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The Importance of Local Voices in Rural Communities

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Abstract

In this issue of the *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*, our authors explore the importance of giving voice to people whose lives and learning journeys are entwined with 'the rural'. The articles reflect the concerns of Australian First Nations students and researchers, of young people and medical students on a vocational pathway, and of Nigerian people navigating risks in post-secondary education. They also reflect the voices of researchers who have contributed to the Journal for over 30 years.

Keywords: *First Nations research, Kimberley schools, engagement, attendance, boarding school, transition to the workplace, rural intention, clinical placement, risk management, environmental risks, career advice, post-secondary education, First Nations researchers, First Nations voices*

Editorial

In this last issue of the *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education* for 2023 we have eight articles with authors from Australia, Zimbabwe, and Kazakhstan who share perspectives about the factors that impact students enrolling in universities in regional areas, Indigenous students transitioning to the workplace post boarding school, rural intention of medical students, the important role of Indigenous researchers, career education in rural communities and perennial issues and trends in rural education. A recurrent and crucial theme is listening to the community voices and the voices of those impacted most by the research.

In Australia, 'Voice' has been a front of mind topic for many people, with a referendum having been held on whether or not to recognise First Nations people in the constitution, with a voice to parliament. While the proposition for change was rejected, it is interesting to note how people in rural and remote communities voted. First Nations people voted with a resounding 'yes' and non-Indigenous people voted with a resounding 'no'. The divergence in opinion across rural and remote parts of Australia reflects to a large degree how differently people perceive issues such as culture, language, health, education, justice, and housing, among others—as they affect First Nations people. One group feel like they haven't been heard, and the other—it could be argued—do not want to hear their voices. The failure of the referendum of course does not mean that voice does not matter. Voices in research are of primary importance, and this issue examines this priority.

The *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*, and its predecessor *Education in Rural Australia*, reached a key milestone this year. The release of the first issue this year (March 2023) coincided with publication of the 500th contribution to the Journal. Over 32 years, the Journal has reported on research and practice that gives voice to people who are learning and teaching in regional, rural and remote parts of Australia, and increasingly, across the world. Noting this milestone, the editorial team felt that it was a good idea to take stock of what the Journal has contributed, and more importantly, what has been learnt through research over the years. The result of this stocktake is an essential research article that explores the full archive of the Journal and identifies perennial issues and emerging trends in rural education research and practice. The team effort and analysis from John Guenther, Melyssa Fuqua, Sue Ledger, Serena Davie, Hernan Cuervo, Laurence Lasselle and Natalie Downes is notable not so much for what it found, but more so for what it did not find, pointing those of us doing rural education research, to future priorities. Also noteworthy, is the finding that many of the issues that resonated with researchers and practitioners 32 years ago, are still alive and well today: issues such as resourcing, teacher preparation, rural student aspirations, contextually responsive curriculum, deficit discourses, and rurality/place. Given all the research undertaken over more than three decades, surely some of these perennial issues might have been put to bed! Whether this is an issue for translation of research into policy and practice, or whether it is a product of the ongoing and persistent positioning of the rural as peripheral to national interest, is hard to say. What we can be confident of though, is that there is a body of evidence that *can* inform policy and practice. Some things have changed over the 32 years. In relation to the topic of 'voice', it is pleasing to see that First Nations people are now not just the subject of research, but are increasingly using their voices in the Journal. It took 20 years for an article to be published by a First Nations person (Gorringe, 2011). It is pleasing to see that in recent years First Nations academics are publishing articles from Indigenous standpoints, both from Australia and elsewhere in the world. Two important First Nations contributions are included in this issue.

A vast number of initiatives have been implemented in the last ten years to address differences in outcomes between First Nations and non-Indigenous Australians (Guenther et al., 2019). Boarding schools play a critical role in the education of many secondary First Nations students from remote communities. Marnee Shay and colleagues' paper captures the thoughts and voices of young Aboriginal people from remote communities transitioning to life beyond boarding school. Importantly, in terms of 'voice', the methodology did not only engage the students as research participants, but as knowledge producers. Identifying opportunities and challenges for young First Nations students has the potential to improve their transition into life beyond boarding. This study was conducted by a team of Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers yarning with young Aboriginal students. The importance of working with key role models such as Elders and family members were highlighted as key influencers of successful post boarding school transition of young First Nations students.

Keith McNaught and Colette Rhoding discuss the need for policy and process changes to the allocation of rural clinical placements for medical students. The demand for rural placements exceeds supply but there is a shortage of rural medical professionals. The paper explores the factors that influence medical students' rural intention focusing on those who initially have a neutral view. Here, the voices of students are critically important for policy and practice, not just from a pragmatic perspective—where gaps need filling—but, as the authors argue, from a moral and ethical perspective.

The paper by Anthony Eniola and colleagues also looks at young people's post-secondary school pathways but in the context of three rural areas in Nigeria. More specifically, the authors examine whether youth perceptions of health, security, and environmental risks influence student enrolment at private universities in rural places. The findings from Eniola and colleagues

show that students' understandings about the management of security risks do not significantly associate with student enrolment but that health and environmental risks are crucial for university enrolment. By this, the authors do not downplay the issue of security in the country but show that the management of health risks, for example, is vital for university leadership if they are going to enjoy healthy student in-take. Finally, Eniola and colleagues' findings relate to a broader issue, the sustainability of rural higher education institutions and, thus, communities. Again, the points raised by the authors demonstrate the vital role of student voice, without which, decisions about risk mitigation could be based purely on legal/regulatory requirements. Knowing what students think becomes important—if they are indeed listened to—for developing a teaching and learning culture where safety is prioritised because it improves wellbeing, satisfaction, and potentially improves retention.

In several of the papers in this issue, the role of community occupies a key place when thinking about the aspirations and pathways for rural students. The link between community and school has been a central research theme in rural education (Cuervo, 2014; Morrison & Ledger, 2020; Watson et al., 2017). In their paper, Sue Kilpatrick and colleagues shift the attention from students' aspirations and views of their future towards the role of 'key influencers' (e.g. families, teachers, employers) and the whole community in young people's post-school pathways. This is a novel approach in rural education pathways research. Using a Community Participatory Research approach, Kilpatrick and colleagues examine how a whole community approach, including an alliance between community members and researchers, can enhance and support key influencers to shape students' post-school pathways. Their findings reveal that community-researcher partnerships can support key influencers in providing rural youth with endogenous, sustainable, accessible, place-based information and tools and strategies to make a life. Ultimately, the authors argue for place-based and community ownership when it comes to students' pathways interventions. 'Community ownership' of course reflects the aspirational voice of community, and allows for successful place-based strategies, which in turn lead to community specific benefits—in this case, improved post-school pathways for a community's young people.

In the rural connections paper Catherine Ridley elaborates on the importance of First Nations leaders taking control of their research and relaying their experiences. Catherine discusses the value of supporting First Nations staff, who are the unofficial leaders in their schools to become qualified school leaders. The main differences between attendance—an administrative requirement—and engagement, which is about education and learning, are highlighted. First Nations teachers and leaders have access to the community knowledge that can be pivotal to the success of students in remote communities.

Finally in this issue, John Guenther provides a book review of Jason Cervone's *Towards Rural Education for the Common Good.* Cervone, who has published in the Journal previously (Cervone 2019) offers readers a pessimistic view of rural education in the United States, based on an assessment of the dominance of neoliberal capitalism's power, and the lack of 'potency' in rural communities. This book is interesting, and requires the reader to think a lot. That is probably a good thing!

Coming back to 'voice', the editorial team is conscious of its own limitations in promoting the voices of those who would be considered to be at the periphery. As a predominantly European heritage team, comprised of mostly privileged academics (or former academics) we could be fairly accused of being unrepresentative of most people who live in regional, remote and rural communities. If the Journal is to truly examine concerns of rural education in Australian and international contexts, we could expect to see changes in the makeup of our editorial team and international advisory board. Looking forward to another 32 years, readers will hopefully reflect on the Journal, and say that it truly does reflect the diverse voices of rural people, through the

content, the authors, the editorial team and its advisory board. Unlike Cervone, we *can* be more optimistic about the future of rural education research.

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The Perennials and Trends of Rural Education: Discourses that Shape Research and Practice

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Abstract

For over 30 years, the Journal of the Society for Provision of Education in Rural Australia has reported research and practice discourses associated with rural, regional and remote education, with the aim of impacting policy and practices relating to education in rural Australia. The journal, originally named *Education in Rural Australia*, commenced in 1991 and, with an increasingly international focus, changed to the *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education* in 2012.

This article critically synthesises the content of the Journal, which includes 500 unique contributions. The articles were placed into an NVivo project and coded using themes derived from word frequency counts. The critical analysis identifies nine perennial themes that appear regularly throughout the 33 volumes: aspiration, success and achievement; community and relationships at the centre of rural education; curriculum, pedagogy and assessment; deficit discourses; equity, rights and justice; parents and family; resourcing and funding; rurality and place, and teacher preparation. In addition, the analysis identifies trending issues, which wax and wane over the Journal's life.

This article highlights the Journal's important and sustained contribution to research evidence for rural education. From the perennial and trending issues, it is possible to see the interconnections and influences between themes, but also the absence of discourses in certain areas that calls for future research. The analysis has policy implications for education stakeholders, particularly given that some of the concerns raised by the articles in the Journal remain largely unanswered more than 30 years on. This article calls for change and challenges policy makers to address issues that we already know exist and have provided possible solutions.

Introduction

For over 30 years, the journal of the Society for Provision of Education in Rural Australia (SPERA) has reported research and practice discourses associated with rural, regional, and remote education. The Journal, originally named *Education in Rural Australia* (ERA), commenced in 1991, and, with an increasingly international focus, changed to the *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education* (AIJRE) in 2012. Since 2018, international editors have been included on the editorial team and an International Editorial Advisory Board was established in 2022. By 2023, the AIJRE had published 500 articles, including research papers, practice articles (described as Rural Connections papers), reports, editorials, and book reviews.

This article presents critical findings of a deep dig into the Journal's archive, examining the perennials of rural education research, the trends, and the gaps. These findings have enormous value, as they potentially inform emerging policy and good practice, and set an agenda for new research in rural education. The article begins with an exploration of the key themes identified from the archive. A methodology for the analysis is presented, followed by a presentation of findings in terms of thematic intersections and key trends that have shaped the field. Finally, the article reinforces the need to address the perennial themes and presents issues that are yet to be fully explored by the Journal. The discussion turns to the implications for research, policy, and practice.

Beyond the Journal

The analysis presented in this article should be read alongside existing literature that explores rural education research themes and trends over time. Biddle and Azano (2016), for example, offer an analysis of 100 years of rural education research in the United States. Stelmach (2011) offers a thematic summary of international rural issues. More recently the *Bloomsbury Handbook of Rural Education in the United States* (Azano et al., 2021) takes a thematic approach to a range of issues affecting rural education in that country, while offering international perspectives on these issues. Roberts and Fuqua (2021), in their book *Ruraling Education Research*, take a similar approach, but with more focus on Australian authors. Other reviews focus on specific issues such as rural teacher education (e.g., Reagan et al., 2019) or pedagogy (Petrone & Olsen, 2021). Embedded within these perspectives is an understanding that *rural* is difficult to define and is not a simple binary alternative to *metropolitan* (Roberts et al., 2022). Many of the issues raised by these international analyses of rural education overlap with the issues that are uncovered in this article. A thorough analysis of the crossover and shared interests is perhaps warranted, but will not be reviewed here, as the focus is to draw attention to the body of work presented in the AIJRE and ERA.

Journal Background

SPERA was formed in 1985. According to Dale et al. (2009), "*in 1991 SPERA launched its journal, Education in Rural Australia, as a means of promoting rural education nationally*" (p. 8). It also advocates for, and responds to, policies that intersect with rural education issues (Boylan, 2012), and many of the Journal's articles respond to policy issues or present policy perspectives (Nash, 2022). The 1990s saw 97 articles published, a mix of practice and research articles along with

reports and opinion pieces. While it was called *Education in Rural Australia*, six of the articles came from international authors. In the 2000s, 120 articles were published, with a greater focus on research. Ten articles were from international authors. A total of 209 articles were published in the 2010s, with 28 international contributions, reflecting the change of name to the *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education* in 2012. At the time of writing in the 2020s, 74 new articles had been published, with 20 from international authors. The 500th article was published in 2023. While most articles published continue to be based on research projects, each issue typically includes at least one Rural Connections practice article, a book review and an editorial.

Literature from the Journal

The literature under examination here is that produced by ERA and the AIJRE from 1991 to 2023. We present a summary of the key themes that have been written about since the journal's inception. The issues covered could be described as "the perennials" of rural education—issues that appear regularly throughout the Journal's history. The themes were identified using key word and phrase searches, as outlined in the Methodology section.

Community and Relationships at the Centre of Rural Education

The social context of community relationships is a central and recurring theme across all volumes of the Journal. The concept of community is variously described. The community is seen as somewhat separate to the school—for example new staff appreciate being welcomed "*into the community*" (Vance & Sullivan, 1993, p. 28). Conversely, staff engage with community to "*influence the community beyond the school*" (Bowie, 1995, p. 36). Others saw that a disconnect between school and community is caused by a lack of the required social capital (Allard & Sanderson, 2003).

The concept of rural social space, advanced by White et al. (2011), connects with community: "*It is the set of relationships, actions and meanings that are produced in and through the daily practice of people in a particular place and time*" (p.71). It has implications for new teaching staff who "*should understand the notion of rural social space … [who] need to develop the social capital … to enable them to be an effective educator, and community member in a rural setting*" (Lock et al., 2009, p. 40). Alongside the idea of space is place (Green et al., 2013), which Christie (2006) connects with identity. Like Christie, Van Gelderen highlights the importance of community as Country and as home in remote Aboriginal contexts (Van Gelderen, 2017; Van Gelderen & Guthadjaka, 2019).

Community is also intrinsically linked to rural sustainability (Downes & Fuqua, 2018; White et al., 2011). Halsey (2009a) makes a strong claim for the important role of education at the nexus between community and sustainable rural community futures. Regardless of the theoretical conception of community, it is clear from the Journal's literature that community is central to the delivery of education in rural contexts (Ledger, 2020; Yarrow et al., 1999). Community connects with the concepts of rurality and place, too.

Rurality and Place

Brennan (2005) argued for a theoretical understanding for "*re-inscribing rurality*" in educational research, suggesting that "*rurality … has been largely missing from the pages of educational research texts*" (p. 11). Roberts and Cuervo (2015), 10 years later in an editorial article, reiterated the lament. However, questions about rurality as a construct outside of rural disadvantage have been raised by other authors going back to the early years of the Journal (Cameron-Jackson, 1995; d'Plesse, 1992; Fullarton et al., 2004). Similarly, the discourses of regionality are also explored by authors in ways that challenge the deficit discourses of rural, regional and remote contexts (Guenther et al., 2014; Guenther et al., 2015; Harreveld, 2004).

Deficit Discourses

To highlight the framing of rural and remote as an inherent disadvantage, we could turn to Griffith's (2003) attempt to measure rural and remote disadvantage, which sees population size, distance, and economic measures as keys to quantifying the deficit. However, in many articles throughout the Journal's history, rural disadvantage is clearly assumed as normative (Croft-Piggin, 2014; Mason & Randell, 1992; McLean et al., 2014; Squires, 2003). Reid (2017) refers to "*persistent and entrenched locational disadvantage*" (p. 88). Deficit messaging from the OECD was called out by Ledger and Fuqua (2021) just a few years later. Deficits are not only described as disadvantage, but in terms of problems such as staffing (Downes & Roberts, 2018), barriers to be overcome (Martin & Broadley, 2018), complexities due to a "*tyranny of distance*" (Rossiter et al., 2018, p. 72) and general concerns (Baker & Andrews, 1991). In one reflective article, rural is described as a declining "*dust belt*" (McConaghy, 2006, p. 39). The entrenched nature of problematising the rural leads to a perpetuation of deficit discourses, for example as "*gaps*" and "*challenges*" (McConaghy et al., 2006, p. 13), or as difficulties and "*wicked problems*" (Reid, 2017, p. 88), or even "*chasms*" (Panizzon & Pegg, 2007, p. 3).

Aspiration, Success and Achievement

There is a counter-discourse which taps into the strength of the rural with narratives of success reflected in many articles (Freeman, 1993; Hemmings et al., 1998), as well as how to improve the likelihood of success for rural students (Sawyer & Medlin, 2002). Even where problems or barriers are identified in research, research questions are sometimes posed to reflect the positive experiences of learning in rural and remote communities (Devlin & McKay, 2018; Hardwick-Franco, 2018).

Against educational research and policy discourses that point out to an apparent lack of aspirations by rural and remote students, families and schools, evidence from the Journal suggests that aspirations of rural and remote students differ little from their urban counterparts (Ellis, 2006; Vernon et al., 2018). While much of the Journal's literature is focused on determining factors that promote aspiration (Drummond et al., 2012; Hemmings & Boylan, 1992; Smith et al., 2017; Stone et al., 2022) , there is also evidence to show that aspirations are grounded in or determined by place (Bangarr, 2022; Smith et al., 2017), and that those aspirations are no better or worse than aspirations of non-rural/remote students.

There is also a strong discourse of resilience, persistence and achievement running through the articles of the Journal. The narratives behind these discourses speak to the strengths of rural and remote students and educators, often in the face of significant challenges (Bangarr, 2022; Holden, 2005).

Resourcing and Funding

Resourcing and funding for schools, teachers, pre-service teachers and university students more generally is a theme that spans all the decades of the Journal. The issues are systemic as noted by Downes and Roberts (2018) and are linked to equity and access (Downes & Fuqua, 2018). This means that the impacts are often felt by individuals. For example, Devlin and McKay (2018) highlighted financial hardships for low SES students studying in rural locations, and this is perhaps more pronounced in rural areas outside Australia (Lin, 2018) where mobilisation of local resources was considered important (Anlimachie et al., 2022). These were associated with higher cost of living, travel and accommodation. Elsewhere, limited access to and availability of educational resources for teachers in rural areas is lamented (Yang, 2018), and this is directly linked to remoteness or rural isolation (Hardwick-Franco, 2018). Low levels of financial literacy are also noted as problems for rural students more often than for urban learners (Ali et al., 2016).

These issues are not new. As Scott (1991) noted in his article, in the first volume of ERA about issues for education in remote rural Australia, "*resources in the end whether they are human or*

equipment come back to money: to train, to purchase equipment and so on" (p. 11). Funding formulas and resourcing that take account of the needs of small schools have been raised as particular issues of concern (Drummond, 2012; Stevens, 1993).

Teacher Preparation

Preparing teachers for rural and remote contexts is another strong and recurring theme running throughout the Journal. Many of the articles explore specific interventions designed to support and attract pre-service teachers to rural and remote communities. These include the Country Areas Program in New South Wales (Hemmings & Boylan, 1992), the Priority Country Area Program in Queensland (Yarrow et al., 1998), university-based internship and mentoring programs (Drummond et al., 2012; Yarrow et al., 1999), community immersion programs and taster field trips (Lavery et al., 2018; Sharplin, 2010), and beginning teacher support programs (Baills et al., 2002). Practicum experience and internship programs are also discussed (King, 1994), sometimes from the perspective of pre-service teachers (Davidson, 2011; Penfold, 2000).

There has also been a focus on preparation of non-Indigenous teachers for remote Indigenous contexts (Wallin & Scribe, 2022). More recently, the importance of nurturing local teachers from remote Indigenous communities has been highlighted (Bangarr, 2022; Van Gelderen, 2017). However, given the ongoing focus on preparing students for rural, regional and remote contexts, little policy or accreditation changes have occurred.

Parents and Families

Research presented in the Journal often seeks to gain views of parents, providing advice about perceptions, positions, and evidence for children's experiences of rural education (du Plessis & Bailey, 2000; Exley, 2007; Kilpatrick et al., 2020). This is an important aspect of the Journal, as it aims to connect research with practice that can have a real impact in rural communities.

The role that parents and families play in rural and remote community education is a strong recurring theme across the volumes of the Journal. Parents are recognised as making choices for their children's education (McSwan & Stevens, 1995), or not being able to make choices (Yang, 2022). The question of choice sometimes means that families or children have to leave their community to pursue a quality education or parents send their children to boarding schools (Guenther & Osborne, 2020; Su et al., 2018). Young people pursuing tertiary education options are faced with these same difficult choices: Do I leave home, or do I stay? (Halsey, 2009b).

The importance of engaging parents in rural schooling processes is also recognised as an important issue (Downer, 1996; Ratcliffe & Boughton, 2019), to ensure strong relationships between the school and family for the benefit of the young person (Lester, 2011). The mechanisms for parent involvement reported in the Journal vary, from involvement of parents in school councils (Boylan & Davis, 1999) to targeted engagement programs (Kilpatrick et al., 2020).

Parent involvement is not always reported as a positive for parents, and some articles suggest that engagement is simply an additional instrument for control and assimilation, particularly for Aboriginal students and their families (Allard & Sanderson, 2003) where historical trauma creates resistance to engagement (Duncan et al., 2022) and fails to have the desired impacts of improved student engagement in learning and better outcomes (Stone et al., 2017). From a teacher's perspective, parent involvement is sometimes seen as a "*complex practice*" (Zhang et al., 2021, p. 31) or difficult work. These critical perspectives on parent involvement offer a counter to assumptions that suggest benefits to children will necessarily follow from strategies to improve parent involvement.

Equity, Rights and Justice

The first article of the first issue, by Morrow (1991), was titled *What does social justice mean for education in rural Australia?* Morrow's view of social justice was limited to issues of redressing perceived disadvantage in terms of technology access, retention rates, and access to further and higher education. The need for equitable access to education has continued as a recurring theme throughout the Journal's history, with arguments presented for better access to education generally (Downes & Fuqua, 2018), distance education and early learning programs (Kirk, 1994), and gifted learning support (Bailey et al., 1995). More recently, attention has turned to online learning (Stone et al., 2019), particularly in the COVID/post-COVID environment (Birnie, 2022).

Much of the discourse related to equity has presented the case for rural students to be considered an equity group (Arnold, 2001). Ironically, some researchers use disadvantage as the basis for justifying an equity agenda (Reid et al., 2005)—that is, the assumed cause of a problem to be fixed is the inherent disadvantage of rurality or remoteness. Social justice, in this sense, can present rural students and schools as disadvantaged and through a deficit lens, thus ignoring the strengths of rural education that contributors to this Journal have highlighted over three decades.

Racism associated with rural education systems was first raised as an issue of specific concern in 2001 (Dunn, 2001). Dunn's article described institutional and individual racism, raised problems with government policies, and made the comment that "*the history of racism and education in relation to Indigenous people in Australia is one which was, in earlier times, largely enacted in rural areas*" (p. 64). McLaren's (2005) self-reflexive article sheds light on emerging ideas of white complicity in racism. She reflects on a professional development: "*The aim of this day titled, 'A Deadly Day', is to upset the dominant deficit and disadvantaged discourses that are commonly used by educators to explain the Aboriginal student's experience at school*" (p. 43). While Gorringe's (2011) keynote address, published in ERA, touches on these issues from an Indigenous standpoint, it was not until 2019, though, that racism was raised in a research article by Aboriginal academic Hogarth (2019), who wrote about her own experience of racism in rural schools. Recently, the focus of attention has shifted somewhat towards the decolonisation of teaching, curriculum and schooling in Indigenous contexts (Duncan et al., 2022; Hlalele, 2019; Wallin & Scribe, 2022; Wallin & Tunison, 2022).

Curriculum, Pedagogy and Assessment

The relevance of curriculum to rural and remote school contexts has been raised often by authors over the years (Fullarton et al., 2004), with recommendations for adaptations to make curriculum work for local rural contexts (Martin & Broadley, 2018) and the incorporation of local cultures and languages (Yang, 2018). This is in part, according to some researchers, because curriculum is developed in "*urban (metropolitan) centres*" (McSwan & Stevens, 1995, p. 48). Of some concern is the limited availability of curriculum options that are normally available to students in metropolitan schools (Staunton, 1995).

In relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, the need to "*de-marginalise Indigenous issues in the curriculum*" (Taylor, 2005, p. 63) is raised from non-Indigenous and Aboriginal positionalities, both in Australia and in other countries such as South Africa (Hlalele, 2019). Lowe et al. (2019), for example, suggest that there are "*inherent dissonances between Aboriginal people and the mandated curriculum*" (p. 22).

That dissonance extends to pedagogies as well, where dominant culture teachers who come into rural and remote spaces are unaware of the local "*cultural practices of pedagogy*" (Clancy & Simpson, 2001, p. 2). In some cases, there is resistance to change in teaching practices (Wallin & Tunison, 2022). More generally, Roberts (2013) discusses the need to re-engage an awareness of place in both pedagogy and curriculum.

The literature on assessment practices and strategies in rural schools is somewhat muted, although critiques of Australia's NAPLAN (National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy) are reasonably common (Belcastro & Boon, 2012; Guenther et al., 2014), as are critiques of national standardised testing regimes more generally, which run counter to the argument for place-based learning (e.g., Bryden, 2004).

Methodology

Three questions driving the analysis presented are:

1. What are the recurring (perennial) issues of concern to rural education that emerge from the Journal?
2. What trends are evident over the life of the Journal ? (How have issues changed?)
3. Are there any areas of study or research overlooked within the Journal?

The methodology applied to this research draws on a relatively uncritical form of content analysis (Peräkylä & Ruusuvuori, 2018), with the intent of producing an analytical coding structure built on an analysis of themes (Braun & Clarke, 2022) that allows for a more critical interrogation of discourses within the data.

The process for the analysis was to import the content of 33 volumes (up to Issue 1 of 2023) of the *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education* (including the initial 21 volumes which were published under *Education in Rural Australia*) into a NVivo database. Attributes were applied to each file, like an annotated bibliography (North, 2011), including the year and decade of publication, the lead institution represented by the first author, whether it was created by an Australian or international author, and what type of article it was (journal, practice article, report or editorial).

In the first phase of analysis, a stemmed-word frequency table was generated within NVivo. This assisted with the identification of frequently used words related to concepts associated with the subject matter of the research. To confirm that content was correctly attributed to themes, a more detailed reading of a sample of articles was carried out. This ensured that more nuanced expressions of some themes were captured correctly.

Two levels of coding were developed: parent and child codes as shown in Table 1.

. In each case, stemmed words were used in text search criteria. Some words were excluded from searches. For example, "teacher," "rural," "student," "school," "education," and "university" were not used on their own. Most of these words are contextual words and could be expected to appear in almost every article.

This first phase of analysis informed the literature review. Even though the literature emerged from the methodology, the literature has not been considered as findings.

