RESEARCH PAPER

"Should I stay, or should I go?": The mobility paradigm in widening participation for regional, rural and remote students

Chris Ronan[*]
The Country Education Partnership, Australia

This paper examines the key question that rural, regional and remote (RRR) students face when they are considering their post-secondary education pathway: "Should I stay in my community, or should I leave?". It considers the last thirty years of Australian higher education policy to explore how policy discourses have re/produced this 'mobility paradigm', where success for RRR students is defined by leaving their local communities. Australian RRR student identity has been discursively constructed in a way that provides the illusion of autonomy in post-secondary choice for students, but surreptitiously channels individuals into prescribed pathways through a process of differentiation and exclusion. These prescribed 'successful' pathways over-emphasise the need for students to leave communities when considering post-secondary study options – irrespective of what educational choices are locally available. The analysis in this paper draws on Foucault to unpack how RRR student identity has been historically constructed in Australia and offers directions for reconceptualising how education policy has affected RRR student participation in higher education and their geographic mobility.

Keywords: rural; regional; remote; discourse analysis; mobility

Introduction

"Should I stay, or should I go?": this is the core question for rural, regional and remote (RRR) students in Australia who are considering their post-secondary pathways. For a large part of the twentieth century, leaving RRR communities was the only option if a student wanted to pursue higher education. However, since 1989 there has been an increasing diversity in post-secondary options and policy interventions created for RRR communities, with the goal of increasing the participation of these students in higher education within regional areas (Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2019; Zacharias & Brett, 2019; Halsey, 2018).

Despite these initiatives, the widening participation agenda of successive governments has had limited impact on RRR participation rates. In 1989, 19 percent of RRR students went to university (Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET), 1989); in 2019, this remained stagnant at 19 percent (Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2019). Additionally, over this period the number of RRR students leaving their communities to study at metropolitan universities has also increased (Cardak et al., 2017; Norton, 2019). This raises the need to interrogate other forces influencing the decision-making process for RRR students

considering post-secondary study. An under-researched concern is the tension that students feel between staying and leaving a community to pursue post-secondary education (O'Shea, Southgate, Jardine & Delahunty, 2019).

The 'mobility paradigm' of RRR students feeling an inexplicable pull to study in a metropolitan area in order to be successful is a constructed truth that has emerged from the dominant discourse over the last thirty years (O'Shea, 2019; Corbett, 2008). Not only has the sociological literature indicated that the mobility paradigm has been present, but the mobility of regional students moving to metropolitan cities has increased with policy efforts to widen participation, such as the implementation of the demand driven system. Since 2011, there has been a significant increase in the numbers of regional students migrating to metropolitan universities, but the overall participation rate has remained largely unchanged (Cardak et al., 2017).

The analysis in this paper draws on Foucault's genealogical approach to unpack how RRR student identity has been historically constructed. It offers directions for reconceptualising how education policy has affected the geographic mobility of RRR students. This paper provides an alternative lens to view the present and offers another account of how historical policy discourse has embedded certain practices and subjectivities in the identity of RRR students.

This study makes use of multiple texts for genealogical inquiry since the formalisation of Australian RRR students as a specific equity group in 1989 (Dawkins, 1988; DEET, 1989). These texts are federal government policy documents and have been selected due to their inherent ability to influence the construction of a 'truth' around the RRR student identity. The analysis is centred on two pivotal documents, which were created thirty years apart: *A Fair Go*, the regional strategy that established RRR as an equity group (DEET, 1989); and the *Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education* (IRRRRE) (Halsey, 2018). The IRRRRE was selected as it has been widely identified as a conscious attempt to shift the educational discourse for RRR Australia, with Halsey articulating this explicitly (Halsey, 2018; Ledger & Downey, 2018).

