‘Everything is Harder’

Participation in Tertiary Education of Young People from Rural and Regional Victoria

Final Report, March 2007

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SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS (available separately)

1. Research Action Plan, December 2005
2. Survey instruments
3. Interview schedule
4. Analysis of the survey data
5. Reports to ten school communities
Acknowledgments

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Report structure

This Final Report consists of three sections. The Executive Report (pp.3-10) presents the key findings and recommendations. The Main Report (pp.11-55) makes reference to Support Documents including the original eight page research action plan, the survey instruments and interview schedules, a summary analysis of the survey data and the ten School Community Reports.
EXECUTIVE REPORT

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

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\(^{1}\) Peri-urban refers to areas which are on or just beyond the urban fringes of larger metropolitan cities.
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 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.
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.

The relationship between our key findings and other research

It is important for the sake of readers who may not read the full report, including the literature review, to give a brief overview into the relationship between our key findings outlined above and recent literature that is relevant to our research.

Our research validates Teese, Polesel and Mason’s (2004a) prediction that the observed differences in transition to university across geographic regions are not simply a selection issue. Rather, not going to university for those rural, regional and peri-urban students and their families who have typically made that decision before
Year 10 is a deliberate and logical strategy from the perspective of the family, albeit based one that is based on limited information.

Our findings about barriers to participation for young people in rural and regional Victoria reinforce Birrell and Rapson’s (2006) contention that the widely recognised problem of mismatch between qualifications, skills and jobs in Australia does not lie in an ‘excessive emphasis on higher education at the expense of trade training’ (p.1) because ‘There is plenty of scope to increase the proportion of young people studying in both…’ (p.2).

The problem of low participation rates, in the case of rural, regional and peri-urban young people, lies mainly in the perceived and real costs and lack of knowledge about the longer-term benefits of both university and TAFE as compared to the immediate benefits of going directly to work. These young people are also discouraged from attending university full time by the foreshadowed, accumulated HECS debt. There is an accurate perception that the higher education sector has recently increased its fees significantly, and we detected considerable resentment of the fact that some students with inferior scores are able to ‘buy’ places at university. For both the university and TAFE aspirants we surveyed and interviewed, there was a clearly perceived need for their parents to underwrite their living away from home and/or travel expenses, at a time when access to income support (mainly Youth Allowance) has tightened since 1996. As Birrell and Rapson (2006, p.11) suggest, ‘In these circumstances the existence of a buoyant job market may swing the balance in favour of work rather than study’.

Educational statistics and research consistently reveal huge inequalities in educational participation and outcomes, measured by both achieved ENTER scores and university enrolment: by location, region, socioeconomic background and also by type of school. In 2003 the average ENTER score of tertiary applicants was 61.05 for government schools, 83.55 for Independent schools and 68.45 for Catholic schools (The Age, 6 October 2006). We suggest that these differences are evidence of the effects of inter-generational inequalities between students, families, schools and communities. People have unequal access to knowledge of the options, local resources and work opportunities. These differences are exacerbated in the case of non-metropolitan and peri-urban schools because of more limited accessibility to, and knowledge of, local and comprehensive higher education and TAFE provision. The differences in participation rates and outcomes are mainly the result of existing inequalities of access to and knowledge of tertiary option, not the cause of the inequality

There is evidence from our study of tertiary aspirations that rurality and isolated location is only one of several factors that affect the known differential rates of tertiary participation between the schools in our study. This finding is supported by James, Wyn, Baldwyn, Hepworth and McInnis’ (1998) review of the literature on rural school students and their higher education choices. They found that the observed differences in participation in higher education between rural and metropolitan areas are ‘due in the main part to the characteristics of families related to rurality, rather than to rurality itself – the economic and educational backgrounds and families living

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2 Lesley Lamb, Principal, Gilmore College draw this insight in part from a ‘Letter to the Editor’ in The Age, p.12, for Girls, Footscray, October 7, 2005.
in rural areas’ (p.10). Our own study indicates that the economic and educational backgrounds of families in the three peri-urban schools included in the research were similar to and had similar to those impacting on many rural and regional families and had similarly negative effects on young people’s aspirations to participate in higher education.

Our findings about higher education aspirations are consistent with Khoo and Ainley’s (2005, p.16) contention that ‘… almost all the influence of attitudes to school on participation in higher education is mediated by the intention to participate.’ Many rural and regional students lack that intention as early as Year 10. Likewise, our research further bolsters Marks’ (2006, p.43) recent finding, which challenges many basic assumptions in prevailing school-study-work pathways discourses, that that there is little evidence that a person’s full-time study in the initial post-school years correlates with their likelihood of subsequent full-time work. Lattimore (2007) similarly concludes that the claim that more education is always better for labour market performance is not borne out by the data.

Our research provides new evidence of the perceived, short-term value of learning through work. This finding supports Beavis, Curtis and Curtis’s (2005, p.10) contention that while secondary students generally have a good understanding of the contents of the world of work, they equate work with income, but their knowledge of the world of work, especially in regional towns, is limited. Unsurprisingly, students in our study aspire to work in the fields of work and study they are familiar with, particularly those that their parents work in. We have found little evidence of a deep understanding amongst rural students, parents or teacher of the nature of recent transformations of work and its likely future forms. We find that while student knowledge of work is particularly enhanced through experiences of paid work while still at school, the work they do get tends to be local, low skilled and short term. Students typically have much more to learn about how to get better jobs and particularly about the skills and qualifications (from university or TAFE) required to advance in those jobs in the medium and longer term.

One of our most important findings is of the advantages of extracurricular activities to rural and regional students while at school, known from Beavis, Curtis and Curtis (2005) to accrue more to students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. We provide new evidence of the close match between preferred academic pedagogies of high achieving students and those of both teachers and the students’ parents. This match works well for students with definite higher education intentions and for those who regard VCE (the Year 12 Certificate in Victoria) as a base educational achievement. However the match tends not to include the high proportion of students who prefer to have some control over their learning, whether this is by doing or through connections between life at school and out of school.

Key limitations

The detailed limitations of our study are provided within the Method section of the report below. In summary, our study was limited to ten Victorian schools in particular regions. The schools were selected because their Year 12 tertiary outcome data for one year (2003) differed from the ‘average’ for all Victorian schools for that year. For
that reason we make no claim to make generalisations that apply to all students, parents or teachers in all secondary schools.

The students, parents and teachers we interviewed and surveyed were selected and recruited locally and non-randomly. The selection criteria for both Year 10 students and parents based on student intentions to attend university (or not) means that our data are biased towards participants who have already definitely decided, and tends not to include those who are undecided.

Our data on 2003 school leavers who decided to leave school without going directly to either university or TAFE were restricted to those who still lived locally. The data are sufficient to confirm that a pathway straight to work locally has usually been deliberate, positive and successful in the medium term though difficult in the short term. It does not allow us to make conclusions about whether this was a good strategy in the longer term or whether it worked for students who moved away from home.

**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+) 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.

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.

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3 ARIA: Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA 1999)
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.*

**It is recommended that for particular schools:**

17. *that any additional information and support provided for students take account of local school circumstances.* The individual ‘School Community Reports’ are illustrative of considerable differences between schools that suggest a ‘one size fits all approach’ will be much less useful than one targeted to the school community-specific circumstances.
MAIN REPORT

Context for the research

The broad project brief from the Department of Education and Training required determination of the major factors that contribute to the relatively poor participation rate of secondary students from regional Victoria in higher education. Following that determination, the brief sought identification of suggested approaches to raise the aspiration to participate in higher education. A description of the consultation process that led to the development of a research action plan from this brief as well as the detailed method and procedures adopted for this research project are summarised in the Research Action Plan, December 2005 (Supporting Document 1).

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 from Teese, Polesel and Mason (2004b). 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 On Track 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?

**Rationale for group and school site selection and research design**

A mixed research method was used based on surveys and interviews from the same informants on-site in schools. We sought to collect data from each participant group and sub-group outlined above in order to answer each of the research questions. Our method allowed a unique comparison of educational attitudes and aspirations between groups of Year 10 students and Year 12 parents, with and without the intention of proceeding to higher education. It also allowed comparison of aspirations of a group from the same school that did not proceed directly to tertiary study three years before (in 2003). Inclusion of students with outcomes that included direct entry to work or unemployment without education and training was considered worthy of closer examination and explanation, in part to discover whether they provided delayed pathways to education and training.

Year 12 student perceptions were deliberately not sought in this research because their tertiary preferences and outcomes are comparatively well known from existing research, aggregated tertiary selection data and annual tracking data at the point of selection undertaken by On Track. There was a particular desire to avoid over-sampling Year 12 students and not affect response rates of tertiary applicants who are routinely asked to participate in On Track phone surveys in the wake of the tertiary selection process.

The final selection of ten schools was based on a number of selection criteria. These included a desire to more accurately objectify the often poorly defined terms ‘rural’ and ‘regional’. For this reason schools were deliberately selected within a range of discrete bands of the Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA+; ARIA
The ten schools included ‘very accessible’ schools (ARIA+ close to zero) as well as less accessible schools (higher ARIA+). The selected set of schools also had varying degrees of access to alternative local schools and to post-school tertiary (TAFE or higher education) campuses within commuting distance. Three schools were included in outer metropolitan (peri-urban) Melbourne. While such schools comprise an important part of some regional university catchments they have high accessibility/low remoteness (ARIA+ values approaching zero).

Half of the schools sampled were located within car-commuting distance to some higher education courses\(^5\), including two schools that had good access by public transport to a regional higher education campus with limited course choices\(^6\). The sample included schools in a range of towns and cities of different sizes, with different degrees of accessibility/remoteness (defined by ARIA+\(^7\)) and distance from Melbourne\(^8\). There was also some consideration of the student catchments of the seven universities with regional campuses represented on the Research Reference Committee. There was an attempt to be inclusive of the main secondary school types\(^9\) found in rural and regional Victoria, including one (Donald) with relatively high school to university transition rates in 2003.

The decision to create ‘School Community Reports’, based on the interview data collected in each school and customised for each school community, was motivated by a desire to create and disseminate research products of interest and use to the school communities beyond this Final Report. The research design embodied recognition of the benefits to school communities of becoming active research partners by helping host the research, distribute the surveys and help recruit and facilitate the focus group interviews and feedback sessions. Our method attempts to model social capital (trust and reciprocity) between schools and university, valued at the level of community in rural and regional Victoria.

The decision not to break survey data down to school level formed one of several ethical conditions that protected privacy and confidentiality of individuals and schools that participated. These conditions were included in our University of Ballarat Research Ethics approval and were consistent with ethical agreements made and communicated separately with the Department of Education and Training, Victorian Education regions, Catholic School Diocesan office and individual schools. School Community Reports were circulated in Draft to the school principal and interview facilitator in each school before finalisation to ensure that they were factually accurate and did not breach interviewee privacy or confidentiality.

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\(^5\) Access is defined as being located less than 50 km from a campus that offers some university level programs. Regional university campuses, though physically accessible to half the schools in the sample (Mount Clear, Traralgon, Kurunjang, Rosebud and Lilydale Heights) do not offer a full range of higher education courses. Only two schools in the sample were within realistic commuting range of comprehensive higher education choices.

\(^6\) Mt Clear and Traralgon.

\(^7\) Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA+) ranges in Australia from 0 to 12. The school selection included 2 schools in ARIA+ range less than 3, 2 in ARIA+ range 1-3 and 6 schools in ARIA+ range 0-1.

\(^8\) The school selection included 3 schools in the 200 km+ range, 4 in the 100-200 km range and 3 in the <100km range.

\(^9\) The school selection included one Catholic college.
Method

Consistent with the rationale already described, there was a purposive selection of a sample of ten school communities in which transition rates from school to university differed from the norm (see Supporting Document 1: Target School Sample in Appendix 2; School contacts in Appendix 3). A local person was appointed by the school to facilitate and act as a facilitator and gatekeeper for interviews (see Indicative Schedule in Supporting Document 1, Appendix 4).

Researchers conducted a total of up to six on-site focus group interviews with Year 10 students, parents, teachers and former students in each school. The Interview Schedule is contained in Supporting Document 3. Surveys were issued to the same interviewees with a reply paid envelope if required. All interviews were audio taped and fully transcribed. Themes emerging from the interview data were identified and summarised at the school level in School Community Reports (see Supporting Document 5). Surveys were analysed first by response frequencies for each of the six groups and sub-groups and common question frequencies were compared. Cross tabulations of selected variables were undertaken to determine whether there were significantly different responses by group. The current research report addresses the research questions informed by analyses of the combined survey interview data for the ten schools. It includes a literature review as well as recommendations.

