Australian and International Journal of Rural Education

Improving Rural and Regional Student Experiences

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Abstract

In this editorial for the second issue of the *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*, we explore the challenges and opportunities for researching and reporting student experience in rural and regional education. The articles in this issue illustrate how the voices of students can be and are represented through research. The articles from rural and regional contexts in China, Sweden and Australia offer insights into student experiences and what can be done to improve those experiences across a range of sectors. We also note that the influence of rurality on experiences is sometimes assumed but not explicitly discussed. In summary, the articles in this issue provide useful illustrations of how student voice and experiences can be used to powerfully reflect and improve the value of programs, pedagogical approaches, curriculum offerings and educational opportunities.

Keywords: *student experience, student voice, rurality*

Introduction

This issue brings together a somewhat eclectic mix of articles. However, as we read through the articles there is a thread of common themes about rural student experiences. We read about the experiences of Aboriginal boarding students, of school students in rural parts of China who are exposed to extended reality, of medical students who are engaged in a rural immersion program, of professionals who work with disengaged rural students, and of students and community members who are part of a regional study hub outreach program. The intent of each article varies, but the reason why these papers appear is because the researchers want to understand student experiences and how to respond to them.

While the dominant discourses in rural education research tend to be related to community and relationships, rurality and place, deficit discourses, and teacher preparation (Guenther et al., 2023), attention is seldom given to the voices of those for whom education is for: the students. In our Journal we regularly hear from researchers, teachers, school leaders, practitioners, policy bureaucrats, parents and community members, but we rarely hear from students themselves. In this issue we do hear from them in a variety of rural learning contexts.

Challenges for Student Experience Research

The dearth of research based on student voice, is related to a few issues. Partly, it is related to the challenges associated with engaging young people in authentic and ethical methodologies (Brasof et al., 2022), and possibly because they rarely have a say in how research about their

experiences is conducted (McCarthy et al., 2025; Oliver et al., 2024; Shay et al., 2023), which means there is considerable research *about* young people but not so much that is designed and conducted *by* them. Nevertheless, there are important findings in the 'about' category of youth research that shed light on the lived experiences of rural students: those that demonstrate positive effects of programs (Wolfe, 2023), and those that reflect the perceived deficits of 'being' or living in rural locations (Grant, 2022; Turega, 2023). Partly, it is related to a focus on younger students' experiences, ignoring those of mature-aged students engaged in higher education who navigate complex paths to fit study into their busy lives (Delahunty, 2022; Delahunty & Crawford, 2024), particularly the guilt associated with taking time away from family life to engage with higher education (Delahunty, 2022).

Hopkins (2024) notes that:

> *A great deal more research highlighting rural student voice is crucial to promote a more equitable future for all Australians and to advocate for rural students who are so often brushed aside by national quantitative studies focusing on achievement outcomes, and whose rural voices are most often lost in the neoliberal education policy landscape (p. 88).*

Much of the literature on rural and regional student experience is focused on the higher education sector. There is considerable research on the experiences of allied health and medical students in rural placements (Bradley et al., 2020; McNaught & Rhoding, 2022, 2023). Some is based on survey data, (Elliott et al., 2023). Other research in this field is qualitative, providing accounts of students in rural settings (Shepherd et al., 2025). There is also a growing body of research on the experiences of young people transitioning to urban universities, from their rural communities, describing the challenges they face and how they have overcome those challenges (Grant & Kniess, 2023; Stone, 2023) and what could be done to better support them (Ndofirepi & Maringe, 2020; Pollard et al., 2021). Very little of research focusses on mature-aged students' experiences (Delahunty, 2022; Delahunty & Crawford, 2024).

There is considerable research about remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experiences. A large body of research describes the experiences of remote students transitioning into boarding environments (O'Bryan, 2021; Redman-MacLaren et al., 2021; Stewart, 2021), and then transitioning out (Rutherford, 2024; Shay et al., 2023). Much of the research reports the challenges rural and remote students face adjusting to foreign environments, maintaining social connections and mental health, and adapting to the culture of non-rural institutions.

More research is needed into the role of Regional University Centres in providing access to universities and support for both young and mature-aged rural students who decide to remain in their rural area during their higher education studies. Delahunty (2022) finds for students who opted to 'Stay Regional', Regional University Centres created a feeling of belonginess and community missing from rural students' experiences at metropolitan universities. There is also research that shows the need for supporting workforce retention for those that migrate from cities to meet skills demand in health and education. What we do not see a lot of is research that shows how rural students use their strengths to succeed in education and career choices, and where rurality is seen as an asset rather than an obstacle (Phillips, 2015). However, Delahunty (2022) begins to address this question. In her report, regional and remote university students expressed how transferring coping mechanisms learnt during times of hardship at home enabled them to persist with their studies at university when they experienced hardships, such as being away from home.

