the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee (Project CF13/1615 – 2013000841, *Geographical Dimensions of Post-School Participation in Education and Work*). The researchers are from non-Indigenous backgrounds and have undertaken sociological and educational research in the United Kingdom, India, and Australia – the countries from where they originate – as well as in Europe.

Methods

The research in the original funded program was designed to explore the variations in post-school participation in different RRR neighbourhoods to open discussion about the social and spatial boundaries described by these terms.

A qualitative approach was used to complement and extend an earlier quantitative study analysis of participation data from the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth cohort. The quantitative analysis of participation at postcode level had established that some neighbourhoods with below-average socioeconomic status have above-average student outcomes, and vice versa (Johnston et al., 2014). They argued that further research using qualitative methods was needed to identify how neighbourhood effects work, particularly the mitigating effects of schools and communities.

The qualitative case site research was designed to explore the social-spatial dimensions of tertiary education participation thinking (Flyvbjerg, 2006). The research literature, cited earlier, argued that post-school education im/mobility is related to people's cultural inheritances and

their social networks. Such literature had been informed by a Bourdeusian conceptual frame (Mills & Gale, 2007; Reay et al., 2011; Heath et al., 2008). Consequently, the qualitative research methodology adopted for the data collection, site selection, and analysis presented here sought to focus on the perceptions and dispositions, or what Bourdeusian scholars conceptualise as the 'habitus' of young people with low socioeconomic status and in understanding the perceptions and influences of the social networks and educational stakeholders with whom young people engaged in developing their views of tertiary education participation.

For this paper, two sites in different Australian states were chosen to explore the research question: *How is the tertiary education participation of young people in RRR communities in Australia impacted by social-spatial distances?* The sites were a regional-remote area in Victoria, labelled 'Eastshire', and a rural area abutting an urban fringe in South Australia, labelled 'Southland'. They were selected from the quantitative analyse undertaken by the Johnston et al. (2014) because both case sites had positive scores on young people's educational *Performance Index*, despite being areas of low socioeconomics compared to two other sites explored in the original quantitative study with similarly low socioeconomic profiles but negative Performance Index scores (see Johnston et al., 2014; Webb et al., 2015). Furthermore, qualitative analysis of data from all four sites originally studied in 2015, showed that the two sites selected for this present analysis exhibited aligned themes in relation to educational participation even though the two sites are very geographically distinct (Webb et al., 2021).

The data collected at both sites was collected in 2013 and reanalysed for this present paper in 2023. The data collection included a series of in-depth interviews and focus groups with 52 young people, both in and out of tertiary education, comprising 24 males, 28 females, from low socioeconomic backgrounds, as well as 56 local stakeholders engaged in supporting young people's educational transitions post-school, such as school principals, community leaders, and local authority planners and policymakers (see Webb et al., 2015, for a report of the original data collection and analysis). The cultural and ethnic background of the young people was predominantly Anglo-Australian reflecting the population of the case sites, with 12 young people—just under a quarter of the study cohort—self-identified with other ethnic or cultural backgrounds, including one First Nations Australian participant.

Interview data was transcribed and analysed using an interpretive approach to explore the subjective meanings of young people's im/mobility decisions to undertake post-school education. In addition, the analysis of the views expressed by the educational stakeholders, who these young people encountered or who had responsibility for educational provision in the area, also helped understand the context and influences on the views and decisions of these young people. We designate the regional youth as case site participants and others as 'stakeholders' in relation to the tertiary education participation of these regional youth.

Emerging Themes

The data collated from participants in the two selected areas were of particular interest, offering compelling themes around the geographical impediments to tertiary participation thereby enabling exploration of a nuanced understanding of rurality.

Eastshire. Eastshire was a comparatively large, but sparsely populated, rural-remote local government area in the far eastern edge of Victoria, located between high mountains and the sea where the predominant industry, forestry, had declined. Like the other selected case site (Southland in South Australia) it had areas of disadvantage but also wealthy landowners, tourism operators and the like, and limited employment opportunities. These milieux were also distinctly influenced by topographic factors as these Eastshire stakeholders stated: the area is "*socially remote from others, due to the topography of the area*". Towns are nestled among the folds of the mountain range and are connected separately to the Princes Highway which forms the "*one major route*" (Eastshire stakeholder). This situation stated the same stakeholder means that "*by*

its very nature" there is a *"big lack of public transport"* and another Eastshire stakeholder said the focus is on "*east-west*" travel, "*there's nothing north-south*". In other words, these stakeholders' use of the direction of travel - east-west - and the highway as the only means of connection across this area illustrate the geographical lines of connection and the barriers to travel across the area. More specifically, these geographical lines affect the opportunities for accessing tertiary education since there is only one road to the tertiary education campus, as one Eastshire stakeholder stated: "*[the route to the campus involves driving] onto the highway, along the highway and then out across the highway again [to town]. So, the further [out] you live the more difficult it is.*"

In Eastshire, a move away from home for tertiary education was a necessity, because "*in terms of tertiary education, we don't have access to it. Our young people between 15 to 24 actually literally need to relocate*" (a stakeholder). Travel distances for most tertiary options in Eastshire are indicated by this stakeholder's view "*the idea of travelling two hours in the morning and night; that would be horrible*".