School sample

Table 1 summarises town location and accessibility as well as Year 12 outcome characteristics (based on 2003 On Track data from Teese, Polesel and Mason 2004a) of the ten school sample. Towns or cites with more than one government secondary college are italicised.

Target respondent sample

The target samples in each of the ten schools are summarised by group and sub group below. The maximum total number of interview and survey participants targeted is shown in brackets.

- 8 Year 10 students: four who were anticipating higher education study, and four who were not (80)
- 4 teachers (40)
- 8 parents of Year 12 students: four whose child was anticipating higher education study, and four whose child was not (80)
- up to 8 school leavers from 2003 who did not go directly to tertiary study (80).

Achieved sample

Table 2 compares the target sample with the achieved interview and survey samples by group. The total achieved survey sample of 68 per cent for the ten schools is regarded as very good compared with what would have been achieved using alternative recruiting and survey methods. Of those participants interviewed, 93 per cent (189/203) completed and returned surveys. Recruiting, as anticipated, was most difficult (and much less successful) for the 2003 school leaver group. When this group
is removed from the survey total, the student, parent and teacher survey response rate was 82 per cent of the target sample.

Table 1: Characteristics of the school sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Locations Accessibility Locations</th>
<th>% Tertiary Application; Yr12 Enrol N</th>
<th>% Uni Enrolled</th>
<th>% TAFE Enrolled</th>
<th>% App / Trainee</th>
<th>% Not in ET; (N Employed; N Seeking work)</th>
<th>ARIA+ Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Donald 286km NW</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>11 (11, 0)</td>
<td>3.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heywood 348km W</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>31 (29,4)</td>
<td>2.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orbost 381km E</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>31 (22, 9)</td>
<td>4.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traralgon + 164km E</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>40 (30, 10)</td>
<td>0.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mooroodoona 187km N</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>44 (38, 6)</td>
<td>0.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melton # 39km W</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>45 (25, 20)</td>
<td>0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ballarat # 113km W</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>48 (34,14)</td>
<td>0.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosebud # 77km S</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>51 (48, 3)</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colac 148km SW</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>53 (50, 3)</td>
<td>1.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lilydale * 39km E</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>08</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>55 (48, 7)</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

KEY: 2003 Year 12 outcome data from On Track survey data; * = comprehensive choice of accessible higher education (<50 km travel); # = easy access by public transport to local but limited higher education at a regional campus; + = limited choice of accessible higher education at a regional campus (<50 km travel). All other schools have no local, accessible higher education choices. Sorted by % of 2003 Year 12 cohort enrolled at university in 2004. ARIA+ Accessibility Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA 1999) is a measure (between zero and 12) of increasing inaccessibility/remoteness based to decreasing access services away from larger service centres.

Table 2: Comparison of target and achieved sample by group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent category</th>
<th>Target N</th>
<th>Interview achieved N</th>
<th>Survey achieved N</th>
<th>Percent*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Year 10 planning going on to university</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 10 not planning going on to university</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent of Year 12 planning going on to university</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent of Year 12 not planning going on to university</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003 school leaver who did not go directly to uni or TAFE</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals</strong></td>
<td><strong>280</strong></td>
<td><strong>203</strong></td>
<td><strong>189</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

KEY: N indicates numbers; * The Percent column gives the percentage of returned surveys in that respondent category as a proportion of the total number of all returned surveys.

Detailed limitations of the method

We acknowledge a number of limitations associated with our method. We relied on a purposively selected, ten-school sample and recruitment of volunteers for interview...
who were also surveyed. We deliberately selected mainly government schools from particular rural, regional and peri-urban areas in Victoria. We also deliberately chose schools whose various Year 12, post-school destinations departed in different ways from the ‘average’ in only one year, 2003, based on On Track survey data. An examination of outcome data for the selected schools from other years indicates annual fluctuations both in the number and proportion of students who proceeded to different forms of further study and work.

Our total achieved survey sample across the ten schools was 189 respondents in six different categories from 203 interviewees. While the surveys provide us with a comprehensive profile of interviewees, as few as 23 surveys in some interview and survey categories make confident, quantitative, group and sub-group analyses and particularly tests of significant difference by group very difficult.

Our Research Reference Group agreed that we should deliberately recruit Year 10 interviewees and parents of Year 12 students who had already decided to either go to university or not. This means that we have tended to sample at the polarities in terms of early tertiary aspirations and not hear from students and parents who might be more equivocal. It also means that we have generally been limited by our method to evidence of factors that are seen to affect student intentions rather than to outcomes actually achieved. The significant exception is the 2003 school leaver group.

The limited budget and timeframe of the research and its emphasis on student, parent and teacher opinions and perceptions in only ten schools means that we were not able to collect data from other education and training stakeholders including principals and regional education managers as well as from other schools. This data would have added more information to answer the final, subsidiary research question about what could be done generally ‘… to provide more information and support for students choosing to study, and also delay study, after leaving school’. The applicability of our general ‘Recommendations’ towards the front of this report are therefore limited by and extrapolated from our findings from the people we consulted in the ten schools.

We recognise that all interviewees, including teachers and former students who were recruited and who participated, are neither representative nor random samples of the groups or schools they were recruited from. Rather, they are biased towards people who were available at the time, chose to volunteer or were deliberately recruited. The timing of the interviews in mid-2006 preceded most Year 10 work experience programs and the preparation for those programs. We present evidence in this report that Year 10 students subsequently learn much from these experiences.

We recognise that our method, since it is based primarily on our interpretation of interview and survey data from selected informants, is informed by both positive and negative tertiary aspirations. At least half of our informants had not aspired to higher education for either themselves or their children. Our attempt in this report is to be true to what we have heard from these selected informants (students, teachers, parents, former students), speaking frankly about their perceptions of learning generally, and about school and further education in particular. While we have reviewed relevant literature we have relied more heavily in our reports to schools as

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10 The sample included one Catholic college in a small regional city.
well as in this report on what we have heard and been told rather than what we think or believe as researchers. We have deliberately tried to frame our findings and recommendations in ways that are ‘true to the data’ and therefore intellectually honest.

However we are inevitably influenced in our writing and reporting by our own values as researchers and the political context in which our research is commissioned and for whom this research discourse and our findings and recommendations are deliberately constructed and directed. We are particularly informed by and cognisant of broader education policies and the literature we cite. We have deliberately set up a dichotomy between students definitely headed for university and those who are not for the purposes of group comparison. We attempt within this dichotomy to be equivocal: to hear and validate both aspirations.

Despite these limitations in terms of selection, dichotomisation by group, sample bias, timing and interviewee representativeness by group and region, our general conclusions are based on rich narrative and insights available from extensive on-site interview data from an average of 20 informants in each school. Rather than focusing only on Year 12 students at the point of university selection, our method has enabled us to gather considerable and unique qualitative insights into the experiences and perceptions of a range of other stakeholders that shape the process of tertiary choice. The method allows us to get an ‘up close and personal’ sense of experiences which are illustrative of the place of education, job and life choices in the day-to-day lives of rural and regional people. The ‘School Community Reports’, prepared separately for each school, provide rich, in context snapshots, narratives and summaries of the ways students, parents and teachers in each school community were grappling with their thinking about the most appropriate post-school destinations in 2006.
Literature review

The literature on post-school study destinations and outcomes in Australia is extremely comprehensive. The review that follows is selective of some of the most pertinent and recent research most relevant to our research questions.

What happens to Year 12 students post-school is known from previous research (Teese, Polesel and Mason 2004, p.15) to be associated with a number of complex and inter-related factors, including:

… the level and nature of tertiary education aspirations; relative offer rates by different tertiary education sectors; the perceived value of tertiary offers from different institutions/sectors [and] the economic and financial situations of different groups of school leavers.

The complexity aside, it is widely recognised that ‘each fall in [student] achievement is also, in general a fall in socioeconomic status’ (Teese, Polesel and Mason 2004, p.19).

Our study is focussed essentially on students who either do or don’t have university aspirations during Year 10. These two groups will be shown later in our study to tend to be high and low achievers respectively. Teese, Polesel and Mason are careful to point out that

… the lower transition rate of low achievers is not simply due to their not receiving a tertiary offer. It is partly because they renounce or never form aspirations and do not make themselves available for selection. … [As] achievement falls, Year 12 completers find themselves progressively excluded from higher education and counterbalance this through increased participation at all levels of TAFE/VET. (Teese, Polesel and Mason 2004, pp.19-20)

Post-school destinations data and tertiary accessibility

Typical post-school destinations of Victorian Year 12 exit students are well known as a consequence of annual telephone surveys of all school leavers (eg Teese, Polesel and Mason 2004a). We know that, overall, across Victoria each year, when those not in education, training or the workforce are excluded, around four out of ten Year 12 students go to university. Around three out of ten go to some form of vocational education and training, including apprenticeships or traineeships that comprise five per cent combined. Around two out of ten go to work, with around six per cent looking for work. We also know from the On Track surveys that young people exiting Year 12 in country Victoria are more likely than metropolitan students to be employed or seeking work.

Teese, Polesel and Mason’s (2004b) On Track survey suggests that of all 2003 Year 12 completers in Victoria, around 44 per cent went to university. When only government schools are included and considered by region, the proportion enrolling at university is much less for all regions, and ranges from 40 per cent in Eastern Metropolitan Melbourne to only 25 per cent in Gippsland. What the regional data also show is that, in all metropolitan areas, the proportion of Year 12 completers going on to either university or VET at Certificate 4 or above is much higher (around 60 per cent going to either) than for non-capital city regions (at slightly more than 40 per cent). This consistent and significantly lower take up of higher-level, post-school
study across regional and rural Victoria, particularly from government schools is one of the focuses of the current research.

The effects of travel and location on whether or not to go on to higher education post-Year 12 are significantly affected by region (based on Year 12 On Track survey data from Teese, Polesel and Mason 2004b). While the actual travel time involved is of some importance, their study showed that it is particularly the need and cost to regional students of leaving home that prevents many students going to university. The need to leave home was seen as an inhibiting factor particularly in Gippsland and Goulburn Ovens education regions. Of particular relevance to our own study that includes three peri-urban schools, Teese, Polesel and Mason’s (2004b) research suggests that the need to travel becomes more of an issue in peri-urban south-eastern Melbourne and the Mornington Peninsula than in objectively less accessible rural areas.

While ARIA, by definition, increases with proximity to service centres of decreasing size the literature suggests that service accessibility, particularly access to university, is only part of the problem. Haberkorn and Bamford (2002) note that, while Australia’s 52 university campuses were mostly located along the densely populated coastal region, tertiary education choices, and particularly higher education choices, were much reduced in areas of highest ARIA. While some areas of Victoria are affected by rurality, Victoria nevertheless has the highest accessibility to university of all Australian states. Only three per cent of the total population (including only eight towns in Victoria with more than 2000 people) live more than 80 km from a university campus (Haberkorn and Bamford 2002).

It is also important however to recognise that despite these effects of proximity to a higher education campus, ‘Access to regional universities has been relatively easy in the recent past’ compared to access to metropolitan universities as measured by ENTER score (Birrell and Rapson 2006, p.10). Many regional and rural students, if they ‘have the score’ that allows them to do so, tend to ‘leapfrog’ over regional universities to attend city universities and courses with higher ENTER scores and perceived higher status. As Birrell and Rapson (2006, p.10) point out, ‘51 per cent of those who received a university offer from a regional university in Victoria had an ENTER below 70’.

The effect of costs of post-school study

Students who undertake university study at regional campuses in Australia are much more likely than students at other types of universities to experience difficulties paying fees and other study costs in first year (Hillman 2005, Table 12, p.27). However, when first year university students are desegregated by home address as ‘rural and isolated’ or ‘other’ (Hillman 2005, Table 23, p.42), these differences are not as marked. One reading of Hillman’s findings is that the socioeconomic profiles of students selected with low ENTER scores at regional campuses affect the family propensity to pay to attend university more than home location alone or SES alone. This reading is supported by other data in Hillman (2005, Table 10, p.23) that show that paying fees or any other study costs are much more difficult for university students who attended either government or Catholic schools compared to those who attended Independent schools, as well as for students parents did not attend university.
These differences are almost non-existent for TAFE students: that is, SES, home location and type of school has little impact on propensity to pay study and other costs for students who attend TAFE compared to students who attend university, and particularly for students who attend regional universities.