Engaging Rurality: A Missing Piece

One of the missing pieces in the puzzle of student experience is the lack of engagement among many rural researchers, with the concept of 'rurality'. How does rurality influence student experience, if at all, and just what about 'the rural' makes any difference? It is one thing to

identify the experiences of rural students, but what is it about 'being' rural or metropolitan that shapes identity, belonging, socialisation, values and aspirations? Many of the studies we have referred to here—based on rural, regional or remote contexts—have no comparison (e.g. Stone et al., 2022) and make assumptions that align with "*metronormative discourses*" of deficit and disadvantage (Roberts & Guenther, 2021, p. 19). We are left to guess what the difference is. Studies that do have multiple sites (metropolitan, regional, rural and remote), often have no analysis of how the locations differ or why (e.g. Lowe & Weuffen, 2022; Shay et al., 2025). Roberts et al. (2024) argue that "*to really value rural people, places and communities, research needs to engage with the complexity of rurality*" (p. 141). This is one of the challenges that rural education researchers face. Delahunty (2022) and Delahunty and Crawford (2024) engage with the complexity of rurality by adopting a strengths-based approach of identifying what works for students, in their local context for their specific life factors. For example, Delahunty's (2022) analysis of geographical movement looks at how age and remoteness categories influence the decision to stay or leave for university studies and points out differences between students aged 25 years and under and those aged 26 years and over. Belonging has been identified as one of the psychosocial requirements for a positive student experience (Kahu & Nelson, 2018). Findings from both Delahunty (2022) and Delahunty and Crawford (2024) identified for regional and remote students a feeling of 'local' belonging (Crawford & McKenzie, 2022), whether that be facilitated by community, family or Regional University Centres support, was more important than a feeling of belonging to a specific institution, for persistence with their studies.

As you read through the articles in this issue, look out for references to rurality or related concepts (they are few and far between) and look for those mentions of how and why being rural makes a difference in the analysis of students' experiences. Then, as an additional challenge, consider how the researchers might have reframed their research to bring the complexity of rurality into focus.

The Articles

The articles in this issue take us to sites of teaching and learning in China, Sweden and Australia, and connect us with student experiences in primary, secondary and tertiary settings.

Xining Wang, Gareth Young, and Conor McGuckin's article on extended reality (XR) in rural China considers how this kind of technology can be used to enhance student learning experiences, compared to more traditional methods. The study shows, perhaps not surprisingly, that students in the XR classes benefited from their new learning experience. The authors suggest that the difference has more to do with teacher-centred and student-centred approaches. They conclude that "*utilising XR technologies in rural classrooms can be one way to bridge educational disparities*" (p. 14), while also noting that the perceived value of XR related approaches is dependent on an expectation that learning is meant to benefit students in the pursuit of better examination results than for the pleasure of learning. While here is a classic example of research of student experience, what we see in the findings is an enculturated view of educational quality determined not by the students, but by the education system. While it does point to the potential benefit for rural students—opening up learning opportunities that would normally only be available to metropolitan students—it also raises questions about perceptions of 'quality' in rural education.

The article from Josef Siljebo, Fanny Pettersson, and Björn Norlin tackles another technology related issue, providing an historical perspective on the adoption of online learning in northern Sweden. While Wang and colleagues' work involved teachers using technology in classrooms, what Siljebo and colleagues discuss is 'remote' teaching where the teacher is not in the classroom. The introduction of remote teaching to rural Swedish schools came about at least in part as a response to declining rural populations, which made offering quality education in rural communities more difficult. The affordances of online learning technologies in the 2000s

facilitated new ways of learning. While this article does not explore student experiences, the implications of 'remote learning' for students in rural areas are perhaps obvious. On the one hand there are opportunities for improved access to a broad range of curriculum offerings. But on the other, in a world where choice is valued, rural student learning experiences are still constrained by what is available to them—and it would seem in this case that face-to-face learning is less likely to be an option. Nevertheless, both articles from China and Sweden represent innovative learning approaches that ameliorate the effects of distance.

Michelle Gossner, Cassy Dittman, Lisa Lole, Lauren Miller-Lewis's article on community insights into disengagement offers important understandings about why young people in rural and remote communities are more likely to disengage and drop out from school compared to their metropolitan peers. Noting that again that while this study does not draw from the perceptions of young people, it does consider the perspectives of those who are close to them, such as youth community service representatives. The findings are discussed in a framework of *Process*, *Person*, and *Contextual* factors over time and while students were not interviewed the findings are similar to other studies that have sought the views of students (Howard et al., 2020) as they relate to peer, family and school factors. While dropout and disengagement are often discussed as an issue for schools and education systems (ACARA, 2025), this study takes a broader view where parents, community members and individual students themselves share in the multiplicity of causes for disengagement. Importantly, along with other studies in Australia (Allen et al., 2018; Guenther et al., 2024), the remedy for disengagement requires a whole of community approach—it cannot be 'fixed' by schools alone.

