RESEARCH PAPER

The sphere of influence that university outreach programs have on rural youth aspirations toward tertiary education

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The CQUni Connect schools outreach program works in regional and rural Queensland schools. The program's design reflects the need to build capacities for careers through tertiary education that enhance self-awareness and inform decision making. It aims to open access to stories and examples of those from similar backgrounds who have successfully navigated the journey to and through tertiary education. This approach allows space for students to contest the binary notion of rural and urban divides, and to imagine futures enhanced by social and cultural capital. Rural youth are among groups who miss out, fall behind or have less positive dispositions towards education. For rural youth, the rural-urban divide may lead to an extraverted sense of place informing identity and perception of outmigration as the only way to fulfil imagined futures. Post-secondary schooling is a crucial life stage for increased social mobility yet financial pressures and lack of educational preparedness make it difficult to access tertiary education. This project uses an action-research design to ensure practice is informed by research. It was expected that findings would show students residing in remote areas (Australian Statistical Geography Standards Categories 3 and 4) would be most influenced by the program enhancing their attitudes towards the benefits of higher education. However, it was Category 2 students who experienced the biggest shift in their belief that university was a possibility for their future post-program. Evaluation of the data shows that gender plays a role in the perception of university as an option. Rurality factors including community norms, family expectations, perceived ability and awareness impact how young people envision their future.

Keywords: widening participation; outreach; aspirations; rural; university; inequality

Introduction

The debate around what constitutes effective education for youth from rural and regional backgrounds and what is considered to be successful is highly dogmatic. From a value sense it is important to contest the simplistic binary of rural (disadvantage) and urban (norm) which positions rural lifestyles in the deficit lens (Cuervo, 2014). This contemporary view is in contrast to historical views which contended that country people should be compensated for the costs of living outside metropolitan areas, which typifies a notion of an interdependence between city and country. In our more metropolitan based society today we have moved away from this interdependence to a more 'unknown-dependence' on rural communities to support our growing

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metropolitan communities without the reciprocation of that relationship (Cuervo, 2014).

The concept of what is tertiary education has also changed in this time, with university study now more accessible. For contemporary youth from rural and regional areas, the opportunities to access and participate in tertiary education are quite different to those of familial influencers who were offered limited access and were often required to move away from family over large geographical distances. They themselves were often influenced by teachers in school who had moved to metropolitan institutions for their tertiary education experience. Rural residents often aspired to futures that resulted in them leaving behind their rural identity particularly when their community workforce needs did not reflect fulfilment of those career aspirations (Bauch, 2001). Education in contemporary society has enabled students to stay local not only during secondary school but increasingly for university as well. This means that more students from regional, rural and remote backgrounds are now accessing tertiary education. However, they often lack access to particular forms of knowledge and capacity for narrowly framed kinds of success in this environment. Therefore, it is important that we take an expanded view of students' capacities and recognise that students come to university with important knowledge and understandings of the world (Gale & Parker, 2015).

University outreach programs aim toward this expanded view of students' capacities and knowledges through widening participation for those from non-traditional backgrounds in regional and rural areas. They aim to provide the opportunity for student voices, by creating spaces which are accessible and inclusive, and where students from regional, rural and remote backgrounds can see stories and examples of those from similar backgrounds who have successfully navigated the journey to and through tertiary education (Gale, 2011). The CQUni Connect program is one such initiative and has been in operation since 2011 in regional and rural areas of Central Queensland. As a member of the Queensland Widening Participation Consortium, its programs and activities have been conducted and are grounded in the view that all students possess aspirations for their future self but that due to regionality or rurality lack the access to particular forms of knowledge or opportunities to pursue those aspirations (Gale & Parker, 2015). This paper will explore the themes and trends that have arisen from several years of long-term investment through the CQUni Connect program into schools in the Central Queensland and southern Cairns regions.