Reviews of research into the first year experience at university (Krause, Hartley, James and McInnis 2005) show that by 2000 ‘… it had become the norm for full-time undergraduate students to combine study and paid employment’ (p.52), following a pattern that becomes established during secondary school. Three quarters of 19 year olds at university are involved in paid work, primarily to be more financially independent of their families and to afford what Krause, Hartley, James and McInnis describe as ‘the extras’ (p.51). They provide evidence of a growing reliance to 2000 amongst 20-24 year olds on support from parents and/or other family members (p.50).

Of considerable relevance to the current study, it is widely recognised that socioeconomic background has a profound effect on university participation (eg Teese and Polesel 2003). There is also a strong positive relationship between taking up part-time paid work while studying full-time and socioeconomic status (SES). Krause et al. (2005, p.51) found that, on one hand ‘… there is a significant relationship between low SES background and taking on paid work to meet basic need and to save for future HECS debts’. On the other hand there is a ‘significant relationship between high SES background and working to be more financially independent of family’. In effect, children of lower SES families are working while studying mainly to survive, while children of higher SES parents are working as a planned strategy to achieve financial independence. The implications of and incentives for students to formally achieve financial independence and qualify for federal government income support will be shown later in the current study to be poorly known and understood by many regional parents, particularly those with limited personal or family experience of university.

The post-2000 literature provides evidence of some very recent shifts in the take up of university places. Downturns in demand have been felt most heavily in regional university and peri-urban campuses with higher proportions of students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Edwards, Birrell and Smith (2005) analysed trends in Year 12 tertiary offers and found that the proportion of students from government schools gaining a university offer dropped by 20 per cent or more between 2000 and 2003 in some of the peri-urban areas included within the current study. They concluded that ‘The government school sector is no longer serving as a ladder of educational opportunity for aspiring students from low-socioeconomic areas’.

Finally, but importantly, it is important to note that previous studies of university demand, preferences and destinations has been conducted in a politicised funding and employment environment in which the ground has been shifting. To make demand analyses more difficult, government and tertiary providers have debated ‘met’ and ‘unmet’ demand without consensus on what either means or how they should be measured (Giles, McClure and Dockery 2005). There is copious evidence that the perceived and actual cost to individuals of higher education has increased as HECS fees have increased and as the higher education system has moved towards user-pays in ways that have impacted differentially on students from poorer backgrounds in government schools. The result in Victoria is that ‘fewer Victorian students from

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disadvantaged backgrounds are making university’ (The Age, 8 October 2005, p.5). The Victoria University Vice Chancellor identified a downturn in university demand in October 2006 from communities that were ‘loan averse’ and ‘sensitive to price’, particularly in the current (2007) buoyant economy and with sustained, strong growth and record low unemployment.

The year in which the current study was conducted (2006) also coincided with the worst drought on record across most of rural and regional Victoria. In the same year student demand for university courses fell for the second successive year, with the impact of falling demand impacting most heavily on Australia’s regional universities and campuses. La Trobe University in 2006 was seriously reviewing the viability and future of its five Victorian regional campuses.

Projected intentions and participation in higher education

The decision in the current research to focus, in part, on the projected intentions of Year 10 students to attend university or not is supported by Khoo and Ainley’s (2005) research. They used longitudinal (LSAY\textsuperscript{11}) data from students who were in Year 9 in 1995 to demonstrate a moderately strong correlation (r=0.59) between intentions to go to university at Year 9 and entry to university (Khoo and Ainley 2005, p.v). Our decision in the current study to also include questions about Year 10 student perceptions of education sectors generally and school in particular is supported by Khoo and Ainley’s (2005, p.v) other finding that ‘Attitudes to school are more strongly related to educational intentions than any aspects of student background … including socioeconomic background.’ Importantly, they showed that … the direct effect of attitude to school on actual participation is not statistically significant, [This is] an indication that almost all the influence of attitudes to school on participation in higher education is mediated by the intention to participate. (p.16)

In summary, their research showed that student intentions in the middle years ‘… act as a mediating influence on actions, and that attitudes to school as well at other factors operate though their influence on intentions’. These findings were found by Khoo and Ainley (2005) to be consistent with Ajzen’s (2001) theory of planned behaviour.

Khoo and Ainley’s (2005) literature review found that most of the previous studies of ‘…. students’ educational plans have focussed on intentions to complete secondary school, rather than intentions for study beyond secondary school.’ One exception is the study by James (2002), who attributed differences in intentions to participate in university for Year 10-12 students (itself linked particularly to socioeconomic status) to opinions and attitudes to post-school education formed during the school years.

The advantage of applying models of planned behaviour (Ajzen 2001) to the link between higher education intentions and attitudes about school is that it recognises scope for student agency and intervention rather than adopting negative, deterministic views of student success at school and university based purely on socioeconomic status. It is important to recognise that entry to higher education should not be seen as being entirely based on an achieved Year 12 score. This is because the Year 12 score is itself known to be strongly influenced by socioeconomic status and school type. The advantage of recognising entry to higher education (or not) as planned behaviour

\textsuperscript{11} LSAY: Longitudinal Studies of Australian Youth.
acknowledges that student intentions can and do play an important part in actual university participation.

The labour market advantages of completing Year 12 or holding post-school qualifications

Australian census data consistently show that, on average, completion of Year 12 as well as completion of a qualification post-school, particularly a university degree, have positive advantages in terms of average income in the medium and longer term. Harding, McNamara, Tanton, Daly and Yap (2006) analysed census data by Statistical Local Area (SLA) from the 2001 census in a study of poverty and disadvantage among Australian children to isolate child and family characteristics which were indicative of social exclusion. They showed that there were particular, marked differences between children in capital cities and regional areas in terms of a range of measures related to education (p.21). However they cautioned that some of the differences might be related to the much higher proportion of capital city children who had access to non-government education. They also found that the proportion of parents outside of capital cities with family members who have completed post-school qualifications is 'strikingly lower' (Harding et al. 2006, p.21: 62% in capitals; 49% outside of capitals).

Stimson, Baum, Mangan, Gellecum, Shyy and Yigitcanlar (2004, pp.27-28) identified significant gaps between human capital in regional and metropolitan Australia as measured by formal qualifications. High school matriculation (Year 12 completion) rates in metropolitan areas in Australia are 1.5 to two times that of regional areas in the same state. The drop out rate from school is higher for rural students than metropolitan students and appears to be inter-generational: a significant proportion of the rural workforce has Year 10 equivalent or less. Stimson et al. (2004) concluded that the problems are largely spatial, ‘with regional areas and industries not fully sharing in the good times and being disproportionately exposed to economic corrections’ (p.29).

However, interpretations of research into the ‘average’ advantages of completing Year 12 and attending university (or the risk of not doing both) need to take account of the labour market context in which the research took place as well as the jobs available by locality. Much of the research into young people ‘at risk’ took place during the early 1990s during a time of very high unemployment. Marks (2006) found that, a decade later, ‘Crisis’ accounts of the youth labour market’ were not supported by their research, and that treating all those young people ‘… who are not in full-time work or study in the initial period after leaving school and being at risk is simplistic’ (p.3).

Of particular relevance to the 2003 Year 12 leaver cohort who did not go directly to full-time tertiary study that are included in the current research, Marks (2006, p.31) analysed educational backgrounds of young people who did not go to university. Marks identified the ‘importance of prior experiences of work in securing full-time employment’ (p.42). Marks found that ‘Obtaining a full-time job in the first year after leaving school almost guaranteed subsequent full-time work’ (p.42). He concluded that early school leaving (before Year 11) was not associated with weaker labour market outcomes in the first five years after leaving school and was not necessarily
undesirable. While apprenticeships were found to play a critical role in securing full-time employment, the benefits of full-time, post-school training for students who did not go to university were found to be disappointing. Contrary to government policy about the importance of post-school education and training, ‘There was no indication that full-time study in the initial post-school years substantially promotes subsequent full-time work’ (Marks 2006, p.43). Only ‘slight regional differences in post-school activities’ were identified in their study.

The assumption that a high ENTER score in Year 12 is a universal (or even an average) ‘silver bullet’ to further education was shown by Marks (2006) to be questionable, particularly for the two thirds of students who do not proceed to university. For all students not at university in the year after leaving school, those with a higher ENTER score (above 80) were twice as likely to be in work and half as likely to be in TAFE than students with ENTER scores below 60. For those who did not go to university, four years after leaving school, the proportion in full-time work is virtually identical to those who attended university regardless of ENTER score, except for the small proportion of students still in full-time study. Marks’ (2006) conclusion departs somewhat from school, parental and government policy emphases on high ENTER scores followed by post-secondary education and training as the best or guaranteed route to work for all students. Marks recognised the importance of work in the policy mix when he concluded that for students who do not go directly to university…

Obtaining a full-time job soon after leaving school is the best pathway to successful and rapid transitions to ongoing full-time work for school leavers. The longer that full-time employment is delayed, the more transition problems young people face. … Post-secondary education and training is important in the transition, and it is much more effective if it is linked to employment. (p.45)

Marks (2006, p.45) pointedly concludes that helping students who do not go to university to secure full-time work is more important ‘than further education and training unconnected to the workplace’.

Senior student perceptions of study plans

Beavis, Curtis and Curtis (2005) undertook a comprehensive study of senior secondary student’s (Year 10-12) educational and occupational plans and aspirations though the study did not take account of rurality. Their study was a follow-up to an earlier study by Beavis, Murphy, Bryce and Corrigan (2004) which indicated the importance of providing both financial and educational support for young people to take up education opportunities. Student plans were found to reflect a combination of understandings of themselves, the nexus between education or training, the world of work and the location in that world to which they perceive themselves as best suited (Beavis, Curtis and Curtis (2005, p.10). Their research into senior secondary students confirms that, while students generally have a ‘good understanding of the contents of the world of work’, enhanced through paid work while still at school, they typically ‘… have more to learn about how to get these jobs and the probabilities of their doing so even if qualified’ (p.6). A higher proportion of students was found to aspire to professional jobs than the proportion that exists in the labour market. Conversely, very few students want the relatively large proportion of lower skilled jobs than are available.

Factors that affect engagement at school
Our own study found some evidence amongst Year 10 interviewees with university aspirations of the importance of extracurricular involvement. Beavis, Curtis and Curtis (2005, pp.79-81) reviewed the wide range of factors that affect engagement with school manifested in two forms, extracurricular involvement in the school community and an ‘academic commitment to learning’. They pointed to a considerable body of research that shows that students who participate in extracurricular activities generally display higher educational aspirations. The wider advantages of these extracurricular activities are known to accrue more to students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

The role of teachers and parents in shaping student attitudes to higher education

The role of parents and particularly teachers in shaping the decisions of young people to attend university are much less well researched in Australia. In the current study, we have chosen a method that anticipates that the attitudes of parents and teachers will be likely to affect student decision making. Khoo and Ainley’s (2005, p.15) research showed that “…in the prediction of the intention towards participation in Higher Education’, parents’ education had a significant effect on the intention towards participating in higher education. By incorporating a parent and teacher survey as part of the current study, with questions that mirrored those asked of Year 10 students, we were able to explore and compare a large number of attitudes about all the main education and training sectors, albeit with a relatively small sample.

The influences on higher education participation in non-metropolitan locations

Australian research into higher education participation prior to 1998 found it difficult to measure location in ways that became possible with development of the Australian Remoteness/Accessibility Index (ARIA) in 1999 (ARIA 1999), subsequently modified to ARIA+. James, Wyn, Baldwin et al (1998), in their study of Rural and isolated school students and their education choices, found that the definition and measurement of ‘both socioeconomic status and rurality or isolation’ was ‘notoriously difficult’ (p.5). They found that ‘for every ten urban students who attend university, roughly six rural/isolated Australians do so’ (p.xi). Of particular relevance to our own study, they concluded in particular that rural students:

… are significantly less likely than urban students to consider that a university course would offer them the chance of an interesting and rewarding career; and that parents want them to do a university course. (p.xi)

James, Wyn, Baldwin et al. (1998) identified the effects on higher education choice of significantly different rural labour market needs than metropolitan labour market needs. They also conducted one of the first Australian studies to identify the perceived debilitating costs to rural students with plans of going to university. They found that rural students were significantly more likely to believe that ‘… a university qualification is not necessary for the jobs they want’, that ‘their families cannot afford the cost of supporting them at university’ and that ‘there is no point in them going to university’ (p.xi).