Methodology

The focus of this study is to analyse the impact that higher education policy has had on perpetuating the 'mobility paradigm' for RRR students. Using a Foucauldian lens to examine the 'historical dimension' (Tamboukou, 1999) of the two policy documents, the paper unpacks how higher education policy has affected the mobility paradigm and constructed truths around RRR student identity. Interrogating this impact requires more than a textual analysis of the policies; it requires 'reading between the lines' (Foucault, 1980; Ball, 2012). That is, it needs to focus on how RRR education policy discourse has constructed and perpetuated the RRR student identity, and how this has been situated in society over the last thirty years.

Discourse analysis

One of the main purposes of discourse analysis is to provide opportunities for thorough examination of how meaning is constructed and negotiated in socially relevant situations (Carbó, Andrea Vázquez Ahumada, Caballero & Lezama Argüelles, 2016). Discourse is sustained in the epistemological orientation of the 'construction of the social reality', creating versions of psychological and external realities which utilise the concepts of power to generate constructions of identity (Tunstall, 2001; Foucault, 1972). Some researchers define discourse as all forms of speaking and writing (Gilbert & Mulkay, 1984), while others refer to discourse as broader practices that are historically conformed and developed to create meaning through a power-knowledge nexus (Foucault, 1980; Ball, 2012).

Discourse analysis is concerned with ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledges and relations between them. That is, discourses are "more than ways of thinking and producing meaning; they constitute the 'nature' of the body, unconscious and conscious mind, and emotional life of the subjects they seek to govern" (Weedon, 1987, p. 108). Additionally, the Foucauldian lens allows analysis of what is silent and absent in the discourse and acknowledges the impact this lacuna has on shaping the construction of truths for RRR students (Schroeter & Taylor, 2018; Tamboukou, 2003; Weedon, 1987).

Foucault challenged the idea that knowledge is objective and universal, arguing that there is "an inextricable link between power and knowledge and used his concept of discourse in exploring the power-knowledge nexus" (Cheek, 2008, p. 1). Given the subjective nature of the power-knowledge nexus, Foucault contended that there are several possible discursive frames for thinking, writing and speaking about aspects of reality, however these are not always given equal presence (Foucault, 1980; Cheek, 2008). Discourse analysis considers these alternate discursive frames and questions how some discourses have shaped and created meaning systems that have gained the status and currency of 'truth', to dominate how we define and organise both ourselves and our social world accordingly (Burke, Bennett, Burgess, Gray & Southgate, 2016; Foucault, 1980; Given, 2008). Williams (1997) contends that students in higher education are constructed through discursive binaries, which impose normalising judgements, or, in a Foucauldian sense, 'truths' about their existence. This established truth is open to analysis and interrogation to examine other alternative discourses which are marginalised and subjugated, yet potentially 'offer' sites where hegemonic practices can be contested, challenged and 'resisted' (Foucault, 1980).

Mobility

Increasing levels and forms of mobility for regional people has led to the emergence of the concept of the 'mobility paradigm', which theorises that mobility is situated within existing power-knowledge structures, identity creation and the "micro geographies of everyday life" (Cresswell, 2010, p. 551; O'Shea et al., 2019). The elements of the mobility paradigm shape the formation of rural self-identities, as the perception that the need to leave rural areas to succeed is a deeply entrenched feature of the progress narrative of modernity (Corbett, 2001, 2008; Smith, Fraser & Corbett, 2017). Corbett (2008) acknowledges that this form of mobility is often uncritically positioned as a necessary precursor to economic prosperity and enhanced social status. More simply, the dominant consensus in regional Australia is that outward geographical mobility is needed for upward social mobility to occur.

The manifestation of the impact that the mobility paradigm has on education in regional communities is epitomised through Corbett's seminal work *Learning to leave* (2001). In this work, Corbett examined how students from a small Canadian coastal community were differentiated by their decision to 'leave' or 'stay'. O'Shea et al. (2019) built on the work of Corbett (2001) to examine the 'leave' or 'stay' paradigm in a rural Australian context by analysing how this affected the post-schooling futures of students and how the concept of mobility informs their decision making. O'Shea et al. (2019) found that communities supported and encouraged students to 'leave' at the end of schooling if they wanted to be 'successful', while those who 'stayed' were perceived as problematic or in deficit within the social mobility discourse.