A reflection of outreach programs: Regional, rural and remote

Outreach programs into regional, rural and remote schools are a key tool in widening participation in higher education. One of the most crucial life stages for increased social mobility is access to post-secondary education, but financial pressures and lack of educational preparedness can make it difficult to access further education (Cunninghame, 2017). Rurality can play a major factor on the self-efficacy of young people who typically receive reduced access and exposure to opportunities afforded to their metropolitan and even regional counterparts. Young people frame their understanding and worldview through the social, cultural and economic contexts which they are exposed to (Cuervo, 2014, p. 546). The aspirations of rural young people who perceive they have a lack of mobility as a result of this social, cultural and economic disadvantage can negatively impact their perceived capability in achieving or even imagining futures (Gale, 2011). University outreach programs into rural communities provide a voice for young people who may never have considered university as a viable post-school education option (Gale, 2011). Evaluations have found that students who participate in such programs are more inclined to consider university upon finishing secondary school as a pathway to fulfilling aspirations (Cunninghame, 2017). The CQUni Connect program has been delivering university outreach activities into rural communities since 2011 with the development of a state-wide approach to widening participation in Queensland shortly following the findings of 2008

Review of Australian Higher Education (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008). The widening participation agenda has earlier foundations in the *A Fair Chance for All* policy where people from regional and remote locations were identified as one of the six equity groups believed to be underrepresented in higher education (Gale & Parker, 2015). This literature review will examine examples of aspiration-raising place-based practice that aim to inform career decision making practices for those from rural contexts.

Aspirations are developed within the social context in which an individual is situated, influenced by social and cultural practices of class, gender and race of one's environment (Burke, 2006). Bourdieu (1984) states that these social contexts result in the reproduction of class inequalities, where one's access to social and cultural capital influences chances of educational success. Social networks and access to 'hot' and 'cold' knowledges (Ball & Vincent, 1998) influence capacity to purse new aspirations that are not already deployed in their current social context. Advocating for an expanded view of capacity recognises that individuals come to university with important knowledge and understandings of the world which in turn promotes greater equality (Gale, 2011; Gale & Parker, 2015). Aspiration formation for regional, rural and remote students is not about lacking or low aspirations but rather structural inequities that impact a students' navigational capacities to pursue those aspirations. Even in primary school, aspiration formation and ideas on future careers are taking place with some young people developing the perception that particular pathways are not for them (Archer, DeWitt & Wong, 2014). Unfortunately, many of the necessary avenues for gaining knowledge and information are only afforded to students in senior secondary school, when many students have already made decisions on post-school education pathways. These findings reflect notions of Bourdieu's class inequity, highlighting that aspiration is formed early and influenced by social, cultural and economic factors of the community one is situated in. Outreach and enabling programs in regional, rural and remote locations work to provide opportunities for accessible and inclusive spaces that position voice as a strategy in and of itself toward increasing participation in higher education.

Rural families are often traditionally viewed as having a strong sense of community deeply rooted in relational aspects of space, place and time (Bauch, 2001). In contrast, rurality in contemporary society has become reduced to simplistic notions of being in deficit compared to the view of urban lifestyles (Cuervo, 2014). Rurality influences one's actual or perceived ability in realising or achieving aspirations toward higher education. Rural youth are less likely to aspire to careers through tertiary education when local occupational structures seem not to reward it, thus rural residents who strongly identify with their home are loathe to leave in pursuit of higher education (Bauch, 2001).

National testing demonstrates that the gap in educational attainment between low socio-economic status (SES) and high SES communities widens as students progress through school. This results in lower participation in senior secondary school which often culminates in lower university entrance scores for school leavers from low SES communities (Gale, 2011). Inequalities are further reinforced through lack of quality educational resources and opportunities for those from rural locations in comparison to their urban counterparts (Cuervo, 2014). The relatively low participation of rural youth in higher education demonstrates they are a minority, despite the trending outmigration of rural young people seeking experiences beyond their current location (Cuervo, 2014; Woodroffe, Kilpatrick, Williams & Jago, 2017). Too often this 'higher education problem' is deemed as rural students having low aspirations. There is a multiplicity of factors affecting access to higher education for those from rural locations which reinforce the binary notion of rural and urban futures.