Moving away to study post-school invariably necessitates a solo move. Some young people who make this shift on their own "*do fine*," said another stakeholder. However, as a far-east Eastshire stakeholder observed, "*others are like fish out of water. They last six months and they come back, and they don't know what to do from there on*", unconsciously invoking a habitus of staying put. The stakeholder emphasises that "*there's no doubt that [geography] does have an impact*" because "*that pull of home becomes a bit – you know you can't just [come] home every – you know whenever something goes wrong and, yeah, you're not going home to Mum and Dad every night*".

Here, tyranny of distance and geographic isolation of regional Australia (Alloway et al., 2004) were significant, but the impact was modified by the different 'doses' of the 'staying put' habitus that young people received. In the current study, some young people who demonstrated greater academic potential were often under more pressure especially from school-based advisors to move. Young people with parents who had experienced higher education and worked in professional roles in the regional area also tended to prioritise educational achievement and mobility over remaining in the local area. Typically, many of these more middle-class young people travelled out of the area often on a part-time basis to attend boarding schools in the urban centres and, in due course, pursue higher education there, too. The necessity of relocation was reflected, along with other factors, in comments by several Eastshire young people who reported adult "*encouragement*" (Corbett, 2000) to aspire to university, where this was felt as a tremendous pressure:

> *When I first finished high school there was a lot of pressure 'You need to go to uni. You need to go to uni. You're not going to get a job anywhere if you don't go to university', which is, I guess, is true… I think, three hours away to study, and that's a pretty big indicator in people's lives when they're making their decisions because it kind of comes down to 'Will I move away or will I stay here?' (Case study participant, Eastshire)*

Tertiary educational provision was very limited in this area, involving some diploma level study at a TAFE in one of the towns located two hours' driving distance from the far eastern town in this area. The take-up of opportunities in Eastshire appeared to be somewhat dependent on the resilience of the dispositions of those concerned, and the borders they imagined or set out to cross.

Southland. Southland is a local government area south of Adelaide that encompasses the rural and spasmodically populated area described by one stakeholder as the "*deep south*". Geographically, the area combined the rolling hills to the east, where farmland, wineries, and forest dominated and the peri-urban northern and western coastal areas. The peri-urban locations within Southland echoed the manufacturing story of elsewhere in the state whereas another Southland stakeholder claimed there were "*serious pockets of disadvantage*" as large-

scale employment opportunities in these areas had declined as global industries relocated manufacturing overseas, yet population pressures partly related to increased inward migration had led to a growth in new housing developments. The consequence of these changes led one school principal (a Southland stakeholder) to state that "*we also have quite wealthy families as well, so socioeconomically, it's disparate*".

In Southland, the themes emerging from the participants about whether to move away for education were different again. There was little mention of university in the focus groups. Only one participant was a university student and no one else aspired to, or mentioned aspiring to, university, which correlates with the census statistics that one stakeholder remarked on (see below).

While in what Southland stakeholders referred to as the *deep south* of the area, low tertiary education participation could be linked to tyrannies of distance. In the peri-urban Southland centres, there was what one Southland stakeholder described as a certain element of "*a psychological impost*" against moving – signalling "*strongly local*" affiliations. She said, "*I believe in terms of travel that people will not move out of that locality where students will say, 'what can I do at [Southland TAFE campus]', not* necessarily, *'what do I want to do'*."