Social mobility is seen as a major source of social justice in contemporary society, however, this discourse is problematic as it is focused on the movement of individuals within an existing

system, rather than addressing entrenched inequalities in the system itself (Reay, 2013). It describes how individuals move from one social position to another, from their 'origin' to their 'destination'. Foster (2018) has raised that much of the approach to social mobility was about 'rescuing' gifted children from their working-class starting points, rather than improving education and living standards for all. This same approach can be seen in the discourse that has shaped the mobility of RRR students. That is, the discourse and policy interventions are focused on channelling 'capable' or 'gifted' individual students to move to metropolitan areas in order to be successful, rather than providing a more equitable education system to serve all RRR communities. This positions the place where one originates as being in deficit to the destination. That is, positioning RRR communities in deficit to their urban counterparts.

Rural, regional and remote students in Australia

The definition of RRR has been continually contested and recategorised in Australian education policy. RRR students were formally identified as a higher education equity group with the publication of the white paper *Higher Education: A Policy Statement* and further refined in 1989 through the *A Fair Go* regional strategy (Dawkins, 1988; DEET, 1989). The *A Fair Go* policy document defined 'rural' or 'non-metropolitan' as any person living outside of capital cities and other major urban conglomerates in Australia (DEET, 1989). Since 1989, subsequent definitions of the non-metropolitan equity group have been identified as 'rural', 'rural and regional', 'regional' and 'regional, rural and remote' (Halsey, 2018; Bradley, 2008; DEET, 1990; Cardak et al., 2017; Poretti, 2019; James et al., 1999; Zacharias & Brett, 2019). Additionally, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) has created subcategories of rurality for the purposes of student access to government assistance such as Youth Allowance, breaking down the non-metropolitan identity into 'inner regional', 'outer regional' and 'rural and remote' (ABS, 2019). Both *A Fair Go* and the ABS classifications are tied to the processes of subjectification of those communities by urban-based policy makers without allowing a mechanism for communities to determine their own identity or influence these constructions. Additionally, these definitions often vary between different levels of governments in Australia and their policy frames. For example, the community of Mount Gambier in South Australia is classified as a 'regional city' under South Australia State Government Policy, but classed as 'rural' under the ABS at a Federal level (ABS, 2019).

For students, these circuitous attempts at categorisation, classification and re-categorisation of RRR students have led to a blurred and homogenous definition that fails to consider the nuance of circumstances that individual students face. The externally imposed definition contributes to the shaping of RRR community identity, which, in turn, affects how individuals within these communities conceive their own identity. Each non-urban community has a diverse interplay of culture, geography and economic factors that make them distinctly unique. Yet public policy has historically categorised them as having equal needs, simplifying and reducing their identity to that of the 'other' when compared to their urban peers. In 1989, *A Fair Go* explicitly defined 'rural' as an umbrella term for any location that is non-metropolitan (DEET, 1989). This definition has shaped the policies of widening participation for RRR communities over the last thirty years, embedding the notion of RRR being a singular equity group into the widening participation policy discourse (Bradley, 2008; Cardak et al., 2017; Zacharias & Brett, 2019).

Reproducing homogeneity

In 2018, the IRRRRE acknowledged the issues with education policy defining the entirety of non-metropolitan Australia as one equity group, with 'understanding the local context' of RRR communities positioned at the core of the review (Halsey, 2018). Despite Halsey's attempts at

shifting the discourse of RRR identity to allow for more nuance and acknowledgment that RRR communities are diverse, the 2019 government response to the IRRRRE defaulted to the entrenched urban-centric classification of RRR identity: "For the purposes of this report, RRR is used as an umbrella term to characterise non-metropolitan areas across Australia" (Commonwealth of Australia, 2019, p. 10).