Cultural mobility and social capital of those from rural contexts informs feelings of self-efficacy. A study showed Central Queensland secondary school students gained access to information about university from their families (47 per cent) which influenced their choice of university options. However, only 18 per cent had siblings attending university and 10 per cent of parents had a degree showing a lack of access to appropriate levels of social capital to make informed decisions (Gale et al., 2013). Participants in a study on aspirations and destinations in four communities in western Victoria indicated that their families and teachers were influential in decision making regarding their futures. However, they indicated that they did not feel the same support from their communities, with a significant number not seeing futures for themselves within their community (Ollerenshaw & Murphy, 2011). In this study young people voiced a sense of lack of community understanding and support of higher education, as well as the impediment of financial barriers, and lack of local role models to aspire to. This is affirmed by youth from a small community where the voiced 'higher education problem' was not low aspirations but rather barriers related to economic, geographic, informational, gender and class inequalities. A strong desire to defer higher education was identified, as young people first wanted to attain financial independence and earn money which would support higher education costs (Ollerenshaw & Murphy, 2011). Equity scholarships have been shown to assist young people from rural areas to access higher education by providing financial assistance on a needs basis to low SES students (Cunninghame, 2017).

In addition to factors of geographic, socio-economic and financial status, gender is also a factor in aspiration formation (Burke, 2006). In a study of Central Queensland school students, 47 per cent of males expressed aspirations towards university compared with 71 per cent of females. Additionally those same female respondents tended to aspire to more prestigious careers through education at more prestigious universities when compared with male counterparts (Gale, 2013; Gale & Parker, 2015). This may be a result of collective family histories such as role models in the family who may themselves have previously attended university or education at boarding schools (Gale, 2013). The findings of Gale's research indicate the complexity of this choice and how it goes beyond binary notions of post-school education to what are acceptable constructions of gender. Community norms, values and attitudes often serve to reinforce barriers or deter aspirations not reflected in those communities (Woodroffe et al., 2017). In addition to those barriers, it is detailed how professionals who resided in one rural community tended to send their children to independent schools out of town due to the dominant narrative of disadvantage (Ollerenshaw & Murphy, 2011). Farnhill and Thomas (2017) term these students as *early leavers* originating from families who have some firsthand knowledge of the benefits of education and the necessary social and cultural capital needed to make the transition, while defining those remaining students as *stayers* who may be more likely to feel daunted by the prospect of leaving home and whose parents may not have direct knowledge of higher education. These examples highlight the complexities of rural communities where there is a disparity in social and cultural capital between those who are local (family ties) and out of towners (professional in the community) which add to the layer of *advantage* and *disadvantage* seen in each such community. Gale (2013) surmised the challenge for students in his study stating that while 67 per cent of students expressed a desire to go to university, only half of those students lived within a 50 kilometre radius of a university campus, thus meaning they would need mobility capacity to move out of their geographical context. Students may not have access to transport options or, if they do, it impacts on time to study and work.

There are often tensions for contemporary rural youth between the feelings of tradition and narratives of isolation that emerge as a result of self-orientation towards the experiences portrayed through metrocentric idylls of larger regional and metropolitan centres (Farrugia,

Smyth & Harrison, 2014a). Urban-based lives have come to be the norm and when coupled with the allure of a satisfying lifestyle voiced from the outmigration of other rural young adults it leaves rural youth with an internal battle of individualised versus familial decision about their future (Cook & Cuervo, 2018). Youth cultures which idolise 'cool' urban lifestyles risk marginalising the potential curricula resource that rural communities can be as 'learning laboratories' extending educational opportunities outside the classroom (Bauch, 2001; Farrugia et al., 2014a; Woodroffe et al., 2017). The popular narrative is that those from rural contexts prefer vocational over academic pathways, yet quite often the issue is a lack of depth of subject offerings in both, especially when the interest pertains to 'hands-on' learning (Cuervo, 2014). Often left unexplored is the potential for actually supporting aspirations of youth through school, university and community collaborations. Unfortunately, community norms and values may further impede learning opportunities as young people are discouraged from specific imagined futures which lie outside of the cultural and social capital available within their communities (Woodroffe et al., 2017). This results in what Farrugia et al. (2014a) have termed an extraverted sense of place informing one's identity formation. Furthermore, the increase in rural-urban inequalities have led to a 'mobility imperative' where success is found in leaving behind their rural identity rather than using the capital from it to inform the next phase of one's life course (Cook & Cuervo, 2018).