While James, Wyn, Baldwin et al (1998, p.xii) identified expenses (including fees and costs of living away from home) as serious inhibitors to the choice to go to university
for non-metropolitan students, rurality was found in combination with socioeconomic status to produce the greatest educational disadvantage. Khoo and Ainley’s (2005, p.15) study also showed that ‘Being from a non-metropolitan location had a negative influence on both [higher education] intentions … [and … participation’]. We observe in passing that in the eight years since James, Wyn, Baldwin et al’s (1998) study, the proportion of total higher costs paid by parents (or more commonly deferred as a debt by students) has increased significantly.

Of particular relevance to our own study, James, Wyn, Baldwin et al (1998, p.xii) identified distance from a campus as not being ‘the single major determinant of student choices’. They showed that, on average, rural students living close to regional campuses shared similar attitudes towards higher education attendance as rural students with more limited access to a campus. They also identified parental encouragement (as reported by prospective students) as a positive factor that affected the decision to participate (p.xii).

Hillman and Rothman (2006) reviewed research into post-school pathways of non-metropolitan youth and concluded that…

‘…the differences in the university participation rates of students in rural areas and capital cities … are largely the results of the differences in schooling decisions around the Year 10 level. (p.3)

Their research also showed that students who go to university from the country are very likely not to return. Conversely, for those that remain in country areas, ‘the chances of leaving decrease dramatically as the years go by’ (p.3).

Hillman and Rothman’s research adopted ARIA (ARIA 1999) as a location variable and demonstrated that…

‘…the decision to leave non-metropolitan areas is not a spontaneous one; rather it is developed over a period of time and within the context of decisions about one’s future, including educational and occupational aspirations and expectations. (Hillman and Rothman 2006, p.vi)

Hillman and Rothman were the first researchers to demonstrate that, as ARIA (remoteness / inaccessibility) increases, young people are increasingly more likely to move to the cities post-school. However, Hillman and Rothman (2006) reasoned that increasing access to tertiary education in their local areas ‘may not be the answer non-metropolitan communities are seeking’, and that ‘young people often choose to move even where there are facilities available to them locally’ (p.38). They concluded that regional educational institutions do not necessarily have an advantage in recruiting students based simply on proximity’ (p.38), and that the challenge for rural communities is to convince young people to return after completing their education elsewhere’ (p.39).

The benefits of universities and TAFEs to communities

Our findings about problems with student and parent perceptions of the benefits (and relative costs) of universities in rural and regional areas need to be balanced against the extensive literature confirming the many measurable benefits to communities, including rural and regional communities, of tertiary study, particularly university study. Australian literature reviewed by Langworthy (2006) on ‘Why universities are important to communities’ confirms that university graduates are most likely to be
employed, receive more ongoing training and in the longer term have more earning power. University participation is widely associated with increases in annual labour productivity and annual per capita growth and tends to become inter-generational. Regional universities and their campuses contribute significantly to local, state and national economies. Other literature from higher education, VET and adult and community education in Australia consistently show that higher levels of education and training are associated with democratic participation, community involvement, health and well being and lifelong learning.
Findings

Findings from the survey data

The survey data comprised a diverse sample (N=189) of students, parents, teachers and former students from ten selected rural, regional and peri-urban schools. The sample comprised Year 10 students, parents of Year 12 students, teachers and school leavers from 2003 who did not go directly to either TAFE or university post-school. Approximately half of the achieved sample (54%) comprised students, parents and teachers with university experiences or aspirations. The other half of the sample (46%) comprised students, parents and school leavers without university experience or aspirations.

The survey findings that follow are based on careful analysis of all survey data, comprehensively summarised in Supporting Document 5.

School community respondent perceptions

This first part of the survey analysis considers the perceptions of all respondents, collectively referred to for convenience as the ‘school community’. The school community is taken in this section of the report to refer to all students, teachers, parents and former students. The school community survey respondents (N=189) from the ten schools comprised 20 per cent teachers, 39 per cent Year 10 students, 30 per cent parents, and thirteen per cent school leavers from 2003 who did not go directly to TAFE or university study in 2004.

In some respects, school community respondents saw university in a generally positive light. However, compared to TAFE, university was perceived as much less practical or hands-on, relatively over-rated in terms of the jobs people get afterwards, of much less value for money and as taking too much time for too little gain.

A relatively low proportion of all school community respondents (one in 20) had a parent who had completed a university degree, and only one in five ‘really enjoyed learning at school’.

Most school community respondents (that included 20% teachers) agreed that they had learnt or expected to learn skills required for work from employers, self, teachers or parents in that order. Formal post-school education (university or TAFE) was perceived to have contributed, or was anticipated to contribute, less. Conversely most school community respondents indicated that they had learnt, or expected to learn, skills required for work at work or on the job. University, home and school were seen by respondents to have contributed (or were anticipated to contribute) more to their work related learning than TAFE.

School community respondent knowledge and perceptions of the closest university and the local TAFE were reasonably similar. Though the closest university was held in somewhat higher regard than the local TAFE, the perceived likelihood of all
respondents doing a course at the local TAFE in the future was slightly higher than them doing a course at the closest university in the future. Familiarity with either the closest university or the local TAFE was low and limited to around one third of this mixed sample of school community respondents. While around one third of respondents said they knew about both tertiary options through friends or family, more than four out of ten respondents said that they did not know enough about either to use either the local TAFE or the closest university.

Based on findings from the survey, the school community respondent’s general learning preferences are primarily by doing, in mixed groups and in outdoor settings. Two thirds agreed that they generally enjoyed learning ‘in a classroom’ and one half said that they enjoyed learning on their own from books and other printed materials.

School community respondents indicated that a wide range of factors affected the likelihood of them going to university. The most important perceived factors, apart from whether the work anticipated actually required a university degree and whether the necessary HECS score had been achieved, have to do with the costs: of HECS, living away from home, travel and the chances of getting financial support whilst at university. Other very important factors for this mixed respondent sample included knowledge of university, confidence to complete a degree and support of parents.

*Adult respondent perceptions*

Adult respondents (defined as all respondents other than Year 10 students) were particularly interested in learning hands on and through work. Two thirds of adults also recognised the value of courses that led to formal qualifications. Social learning, learning for leisure and individual learning were also relatively highly regarded.

*Year 10 respondent perceptions*

Year 10 students had very limited awareness of ENTER scores. Students who intended ‘going on to university’ had much better knowledge about ENTER scores. While one quarter (mainly those not intending to go to university) did not care what ENTER score they got, around three out of ten had a good idea of what score they needed for their chosen course. Four out of ten (mainly those intending to go to university) intended to make subject selections that help them achieve a high ENTER score. Four out of ten Year 10 students had ‘no idea’ what ENTER score they expected to achieve. Of the Year 10 students who indicated a numeric score expectation, many appeared to have high expectations: 30 per cent of students expected to get a score above 90. Year 10 student respondents therefore tended to have either no idea about their anticipated ENTER score or an expectation in an apparently unrealistically high range.

*Perceptions of 2003 school leavers who did not go directly to tertiary study*

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12 This finding in particular needs to be tempered by the likely polarity caused by the interviewee selection process. That is schools may have deliberately chosen to showcase some of the ‘best and brightest’ students in the school for the ‘headed for university’ interview group, and the reverse for the non-university group.
School leavers from 2003 who did not have immediate tertiary study aspirations were heavily influenced in their choice of work by the time it takes to get educated and trained and by a desire to eventually become self-employed in a secure and interesting job. They had generally to compromise between their local work lives and social lives (including sporting commitments) by deciding to live and work in the same area as they had gone to school. Practical and family considerations including distance to travel to a tertiary institution, the ability to live at home and cost of further education were, three years after leaving school, considered to be of relatively low importance.

Summary of respondent perceptions by group

Year 10 students who expected to go to university, followed closely by parents of Year 12 students anticipating university as well as teachers, were most positive about university of all groups surveyed. University was positively perceived by a majority of each of these groups as an interesting and enjoyable place to learn and improve their job prospects. Students, regardless of their university aspirations, were generally more positive about university than their parents were. The 2003 school leaver group was the group most likely to regard university as over-rated in terms of the jobs people get afterwards.

There was more consistent and broad agreement across groups about the nature of TAFE and its vocational advantages than about the nature of university. All groups, including teachers, regarded TAFE as more hands-on and good value for money compared to university. There was also reasonably close agreement between all groups (Year 10 students, 2003 school leavers, and parents) about what will, has and should influence student work choices respectively. All groups consistently regarded an interest in the type of work and satisfaction with both social life and work as the most influential factors impacting on their choice of work. Local factors, such as an ability to live at home as well as distance to the nearest tertiary institution were more important for students who planned to stay in the area than for those who planned to leave.

School was generally positively regarded by all groups as a place to socialise, get a general education and improve job prospects, particularly by Year 10 students planning to go to university. Year 10 students not planning on going to university, along with parents of Year 12 students not anticipating going to university, were least positive about a number of aspects of school and were more likely to see it as over-rated, not enjoyable, not exciting and not sufficiently practical.

Year 10 students not planning on going to university perceived relatively negative experiences at school. They were more likely than other groups to be ‘sick of school’ and have had difficulties learning. They were also more likely not to have enjoyed their learning and prefer to learn ‘hands-on’. By contrast, teachers and Year 10 students who intended to go to university had the most positive experiences of their own school learning and were least likely to prefer to learn ‘hands on’. Both parent groups, as well as 2003 school leavers, had very similar attitude attitudes to learning, close to the average for all respondent groups.

Low levels of knowledge and experience of the local TAFE were indicated across most groups. However TAFE was best known and regarded as a familiar, ‘good place
to do courses’ by 2003 school leavers, parents of Year 12 students not anticipating university, Year 10 students not planning going to university and teachers. It was least well known by Year 10 students anticipating going to university. Knowledge of the closest university was also not high and broadly similar to knowledge of the local TAFE. Interestingly, the local TAFE was better known and regarded by Year 10 students anticipating university and by teachers than by the groups that were more likely to need to go there in the future.

All respondent groups tended to prefer to learn in mixed groups by doing. Year 10 students anticipating university considered that they learned best of all groups surveyed in a classroom setting and via ICT. Teachers considered they learned best of all groups on their own. Learning by doing or learning ‘outside’ was most preferred by Year 10 students not planning on going to university.

Financial factors (getting financial support, the cost of HECS and living away from home) were regarded as the most influential of all factors affecting choice of whether or not go to university, particularly for parents of Year 12 students, especially if their children intended to go to university. For Year 10 students intending to go to university and parents of Year 12 students anticipating university, the achieved ENTER score was also very important.

School leavers from 2003 who did not proceed directly to tertiary study in 2004 indicated that they had been very strongly affected by ‘not having the confidence to complete a degree’ and much less affected by financial considerations. There appears to be a need for better information for parents and students about university options, particularly about the financial implications of attending university.

Respondents in small rural schools seemed to be more resigned to students leaving home to work and study. They were also less likely to have access to or knowledge of the local TAFE. As for small schools, less accessible school communities (higher ARIA+) were more resigned to students leaving home to work and study at both university and TAFE. They were also less likely to have access to or knowledge of the local TAFE than larger schools.

Rurality and the higher costs involved in living away from home to attend university were in some ways ‘taken as given’ in the least accessible rural schools. Cost of travel to university and living away from home was also less of an issue for more accessible school respondents with local university choices. By contrast, for respondents in moderately accessible regional towns without comprehensive university options but with ready access to regional universities with relatively low minimum ENTER scores, ENTER score knowledge and achievement perhaps become less important.

Findings from the interview data

A total of 60 on-site focus group interviews were conducted in the ten school communities. Each of the six groups interviewed is identified in Table 2. The focus groups produced a large amount of transcript data from over 200 participants. The interview data were firstly analysed and reported separately in Supporting Document 5 by school and group in the ‘school community reports’. What follows is a synthesis of these reports by group.
It is important to stress that this snapshot of ‘typical’ attributes by group summarises views that were expressed across most but not necessarily all of the ten schools and by most but not necessarily all interviewees.

**Year 10 students planning on going to university**

*Year 10 students planning on going to university:* were relatively articulate and confident. Most enjoyed school and were comfortable talking about their positive achievements at school. They tended to distinguish themselves from other students in academic ways recognised by their teachers as being ‘smart’, more motivated and hard working. They tended to have considerably more cultural capital acquired from home and family: they were formally polite, presented more neatly and provided articulate verbal responses to interview questions. Overall, they demonstrated clear matching between student interest, abilities and known educational demands of their future careers.