Between 1989 and 2019, the definition of RRR has been challenged, however, it has consistently shifted back to the most simplistic construction of 'other'. This reduction, and subsequent reproduction of a homogenous RRR identity, has shaped the approach of equity interventions and framing of the challenges to increase participation rates of RRR students in higher education.

The stagnation of higher education participation rates for RRR students is "one of the persistent inequities in Australian higher education" (James et al., 1999, p. 22). In 1980, Longitudinal Survey of Australian Youth data indicated that 19 per cent of rural students attended university (Long, Carpenter & Hayden, 1999, p. 87). Seventeen years later, the Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs reported that in 1997 rural students comprised 19.2 per cent of the total student population (Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2019). By 2017, the rate remained at 19.68 per cent, while those living in metropolitan areas were 39.7 per cent (Commonwealth of Australia, 2019, p. 11). The participation rates of RRR students in higher education have largely remained unchanged in thirty years, in contrast to the steady increase in metropolitan student access (Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2019).

Since 1990, the widening participation of identified equity groups in higher education has been problematised through a nationalistic frame with the benefits being focused on national economic development, rather than a framework of social justice (Gale & Tranter, 2011). The literature and policy discourse in this area is grounded in the rationale that increasing access to higher education is likely to produce positive economic, cultural and social development for Australia (Zacharias & Brett, 2019; Commonwealth of Australia, 2019; Halsey, 2018; Bradley, 2008; DEET, 1990). This construction is problematic as it positions equity policy as something that is 'done to' RRR people to improve their outcomes so that it benefits Australian development as a whole, while not exploring what may be needed in specific RRR communities. The lack of understanding of the complexity of RRR identities has led to an over-simplification of equity policy interventions.

One of the largest policy devices to widen participation was the introduction of the demand driven funding model in 2012 (Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2019). In the two decades prior to the creation of the demand driven system, progress on lifting enrolments of students across different equity groups had been modest at best (Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2019; Zacharias & Brett, 2019). While the introduction of the demand driven system created significant increases in access to higher education for first-in-family, low-SES, and non-English speaking background students, it made little impact on the participation of RRR students (Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2019). The lack of impact that the demand driven system had on RRR student participation became one of the catalysts for the IRRRRE review to be undertaken (Halsey, 2018).

All of these policy attempts to increase participation over the last thirty-years have been underscored by a persistent tension: "A central issue in regional higher education policy has been the tension between delivery of higher education in the regions, and support of students to move from the regions to undertake study" (Cardak et al., 2017, p. 3).

Governments have attempted to resolve this tension between 'staying or leaving' by focusing on how best to retain young people living in regional areas. One example is the development of higher education infrastructure – such as the recent Regional Study Hubs initiative – in rural areas to incentivise students to remain living and studying in their communities. This is driven by the idea that students who study locally will remain after their graduation and contribute to the future development of regional Australia, which is a key policy goal for the Federal government (Commonwealth of Australia, 2019; Halsey, 2018). Despite this attempt at equity in access to higher education, building university infrastructure in regional areas has had limited impact on participation rates and retaining rural young people in their communities (Cardak et al., 2017; Norton, 2019).

The persistence of inequities

At a thematic level, the comparison of the two key documents (Table 1) indicates that the objectives and outcomes of RRR equity in higher education policy have remained consistent across the last thirty years. Examining each document at a deeper discursive level begins to highlight how government policy mechanisms have constructed and re/produced RRR student and community identities since the initial problematisation of RRR student equity.