Rural communities often have a deep sense of familial roots, informing community norms and attitudes through individuals' experiences in key community activation hubs such as schools, which are the glue of a community (Bauch, 2001). When these key community activation hubs are not utilised to provide the glue point for a rural community then a potential disconnect can occur. An example of the potential disconnect was in a small town where school and industry were not thinking of succession planning despite schools in that community operating industry skills programs. This was a missed opportunity for schools to provide youth with access to the social capital of that community and reinvigorate that notion of schools as key community activation hubs (Ollerenshaw & Murphy, 2011). Conversely, another study found future pathways programs in rural Tasmania enabled a non-conventional learning environment which was conducive to creating linkages to real life examples perceived as valuable by students and teachers (Woodroffe et al., 2017). This was beneficial as teachers in rural communities are often younger, less experienced and felt more isolated than urban counterparts. In particular, when having grown up outside of the community, teachers can lack the social capital to gain trust from the community and lack the confidence that their knowledge on what is available to students' post-secondary school is up-to-date (Bauch, 2001; Woodroffe et al., 2017). School and community in rural contexts have a significant role to play in the aspiration formation of young people. Formal and informal career services available through schools are important in shaping aspirations of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds (Archer et al., 2014).

While no two rural communities are the same, carefully designed place-based school-community partnerships often result in feelings of positive community support (Woodroffe et al., 2017). Gale and Parker (2015) argue for a review of widening and expanding participation in Australian higher education that the current nation-bound concept was limited. He called for a broader recognition of the global context which ensures spaces are created for the globalisation of knowledge. It could be argued that the same philosophy be applied to the urban-rural discussion to create a more nuanced view of contemporary Australian society where communities feel empowered to create spaces for realising youth aspirations. University outreach programs can assist by emphasising diverse and informed aspirations rather than focusing on the problem of raising 'low aspirations' which in the long run works to support rural communities to maintain trained professionals across a diverse part of the workforce. The data analysed below will

examine themes of aspiration, rurality and school culture, and the influence a university outreach program has on supporting and raising aspirations of youth in rural communities. By enhancing students' social and cultural capacities in their own context the view is the transportability of those capacities into the future is grounded in more confidence.

Methodology

The CQUni Connect program aims to raise and support aspirations of students from low SES schools, their families and communities towards tertiary study as a real option for their future by developing strong partnerships between schools, students, families, community and the university. Participants in this study were students from primary and high schools in Central Queensland and Cairns considered to be within regional, rural and remote communities. Students attended schools who participate in the CQUni Connect Program, a range of widening participation activities targeted to provide age and stage appropriate career education information.

The research design was an action-research methodology following a four-step model of planning, acting, observing and reflection. The data collection method used was a survey, which included a series of Likert-scale and short answer response questions conducted before and after activities. The methodology used in this study draws on Creswell's (2013) use of mixed methods. Following Creswell (2013), we used a mixed methods approach to gather and analyse quantitative and qualitative data through survey questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, focus groups and informal feedback from schools, parents and industry bodies (Creswell, 2013; Woodroffe et al., 2017). While utilising qualitative methods such as those used by other related studies (Cuervo, 2014; Cook & Cuervo, 2018; Farrugia, Smyth & Harrison, 2014b) would have revealed more of the narrative of participants in the CQUni Connect program, those studies were conducted over a shorter period with a significantly smaller sample size.

In the study presented here, data collection occurred over a three-year period with 11,727 survey responses (6196 before and 5531 after) which revealed many insights into the aspirations of youth from regional, rural and remote schools. Student participants ranged in age from nine years to eighteen years old at the time in which surveys were completed. Surveys were administered anonymously and completed by students voluntarily. The design of the survey was in three components which included the collection of personal demographic information, Likert-scale responses of self-perceived knowledge before and after programs, and lastly, the collection of short-text responses. Given that surveys were administered in this fashion it was not possible to draw connections of individual student's participation within program activities in one year or even from one year to the next. This limited the capacity to adjust program activities to be tailored to individual student journeys, however, it did reveal themes across the population that might not have been revealed in a qualitative-only method focused on interviews as the data collection tool.