Though comfortable about their decision to attend university and unlikely to be swayed, they typically had only partly-formed ideas about what they wanted to do post-school, for what reasons and with what likely outcomes. Their understanding of the sort of work they would do as graduates was particularly vague. Beyond the need to achieve ‘success’ at Year 12, they were typically unclear about what ENTER score they would need or the subject prerequisites. These students, despite stated tertiary aspirations, had a limited knowledge of what a university course actually entailed. They showed evidence of a lack of clarity as to what was required to gain entry to courses generally or to a specific course. Many had deferred thinking about what they would actually do until they really needed to.

Most tended to associate university with an anticipated career, learning and also social activity. They choose particular preferred universities on the basis of course offerings, proximity and reputation, particularly informed by knowledge from friends and family. However they showed evidence of a disconnection between the reasons for doing a university course and what the course or the job that might flow from it would actually entail. Some were aware that the completed degree would not necessarily get them a job but were happy, with parents of higher socioeconomic status, to ‘go along for the ride’: as long as their parents could afford it.

What they knew about university came not from research or school career advice but from parent, sibling and family university connections, experiences, expectations and advice. They saw their school success as endorsing their abilities and reaffirming their decision to go to university and saw teacher’s role to push and encourage them, make classes interesting and enable them to achieve the entry requirements set by the university. The student’s decisions to attend university were seen to be external to the influences of school. Their specific university aspirations were strongly shaped by extracurricular activities and family connections that put them in touch with other students and university campuses, particularly in Melbourne. Rural students in particular were clearly aware of the likely need to move away from home and of the implications and costs of travel and accommodation. However there was a relatively limited understanding of the levels of income support they would require or their eligibility for such support, particularly for first children in a family.
These students displayed a limited knowledge of tertiary (university or TAFE) opportunities particularly locally but also elsewhere other than through family or personal experiences. They almost universally ruled out TAFE as an option, even as a ‘Plan B’. Most had a significant adult somewhere in the background, not necessarily a parent urging them on. Often it was a sibling who preceded them in being first to go to university or who encouraged then to go. Many students identified teachers as influences, though more because of their expectations of them than personal interest in the students and most had carefully selected Year 10 work experiences that they thought matched their university aspirations.

**Year 10 students not planning on going to university**

Year 10 students not planning on going to university tended, compared to students with university aspirations, to be more independent, resilient and street wise, driven more by the immediate goals of post-school income but nevertheless to be poorly informed about their longer term post-school options. They tended also to be more suspicious, less confident and reluctant in interview to fully engage in group discussions about their futures. There was evidence of considerable bravado about their sometimes vague and partly formed plans to leave school, even when the realistic options appeared to the researchers to be limited. They tended to have always known they would not go to university, particularly those who were oriented to undertaking a trade.

Students without university aspirations displayed a very limited theoretical and practical knowledge of university as well as TAFE, particularly those students from smaller rural towns without a local TAFE. Their knowledge of most post-school options other than work locally was severely limited. They typically had clear and good reasons for not wanting to go to university and for ‘escaping’ from school. They tended to regard university expense as a significant deterrent. To participate in university would be to pointlessly defer income and engage in an illogical and meaningless academic and social activity.

TAFE was regarded, compared to university, as comparatively closer, quicker, cheaper and less likely to impinge on paid work. These Year 10 students were typically very clear about what trade and job they wanted to do, and why. Most had a desire for hands-on experiences as well as for work connected in some way to local, parental or family occupations and associated precedents, networks and businesses on which they based their choices. Most were generally resigned, very reluctantly, to stay at school at least until a job or apprenticeship had been lined up. Meantime they were typically ‘waiting for something to happen’ to them at school, and actively exploring options beyond school. They were quick to recognise systemic failures in schools and particular failings in teachers they did not like or respect and who did not respect them. They preferred that the school curriculum be directed to their own life experiences and projected a desire for employment rather than ‘stuff that they don’t really need for jobs’.

Most were keen to learn, but had long been ‘sick of’ and ‘bored by’ learning at school. They were ripe to ‘get out into the real world’, get a job and have some money and a car. They often expressed a desire for more say over the form, content and
context of their learning and showed minimal interest and some hostility toward the academic (and forthcoming VCE) curriculum. However some were attracted to VET, had positive perceptions and a good knowledge of VET in schools and VCAL and school-based apprenticeship options. They shared a fondness for a small number of individual teachers who appeared to understand them. They tended to like activity at school. Some admitted to being capable learners: however school and the way they tended to be taught were not related or connected to their lives. While they generally recognised teachers as supportive, they claimed they found school repetitive, easy and the learning too passive. Most had a very limited knowledge of ENTER scores or their implications. They shared their family expectations about the perceived benefits of job security in a trade qualification. They displayed limited career aspirations but clear aspirations for money, a home and particularly for boys: a car, sport and outdoor activity.

TAFE was seen as a better and more practical option, though their knowledge of TAFE and particularly the local TAFE was surprisingly limited. Other than knowing it is practical and hands on but it was seen as ‘a bit like school’. TAFE without related work generally did not attract them. They were sceptical of the value of university though their knowledge of university was even more limited and superficial. University was seen as being like ‘doing more school’, that they typically hated. Most were bursting to get out of school for very carefully thought out reasons. Ideally they wanted paid work and they saw constructive work as attractive. They had a strong work and social ethic and were keen not to become bludgers, on the dole or dependent on others. Many got the work ethic from their current work, which was seen as a natural progression post school to which they were already culturally conditioned. They had what they wanted to do and where they wanted to go post-school firmly shaped particularly by negative experiences of school.

If from rural schools beyond regional cities, most students would leave town if they had to for work, but would tend to prefer to go to the regional cities rather than to Melbourne. Whether they were likely to leave the area (or not) was particularly affected by whether they wanted to retain contact with family and friends (which most girls were positive about). Some were attracted by the idea of living, working and socialising somewhere else (which most boys were positive about).

Parents of Year 12 students planning on going to university

Parents of Year 12 students planning on going to university were proud, articulate, supportive and totally understanding of their child’s early decision to go to university, particularly if their child’s chosen career required or would be enhanced by a university degree. They were prepared to allow their child to decide, and stand by their child’s typical choice of a higher status, Melbourne university over the lower status and more limited offerings at the regional alternative. Nevertheless most expressed a personal preference for a closer choice so students could come home if they needed to and were concerned about the likely further erosion of regional university options because of the cost and difficulties of living away from home, particularly in Melbourne.

Many tended to have university or other study experience themselves and recognised the longer-term advantages for their children of ‘going away’ to university. They saw
university as a desirable but difficult and costly, long-term option for the family and the student, without clear vocational outcomes from generic degree courses in particular. They were very informed about what processes were operating at the point of selection and had a good understanding of the teachers and the school. However they understood that going to university realistically meant that their children were leaving home and family in most cases, and mentally prepared their children and themselves for that reality very early on.

While parents recognised deferral as a realistic option they were concerned that a year away from study and in work might break their child’s focus and aspiration for a professional career. They were particularly concerned about how their child would cope the following year, balancing a need to do the university work, undertake new domestic and part-time work roles and exercise new social freedoms. They perceived considerable risks of ‘losing the plot’ and ‘dropping out’ in first year in particular. They recognised that particular, highly motivated groups (mainly girls) in the school with a desire to attend university tend to band together, often against peer pressure, and commit themselves to working towards a life at university.

Parents were particularly informed by recent university experiences of their older children, friends and family as well as their own study and life experiences but otherwise had very limited knowledge of the possibilities and implications of independent financial status on income support for students. Those parents who knew about income support were typically less likely to need it. Those who would benefit most from income support often did know about it unless they had older children who were already studying and living away from home. Most parents totally dismissed TAFE as a pathways option for their children other than as a less preferred final ‘backstop’ or as a ‘back entrance’ to university, and had very limited knowledge of other VET options.

**Parents of Year 12 students not planning on going to university**

Parents of Year 12 students not planning on going to university were supportive and totally understanding of their child’s definite, early and rational decision not to go to university and were not well informed about university. What they did perceive is that university was abstract and not practical and their children were not ‘equipped’ to go to university.

Most parents recognised that school had tended to deal their child ‘a difficult hand’, including low aspirations, inability to cope with the academic subjects, not liking school and not being good at school. They wanted their children to be happy and secure and recognised the school tended, despite its best efforts, not to do that for them. Many recognised that it was sometimes better off leaving school and working than having their child’s nose ‘rubbed in’ more of what they don’t like and can’t succeed at. Some recognised and recounted an event in the student’s school or work life that confirmed the decision not to undertake tertiary study and go to work instead. Often that event was part-time work with a family business or Work Experience organised through school in Year 10.

Most parents of students without university aspirations recognised the social pull of Melbourne and the temptation of peers getting jobs without education or training.
They expected, in the short to medium term, that their child would stay at home to earn money, but (particularly if male) might leave the town or the region for better work opportunities. In general, they anticipated that their child would most probably eventually work and train locally or regionally and recognised that female students in particular have work choices circumscribed by existing emotional, family and social relationships.

Parents were broadly supportive of VET pathways as a quicker and cheaper option than university, but had very little knowledge or experience of VET/TAFE options, locally or elsewhere, even when it formed part of their child’s plan. They had a reasonable knowledge of TAFE but saw TAFE as an option best combined with work, though at best a ‘backstop’ to work. They perceived that teachers tend to push high achievers harder. They also perceived (and were reluctantly supportive of) encouragement from the school to remain at school until Year 12, unless there was a definite and ongoing job to go to. They saw VET in schools and particularly VCAL as positive in that it prevents students from leaving early without a job to go to.

**Teachers**

Teachers recognised that many Year 10 student had very little realistic notion, particularly prior to school-based Work Experience programs, about what they wanted to do (and what was possible) post-school. They also recognised that school Work Experience eliminated possibilities as much as confirmed intentions.

They saw Year 12 as problematic, attempting to represent the competing interests of the school, students, parents and policy and were critical of the way the VCE was used to enable universities to offer student places in much the same way as a ‘tail wagging the dog’. While they claimed to have tried to give students ‘politically correct’, equivocal advice, but nevertheless in most other respects they articulated a hierarchy that overtly or covertly placed university above TAFE, knowledge above skills and academic above vocational as well as school above work.

They typically felt isolated from the information flows (including current research and policy) that would enable them to counsel their students more comprehensively. They felt that their pathways work was essentially to advise students independently of parents rather than with parental input and considered that student post-school choices were heavily influenced by student peers. Teachers emphasised the small and local worldview many students held of post-school study and work possibilities and the daunting and unknown nature of universities, particularly of the larger inner city campuses. They were also critical of the impact of tertiary selection processes on an increasingly diverse group of students encouraged to remain at school until Year 12, but who weren’t necessarily being served by the existing curriculum.

Teachers challenged the dominant position allocated to universities as post-school destinations and saw VCAL as one solution. However they were often torn in terms of their own positive experiences of academic learning and a recognition that what they and the school were doing was not working in the best interests of a large proportion of students. They said that they tried not to give specific advice to students about jobs and careers in order not to personally influence students by their own study or career path. They claimed to try to give students the necessary information to make their
own, informed choices about university and recognised parents and family (including siblings) as having the most significant informal influence on post-school choice. They considered that while parents needed to work in partnership with parents, they tended to ‘leave it to the school’ if they lacked the necessary experience or resources to advise about tertiary options.

Most teachers encouraged all students to stay on until Year 12, but particularly supported and mentored the most academic students with the highest university aspirations. Academic student success was seen to reflect also on their professional expertise as teachers. Careers coordinators and teachers were very careful to try to be ‘politically correct’ and tow the school line on the school culture, advising against early school leaving and encouraging high academic aspirations. However careers coordinators, amongst all interviewees were the first to concede that for some students more school and particularly more academic curriculum was sometimes inappropriate.

Teachers were generally poorly informed about TAFE but much more familiar from their own experiences with university. They were coming around to the idea that a growing range of VET/TAFE options led to lower costs (in fees, living away from home and travel) and allowed young people to stay closer to their family and benefit from their support. However they saw that these changes were difficult to implement within the limitations of a school timetable and a curriculum that remained largely subject and exam-based. In general teachers felt that both teachers and students were responding to the current discourse about the push for trade jobs and skills.