Table 1. ***Parent and Child Codes***

Parent codes	Child code 1	Child code 2	Child code 3	Other child codes
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education	Aboriginal	First Nations	Indigenous	
Aspiration, success, and achievement*	Achievement	Aspiration	Success	Excellence
Attendance and truancy	Absenteeism	Attendance	Truancy	
Collaboration	Collaboration	Networks	Partnerships	
Community and relationships at the centre of rural education*	Community	Relationships	Socialisation	
Curriculum, pedagogy and assessment*	Assessment	Curriculum	NAPLAN	Pedagogy
Deficit discourses*	Barriers	Complexity	Concerns	Difficulties, Disadvantages, Discourses, Problems
Educational leadership	Leaders	Leadership	Principals	
Equity, rights and justice*	Disability	Diversity	Equality, Equity, exclusion	Inclusion, Justice, Racism, Discrimination, Rights, Migrants, Refugees
Gender and difference	Feminism	Gender	Masculinity	Queer, Sexuality, LGBT
Health	Clinical	COVID-19	Health, Hospitals	Medical, Mental health
Information and communication technology	Internet	Online learning	Technology	
Literacy and numeracy	Language, Bilingual	Literacy	Numeracy	Adult literacy
Parents and family*	Family	Fathers, Mothers	Parents	
Policy and politics	Policy	Politics		
Resourcing and funding*	Finance	Funding	Resourcing	
Rurality and place*	Country	Distance education	Isolation	Regionality, Remote, Rurality
Teacher preparation*	Internships	Placements	Practicum	Preparation, Preservice
Theory and philosophy	Theory	Epistemology	Axiology, ethics	Ontology
Transitions and pathways	Career planning	Pathways	Transitions	
Workforce	Attraction	Recruitment	Retention	Salaries, Incentives

Note: An asterisk (*) denotes perennial themes.

Once the coding framework was established, a second phase of analysis was conducted. A series of crosstab tables was prepared to examine the presence of coding references (defined as paragraphs containing key words). The first crosstab was a parent code by parent code matrix so that points of intersection across codes could be identified. The second was a crosstab of parent codes by decade. A third crosstab examined codes by international/Australian authorship.

Also as part of the analysis, sectors and models were identified. These refer to the educational sectors (primary, secondary, tertiary) and models (such as alternative, distance, boarding schools) that articles are based on. They are contextual attributes of articles, rather than issues that are raised.

Limitations

The analysis presented here could be seen as preliminary in nature, in that it relies primarily on stemmed word searches. At times, this can give false positive results; for example, where a word is used incidentally in an article and may have nothing to do with the research or topic presented in the document. Further, some words may have multiple meanings; for example, under the parent code of deficit discourses, a child code related to "concerns" is shown. This might reflect "concerns held" about an issue or problem, but at times it may include "concerns" as an expression of inclusive descriptors; for example, "education philosophy is concerned with epistemology and ontology." To avoid unnecessary inflation of coding numbers, at times word stemming was not used; for example, rather than using "concerns," "concerns about" was used as the search term.

Also, because the unit of analysis here is the "file," rather than a paragraph within a file, the overlaps tend to be inflated. For example, one code might appear in the introduction to an article and another code could be found in the conclusion.

The analysis perhaps raises more questions than it answers, but this opens opportunities for future, more detailed analyses. As discussed later in the article, the gaps in the data also create opportunities for future interrogations of the data, and potentially, for a comparative study, drawing from a broader body of international rural education research. In this article, there is not sufficient space for an interpretive and critical consideration of the data. It does, however, leave room for subsequent analysis to explore the issues raised (and those that are missing) with a more critical lens.

Findings

Table 2 summarises findings from the analysis of intersecting key themes identified through the analysis process. The numbers represent the count of documents that include references to the NVivo stemmed word frequency search for each of the parent codes. The numbers in bold reflect the total number of files coded to an individual parent code.

The other numbers represent the number of files coded to both the parent codes in the corresponding rows and columns. For example, references to "attendance and truancy" appear in 340 of the 500 files reviewed, but only 86 files have been coded as both "attendance and truancy" and "collaboration." The grey highlighted cells indicate an association between two themes (column and row), such that at least half of the files with reference to one theme are included in files containing the other theme.

Table 2. ***Intersection of Key Themes, Based on the Number of Articles that Contain Descriptors of each Theme***

	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education	Aspiration, success and achievement	Attendance and truancy	Collaboration	Community and relationships	Curriculum, pedagogy and assessment	Deficit discourses	Educational leadership	Equity, rights and justice	Gender and difference	Health	Information and communication technology	Literacy and numeracy	Parents and family	Politics and policy	Resourcing and funding	Rurality and place	Teacher preparation	Theory	Transitions and pathways	Workforce
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education	**234**																				
Aspiration, success and achievement*	98	**463**																			
Attendance and truancy	69	118	**340**																		
Collaboration	68	195	86	**394**																	
Community and relationships at the centre of rural education *	171	350	201	394	**487**																
Curriculum pedagogy and assessment*	78	222	90	138	300	**439**															
Deficit discourses*	114	292	170	191	408	251	**483**														
Educational leadership	63	142	71	130	235	122	151	**356**													
Equity, rights and justice*	97	175	77	109	297	163	218	83	**406**												
Gender and difference	22	34	23	20	80	24	57	25	54	**171**											
Health and wellbeing	62	99	48	87	205	95	151	63	83	19	**301**										
Information and communication technology	43	121	73	127	214	139	164	62	91	8	78	**366**									
Literacy and numeracy	70	121	58	67	165	142	138	58	82	20	46	96	**299**								
Parents and family*	98	214	149	141	343	163	256	142	147	51	119	91	87	**412**							
Politics and policy	64	165	53	109	270	147	209	101	147	35	74	69	62	135	**379**						
Resourcing and funding*	79	227	107	188	327	183	255	135	149	26	109	137	78	185	162	**448**					
Rurality and place*	152	282	165	199	380	228	337	148	216	51	129	206	119	264	193	254	**473**				
Teacher preparation*	103	241	135	195	347	260	292	160	184	43	99	151	131	216	147	216	278	**453**			
Theory and philosophy	46	88	25	75	184	82	118	55	71	16	45	54	47	57	80	65	93	101	**305**		
Transitions and pathways	46	145	54	89	205	103	149	82	69	29	59	61	51	86	56	77	123	116	42	**279**	
Workforce	43	125	47	74	199	83	175	78	86	17	61	59	36	93	86	124	169	143	29	47	**332**

Note: Themes marked with an asterisk (*) are described as "perennial" in the text. The shaded cells indicate strong thematic relationships, where at least half of the articles containing one theme are also found in documents with the intersecting theme.

The Perennial Issues

While the methodology for analysis is preliminary, the perennial issues—those that crop up year in and year out—are represented with high numbers in Table 2. Those that are represented in more than 80% of articles are:

- aspiration, success and achievement
- community and relationships at the centre of rural education
- curriculum, pedagogy and assessment
- equity, rights and justice
- deficit discourses
- parents and family
- resourcing and funding
- rurality and place
- teacher preparation

Thematic Relationships

The relationships shown in Table 2 (shown in alphabetical order of parent codes) point to research and discourse associations, where one theme informs or underpins others, or where themes are mutually supportive. Strong thematic relationships are indicated by cell shading. These relationships are important because they frame the discourses associated with rural education. The data do not indicate the direction of the relationship, that is, one theme leading directly to another. Rather, we can be confident only that there is a relationship or association between the themes.

A summary of the strong thematic relationships, ranked by the number of connecting themes, is shown in Table 3. The table shows how the theme "community and relationships at the centre of rural education" connects strongly with every theme except "gender and difference." Beyond this, the theme of "deficit discourses" connects with another 20 themes; "rurality and place" connects strongly with 10 themes; "teacher preparation" with three, and "parents and families" and "aspiration, success and achievement" with one each.

Trends over Time

Table 4 shows the number and percentage of articles, within a given decade, that include one of the 21 themes shown in Table 2. The perennials, as listed at the start of the Findings section, are highlighted in shades of green, and the shades of red indicate items that appear in fewer than 80% of the articles in each decade. Darker shading reflects the lower and higher extremes of thematic representation in the Journal's articles (also the case for Table 5).

The table also highlights changes in content with progressive and sustained increases in themes related to "Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education" including international Indigenous education, "attendance and truancy," "collaboration," "educational leadership," "health and wellbeing," "transitions and pathways," and "workforce" issues. Interest in "theory and philosophy," "gender and difference," "literacy and numeracy," "policy and politics," "equity, rights and justice," and "information and communication technology" peaked in the 2010s.

Table 3. ***Summary of Strong Thematic Relationships***

Themes	Are associated with
Community and relationships at the centre of rural education	Attendance and truancy Educational leadership Health Information and communication technology Literacy and numeracy Theory and philosophy Transitions and pathways Workforce Aspiration, success, and achievement Collaboration Curriculum, pedagogy and assessment Deficit discourses Equity, rights and justice Parents and family Politics and policy Resourcing and funding Rurality and place Teacher preparation Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education
Deficit discourses	Attendance and truancy Workforce Aspiration, success, and achievement Curriculum, pedagogy and assessment Parents and family Resourcing and funding Rurality and place Teacher preparation Aspiration, success, and achievement Parents and family Resourcing and funding
Rurality and place	Collaboration Curriculum, pedagogy and assessment Equity, rights and justice Information and communication technology Politics and policy Aspiration, success and achievement Parents and family Resourcing and funding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education
Teacher preparation	Aspiration, success and achievement Curriculum, pedagogy and assessment Rurality and place
Parents and families	Teacher preparation
Aspiration, success, and achievement	Resourcing and funding

Table 4. *Thematic Trends over Four Decades*

Themes	Number of articles within decade				Percentage of articles within decade			
	1990s	2000s	2010s	2020s	1990s	2000s	2010s	2020s
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education	27	56	103	48	28%	47%	49%	65%
Aspiration, success and achievement*	86	110	196	70	89%	92%	94%	95%
Attendance and truancy	54	82	151	53	56%	68%	72%	72%
Collaboration	51	101	176	65	53%	84%	84%	88%
Community and relationships at the centre of rural education *	92	115	204	74	95%	96%	98%	100%
Curriculum, pedagogy and assessment*	78	107	189	64	80%	89%	90%	86%
Deficit discourses*	91	113	205	73	94%	94%	98%	99%
Educational leadership	59	76	160	60	61%	63%	77%	81%
Equity, rights and justice*	61	97	179	62	63%	81%	86%	84%
Gender and difference	17	33	91	30	18%	28%	44%	41%
Health and wellbeing	33	71	136	60	34%	59%	65%	81%
Information and communication technology	56	86	169	55	58%	72%	81%	74%
Literacy and numeracy	37	75	143	43	38%	63%	68%	58%
Parents and family*	80	97	168	66	82%	81%	80%	89%
Policy and politics	54	85	179	60	56%	71%	86%	81%
Resourcing and funding*	82	107	188	70	85%	89%	90%	95%
Rurality and place*	92	111	194	72	95%	93%	93%	97%
Teacher preparation*	82	105	195	70	85%	88%	93%	95%
Theory and philosophy	20	62	165	57	21%	52%	79%	77%
Transitions and pathways	38	71	163	59	39%	59%	78%	80%
Workforce	48	75	154	55	49%	63%	74%	74%
Total articles	97	120	209	74	97	120	209	74

Note: Codes marked with an asterisk are perennial issues, that is, they appear consistently in 80% or more of articles in all decades.

Table 5 presents an analysis of articles that describe specific sectors and models of education (sorted alphabetically). Red shaded cells indicate that fewer than 20% of the articles in each decade discuss a particular sector or model, while the green gradients show sectors and models with greater representation. The strongest focus has been on secondary education. The higher education sector has increased in prominence. Boarding schools and middle years education have increasingly been represented. A special issue on boarding schools in Volume 30 affected the numbers in the 2020s. Distance education, area schools, special needs education and adult education have had a reducing focus over time. The representation of primary schools and vocational education has remained constant throughout the decades.

Table 5. *Focus on Sectors and Educational Models by Decade*

	Number of articles within decade				Percentage of articles within decade				
Sectors and models of education	**1990s**	**2000s**	**2010s**	**2020s**	**1990s**	**2000s**	**2010s**	**2020s**	**Total articles**
Alternative education	4	5	7	4	4%	4%	3%	5%	20
Area schools or District High Schools	6	6	8	1	6%	5%	4%	1%	21
Boarding	16	12	29	24	16%	10%	14%	32%	81
Distance education	46	37	56	10	47%	31%	27%	14%	149
Small schools	21	17	23	13	22%	14%	11%	18%	74
Special needs	9	13	17	1	9%	11%	8%	1%	40
Adult education	18	30	40	5	19%	25%	19%	7%	93
Early years	24	39	78	23	25%	33%	37%	31%	164
Middle years	2	5	29	10	2%	4%	14%	14%	46
Primary schools	32	33	73	24	33%	28%	35%	32%	162
Secondary education	65	80	157	52	67%	67%	75%	70%	354
Universities (higher education)	29	53	136	44	30%	44%	65%	59%	262
Vocational education	18	29	55	19	19%	24%	26%	26%	121
Totals	97	120	209	74	97	120	209	74	500

Table 6 presents the analysis of articles by international/Australian lead authors for each decade. The data show the rise of internationally based articles in the 2010s and 2020s, following the change of direction with the renaming of the Journal in 2011. By the 2020s, more than a quarter of lead authors was based outside Australia. A comparison of article themes for international and Australian articles is shown in Appendix A. The themes diverge very little with only "health and wellbeing and "policy and politics" showing a difference, being more likely to appear in international articles. Part of the shift in emphasis to international articles has come from special issues (see Appendix B), which in the five years to 2022 have included three issues with a mainly international focus. A further special issue with an international focus was published in 2023 after the analysis for this article was conducted.

Table 6. *International and Australian Lead Authors by Decade*

	Number of articles within decade				Percentage of articles within decade			
Lead Authors	**1990s**	**2000s**	**2010s**	**2020s**	**1990s**	**2000s**	**2010s**	**2020s**
International	6	10	28	20	6%	8%	13%	27%
Australian	91	110	181	54	94%	92%	87%	73%
Total	97	120	209	74	100%	100%	100%	100%

Discussion

What are the Recurring (Perennial) Issues of Concern to Rural Education that Emerge from the Journal?

The recurring or perennial concerns of rural education that emerge from the Journal are contained in nine major themes, which have been briefly outlined and discussed in the literature review, based on articles from the 33 volumes of the Journal.

- aspiration, success and achievement
- community and relationships at the centre of rural education
- curriculum, pedagogy and assessment
- deficit discourses
- equity, rights and justice
- parents and family
- resourcing and funding
- rurality and place
- teacher preparation

The theme of "community and relationships at the centre of rural education" intersects with all the perennials. This may suggest, as discussed earlier in the literature, that community is at the core of rural education and forms a foundation for strength as reflected in the theme of "aspiration, success and achievement" and the importance of "parent and family" involvement in rural schooling. But community is also connected to "deficit discourses" which, throughout the Journal's history, have been articulated as a problem for researchers to resolve. The problems revolve specifically around "resourcing and funding," and around "teacher preparation"—finding enough of the right kind of teacher to work in rural schools.

While these perennials are perhaps not surprising, what is surprising is that, despite the evidence of more than 30 years of rural educational research, those of us working in the field today are still discussing unsolved problems related to perceived deficits, community-centred education, justice and equity, and preparing teachers for rural contexts. We continue to point to funding shortfalls, high costs and rural disadvantage as barriers, and use these deficit discourses to argue for better policy, greater funding, and contextually relevant curriculum. Why are we not using discourses of strength and diversity, and the economic benefit that comes from rural and remote communities?

Perhaps, as Nash (2022) argued in her conference keynote that was published in the AIJRE in 2022, the answer lies in presenting solutions, rather than simply focusing on the challenges.

What Trends are Evident over the Life of the Journal? (How have Issues Changed?)

Several trends can be noted following the analysis presented in the findings. These trends are in part a product of the direction provided by the editorial teams that have led the Journal. But they are also a reflection of changing rural and policy contexts and developments.

The shift towards internationalising the Journal (see Table 6) is one example of the direct impact of editorial leadership. So too is the increased focus on Indigenous education and boarding (Table 5), which towards the end of the 2010s and the early 2020s rose from the networks associated with members of the then editorial team and resulted in two special issues (see Appendix A). The greater focus on theory and philosophy has also been driven by the more academic focus of the editorial team that emerged in the 2010s. The impact of editorial teams shaping fields of study within journals is highlighted in higher education journals (see Whitsed et al., 2021); the shaping of rural education discourse in the AIJRE is strongly linked to the editorial team composition (which has had international representation since 2018).

Other shifts in emphasis, such as a decline in articles about adult education, have come about because of the decline in the adult and community education sector. Conversely, the rise of articles related to higher education reflects in part a policy focus on addressing equity in higher education, the Behrendt Review (Behrendt et al., 2012), and the establishment of the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education in Australia at Curtin University.

Other trends, such as the declining focus on special needs, possibly arises from the lack of special needs education options in rural contexts. Given the increased presence of articles that discuss equity and justice in the Journal, one might have expected to see more about human rights issues such as access to special needs supports. The decline of distance education as a topic reflects the normalisation of online learning as an option for learners, particularly in higher education, over the last decade.

What's Missing? Where to Now?

While the volumes cover a lot of ground, there are missing topics which are of critical concern to rural education. Some potential issues, which could be a focus of the Journal, are not covered. Roberts and Cuervo (2015), in their editorial for Volume 25(3), posed a useful question: "*What next for rural education research?*" (p. 1). It is quite likely that the perennials will continue for some time, but what is perhaps more important is the long list of largely unexplored topics that could form the basis of future research. The list of topics in Table 7 is not exhaustive and could be expanded; for example, another potentially useful exploration would be an examination of rural education research methodologies. This topic has not been considered in this article, but it may be pursued in a separate article.

Table 7. ***Possible topics for future research and publication***

Topic	Explanation
K–12 schools	Many rural schools are designed to cater across the phases of learning K–12. The United States typically has only state schools to service small country towns. In Australia, state schools are structured to cater for all grades (sometimes called District High Schools and sometimes Area Schools). Little research appears to have covered this significant feature of education in rural areas.
Articles from non-English academic research	While the number of articles from international lead authors has increased considerably and is likely to continue—with articles from African, European, Asian and North American countries featuring regularly—so far, no articles have explored rural education in Latin America (except Cruz-Arcila, 2017), Eastern Europe, or the Middle East. Part of the issue here is that the Journal's editorial team and host (SPERA) is Australia-centric where English is the dominant language. This creates missed opportunities in cultural spaces that offer rich insights into rural education.
Inclusive education: Disabilities, migrants and refugees	In general, equity and justice are well covered in the Journal, although specific issues, such as educational support for people with disabilities, are barely touched on. "Disability," for example, appears only twice in an article title or abstract (du Plessis & Bailey, 2000; Li, 2018). Similarly, the words "migrant" or "refugee" appear only five times in an article title or abstract (Gouwens & Henderson, 2017; Kline et al., 2014; Major et al., 2013; Penman & Sawyer, 2013; Yang, 2022), and these only in the last decade.

Topic	Explanation
Adult literacy	While there is a strong focus on literacy throughout the Journal, the focus on adult literacy is very limited. This is perhaps related to the declining presence of articles about adult education more generally. However, adult literacy remains an important issue, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in rural and remote areas, as noted by Ratcliffe and Boughton (2019). More research on this important topic will fill a critical gap.
Religious education and faith-based schools	Among the different sectors and models of education, references to religious or faith-based schools are scarcely made in the Journal. There are just six articles that refer to these terms in their abstract or title. And yet, according to the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) school list (https://asl.acara.edu.au/School-Search), 490 of 2190 schools located in regional and remote areas are independent or Catholic schools, with most of the independent schools being faith-based.
History of rural education	Only six articles explore historical issues (Boylan, 2012; Brady, 2012; Claudi, 2021; Freeman, 1993; Hemmings, 1995; Moore, 1998). The lessons learned from history are important for rural education.
Education and climate change/ environmental sustainability	Given the significance of climate change on rural communities and industries, one might expect that the intersection between environmental sustainability, climate change and education might be evident in the content of the Journal. While there are about 20 articles that mention climate change, it is not a prominent topic for research.
Mental health and wellbeing	Mental health was hardly mentioned in the 1990s and 2000s, and while it has become more prominent in the last decade, there are only four articles where "mental health" is mentioned in the title (Lester & Mander, 2020) or the abstract (Evans et al., 2013; Jervis-Tracey et al., 2012; Miller et al., 2012). Despite the recognition of mental health, wellbeing and suicide affecting rural communities, these issues are under-researched in any education sector within the Journal.
Ethics of rural education	Only four articles referred to ethics in their title or abstract (Burns, 2020; Jervis-Tracey et al., 2012; Kline et al., 2014; O'Dowd, 2010). While many articles point to ethical clearance from an institutional committee, the general absence of articles that discuss ethical practice or ethical research in rural education within the Journal suggests that, by and large, ethics is a forgotten topic that should deserve attention.

With these issues open for exploration, the question might well be asked: How do we get there? In part, this requires some strategic thinking on the part of SPERA and the editorial team. One strategy is to continue to diversify the Editorial Advisory Board to ensure adequate representation of groups that may be able to guide the editorial team in targeted areas. Another possibility may be to cast the net wider, to capture the views of researchers who are not currently aligned to rural education research, but whose interests intersect.

Conclusions

This article has provided an overview of the content of the SPERA journal (1991–2023): *Education in Rural Australia*, later named the *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*. The analysis has identified recurring themes which appear consistently over 33 volumes of the Journal. Among the themes that emerge from the analysis, community and relationships are clearly positioned at the centre of the research and practice of rural education. Connecting with this theme, other perennial issues are reported on: aspiration, success and achievement; curriculum, pedagogy and assessment; deficit discourses; justice, equity and rights; parents and family; resourcing and funding; rurality and place; teacher preparation. These issues are those that, despite overwhelming evidence, remain unresolved for rural and remote education. Other issues have gained prominence over the decades: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education including international Indigenous education, attendance and truancy, collaboration, educational leadership, health and wellbeing, transitions and pathways, and workforce issues, while others have waxed and waned, such as theory and philosophy, and the role of technology.

The Journal has covered a lot of ground in its history of 500 articles, and has built a valuable evidence base for practitioners, researchers, policy advisors and policy implementers. But there is more to be done, and there are some holes in the evidence base which could or should be a focus of future research. For example, the growing internationalisation of the Journal has mostly been focused on English-speaking countries, while a whole continent (South America) is yet to present an article. Other issues are barely touched on, including the ethics of rural education research and practice, the role of faith-based schools, mental health and wellbeing, climate change and rural environmental sustainability, marginalised groups such as migrants, refugees and people with disabilities, and education at the intersection of youth detention and prisons. Our recommendations are firstly, to build on past research by offering solutions to perennial issues, and secondly, to focus on the identified gaps in the research to stimulate future research.

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Appendix A

Comparison of Australian and International Articles by Theme, with Chi-Square Probability

	Number of Australian articles	Number of international articles	Percentage of Australian articles	Percentage of international articles	Chi-square probability
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education	211	23	48%	36%	
Aspiration success and achievement	401	62	92%	97%	
Attendance and truancy	292	48	67%	75%	
Collaboration	340	54	78%	84%	
Community and relationships	424	63	97%	98%	
Curriculum, pedagogy and assessment	381	58	87%	91%	
Deficit discourses	421	62	97%	97%	
Educational leadership	304	52	70%	81%	
Equity, rights and justice	352	54	81%	84%	
Gender and difference	146	25	33%	39%	
Health and wellbeing	255	46	58%	72%	p<.05
Information and communication technology	316	50	72%	78%	
Literacy and numeracy	259	40	59%	63%	
Parents and family	358	54	82%	84%	
Policy and politics	322	57	74%	89%	p<.05
Resourcing and funding	385	63	88%	98%	
Rurality and place	412	58	94%	91%	
Teacher preparation	397	56	91%	88%	
Theory and philosophy	259	46	59%	72%	
Transitions and pathways	291	41	67%	64%	
Workforce	286	46	66%	72%	
Total articles	436	64	74%	79%	

Appendix B

Special Issues of ERA and the AIJRE

Year	Volume (Issue)	Topic	Number of articles with international lead authors	Number of articles with Australian lead authors
2022	32(2)	Educating for Cultural Sustainability	7	3
2020	30(2)	Boarding Schools for Rural and Remote Families: Panacea or Problem?	1	9
2019	29(1)	Rural Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education	2	7
2018	28(2)	Rural Education in China	6	3
2018	28(1)	Aligning AIJRE Research with the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education	0	12
2017	27(3)	A Small Place: Challenges and Opportunities for/in Tasmanian Rural and Regional Education	0	13
2017	27(2)	Rural Schools as Hubs for Socio-Educational Development of Communities	8	3
2015	25(3)	What Next for Rural Education Research?	0	8
2007	17(1)	International Perspectives on Challenges Facing Rural Education	7	2
			31	60

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"From the Bottom to the Top": Learning Through Stories of Transitioning from an Aboriginal Boarding School to the Workplace and Life Beyond School

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Abstract

Successful transition from education to the workplace is vital for young people, particularly Indigenous students from remote communities, to support their long-term economic and emotional well-being, social inclusion, physical and mental health. This paper reports findings from a three-year study undertaken collaboratively with young people at a remote Aboriginal boarding school. Motivated by the theoretical constructs of Indigenist theory and Funds of Knowledge, this research centres the voices of Aboriginal peoples. A team of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal researchers worked *with* young Aboriginal people at the school to develop the method, to collect, and then analyse the data for this strengths-based qualitative study. Currently enrolled young people engaged in yarning with the participants, namely those who were past students from the school. This made it possible to gather stories to better understand the experiences, strengths, and motivations of Aboriginal young people from remote communities and the issues, constraints, and challenges faced when transitioning to life beyond the classroom. The findings highlight what can be improved to prepare Aboriginal people from remote communities for the workplace and for life beyond school—including their existing strengths and knowledge, aspects that occur within the parameters of the school, employer roles, skill development, and enablers of job and life success.

Keywords: *Aboriginal students, remote communities, transition to the workplace, boarding school, yarning, funds of knowledge.*

Introduction

After school, Governments and broader societal norms expect young people to engage in training, work, or further study – for their development, wellbeing, equity, and productivity in the broader society (AIHW, 2021a). Employment is essential for economic reasons, but also for social inclusion, and physical, and mental health (AIHW, 2021b). According to the Steering Committee

for the Review of Government Service Provision (2016), "*young people who do not successfully make the transition from education to work are at risk of long-term disadvantage*" (p. 7.14). Hence, a range of government policies focus on supporting this transition (OECD, 2019).