Data Analysis

The results gathered on students' perceived belief of being able to attend university showed a gender disparity. Table 1 shows a mean difference (0.5) from *before* to *after* for both male and female respondents. However, for male respondents the mean response beforehand was significantly lower (3.4) when compared with their female counterparts (3.7). This reflects findings of a previous study from similar communities which showed 71 per cent of female respondents viewed university as both desirable and possible for them compared with 60 per cent (desirable) and 47 per cent (possible) of males (Gale et al., 2013). The majority of both

male and female participants responded before and after the program with either a 'definitely' or a 'probably,' which indicates that participants came to the program with some preconceived ideas of the value of a university education for one's future.
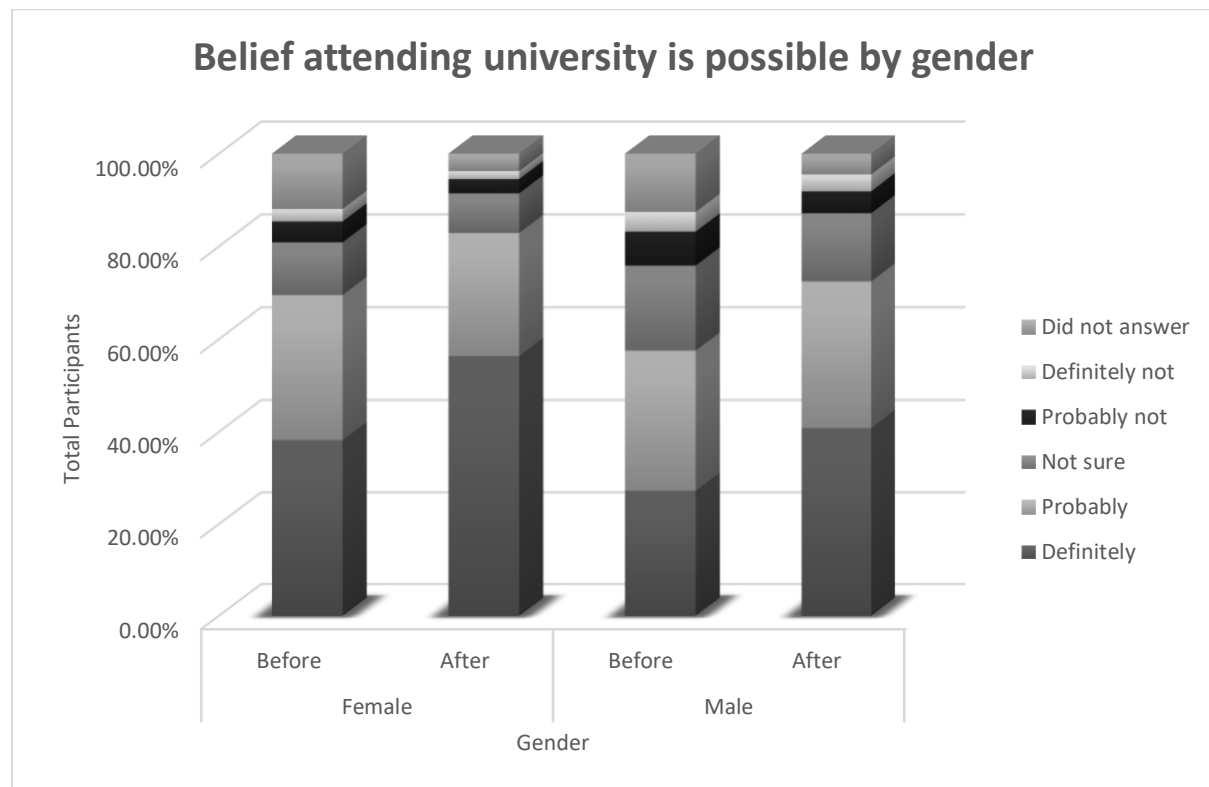
**Figure 1**: Belief attending university is possible by gender