Like students and parents, teachers recognised the significant value of work experience in Year 10, allowing students to realistically try out (and confirm or reject) early job choices and roles. They recognised that the school was effectively required to publicly endorse the high status university destination and high ENTER scores and university as the culmination of a successful school experience to compete with other schools and conform with widely held community perceptions that university degrees were inherently valuable. Meanwhile they were required, with considerable difficulty, to quietly accommodate the needs of the majority students not going to university or to such high status universities where score mattered.

Teachers saw affordability, specifically the high and long term cost of university as a high and growing deterrent to higher education participation. They saw the HECS debt issue as ‘huge’ and found it difficult for many families to justify or ‘explain it away’ as being a sensible debt. Like most parents, they generally did not know or understand the importance of income thresholds for independent study status post-school, unless they were parents of university-age children. They recognised and had experience (sometimes their own or through their children) of the fears, costs and practical difficulties of leaving a close knit family and community in the country and attending a city university, particularly for the first child in the family. Like parents, they also talked about ‘mini-communities’ of former students from the school who had moved to Melbourne and who had tended to stick together post-school.

Most teachers recognised that despite the difficulties, in the absence of local and comprehensive, high status university alternatives, the ‘best and brightest’ students from the school would leave and study in Melbourne at the highest status institutions they could gain entry to with their ENTER. To do otherwise was seen as ‘throwing
the ENTER away’. Nevertheless they saw the academic school curriculum as a significant deterrent to Year 12 completion and recognised, particularly in smaller schools, that the curriculum was limited and shaped by very difficult decisions about whether to support the academic or vocational streams. These decisions were necessitated by limited minimum class sizes at senior levels.

Teachers supported the idea of local apprenticeships ‘for those that can’t’. They held a supportive, ‘soft spot’ for the regional universities but not as a destination for the high achievers whom they recognised and encouraged to go to the ‘big pond’ in Melbourne and to select university on status. This rank in status was based on a shared and widely acknowledged ‘peck order’ based primarily on ENTER scores. They recognised that high achieving country girls were more likely to aspire to go to university than boys were. Finally, they encouraged alternatives to Open Days that involved school visits and presentations to all students and also inviting past students back to tell their stories.

**School leavers from 2003 who did no go directly to tertiary study**

The school leavers from 2003 who were interviewed in person were primarily those who had deliberately (or by default) stayed in the same town in which the school was located and in which the interview were conducted. The summary below therefore tends not to include or account for students who moved elsewhere to live, work, study or train.

School leavers from 2003 who did no go directly to tertiary study: had their choices toward learning and work shaped very much by negative experiences and attitudes towards school. They were particularly affected by non-school factors (including relationships) that prevented them from leaving or which were not strong enough to draw them away permanently. They usually got jobs quickly and opportunistically and had undertaken some form of intermittent training ever since. They were particularly influenced by the part-time job they had while still at school, that often continued and expanded: and sometimes led to accredited training and/or a trade associated with that work. Most were unlikely to leave the town or suburb as long as they held onto their current job or relationships.

In general they took less direct, though logical paths to training and to work, mainly through work. They usually accepted a compromise between what they knew they could do elsewhere, their desire to be employed and live locally and to save money by living at home. They recognised that the likelihood of promotion through education in their current job and town were limited, but were content to work and train to advance through their work organisations from the ‘bottom up’.

Looking back, they found Year 12 in particular a very stressful but enjoyable social experience and saw the need for schools to better validate and articulate the VET and work options. In general they were content with the local vocational and life path they had deliberately chosen, particularly the employment, and the local family and community supports and did not see, particularly in retrospect, that going to either university or TAFE was or would have been an advantage. They tended to be the first to complete Year 12 in the family, through many either ‘coasted’ or ‘just scraped through’ schools. Most had undertaken some part-time, post-school training related
directly to their current work. Surprisingly many still had a fairly limited knowledge of TAFE and did not contemplate going to university in the foreseeable future.

They were very aware of the high economic and social cost of leaving home and relocating, particularly to Melbourne and perceived, in retrospect, that the teachers and the school expected and pressured everybody to ‘go on’ to university. They were aware that many of their peers (including friends) had moved away and also moved on. They were acutely aware of peers who went to university and who are not succeeding, not fulfilled, going nowhere, short of money, coping with high study loads and meantime racking up a huge HECS debt. Some peers they knew were ‘dropping out’ of university.

**How are post-compulsory options in peri-urban schools different?**

Three schools in the ten-school sample were peri-urban, being towards or just beyond the edge of metropolitan Melbourne. While these three schools (in Melton, Lilydale and Rosebud) had high accessibility (ARIA+ values approaching zero) and none of the schools was close to university campuses with comprehensive course options, there was some potential for students to attend a local campus or else commute to universities in Melbourne. The interview data were different enough from these peri-urban schools to warrant brief consideration of how the data were different from regional and particularly rural schools where there was no option to commute.

*To travel or not to travel*

Rural and regional students who are wishing to attend a Melbourne-based university typically have no choice about whether to move out of home and relocate to the greater Melbourne area. It is rarely a viable option for regional and particularly rural students to stay living at home and travel each day to Melbourne. Interviewees in our study reported that this move to Melbourne required them to find accommodation in areas with which they were not familiar or naturally drawn but which were in reasonably proximity to their chosen university. With this move goes a disconnection with existing family living arrangements and the emotional and social support that may be available through those arrangements. Such students were very aware of the need to cover the costs of travel, accommodation, and living away of home. For most students this would also mean finding a new part-time job in their new residential area.

However, like many higher education students living in the family home in the inner suburbs of Melbourne, those school students from three peri-urban schools in our study who wanted to attend a Melbourne-based university had more choices. They included the choice to stay at home, travel or to move closer to the university. This decision was central in the thinking of the students, their parents and teachers in peri-urban schools. Students perceived that staying at home meant lower living expenses, higher travel costs but also a relatively large amount of time spent travelling back and forth. In contrast, living out of home and closer to a Melbourne-based university meant substantially higher living and accommodation expenses, cheaper travel costs and much lower travel time each day.
While acknowledging these concerns parents and teachers in peri-urban schools had additional concerns shared by many regional and rural parents. They expressed apprehension for these students around the transitions required in moving out of home and to greater autonomy and independence. Most parents saw living independently in Melbourne as a student as presenting a risk for their children. Parents felt that their children needed financial, emotional and social support in order to live away from home and were very active in considering ways that these could be provided. Most parents saw that they had a major part to play in meeting the costs of living away from home. Alongside the need to meet these costs they initially found options like living in campus-based accommodation or with family relatives closer to the university. Parents and teachers cited examples of ‘very clever’ students they knew, who had moved to Melbourne to attend university, and who for economic, social, and/or emotional reasons had not been able to successfully complete their studies. These examples seemed to weigh heavily on parents thinking.

Job options and gender segmentation

The other area where there were differences between the data collected in the peri-urban schools and those in the rural and regional areas was in the availability of relatively good jobs for young men. Most of the male school leavers who didn’t go onto higher education in 2003 reported that they found traineeships and especially apprenticeships in what they considered to be good or desirable occupations. Some told of the ease in which they found full-time paid work in traditional trades. Others had reported that they had found and tried a few different trades.

Paid employment in traditional trade areas for young men was seen as a particularly lucrative option that was being taken up by these past students. These respondents told how these jobs required only minor maintenance changes to existing living arrangements and to existing networks of friends. They perceived the security of a known career path in areas of current skills shortage and access to further and vocational education related to their trade. In addition, the access to money through their full time paid employment gave them the potential to buy a car and live reasonably well.

The story reported by female school leavers was somewhat different. Most young women interviewed had received a substantial amount of information on job and study options as part of their school studies but had still been unable to decide what to do post-Year 12. They reported feeling very confused and torn between going on to full time study, and what that might mean about leaving home, family and friends. Many reported going into ‘a wait and see what happens’ mode. In contrast to the young men, successfully passing VCE meant little in the way of immediate new job options. Instead they typically opted to continue with their same part-time jobs in fast food outlets, hospitality, and supermarkets. Sometimes the change simply meant increasing the number of hours that they had worked when they had been doing their VCE studies.
Summary of findings by group

Year 10 students planning to go to university in rural, regional and peri-urban schools have very different and divergent views of school learning as well as anticipated post-school learning plans, from those of their peers who do not plan to go to university. These divergent views have their roots in very different perceptions and experiences of success at school together with family knowledge and experiences of higher education. The ‘typical’ group characterisations that follow, while they do not apply to all group members, are based on solid survey and interview data.

University aspirants in Year 10 have typically had happy and successful experiences at school. Their aspirations are strongly supported by both teachers and parents as well as by experiences of considerable school success. They are resolved, with parent support, to move away if necessary from parents, friends and family and accrue a debt to be paid off over many years, for a distant and sometimes vague professional goal. Learning styles closely coincident with those of most secondary teachers excites them. They are typically motivated by and benefit from formal class-based pedagogies.

Apart from parents, families and siblings, it is the activities outside of school beyond the subject-based curriculum (such as sport, part time work, leisure interests, music and debating) that most shape and inform these students about the opportunities beyond school and their home town or suburb. After the ENTER score achieved, Year 10 students who aspire to university, along with their parents, see financial factors, specifically the cost of tuition and moving away from home, as being the biggest impediments to proceeding to university.

Students without university aspirations in Year 10, by contrast, are typically ‘sick of school’. They have a keen desire to leave school to work and learn hands on, earn some money and keep the rest of their life and friendships in balance. Their post-school plan mostly centres on learning and advancing through work. Any associated training is kept to the minimum required for their paid work role. The desirable work they seek has been identified though part-time work as well as through networks, experiences and opportunities associated with family members or family businesses.

Most students, parents and teachers interviewed had very limited experiences and knowledge of vocational education and training (VET) options. Informed knowledge about the closest university and the local TAFE (Technical and Further Education) campus were both surprisingly limited. Compared to TAFE, university learning tends to be typically perceived as much less practical or hands on, overrated in terms of the jobs people get afterwards, much less value for money and taking too much time for too little gain.

With some exceptions amongst university aspirants, Year 10 students typically have a surprisingly limited knowledge of ENTER scores and unrealistic expectations of the score and the combinations of subjects they would need to achieve entry to the tertiary course or job of their choice. They anticipate much less change in their intended career than they are likely, on average, to experience during their lives.
Year 10 students in rural, regional and peri-urban schools in our study showed remarkably consistent aspirations. Those students in smaller, less accessible rural schools (along with their parents) are more resigned than students in larger urban schools to the requirement of moving away from home to work, train or study. They are also less likely to have access to or knowledge of a local TAFE. Physical remoteness and the higher costs involved in going away to attend university are in some ways ‘taken as given’ in the least accessible rural schools.

The costs of HECS and the need for financial support from their families are the most important barriers to attending university for most respondents, regardless of their location. The cost of living away from home, while significant for rural students, is less of an issue for relatively accessible regional and peri-urban school respondents with local university or TAFE options and aspirations.

Both survey and interview data confirm that most members of the rural and regional school community (students, teachers, and parents) prefer to learn from work or on the job. Year 10 students particularly benefit and learn from school-based Work Experience, part-time paid work undertaken while studying and extracurricular activity. All these experiences provide a current, practical and very valuable source of information and inspiration that there is rewarding work beyond and after school. These experiences complement what students know and learn informally about post-school options from their parents, peers, family, siblings and other sources.

Teachers’ professional aspirations and learning preferences in the schools we studied are similar and relevant to the minority of students aspiring to university. Teachers have very limited experiences of non-university pathways or hands on, work-based pedagogies that many young people prefer and typically experience through vocational training or work post-school.

Survey and interview data show that, while rural and regional students have a wide range of positive and negative experiences of learning at school, few are passive ‘victims’ of school-based learning. Most are active agents in defining and creating their own futures. They know what and how they want to learn. While students are forced to submit to high stakes assessment in post-compulsory years, their sense of future is shaped more by forces outside school than by school. Almost all students surveyed regarded an interest in the type of work they will eventually do and happiness with both social life and work as most influential in their choice of work. In this sense, education and training for most young people is a ‘means to an end’ rather than intrinsically interesting and rewarding.