This paper reports on a three-year study that aimed to understand the strengths of Aboriginal young people who attended a remote boarding school, focusing on how they navigated life after school. To protect participants' identities, this paper (as per Oliver, 2021), uses the pseudonym Kutja for this school – a name given to us by the school's Elder at the time of the study – a word meaning 'learning language'. The research aimed to understand better the experiences of Aboriginal young people from remote and very remote communities of life beyond school to inform how remote boarding schools can better prepare young people for their unique contexts by elevating the voices and stories of people who have undertaken their educational journeys away from their home communities. The research emphasises the strengths of Aboriginal people and their home communities to highlight what schools can learn by exploring schooling practices that centre the voices of Aboriginal peoples.

This research was enabled by the long-term relationship the team has with the staff and students at Kutja School. A previous study explored the needs of the young Aboriginal people from the perspective of the various stakeholders and the students themselves (Oliver et al., 2012, 2013a, 2013b) and worked on translating the findings from such research into classroom practice (e.g., Oliver, 2020, 2021). This collaborative research was undertaken *with* rather than *on* Aboriginal people. It was co-designed in conjunction with the school Elders, staff, and the young people.

Kutja is an independent vocational school overseen by a board of mostly local Aboriginal people, whose goal is to prepare students for life beyond the classroom—both in terms of work and life skills and English language and literacy development. Kutja is located in the southeast of Western Australia, about 700 kilometres from Perth, within a working farm of approximately 1,000 acres. All students are young Aboriginal people aged 15-18 years, almost all of whom come from remote and very remote communities across the state. Enrolment can vary from 50 to 70 students. The young people may board at the school for up to four years, but some stay only temporarily. The school leadership staff and Elders worked with the research team to support this study.

Literature Review

Trajectories of Aboriginal Young People from Remote Communities

Transitioning from school to the workplace is multifarious for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people in remote communities. According to statistics, 60% of the remote Aboriginal youth in Australia engage in further education, training, or work after school (Rutherford et al., 2019). Employment of Aboriginal Australians decreased overall in the last decade, falling to 59% in major cities and 35% in very remote areas in 2018-2019 (AIHW, 2021b). According to the Productivity Commission (2020), the employment rate decreased by around 10% and 16% in remote and very remote areas, respectively, between 2004-05 and 2018-19 (p. 4.71). Notably, the Mobility Survey by the Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation (CRC-REP) showed the rates of unemployment that were "*markedly higher for younger residents of the communities*"—69.1% among 15–24-year-olds compared to 44.3% of 24–39-year-olds and 32.7% among those aged between 40-54 (Dockery & Lovell, 2016, p. 156).

The reasons for lower rates of post-schooling engagement in employment or study are manifold; this could include "historical misalignment of education approaches with community values and aspirations" (Rutherford et al., 2019, p. 8), such as the mismatch between the neoliberal economy and the cultural values of Aboriginal people, as well as other socio-economic factors or limited opportunities in remote communities. It must be considered that "*not all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are actively looking for work find paid employment*" (Productivity Commission, 2020, p. 4.66). They may be challenged due to past traumatic experiences, such as

exploitation and discrimination, or experience other barriers such as health issues, disability, caring responsibilities in their family and community, lack of jobs in their area, and the cost of looking for or training for a job (Dockery & Lovell, 2016; Productivity Commission, 2020). Not having a driving license can further restrict mobility and limit workplace options and looking for jobs away from their community means losing connection to their land, family, and culture (Dockery & Lovell, 2016). Hence, even those who move away are unlikely to enjoy improved employment outcomes because of loss of kinship and cultural connections, discrimination, low skill levels, and language challenges (Dockery & Lovell, 2016). However, those who stay in their communities often engage in essential activities, such as cultural production, which are not included in the employment data as it is not paid job but is crucial to health and wellbeing (Productivity Commission, 2020).

Research has confirmed the connection between education and employment for remote Indigenous communities (Wilson et al., 2019). Guenther et al. (2017) explored what successful education is and what it should achieve in remote Aboriginal communities. They interviewed a range of community education stakeholders across many remote communities and their data found "*the issue of employment or economic participation [was] ranked fourth behind language, land and culture, identity and being 'strong in both worlds'*" (p. 258).

A noticeable shift from Aboriginal people employed as labourers to those in professions between 2001 and 2016 indicates the positive dynamics in education to employment pathways (Productivity Commission, 2020). However, it is less clear whether this is true for remote communities. Some factors of positive changes to employment include the increasing flexibility of education. According to the CRC-REP Mobility Survey, only half of those studying or in training had to go outside their communities, and others engaged in block study or remote learning (Dockery & Lovell, 2016). However, most respondents completed their studies at the certificate level rather than undertaking higher education degrees. Even so, the authors noted a "*strong association between employment outcomes and the completion of certificates in the remote communities sample, when such certificates hold little value elsewhere*" (Dockery & Lovell, 2016, p. 167). Hence, it was concluded that the popularity of getting a certificate could be attributed to it being a practical way to successfully engage in employment in remote communities (p. 168). Although encouraging, the survey findings showed that of 1,075 people from 21 remote Aboriginal communities around Alice Springs, only 3% had post-school educational qualifications (Dockery & Lovell, 2016).

Some initiatives have encouraged remote Aboriginal youth to enter higher education; however, work needs to be done early in the educational journey to address challenges at the outset as in some remote communities, there is little understanding of the relevance of higher education. Some young people do not see themselves as prospective university students, do not aspire to careers that are challenging, or will not move away from home (Thomas et al., 2014, p. 24). Collaboration between schools, higher education institutions, businesses, and community organisations continue to emphasise the usefulness of higher education to help these young people establish aspirations for their future careers (Lea et al., 2008). Further, given that "*remote communities offer students the limited opportunity to make connections with employers, community groups, or to develop the skills needed to navigate the challenges they face in larger communities*" (Thomas et al., 2014, p. 25), programs such as UniCamps may provide young people with such information, skills, and connections.

The Australian Government (2020) aims "*to increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth (15–24 years) who are in employment, education or training to 67 per cent, compared with a 2016 baseline level of 57%*" by 2031. Based on surveys from 917 Aboriginal people in remote locations aged 15-34 (chosen as the age group for moving from education to employment), empowerment (i.e., "*identity, self-efficacy and resilience*") has a strong influence on education and employment outcomes in these communities (Wilson et al., 2019, p. 153). However, there is

little evidence indicating that schools engage in identity-affirming approaches for Indigenous students (Shay & Sarra, 2021). Thus, the disconnect between policy aspirations and what Indigenous people identify as solutions to the same problems remains an issue (Shay et al., 2022b).

While research questions whether "*remote residents are willing to go out of their way to access education and training opportunities, and the uptake of online modes of study also appears limited*" (Dockery & Lovell, 2016, p. 167), remote Aboriginal young people have rarely been invited to the discussion. Indeed, "*relatively little is known about the nature of remote labour markets and the interactivity of them with opportunities in education and training*" (Dockery & Lovell, 2016, pp. 146-147). Therefore, this paper contributes a new Indigenous-based narrative by addressing assumptions represented in the literature and policy about what remote Aboriginal residents are interested in or 'willing to do' by accessing the lived experiences and stories of Aboriginal people who have left their communities to access secondary education.

Remote Boarding Experiences

The demand for boarding services for Aboriginal students in Australia has grown (Australian Government, 2017). This is attributed to the shortage of secondary schools in remote communities (Australian Government, 2017). In 2015, over 75% of 7,500 Aboriginal students in secondary boarding schools receiving ABSTUDY[1] were from remote locations (Australian Government, 2017). Besides access to quality education, the benefits of boarding reported by such students and their educators include safety, better health outcomes, and opportunities to engage in "*meaningful career pathways*" (Macdonald et al., 2018, p. 1). It is claimed that boarding enables young people to attend school, providing more opportunities for better economic participation in the future (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2017). Boarding can be chosen for a variety of reasons, such as when young people "*take up a scholarship opportunity, access specific courses of study, avoid community unrest or domestic issues, referrals by courts, youth service providers, churches, councils, other schools or transition support services, or because of family or community historical connections with a particular boarding provider*" (Thornton, 2019, p. 5). A number of these factors, particularly the last, align with the situation for Kutja School students.

Based on previous research, recommendations have been made for boarding administrators and staff. It was identified that staff must be aware of the students' family obligations (e.g., attending funerals) and homesickness (Macdonald et al., 2018), be wary of generalising and to understand that every community is different (Benveniste et al., 2015). Other recommendations have been made about recreation (after classes) time and allowing students 'self-determination' about what they do (Benveniste et al., 2015). However, limited data is available from Aboriginal people from remote communities who attend boarding schools (Stewart & Lewthwaite, 2015), particularly regarding how boarding influences educational outcomes and post-school transition and employment (Benveniste et al., 2015). One notable exception is O'Bryan's (2021) work which points to issues experienced by Aboriginal students in boarding school. Therefore, the current research examines the perceptions of those who have attended boarding school, especially those from remote communities, about life after boarding school.

It is essential to explore how attending boarding school prepares Aboriginal people for independent life after school, supporting them to "*walk in two worlds*" (Benveniste et al., 2015). Research is required into how this might be achieved to reveal "*how does this manifest once students return home?*" (Benveniste et al., 2015, p. 171). Hence, the aim of the current study is to address the gap in our understanding of the life journeys of Aboriginal people who attended

[1] Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Study Assistance Scheme (ABSTUDY) aims to support students with the fees related to boarding.

remote boarding schools and their reflections on how their experiences prepared them for the workplace and life. We want to learn more about: Where do they end up? How did they get there? And: What recommendations can be made to schools and other Indigenous education stakeholders to improve their post-school journey and the outcomes? In this study, we explore these questions as we seek to understand the situation of students—past and present—from Kutja School.

Methodology

This study is framed theoretically by Indigenist theory (Rigney, 2006) and Funds of Knowledge (Moll et al., 1992; Velez-Ibanez & Greenberg 2005). This research is Indigenous-based, with a focus being Aboriginal people from remote communities and their life stories beyond school. This was an applied study prompted by an invitation from the school leadership at an Aboriginal parent-governed remote boarding school—Kutja School—and the theoretical lens that reflects Indigenous knowledge, paradigms, and ontologies. The research team are Aboriginal (Shay) and non-Aboriginal (Oliver, McCarthy, Bogachenko, and Jackson), making the study's conceptual and theoretical framing critical in cross-cultural research. Although Shay is an Aboriginal woman, she is not from the communities of the participants. Therefore, this is also a cross-cultural research context (Shay et al., 2022c).

Indigenist theory is framed by three fundamental principles that guided the research: resistance as the emancipatory imperative, political integrity, and the privileging of Indigenous voices (Rigney, 2006). The principle of political integrity was enacted by enabling student co-researchers to guide the research process. Further, local Indigenous people (two Elders who work at the school and one Indigenous teacher) were invited to be part of the research in recognising their epistemic and ontological expertise as people from the localised context. Finally, encouraging and allowing for multiple ways for Indigenous young people to express their stories, perspectives, and voices ensured that the voices of Indigenous people were privileged (Shay et al., 2022a).

In this study, Funds of Knowledge is used alongside Indigenist theory. Funds of Knowledge theory challenges deficit theorising, which blames minoritised students for perceived deficiencies (Hogg, 2011). Deficit discourses are pervasive in Indigenous education (Patrick & Moodie, 2016). Indigenous young people from remote communities are reported to have the poorest educational outcomes, and these 'gaps' continue to be the dominant narrative in educational policy (Australian Government, 2020) and Indigenous education scholarship (Guenther et al., 2019). This study refutes these deficit ideologies, allowing Indigenous peoples' capital and existing knowledge to be identified. Funds of Knowledge enable participants to identify the existing knowledge informed by their family homes, communities, peers, or other social contexts that all contribute to the knowledge and skills of the young person (Velez-Ibanez & Greenberg, 2005).

Funds of Knowledge recognise the hybridity of cultures (González, 2006). This study encompasses the entirety of the journey of Aboriginal young people from remote communities in understanding their stories of life beyond school. Because of this, hybridity must be recognised as young people navigate different cultural and institutional contexts in accessing further study or entering the workforce.

Participants and Methods

Methods such as storying, arts-based methodologies, and digital storying through yarning (podcasts) are utilised to allow stories to emerge that bridge knowledge between home and school (González, 2006) and knowledge that is rooted in historical and contemporary experiences in family homes or home communities (Velez-Ibanez & Greenberg, 2005). During data collection, approximately 60 young people were enrolled at Kutja School. Two 'English'

classes, deemed by the school as having the highest literacy levels and representing about 1/3 of the cohort (n ≈ 20), were involved in the study. This figure fluctuated as students returned home for funerals or left or joined the school. They worked with one of the research team members (McCarthy – who visited the school every week) and their teacher (Jackson) to develop appropriate yarning questions. When they were confident that the questions were correct, they again worked with the researcher and teacher to make the questions more natural and culturally appropriate, namely using a 'yarning' approach (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010, Shay, 2021). Yarning is how Aboriginal people make and share meaning by retelling, re-visiting, and representing their languages and cultures (Steele et al., 2022). They then trialled this approach with each other and with past-enrolled students living in the community near Kutja School.

In the initial phase of engaging young people in the project, the team used an art-based approach to engage young people in storytelling. Multiple activities included the writing and recording of a song by current students about their experiences leaving their home communities, as well as artwork, led by the school's only Aboriginal Teacher.

These artworks were collated into one graphic design that was afterwards printed onto a school shirt, now serving as a quasi-school uniform but also as the cover for the podcast series. The song also serves as an introduction to one of the three podcast series.

Using a convenience sample, past students from the school—those who were still in touch with staff and students at the school—were contacted and invited to participate in storytelling to understand their trajectories after school. With consent, they engaged in yarns with different individual current young people at Kutja School. These yarns were audio recorded, edited, and collated into the three Podcast series. These served as the primary data for analysis. Both the research team and the current young people at the school analysed the data as described next.

Qualitative Thematic Analysis

This study utilises Braun and Clarke's (2006) qualitative thematic analysis framework. Qualitative thematic analysis was used after the podcast recordings were finalised and transcribed. This framework embraces the complexities of the data and the research context while allowing for the theoretical framework to guide how the themes emerge. Braun and Clarke (2016) explain that there is no widely agreed-upon definition of a theme in qualitative thematic analysis. They also speak to the notion of "theme discovery" (p. 740) and caution against positivist approaches suggesting themes already exist in the data. The interpretive aspect of the current research was considered within the study's theoretical framework. As the cohort of participants were diverse and their experiences reflected this, the analysis addressed coding reliability and incorporated reflexivity in the latter phases of the analysis process. Specifically, the approach to qualitative data analysis used in this study, as informed by Braun and Clarke's process, is outlined in Table 1, below:

Table 1: ***Phases and Processes of Qualitative Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006,) p. 87.***

Phase	Description of the process
1. Familiarizing yourself with your data:	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.
2. Generating initial codes:	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
3. Searching for themes:	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
4. Reviewing themes:	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis.
5. Defining and naming themes:	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
6. Producing the report:	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

Informed by the theoretical framing, phases 1-4 focused on Indigenous voices and stories (Rigney, 2006) (but also, not discounting aspects of data based on researcher ascribed value) with an emphasis on participant knowledge and skills across contexts (home, communities, peers, social groups, school) (Moll et al., 1992; Velez-Ibanez & Greenberg, 2005). Inductive (bottom-up) and deductive (top-down) approaches were used in this process, allowing for an examination in response to the research questions and any other new essential knowledge and insights from the participants that emerged (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

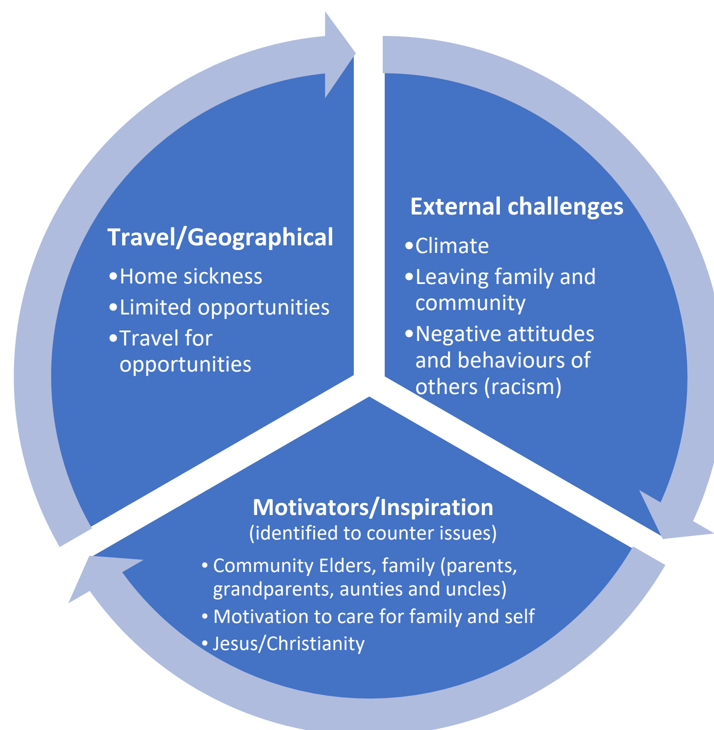
Findings

The key findings are reported under the research questions: 'What are the issues Aboriginal adults face as they transition to life beyond school, including the workplace?' and 'What can be done to better prepare Aboriginal people in remote communities for the workplace and life?' We will report the themes that emerged in applying Funds of Knowledge to our analysis.

The Issues Faced by Aboriginal Adults from Remote Communities as they Transition to Life Beyond School.

Three themes emerged regarding transitioning from school to the workplace and life: travel and other geographical constraints, motivators/inspiration, and external challenges. Figure 1 illustrates the themes and sub-themes of how participants talked about their experiences navigating life beyond school.

Figure 1: ***Three Themes and Subthemes of Navigating Life Beyond School***



Travel and Geographical Constraints. The first theme of 'travel/geographical constraints' reflects the remoteness and distances travelled by the participants, what it meant for them to leave home to access remote education, and the implications as they transitioned to life after school. While many participants identified limited opportunities due to the remoteness of their home communities, some young people reflected that the school afforded them opportunities and developed their approach to life: "*Growing up in different places taught me that there's more*

to see out there around the world. So, I didn't really have that deep connection with home, so I was pretty much adventurous." From other participants' self-reports, overcoming 'homesickness' when going to boarding school (e.g., "*Being away from home was not good. I mean we all get homesick*") helped them to navigate their subsequent decision-making regarding work and study choices. In this way, many participants saw homesickness as providing both an initial challenge, but later an opportunity. One participant shared:

> I'm not quite sure if that helped being homesick. But it just shows you the value [they have for their] of community and their families in wanting to better themselves with their education and being a long way from home to do that.

External Challenges. Similarly, the second theme, 'external challenges,' described how the boarding school's location's cold weather impacted many participants, and there was a connection between the contrast in the weather from participant's home communities and their wellbeing and motivation. One participant talked about their experience at Kutja School as: "*It was really good when it was there… [but it] was a bit cold for me*." Although the cold was challenging, others took it in their stride: "*The weather was very cold – it was a change for us.*" Therefore, once again the experience set them up for living and working outside their communities as they transitioned to life after school or at least confirmed where they wanted to live and work.

The experience of dealing with the 'negative behaviours' of others within their learning environment helped them to develop the skill of making good life choices. One participant discussed the effects of other young people:

> *I don't want to be hanging out with kid brain (immature) people I just like to be, you know… kid brain people can get on your nerves. So being kid brain just gets in your way, stop what you are doing… it just stops you halfway or halfway through your year. So, I decided to fight it.*

This was reinforced by another participant who shared the impact of other students and their influence: "Bad things for me was one of my first things was hanging with wrong crew that was addicted to smoking and yeah getting into trouble with them." This person learnt to choose who to socialise with not only at school, but in other parts of their life.

The term racism was not used in any of the stories. However, experiences of discrimination were implied in some stories, particularly about the challenges they faced in their journeys when leaving their home communities to access education and then when they transitioned to work. One participant shared: "*I think the hardest thing [about going to work] would be having to navigate the negativity side of things. We do have to work through a lot of things with our wider community in regard to reconciliation*"**.** Given the evidence regarding racism in education settings that Indigenous peoples face (Bodkin Andrews et al., 2021), it was surprising this issue did not feature more in the stories. However, it may be that their experiences at boarding school built upon their individual resilience in ways that minimised the impact of racism.

Motivators and Inspiration. The final theme to emerge was what 'motivated and inspired' participants. Community Elders and family members were frequently cited as inspirational role models. One participant said: *"I look up to my Elders cos I learn more off them about my land and culture, where I'm from and language group and all that."* Another participant explained:

> *My role model in my community would be some of my Elders, like my Aunty, who's a Christian woman and she has always been encouraging me since day one. Encouraging to do a lot of things that I thought I couldn't do in my life. I'd say my grandmother because she was a strong lady and always wanting something better for us. Also, for them always sharing knowledge to us and I reckon that where I get it from my great-grandmother and my*

> *grandmother. They sharing their knowledge with me and then me I'd like to share my knowledge to the young generation. Yeah, there have been a lot of role models in my life.*

A further example was a participant who shared:

> *My role model in my community was my dad 'cause he gave me the work ethic to get up and don't sit down. You got all those skill and stuff like that and knowledge and don't let it go to waste since you went to schooling to get it. So, he is my role model, I always saw him working all his life.*

Another participant also indicated:

> *My role model was my dad—well really my parents. Like I wouldn't be down here and far away if it wasn't for parents to make that sacrifice of sending me a long way, so I'd say they are my role models.*

One participant talked about the importance of knowing who your supporters are and recognising strengths from communities when adjusting to a new environment:

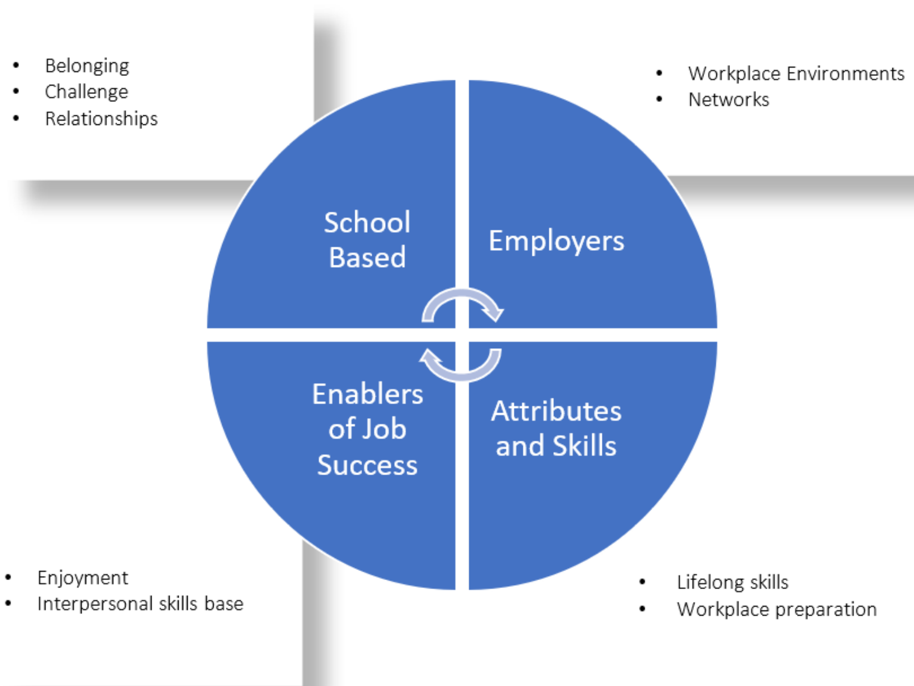
> *I had people around me as well like who I knew who was there to encourage me. I think that was a good part of it was having someone there I already knew. You know coming from a small community, you don't really want to explore outside the bubble when you are in an Indigenous community, you wanna stay in your familiar surroundings. So having those people I already knew from my community there (at Kutja) it made things a bit more comfortable for me, I guess. I had support from them and the hostel parents. Keeping me grounded I guess, and you know encouraging me to finish off the year or at least stick it out for the next couple of months to see how I like it.*

Hence, the experience of boarding and the support that was provided by staff and especially by peers helped the participants to develop the type of resilience needed as they transitioned to life beyond school.

What can be Done to Better Prepare Aboriginal People in Remote Communities for the Workplace and for Life?

In understanding how education providers can better prepare Aboriginal people from remote communities for the workplace and for life, analysis revealed four distinct themes: 'school-based aspects', 'employers', 'attributes and skills', and 'enablers of job success.' These four themes are illustrated in Figure 2:

Figure 2: ***Workplace Preparation Findings***



School-based. The 'school-based aspects' theme includes participants' experiences that both challenged them, but also helped them after school. Within this theme there are three sub-themes: 'belonging', 'challenges', and 'relationships.' These aspects and what they got out of the related experience featured in almost all the stories of the participants. Within the sub-theme of 'belonging,' many participants discussed the concept of *home*, or as one person said: *"Kutja is like a home to me even when you are far away… Kutja can be like a second home."* Another participant explained: *"My best memory of Kutja was spending time with family, you know, your brothers and sisters (cousins) are on the dorm and (with) the dorm staff, with the teachers and going to camps. Just spending quality time."* One young man shared his perspective about the notion of brotherhood and its importance in creating a sense of home: *"Coming to Kutja was like a second home for me and in the dorm with the other boys well we were all like a band of brothers. Look after each other, help each other."*

The second sub-theme concerned the 'challenges' the participants encountered. The expectations of the staff were reflected upon but mostly framed in a positive way. One participant noted that: *"Kutja can give you everything, but as long as you listen. Which is not that hard, it's so easy. Kutja made me better by giving me some rules… understand them by listening, and I start learning."* Another participant shared: *"Respect the property and the teachers, and they will respect you. Just be more confident and speak your mind, (say) what's troubling you and what other stuff needs to be improved at Kutja."* It was implied that this was a positive thing and would support students later in life.

The final sub-theme, one that surfaced in most stories, was 'relationships,' encompassing relationships with students, staff, teachers, dorm parents, and employers. One participant said: *"You are with your friends, and you all become one," while another said their school was: "like a second home to me, with the people around me I had a lot of respect and love. They were like family (and) treated me like one too. I never thought Kutja would be like this for me."* The same participant expanded on this: *"The good things were getting to know other students, girls and boys. Meeting new friends – meeting them – and working together as a team. Yeah, doing new*

things that I haven't done in life before". One participant talked about the level of care at school and the importance of that care:

> *I'm disabled see and they used to watch me and protect me. I thank all the staff for* looking over me. Every time I went to school, I would have problems with my knees get cold and thing. It was a bit challenging during the years (as time) went by everything started to work out. I start to like going back there you know, it was good.