Table 1: Belief attending university is possible by gender

	Female	Male
Mean (Before)	3.7	3.4
Mean (After)	4.3	3.9
Difference	0.5	0.5

Figure 2 (below) shows the post-school pathways that students intended to take before and after the program, based on their responses of their perception of university being possible. As would be expected students who responded with *not sure*, *probably not* or *definitely not* were more likely to select pathways other than university. The results showed a 5.45 per cent increase from before to after the program of students who believed university was possible for them and that it was their intended post-school pathway. This is again significant as it indicates that the program positively impacts the students' awareness and understanding of pathways including but not limited to university. In contrast, when collating the students' responses of TAFE, apprenticeships and work both before and after the program the combined totals exceeded university as the preferred option. Practitioners note that anecdotal responses from student participants at the beginning of the program often indicate interchangeable use of TAFE, apprenticeships or work. These perceptions are associated with the practical (hands-on) nature of the three pathways as opposed to the more theoretical knowledge that is commonly associated with university (Farnhill & Thomas, 2017). The data collected does not indicate what prior knowledge students present with and how this has shaped their imagined futures. Archer et al. (2014) identified that students need to strengthen their knowledge and understanding of careers

during middle school years (Year 6–9) to enhance their social capital. Young people can be discouraged from choosing opportunities to explore 'unimagined' educational or career pathways and in some instances community or family norms may discourage students from taking up such opportunities (Woodroffe et al., 2017). Findings from a study by Farrugia et al. (2014a, p. 1160) revealed narratives that reflected cultural and social resources available to rural youth. Given the age range of students who participated in this study, looking from a practitioner standpoint, students were viewed to have contrasting personal, social and emotional developmental levels, and their awareness and understanding of careers also varied significantly.

Data was not collected to identify specifically the differences between social or emotional development of students but rather to highlight changes in self-perceived knowledge before and after the program. Data compiled by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2018) shows that the proportion of people in major cities aged 20–64 years with a bachelor degree (or higher) was 36 per cent compared to 18 per cent of regional Australia. The lack of community role models who have undertaken university studies in regional Australia may be one factor informing the perceived attainability of university for rural Australians.
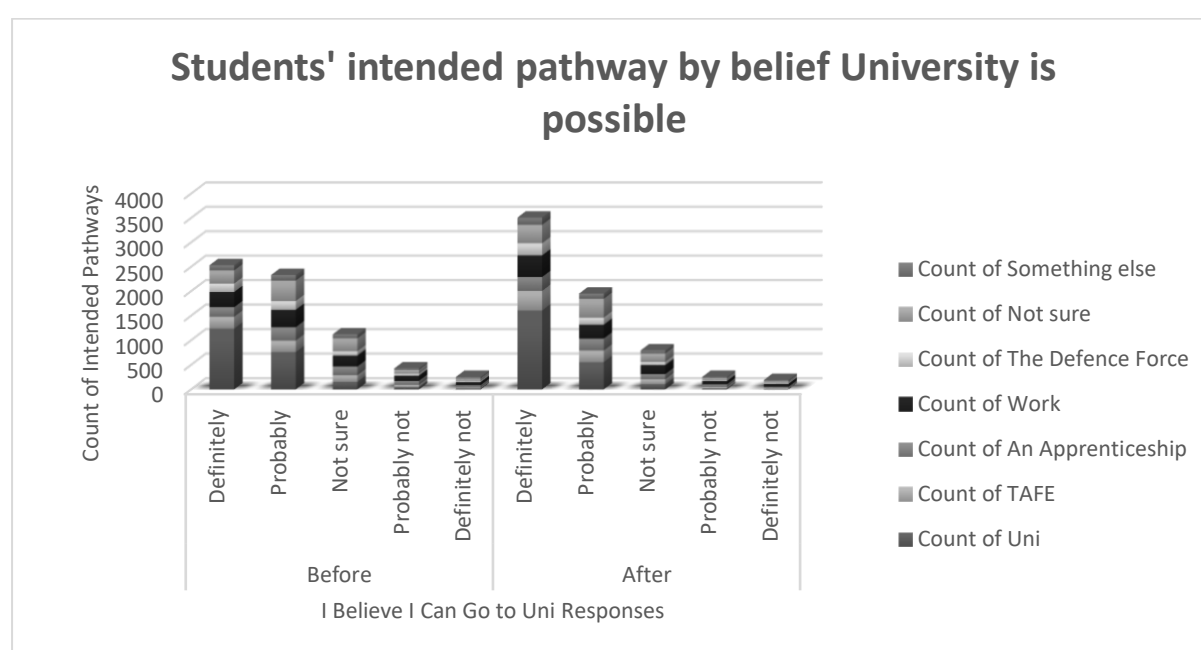
Figure 2: Students' intended pathway by belief University is possible

