Research context and method

The research investigated the major factors that contribute to the relatively poor participation rate of secondary students from regional Victoria in higher education, including identification of suggested approaches to raise the aspiration to participate in higher education. School site selection was motivated by a desire to explore, at the school community level, a range of interesting differences in transition rates for particular schools published in school destination data.

The final site selection was restricted to school communities that had 2003 transition rates to university, TAFE, apprenticeships/traineeships, employment (without associated education or training) or unemployment that departed significantly from the Victorian data average for that year. Most (but not all) schools selected had lower than average rates of transition from Year 12 to higher education. Some had higher transition to TAFE, to apprenticeships or traineeships, to work or to unemployment. The sample represented most of the non-metropolitan regions and included schools that were at varying distances from Melbourne and regional cities. A sub-set of three peri-urban schools (close to the edge of Melbourne) was also included.

Our research deliberately focused on investigation of the post-school education and training knowledge, plans and aspirations of three selected groups in each of the ten selected schools in 2006. The groups surveyed and interviewed included Year 10 students, Year 12 parents and school leavers from 2003 who went directly to employment without further education or training or else into unemployment. The Year 10 student and Year 12 parent groups were recruited from two different sub-groups depending on whether students anticipated proceeding to higher education (university) or not. In order to complement the school community perspective, teachers were also surveyed and interviewed.

Research questions
There were two main research questions. They were

• ‘What major factors contribute to the relatively poor participation rate of students from regional Victoria in higher education?’
• ‘What approaches could be used to raise the aspiration to participate in higher education?’

For the ten selected school communities in diverse locations whose patterns of post-school outcomes differ from the norm, the subsidiary research questions were:

• What factors including current experience of learning affect post-school choice for Year 10 students?
• In what ways are post-school aspirations (including for higher education) similar or different for Year 10 students across schools?
• To what extent do Year 10 students, parents of year 12 students and teachers have access to information about the range of post-school options including work?
• What are students’ sense of their futures and the perceived capacity of learning and further education to influence their futures?
• What influences student, parent and teacher optimism (or pessimism) about post-school education and training, including higher education?
• What local factors are at play in particular schools shaping student choices including access to higher education?
• What pathways do students follow who leave school without proceeding to study or further training? What are their perceptions and experiences two years post-school?
• What could be done in particular schools - and generally - to provide more information and support for students choosing to study, and also to delay study, after leaving school?

Key findings
Our key findings are about the attitudes that shape post-school education and training decisions and choices for peri-urban\(^1\), regional and rural students and their families. We conclude that the longer-term economic and employment benefits of further education, particularly higher education, are perceived by many of our research participants as reducing and becoming less significant and more delayed compared to the perceived short-term advantages of direct entry to work.

Our study was undertaken in 2006 in localities where a full range of vocational education and training options was generally not available locally. While entry to higher education courses at a regional or peri-urban university typically requires a relatively low Year 12 ENTER score, the range of courses available is typically limited. Moreover, the location of higher education institutions is often beyond reasonable commuting distance for students in our study. The general need for school-leavers to either commute long distances or relocate in order to undertake tertiary study made all post-school decisions that involved further study much more difficult since it necessitated considerable family cost.

Our study was also conducted in the context of a strong job market where options for entry to local full or part time work, including options associated with traineeships and apprenticeships were relatively available. The only realistic financial option for school-leavers who could not afford to relocate or commute was to remain at home, defer tertiary study and work, with or without a traineeship or apprenticeship.

Year 10 student and family decisions to about higher education, TAFE, traineeships, apprenticeships or work are being made relatively early on in students’ secondary schooling, in the general absence of full information about options, choices and range of courses in TAFE or higher education. In particular the students and their parents, on the evidence of our sample, often have limited if any knowledge about income support that is available post-school. These decisions are largely informed by student’s own experiences of success or otherwise with formal, school-based learning and assessment and also by their experiences, either positive or negative, of part-time work.

Year 10 students who plan to proceed to higher education have typically experienced considerable success at school and are typically supported and informed in their choice by their families. For Year 10 students without university aspirations, school has tended to become, at best, an enjoyable social experience but not a positive learning experience. For some, by Year 10, the learning school provides has become irrelevant.