The survey data clearly reveal the similarity in preferred learning styles between Year 10 students with aspirations for higher education and the preferred learning styles of their teachers. Year 10 students who have experienced academic success at school are generally rewarded and supported by parents who share and support their university aspirations. They have usually been mentored and supported by teachers who understand, share and perpetuate their learning preferences, as well as by schools that publicly ride on their publicity generated by their university successes. Year 10 students with aspirations for higher education are even more positive and optimistic about universities than their parents, who anticipate underwriting the possible pitfalls and considerable financial costs and risks associated with university study. Like the
students, parents accept the reality that most students who ‘go away to university’ will have to leave home and their communities, probably seldom to return to that same community.

Those Year 10 students who do not enjoy or do well in formal learning contexts and assessment tend to find some positive social meaning at school but are generally committed to leaving school to work and start earning in the medium term before Year 12 or immediately afterwards. Their curiosity to learn for learning’s sake has typically been ‘knocked out of them’ over many years. They say they will learn what they need to for work and no more. For these students, TAFE and particularly university would be like more school, and a tertiary aspiration is only present if it is seen as a means to access desirable, paid work.

The path to employment through higher education is regarded, even by those students who have chosen that path, as becoming increasingly difficult, expensive, optimistic and idealistic. The decision to decide to undertake higher education is all the harder because of the personal social, family and economic consequences of the choice. This is particularly because of the very different life consequences of ‘going away’ to university compared with the consequences of choosing not to go to university.

The influences and short-term benefits of work in parallel to school, both as an immediate post-school pathway and as an incentive to further learning, are important for Year 10 students. All members of the school community claim to have learned or expect to learn most of the skills required for work at work or on the job. University, home, school and TAFE (in that order) are widely perceived as similarly ranked, second-order sites for learning about the world of work.

Most students who left school without proceeding to study or further training claimed that their attitudes towards learning and work were shaped by negative experiences and attitudes towards school. In addition non-school factors (including social lives and relationships) prevented them from leaving or were not strong enough to draw them away permanently. They were unlikely to leave the town as long as they held onto their current job or maintained their existing partners or social relationships. They were aware that many of their peers (including friends) have moved away and moved on, but are also aware of the high economic and social costs of leaving home and relocating, particularly to Melbourne.

In the schools we studied most students who left school without proceeding to study or further training and who remained in their hometown or district secured jobs quickly and opportunistically. Almost all had undertaken some form of intermittent training and work ever since, related directly to their current work. Those that remained in the same town or district told about how they had accepted a medium-term compromise between what they know they could do by moving elsewhere, and their desire to be employed, have a car and save money by living at home. They recognised that the likelihood of promotion through education in their current job in that rural town or region was limited, but they were resolved to slowly work through an organisation that employed them from the ‘bottom up’. They were generally content with their vocational and life path in the three years since leaving school. Even in retrospect, they did not see that going to either university or TAFE would have been an advantage and did not contemplate going to university in the foreseeable
future. They perceived that their teachers and the school expected and pressured everybody to ‘go on’ to university and therefore found Year 12 in particular very stressful.
Conclusions

The conclusions that follow are divided into two parts. The first set of conclusions under the heading ‘Factors contributing to lower participation in education’, directly address the original research sub-questions. The second set ‘Overarching conclusions’ present some new, broader findings available for our study that cut across the specific questions and informs our second main research question ‘What approaches could be used to raise the aspiration to participate in higher education?’

Factors that contribute to low participation

Factors including current experience of learning that affect post-school choice for Year 10 students

Year 10 students who plan to go to university have different views of school learning as well as different post-school learning plans from the Year 10 students who do not plan to go to university. These divergent views have their roots in different perceptions of learning and different experiences of school and the support of others to go on to further learning.

University aspirants in Year 10 have typically had happy and successful experiences at school and have been reinforced in their aspirations by their school success. They are resolved, with the support of their parents, to move away from home, friends and family and pay a lot of money (or accrue a substantial debt) over many years. They have learning styles closely coincident with their secondary teachers, and benefit from formal pedagogies. Apart from parents, families and siblings, it is extracurricular activities that most shape and inform these students about opportunities beyond school particularly about university. After the ENTER score achieved, Year 10 students who aspire to university and their parents regard financial factors, specifically the cost of HECS and living away from home, as being the biggest impediments to going to university.

Year 10 students who do not have university aspirations, by contrast, usually have not enjoyed school. They typically say they are ‘sick of school’ and express a keen desire to leave school to work and learn hands-on to earn some money. Their stated plans post-school mostly involve work, but any associated training, they say, will be kept to the minimum required for their work role. The desirable work they are seeking has been identified though part-time work, family networks and family businesses.

These differences raise important questions about when and in what ways schools can best communicate post-school options to parents, as well as about what should actually be communicated. Efforts to inform students about university options seen to be much more effective for students whose parents are already informed through their own or their family members’ university experiences, networks and associations.

By virtue of their university backgrounds, teachers generally have limited experience and knowledge of vocational education and training and are inclined to diminish TAFE and regard it as a second, lesser choice. Perhaps for this reason, TAFE was presented as an ‘escape’ from school in a way that university was not. Knowledge of
TAFE is particularly limited amongst parents, Year 10 students and teachers. Compared to TAFE, university tends to be seen as much less practical or hands on, overrated in terms of the jobs people get afterward, of less value for money, and taking too much time for too little gain.

With some exceptions, amongst university aspirants, most Year 10 students have a surprisingly limited knowledge of ENTER scores and unrealistic expectations of the score and the combinations of subjects they would need to achieve entry to the university course of their choice.

At the risk of oversimplifying a diverse range of attitudes amongst interviewees, Table 3 summarises the general polarities of choices we identify amongst Year 10 students choosing to go either directly to university or work. We have labelled the group not planning on going to university ‘Headed for work’ deliberately. We believe it is more accurate to acknowledge this group as, in the main, being positively motivated by the prospect of work rather than not being motivated to go to university. For most of the Year 10 group ‘without university aspirations’, university had already effectively been ruled out by a combination of factors including location, family finances, family or community culture and attitudes to school and learning. University was in effect irrelevant to their vocational interests and learning preferences compared to work.

Table 3 Polarity in attributes of Year 10 students headed for university or work

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attributes</th>
<th>Yr 10 Headed for university</th>
<th>Yr 10 Headed for work</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student ambitions</td>
<td>Professional career</td>
<td>Job, money &amp; car ASAP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental influence on Uni choices</td>
<td>Informed encouragement to go</td>
<td>Ruled out by circumstance &amp; attitudes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student attitudes to school</td>
<td>Positive, successful &amp; scholastic</td>
<td>Bored &amp; had enough; seen as different to the ‘real world’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World views</td>
<td>Capital city or national</td>
<td>Local or regional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes</td>
<td>Confident &amp; success oriented</td>
<td>Modest ambitions; Less certain beneath the bravado</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preferred learning styles</td>
<td>Individual, formal, academic</td>
<td>Practical &amp; hands on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likely work situations post-school</td>
<td>Part-time while studying at uni</td>
<td>Combined with necessary VET</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to tertiary information</td>
<td>Extensive through parents &amp; self</td>
<td>Limited - through school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likely Year 12 program</td>
<td>Oriented to maximum VCE score</td>
<td>VET in School or VCAL</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ways that post-school aspirations (including for higher education) are similar or different for Year 10 students across schools

Year 10 students in rural, regional and peri-urban schools in our study showed remarkably consistent aspirations for further education post-school. Year 10 students who are unable to see the long-term advantages of deferred gratification associated with full time post school study, go for what they want most, now: the job, the money, the relationships and usually the car.

Respondents in the smaller, less accessible rural schools included in the study sample were more resigned to the fact that students have to move away from home in order to work and study. They are also less likely to have access to or have knowledge of a local TAFE. Physical remoteness and the high costs involved in ‘going away’ to attend university are in some ways ‘taken as given’ in these schools.
Cost of travel to university and of living away from home is also less of a problem for relatively accessible, regional school respondents with local university options. The cost of HECS, living away from home, being supported by families and the lack of good career advice become more important barriers to attending university than for respondents in both more accessible and less accessible schools.

Access by Year 10 students, parents of Year 12 students and teachers to information about diverse post-school options including work

Given that part-time or full-time work is the most likely single outcome post-school for all students, whether they go to university or not, knowledge and information about work should be a priority in the senior school curriculum for all students. Part-time paid work is already very familiar to many students in senior secondary school. Most members of the school community (students, teachers, and parents) state that they learn and prefer to learn from work or on the job. What students choose to learn formally is mainly motivated by their preferences for particular types of work. Based on what we have heard, there is an argument for broadening the focus of ‘career education’ in schools to include more education about work.

Both Year 10 student groups indicate that they particularly benefit and learn from school-supported Work Experience and part-time paid work undertaken while studying. Extracurricular interests are also advantageous to all students. Both of these experiences provide current, practical and very valuable sources of information and inspiration about life beyond and after school. Both experiences also positively complement what students already know and learn informally about work from parents, peers, family and siblings. Teachers, while being exposed daily to children in class, may still be relatively insulated from the everyday informal learning experiences and difficulties that many children and their families face. Teachers’ learning preferences and aspirations are most similar to and mainly relevant to students bound for university. Most teachers have limited experiences of non-university pathways or of hands on, work-based pedagogies that most young people say they prefer and that they will typically experience through post-school work.

Students destined for university are already reasonably well informed about some of the aspects of universities and the courses they offer in particular fields, but have a limited understanding about the work they will actually do as graduates. Most students in the focus groups, even those aiming to go directly to work post-school, see TAFE as either as a fall-back position or what one has to do in parallel with work rather than as a preferred tertiary destination in its own right.

Students' sense of their futures and of the perceived capacity of learning and further education to influence their futures

While students have a wide range of positive and negative experiences of learning at school, few are simply ‘victims’ of school-based learning. Most are active agents in defining and creating their own futures. They know what and how they want to learn and don’t want to learn. They have lives, interests and identities that they cultivate at home and through part-time work, independently of school. While they are forced to submit to high stakes assessment in senior secondary school, their sense of their future
is shaped largely by forces outside of school. Most students regard an interest in the type of work they will eventually do and happiness with both social life and work, as most influential in their choice of work. In this sense, education and training for most young people are more a means to an end than intrinsically interesting and rewarding.

Students who experience success at school are generally rewarded and fully supported by parents who tend to share and support their university dream. They are also supported by teachers who understand them and share their learning preferences. They are more positive and optimistic about universities than their parents, who anticipate underwriting the possible pitfalls and costs. They will probably go on to be lifelong learners if they continue to experience academic success.

Students who do not enjoy or do well in formal learning and assessment contexts tend to find alternative life and informal learning paths through work and remuneration. Their curiosity and enjoyment of learning for learning’s sake has typically evaporated over many years. They insist that they will only learn what they need to for work, preferably hands-on.

**Influences on student, parent and teacher optimism (or pessimism) about post-school education and training, including higher education**

The path through higher education to work is seen, even by those students who have chosen that path, as a difficult and increasingly expensive choice. The social, family and economic consequences of choosing to go to university (particularly if also living away from home) are huge. There is evidence from our research that post-school pathways that lead directly into local work have some perceived short-term benefits. The factors that lead such students directly into work (as well as the longer costs and benefits of this choice) are worthy of further research.

Rural and regional mothers, in particular appear to have a strong influence over their children’s tertiary choices. They have particular concerns about their daughters becoming ‘lost’ in big cities, particularly at city universities. For first children in the family who aspire to attend university, parents tend to prefer the ‘pond’ at the most local, regional university or campus. This choice is not always shared by children, who tend to choose ‘the big pond’, if they get the score required to attend a Melbourne-based university.

**Local factors at play in particular schools shaping student choices including access to higher education**

The local factors at play in shaping choices in particular schools were identified through on site interviews and are summarised within each School Community Report in Supporting Document 5. It is neither ethical nor statistically valid to break the survey data down by individual school.

In some rural schools, school-based apprenticeships are seen as being particularly relevant for boys with an interest in practical, hands-on work learning and for whom the narrow academic curriculum is totally inappropriate. It allows young people to experience the connections between learning and life, an ability to get an income as
they study and to stay in the community they feel most at home in. The trade qualification it gives them provides the option to move and travel elsewhere later.

**Pathways students follow who leave school without proceeding to study or further training**

NOTE: Knowledge of post-school pathways for students who left school without proceeding to study and further training is restricted in this study and in the summary that follows, to those students who still live in the area that they were educated.