Table 1: Comparison of themes in RRR higher education equity policy

Theme	*A Fair Go* Objectives (DEET, 1989, p. 3)	IRRRE Terms of Reference (Halsey, 2018, p. 1)
Closing the gap between metropolitan and rural educational achievement	*Increase non-metropolitan school retention rates to Year 12 in line with the national objective of 65 per cent*	*Investigate the gap in education achievement between regional, rural and remote students and metropolitan students*
Improve transitions from school to higher education	*Increase the transfer rates of students from school to post-high school education to levels comparable to those in metropolitan areas so that more non-metropolitan students transfer to TAFE and higher education*	*Investigate the gaps and opportunities to help students successfully transition from school to further study, training and employment*
Closing the gap in qualification attainment rates between RRR and metropolitan workforces.	*Increase overall participation in education and training so that the proportion of the non-metropolitan workforce with qualifications after high school approaches the national average*	*Investigate innovative approaches that support RRR students to succeed in school and their transition to further study, training and employment* *Investigate the gap in education achievement between regional, rural and remote students and metropolitan students*

A Fair Go (DEET, 1989), states that "while the education and training needs of rural Australians are similar to those of their metropolitan counterparts, the isolation of rural communities often makes it more difficult for governments to effectively meet these needs" (p. 1). This statement situates the government as having the ability to meet the 'needs' of RRR people but implies that the isolation of rural communities is inhibiting their ability to do so. More simply, the statement

indicates that the policy approach of government is adequate, and their obstacle is the distance and location of rural communities themselves, which positions rural communities as the 'other' or the problem. This statement simultaneously constructs rural people as being needier compared to their urban peers, while positioning government as having the ability to meet these needs – without defining what those unique needs actually are.

This illuminates the power relations in the policy discourse between the government and RRR communities through the 'othering' of RRR young people. This is consistently reinforced throughout the policy document: "While it is difficult to generalise about the rural population, rural people have special needs, particularly in regard to education and training" (DEET, 1989, p. 3). This highlights that the government acknowledges it is difficult to generalise about the rural population, but then proceeds to make the generalisation that rural people have 'special needs'. This contradiction typifies the challenge of defining what educational equity for RRR Australia means, highlights the problematic construction and discourse of the 'needs' of RRR people, and situates the government in a dominant power relationship with rural communities.

On the surface, these government objectives support a holistic approach to improving educational outcomes for individual RRR students to obtain parity with their urban peers. However, the government consistently limits what the scope of educational opportunity is by specifically prescribing what is a relevant education for rural people, in an attempt to ensure "that rural based industries are fully catered for" (DEET, 1989, p. 1).

The government defines these 'rural based industries' as predominantly agriculture with the addition of "rural forest industries; fishing; and drilling" (DEET, 1989, p. 8). This defines and limits the identity construction of what students in RRR Australia in higher education are and what their idea of success should look like. It is the early formation of a constructed truth that rural students should be limited to educational opportunities that are aligned with their prescribed rural identity and the economic priorities of the nation, rather than adhering to ideals of social justice. Within this discourse, the individual student has limited self-efficacy and is influenced by the normative construction of what their identity should be.

The discursive policy construction of RRR student identity provides the illusion of autonomy in post-secondary choice for students, but surreptitiously channels individuals into prescribed pathways through a process of differentiation and exclusion. This practice disallows the formation of a unique RRR student identity to exist outside of governmental discourse on widening participation as a matter of national economic prosperity. Further, it limits the agency of RRR communities to define what their identity and needs are, as these are prescribed embedded and re/produced through national policy discourses.

The limiting discursive construction of RRR student identity within policy subsequently affects the practical mechanisms that governments use to attempt to improve educational outcomes. One initiative that emerged from *A Fair Go* (DEET, 1989) is the Innovative Rural Education and Training Program, which aimed to fund "innovative methods of delivering education and training to rural areas" (DEET, 1989, p. 8). This statement appears salient with the overarching policy objectives in *A Fair Go*, implying that it is a general program to deliver new ways of learning for RRR students. However, this pragmatic program is masked by the limiting discourses of RRR student identity. Within this program, the specific educational areas targeted for innovation were limited to "farm business and financial management; safety in agriculture […] and marketing for agricultural products" (DEET, 1989, p. 8). This discourse constructs educational equity as being limited to agriculturally based industries and further constrains how we think, speak and write

about RRR student identity.