Similarly, one *deep south* Southland stakeholder summarised the challenge for young people to travel to educational providers in the northern reaches of the local government area as "*unless you're very committed and have support and finance available that you can drive and so on, … it does cause that restriction and that's the sheer nature of the geography of where we live*." This equated to "*very, very poor results… in higher education attainment*". Even though a university campus was about a 45-minute car drive away, it may as well have been double the distance because of the geographic, topographic, and emotional borders between it and many of the young people of the *deep south*. The implications for these localities were significant, as one Southland stakeholder reported:

> *We've done a lot of work, we did geographical dimensions, … the further south, the further you get away from the city, the less likely people go to university, so that shows up really clearly in our statistics through the census.*

Situations, not Choices

In the context of student choice and opportunities, these two case study areas highlight the boundedness of young people's perceptions. Many of the themes of post-school educational pathways were tied to deficit disc*ourses* of dislocations for individual young people and whole families and for those left behind, as "*there was a lot of people from our year that sort of headed off and it does put a bit of a dint on it all*" (case study participant). There were senses of failure for those returning without a qualification and for those not achieving university entrance qualifications and so not being able to leave; psychological imposts and tyrannies of distance limiting aspirations; financial limitations and the burden of pressures to attend university; difficulties, as one young Eastshire case study participant put it, "*to survive really*". But amidst these presumptions and perceptions of deficit, we met some young people with 'strongly local' rural identities and beliefs who had navigated their situations in inspiring ways:

> *I think that it's important that there's no choices, there's situations. That's what leads to what you can do… you either can financially move or you can't financially move and then you've got what you can and can't do based on where you are. And the transport thing is just really quite huge in terms of where we are. (Case study participant, Eastshire)*

Such geographical, financial, and infrastructural factors were found repeatedly across the research sites, where each is diversely enacted or experienced as variations on a theme and intersecting into distinctive accommodations to understanding the situations young people found themselves in and the choices that they perceived to be available in these contexts. The

factor of limited finances was hardly subterranean, given the focus on people from low socioeconomic postcodes, but finance was only one of several forces and was not always a constriction on aspirations. Transport, in terms of costs (petrol, registration, parking, and fares), but importantly, the geographical spread of this in terms of ready access to frequent and reasonable public transport and travel times, was another aspect that followed from these situations and affected perceptions of choices. Educational participation seemed to depend on how participants understood their situations and choices, in other words what they perceived to as the theme of 'what you can and can't do based on where you are'. And there were several variations on a 'moving or not moving for education purposes' theme across the sites, linked in part to financial considerations and what many participants referred to as "*the transport thing*" as well as the limited availability of localised tertiary educational institutions. However, importantly, we found that cultural dispositions were also influential in shaping the decision-making of young people from the most rural and remote locations in these two case sites.

In Southland, stakeholders, particularly those in the *deep south,* opined that "*we're very overlooked in the south*" by government. One participant wistfully compared her area to the city and peri-urban centres to the north of the city which are perceived to be areas that received greater economic and education investment:

> *There's not as much, the economy down this way is just not as blooming as it is out north. I don't know if it's just like they spend more money out there, they've got more businesses. I don't know if it's more populated, but I think because the southern it's heaps more spread. (Case study participant, Southland)*

As noted above, tales of bus travel travails in the "*spread*" *deep south* geography further emphasised a sense of difference, disconnection, and frustration. The implications of these particular 'dispositions' were significant, as a case study participant explained why he was reluctant to take up the offer of a construction apprenticeship, saying "*I'd travel probably up to an hour maximum. I don't think I'd travel any further than that… you're spending $100 a week in petrol and then after tax as well when you're being paid, it's not a lot of money*". As did another:

> *Public transportation from where I live is just pretty much no go, because . . . They come every couple of hours and you have to interchange a lot of buses. To get to Uni I'd probably take two hours. (Case study participant, Southland)*

Given the ameliorating practices of schools to encourage tertiary education participation, several young people do make the geographical shift to study away from home, but the distance can be too much for some as this Eastshire stakeholder from a regional university noted:

> *Those that have got the aspect of a secondary school student going 'I'm going to university', they're striving for that, that's where they want to go. Those that haven't the self-confidence for that sort of stuff are majorly inhibited and that's a big barrier for them. It's like, it means 'I've got to live away from home. I've got to go there, no, too much, too scary. I'll stay here and do a traineeship or an apprenticeship or work in a supermarket'. Their aspirations are cut short by that.*

And others cut short their study away from home or seek alternative means to study online:

> *Kids might go away for 12, 18 months, 2 years, and then that pull of home becomes a bit [too much] (School principal, stakeholder Eastshire)*

> *I talk to all my friends now because they're still at uni. …I'm just like 'I wish I'd done that'. So now I'm at the stage where I'm looking online. Can I do an online university course or should I go now while they're in their final year? (Case study participant, Eastshire)*

There seemed to be a disconnect in policy-thinking about the geographical and social-emotional barriers between the support offered in rural areas to those in secondary education and those in tertiary education:

> *The minute they leave school or do VET [vocational education and training], VCAL [Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning] or anything else, apprenticeship, their right to the school bus is gone. The policy makes no sense and that's what we've been arguing for. We're saying the way people are educated now has changed in the last twenty years. The policy has not kept pace. (Spokesperson for Eastshire Council)*

The Southlanders' strong sense of attachment and belonging to their towns, infrastructure, services, and environments, in this case to the town on the coast, is similar and summarised by a stakeholder as "*I think the culture of [the town] is very much local, very strongly local. We are strongly connected into our local industries, the hospitals, the schools, the community environments, and the networks and so on.*"

From this, it becomes clear that one needs to look beyond simple academic 'achievement' and young people's educational aspirations to understand patterns of participation in further education, work, and training among this student group. Indeed, each young person occupies a private socio-spatial context which needs exploration based on their observed educational 'choices' (Bowl, 2003) and supporting infrastructures. Individual circumstances are the outcome of numerous factors – socioeconomic status, geographical location, indigenous/non-indigenous background, parental influence, and engagement with mainstream schooling – which are all interwoven to either open up, close off, or obscure possible post-school pathways. As Bryce and Anderson (2008) and others (Hillman, 2005; Mills et al., 2011,) point out, a young person's socio-spatial location also affects their access to information about possible post-school pathways and their confidence in seeking out such information.

Importantly, despite the geographical differences and designations of these two case sites—one peri-urban and rural and one regional and remote—the two sites highlight many similarities in relation to the geographical, economic, and socio-cultural impediments that affect young people's thinking about whether or not to engage in tertiary education. These perceptions or put another way, young people's thinking about their post-school educational participation is informed by both material (transport and/or relocation costs, work requirements, and a lack of information on options), as well as symbolic (uncertainty about cultural isolation or strong ties to local culture) factors. Yet the experience of these similar impediments is often expressed differently because participants' accounts of their thinking are grounded in different locales.

Discussion

Discussions about participation in tertiary education at the two case sites revealed numerous factors apart from context-related mobility. The main factors which emerged as barriers to youth participation in higher education and vocational education options related to geographical and infrastructural features of the areas which impacted on the economic costs of tertiary participation. These factors included the limited number of higher and vocational education options in RRR areas and the escalating costs of travel and accommodation to access tertiary education, along with policy disjunctures in supporting mobility from different RRR areas and material factors such as housing and work (Hoefstede et al., 2022) opportunities. These findings support the broader picture emerging at the global level. However, this analysis also demonstrated that despite popular notions of the attractiveness of mobility for education, parallel socio-cultural factors such as relationality and reflexivity affected people's perceptions of their own motilities (Cook & Cuervo, 2020). The emotional context and networks young people engaged with (Corbett, 2015; Alexander, 2023) emerged as influencing factors for both leavers and stayers. Though not a focus of this paper, gender remains an ongoing factor in rural youth

mobility for tertiary education when young women perceive that local employment opportunities are more limited than that for young men. At the same time, many girls, like some young men, choose to remain local, marry young, and forego tertiary education participation. Nonetheless, Fleming and Grace's (2014) study reveals that among rural youth, more females than males tend to aspire towards post-secondary education. The literature, as well as the material drawn from the qualitative data here, reveal that a simplistic, deficit lens on rurality as a space of locational and socioeconomic disadvantage must be avoided and a more layered understanding developed of the issue at hand.

Considering the qualitative empirical research from the case sites enables the voices of the people to draw on their own sense of region-regionalism (Brown & Deem, 2014) as they characterise and discuss the impact of their home regions on their thinking about tertiary education participation. The study revealed that there were similarities across the two case sites, Eastshire and Southland despite their geographical differences and differences in their distance from the metropolitan areas of Australia. The education stakeholders and the young people highlighted the difficulties of geography, the distance from urban centres, and lack of nearby affordable education and training facilities as major restrictions on their post-school opportunities. The issues were, in some senses, common across both the case sites; these common issues were raised both in the regional-remote area of Eastshire, where travel distances could involve several hours travelling time and had to be by car (buses and trains were not available or did not run at appropriate times), as well as in the rural-urban fringe areas of Southland, where public transport was generally more frequent. At the same time, distinct but differentiated barriers were identified by participants and stakeholders in these two case sites. In the rural-peri urban area of Southland, the geographical and topographical features resulted in high financial costs and transport difficulties for participating in tertiary education. In Southland, these transport difficulties were perceived to make mobility difficult even for distances that car drivers would view as commutable. In Southland, there was a perception that the area was being neglected by state government and employers. Therefore, non-participation was the default disposition even though Southland was not as physically distant from the metropolitan facilities as Eastshire. In contrast, in the regional-remote area of Eastshire where the geographical distance to any tertiary institution was very great and financial costs and lack of public transport were also considerable, when young people tried to travel or move away for tertiary education, the social connections they retained to their home area and the importance of familial and friendship relationships were prominent in pulling them back to Eastshire. Such social connections helped to sustain the perceptions and dispositions of immobility for young people in Eastshire.