Employers. The second theme 'employers' referred to the role of various employers. The educational 'workplace experience' emerged as a sub-theme and examples emerged about how workplace environment impacted the participants' later experiences. One participant discussed his work placement via the school where the employer encouraged him to pursue an apprenticeship:

> *Because I had been doing work placement and going to work just about every day of the week until one day my boss had a chat to me about how to go on as an apprentice. And so, I said yes that will be a big step and a good opportunity, so I got something lined up after work. So… made me realise that Kutja really helped me out going on work placement and (helping me) find better opportunities.*

Another participant also spoke positively about their workplace experience: "*Work experience was good for me there; I learned a lot from it*". Another described the opportunities and employment outcomes as: "*money, freedom, getting to know new people to be good for my community*".

The second sub-theme was 'networks' and highlighted the participants' connections with different families, communities, workplaces, and schools and how these assisted in their vocational opportunities after school. The power of networking was noted by one participant: "*You meet a lot of good people that you know you wouldn't meet back home."* Others discussed their home community networks they developed 'on Country' (i.e., on their traditional lands).

Attributes and Skills. 'Attributes and skills' was the third theme to emerge, with the two sub-themes being 'lifelong skills' and 'workplace preparation.' The subtheme of 'lifelong skills' was identified, with some participants recognising the strength and knowledge they took to the school through their culture and identities. One participant discussing role models shared how their family: "*taught me a lot about Country and never forget where you come from. Just teach me from the bottom to the top about respect—I reckon for old people and the country."* Many young people valued learning how to establish a routine. Others talked about learning skills like how to apply for important documents as a birth certificate and a driver's licence. One participant shared that they learned lifelong skills like how to purchase: "*my own car and learning how to save and be wise with money and not spend it on smoking and drinking and (to) want a better life."*

The second subtheme of 'workplace preparation' referenced the vocational certificates offered by Kutja School and how the participants valued these for preparing them for the workplace. One participant shared that they: "*got a cert II in CALM and then did a cert 1 in hospitality."* Another participant talked about the value of applying for and being granted a 'white card' (a health and safety certificate to allow access to construction sites), while another participant talked about the value of skills such as working in the metal and engineering area.
Enablers of job success

The final theme to emerge was 'enablers of job success.' These are factors that participants said helped them to achieve success and ones they were eager to share with the next generation of young people. The two sub-themes to emerge under this include: 'enjoyment' and 'interpersonal skills.' The first sub-theme of enjoyment was described by some of the participants as making sure that a person is passionate about what they are doing while having fun. One participant shared this about their workplace story:

> *"[going to work] just getting up just have that routine going that you're going to have a good day, that keeps you motivated. That you'll have good mates out there working with you and you just know that you'll have a good day. It's more like having fun, you have fun at your job you'll like it more and then you'll want to get up every day, want to do it more and soon as you get that you can't stop."*

The second sub-theme referenced the interpersonal skills the participants felt were important to enable young people transitioning into the workplace. Most frequently mentioned were effective communication skills, building confidence, speaking up, and not "getting shame." Shame is "an expression akin to embarrassment or feeling shy or 'bad' because you have been singled out, sometimes for doing or saying the wrong thing" (Oliver & Exell, 2020, p.824). One participant felt that: "*one of the qualities I think Kutja School help me with is being able to talk to people from different backgrounds. I mean, we did come from different communities…*" Another person shared the importance of learning how to care for themselves:

> *You got to learn to look after yourself if you want to better yourself you've got to stop drinking and if you've got a young family you've got to provide for your family, and you got to learn to grow your family up the proper way and you've to limit yourself with grog and what not. Learn to love and respect yourself, and you got to respect others as well. It's all about growing, and it's all about life.*

On not getting shame, one participant shared:

> *giving me confidence to speak out, not being shame or sitting back and (to) have a voice. Be strong in what you want, so have the confidence. I came here to Kutja School as a young fulla, quite a young fulla. But yeah, the confidence it gave me for speaking out.*

Discussion and Conclusion

The data collected provides critical insights for Indigenous education, particularly for remote and very remote communities. Whilst there is an existing body of literature, minimal studies use the theoretical lens of Indigenist theory and Funds of Knowledge and arts-based methods to privilege Aboriginal people's lived experiences from remote communities to understand their perspectives of navigating life beyond school. Significant data came from the stories about what it was like for Aboriginal young people to leave their communities to access secondary schooling. These data may assist schools in understanding how better to prepare students from remote communities for the workplace.

This study supported on issues such as geography, lack of opportunities in communities, and the challenges presented when people need to leave their home communities to access schooling or employment still remain. A new finding to emerge is the significance of role models and family and how these could be harnessed in building the confidence and skills of students in preparing for the workplace. O'Bryan (2021) points to issues experienced by Aboriginal students in boarding schools, such as the "Eurocentric" way of boarding, culture shock, and identity dissonance, exacerbated by the geographical and cultural differences between the home community and school. The data from our study suggest an urgency in addressing how boarding schools (or schools located in remote communities) can work collaboratively with Elders and communities to draw from the rich knowledge and support they have for their young people to thrive. Our data provide evidence from Aboriginal people from remote communities that counter dominant narratives that persist about challenges in remote communities, as many Elders and families are an incredible source of inspiration for the new generations.

Dockery and Lovell (2016) state that more evidence is needed to show that Aboriginal people from remote communities go out of their way to access education and training. Data from our study shows that Aboriginal people from remote communities do this. Participants in our study

talked comprehensively about how their families supported them to challenge themselves to stay away from home to access education with the hope of gaining employment or continuing further study. There were many examples of participants sharing that they were struggling but continued because their families told them how important education was and how it prepares them for the future.

The workplace preparation data also contributes new knowledge regarding how Aboriginal people from remote communities navigate life beyond school. The two key enablers of job success were enjoyment and interpersonal skills, aspects not often recognised in the development of program and policy approaches. Hence, there are significant implications for how education providers and governments might incorporate these aspects into future strategies to address workplace preparation. Furthermore, how participants described life and interpersonal skills as critical is rarely discussed in the literature on policy approaches to improving education and employment outcomes for Aboriginal people from remote communities.

The research design impacted the knowledge that emerged from a study exploring the experiences of Aboriginal people from remote communities in navigating life beyond school. However, critiques of Funds of Knowledge point to the fact that there is still a mediator (the researcher) on what knowledge is recognised as valid or essential (David, 2016). Cognisant of this, the current research adopted a slow reflexive qualitative thematic analysis to account for positionality subjectivities (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The investigation by the core research team was cross analysed by the student co-researchers. The risks will never be fully mitigated, but undertaking the study in such a way allowed the participants' voices to be at the forefront, proactively reducing the risk of misidentifying Funds of Knowledge from the stories told by the participants. A further limitation of our findings is that this study only included a select group of Aboriginal people from remote communities in Western Australia. The research team acknowledges the vast cultural, linguistic, historical, contemporary, and geographical diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples nationally and that these findings are not intended to homogenise the experiences of Indigenous peoples in remote communities.

Indigenous-informed knowledge and Indigenous-centric theories and methodologies are needed to reshape policy and practice approaches to support improved outcomes for Indigenous peoples in remote communities (Shay et al., 2022b). Our findings provide new insights into how Indigenous people from remote communities draw from strengths and existing knowledge from their home communities in navigating complex challenges such as life after school.

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Exploring Medical Students' Rural Intention on Course Entry

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Abstract

Understanding the rural intentions of medical students has the potential to improve the effective allocation of rural clinical placements, the demand for which regularly exceeds availability. Longitudinal studies on students' rural intentions have been published but a refined understanding of the spectrum of intentions is absent in the literature. To fully understand students' rural intentions, and the factors influencing those intentions, comprehensive research, at all stages of a student's academic career, is required.

The project used for this article, identifies a group with neutral intention and explores the influence of a range of demographic factors and variety of rural experience for their potential to move students towards high rural intention. The study also identifies trends in student perceptions of potential locations for rural practice in Western Australia. This more detailed approach is offered as a basis for a future model to inform the allocation of scarce rural placement opportunities, known to be significant in converting rural intention into practice.

The project responds to increasingly frequent calls for changes to policy and practice regarding the allocation of rural clinical placements to better realise their value in improving the maldistribution of Australia's medical workforce. The study suggests that a greater range of indicators, beyond being of rural origin, can lead to neutral or high rural intention. The results of this study suggest a model that incorporates these additional elements and tracks their development over time would be a valuable component in initiatives aimed at building positive rural intention.

Keywords: *Rural, remote, rural education, rural intention, clinical placements, students, medical*

Introduction

Despite decades of substantial financial investment and extensive research (KBC Australia, 2020), recruiting and retaining medical professionals in rural, regional, and remote areas remains a significant problem in Western Australia, and Australia generally. Rural intention is defined as a student's interest in rural practice as a future career option and is known to influence student decision making throughout their higher education, from applying to specific medical programs to post-graduation rural practice choices (Woolley et al., 2019). Research has also established that students' rural intentions are mutable and responsive to experiences delivered during their course of study (Playford et al., 2021; Kent et al., 2018).

Rural training interventions are a key feature of Australian universities' efforts to grow the rural medical workforce (Johnson et al., 2018). The opportunity for rural clinical experience is known to be an important factor in converting medical students' rural intention into rural practice (Kondalsamy-Chennakesavan et al., 2015). At the Curtin Medical School, these initiatives include a week-long wheatbelt program, a Kalgoorlie Immersion Program, seminars led by rural practitioners and rural clinical placements. However, medical schools consistently face the challenge of best distributing limited rural clinical training opportunities and Curtin Medical School is no exception. A more systematic approach could identify those students for whom these initiatives might be the most valuable and likely to eventuate into rural practice in the future.

Past research has discussed rural intention from a polarised binary perspective, in which students either have rural intention or do not (Playford et al., 2021; Kent et al., 2018). Less is known about students who have neutral rural intention. This study reports on data from a single cross-sectional study, exploring the range of rural intention of a group of Curtin Medical School first year medical school students in their first week of study. It identifies a group of students lacking specific geographical intention at commencement and categorises this group as having neutral intention. Strong intentions are more likely to remain stable over time and be less responsive to interventions (Conner and Norman, 2022), suggesting that the medical students with neutral rural intentions are the students most likely to be influenced by rural medical education initiatives. The study further explores whether significant trends could be distinguished between the students with low, neutral or high rural intention by looking at a range of sociodemographic factors, perspectives and past experiences.

For the purposes of this article, the term 'rural origin student' is defined in accordance with the Rural Health Multidisciplinary Training Program as a student who has resided in a rural Australian Statistical Geography Standard remoteness area (defined as areas 2-5) for at least 10 years cumulatively or any five years consecutively (Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care, 2021). The Australian Statistical Geography Standard determines five levels of remoteness for areas in Australia—Major Cities, Inner Regional, Outer Regional, Remote or Very Remote (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2023). The remoteness areas 2-5 have an overarching definition of 'rural'.

Literature Review

High rural intention at the commencement of medical studies is known to be a significant factor supporting student interest in rural placement opportunities and leading to rural practice (Herd et al., 2017; Playford et al, 2017). Research has also shown that rural intention at commencement appears insufficient as an independent factor to convert intention to rural practice (Playford & Puddey, 2017). It is well acknowledged that the effect of rural intention is enhanced when concurrent with rural origin (Herd et al., 2017; Playford et al., 2021) and that there exists a strong association between rural intention at commencement and rural training interventions, such as rural clinical placements, in converting rural intention into rural practice (Playford et al., 2021).

The effect is contested, however, of rural training interventions on the rural intention of urban students who expressed no rural intention at the beginning of their medical degree. One study found that rural training interventions were particularly effective for altering rural intention among urban students who had not previously identified as having rural intention (Playford et al., 2021). This contrasts with a finding that providing rural training for students with urban backgrounds did not significantly impact the likelihood of rural practice, though the authors acknowledged the existence of an insignificant trend in the data (Kondalsamy-Chennakesavan et al., 2015).

The mutability of students' rural intention is another factor discussed by several studies. The stability of students' rural intention in most medical students appears to be high. In two studies, rural intention was found to be stable in 82% (Playford et al., 2021) and 71% of students (Kent et al., 2018). However, for a minority of students, rural intention is mutable from the commencement of medical studies to graduation and responsive to experiences delivered during the course of study (Playford et al., 2021; Kent et al., 2018). One study found that, for the students whose rural intentions were mutable, the shift in rural intention was stronger towards a rural career than away from it (Kent et al., 2018). Finally, it was found that the rural intention evident at the end of a student's study is the most predictive of rural practice (Playford et al., 2021).

The review identified several issues with previous research on the subject of rural intentions at commencement of medical school. Firstly, research exploring the factors contributing to the development of rural intention prior to entry to medical school is limited and focuses primarily on rural residential experience (rural origin) (McGrail et al., 2016), potentially neglecting other contributing factors. Secondly, previous research has relied primarily on data from the commencement surveys, delivered as part of the Medical School Outcomes Database longitudinal study. Changes to the Medical School Outcomes Database data collection processes in 2014 terminated the use of commencement surveys (Herd et al., 2017), which will undoubtedly have a significant impact on future research on the topic. This poses a particular issue in accessing data from large study samples across Australia. Thirdly, few projects differentiate between data from undergraduate and graduate medicate programs, blurring the effect of age and experience on students' rural intentions. Finally, the terms used to discuss changes in students' rural intention, such as 'switch' (Playford et al., 2021) and 'change' (Kent et al., 2018), suggest a binary perspective where students are seen as 'having' or 'not having' rural intention, neglecting the possibility that a spectrum of intentions exists and might be informative for understanding rural intentions. In general, strong intentions are more likely to remain stable over time and be less responsive to interventions (Conner and Norman, 2022). With this in mind, there is a clear argument for identifying the group of students with the most mutable intentions, for whom a clinical placement may be most transformative.

Demand for rural clinical placement opportunities exceeds the number of places available (KBC Australia, 2020). Given this, and that the key goal of rural clinical placements is to build the future rural workforce (KBC Australia, 2020), medical schools need to allocate students to placements in ways that maximise effectiveness of this scarce resource. The evidence that rural origin students who complete an extended rural clinical placement are the most likely to practice rurally after graduation (Woolley et al, 2021), provides one key factor in selecting students for rural placement opportunities. Whilst applicants for rural clinical placements may express their desire to work rurally in the future to increase their chance of gaining a place (White et al, 2012), the identification of rural intention throughout the course is essential to enable the most effective allocation of the scarce number of extended rural placements.

Methods

This project utilised a hard-copy survey. The survey questions (see Appendix A) were developed in the interest of determining if a range of qualitative data, obtained from a student survey, could be used to identify a spectrum of rural intention at commencement of medical school.

The locations listed in the survey were selected as representative destinations for rural clinical placements offered to medical students through the Rural Clinical School Western Australia. In addition, the list included a range of locations from the categories defined by the Modified Monash Model, which measures a location's access to services and defines locations from Modified Monash category MM 1, a major city, to MM 7, a very remote location (Department of Health and Aged Care, 2021).

Prior to submission for ethics approval, the survey was trialled by two volunteers, a colleague of the authors at the Curtin Medical School and a member of the public from outside the discipline. The trials did not result in any modification to the survey instrument.

The survey was delivered in a lecture environment in the first week of Semester 1, 2020. The survey participants were year one students, the fourth intake of medical students in the Curtin University Undergraduate Bachelor of Medicine, Bachelor of Surgery (MBBS) program. Of the 83 students present on the day, all 83 voluntarily completed the survey and 81 gave written permission for their responses to be included in the project. The students were given 25 minutes to complete the survey, composed of 15 questions. The survey included a mixture of multiple-choice, closed and open questions. This research was approved by Curtin University HRE 2019-0762.

The survey was preceded by a series of communications designed to ensure that the students were assured of confidentiality, and that participation in the research project was voluntary and without consequence to their studies or prospects in the Curtin Medical School program. The communications also attempted to mitigate the influence of social desirability bias specifically by informing the students that there was 'no right answer' to the questions. The survey required students to provide or withhold permission for their responses to be used in this project. The Year One Coordinator, who had no connection to the research project, was chosen intentionally for these communications to avoid the potential for any form of bias or coercion.

The completed surveys were de-identified and the closed question responses subjected to cross-tabulation analysis to identify trends in students' responses. Several questions included an option that allowed students to respond in their own words where the set response choices failed to reflect their thinking on the question.

All open responses were analysed separately using an inductive thematic analysis approach (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). This analysis was conducted manually and the aggregated data were organised into topics. To ensure analytical rigour and avoid potential bias, the process was replicated by a second investigator 'sight unseen' and the findings of the two researchers were compared and discussed until agreement was reached. In the single instance where a dispute could not be resolved, the topic was discarded.

A total of nine topics were identified. One topic, the influence of attending public versus private high school, was discarded due to the potential for privacy issues in such a small cohort study. The remaining eight topics were aggregated into three overarching themes, which were used to calculate the students' rural intention score. Two themes, preferences regarding living and working rurally and perspective on rural placements, were derived from the quantitative data. The third theme, students' perspectives on rural life and work, was derived from a mixture of quantitative and quantitative data.

The rural intention scores were established through a process of positive-neutral-negative sentiment analysis (Liu, 2012) of data from eight questions in the survey (Qs #1, 3, 7, 8, 9, 10,11 and 12 (see Appendix A), chosen for their potential to demonstrate the desire to live and work in a rural setting, the willingness to live and work in a rural setting, and the students' perspectives (including those gained from previous rural experiences) on living and working in a rural setting. Seven of the questions received minus one point for negative response, zero points for a neutral response, and one point for a positive response. Question #12 (relating to the length of rural placement the student would consider undertaking) was allocated two points, as research shows that an extended rural placement experience is strongly associated with rural practice (Hays, 2017). Question #8 (which asked students to identify locations that appealed as a location to work as a doctor) was calculated by allocating one point per rural location that was rated as appealing, zero point per rural location that was unknown to the student (considered a neutral response) and minus one point for each location that was rated as unappealing. The final score

for this question was utilised twice in the final score, as it was felt that the question reflected the students' willingness and perspective. This data also shows the desirability of various locations for rural practice in Western Australia. Of the survey questions that were excluded from the above calculations, one (Q.2) was excluded due to potential privacy issues, one (Q.4) was used to collect supporting demographic data and five (Qs. 5, 6, 13, 14 and 15) were used to cross-validate accuracy of responses by being subjected to the same sentiment analysis.

The total possible score for each student, resulting from eight questions, was between -10 and +10, though the range of resultant scores was -8 to +8. These scores were used to establish three points of rural intention, with a score between -8 and -1 considered low rural intention, 0 to 3 points considered neutral rural intention, and 4 to 8 points high rural intention. Whilst there were a greater number of possible scores to gain a 'low rural intention' categorisation, in the validation process, all final 'low' scores were deemed to be accurately representative.

The accuracy of the rural intention scores was further strengthened through comparison of the scores against the results of a closed question on rural intention, conducted manually against the classification of 10% of the students chosen at random. After adjusting for confounders such as personal concerns or restraints about living rurally, such as pre-existing health conditions or partnership concerns, this analysis supported the accuracy of the rural intention scores.

Results

Eighty-one students participated in the project: 33 (41%) were identified as low rural intention, 26 (32%) as neutral rural intention, and 22 (27%) as high rural intention. Applicants to Curtin Medical School know that the faculty is focussed on building a future rural workforce in Western Australia. This logically inclines applicants, in their admission interviews, to focus positively on future rural work. However, this survey demonstrates that, in their first semester of study, a significant percentage have low rural intention.

The data offer several insights into the demographic features of the three groups, identifying minor trends between increased rural intention and students who are female, older and born in Australia. A stronger trend was identified between increased rural intention and students who self-reported as rural origin.

Table 1: ***Sociodemographic Factors in Students who were Classified as Having Low, Neutral or High Rural Intention.***

	Whole group		*Low rural intention*		*Neutral rural intention*		*High rural intention*	
	N		n		n		n	
Gender								
Male	34	42%	15	44%	12	35%	7	21%
Female	47	58%	18	38%	14	30%	15	32%
Age								
17-18yo	49	60%	21	43%	18	37%	10	20%
19-20yo	23	28%	9	39%	5	22%	9	39%
21+yo	9	11%	3	33%	3	33%	3	33%
Country of origin								
Australia	54	67%	21	39%	17	31%	16	30%
Overseas	27	33%	12	44%	9	33%	6	22%
Origin/background								
Rural origin	22	27%	5	23%	7	32%	10	45%
Urban origin	59	73%	28	47%	19	32%	12	20%

The data showed that, for Australian-born students in this cohort, students born in Western Australia are more likely to be classified as having neutral or high rural intention, suggesting that 'local' birthplace might be an influential factor in developing rural intention.

Table 2: ***Distribution of Australian-born Students (N = 54), Based on Self-Identified State of Origin.***

	Whole group		**Low rural intention**		**Neutral rural intention**		**High rural intention**	
	N		n		n		n	
Western Australia								
	37	69%	10	24%	12	34%	15	41%
Other state or territory								
	17	31%	11	65%	5	29%	1	6%

The survey sought to identify whether a positive correlation existed between students' past rural experience (outside the definition of rural origin) and their rural intention. The data indicate the influence of other rural experiences may have a positive effect on rural intention. Formative

experiences mentioned by the students included “*working in an Aboriginal Medical Centre*”, road trips to the Outback and family camping trips in rural Australia as formative experiences.

Table 3: ***Students who Identified a Formative Rural Experience that Impacted their View of Rural Life or Work.***

	Whole group		Low rural intention		Neutral rural intention		High rural intention	
	N		n		n		n	
All rural experiences								
	44	54%	9	20%	17	39%	18	41%
Rural experiences other than rural residential experience								
	31	38%	8	26%	11	35%	12	39%
Controlled for rural origin students								
	25	31%	7	28%	10	40%	8	32%

The survey asked students to identify what they thought would be the worst aspect of a rural placement. The most common issue for all groups related to fears about being away from family and friends, and the possibility of experiencing loneliness while on placement. Students identified as having neutral or high rural intention were less likely to comment on this issue than students of low rural intention.

Table 4: ***Students who Indicated that Loneliness or Isolation from Family and Friends Might be of Concern on a Rural Placement.***

Whole group		Low rural intention		Neutral rural intention		High rural intention	
N		n		n		n	
55	68%	27	82%	14	54%	14	64%

The survey also asked students to rate specific West Australian locations for appeal as places in which to live and work. Perth, the only metropolitan area on the list of eight locations, attracted the highest rating from all three groups of students.

Table 5: ***Locations Selected by Students as 'Appealing to Live or Work in'.***

	Whole group		Low rural intention		Neutral rural intention		High rural intention	
	N		n		n		n	
Perth	76	94%	31	94%	25	96%	20	91%
Margaret River	48	59%	13	39%	16	62%	19	86%
Albany	48	59%	12	36%	19	73%	17	77%
Broome	37	46%	5	15%	14	54%	18	82%
Esperance	33	41%	5	15%	12	46%	16	73%
Geraldton	32	40%	5	15%	11	42%	16	73%
Kalgoorlie	21	26%	1	3%	8	31%	12	55%
Wyndham	7	9%	1	3%	2	8%	4	18%
Merredin	4	5%	0	0%	2	8%	2	9%

There was a significant preference for coastal towns, with six of the seven coastal locations—Perth, Margaret River, Albany, Broome, Esperance, and Geraldton—attracting higher ratings than either of the two inland locations—Kalgoorlie and Merredin. In the open responses on this topic, a number of students specifically identified a preference for coastal locations due to the climate and the potential for leisure activities and hobbies associated with the ocean.

Students identified as neutral and high rural intention rated remote locations—Broome, Esperance, Kalgoorlie, Wyndham and Merredin - substantially higher than the students identified as low rural intention. The data also showed a notable divergence in perspectives between the three groups of students in relation to particularly remote or hard to staff locations. Compared to the low rural intention students, the neutral and high rural intention students gave remote coastal locations—Broome, Wyndham and Esperance—and hard-to-staff locations—Kalgoorlie and Merredin—a much higher rating.

Discussion

By attempting to identify students with neutral rural intention, the survey identifies several factors that could be brought into play in initiatives during students' studies to build rural intention.

Firstly, analysis of the open responses, which provided greater scope for expression of students' interests, perceptions and ambitions, identified that neutral and high rural intention participants are more likely to have an adventurous personality than low rural intention participants. Comments included: "*It will be interesting to experience new things and meet new people*", "*It may give me a different perspective on my life and how I perceive others*". Many short comments referred to experiencing a "*new way of life*", a "*growing opportunity*" and a chance to "*improve my independence… and adaptability*". It is also interesting to note that the students classified as having neutral rural intention were the least likely of the three groups to view loneliness or separation from friends and family as a potential negative factor associated with a rural placement, further suggesting a more adventurous outlook. If, as research suggests, personality has the potential to influence a student's interest in, and ability to cope with, rural training and rural practice (Eley et al., 2017), having an adventurous personality may improve a student's response to the unique challenges of rural learning experiences and, ultimately, rural practice.

Secondly, analysis of the students' responses identified that many students were not familiar with eight of the nine locations listed—only Perth, the major capital city, was familiar to all students. This issue could be exacerbated in medical programs, where entry is highly competitive (Razack et al, 2015) and students are likely to accept the need to relocate inter-city or interstate in order to secure an offer to study (Soutar & Turner, 2002). It is logical that relocating from the city or state of their youth decreases the students' familiarity with the regional and rural areas around their new domicile. The effect may also be emphasized in states with a high proportion of remote locations, such as Western Australia. Initiatives to build awareness of regional and rural locations could help students see them as real alternatives for practice and offers an opportunity to address the persistent workforce imbalance in these locations.

Thirdly, the findings suggest that a range of rural experiences, beyond the Rural Health Multidisciplinary Training definition of 'rural origin', may be influential in developing students' rural intention. The survey asked students to identify previous rural experiences they believed to have impacted their view of rural Australia, and analysis of their responses showed that students who reported formative rural experiences were more likely to be identified as having neutral or high intention. Additionally, students who had lived rurally, but of a timeframe insufficient to meet the official definition of 'rural origin', were more likely to be identified as having neutral or high intention. Currently, rural origin is the measure for evaluating the relevance of students' rural experience (KBC Australia, 2020); the results of this study, however, suggest that a greater variety of significant rural experiences may need to be investigated for their impact in developing rural intention.