Moreover, the foreword to the document, which is written by Minister Dawkins, specifically defines the government's priority in achieving educational equity in RRR Australia as being primarily dedicated to developing capacity in rural industries:

> "Education and training has a vital role to play in ensuring that Australian primary industries remain productive, competitive, innovative […] The basis of the Federal Government's approach to rural education and training is two-fold: To ensure that broad-based education and training initiatives are appropriate and effective in non-metropolitan areas; and to target specific initiatives directly at particular problems faced by rural Australians." (DEET, 1989, p. 1)

These 'particular problems' are all centred in the primary industries and the six policy initiatives that are outlined in *A Fair Go* (DEET, 1989) and implemented by the government reflect this. Four of these initiatives are agriculturally-focused and aligned themselves with the government priority for the Australian economy to adapt to a "rapidly changing global agriculture industry" (DEET, 1989, p. 11). The remaining two initiatives in the document relate to distance education development and student accommodation for students required to move from home to study.

A Fair Go clearly delineates two starkly contrasted options for potential RRR students: stay in the community and work in agricultural industries; or move away to develop a career in non-agricultural industries. In the 1980s, agricultural industries and associated working-class occupations were perceived as important for the growth of the nation, but not as financially lucrative as moving away to study for a middle-class 'white collar' occupation (Cloke & Thrift, 1987; DEET, 1989). These higher-paying professions were considered a more successful pathway than staying in a rural community (Corbett, 2008).

This narrows the construction of choices to two perceived forms of educational opportunity and thus is complicit in the individualising discourses of 'student choice' as being decontextualised from community and relational orientations, to a stark 'stay or leave' narrative. If a student chose to stay, it limited educational options to agriculture or related industries, while the choice to move had more flexibility in career options and consequently the perception of being more successful (Corbett, 2008; O'Shea, 2019).

This discursive construction of RRR student identity and the 'stay or leave' tension that were embedded in *A Fair Go* (DEET, 1989) have been reproduced through successive RRR government reviews and policy documents over the last thirty years. In 2018, the IRRRRE (Halsey, 2018) highlighted this continual tension in how the discourse of education in RRR Australia has manifested:

> This is because at the heart of RRR education is a critical question about its purpose, and as a student might ask, 'am I learning so I can leave my community, am I learning so I can stay locally, or am I learning so I have a real choice about what I do?'" (p. 15)

Corbett (2008) and O'Shea et al. (2019) identified that this tension between staying or leaving significantly contributes to the mobility paradigm and shapes the formation and re/production of rural self-identities. Those recognised as 'RRR students' are subjected to the 'disciplinary gaze' of RRR education policy discourses (Foucault, 1980). To be recognisable as a subject of this policy, the person must be subjected to the discourses of RRR student mobility which force students to take up particular kinds of practices of 'choice-making' and dis/connection to their communities. This subsequently leads to the re/production of identities that are embedded in the

'stay or leave' mobility paradigm.

In their analysis, both Corbett (2008) and O'Shea et al. (2019) considered the effects of the mobility paradigm on individual students in the present moment of their studies. They did not examine the underlying causes of why the mobility paradigm has been embedded and re/produced through education policy discourse and produced subjectivities that compel students to take up particular kinds of practices of 'choice-making'.

This paper does not contend that the Australian higher education policy of the 1980s single-handedly established the mobility paradigm for rural students. Rather, it is that at that historical moment the construction of the paradigm was embedded into higher education policy, where a policy narrative commenced that re/produced limitations on RRR post-secondary pathways. The reduction of RRR identity and the prescribed pathways for their subsequent choices have strengthened the mobility paradigm that Corbett (2008) and O'Shea et al. (2019) have acknowledged is an issue for widening the participation of RRR students in higher education.

The policy choices of the Federal government in *A Fair Go* were the building blocks for the mobility paradigm as they cemented the dichotomy of working in limited rural industries if a student stays, to a plethora of opportunity if the student leaves the community for further education and that these opportunities are mutually exclusive. By focusing on place-based education, or education that is only relevant to the current industries within a community, education policy has assisted the perpetuation of the mobility paradigm. That is, the policies have clearly defined and only supported the two options of staying in agriculture or leaving to pursue other careers. Given *A Fair Go* was the first policy document that established rural students as a defined equity group for higher education access, it set the agenda for what the needs of rural communities were and constrained how governments could attempt to assist students in RRR Australia.