In both case sites, studying locally was the preferred mode, but this preference reduced the options available since not all education and training opportunities were available in each of these areas. In particular, the findings from these case sites show that even smaller distances from peri-urban areas to urban, or the complexity of travel within regional-remote areas, are major restrictions on post-school participation. These findings add depth to other research that has shown that lack of affordable and convenient public transport impacts even those who do not live very far from urban centres and, therefore, results in the necessity to migrate to a metropolitan centre to continue with any form of post-school education (Walsh & De Campo, 2010).

Limitations

Since this research data was collected in 2013, there have been several changes to the landscape of post-school education in the areas investigated that may affect opportunities, including for example, the withdrawal of one higher education provider in the area adjacent to Eastshire and its replacement by another with a more regional focus. Additionally, since the original data was

collected, the disruption to the idea of face-to-face attendance for education in schools and higher education, and even in employment, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, may have tempered the pressure to move to urban areas, increased opportunities to study at a distance, and modified young people's views about im/mobility. Furthermore, RRR areas in Australia are very diverse. Further research to study more ethnically diverse populations, and importantly, areas where many more First Nations people live, would be valuable.

Conclusion

There are symbolic and cultural barriers to participation related to moving away and identity challenges which have surfaced in this research, confirming Mills and Gale's (2007) foundational work relating to dispositions of rural and regional youth. Whilst the opportunities of post-school education are presented in the outreach and aspiration-raising activities of tertiary education providers, the literature argues that there is little discussion in these activities of the losses that young people may experience by considering different trajectories (see for instance, Alexander, 2023). that may be new to a community or family and may undermine or devalue received inheritances (Mills & Gale, 2007). Policy narratives using language about student choice and poverty of aspiration fail to understand the actual barriers described by the participants in the case sites which range from the abstract and emotional to the extremely concrete of transportation and financial barriers. As Bowl (2003) explains, the idea of choice delegitimises lived experiences, overlooks social disadvantage, and minimises the extent to which young people inhabit their own private socio-spatial context. Our study reinforces the idea that the perception of place plays a powerful role in influencing young people's geographic mobility (Alston & Kent, 2009; Drummond et al., 2013).

We outline how rurality can stretch from the outer margins of metropolitan areas to extremely remote areas in the lived experience of their inhabitants. We argue that 'geographic sensitivity' needs to be understood in terms of the impact of policy on the imagined aspirations of young people in their local contexts. In other words, policy and practice need to be shaped so that programs deployed at the local level engage with communities on their own terms.

At the same time, consideration needs to be given to the sheer natures of local geographies and topographies which influence socially distinctive patterns of opportunities in view of the multifaceted nature and impact of tertiary education. The forces forming localities and connecting people to the places where they live may not be readily measurable and, therefore, visible to distant decision-makers, but uncovering these attachments and connections is necessary to understanding the 'what you can and can't do' situations within which young people form educational, career, and life aspirations. In addition, other shifts are occurring. In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is conceivable that unprecedented ways of thinking about engagement with young people in regional areas is emerging, with Teague et. al (2022) providing a survey of Australian institutional responses heading into the post-COVID era. Notably, this includes differing delivery of post-school opportunities, especially through external online studies, and the emergence of more localised approaches that reinforce the need for regional policies and initiatives that follow a more precise analysis and search for solutions at the local level.

The policy expectation of increasing tertiary education participation suggests that continuing with education post-school requires a geographical move – and a shift psychologically and emotionally – to want to move. Participants (the young people) and stakeholders in both case sites expressed this idea, but in the regional- remote area of Eastshire unlike the rural peri-urban area of Southland, this view was qualified by the expectation and/or hope that participants will return to the rural home, albeit in the future, or with the ambivalence that they might never come back. Geography made a significant difference in the post-school lives of the local youth,

but rurality was experienced differently in the remote case site compared to the rural-peri urban site.

Until these challenges are addressed, the issue of social justice in relation to rural areas in Australia will remain under-valued and under-utilised in relation to driving improvements. This is in contradiction to the principles of both inclusive education, notably in the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration of the Council of Australian Governments, which in its Preamble commits to supporting all young Australians to achieve excellence in education, regardless of where they live (Education Council, 2019).

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