Thirdly, the findings identified a common preoccupation, across the three groups of rural intention, with the fear of loneliness or isolation from family and friends during rural placements. This is consistent with research showing that fear of isolation or loneliness are issues for medical students considering rural placements (Rural Health Workforce, 2015), though previous research has commonly failed to differentiate between students in undergraduate and post-graduate medical programs. Given that Australians between the ages of 18-24 report the highest feelings of loneliness of any age group in the broader community (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2021), it is quite possible that youth and inexperience exacerbates undergraduate medical students' concerns about, and experience of, loneliness and isolation while on rural clinical placement. In short, some undergraduate students who identify as low rural intention may be reflecting a lack of personal confidence about their capacity to be away from their family and friends. Research exploring these issues specifically in an undergraduate cohort could not be located, but may be instructive for future training and planning.

Finally, rural clinical placements have been shown to be one of the most effective means of fostering students' rural intention (Campbell et al., 2019) and they offer significant learning experiences for all students, whether they ultimately practice in a rural or urban setting. Students who undertake a rural clinical placement will better understand rural communities, varied perceptions around health, and the limited services which exist in many rural locations (Smith et al., 2018). It may also be that a rural clinical placement offers a transformative experience (Prout et al., 2014) sufficient to change a student's intention from urban to rural and alter a rural intention mindset (Playford et al., 2021).

However, while there is inherent value in a rural clinical placement for students who are unlikely to work rurally themselves in the future, the number of available rural clinical placements is limited (Playford et al., 2021), and student demand typically exceeds availability (KBC Australia, 2020). Strategies are needed to better understand students' rural intentions (Playford et al., 2021) and maximise the value of rural clinical placements in fostering those intentions.

Conclusion

Longitudinal studies on students' rural intentions have been published but a refined understanding of the spectrum of intentions is absent in the literature. To fully understand students' rural intentions, and the factors influencing those intentions, comprehensive research, at all stages of a student's academic career, is required. This project identifies a range of additional factors that could be used to measure, understand and foster student rural intention. Plotting three points of rural intention, and measuring students' intention over time and in response to a variety of experiences, would provide a level of detail which is currently lacking.

This project sought to determine if the rural intention of medical students could be placed on a spectrum, rather than viewed from the usual binary perspective of those who have, or do not have, rural intention. In offering this basis for a more refined model of students' rural intentions, this project responds to increasingly frequent calls for changes to policy and practice regarding the allocation of rural clinical placements. Rural clinical placements are in high demand among students and demand regularly exceeds availability. There is a moral and ethical issue in the strategic provision of significant rural training experiences to better realise their value in improving the maldistribution of Australia's medical workforce.

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Appendix A

Understanding the 'rural intentions' of first-year medical students

Student name: ____

Student number: ____

The purpose of this survey is to help us understand your current thinking about rural placements, as you commence your studies.

A rural placement is a full-time study experience in a clinical setting. These placements vary in time duration, from short (e.g. a week) to extended (e.g. a year-long placement).

There are no 'correct answers' in this survey. This survey has no bearing on your future clinical placement locations or studies.

Providing consent for your survey to be used for research purposes:

I have received information regarding the use of this survey for research purposes and had an opportunity to ask questions. I believe I understand the purpose, extent and possible risks of my involvement in this project and I voluntarily consent to take part.

1. Which phrase best describes you:
    a. I'd rather live in a city than in the country
    b. I'd rather live in the country than in a city
2. Which phrase best describes you:
    a. I completed most of my secondary schooling in a city
    b. I completed most of my secondary schooling in a city, as a boarder
    c. I completed most of my secondary schooling in the country
    d. I completed most of my secondary schooling in the country, as a boarder.

    Other:
3. Which phrase best describes you:
    a. I grew up in the city but like the idea of working in the country
    b. I grew up in the city and like the idea of working in a city
    c. I grew up in the country but like the idea of working a city
    d. I grew up in the country and like the idea of working in the country

    Other:
4. Please indicate each place of residence, your age at the start of each residence,and the length of time you lived there.
    a) As a child, until the age of 12:

Place	State	Country	Length of time (months or years)

b) From the ages of 13 – 18:

Place	State	Country	Length of time (months or years)

c) As an adult:

Place	State	Country	Length of time (months or years)

5. Have you ever had a significant rural experience that impacted your view of rural Australia? Indicate all that are relevant:
    a. No
    b. Yes, visiting family/friends who were living in a rural location. Please explain:
    c. Yes, had a memorable holiday(s) in a rural location. Please explain:
    d. Yes, had a memorable experience passing through a rural location. Please explain:
    e. Other, please explain:
6. Where do you intend to work as a doctor?
    a. In Australia
    b. Country other than Australia: please indicate
    c. In Western Australia
    d. If outside Western Australia: please indicate
    e. Unsure at this stage
7. What is your preferred location to work as a doctor?
    a. Major city (more than 110,000 people)
    b. Regional centre (25,000 – 100,000)
    c. Town (10,000 – 24,999)
    d. Small community (less than 10,000)

e. Other: please indicate

8. Please rate the following West Australian locations that appeal as a location to work as a doctor. Please tick ✓ your choices:

Location	**Appeals to me tolive and work there**	**Does not appeal to me to live and work there**	**Not familiar withthis location**
Albany			
Broome			
Esperance			
Geraldton			
Kalgoorlie			
Margaret River			
Merredin			
Perth			
Wyndham			

Other locations that appeal as a location to work as a doctor:

9. Please state the main reasons you rated particular locations as appealing.

10. What impact do you think rural placements might have on you?

11. In what ways do you think rural placements might impact on where you work asa doctor in the future?

12. What would be the length of time you'd be willing to spend on rural placement?

None	
Up to 2 weeks	
2-4 weeks	
Up to 3 months	
Up to 6 months	
An extended placement up to 1year	

13. What you think might be the best aspect(s) of a rural placement during your studies?

14. What do you think might be the worst aspect(s) of a rural placement during your studies?

15. Is there anything else that came to mind when you were completing this survey, which you would like to add?

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Risk Management and Student Enrolment at Universities in Rural Areas of Nigeria

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Abstract

This study sought to determine whether students' perceptions of health, security, and environmental risks influence student enrolment at private universities in rural areas of Nigeria, as well as whether security risks mediate the correlations between the variables in the study. The research utilised multistage sampling approaches to ascertain and analyse scientific knowledge on the impact of the perceptions of the three risk management variables on students from three different universities situated in the north central and southwest regions and across six academic branches of learning. To analyse the study, the generalised structured component analysis method was used. The findings reveal that perceptions about environmental and health risks are very important and vital for university enrolment as well as performance. Although security is crucial, the results show that enrolment performance is notably moderate. This study concludes that examining risk linkages and correlations is a critical consideration for ensuring the sustainability and development of Nigeria's higher education sector, as well as its strategic management.

Keywords: *risk management, universities, health risks, student enrolment, security risks, environmental risks, rural education*

Introduction

Nigeria is mostly a rural society, with most of its population residing in rural areas (Bolaji et al., 2019). Even though Nigeria's rural residents are not usually included in government development projects, the country's wealth comes from its rural areas (Olawale, 2016). Prioritising the development of urban centres at the time, rural areas were excluded. In response to the call for development in rural areas, universities are designed to meet the requirements of host small towns and have been recently built in these places (Uleanya et al., 2020), primarily by private education investors. One of the factors that can contribute to local economic development in rural regions is the establishment and development of quality university education, which can also aid rural communities in coping with a rapidly changing environment (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2021). However, establishing universities in rural areas

to meet economic development is a risk that affects students' enrolment and profitability (Deloitte, 2018) among private institutions.

Individuals frequently consider a location rural rather than urban based on their personal experiences, such as the number of people who live there or how far it is from cities (Nelson et al., 2021). Even though many scholars have tried to define what it means to be rural, researchers cannot agree on how to define rurality (Nelson et al., 2021; Olatunji & Ajayi, 2016). Notwithstanding that, there is no one definition of a rural region that everyone agrees on.

According to the report by the National Bureau of Statistics (2020), the average household size in Nigeria is 5.06 people. Rural households are somewhat larger than urban households, with a ratio of 5.42 to 4.5 people. While educational attainment is possibly the most essential attribute of family members, it is higher in urban regions than in rural areas. As indicated by Bolaji et al. (2019), students attending institutions in rural regions have fewer educational possibilities than those in urban areas. This leads to rural vulnerability. Similarly, according to the TheGlobalEconomy (2021), as reported by the World Bank, 47.25% of Nigerians live in rural regions. This is higher than the global average of 39.21% reported in 2021. Moreover, as of February 2023, Nigeria had 221 universities (National Universities Commission, 2022), with private universities accounting for half of the universities, with the bulk of them located in rural areas.

The present world growth and changing business climate lead businesses to look further than profitability (National Bureau of Statistics, 2020; Opute et al., 2022; Schwartz, 2007). The chain reaction of occurrences around the globe contributes to a future that is challenging and uncertain. Factors including social, political, and economic complexities and constant environmental confusion, fierce competition, rapid technological advancements and operational shifts in the value chain are among other concerns that encourage businesses to build solid risk management strategies (Mohammed & Knapkova, 2016).

Risk is a challenge that affects the capacity of an organisation to achieve its goals. Every organisation is subject to risks, and the management of risks plays a role in helping companies to consider and handle the risks involved in the overall corporate objectives being accomplished. This lets companies define necessary risk management techniques, so they can use their resources well and build a culture that encourages change and openness.

Risks are inherent and apparent across all activities and processes of tertiary institutions in today's demanding world economy. Therefore, to take the most appropriate decision, universities must continually define, analyse, control, and track their risks. Barton et al. (2002) warned how risk mismanagement would put an extremely high price on any company. Management of risk at all tiers of universities' activities and processes ought to be a top concern for policymakers. Efficient risk management provides institutions with a way to enhance their strategic, organisational, and financial management. In addition, it helps to minimise financial losses.

Risk management has been introduced in several organisations, including private corporations and public universities across the globe (Priyarsono et al., 2019). Given that most companies adopting risk management are steadily growing, it suggests that they have profited from its adoption, or they at least anticipate profiting. In Nigeria, risk management was adopted even later than it was in progressive, developed nations. It was first introduced in the private sector in financial industries such as insurance and capital markets. These are regarded as high-risk industries and are thus highly supervised by state bodies such as the Central Bank of Nigeria. Lately, risk management has been introduced in non-financial industries, such as manufacturing, transportation, and other high-risk industries. Risk management is hardly ever applied in the public sector or by federal and state agencies in Nigeria.

The concept of risk management has been of great interest in both the academic and business worlds for years. Universities have long faced risks, but it was not until the 1980s that they began to actively manage these risks (Wu et al., 2017). The popular controversy as to whether risk management is required in higher institutions has been rather substantial. There has been an opinion that, although risk management has been taught in tertiary institutions, very little of these teachings have been applied to the institutions themselves.

Nevertheless, the meagre studies on risk management per se and its actual implementation, are in the context of tertiary education institutions (Tamrat & Teferra, 2020), but not in rural areas. Although top universities in established, advanced economies introduce risk management policies, there is a dearth of studies on the universities in developing countries that have implemented them, including Nigeria (Priyarsono et al., 2019), most especially in rural areas. In addition, most companies in Nigeria do not practise risk management as a recurring activity (Fadun, 2013). Accessible risk management research has been based primarily on the Nigerian banking sector (Njogo, 2012). Umar's (2016) study that was carried out within university settings in Nigeria is on information resources and services provision in university libraries. Our research provides one of the few papers to focus on the application of risk management experiences in institutions of higher education in rural areas in the context of Nigeria.

The practical essence of universities is the subject of education and research. Estimations about the standard of research prove to be especially difficult (Huber, 2011). It is not surprising, then, that risk experts associate teaching risks with contextual elements other than the teaching and learning processes, such as student expectations of teaching, teaching environments, and student security and health. Unsatisfactory student experiences regarding regional and global competitors can result in a loss of reputation. It is instantly understandable that the student experience will adversely affect the market niche, but it also poses several problems. Hence, this study considers research from the students' perspective. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to bring risk management to the academic world to see how it affects student enrolment. Moreover, even though the relationship between student enrolment and health risk management has been proven (Ong et al., 2021), the role of security risk management, as a mediating factor, has not been tested. This study aims to enhance knowledge and understanding of perceptions about risks and risk management in the higher education context. It also aims to deepen understanding of the concept of risk management against the current narrative of bureaucracy, especially regarding student enrolment and universities' abilities to meet strategic goals in rural areas.

Theory and Hypothesis Formation

The theory of systems was not initially a theory of business. Although scientist Ludwig von Bertalanffy created systems theory in the 1940s (Bertalanffy, 1968), the emergence of the theory of systems was centred in the USA. Nonetheless, the concept was initiated from the USA in the 1960s and 1970s, mainly through *The Limits to Growth* (Meadows et al., 1972). The early supporters regarded organisations as collections of multiple and interdependent components called subsystems, and as transparent structures.

Bertalanffy (1968) argued for open systems rather than closed systems, which are more typical in conventional science. Open systems are those that communicate with other systems or with the environment. Closed systems are those that do not interact with other systems or with the environment. Most biological and social systems are open systems, whereas mechanical systems are often closed systems. Open system boundaries are more malleable than closed system borders, which are stiff and, for the most part, impenetrable (Wilkinson, 2011). The principles of systems theory have been used in a variety of domains, including the social sciences and business management (Wilkinson, 2011). However, systems theory is not a single, unified theory, but

rather a technique for conceptualising the structure and features of an organisation in terms of the interactions and interdependence among its components (Leveson, 2015).

The use of systems theory in risk management is relatively uncommon (Hatfield & Hipel, 2002; Renn et al., 2022). Yet, research has revealed that it is relevant to risk management (Hatfield & Hipel, 2002; Renn et al., 2022; Skoko, 2013). According to systems theory, an educational organisation is a social system composed of integrated elements; a system is a unit composed of a succession of interacting and interdependent parts, the interactions of which influences the whole. Risk management is concerned with humans; it is handled from a human perspective and is associated with both the limited ability to anticipate the future and the repercussions of certain occurrences.

In the higher education context, systems theory is important because it teaches university management to be careful and to remember that a problem in one subsystem could hurt the whole system. The reason for this is that the function of education in risk management and prevention, as well as the production of risk-taking, must be conceptualised within sociocultural theories and risk perspectives (Elujekwute et al., 2022). Reintegrating risk management analysis into the university management system is critical because the risk narratives generated affect student enrolment. Similarly, researchers have examined and deconstructed the racial and social class educational and policy consequences of at-risk categories(Bialostok, 2015). Systems theory, according to Vancouver (1996), contends that rather than addressing the various parts separately, university leaders and managers should approach the educational system. This was on the assumption that every activity in the system has an immediate influence on every other part of the educational system. This is based on the idea that separate sections perform diverse responsibilities in all systems, such as students' wellbeing, the university environment, and classroom security; they interact and are interdependent with each other and with the system, which is the risk environment that surrounds them. Chand (2018) stated that, in the systems approach, most people are concerned with the total performance of the system rather than the performance of the subsystems. Systems theory can be applied to the administrative level of rural education development. Instead of considering only the objectives and performance of various functional departments (i.e., subsystems), the overall corporations are considered while implementing system concepts.

Systems theory views organisations as transparent systems that must interact with their environment to survive. A system's relationship with an issue considers the interlinked, evolving, and volatile existence of the climate organisations face. Considering that threats cannot be easily and accurately predicted in advance, every organisation must be vigilant, prepare for the unpredictable, and respond appropriately as new risks emerge. If every organisation is seen as an open system, it may suggest that organisations must interact with their surrounding environments to better serve them. Organisations must be transparent with their affairs, ensuring that both their internal and external environments are carried along. If they successfully achieve this, their risk management process could be easily accomplished, as everyone would be made aware of the risks they face and the steps to take—moving forward—in curbing these risks, which would then have a significant impact on organisational performance (Valentinov et al., 2020).

Luhmann's (2013) contributions to systems thinking were frequently regarded as fitting within a "*system environment model*" (p. 121) which serves as an alternative to what they called the "*whole part model*" (Luhmann, 2013, p. 1–16). Though the latter model is about the structured and tranquil relationships of the parts inside the evolving whole, the preceding model begins with the principle of distinctions of complexity and emphasises the precarious existence of the social structures' relationship with the predominantly dynamic and tumultuous environment.

Even though systems theory aligns with risk management standards, particularly in educational institutions, it has been criticised for having a mechanical view of humans. Meadows (2008) criticised the theory for seeing social systems as conforming to or being annexed to scientific principles of biology, geology, and planetary science. Meadows goes on to claim that social groupings and psychological beings are fundamentally different from natural realities, in that they are social creations that may be altered by participants' will and intent.

The application of systems theory to the current study is that a positive higher institution environment, that is devoid of health risk, security risk and environmental risk, provides a stable environment for increased student enrolment. The higher institution is a psychologically and educationally unifying influence for young adults, especially if they are undergoing change or conflicts (Ileuma, 2015). Tuition-dependent universities cannot maintain their financial stability and finance operational activities in the absence of substantial, continuous university student enrolments. Discrepancies between projections and total student enrolments restrict the capacity of universities to predict turnover of staff, use of resources and the demands on facilities to sustain the population of students.

According to Deloitte (2018), there is no need for entities to have explanations for all risks they face. Yet, they ought to be more mindful of the growing range of risks that impacts them, taking measures to prevent what they can, but still planning for worst case situations to mitigate the harm of out-of-control events. Looking at the classification of risks, Deloitte, in its report on the significant risks facing higher education, classified risk into five major components: business model risks, brand or reputation risks, operating model risks, supply risks for enrolment and regulation risks. As an example, the risk description presented by Huber (2011) addresses problems based on duty or functionality. Therefore, the most likely forms of risk universities encounter include strategic risk (risks influencing the ability to attain objectives), financial risk (that may result in a loss of assets), operational risk (affecting an active management process), enforcement risk (affecting compliance with laws and regulations implemented externally or with policies and procedures implemented from within), and reputation risk (affecting public image, brand, or both). Moreover, some authors recognise risks primarily on a wider scale. Brewer and Walker (2011) examine risks as two key aspects: strategic risk (related to the macro risk context) and operational risk (at the implementation phase). Our study investigates the classification of risk by Brewer and Walker (2011) from this angle. Helsloot and Jong (2006) stated that tertiary education is a societal microcosm, and that the issues affecting an educational institution are not different from those affecting any other enterprise. Simply put, they likened educational institutions to enterprises. As a result, careful consideration should be given to the increasing levels of hostility and abuse, often involving weapons, both in society at large and in higher institutions.

Sum and Saad (2017) carried out a research study to examine the need for risk management in Malaysian universities. Their study examined risks to which the university environment seems vulnerable, the forces that influence the development of risks, and the benefits obtained when those risks are managed. The findings of their study revealed that risk is not confined to big companies or financial institutions. Non-profit government entities and academic institutions are now facing several threats. In Malaysia, risk management strategies are less established in non-profit organisations, particularly universities and research schools, than in most business fields. Hommel and King (2013) studied the possible effects risk-based policy reforms have on business school behaviour. To gain common concepts for risk management in business schools, the paper refers to the financial context of organisational performance and appeals to corporate risk management writings. Tamrat and Teferra (2020) conducted a study to review the scope and level of risk confronted by private universities in Ethiopia. The study further concluded that comprehending risk dynamics and developments is key to securing the sustainability and growth of private universities in Ethiopia. Similarly, Shanahan and McParlane (2005) focused on risks to

Australian universities' attempts to create sections or additions abroad. They explored how these universities attempted to grow as companies abroad, and they analysed the associated risks in such undertakings along with their influence on academia.

The tertiary institution environment refers to the feelings and attitudes evoked by its security and safety management. The concept of safety or security risk, or the safe tertiary institution environment, is closely related to an institution's climate, and the terms *safety* and *safe learning environment* are frequently used interchangeably (Kutsyuruba et al., 2015). If the settings of tertiary institutions were safe and supportive, there would be a high percentage of students enrolled. This would help the enrolled students thrive emotionally and socially (Kutsyuruba et al., 2015). There are some tertiary institutions where the atmosphere is warm and inclusive, while others are hostile and intimidating. Economic, social, psychological, and interpersonal health, as well as behavioural health, have been identified as potential mediators between student enrolment (education) and health outcomes (Kutsyuruba et al., 2015; Raghupathi & Raghupathi, 2020). While the relationship between student enrolment and health risk management has been proven, the mediating role of security risk management has not been tested. As a result, it has been discovered that security risk management in tertiary institutions can have a positive influence on student health management and enrolment surge, yielding favourable educational and psychological outcomes for students and authorities. However, it can also be a problem for learning, because it stops students from learning and developing to their potential.

Based on the above, the study proposes hypotheses that:

> ***Hypothesis 1****: The relationship between students' perceptions of the management of health risks and student enrolment is not significant.*
>
> ***Hypothesis 2****: The relationship between students' perceptions of the management of security risks and student enrolment is not significant.*
>
> ***Hypothesis 3****: The relationship between students' perceptions of the management of environmental risks and student enrolment is not significant.*
>
> ***Hypothesis 4****: Perceptions of security risk do not mediate the relationship between students' perceptions of the management of health risks and student enrolment.*
>
> ***Hypothesis 5****: Perceptions of security risk do not mediate the relationship between students' perceptions of the management of environmental risks and student enrolment.*

Method

This research utilised multistage sampling approaches to ascertain and analyse the impact of the three risk management variables (students' perceptions about health, security, and environmental risks) from November 2019 to August 2020 in three universities in Nigeria (Landmark University, Omu-Aran, Kwara State; Elisade University, Ilara-mokin, Ondo State; and Bowen University, Iwo, Osun State) on student enrolments. The justifications for selecting private institutions for the study were: first, that the institutions were proprietor-based; second, they were self-financing institutions; and third, they were established in rural regions. These institutions relied on student enrolment for continuing to exist and for expanding. This is different from public institutions that rely on government subventions. The selection of institutions for the study was also based on the consistency of the variables under examination across campuses, as well as the country's geography and tertiary educational demands. Hence, the results can be generalised across the private universities in Nigeria.

The study applied a quota sampling technique. A total of 2,684 students from the three universities were examined across six academic branches of learning: the graduate college (n = 400), science (n = 250), business (n = 700), humanities (n = 600), engineering (n = 434), and

law (n = 300). The purpose was to ascertain and examine risk elements of concern to university students through a stakeholder participatory process.

This study proposed to survey 10% of the target population. Cochran's sample size formula was applied at the 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error, to arrive at 336 from the target population. Therefore, a sample size of 336 was used for the study. Ethical consent was sought and obtained from the three universities before distributing surveys to respondents. A pilot study involving 35 students was conducted prior to the survey's wider distribution, and some small phrasing adjustments were made based on the students' responses, to further enhance face validity.

Surveys were distributed to the research participants through both paper and online surveys. A total of 336 surveys were sent out, and 219 were returned, a response rate of 65.2%. According to Eniola (2020), samples of about 10% of a population can provide excellent reliability if well selected. With research of this kind, a 65.2% response rate is relatively high. The survey was constructed with 12 popular statements that related to environmental, security and health risks, using a four-point Likert Scale for the research participants' responses: Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D), and Strongly Disagree (SD). The environmental risk factors were adapted from Nunoo et al. (2018) and Ratnapradipa et al. (2011), the security risk factors from Johnson et al. (2009), the health risk factors from Johnson et al. (2009), and the student enrolment factors from Johnson et al. (2009) and Nunoo et al. (2018). The respondents recorded their agreement/disagreement to each statement in the survey, thus recording their attitudes, perceptions or beliefs.

The data were analysed with the use of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS version 25) and Generalised Structured Component Analysis software. For analysis, the descriptive Likert Scale (SA, A, D, SD) was converted to the corresponding values of 4 through to 1 respectively. The research applied a Spearman Rank Correlation (commonly known as Spearman rho), to test the relationship between the dependent variable (student enrolment) and the independent variables (students' perceptions of the management of health risks, security risks and environmental risks). In a Spearman rho, the strength of correlation is measured, providing a correlation coefficient between 1 and -1: 1 represents a perfect positive correlation; -1 represents a positive negative correlation, and 0 represents no relationship between the variables. In addition, a linear regression analysis was used to test the research hypotheses for the linear relationship between the dependent and independent variables. Subsequently, this allowed us to compare results with the Spearman rho. Further details about data analysis are provided in the Results section.

Results

Likert Scale Results

As can be seen from Table 1, items 1, 2, and 3 have means of 3.40, 3.01, and 2.80, above the criterion mean of 2.50, which is an indication that the entire items are agreed upon. Also, the aggregate mean of 3.07 is greater than the criterion mean of 2.50. The results confirm that a majority of participants agree with the popular statement. The popular remark about student enrolment is confirmed.

Table 1. ***Numbers of Responses and Means for the Student Enrolment Items***

		Number of Responses (Sentiment Level Score)a				Mean
Item Number	**Item Statement**	**Strongly Agree**	**Agree**	**Disagree**	**Strongly Disagree**	
1.	Student enrolment is important for the university.	131 (524)	47 (141)	28 (56)	13 (13)	3.40
2.	My enrolment to the university is impacted by the risk control in the university system.	60 (240)	123 (369)	15 (30)	21 (21)	3.01
3.	I am happy with my enrolment.	43 (172)	98 (294)	70 (140)	8 (8)	2.80
	Aggregate Mean					3.07

[a] The sentiment level score = the number of respondents for the level x the numerical value of that level.

To What Extent do Perceptions About the Management of Health Risks Associate with Student Enrolment? From Table 2, items 4, 5, and 6 with respective means of 2.50, 2.90, and 2.70, are at or above the criterion mean. This indicates that the item set is agreed upon. Also, the aggregate mean of 2.70 is greater than the criterion mean for rejection which is at 2.5. This shows that most participants regarded the management of health risks as associated with student enrolment to an extent.

Table 2. ***Numbers of Responses and Means for the Items About the Management of Health Risks***

		Number of Responses (Sentiment Level Score)[a]				Mean
Item Number	**Item Statement**	**Strongly Agree**	**Agree**	**Disagree**	**Strongly Disagree**	
4.	I have faced health risks as a student at the university.	8 (32)	113 (339)	71 (142)	27 (27)	2.50
5.	Health risks are managed in the university.	53 (212)	112 (336)	33 (66)	21 (21)	2.90
6.	The management of health risks influenced my enrolment to the university.	18 (72)	140 (420)	34 (68)	27 (27)	2.70
	Aggregate Mean					2.70

[a] The sentiment level score = the number of respondents for the level x the numerical value of that level.