There have been some attempts to broaden the intense focus on place-based education for RRR communities and challenge the construction of the mobility paradigm. The IRRRRE (Halsey, 2018) acknowledged the importance of agricultural framing of RRR higher education in the past, but challenges the discursive construction of these students being directed to primarily agricultural careers in the future:

> The importance of RRR students' access to high quality education and training at all ages and stages of life is intensified by changes in employment opportunities from new generation primary production, to growth in industries such as tourism, financial services and education. New skills and jobs have emerged as a result of the large-scale shift to a digital economy, particularly within specialised business services and education. Areas of growth and employment in regional Australia will require a highly skilled and qualified workforce. (p. 27)

Above, Halsey is attempting to recognise and broaden how the industries of rural Australia are imagined, to highlight the diversification that is occurring in the rural economy and the type of workforce that is required to meet these demands. It is a significant shift from the limited discursive construction of agriculture being the sole priority and mechanism for achieving educational equity in regional Australia. Halsey (2018) embraces the emerging diversity of local industries in RRR communities, but still acknowledges the importance of maintaining a local connection: "There is much that can be done and should be done to generate rewarding opportunities on a more localised scale and in interconnected ways using education and training together with a renewed commitment to valuing RRR contexts and communities" (p. 27). Halsey is here focused on trying to renew the commitment to valuing RRR contexts and communities in

order to shift the discourse from a prescriptive urban-centric policy to one that values the communities that widening participation policy is supposed to support.

Despite Halsey's attempt to reframe and broaden the possibilities of what education could look like in RRR communities, the notion of place-based education remains deeply entrenched in how communities perceive their own educational opportunity (O'Shea et al., 2019; Corbett, 2008). As a result of the dominant framing and constructed truth that RRR higher education policy has historically perpetuated, the most tangible employment outcomes are perceived to be in agriculture and related dominant local industries, irrespective of the actual employment prospects. Alternatively, all other professions or post-study employment opportunities are regularly constructed as being 'away' from the community. This connects employment prospects directly with the decision to stay or leave and further perpetuates the mobility paradigm.

O'Shea (2019) illuminates the impact that this limiting frame of place-based educational relevance can have on student choice in pursuing higher education. If a student feels that their desired degree path does not create a tangible job or prepare them for a profession at the end, then there is less chance that they will pursue that field of education (O'Shea, 2019; O'Shea et al., 2019). Even if there are study and employment opportunities in a student's local community that are not in a traditional local industry, the strength of the mobility paradigm will likely influence this student to make a choice that is reflective of what is deemed 'successful'.

The homogenous framing of RRR identity also means that the mobility paradigm is unnecessarily influencing the post-secondary decisions of students in larger regional communities, which have sufficient universities to serve their community. However, because these students are homogenised into RRR as a singular equity group, the policy discourse still impacts their identity and the seemingly inscrutable push to leave the community in order to be 'successful'. That is, geographic mobility remains a precursor to a successful career irrespective of the actual post-secondary options available locally.

Halsey attempted to challenge how we conceptualise RRR student identity, but this made little impact on subsequent policy responses. In 2019, the Federal government policy response to the IRRRRE still used RRR as an "umbrella term to characterise non-metropolitan areas across Australia" (Commonwealth of Australia, 2019, p. 10). There is no consideration for the complex issues of identity that Halsey attempted to raise nor the impact that this rigid construction of identity can have on influencing the educational equity of RRR students in different communities across Australia.

Conclusion

This paper has focused on how 'place-based' education of RRR students in higher education policy has had a significant impact on perpetuating the mobility paradigm for school leaving students in RRR Australia. Higher education policy discourse has constructed a set of realities for RRR students that have surreptitiously impacted their decision making to favour leaving their communities when considering post-secondary study options – irrespective of what educational choices are locally available.