Table 2: Post-secondary school pathway choices

Post-School Pathway	Before	After
University	31.9%	33.5%
TAFE	10.2%	11.6%
Apprenticeships	11.5%	10.7%
Work	15.6%	15.5%
The Defence Force	7.8%	7.4%
Not Sure	15.8%	15.1%
Something else	4.7%	5.3%
Did not answer	2.5%	0.8%

The results from this study revealed that students from all Australian Statistical Geography Standards (ASGS) categories on average increased in their belief they could go to university

after participating in the CQUni Connect program. The ABS defines Category 1 as inner regional, Category 2 as outer regional, Category 3 as remote and Category 4 as very remote (ABS, 2016). The mean increase before and after varied by remoteness category. The mean increase for each category was:

- ASGS Category 1 +0.2
- ASGS Category 2 +0.6
- ASGS Category 3 +0.2
- ASGS Category 4 +0.3

The mean for before and after responses were very similar for those in ASGS remoteness Categories 1, 3 and 4. While this may be expected for students residing in ASGS Category 3 and 4, due to their remote and very remote residential status, that ASGS Category 2 students had the biggest shift in their response (that they believed they could go to university after participating in a widening participation program) was unexpected.

Archer et al. (2014) argue that young people's aspirations are shaped by what feels right, what feels appropriate and what resources are available to support this. In the rural and remote contexts particularly, this would typically look like aspiration towards fulfilling familial and community expectations, which can lead to the reproduction of the same disadvantage that typifies the urban-rural divide. Students residing in those ASGS Category 3 and 4 schools are geographically isolated from regional centres, which may limit their exposure to role models who have previously transitioned to careers through tertiary education. Without those family networks, or social and cultural resources from the community, the orientations towards the future for rural youth can lack anchors of a social, spatial or temporal nature, meaning aspirations for careers beyond what is visible in their daily social sphere may not be concretely formed (Farrugia et al., 2014b).
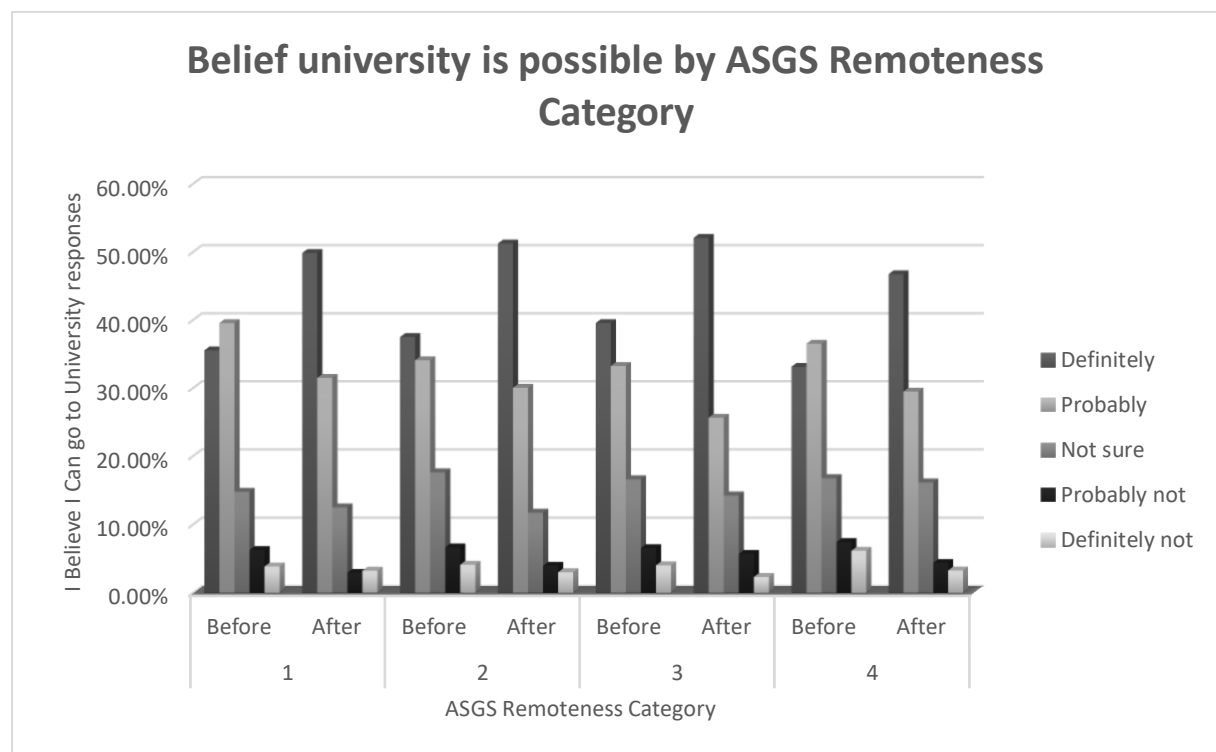
Figure 3: Belief attending university is possible by ASGS Remoteness Category