For a significant minority of students, school has become a boring and debilitating chore. For most students in this group who have experienced the taste of part-time work, the status and independent income associated with that work means has convinced them that any job, at least in the short term, is a welcome relief from more failure at school.

Early decisions about student futures are usually based on a combination of partial or out of date information about post-school choices and opportunities. Year 10

\(^1\) Peri-urban refers to areas which are on or just beyond the urban fringes of larger metropolitan cities.
students’ projected tertiary choices seem to be strongly influenced by the experiences of a small number of family members. In this respect, students with parents or other family members who have had previous, and particularly recent, higher education experience are greatly advantaged.

The decision of Year 10 students and their families not to proceed to higher education is usually informed by a combination of positive experiences associated with the student’s part-time work and negative experiences of formal, school-based learning. The decision also takes account of the perceived significant and increasing cost to the family of post-school education, particularly in the young person wishes to undertake higher education. The decision not to proceed is typically made without full knowledge of the financial and other incentives available to assist them to participate in higher education.

Year 10 students and their parents who have limited or no family experience of higher education usually regard the potential benefits of higher education as so being deferred and marginal as to be simply not worth the effort.

There is a widespread perception from Year 10 students, their parents and teachers that the experiences associated with paid work, full time or part-time, before or after leaving school, are extremely useful in giving young people their vocational direction.

There is evidence of a growing perception by parents and teachers that a positive decision of a young person to delay post-school study and go to work immediately after school, even before the completion of Year 12 for some students, is preferable to arbitrarily requiring all students to stay on at school. The condition teachers would attach so such a perception is that school-leavers should participate in some form of training while working in order to improve their eventual job prospects.

A high proportion of Year 10 students and their families without any aspiration to participate in higher education perceive the intention to leave school and work locally without undertaking any further education or training as an economically rational choice, at least in the short term. Their parents generally agree. These students are more likely than other students to form part of what Birrell and Rapson (2006, p.1) describe as the ‘large proportion of young men and women in Australia (aged in their late teens and early 20s) [who] are not engaged in any form of post-school training’.

Most Year 10 students and their families, including those who see TAFE (Technical and Further Education) as a likely post-school option, lack knowledge about the income support available to undertake a higher education or TAFE course. A surprisingly high proportion of Year 10 students, regardless of their post-school plans, know very little about the nearest local TAFE or university campus.

Rural, regional and peri-urban Year 10 students who aspire to higher education typically have had positive experience of and considerable success at school. They usually are influenced by a combination of personal, family and parental experiences of higher education that makes their decision to proceed seem logical and positive. They make their decision to attend university with the support of teachers and parents but with an expectation of deferred benefits and prolonged family and personal financial hardship.
The anticipated financial hardships associated with undertaking any form of post-school study is exacerbated for rural students who have no option but to relocate if they are to complete their studies. For many regional and peri-urban students the first choice of tertiary institution is not the closest regional or outer metropolitan university campus. The knowledge of Year 10 students and Year 12 parents about income support while studying away from home is typically very limited unless they already have other students attending university.

The significant cost, even if income support is available, of being supported by parents while commuting or living away from home acts as a particular deterrent to participation in higher education in peri-urban, regional and rural Victoria. Their perceived need to find and juggle part-time work to finance their study at university strongly affects the student and family decision about where to study and where to live while studying.

There is strong evidence from our study that the recently increased cost of HECS (Higher Education Contribution Scheme), the deferred debt associated with higher education, is a major factor eroding that is perceived to negate the deferred financial benefit of higher education.

Because Year 10 students aspiring to higher education tend to choose a course and to judge its perceived quality and status according to its minimum ENTER scores, they typically aspire to and know most about the ‘big pond’ of the higher status Melbourne universities rather than the closer, usually regional university campuses. Their knowledge of potential ‘fall-back’ options, such as the closest university or the local TAFE, is typically very limited.

Our final finding is that most student and parent attitudes toward higher education in peri-urban areas are not dissimilar from attitudes in non-metropolitan regional areas. Students in the peri-urban schools we studied, and their parents, were similarly relatively disadvantaged socioeconomically and in terms of their proximity to comprehensive higher education. However in some cases, commuting to a metropolitan campus is more feasible for young people in peri-urban areas.