Most students who left school without proceeding to study or further training and who remain in the same area had their choices towards learning and work shaped very much by negative experiences and attitudes towards school. In addition, non-school factors (including relationships and a liking for the culture and opportunities offered by a supportive small community and family) often prevented them from leaving. The ‘push’ factors away from the town and the ‘pull of the big pond’ towards regional cities and Melbourne, while acknowledged, were not as strong as the ‘pull’ factors that kept them close to home. They were unlikely to leave town as long as they held onto their current job or relationships. They are aware that many of their peers (including friends) have moved away and also moved on socially, but are also aware of the high economic and social cost of leaving home and relocating, particularly to Melbourne. Many had stories about peers still at university, who three years on had lost their way, accrued huge HECS debts and had limited prospects of relevant professional work post course.

Most got jobs quickly and have undertaken some form of intermittent training and work ever since, related directly to their current work. They took less direct though logical paths to training and to work, mainly through work and have accepted a compromise between what they know they could do elsewhere, their desire to be employed and live locally and save money by living at home. They recognise that the likelihood of promotion through education in their current job in that town are limited, but are content to work through organisations from the bottom up.

They are content with the vocational and life path they have deliberately chosen, particularly the employment, and the local family and community supports it offers. Even in retrospect, they don’t see that going to either university or TAFE is an advantage and don’t contemplate going to university in the foreseeable future. They perceive their teachers and the school expected and pressured everybody to ‘go on’ to university and therefore found Year 12 in particular very stressful. They see the need for schools to better validate and articulate VET and work options.

Boys in this group tended to have somewhat different trajectories than girls. The trades young men enter and the skills they develop through combinations of work, apprenticeships and training tend to provide options for skilled work elsewhere. Young women risk becoming ‘trapped’ in the town in service-based employment without trade-based qualifications. They are also more likely to remain in town to support families and siblings than young men.
Overarching conclusions

These overarching conclusions pull together some of the diverse threads of our research and serve to inform our second main research question, ‘What approaches could be used to raise the aspiration to participate in higher education?’ They also provide a theoretical basis on which the general ‘Recommendations’ towards the front of the report are based.

In keeping with stereotypes, young people we talked with from rural, regional and peri-urban schools who aimed to attend university regarded themselves as being in a minority. They had already distinguished themselves from their colleagues in academic ways and also in term of dispositions and style. They had qualitatively different cultural capital. They were the Year 10 ‘high flyers’, liked and mentored by teachers and perceived as interesting and capable. They were recognised by teachers as more articulate than their peers. Their peers, teachers and parents also saw them as ‘smarter’, harder working and more motivated to succeed than other students. They also perceived themselves, and were perceived by their less academically successful peers, as being the kind of students that teachers liked and supported. Unlike their peers, these students still enjoyed school and were good at it. Achieving university entrance was perceived as both a further mark of distinction and an opportunity to enter a relatively high-paying profession.

Our research provides evidence of, and contextualises, some of the factors that compound and perpetuate rural, regional and peri-urban educational disadvantage and that lie beneath the widely known ‘average’ lower participation in rural and regional areas. Our research illustrates that rural, regional and peri-urban experiences are compounded by a combination of factors, including poverty, existing lower levels of parental education, restricted role models in both education and geographic isolation from education services.

We have provided evidence of the overwhelming importance of distinctive and different school and rural/regional/peri-urban cultures in post-school choice. Dispositions towards education, particularly higher education, are formed in a cultural environment in which communities, personal networks and most families have little familiarity or first-hand experience of university education. This leads to social and cultural barriers to proceeding to university that are at least as significant as the financial barriers and distance barriers. In this sense, a huge social and psychological distance matches the geographic distance to central Melbourne.

It would appear from our qualitative data that the rural, cultural climate is likely to be more inclusive of young males than young females. Job possibilities, lifestyle and recreation in rural areas are overwhelmingly male-oriented. We suggest that the ‘maleness’ of country life and society may, to some extent, weaken the local cultural bonds for young women, who are more likely to give consideration to alternative futures elsewhere including a university future. Boys are more likely than girls to be strongly influenced by rural culture, to see schooling as irrelevant, to regard the rural lifestyle as acceptable if not desirable, and to perceive future employment and lifestyle possibilities in the local area. Girls, as a consequence, may be likely to think more seriously and earlier about a future elsewhere that is more closely tied to
educational achievement. However girls also have stronger familial ties to the local area.

For boys, in particular, given the social and cultural norms of the rural and regional societies in which they live, university, if it is on their horizon at all, is likely to seem less relevant and of little use to them in their foreseeable futures than for girls. And in terms of the possible job futures that are available in the local area, early school leaving is more likely and more understandable for boys than girls. Leaving school to get any job at all typically can look like a good short-term move in these circumstances. For some young people, however, according to our data, the identical circumstances can prompt thoughts of ‘escape’ from the local area through proceeding to higher education. This is most likely to be the case for girls who are experiencing success at school.

The narrow vocational horizons and experiences of most of the young people interviewed are consistent with the small size and/or geographical isolation of the communities more generally. Most young people wanted a job quickly and some couldn’t contemplate or understand people paying for university when they could be getting paid to work. For most, getting a job was the main reason for being at school. For many, the view expressed is that a qualification helps you get the job and, particularly for those planning trade apprenticeships, you put up with the boredom of school only until you find a job to escape to. For such young people, school was seen instrumentally in terms of employment. There was a very limited sense of the joy of learning or interest in knowledge per se.

The early leaving possibility is reinforced as a feasible and desirable option by the obvious presence of early leavers who have found work locally and who frequently intersect with the school-stayers at local sporting and recreational events and when visiting the shops or walking in the main street. Several people (students, parents, and teachers) commented on recent leavers, frequently school resisters, driving past the school at lunch times and showing off. For young people not enjoying school or seeing the relevance of school, the school leavers appear, superficially at least, to have an enviable lifestyle in the short-term.

Financial barriers are clearly huge for students who are contemplating university. When combined with the barrier of the cultural remoteness of university, some initially curious young people seem to stop themselves thinking about the possibility of going to university. Since most rural families already experience socio-economic circumstances well below national averages and communities are in the midst of a severe and prolonged drought, the combined costs of university, travel, accommodation, and living away from home are likely to appear overwhelming and prohibitive.

The financial barriers become particularly acute for rural and regional young people who, because of any number of reasons (such as encountering a teacher or school friend who stimulates their interest in university as a possible future), get to the point of beginning to think seriously about university. The barrier of the costs of HECS, travel and living away from home, can overwhelm their thoughts of a university future at this critical stage. Or, if the dream of university persists, the looming cost can be sufficient, in a culture in which there is little familiarity with university or even
antipathy to university, to tip the balance towards a decision not to proceed. Such ‘backing off’ from proceeding to university is all the more understandable if the potential university student is unsure of what it will take to be successful at university, or is aware of examples of young people who have tried and failed at university.

Our data show that it takes courage for many Year 10 students to step into the unknown and take a definite choice for higher education. Hesitancy about the prospects of university success is likely to occur at precisely the point at which some young people need support and reinforcement. If doubt sets in, the student is likely to consider other options including work or an apprenticeship. Parents, in particular, were acutely aware of the possibility and dangers of their child dropping out and were likely to caution them about this possibility.

The data leave us with no doubt that rural, regional and peri-urban students along with their parents find the cost of HECS extremely daunting. The further cost of living expenses for a child who leaves home for university makes the financial burden of supporting a child at university seem impossible. Yet many young people from diverse low socio-economic backgrounds including many from rural areas do make it to university. Through a combination of Youth Allowance, the ability to repay their HECS debt at low rates through the taxation system, and particularly part-time work, many young people do manage to complete their courses and move into a profession. Substantial hours of part-time work have become the norm for most university students who now work an average of around 18 hours a week in order to fund their study.

Rural young people and their parents therefore need to know that, while it is likely to be difficult, there are plenty of examples of people in difficult financial circumstances completing university studies. Unfortunately, in our sample, parents and students seemed to be more aware of the ‘horror stories’ of young people who dropped out of university in the short and medium term, rather than of the many longer-term success stories. The key point here is that the costs to parents need not be large if their children can secure Youth Allowance and/or part-time work. And the HECS debt can be managed in the future once the young people have left university and need not be an overwhelming financial burden.

It would seem an obvious equity issue that many rural and regional young people and their parents are unaware of the requirements for qualification for Youth Allowance. Many parents simply do not have a the ‘savvy’ or awareness of ways of ‘working the system’ and securing support payments that could possibly make a huge difference in judgements about whether leaving home to attend university was financially feasible.

Parents’ and young peoples’ general lack of familiarity with tertiary education also causes even the ones who want to encourage and support their children to attempt tertiary education to invest undue importance in the ENTER score as demarcating those who can proceed to their chosen course and those who cannot. Our data indicate that many rural people are unaware of the ‘more than one way to skin a cat’ syndrome when it comes to thinking about multiple possible pathways into and through tertiary education. Greater knowledge of these matters, including financial support and alternative pathways would result in at least some additional students and their parent(s) perceiving that a university future is feasible.
It is the cumulative effects of various cultural, social and economic barriers to rural and regional young people proceeding to university that we most want to emphasise. Each of these has a discouraging effect and, together, they are formidable. The extent of the accumulation of barriers has only recently been realised (James, Wyn et al 1998). This realisation forces us to reconsider the concept of ‘access’ to higher education. Used in relation to rural and regional students, the concept is clearly multi-layered. Any policies that might try to provide equality of participation in higher education for such young people will have to address not just issues of physical ‘access’ but also the many other social, cultural and economic barriers to full participation. Consistent with the title of our report, we conclude that, for this group of rural and regional students, ‘Everything is harder’ for those who would like to attend university. As our qualitative data, in particular, show, the barriers are subtle. But the effect is that rural and regional students have to be more determined, more motivated, more everything in order to make it to university and to get through.

In the sense described above, our qualitative data provides illustrative confirmation of the findings of the Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission (Rural Access 2000) report into education in rural and remote Australia. It concluded that the substantial disadvantages experienced by country children amount to a clear case of discrimination. There is also abundant literature on the nature of, and needs of, country schools and teachers. These include the 2006 report of the National Centre of Science, ICT and Mathematics Education for Rural and Regional Australia (SiMERR 2006). Starting from clear evidence that ‘students in metropolitan schools outperformed those in provincial schools, who in turn had a higher mean achievement than students in remote schools’, the report generated more than 100 findings that, if implemented, would contribute to improvements in the teaching of science, ICT and mathematics in rural schools.

The main point we emphasise in own recommendations is that, as our data illustrate, it is the subtle, cumulative and mutually-reinforcing disadvantages and barriers to tertiary participation that have to be understood in order to redress the rural disadvantage. We have highlighted data that provide insights into the social, cultural, educational and economic circumstances of rural and regional young people. Reports such as the SiMERR report make it clear that redressing education outcomes such as the low rate of tertiary participation requires also the examination of factors that negatively affect the education provided in rural schools. The Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission report makes it clear that any redress of the inequity in educational outcomes must be seen as being connected to rural disadvantage and deprivation. These include the precarious state of many rural communities, the decline of services, fewer transport options, disaffection of young people, youth depression and suicide, rural insecurity, low morale caused by drought and rural contraction, low incomes, unemployment, increased risk taking, drug abuse and unsafe sexual activity among the young, retreat of professionals to large towns and cities, high unemployment and poor community health. Educational outcomes would be expected to be awful in these circumstances. The miracle is that schools do as well as they have been doing.

In terms of the obvious factors that affect rural educational outcomes and post-school possibilities, the SiMERR report identifies, among other things, the large number of
vacant hard-to-staff teaching positions, difficulty of attracting and retaining teachers in regional schools, professional isolation of teachers and lack of opportunities for their professional development, shortages of material resources and support personnel, lack of diversity and richness of learning experiences (e.g. excursions, access to cultural performances and sites, and visits by experts), lack of familiarity with educated role models and professionals.

Our qualitative data provide some limited insight into such factors. Our findings are therefore consistent with the principal recommendation of the SiMERR report that ‘a whole-of-government approach to addressing the issues of rural and regional school education be developed in the form of a National Rural School Education Strategy’.

Although students with a firm intention to proceed to university typically said they liked school, many rural students appear to dislike school and regard it as boring and largely irrelevant. There would seem to be a huge need for schools and teachers in rural areas to try whatever it takes to get rural young people engaged in the curriculum. Wherever possible it should allow young people to ‘have multiple opportunities for contextual and authentic learning’ (Sweet 1997), particularly about the school to work transition (Angus 1999, p.31). We realise the difficulty teachers face in making school more appealing, but we recommend that local curriculum initiatives that are relevant and of interest to rural young people need to be developed.
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