Conclusion

The research conducted through the CQUni Connect program adds to the discussion around disadvantage and lower educational outcomes for those from rural youth backgrounds. The research found three key themes around gendered differences on aspirations, post-school transition choices and rurality factors which would warrant future research. One of the major findings highlighted traditional gendered aspirations around university not being a preferred post-school pathway. An additional and unexpected finding highlighted the impact that university outreach programs have on those from ASGS Category 2 schools from communities on the periphery of regional towns, which could speak to traditional community and familial expectations despite the geographic proximity to education and employment opportunities. Finally, the study provided further evidence of how university outreach programs play a crucial role in orienting rural youth towards more diverse pathways, enabling greater breadth of skills to bring back to the community.

Further research could examine the influence of teachers, family and community on gendered aspirations to identify strategies that appropriately increase aspirations toward careers through tertiary study for young males in rural communities. For youth from these rural communities familial and community expectations play a significant role. This seems to indicate an importance for outreach programs in rural areas to be social and include families in the information gathering process (Cook & Cuervo, 2018, p. 6). Often parents' own experiences in education and work play a significant role in whether they assign value and thus would participate in such programs.

A further area of research may examine career decision making choices for those transitioning and how these may be impacted by exposure to real world opportunities beyond school. This could involve examining how school-industry-university partnerships can work most effectively and sustainably. Woodroffe et al. (2017, p. 166) commented on how educators had expressed challenges in continuing such exposure within their school beyond the life of the Pathways to Success project, including resourcing and budgets which meant it was not always possible to transport students to continue such activities outside their school. For the CQUni Connect program similar challenges in continuing to resource delivery of both place-based and campus-based activities to rural and remote communities beyond major regional centres may play a role in conducting further research to examine the impact of school outreach programs.

A third area of future research may choose to examine one or more of the multiplicity of factors that contribute to the notion of rurality discussed through this paper. The notion of rurality is merely examined here, however there would be opportunities to consider how enhanced capacities can inform development of social and cultural capital for rural youth. Students from advantaged backgrounds have the financial resources to navigate pathways to careers beyond higher education (Gale & Parker, 2015). For those who are first-in-family or from socially disadvantaged backgrounds financial fears create barriers when considering further education pathways. While concepts of spatial reflexivity and motility are presented here the paper does not reach any sort of fixed conclusion for what non-actualisation of imagined futures or mobility means for people from rural origins (Cook & Cuervo, 2018).

Acknowledgements

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