**Recommendations**

Our recommendations apply specifically to rural, regional and peri-urban schools without ready access to full and comprehensive local tertiary choices. We have focussed on recommendations in two broad categories. One set of recommendations are designed to improve the quality of post-school decisions currently being made by students and parents on the basis of limited or no information. The other set of recommendations aims to increase the proportion of students engaged in productive and enjoyable learning pre and post-school, including learning associated with work, particularly in local and regional TAFE institutes and universities and enterprises.

**It is recommended that the Office of Learning and Teaching:**
1. find mechanisms and school programs that better inform middle year students, parents and teachers about the full range of options and opportunities for participating in further education and training.

2. liaise with relevant government authorities to recognise and address the combined adverse implications of current educational under-representation of rural, regional and peri-urban young people in tertiary education, particularly its effect on rural and regional economies and on current national skills shortages.

3. find ways to encourage students to make use of existing local education and training opportunities including incentives such as scholarships for students with high ENTER scores.

4. consider how additional financial support might be provided to assist students who need to leave home to attend tertiary institutions, to meet their relocation and accommodation costs.

5. fund community education campaigns that include Centrelink, local schools and local government that target middle years students and parents to alert them of their likely eligibility for income support, specifically Youth allowance, while studying and/or living away from home post-school. In particular, young people and their parents need to be well informed in advance about the benefits of achieving ‘independent financial status’ within the Youth Allowance regulations. This includes improving knowledge of the benefits of tertiary aspirants taking a ‘gap year’ in order to earn sufficient money to qualify for ‘independent financial status’ under Youth Allowance.

6. find better ways to validate, accredit and promote work pathways (part-time or full time) as an alternative entry mechanism and preparation to tertiary study in its own right for students who, for whatever reason, are unable to go directly to post-school tertiary study.

7. encourage education and training organisations and sectors to continue to develop more flexible pathways, including the use of multiple entry and exit points, special entry programs, greater recognition of the value associated with learning through all forms of work including work while studying. It would also promote cross-institutional credit to facilitate greater movement between school, work, VET providers and higher education.

8. use the national measure of Accessibility / Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA+)\(^2\) to recognise and compensate students who are currently disadvantaged in high ARIA school and home locations. These students face higher costs of living away from home and have less access to a full range of educational services in their home location. This measure might be applied to assist in tertiary selection and/or to rural tertiary scholarships and income support for living away from home.

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\(^2\) ARIA: Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA 1999)
9. identify, promote and support ways of implementing good educational practice to stimulate curriculum engagement in rural and regional schools. This has to include primary and secondary curriculum but the most urgent and immediate priority is the middle years. The intention would be to make schools more engaging places with more opportunities for contextual and authentic learning.

It is recommended that regional and peri-urban tertiary education institutions:

10. broaden the focus of their relationship with schools from one of student recruitment to one of maximising educational synergy and establish collaborative, long-term relationships and pathways between schools and industries.

11. attempt to be a ‘presence’ in schools for students before they reach Year 10. It is particularly important that the post-school study options in the closest higher education and TAFE institute to each school are well known to all students, parents and teachers regardless of the student’s first tertiary choice.

12. allow bonus marks in recalculating the middle band ENTER for applicants from the local area and also for students whose secondary schooling was completed in areas of higher ARIA+ (Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia).

It is recommended that in general, schools:

13. promote the view that it is advantageous for most students to remain at school until Year 12, but also validate and support the decision of students with parental support to leave school and engage in work full time or part time post-school. This would also involve promoting re-entry to education and training after experiences of work post-school.

14. ensure that the school curriculum and pedagogies are relevant to the needs of all young people including their local life and world of work. It is critical that as many young people as possible enjoy, are interested in and are connected to learning both prior to, and during, the post-compulsory years, and that in the long term they become lifelong learners.

15. be funded and supported to expand extra-curricular activities for students, which include trips to local universities and TAFE institutes. This might include a ‘University Experience’ program run parallel with the current Work Experience program where university student mentors would be engaged in a program of activities to introduce them to aspects of life and work at university.

16. encourage all teachers to be informed, through ongoing professional development, to act as informal careers advisers and mentors.

An electronic copy of the complete, final 55 page report is available on request from Associate Professor Barry Golding, University of Ballarat b.golding@ballarat.edu.au