To What Extent Do Perceptions About the Management of Security Risks Associate With Student Enrolment? Considering Table 3, items 7, 8, and 9 have respective means of 2.65, 3.10, and 2.72. All are above the criterion mean for rejection, which is an indication that the entire items are agreed upon. Also, the aggregate mean of 2.82 is greater than the criterion mean for rejection. This shows that most participants regarded the management of security risks as associated with student enrolment.

Table 3. ***Numbers of Responses and Means for the Items About the Management of Security Risks***

		Number of Responses (Sentiment Level Score)[a]				Mean
Item Number	**Item Statement**	**Strongly Agree**	**Agree**	**Disagree**	**Strongly Disagree**	
7.	There have been Security risks since I enrolled in the university.	88 (352)	44 (132)	9 (18)	78 (78)	2.65
8.	Security risks are managed in the university.	94 (376)	81 (243)	16 (32)	28 (28)	3.10
9.	Management of Security risks has contributed to my enrolment in the university.	25 (100)	108 (324)	86 (172)	0 (0)	2.72
	Aggregate Mean					2.82

[a] The sentiment level score was calculated by multiplying the number of respondents for the level by the numerical value of that level.

To What Extent do Perceptions About the Management of Environmental Risks Associate with Student Enrolment? As can be seen in Table 4, items 10 and 12 have means of 3.70 and 2.53 respectively, which are above the criterion mean for rejection (2.50). Also, the aggregate mean of 2.88 is higher than the criterion mean for rejection. This is an indication that the participants perceived that environmental risks are within the universities, and that the extent to which perceptions about the management of environmental risks associate with student enrolment is above the criterion. However, item 11 with 2.40 was rejected for having a mean below the criterion mean for acceptance. This means that it is not largely or highly agreed that environmental risks are managed in the university.

Table 4. ***Numbers of Responses and Means for the Items About the Management of Environmental Risks***

		Number of Responses (Sentiment Level Score)[a]				Mean
Item Number	**Item Statement**	**Strongly Agree**	**Agree**	**Disagree**	**Strongly Disagree**	
10.	I have faced environmental risks since my enrolment.	186 (744)	0 (0)	33 (66)	0 (0)	3.70
11.	Environmental risks are managed in the university.	33 (132)	98 (294)	4 (8)	84 (84)	2.40
12.	The management of environmental risks influenced my enrolment in the university.	0 (0)	134 (402)	66 (132)	19 (19)	2.53
	Aggregate Mean					2.88

[a] The sentiment level score was calculated by multiplying the number of respondents for the level by the numerical value of that level.

Inferential Analysis

Table 5 shows the summary of the Spearman rho on the correlation between perceptions about the management of health risks and student enrolment. It shows that this relationship was positive and strong ($\rho = .518$). The p-value of .000 showed that the management of health risks and student enrolment had a strong correlation ($\rho = .518$, $p < .05$). The null hypothesis was

rejected at .05 alpha level and the alternate hypothesis was accepted. Therefore, perceptions about the management of health risks and student enrolment are strongly related.

Table 6 shows the summary of a Spearman rho on the relationship between perceptions about the management of security risks and student enrolment. It shows that the relationship between perceptions about the management of security risks and student enrolment is strong (ρ = .470). The p-value of .008 showed that perceptions about the management of security risks and student enrolment have no correlation (ρ = .470, p >.05). The null hypothesis was rejected at .05 alpha level, and the alternate hypothesis accepted, which means that perceptions about the management of security risks and student enrolment are significantly related.

Table 5. ***Summary of the Spearman Rho Analysis on the Relationship Between Perceptions About the Management of Health Risks and Student Enrolment***

		Perceptions About the Management of Health Risks	Student Enrolment
Perceptions About the Management of Health Risks	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.518**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
	N	219	219
Student Enrolment	Correlation Coefficient	.509**	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
	N	219	219

Note: ** represents statistical significance.

Table 6. ***Summary of the Spearman Rho Analysis on the Relationship Between Perceptions About the Management of Security Risks and Student Enrolment***

		Perceptions About the Management of Security Risks	Student Enrolment
Perceptions About the Management of Security Risks	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.470**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.162
	N	219	219
Student Enrolment	Correlation Coefficient	.330	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.008	.
	N	219	219

Note: ** represents statistical significance.

Table 7 shows the summary of Spearman's rho on the relationship between perceptions about the management of environmental risks and student enrolment. It showed that this relationship was positive (ρ = .671). The p-value of .000 showed that perceptions about the management of environmental risks and student enrolment have a strong correlation (ρ = .671, p > 05). The null hypothesis three was rejected at .05 alpha level and the alternate hypothesis was accepted. Thus, perceptions about the management of environmental risks and student enrolment are positively related.

Table 7. ***Summary of the Spearman Rho Analysis on the Relationship Between Perceptions About the Management of Environmental Risks and Student Enrolment***

		Perceptions About the Management of Environmental Risks	**Student Enrolment**
Perceptions About the Management of Environmental Risks	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.671**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.162
	N	219	219
Student Enrolment	Correlation Coefficient	4.70	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
	N	219	219

Note: ** represents statistical significance.

Testing of the Hypotheses Using Regression Analysis

Two regression models were used to analyse the relationship between the dependent variable (student enrolment) and the independent variables (perceptions about health risk, security risk, and environmental risk). Model 1 is the regression model without mediation and Model 2 is the model with mediation. Table 8 shows the estimated weights and loadings for the models' indicators, as well as their standard errors and 95% confidence intervals. The standard errors and 95% confidence intervals were estimated using 100 bootstrap samples in the study. All estimated weights and loadings were statistically significant.

The variable models were thoroughly assessed using a range of measures, including FIT (Henseler, 2012), adjusted FIT (AFIT) (Hwang et al., 2007), the Goodness of Fit Index (GFI) (Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1986), and the Standardised Root Mean Squared Residual (SRMR) (Hwang, 2008). FIT displays the percentage of the overall variation of all indicators and latent variables that a single model specification can explain and has values between 0 and 1. The greater the value, the more the model specification accounts for the variance in the variables. AFIT should take the model's complexity into account. The variance of the data described by a model specification is considered when determining the degrees of freedom for the model being tested, using both FIT and AFIT. For the model without a mediator, FIT = 0.297 and AFIT = 0.29. It indicates that the model explains around 29% of the total variance of all variables. For the model with a mediator, FIT = 0.298 and AFIT = 0.291. This suggests that around 30% of the variance in the data was explained by the model.

Table 8. ***Metrics for Regression Models 1 (Original Model Without Mediation) and 2 (With Mediation)***

Variables	**Model 1**						**Model 2**					
	Weight			Loading			Weight			Loading		
	SE	95% CI		SE	95% CI		SE	95% CI		SE	95% CI	
Health Risk (Hypothesis 1)	VIF = 1.01						VIF = 1.001					
HRM1	0.115	0.327	0.115	0.124	0.263	0.825	0.094	0.321	0.681	0.104	0.436	0.825
HRM2	0.243	-0.276	0.243	0.283	-0.391	0.729	0.201	-0.208	0.585	0.248	-0.264	0.721
HRM3	0.055	0.502	0.055	0.051	0.629	0.834	0.058	0.473	0.712	0.064	0.583	0.835
Security Risk (Hypothesis 2)	VIF = 1.019						VIF = 1.02					
SRM1	0.179	0.072	0.179	0.16	0.157	0.806	0.109	0.28	0.68	0.131	0.303	0.824
SRM2	0.054	0.5	0.054	0.08	0.647	0.84	0.079	0.468	0.698	0.092	0.567	0.837
SRM3	0.221	-0.64	0.221	0.257	-0.749	0.175	0.261	-0.608	0.419	0.313	-0.754	0.43
Environmental Risk (Hypothesis 3)	VIF = 1.013						VIF = 1.012					
ERM1	0.165	-0.324	0.259	0.233	-0.47	0.394	0.173	-0.4	0.31	0.237	-0.531	0.437
ERM2	0.158	-0.187	0.419	0.249	-0.309	0.589	0.173	-0.25	0.439	0.245	-0.33	0.597
ERM3	0.046	0.435	0.634	0.057	0.652	0.854	0.052	0.435	0.652	0.068	0.615	0.857
Student Enrolment (Dependent Variable)												
STE1	0.065	-0.448	-0.206	0.087	-0.683	-0.34	0.088	-0.464	-0.08	0.135	-0.698	-0.125
STE2	0.129	-0.183	0.289	0.178	-0.148	0.508	0.133	-0.163	0.353	0.201	-0.219	0.521
STE3	0.04	0.413	0.557	0.044	0.631	0.812	0.049	0.395	0.601	0.05	0.613	0.824
FIT	0.297						0.298					
AFIT	0.29						0.291					
GFI	0.943						0.943					
SRMR	0.066						0.066					
R-squared	0.23						0.19					

Notes: SE – Standard Error; CI – Confidence Interval; VIF – Variance Inflation Factors; HRM – … ; SRM – … ; ERM – … .; FIT – … ; AFIT – Adjusted FIT; GFI – Goodness of Fit Index; SMSR – Standardised Root Mean Squared Residual.

The gap between the sample covariances and the covariances represented by the parameter estimations is also proportional to the GFI and SRMR. Hu and Bentler (1999) proposed the following cut-off parameters for GFI and SRMR as rules-of-thumb: a GFI value greater than 0.90 and a SRMR value of less than 0.08. These may both be regarded as a good fit, because a GFI value near 1 and a SRMR value near 0 are typically regarded as being indicative of a good match. The study's GFI and SRMR values (0.943 and 0.066 respectively) indicate that the model fits the data reasonably well.

When the predictor variables are not linearly connected, the variance of the estimated regression coefficients is inflated to a certain extent, and may be measured by the variance inflation factors (VIF). There is no association between the independent variable and the other variables when the VIF is equal to one. The findings indicated that there is no multicollinearity in this study. The results of the R-square test are shown in Table 8, implying that 23% of the variation in student enrolment is explained by variations in the predictor variables (perceptions about the management of health risk, the management of security risk, and the management of environmental risk). Moreover, the R-square of the mediator test, as shown in Table 8, indicates that 19% of the variation in perceptions about the management of security risk is explained by variations in the predictor variables (perceptions about the management of health risk and the management of environmental risk).

As shown in Table 9, the first hypothesis was tested to determine the relationship that exists between perceptions about health risk management and student enrolment. The results showed that the coefficient of perceptions of the management of health risks was SE = 0.095, 95% CI = -0.266 ~0.155. It indicates that a change in perceptions about the management of health risk should result in a change in student enrolment. Accordingly, this means that the test was significant at the 5% level, since 0.05% is less than 5%. With a 95% level of confidence, this means that perceptions about health risk management have a large positive effect on student enrolment. The decision rule, therefore, is to reject the null hypothesis (Hypothesis 1) and accept the alternate hypothesis.

Table 9. ***Path Coefficient Estimates***

Paths	Estimate	Standard Error (SE)	95% Confidence interval (CI)	
Hypothesis 1: HRM→STE	-0.07	0.095	-0.266	0.155
Hypothesis 2: SRM→STE	-0.022	0.076	-0.156	0.145
Hypothesis 3: ERM→STE	0.133	0.084	-0.055	0.303
Hypothesis 4: HRM → SRM → STE	-0.002	0.009	-0.016	0.027
Hypothesis 5: ERM → SRM → STE	0.002	0.010	-0.020	0.023

Note. HRM, SRM, ERM, and SET refer to perceptions about health risk management, security risk management, environmental risk management, and stability and equilibrium data respectively.

The result is in line with the Spearman rho ($\rho = .518$, $p < .05$) which also rejects the null hypothesis and accepts the alternate hypothesis. It is evident that perceptions about health risk management affect organisational performance in terms of university enrolment. This study is in line with the Deloitte's (2018) observation that organisations that embrace risk management are competitive, while those that do not undertake this operation have proven to be ineffective. The study shows that embracing risk management in a university shapes its performance. This

analysis has proved that with better perceptions of health risk management, the university should increase its student enrolment and positively affect it as well.

The second hypothesis was tested to find the correlation between perceptions about the management of security risks and student enrolment. Results show that the coefficient of perceptions about the management of security risks was SE = 0.076, 95% CI = -0.156 ~0.145. This indicates that a change in the perceptions of the management of security risk should result in a change in student enrolment. As a result of being more than 0.05%, the test was not significant at the 5% level. At a 95% level of confidence, it is implied that perceptions about reducing security threats does not significantly increase student enrolment. Therefore, the decision rule is to reject the null hypothesis two (Hypothesis 2) and accept the alternate hypothesis. The result is in line with the Spearman rho (ρ = .470, p>.05) which rejects the null hypothesis and accepts the alternate. This portrayed the fact that, despite security being the most crucial element of our society in these recent times, perceptions about it do not, however, have full impact on the enrolment of students into private universities. This finding is in line with the research of Helsloot and Jong (2006), and it suggests that careful consideration should be given to the increasing levels of hostility and abuse, often involving weapons, that are occurring both in society at large and in higher education institutions. Universities should make security a top issue if they wish to be rated as a feasible option for students. Departments and staff need to be equipped to deal with a broad variety of risks, such as sexual assault, physical security, laboratory safety, and drug-related violence, to list a few. Moreover, while this research was performed in private universities where the level of security is top notch, like can be said for public universities in terms of the risks mentioned.

The third hypothesis was tested to indicate the relationship between perceptions about the management of environmental risks and student enrolment. The result shows that the coefficient of the perceptions about the management of environmental risk was SE = 0.084, 95% CI = -0.055 ~0.303. This indicated that the test was significant at the 5% level because it was lower than 0.05%. Therefore, the implication at a 95% confidence level is that the perceptions about the management of environmental risks does have a significant positive influence on student enrolment. Therefore, the decision rule is that the null hypothesis three (Hypothesis 3) be rejected and the alternate hypothesis be accepted. The result is in line with the spearman rho (ρ =.671, p > 05) which rejected the null hypothesis and accepted the alternate hypothesis. Hypothesis three indicated that a strong relationship existed between perceptions about the management of environmental risks and student enrolment. From this finding, the environment is seen to have a highly positive influence on the registration and admission of students to the university. The terrains of the university and how they are controlled has been tested to find that it plays a part in impacting the enrolment of students in a university. This means that perceptions about good environmentally secured terrains where there are good road networks, a constant power supply, good hostel facilities, good pipe-borne water, no insect infestation and so on, majorly affect the intake of students. All these make the environment student friendly.

The testing of the mediating effect of perceptions about security risk management on perceptions about health risk management and student enrolment was SE = 0.009, 95% CI = -0.016 ~0.027. When compared to the significance threshold of 0.05%, this suggests that the test is significant at the 5% level. As a result, with 95% certainty, perceptions of security risk management mediated the association between perceptions of health risk management and student enrolment. The result does have a significant negative influence on student enrolment. Therefore, the decision rule is that the null hypothesis four (Hypothesis 4) be accepted and the alternate hypothesis be rejected.

The mediating effect of perceptions about security risk management on perceptions about environmental risk management and student enrolment. The result was: SE = 0.010, 95% CI = -0.020 ~0.023. This suggests that the test was significant at the 5% level since it is less than

0.05%. As a result, the implication is that, at a 95% confidence level, perceptions of security risk management mediate the association between perceptions of environmental risk management and student enrolment. The result does have a significant negative influence on student enrolment. Therefore, the decision rule is that the null hypothesis four (Hypothesis 4) be accepted and the alternate hypothesis not confirmed.

Discussion and Conclusion

It was determined that perceptions about the management of health risks is related to student enrolment. This suggests that high levels of health and safety risk mitigation activities should not just be about meeting the legal requirements of the nation. Since maintaining health and safety risk mitigation policies is at the core of running an institution, a resourceful outlook on this says quite a lot of the institution's fundamentals. The findings also suggest that any university devoid of health risk management is bound to lack student intake. A resourced approach to health risk assessment may very well serve as a motive for all shareholders in the university to improve their performance, and it could also offer a forum to educate and urge them to remain healthy.

The findings showed that perceptions about the management of security risks do not significantly associate with student enrolment. However, because security an important element of our society and is lacking even in our country, Nigeria, it is still an important measure of risk management in universities. According to various studies (e.g., Sum & Saad, 2017; Tamrat & Teferra, 2020), a university campus devoid of security risk management will not particularly lack student intake, but it is likely to suffer in other areas such as development risk, strategic risk, and operational risk. Universities must understand that, with encouragement and sponsorship from the university's board, a successful risk management process should improve the probability of a university achieving its objectives and goals, increase accountability, and permit limited resources to be properly allocated. Overall, security risk management should help a university to sustain competitive advantage, strengthen its image, and establish a significant response when a major risk event happens.

Lastly, the findings showed that perceptions about the management of environmental risks is associated with student enrolment. The environment is seen as the surroundings of a university campus, either in an urban or rural setting (see Kutsyuruba et al., 2015; Raghupathi & Raghupathi, 2020). It is obvious that the universities in the urban cities are increasing students' enrolment compared with those in the rural settings. This is because most urban universities have effective environmentally secured terrains, where there are good road networks, a constant power supply and pipe-borne water, unlike those in the rural cities. Therefore, it is extremely important that universities consider their surrounding environment as a major factor in admitting and registering students. All these make the environment student friendly. It is on this note many universities understand that, with encouragement and sponsorship from the university's board, a successful risk management curriculum would improve the probability of a objectives and goals, increase accountability, and permit limited resources to be properly allocated. Environmental risk management essentially helps a university to sustain competitive advantage, strengthen its image, and an effective registration and admission of students.

Limitations and Further Study

The work has limitations. The study was carried out within private institutions in rural communities, which makes it difficult to generalise results across all universities in Nigeria. For instance, this study found no statistically significant association between perceptions about security and student enrolment. However, the study established that perceptions about security are one of the major risks that make most students patronise private institutions in Nigeria. As detailed in this study's literature, most students believe that institutions with a decent, accommodating, and student-friendly environment will buffer deficient security. Another bias of

the study is that the surveys only cover students who reside on campus, based on the selected universities' disallowance of off-campus housing. The off-campus housing students could be researched in the future to draw comparisons.

Further study should investigate public universities in rural areas in the country. Furthermore, the variables should be expanded to capture both the perceptions and behaviours of universities' management as well as students. In addition, future research could examine the distinctions in opinion expressed by students from different universities and the six academic disciplines.

Likewise, with the COVID-19 pandemic, which included lockdowns and other barriers, which helped to limit and prevent the spread of the virus, it was difficult to get respondents to comply and respond to the questionnaire because of the online means of administration, so it took months to obtain responses. Therefore, the gathering of data was spread out over several months until the researcher was able to access the respondents in person. Future studies should Future studies should address the issue that the online survey population must be precisely characterised and as representative of the target demographic as feasible. This would be conceivable if an online survey had a credible sample frame and participants were chosen using a randomised or probability sampling procedure.

Authorship Statement

We confirm that the submitted work is original and the authors' own work, and the work is not currently under review by any other journal.

Conflicting Interest

The authors have indicated that there are no controversies about the authorship and publication of this work.

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A Whole-of-Rural-Community Approach to Supporting Education and Career Pathway Choice

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Abstract

Rural communities and partnerships are critical in career education, promoting pathways into work and further education and training. Families, teachers, and employers all may influence young people and adults who are considering pathway choices. This research aimed to equip these 'key influencers' with the knowledge and confidence to have supportive pathway conversations with rural young people and adults. The focus was not on those needing help with education/career choices, but rather those who influence their decisions. We used a Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR) approach in three communities to address the question: How can a whole of community approach best equip key influencers to inform and support rural student post school pathways?

Community working parties were established to work alongside researchers to select, trial and evaluate of whole community, place-based, coordinated career education interventions, which targeted communities' individual geographic, demographic and employment context. Communities were resourced with a local pathway broker and small budget for interventions. Individual interventions and the overall project approach were evaluated.

Findings suggest that rural community-researcher partnerships can be effective in equipping key influencers with confidence and knowledge to inform and support education/career pathway choices. Community partnerships can take account of community assets and allow for

interventions that address community contexts. Partnerships should foster community ownership to deliver education/career pathway information interventions that are flexible, accessible, sustainable, place-based, and authentic. This paper sets out a model for partnerships that effectively equips key influencers in rural communities to support education/career pathway choices.

Keywords: *careers advice, post-secondary education, rural community education*

Introduction

Education and career pathway decision making in rural, regional, and remote (hereafter 'rural') Australia is crucial for building strong societies and economies in the context of a changing global economy (Napthine et al., 2019; Halsey, 2018). There is a strong mandate in Australia to strengthen rural career education, supported by recent education reviews. Napthine et al. (2019) assert that halving the gap in attainment and participation rates in rural areas would increase Australia's GDP by approximately $AUD25 billion by 2050 and recommends a regionally- based model for career guidance to enable aspiration and improve advice for rural students. Halsey (2018) notes declining rates of transition to university as remoteness increases and a persistent gap in educational attainment of rural students compared to their urban counterparts. Halsey also notes that contextual factors and relationships interact to influence learning and post school pathways of rural students.

The *National Career Education Strategy* (Department of Education and Training, 2019) identifies that rural local communities and partnerships are critical in career education, promoting pathways into work and further education and training. The strategy asserts that communities can contribute to program design and delivery so that programs have authentic, relevant learning experiences that meet local needs and expose people to local employment opportunities and pathways. It argues career education partnerships should: draw on local resources; involve collaboration with families, employers, and the local community; reflect the diversity of employer needs and available pathways; and work in partnership with higher education and vocational education and training (VET) providers to ensure career education places equal value on all pathways.

A whole community approach to supporting pathway choice can be expected to be able to take account of place-based contextual factors and relationships noted by Halsey (2018), Napthine et al. (2019) and Department of Education and Training (2019). The project discussed in this paper therefore addressed the research question: *How can a whole of community approach best equip key influencers to inform and support low SES rural student higher education participation?* Because we are interested in active support of students, our question is about individual and institutional actors, termed influencers, rather than the more passive concept of influences.

The following sections provide background on formation of aspirations in rural areas and how individuals, groups and institutions can influence formation of aspirations and decisions about education and career pathways before discussing the role of communities in pathway decisions.

Aspirations, Attainability, and Influencers of Education Pathways

Aspirations are typically formed in primary and early secondary years, when parents, families and teachers are key influencers (Naylor et al., 2013). Previous research in Australia and elsewhere (Woodroffe et al., 2017) found that schools are charged with most of the responsibility for providing a curriculum that equips students with the necessary skills, knowledge, and attributes to navigate the work environment, but teachers feel ill-equipped to give careers advice. They welcome involvement of other stakeholders in raising their own awareness, as well as students' knowledge. Calabrese (2006) argues that schools alone are "*unable to successfully respond to*

social and economic changes" (p. 176) and rural youth are often not given the information and skills they need at school to make informed choices about future life and work.

An understanding of the attainability of higher education is essential to convert aspiration to expectation and eventual participation for young people; an understanding that is also necessary for older adults (Khattab, 2015; Kilpatrick et al., 2019). There is strong theoretical evidence for pathway and articulation programs in influencing both aspiration and attainability (Naylor et al., 2013).

A comprehensive literature review spanning 25 years that focussed on key influences on rural Australian school students' aspirations for higher education found home and community had a significant role in shaping aspirations (Fray et al., 2020). Much of the research focused on barriers and enablers including home and community factors, financial capacity, distance to university, emotional cost of relocation, supportive school environments, teacher encouragement and school experiences, and a lack of certainty regarding post-school options. Turner (2020) argues that the role of community influence can be important in Australian students' pathway decisions, but that it is different for each student as other factors including financial resources also influence decisions. International research has similar themes, Rönnlund et al. (2018) find that social, cultural, and financial resources are not only important in Swedish students' decision-making processes, but these resources are more important for rural young people than for their urban peers.

Parents, Family, Teachers, Peers, Employers and Others as Influencers

Peers, parents, family, and teachers influence students' aspirations and pathway choices in Australia and elsewhere (Hallinan & Williams, 1990; Kiuru et al. 2007; Krause et al., 2009). For rural students in Australia and internationally, universities are an important influencer of aspirations, perceptions of attainability and eventual participation in higher education, along with community members, employers, industry, and local media (Katersky Barnes et al., 2019; Hughes & Karp, 2006). Employers play a role in influencing employees and other adults in rural communities to upskill for increasingly sophisticated rural jobs (Houghton et. al., 2023). International research suggests employers are also influential in student pathway decisions (Hughes & Karp, 2006). These key influencers can help motivate students and adults alike through connectedness, positive and reciprocal relationships, and support; all found to be beneficial for students' academic engagement, competence, motivation, and achievement (Guay, et al., 2013; King, 2015; McInerney, 2008; Ricard & Pelletier, 2016).

The Role of Communities

Community members, particularly young people, are impacted by the 'knowledge production' featuring in their social context. It is communities where associations are made about values and norms of education, training, and future work, including education pathways (Corbett, 2007; Harwood et al., 2017; Krause et al., 2009). Harwood et al. (2017) argue "*where we live and who we interact with have a big impact on what we do*" (p. 36). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and people with disability who live in low socioeconomic communities, combined with rural status, experience a compounding disadvantage which further increases the challenge of higher education participation (Cardak et al., 2017).

In Australia, people living in communities and families with limited experience of higher education are less likely to aspire to a university pathway (Cardak et al., 2017), and often struggle to imagine studying at university and working in the kinds of jobs a degree would qualify them to do (Woodroffe et al., 2017). People living in communities with limited experience of higher education have often not been exposed to the navigational capital, or "*skills of maneuvering through social institutions*" (Yosso, 2005, p.80) to negotiate the academic and practical steps to get to university (Abbott-Chapman, 2011; Krause et al., 2009).

Several international studies analyse how rural communities shape young people's options in transitions to post-school education and careers, particularly in relation to students' financial and other resources (Hinton-Smith, 2012; Shah et al., 2015; Shah & Whiteford, 2016). Other factors affecting rural young people's decisions include schools promoting 'learning to leave' (Corbett, 2007; Rosvall, 2020), and gendered socialisation factors such as promotion of male-dominated trades which meant young women were more likely to leave communities for education and career purposes (Bjarnason & Thorlindsson, 2006; Rosvall, 2020). Corbett (2007) finds that rural Canadian youth who have the luxury of flexibility in time to make decisions and have the option to be mobile, are more successful in their educational pursuits.