Wili Suluma and Greg Burnett, in their article on boarding school outcomes for remote Aboriginal students, explore student perspectives along with parent and staff views of boarding school outcomes. They find that the various perspectives of their participants, converged around expectations of year 12 completion, employment and a better future more generally. Students expressed their aspirations clearly in terms of pathways beyond school, consistent with other studies of remote students (Benveniste et al., 2022; Rutherford, 2024). A question could be raised here about the role that rurality or remoteness have on the experiences of young people at school. For Suluma and Burnett's respondents, this is probably tied up in the connection to (ancestral lands) that students had: "*Students' connection to family and Country was noted to have a great influence on their plans*" (p. 63), though from a systemic perspective, the influence of rurality is likely obscured by the demands of systems which, in the case of boarding schools, have long been associated with assimilatory practices and assumptions. O'Bryan (2021) concurs: "*However much boarding is wrapped in the language of opportunity and choice, any policy priority of sending children away from family and community inevitably resonates with assimilatory practices of the past*" (p. 26).

Scott Graham, Jim Pratley, David Randall, Lincoln Gill and Jeff McCormick shift our focus to secondary offerings of agricultural education subjects. The extraordinary finding of this paper is in its reporting of incredibly low completion rates in agriculture subjects. In part, this is due to the limited offerings at a senior secondary school level. The implications for agricultural industries will undoubtedly link to skills shortages in the not-too-distant future. The authors make the valid point that to increase completions, there need to be more agricultural courses available for students to be able to choose. Perhaps, just as important, in terms of implications is what students themselves think about agricultural education (Cosby et al., 2022; Manning et al., 2024). This may shed light on how to address the current skills shortages and workforce gaps in some sectors of Australia's agricultural industries (Job and Skills Australia, 2024). Like other skills shortage issues in rural areas, this has complexities associated with it that relate to school-industry collaboration, resourcing and political will.

The last two journal articles address a different workforce issue—attracting and retaining medical students in rural Western Australia. Keith McNaught and Gina Sjepcevich report on

perspectives of students in an immersion program linked to their future involvement in the Rural Clinical School of Western Australia. This study finds that "*a short-term program can have a significant impact on urban-origin students, with all students reporting a positive change in their thinking about rural practice*" (p 100). As noted earlier, a lot of studies focus on the perceptions of rural students moving to an urban context. This study turns this around. While the findings from the program were positive, it seems that students wanted more: "*A recurring theme in student feedback was the desire for even more interaction with the local community*" (p. 101). In effect, what the students are saying is 'our experience of the rural has been positive, but please can we have more'. The strengths and positives of rurality do count for something, and may well mitigate the downsides of rurality. Anett Nyaradi and Keith McNaught provide a complementary article that reports on the results of a separate but related study. Students in this article are in their second year of study and are required to participate in a four day rural immersion placement. The pre-post survey methodology demonstrates a positive shift in perceptions before and after the immersion program such that: "*Rural Immersion Week significantly influenced students' intentions to pursue future rural clinical placements and consider rural practice as a career path.*" (p. 117) Both of these studies demonstrate that ambivalence towards engagement in rural practice can be shifted positively, and potentially that rich learning experiences in rural contexts are valuable in showing immersion participants that there is much to be appreciated and enjoyed in rural communities.

The Rural Connections article in this issue describes an evaluation of a program called EduVentures, developed through the Taree Universities Campus. Gemma Death and Evan Weller describe how the program was intended to build connections between the universities involved, local schools and community stakeholder, and potential students. The article reports on survey responses from students. In the findings, the voices of students are reflected in the quantitative data and the qualitative responses from students. While it could be argued that the findings are simplistic, as a starting point, to get a better understanding of perceptions, the results can give good advice to staff to better design and build the resources and activities that the Campus produces. Coming back again to the impact rurality (or in this case regionality) has on perception and program design, there is room to develop this program further—tailoring responses to better meet community needs and expectations, expanding the program to include mature-aged students, as well as the needs of universities and industry stakeholders.

Conclusion

Rounding out the discussion, the articles in this issue provide useful illustrations of how student voice and experiences can be used to powerfully reflect and improve the value of programs, pedagogical approaches, curriculum offerings and educational opportunities. Students are of course at the centre of education, and there would be no such thing as education if not for students. So how students think and respond to what educators offer is important. We have also seen how a study can be reinterpreted to ask the important questions about what the implications for students might be.

For the field of rural education research, the issue of rurality should also be central—what rurality brings to education and what the implications are for rurality. Thinking critically about each article, it is not too difficult to see that a definition of rurality depends on context. Rurality is viewed differently by insiders and outsiders (exemplified by McNaught and Sjepcevich's article). Rurality may be perceived differently by students and teachers (as is undoubtedly the boarding school research presented by Suluma and Burnett). Rurality can be viewed through an industry and workforce lens (Graham and colleagues) and through a career development lens (Death and Weller). In all the articles rurality is contextual and provides a site for learning and (dis)engagement (Gossner and colleagues), and rather than being a cause of problems, it can be a reason for innovation (Wang and colleagues, Siljebo and colleagues).

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