Education-community Partnerships

Australian schools currently have limited external support in providing career education to their students (Hooley et al., 2015; Woodroffe et al., 2017). Most are not well equipped to create locally relevant programs that facilitate, promote, and enable students to actively understand, negotiate and feel supported in their choice of careers. Partnerships with community can provide students with authentic learning opportunities and expose career pathways (Kilpatrick et al., 2002). Partnerships between schools, universities, VET, industry and community organisations can be effective structures for programs which prepare students and their families for further education and work (Machimana et al., 2020; Santarossa & Woodruff, 2020; Woodroffe et al., 2017). Education-community partnerships can lead to a radical shift in attitudes and practice (Machimana et al., 2020), suggesting university outreach should work in partnership with rural communities to inform student aspirations and reveal practical steps that make higher education attainable (Kilpatrick et al., 2019).

People termed 'boundary crossers' (Kilpatrick et al., 2002) or 'boundary spanners' (Miller, 2008) are key in making education-community partnerships work. They have credibility within multiple community domains, speak the language of all, build trust and dialogue between domains, and provide partnership continuity. Their informal leadership assists communities to develop shared understandings and goals, supporting community participation in shared decision making to facilitate transformation to meet community needs (Barnes et al., 2016; Kilpatrick et al., 2020; Miller, 2008). Success in partnerships is more likely when the boundary crosser is motivated by an underlying community commitment and community is supportive. Boundary crossers' actions can reduce tensions between groups to bring about mutual benefit (Kilpatrick et al., 2002; Miller, 2008).

A people-rich, partnership approach is most effective in informing key influencers of post-school education pathway choice (Fischer et al., 2017). A place-based learning approach takes advantage of geography to create authentic, meaningful, and engaging learning (Gruenewald & Smith, 2008). Taken together, this suggests a whole of community approach to equipping key influencers with an understanding of education and career pathways is likely to be most effective.

Methodology

Community based participatory action research (CRPR) was applied to select, trial, and evaluate whole of community, place-based, coordinated career education interventions which targeted key influencers in three rural case study sites in two Australian states. CBPR draws on community development principles and involves community members more equitably than traditional methodologies through a collaborative approach (Collins et al. 2018). It aims to build understanding and knowledge, in this case of education and career pathways, and integrate knowledge gained with interventions and changes while also building the capacity of community members (Israel et al., 2012).

Three Australian rural communities in two states were selected as study sites based on: consultation with state departments of education, schools, local government, Regional Development Australia Committees, neighbourhood houses, libraries, local business groups and industry stakeholders; and interest shown by local government and community stakeholders in education and career pathways/partnerships. The rural communities are typical of lifestyle communities which attract population growth, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic (Houghton et. al, 2023). They are either coastal, or in attractive settings, not too far from major population centres. Their populations are older than the Australian average. All communities have an Aboriginal population above the national average. Major industries are typical of rural lifestyle communities: health and social assistance; agriculture, forestry and fishing, tourism and retail were prominent (Houghton et. al, 2023). Rural Community 2, located closest to its state capital has the highest educational attainment relative to its state average, although Year 12 completion is highest in Rural Community 3 which has the best access to Year 11 and 12 schooling (.economyid, nd). Youth unemployment significant makes a contribution to overall unemployment in each community (.economyid, nd). Site populations varied from 6,000 to 38,000 (.economyid, nd). Appendix A compares the communities on several demographic indicators and other characteristics. While the original intention was smaller sites, findings suggest that for education and careers pathway information or advice programs, rural regions centred on towns with a range of services are an appropriate scale.

The communities were embedded in selection/modification of interventions, their delivery and evaluation. The research design was flexible, with ongoing evaluation informing modifications as the project progressed (see Woodroffe et al. (2022) for detailed discussion of how CBPR was applied in this project).

Ethics approvals were obtained from the Ethics Committees of the researchers' universities (University of Tasmania Human Research Ethics Committee, H0018302, University of Wollongong Ethics Committee, 2019401).

Education and career pathway working parties of 10 to 12 members (hereafter: working parties) were established in each community between October and December 2019. Organisations that had assisted in the site selection process were invited to join the working party and/or nominate others active in education and career sectors to be members. Each community was resourced with a part-time locally based pathway broker. Pathway brokers were familiar with the community context and were responsible for coordinating the project within their community. Each community was also resourced with a small budget to be used for interventions, for example, to purchase training, develop resources and/or put on events.

To evaluate the project at levels of the whole community approach in each community and of individual interventions, different quantitative and qualitative tools were used. A mixed method, multi-phase, triangulation design (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998) was chosen. Evaluation was built into the structure of the working party meetings. Notes from working party meetings including researcher reflections and field notes assisted in informing the choice of evaluation techniques. Within the CBPR framework, working party meetings helped legitimise decisions and guide both project activities and the evaluation. It was anticipated that working party members' understanding of local context would increase the likelihood of interventions being successful (Israel et al., 1998). A sequential iterative approach was used for data analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

Initial meetings provided statistical data about the communities such as that provided in Appendix A. They included short surveys and focus group discussion which served to capture 'baseline' evaluation data about relevant existing programs and information sources and provided advice about community understandings and culture to inform selection of interventions. Second meetings discussed interventions that had been successful in informing

key influencers in similar community contexts. Researchers and working party members collaboratively identified and modified one or two interventions to fit each community's context and need, see Appendix A for context and needs and Appendix B for interventions and their aims. COVID-19 disrupted planned delivery, with some interventions to more flexible, online approach. Final evaluation interviews and focus groups were conducted as interventions concluded.

A variety of methods informed the evaluation reported here, including thematically analysed focus groups, interviews, community meetings and field notes as well as simple descriptive statistical analysis of survey data.

Results

Working Parties and Pathway Brokers

All communities established working parties that captured a broad diversity of community key influencers. There were representatives from education, employers and industry, community organisations/services, family/carers, and local government, who collectively had networks reaching across each community. Rural Community 2 working party attracted several 'people who had moved from interstate, who came with experience in marketing, communication and project management. While working party members in all communities reported they were motivated by what they might learn as individuals and what they could do to support other community members, Rural Community 2 working party members were also interested in building connections for themselves and others.

While each working party was supported by a pathway broker, the role was enacted differently. In Rural Community 1, the working party was consulted about a local broker, and it was agreed to advertise locally, but the university employ the broker. Rural Community 2's local government was about to employ a part-time project officer for an employment related project. The university subcontracted the local government to employ the pathway broker a person was jointly selected for both roles. In Rural Community 3 staff from the local university campus responsible for outreach activities jointly took on the role.

Overall, working party members in each community reported that they had started with a 'good' to **'**expert**'** understanding of careers education and pathways and were mostly confident in sharing this knowledge with young people and others. Despite their initial assessment of their own understanding and confidence, at the end of the project working party members reported increased capacity in supporting others to make education and career pathway decisions.

Interventions

Each working party identified their community's needs for education and career pathways advice, and the target key influencer groups best placed to address these needs. They selected interventions to improve the knowledge and confidence of target key influencers. Some interventions had to be modified in response to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. Implemented interventions are set out in the Appendix B.

All three communities identified parents/carers/families as the group most in need of upskilling and initially chose adaptations of the *Parents Matter* intervention. Challenges of bushfires and COVID-19 in Rural Community 3 saw the working party modify their parent intervention to *FutureTalk*, targeting Year 12 parents. Rural Community 1 also chose *Warm Connections*, targeting staff and volunteers in community centres and libraries, to better address a high unemployment in its community, despite many local job vacancies. Rural Community 2 also selected the *Growth Industry Preparation Program* (*GrIPP)* to better equip teachers, staff in community centres and

employment agencies and support services to act as key influencers by exposing the many and varied jobs in local industries.

Surveys of those who participated in interventions agreed participation increased their knowledge of education and career pathways and their confidence in talking to others about pathways. For example, 92% of 27 surveyed Rural Community 1 Careers Expo attendees agreed the event provided them 'with improved knowledge of career options after school', and 96% agreed it 'gave me more confidence about speaking to my children/employees/ students/others about career options after school'. Agreement on the same questions from 9 surveyed after Rural Community 2's Parents Matter online Q&A event was 78% and 89%.

Interviews with intervention participants and stakeholders found similarly positive outcomes. *FutureTalk* participant parents were especially motivated to join the program to assist their Year 12 children navigate post-school options to alleviate the impacts of both the bushfires and COVID. It was a valuable way to learn about post-school options for parents educated overseas. One parent reported a change in her son's perception of her role in his post-school decision making process, from that of outsider to valued contributor. Another felt an extra burden to help her daughter following traumatic events:

> *I did this [program] because my daughter's in Year 12 … I thought I'd help her because we'd also lost our house at the beginning of the year in the fires … She was really struggling so I just thought I'd try and help her any way I could.*

A staff member interviewed about Warm Connections in Rural Community 1 noted benefits to her community centre's clients. When someone comes in for one type of support, they may realise that there are other services they could use, such as education or training:

> *We're quite an active community centre and we provide a lot of resources to communities… Oftentimes… you strike up a conversation and you discover their interests …[for example] a guy that was really tech savvy, self-learned, and so I asked him had he ever explored the idea of making a career out of it and considering further education …. (Community service staff member)*

Reaching the Target Audience

Evaluation data collected from lead parent and panel volunteers and those who participated in *Parents Matter* and *GrIPP* events in Rural Community 2 strongly suggested working party-selected interventions were well promoted and attracted key influencers in their community, who reported increased knowledge of, and confidence in talking about, careers and education pathways. Coupled with the overall success of the chosen interventions, Rural Community 2 working party's expectations revealed at the start of the project appeared to have been met, that is learning as individuals, and supporting other community members to learn more about education and career pathways.

Support from schools in Rural Community 1 was more limited than anticipated: it was anticipated that the schools would be active members of the working party and promote the project and its interventions through school communications with parents. This was partly due to the impact of COVID-19 and the pressure on schools to move to online learning. Working party members, lead parents and other stakeholders interviewed all noted that a strong school presence was integral to the effectiveness of any program to inform teachers and other key influencers of education and career pathway choice. Concern was expressed at the third working party meeting that the schools' priorities were not aligned with local employment options; schools' limited subject offerings did not meet major industry employment requirements. Limited school engagement reduced access to information channels that would reach and engage parents and may have constrained the project's ability to reach all Rural Community 1 sub-groups.

> *It was pivotal that we had to work through the school to get these things happening. And because the school was, not disengaged, but just so hard to access because kids weren't there ... it was very hard to get hold of anyone or any support from the school at that time. I think that dragged it on a lot longer than it needed to. (Pathway broker)*

Community Orientation and Maturity in Working Together

The Rural Community 2 working party, pathway broker and those who volunteered for both *Parents Matter* and the *GrIPP* events highlighted what can be achieved when a group operates with a coherent approach to achieving the goal of informing key influencers of careers and education pathway decisions in their community. The community was generally supportive, including businesses, industries, and other community representatives. As the project progressed, it became apparent that project ownership moved from the university to a shared responsibility, then to the community. In contrast in Rural Community 1, although the pathway broker worked closely with local government, working party and community, the project was driven by the university throughout its duration.

Each community faced unique challenges and opportunities. They varied in the ease with which they worked together internally, and for Rural Communities 1 and 2, with external parties including university researchers and the GrIPP program. Differences appear to be related to the commitment of a trusted local institution, a history of working together internally and with external parties, and skills and expertise of community members who are willing to volunteer to work for the benefit of their community. The planning and delivery of interventions in Rural Community 3 benefited from the skills and networks of the externally orientated working party, while Rural Community 2's intervention benefited from its working party and lead parent group, which included parents who had moved into the community, bringing professional skills and a desire to make a difference in their new home.

Although the project was successful in providing information and confidence to key influencers in Rural Community 1, social and political divides hindered its operation and impact. While Rural Community 3 benefited from a local university campus and Rural Communities 1 and 2 from support from local governments, having a pathway broker employed by a local institution appeared to assist in initiating community engagement with the project. The role of local government as a trusted, respected community institution gave the project credibility in Rural Community 2.

It was apparent that Rural Community 1 needed some support to work collaboratively across all community subgroups. The community has the potential to build capacity in this area. While the intention of the project was to move the weight of ownership and leadership from university to communities, project design was flexible enough to provide an on the ground local pathway broker who was able to work closely with the university to drive the project.

A final indication of the success of the project is that there are plans in all three communities to build on learnings from the project and move forward with some kind of education and career pathway information program for key influencers. There was evidence in Rural Community 1 that the community was prepared to take some ownership of the education and careers space. At the well-attended joint working party-community meeting a recently established local employment agency agreed to apply for funding for a school-community employment coordinator, and businesspeople agreed to revitalise the chamber of commerce so business could present a united voice about education and training for local jobs.

Discussion

The project design which required community and expert researcher input into choice and design of interventions appeared to assist in identifying, reaching, and engaging the target community

influencer audience. In all three communities, the project engaged key influencers who research has shown can play a strong role in influencing career and education pathways (Kilpatrick et al., 2019; Machimana et al., 2020; Turner, 2020). They included families, teachers, employers and others in the community who have conversations with young people and adults considering education and career choices.

Findings indicate that the three communities were very different in how they operated, their resources, and how they approached project partnerships. CBPR proved to be effective for working with the diverse communities to promote whole of community education and career pathways (Woodroffe et al., 2022). Across sites there were overarching themes and practices that provide important insights into the how to implement a whole of community approach, and what is effective for equipping key influencers to support education and career pathway choices. The themes were community ownership, engagement, and inclusion; flexibility, accessibility, and authenticity; and community orientation and maturity.

What Makes for an Effective Whole of Community Approach?

Community Ownership, Engagement and Inclusion. Working parties across all three sites engaged people with a range of the roles suggested in the national career education strategy: government, parents and carers, school leaders and teachers, and employers (Department of Education and Training, 2019). Employers were explicitly included in all communities as representatives of key local industries, rather than employers more generally, consistent with literature about programs that are effective in informing parents, as well as students about careers and employment (Machimana et al., 2020; Santarossa & Woodruff, 2020; Woodroffe et al., 2017). All working parties included community providers of VET and/or adult education. Rural Communities 1 and 2 also included people with roles in sporting and other groups. Rural Community 3 had representation from its Aboriginal community.

The inclusion of, and engagement with, community members who have credibility and visibility, and are well-integrated in their community is a critical part of CBPR (Israel et al., 2012; Woodroffe et al., 2022). Drawing on a diversity of community members' knowledge (Israel et al., 1998) led to improved understanding of local context and experience, fostered local ownership of activities and outputs, and assisted in validation of findings (Dockery, 2020). Key mechanisms which assisted in driving community ownership, engagement and inclusion in the project were local working parties and pathway brokers who acted as community-based incubators, activators and boundary crossers, as discussed below.

Community Working Parties and Brokers. CBPR design emphasises the involvement of community members in projects. The nature and extent of their influence on the governance, design and implementation of research can differ and lead to different forms of ownership (Blumenthal et al., 2013). Community working parties provided local contextual input and played key roles in decisions made throughout project implementation. Each working party captured a broad diversity of key influencers of education and career pathway decisions in their community and had networks reaching across the community. Members were motivated by a shared desire to improve outcomes for their communities. Young people were not included in the working parties because of the focus of this project on key influencers to fill a research gap.

The working parties acted as *incubators*, creating a supportive environment for the development of new ideas and promoting connections with other efforts within the community (Spitzer-Shohat et al., 2020). They assisted in testing ideas, explained secondary data, shared observations of their lived experience, provided insight and input into findings and progress and, most importantly, identified local contextual factors that might enhance or hinder understanding of education and career pathways in their community and how ideas could be translated into programs and participation (Harwood et al., 2017, 2017; Kilpatrick et al., 2019). For example, in two communities, statistical data indicated that there was limited experience of post-school

education. Local knowledge gained from the working parties assisted the researchers in understanding that this was largely attributable to community culture (Kilpatrick et al., 2019; Southgate & Bennett, 2016). The working parties helped to navigate factors such as program delivery format preferences, the social/political divides in Rural Community 1, the invisibility of many jobs in local industries in Rural Community 2, and the siloed approach to career education in Rural Community 3.

Working parties acted as internal community *activators* through developing a charter of action for a whole of community approach. They developed expected project outcomes, assisted in development, implementation, and evaluation of interventions, and confirmed the relevance of findings to local context (Woodroffe et al., 2022). The breadth of experience and local contextual understanding in the working parties assisted identify enhancers and hindrances to effectiveness of interventions for key influencers. Overall, the combination of three factors resulted in the selection of interventions that fitted local community contexts and were owned by the community. They (1) identified their community's needs in terms of education and career pathways advice, (2) identified the key influencer groups best placed to address these needs, and (3) selected interventions (*Parents Matter*, *Warm Connections*, *GrIPP*, *FutureTalk*) to improve the knowledge and confidence of key influencers. Working parties were therefore a key mechanism for engaging key influencers, and for the development and implementation of locally relevant activities that worked for that community (Israel et al., 1998).

Working parties, alongside pathway brokers, acted as *boundary crossers* (Kilpatrick et al., 2008; 2002; Miller, 2008), connecting institutions and subgroups within community and connecting researchers with communities. The employment of a locally based pathway broker in each community was critical. Pathway brokers were key to the partnership as well as the whole of community approach, acting as community liaison, organising interventions, meetings and distributing evaluation tools. They joined up groups and key influencers and drew on their own lived experience and knowledge of community to increase project engagement and community ownership. Pathway brokers were integral in creating co-learning processes that facilitated reciprocal transfer of knowledge, skills, capacity, and experience between community and researchers (Israel et al., 2012).

Community trust of pathway brokers was important to an effective CBPR approach (Blumenthal et al., 2013). In Rural Community 1, local tensions affected trust – while not a widely shared view, it nonetheless negatively affected the engagement of some community members. In Rural Community 2, where the pathway broker was employed by local government, the combination of personal knowledge and community trust resulted in high community buy-in and engagement with the interventions. It was evident that having a well-integrated pathway broker is essential to the success of initiatives in a community, and that the broker must be trusted and seen as credible across the sub-groups of their community to successfully play a boundary crosser role (Kilpatrick et al., 2008; Miller, 2008).

While the pathway brokers were key activators and boundary crossers, they were not the only boundary crossers active in the project. Local government played the role of boundary crosser in Rural Community 2 by employing the broker in other work which was synergistic with the project and by developing a shared understanding with the researchers about desired project outcomes. The university was a boundary crosser in Rural Community 3, being credible both within the community and aligned to the researchers, and so able to speak the language of both, and manage expectations of both partners in relation to what the project could achieve.

In line with the CBPR approach, involvement of community members was an essential part of the project. Searching for the right people demands time and commitment; 'don't just target the usual suspects', consider the skills of those who have recently arrived as well as established residents and others with connection to community, for example industry bodies.

Flexibility, Accessibility, Sustainability and Authenticity

This project took place during a global pandemic, where all sites faced considerable challenges including limits on mobility; a move to students learning at home; closure of university campuses; and a significant reduction in industry and community activity. The longer-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in areas such as post-school education and training pathways as well as youth employment foregrounded the importance of the project to the local community setting. It also highlighted the significance of identifying key influencers and supporting communities to best equip themselves for education and career pathways. Finding ways in which this project could continue and adapt to changed external contexts and also be responsive to the local contexts while remaining authentic and relevant, was essential. Three principles, flexibility, accessibility and authenticity, emerged as central to success of the project. They also should be applied in any future programs.

Flexibility. The findings show that COVID-19 provided an opportunity for the sites to think differently and more innovatively about their interventions and to adapt them to what was happening in their community, in relation to both communication about interventions and their delivery format. While many project participants would have preferred face to face meetings and events, all three communities moved to some online activity. By considering community context, researcher-community partnerships built on identified strengths and assets (Blumenthal et al., 2013) which facilitated flexibility. This was exemplified particularly in Rural Community 3 where COVID-19 and bushfires tested the responsiveness of the approach. Flexibility allowed re-targeting and re-design of their intervention. *FutureTalk* was reported to be successful in meeting needs.

Accessibility, Authenticity and Sustainability. Two principles of program design, accessibility, and authenticity, emerged as being central to success of future programs in the sites, and related to sustainability. The online format made interventions more easily accessible for many participants, and the option for recording for later online viewing by those who could not make live sessions was appreciated. Online activity also led to more sustainable outcomes, with websites, social media pages and videos that can still be accessed and added to by the community over time. In enabling a whole of community approach, programs and resources needed to be accessible to targeted participants by being delivered at locations, times and in modes suitable to them. Considering local contextual factors to ensure accessibility to target groups is consistent with the literature which argues that there should be due consideration of proper design as well as the challenges of undertaking project work before a partnership can become effective (Israel et al., 1998).

Rural Community 3 targeted a small group of parents and was successful in engaging with them at an extremely difficult time, with positive feedback being received from parent participants, including regarding delivery mode and timing. Rural Community 2 reached large numbers through online events and resources. The timing of online *Parents Matter* training was negotiated to suit the lead parents in Rural Communities 1 and 2. Due to COVID-19, Rural Community 1 Careers Expo clashed with other community events –also pushed out toward the end of the year, and attendance was unavoidably lower than anticipated.

None of the sites were particularly successful in engaging their Aboriginal populations in interventions, suggesting a future focus on education and careers pathway information programs for key influencers with significant input from Aboriginal communities.

Authentic Place-based Learning. In addition to events and resources being easily accessible, trust and authentic connections are essential (Department of Education and Training, 2019). Rural Community 1's videos and Careers Expo, Rural Community 2's Parents Matter online Q&A and GrIPP panel sessions, and Rural Community 3's FutureTalk program evidenced the import of using community members and local practitioners to ensure a credible, trusted

messenger was delivering information, supporting the successful uptake of knowledge. The local government in Rural Community 2 and university campus in Rural Community 3 provided 'credibility' to the project and interventions by employing brokers, increasing trust and community willingness to engage. Engagement of local institutions and community members who were prepared to be on panels, appear in videos and plan and run community events also increased community ownership, increasing sustainability by leaving a legacy of people with capacity and willingness to take part in future education and career pathway interventions for key influencers.

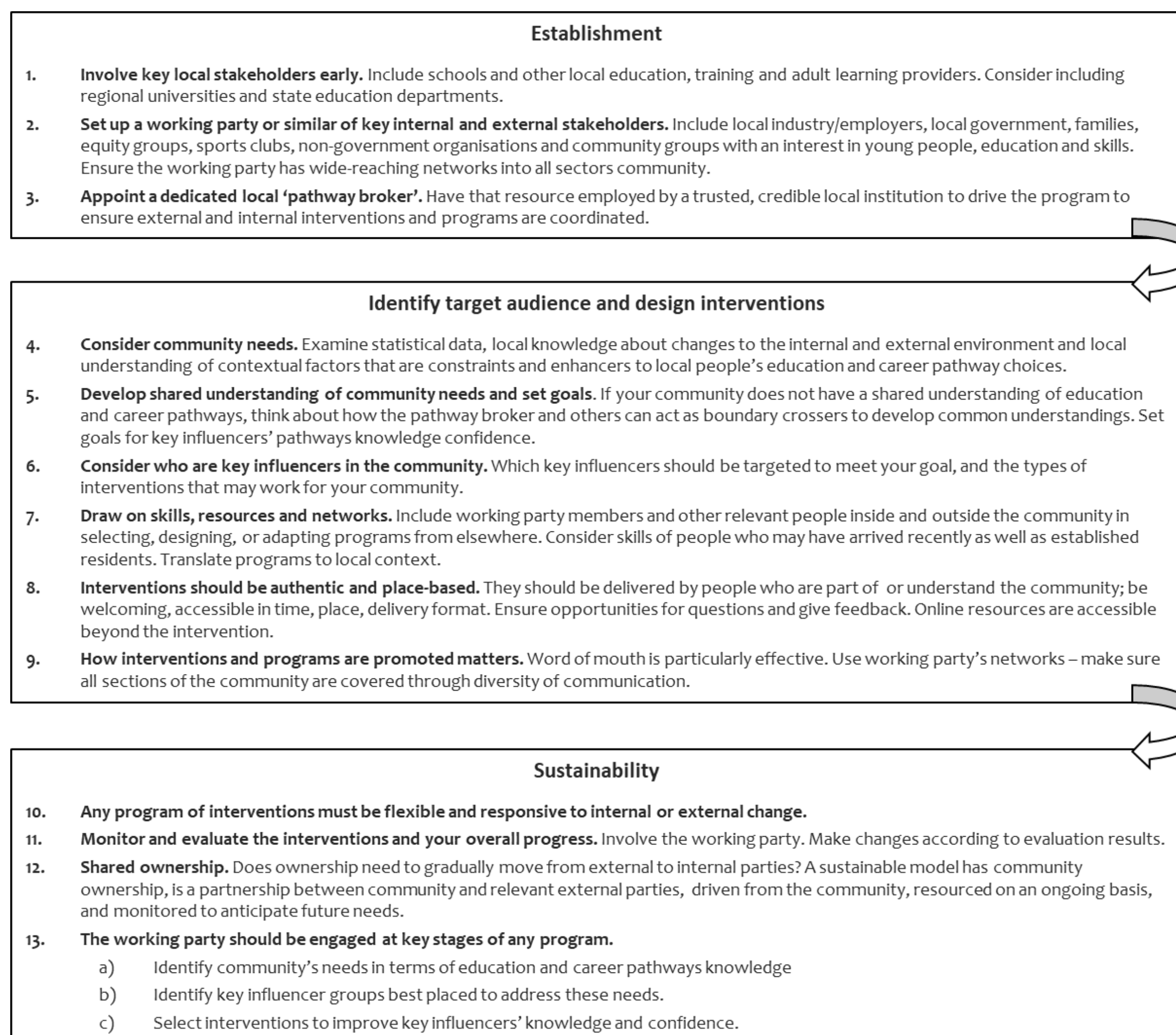
Working party members with relevant local knowledge assisted in ensuring authenticity of interventions. Industry representation on working parties assisted in engaging local industry in interventions. While the researchers brought resources to the communities, local people, particularly working party members, also had external links that were drawn upon.

These findings reinforce the importance of community connectedness to research (Blumenthal et al., 2013; Israel et al., 1998), engagement of industry (Machimana et al., 2020; Santarossa & Woodruff, 2020; Woodroffe et al., 2017), and a bottom-up approach to the selection of interventions. The findings also link to literature around place-based learning which takes advantage of geography to create authentic, meaningful, and engaging personalised learning for students (Gruenewald & Smith, 2008).

Local ownership of activities and outputs, and sustainability was fostered through the CBPR approach, and assisted in validation of the project findings (Dockery, 2020). CBPR also provided a model for the ways in which communities can work together using a local and regional lens that can be adapted to context and need and can be used to inform education and career pathways (Department of Education and Training, 2019).

Those working with communities should be mindful of community culture, community maturity to work together across community sectors, and capacity to engage with external parties, such as universities (Kilpatrick et al., 2008; Sporn, 1996). The model (Figure 1 below) was developed through the project and is intended to assist communities wanting to work in partnerships to equip key influencers to support education and career pathway choice.

Figure 1: ***Model to Equip Rural Community key Influencers to Support Education and Career Pathway Choice***



Establishment

1. **Involve key local stakeholders early.** Include schools and other local education, training and adult learning providers. Consider including regional universities and state education departments.
2. **Set up a working party or similar of key internal and external stakeholders.** Include local industry/employers, local government, families, equity groups, sports clubs, non-government organisations and community groups with an interest in young people, education and skills. Ensure the working party has wide-reaching networks into all sectors community.
3. **Appoint a dedicated local 'pathway broker'.** Have that resource employed by a trusted, credible local institution to drive the program to ensure external and internal interventions and programs are coordinated.

Identify target audience and design interventions

4. **Consider community needs.** Examine statistical data, local knowledge about changes to the internal and external environment and local understanding of contextual factors that are constraints and enhancers to local people's education and career pathway choices.
5. **Develop shared understanding of community needs and set goals**. If your community does not have a shared understanding of education and career pathways, think about how the pathway broker and others can act as boundary crossers to develop common understandings. Set goals for key influencers' pathways knowledge confidence.
6. **Consider who are key influencers in the community.** Which key influencers should be targeted to meet your goal, and the types of interventions that may work for your community.
7. **Draw on skills, resources and networks.** Include working party members and other relevant people inside and outside the community in selecting, designing, or adapting programs from elsewhere. Consider skills of people who may have arrived recently as well as established residents. Translate programs to local context.
8. **Interventions should be authentic and place-based.** They should be delivered by people who are part of or understand the community; be welcoming, accessible in time, place, delivery format. Ensure opportunities for questions and give feedback. Online resources are accessible beyond the intervention.
9. **How interventions and programs are promoted matters.** Word of mouth is particularly effective. Use working party's networks – make sure all sections of the community are covered through diversity of communication.

Sustainability

10. **Any program of interventions must be flexible and responsive to internal or external change.**
11. **Monitor and evaluate the interventions and your overall progress.** Involve the working party. Make changes according to evaluation results.
12. **Shared ownership.** Does ownership need to gradually move from external to internal parties? A sustainable model has community ownership, is a partnership between community and relevant external parties, driven from the community, resourced on an ongoing basis, and monitored to anticipate future needs.
13. **The working party should be engaged at key stages of any program.**
    a) Identify community's needs in terms of education and career pathways knowledge
    b) Identify key influencer groups best placed to address these needs.
    c) Select interventions to improve key influencers' knowledge and confidence.

Conclusion

This project generates new knowledge of how key influencers can work within communities to shape their own localised context and impact the pathways of rural students. Findings support the principles of community-based partnership approaches, as well as supporting the importance of career education which recognises and draws on local context. Specifically, many local stakeholders bring expert knowledge, partnerships should build on strengths and assets, and communities are more likely to engage with initiatives which consider local context because they are seen to be relevant (Blumenthal et al., 2013; Israel et al., 1998; Department of Education and Training, 2019).

We note that the findings are drawn from only three study sites in rural Australia. The model and other findings should be tested in other communities in Australia and internationally, we suggest through a community based participatory research approach. Further research is needed regarding education and careers pathway information programs for key influencers of Aboriginal populations, with significant input from Aboriginal communities.

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Appendix A

Case Study Community Demographic Indicators and Other Characteristics

	Community 1	Community 2	Community 3
Approximate population	6,000	17,500	38,000
Index of Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage	890-900	960-970	960-970
Youth unemployment	15% (state 15.7%)	15% (state 15.7%)	13% (state 13.6%)
Age	40% over 65 years	20% over 65 years	33% over 65 years
Cultural identity	4% Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander; 90% Aust born	9% Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander; 75% Aust born	7.5% Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander; 75% Aust born
Educational attainment	10.5% Bachelor Degree + 28.5% Year 12 education	15.5% Bachelor Degree + 38.5% Year 12 education	9% Bachelor Degree + 46.5% Year 12 education
Major industries	Agriculture, forestry & fishing; retail, health & social assistance; mining; tourism	Agriculture, forestry & fishing; health care and social assistance; construction; retail	Aged care; disability and health services; tourism
Description	Rural, mixed rural-residential, and holiday homes. Rapid growth in response to tourism. Two major service centres. 200-250km from state capital.	Semi rural area with small towns ranging from 40-95km from state capital. Limited post schooling options; university and TAFE in state capital. Significant population who have moved from interstate	Regional Service centre with 280km from state capital. Severely affected by bushfires and COVID. Many displaced through home and business loss, disrupted schooling. Community in significant stress
Education Facilities	1 trade training centre, 2 combined primary-high schools, very limited vocational or other post Year 10 options	1 trade training centre, 1 high school, 2 combined primary-high schools, 5 primary schools	Small university campus, university rural clinical school, 7 high schools, 12 primary schools

Source: .economyid (nd)

Appendix B

Implemented Interventions for Key Influencers

Interventions	Description
Parents Matter	Aim: Train parents and others to organise events/activities to familiarise other key influencers with career pathways and education pathways. • Volunteer parents/carers/community members ('lead parents') recruited to lead and facilitate community-based learning for key influencers. • Lead parents undertake accredited place-based training (VET units). • Lead parents meet 2-3 times (some online due to COVID) to increase understanding of post-year 10 education and career options and plan, and subsequently deliver, interventions. (Douglas et al., 2020)
	Community variations of Parents Matter:
Rural Community 1	Produced **videos** from interviews of 12 people from local industries, businesses and education providers focusing on: advice for school leavers, post-Year 10 options, career pathways, local careers and choices. Videos published on a YouTube channel and launched at a Careers Expo. Videos uploaded by local government, neighbourhood houses, online access centre, and schools. **Careers Expo** for key influencers held in Trade Training Centre, with employer/industry, school, and post-school education provider stalls and the videos, attended by parents and other community key influencers.
Rural Community 2	**Facebook page** hosted by local government with information, resources and videos about education and career pathways. **Online question and answer (Q&A) session** with education and industry panelists, live-streamed on Facebook. Online format in response to COVID.
FutureTalk Rural Community 3	Aim: to assist parents/supporters to engage with information relevant to their Year 12 child in the context of COVID-19 restrictions, and encourage career conversations about their child's post-school options. • Five informal, online interactive workshops and weekly emails. Parents/supporters of students involved in local university campus's university preparation program for Year 12 students invited to participate. **Workshops:** covered world of work; education in the 21st Century; post high-school options and pathways; student-led education and career stories; and local education and career opportunities. Evening workshops of 1-1.5 hours accommodated working parents. University staff delivered workshops, alongside guest presenters, including local registered training organisations, employers, current and previous students, a parent of a previous Year 12 student and school career advisers. **Emails**: highlighted discussions children were having in University Preparation Program that week, offered conversation starters around careers and provided links to resources.

Interventions	Description
Warm Connections Rural Community 1	Aim: to provide a general introduction to VET and higher education pathways for the relatively large number of rural adults not currently in education or training, through local community organisations and sites. **Workshop** for library, neighbourhood house and other community organisations staff and volunteers who were trained to become a front line, contact point for locals interested in vocational education and training, or higher education. **Promotional stands and video displays** set up in the library, neighbourhood house and other community organisations. Stands display course information guides and brochures. (Douglas et al., 2020)
GrIPP Rural Community 2	One-day program to raise teacher, parent and other key influencer awareness of skills shortages and career opportunities within the community and around the State. **Site tour**: industries showcase the workforce and future career opportunities to parents/families, teachers, and other community members (because of COVID, replaced by virtual tour). **Work readiness learning**: Following tour, participants attend workshop that builds confidence and understanding of workplace expectations. Industry mentors assist connection with workplaces and industries (because of COVID, was interactive live streamed workshop including Industry Q&A Panel session, also recorded, and uploaded). (Beacon Foundation, n.d.)

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Research and Education in the Kimberley: A Local Perspective

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Abstract

The picture of researchers arriving in 'remote' communities to conduct research on a topic of interest to them (complete with consent forms and ethical clearance), is conjured up frequently by First Nations people, as a sign of White power and colonial control. 'Research' for many, has become a dirty word. But when First Nations researchers who live in those communities, take responsibility for research, a different dynamic comes into play. Research then becomes a legitimate way for community members to tell their stories, and for the voices of community members to be heard and relayed with integrity. This Rural Connections article tells two interwoven stories of Catherine Ridley, in her own words. The first story is about her experiences growing up and learning at school in the Kimberley region of Western Australia. The second story is about her experiences as a researcher, investigating issues of school engagement, attendance, and retention.

Keywords: *First Nations research, engagement, retention, attendance, Kimberley schools*

Introduction

One of the many challenges that face schools in remote communities across Australia, is how to engage and retain young people in schooling. In this Rural Connections article, we hear from Catherine Ridley, who has worked with a team of researchers from Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education, Curtin University and University of Notre Dame Australia, to explore these issues. This research team has talked with students, staff, and community members in many schools across Western Australia and the Northern Territory. Local researchers play a critical role in hearing and relaying the voices of people living in communities. Catherine's interwoven stories highlight some of the challenges and opportunities that arise from working as a local researcher in contexts like those in Kimberley communities. What follows is a conversation between Catherine and John Guenther (Editor).

Catherine's Learning Journey

John: Catherine can you tell me first a bit about yourself and your learning journey?

Catherine: I was born in Kalgoorlie and raised in the Kimberley. There's a community there called Wankatjungka on the edge of the Great Sandy Desert. That's where I live now. On my mother's side, she is a Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara woman and my dad's side he is a Martu Wangkajunga man. That's my background. My skin is Karimarra / Nangala and my clan group is Murkurtu. I'm a mother, five kids grown up, I have been currently working for Notre Dame on this research project on educational engagement and retention. I studied in early 2010, graduated in 2014 with a Bachelor of Applied Science degree in Community Management and Development from Curtin University. I worked in the public sector for various government departments for a long time:

housing, child protection, disability services commission, and did a stint with the Aboriginal Legal Service of Western Australia for a while, so I did some training in the legal unit with Aboriginal Legal Service Western Australia in Perth. I was more interested in community development and how things worked for people in community, managing projects and all that sort of stuff.

John: Where did you go to school?

Catherine: Most of my early childhood schooling was done at Wankatjungka on the outskirts of Christmas Creek Station. The school was right there beside the old camp where we use to live. I had a lot of my early childhood there and Gogo School then Fitzroy Valley High School at the old school, not the new one. It was kind of very transient. So, Kalgoorlie was also a place where I attended schooling, when we were there, we would go to school, but of course there were a lot of racial issues around that, but I loved school.

John: What made you like it?

Catherine: It was a happy space, it was a place, an environment where I wanted to do things. It made me happy I loved school, whether it was because I wanted to be away from the chaos at home (I was too young to understand). I know when I walked into that school yard, it was a happy place. Of course, there was the bullying and stuff, but that was nothing compared to that good feeling I had about being in that space. Schooling for me was in Fitzroy crossing, a little place out at Gogo Station, about 15km out of Fitzroy crossing when I lived with my mother's sister and her partner at Bayulu community for a while. So, I sort of went between my dad's sisters at Christmas Creek Station and my mum's sister based in Bayulu community, I bounced off those families. I never really had a stable education.

John: Obviously it worked for you because you then went on to do your degree.

Catherine: Yeah, I didn't finish school, I finished at Year 9. I pulled out very early.

John: What made you want to go to uni then?

Catherine: Because I wanted to further my studies, I always had that in the back of my mind that it would help me. I think it was my family issues, the push behind my desire to go to uni and finish it. Initially I thought of it, but I thought I wasn't good enough. So, I never even tried. I guess when you have a lot of problems, it's like if we have issues—are we going to dwell on it and sink in it and stay down or whether we are going to get up and do something about it? So, what would make my family better? I thought that education is the key to open many doors of opportunity for me. And it did! It really did, and someone once said to me just in casual conversation, they said 'you know that knowledge is very powerful' I really couldn't understand that it didn't make sense. How? When I did go to study, I could feel that power. It was there. And it is very powerful because you can go back to your community and help your people. You know right from wrong, and you can guide your family in the right direction. There's a lot of backlashes too when you speak the truth, and some people don't like the truth. It can cause a lot of problem in your community, it can cause division, you know, all that sort of stuff. I think it stems from lack of knowledge and understanding. But I stand firmly on the fact that you have always got to do the right thing. And understanding that mistreatment and doing things that aren't right creates disadvantage more for our people. And that we can't work like that.

John: Obviously you have navigated that space reasonably well over that time.

Catherine: Yes, it was hard, but you still manage to navigate all that, and graduation for me was the greatest thing that ever happened I couldn't believe I was on that podium getting my degree--one of the best moments of my life. It changed me. Although I worry sometimes that as an Aboriginal person with skills and knowledge, I am very scared of being put up on a pedestal. I always try hard to keep my feet firmly on the ground. No position of authority will ever make me forget who I really am and where I come from.

Research in Kimberley Communities

John: So, you have been working as a researcher on a project that is designed to understand attendance, engagement, and retention dynamics in rural and remote Aboriginal schools. How has that experience been? What has that been like?

Catherine: For me it has been a very great journey. It has been not only good that Notre Dame thought I might have some good skills to give to the team, I not only gave, I actually gained a lot of knowledge from being on that team. I learned a lot about research in-depth, and the thing I have learned is that there are processes in place with government and schools and education and all that. I don't come from an education background, but it was good to have an insight into education which I didn't have. Everyone else on the team I think comes from an education background, whereas I don't but it was good. Even though there is that community development side of things, people in the community and how that school is attached to that community and how important that it is to see—that if you want positive outcomes in terms of education and children—then that school and community must be hand in hand. The community needs to own the school. That's just my views on how I see it coming from the outside.

John: What are some of the communities that you have visited or are going to visit?

Catherine: I have been all along the East Kimberley, right up to Frog Hollow, all around Yiyili--I had a lot to do with Yiyili community because that's one of the case studies on this project. I even went as far as Arnhem Land with the team that looks after that area, it is good to see how other communities are working, you share your knowledge and take it back to share with other schools and say, 'this is how this mob do it and it is working for them'. Sharing of information is good too. And working together makes it even more successful. I have been covering Yakanarra school, and all other independent schools, I am booked to go to Yiramalay Studio school in 2 weeks' time. I have covered a lot of area!

Engagement, Attendance and Retention in Remote Kimberley Schools

John: Thinking about talking to community members and school staff, what are your impressions about what they think about that topic of attendance, engagement, and retention?

Catherine: Funny thing is a lot of them, some of them don't even know that attendance and engagement are two different things. I picked that up in conversations with community members and I have always had to affirm them that attendance is like ticking the box, yes that kid is at school, 'yes I am here!' He is there but engagement is different, they are there but are they focused, are they happy to be at school? You must make them understand that there is a difference.

John: Did they get that?

Catherine: Yes, I said 'that kid could be at school, but could have been forced to come'. 'Come on you got to go to school', parents /caregiver shout at kid, and kid goes to school not wanting to be there, so because kid doesn't want to be there, kid is not engaged. That's engagement. You can be attending, but if you are there and you're not engaged, it's useless, we would all prefer that when they send their kids to school, they are there, they are focused and happy they are learning. Whereas if they are just attending and not engaged, there is no use being there. I discuss in depth of how attendance and engagement work.

John: I think that's an interesting role for the researcher to unpack the question so they can understand it, so they know what you mean and give them fresh insight in a way to reflect and think on their own. What did some of the people say about what made it difficult for remote kids to go to school?

Catherine: One of the things that stands out from my research work is that the people complain about the social media. How much it has interfered with their relationships. Not only the kids going to school but their relationships you know 'come on you gotta go to school' and that kid he knows he can’t be on YouTube, he can't be on TikTok they can’t be on Instagram, they can’t be on Facebook, you know. They get all that at home.

John: What could turn that around, so it was no longer an issue?

Catherine: Maybe the school and community meet, it really needs to be discussed on where that issue is with that community. And that community members and schools can plan where these kids can come and be happy and how that social media and that can work together. It’s a hard one. Maybe if they gave them time during recess or something, allow it in that time, but then you got the issue of what they are googling up? That’s another thing. There’s a bit of a problem no matter what way you try and look at it. You don’t know what these kids are looking at on their sites.

John: What have you heard or seen that does engage kids at school?

Catherine: I have noticed that the relationship that they have has to be a good relationship, I have noticed in some of their schools, the kids and teaching staff get on very well and the kid is able to have breakfast, so they got meals at the school for them, so nearly all their needs and wants are being met at the school. The school will cater for that. They might say 'I got no clean clothes'. Well, we got clean clothes at the school, like uniform and shorts and we can help you wash the clothes you got on. That sort of stuff. 'I never sleep, I am tired'. Well, it might have been because they’ve been drinking or whatever, 'well come to the school, we have a sleep room there'. Frog Hollow was one where this one little room was designated especially for those ones that are tired, and they let ‘em have a sleep and they tell 'em when they are ready they can come in, even if they sleep the whole day there which does happen, at least they know that kid has had a good sleep so they can be refreshed in the morning, and that kid turns up in the morning, because they have caught up on their sleep. And it’s a happy place. The teachers and the Aboriginal staff play a very critical role there. I don’t think any of these remote schools can survive without those Indigenous staff.

John: What difference do they make?

Catherine: They have got all the community knowledge, they are very skilled, minus what the teachers that do come from other places that do have a degree in teaching. So but then, they [the teachers] come from university and go out to these Aboriginal communities not having an idea of anything about the community, so I find that they struggle. It is really hard, they gotta depend on the Indigenous staff because the Indigenous staff are full of knowledge, it is their community and they have a lot of skills within the education sector too, they might not have a degree, but they have worked there long enough to be able to gain a lot of skills. It’s just not written on paper like the other teachers. These Indigenous staff can just be--with training they could be the principal running the school--and that would have been the ideal case.

John: Do you think that's possible?

Catherine: Yeah. I think there is a way. Where there is a will there is a way. I think something needs to be implemented now where they go away, and they study at school. They have to go away for a certain block release, that’s fine, support them in that because at the end of the day they are going to be there forever, and their kids they will—if someone is playing up, their voice is more stronger than non-indigenous teachers. It’s like, ‘who are you? I am not listening to you’. And I picked that up. As soon as an Indigenous worker walks in 'Hey! Sit down!' They sit down. And when you see those signs, it’s telling you something. What are we doing? Why are we stuffing around with all these teachers coming in on a good salary, more than the Indigenous staff but when you weigh up the amount of work those Aboriginal staff do, they are over-

worked. And that really stood out for me, the biggest thing, they don't get acknowledged for all the work they do. A non-Indigenous teacher can go away and put it on their resume that they have worked at this Aboriginal remote community, they did this and that, but they don't acknowledge who gave them all that cultural knowledge who gave them all that other knowledge, that is never mentioned.

A Hopeful Future for Kimberley Education

John: We have a long way to go with remote education, for kids in those communities, but it sounds like you have some hope, and you see a lot of positives.

Catherine: Oh yeah. I support 100% for those Indigenous teachers, local Aboriginal teachers working at the school. They need to be trained up to become qualified teachers, become qualified principals because our kids in those schools, that's who they listen to, that's who they look up to. I have noticed that the kids don't even go into that mischievous behaviour. They know who they can play with, it's the non-Indigenous teachers who is not from there who has no connection there. And we say that education starts from the home. These people are from the home. So why aren't the government looking at investing in our Aboriginal staff? If they want to fix education, it's all there. The answer is there. indigenous People are employed already but they need to give them more support, leading them, putting them into that role, not just being the second-hand thing, because you know, you can't go anywhere without education, kids can't learn when they are constantly being told to straighten up, sit down, whatever. When there is an Aboriginal staff there, they listen straight up.

John: Thank you Catherine for sharing with me, and for taking the time to reflect on your own learning journey but also those experiences of doing research. It's been great talking with you.

Catherine: That's good thank you.

Australian and International Journal of

Rural Education

Book Review: *Cervone, Jason A. (2023). Towards Rural Education for the Common Good (Routledge Studies in Education, Neoliberalism, and Marxism). Taylor and Francis*

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Rural Futurability in an era of Neoliberal Capitalism

Jason Cervone opens his book with a polemic (some might say rant) against the state of politics, religious fundamentalism and capitalism in the United States. He argues that the same issues affecting rural education, affect the whole of the United States. He offers a 'rural lens' through which to look at the issues. His bleak assessment is that:

> *Rural spaces are currently stuck between neoliberal dominance and the rise of neo-fascists and white supremacists. They serve as sites of extraction and sites of refuge for the wealthy. Without new, emancipatory ways of thinking and new visions for education, there is no future for rural spaces. (pp. 15-16).*

He introduces the reader to terms such as 'autonomism', 'futurability', 'space as an act of resistance' and in the context of rural education, sees an opportunity for rural schools to not only reimagine a future, but to resist and find transformative power to overcome the influence of neoliberalism on education. The philosophical and theoretical underpinnings of the book, based on an understanding of these terms, requires that the reader be prepared to listen and learn as the author makes his case.

Chapter One presents an argument for 'rural futurability' based on education for power, potency and possibility, drawing from Berardi (2017). 'Futurability'—as I understand it—speaks to possibilities. 'Potency' is the force which turns possibilities into actuality. Cervone sees rural education as a potential vehicle for change: "*Futurability, radical rurality, and production of space are concepts that can all come together in education*" (p. 45). He argues that the 'power' of neoliberalism has left rural spaces without an imagined future beyond their role in capitalistic extraction and production. What is needed is "*collective struggle and action*" (p. 51). To achieve this, schools must be public institutions, with participatory governance and include anti-capitalist elements in the curriculum. Cervone sees neoliberal capitalism as the enemy which needs to be "*eroded*" (p. 59) so that alternative possibilities can be realised. Cervone draws quite heavily on the work of Corbett (e.g. 2016, 2020, 2021) to draw out meanings of rurality, space and place—but he does not share Corbett's more optimistic outlook for "*finding new ways of working at the interface*" (Corbett, 2020, p. 295).

My first reaction to the idea of eroding capital was 'well good luck with that!'. While the education system is different in Australia (where I live and work), I can see the principles of futurability at play in different ways. Many remote communities are opting out of public education for the very reasons Cervone wants it to stay—parents and community leaders see public education being captured by neoliberal priorities (Guenther & Osborne, 2018). But they do

engage in collective struggle to make locally imagined possibilities become reality (Guenther & Falk, 2022; Guenther et al., 2022).

Chapter Two explores in more detail, the concept of spatial futurability. The points that grabbed me here were about the difference between 'abstract' and 'differential' spaces. Abstract space, is conceived by Lefebvre (1991) as "*the dominant form of space, that of the center of wealth and power, endeavors to mold the spaces it dominates*" (p. 49). In neoliberal terms, Cervone argues that abstract spaces in rural education are homogenized, to ensure that schools produce economically productive graduates. Differential spaces, according to Cervone, "*exist as possibilities*" that "*push back against capitalism*" to be "*liveable*" (p. 77). Differential spaces depend on and emerge from abstract spaces. As I thought about this, my mind went to structures such as national curriculum and national standards, which for many regional and remote schools have been a springboard for curriculum adaptations and pursuit of culturally responsive/nurturing teaching practices (see for example Lowe et al., 2023; Lowe & Weuffen, 20223; Weuffen et al., 2023).

The third chapter focuses on power—though it would be more accurate to say that the focus is on neoliberal forces that shape rural education. Cervone takes broad aim at neoliberal capitalism as a force that problematises 'rural' as inefficient, and in need of fixing—an argument he has previously described as 'rural erasure' (Cervone, 2019). In part, this arises from the abstraction of 'rural' into geographic classifications, and a tendency for the development of strategies that tend towards 'consolidation' (for example through closure of small schools), and which encourage 'outmigration' of individuals so they can pursue a more productive life. He takes aim at the "*abundance of research in rural education regarding student out-migration, [where] there is often a focus on the individual aspirations of students, their parents, and educators rather than the societal and economic factors that shape those aspirations*" (p. 124). Similar dynamics are at play in Australia, where boarding schools are seen as the 'solution' to the rural problem of perceived poor quality in remote schools, even though that 'problem' has been created by systems that underfund remote schools, so that parents are forced to make a "*choice-less choice*" (Guenther & Osborne, 2020).

Cervone admits that many rural communities have bought into the neoliberal discourse. Have they simply been persuaded by the politics of neoliberalism or is this a real choice, based on informed choice? This, is where 'potency' and 'impotence' comes into the picture—the topic for Chapter Four. Cervone argues that questions like the one I posed are not about choice, but rather about a perception of impotence, which results in a reactionary response from "*right wing conservatives*" who "*fill school boards*" in order to "*dismantle the public sphere*" (p. 154). Cervone gives a couple of examples where potency—"*the ability to create and change societal factors*" (p. 141)—is evident. Far from offering hope for rural spaces and schools, these examples serve to demonstrate the power of neoliberal capitalism, leaving the reader with a pessimistic hopelessness at the end of the chapter.

Indeed, at the outset of Chapter Six, which discusses 'possibility', Cervone confirms his pessimism: "*The concept of possibility and taking an optimistic view of the world is currently an extremely difficult proposition*" (p. 177). He does, however, attempt to map out a future based on place and differential spaces. Several sections using the word 'commoning' follow that presumably offer an alternative to the individualisation of neoliberal capitalism. I found it hard to follow the threads of the argument, though Cervone's aspirations for a 'collective focus' is rephrased in the following statement: "*The general intellect as described here can be developed and fostered through a common school movement that is aimed at creating a stronger collective and focus on human need rather than economic production*" (p. 206). The problem with this rather abstract manifesto is that it is difficult to imagine. While calling for a disentanglement from capitalism to reveal new possibilities, he concedes that "*what those possibilities are remains unclear*" (p. 209). Instead he argues for what rural spaces will not be: "*sites of decline*",

"*peripheral or remote*", "*sites of extraction*", an "*obstacle to those who live there*" (p. 209). This leaves me feeling underwhelmed and somewhat mystified about what the goal for rural education is (beyond dismantling capital).

The conclusion to the book is equally pessimistic in its outlook, restating many of the maxims that are presented throughout the book. According to Cervone, the outlook for rural education in the United States is bleak, and requires revolutionary dismantling of one system, with no clear path forward, because according to Cervone, neoliberal capitalism will always hold sway and trump the attempts of rural schools to create differential spaces, which look beyond the value of education as a means of extraction and production.

While I acknowledge that the context of Cervone's work—rural United States—is different to those I work in, I feel that he would do well to have a look at rural and remote schools in other contexts where the imagination for change has resulted in possibilities being realised. That said, this is an interesting book, which despite its somewhat turgid use of terminology, offers insights that are valuable for educators in colonised, capitalist neoliberal countries.

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