Bringing Foucault's genealogical approach to analysis of RRR education policies provides an alternative lens to view how the embedded historical practices and subjectivities in the identity construction of RRR students have impacted their post-secondary choices over the last thirty years. RRR education policy has shaped community and individual student expectations and identities, which subsequently influences the post-secondary paths that RRR young people

pursue and constructs a truth around what a 'successful' pathway looks like. The historical emphasis on place-based education, or education that is only relevant to the current industries within a community, and the homogenous framing of RRR communities has perpetuated the mobility paradigm.

To increase higher education participation of young people in RRR communities, and to help these young people remain in their local area and contribute to the prosperity of RRR Australia while feeling valued and equal to their urban peers, the discursive frame of higher education and the constructed truths of student identity need to be reimagined.

References

Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2019). *The Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS) Remoteness Structure.* Retrieved from https://www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/d3310114.nsf/home/remoteness+structure

Australian Government Productivity Commission. (2019). *The Demand Driven University System: A Mixed Report Card.* Productivity Commission Research Paper.

Ball, S. (2012). *Foucault, Power, and Education.* London: Routledge.

Bradley, D. (2008). *Review of Australian Higher Education: Final Report*. Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, Commonwealth of Australia.

Burke, P. J. (2016). Access to and Widening Participation in Higher Education. In P. Nuno Texeira et al. (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of International Higher Education Systems and Institutions*, (pp.1–7). Springer.

Burke, P., Bennett, A., Burgess, C., Gray, K. & Southgate, E. (2016). *Capability, Belonging and Equity in Higher Education: Developing Inclusive Approaches.* Centre of Excellence for

Equity in Higher Education, University of Newcastle.

Carbó, P. A., Andrea Vázquez Ahumada, M., Caballero, A. D., & Lezama Argüelles, G. A. (2016). "How do I do Discourse Analysis?" Teaching Discourse Analysis to novice researchers through a study of intimate partner gender violence among migrant women. *Qualitative Social Work*, *15*(3), 363–379.

Cardak, B., Brett, M., Bowden, M., Vecci, J., Barry, P., Bahtsevanoglou, J. & McAllister, R. (2017). *Regional Student Participation and Migration: Analysis of factors influencing regional student participation and internal migration in Australian higher education*. National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, Curtin University.

Cheek, J. (2008). Foucauldian Discourse Analysis. In L. Given (Ed.), *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*. Sage Publishing.

Cloke, P. & Thrift, N. (1987). Intra-class conflict in rural areas. *Journal of Rural Studies, 3*(4), 321–333.

Commonwealth of Australia. (2019). *National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy*. Canberra: Department of Education and Training.

Corbett, M. (2001). *Learning to leave: The irony of schooling in a coastal community* (Doctoral thesis). Vancouver, Canada: University of British Columbia.

Corbett, M. (2008). *Learning to Leave: The Irony of Schooling in a Coastal Community*. Nova Scotia, Canada: Fernwood Publishing Co.

Cresswell, T. (2010). Mobilities 1: catching up progress. *Human Geography, 35*, 550–558.

Dawkins, J. (1988). "$637 Million Education and Training Strategy for Rural Australia" [Press Release] Minister for Employment, Education and Training. Canberra: Department of Employment, Education and Training.

Department of Employment, Education and Training. (1989). *A Fair Go: The Federal Government's Strategy for Rural Education & Training*. Canberra: AGPS.

Department of Employment, Education and Training. (1990). *A Fair Chance for All: Higher Education That's Within Everyone's Reach*. Canberra: Department of Employment, Education and Training.

Foucault, M. (1972). *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. London: Routledge.

Foucault, M. (1980). Two Lectures. In C. Gordon (Ed.), *Michel Foucault: Power/Knowledge*. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf.

Foster, D. (2018). Helping gifted children is all very well – but what about the rest? *The Guardian*. Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/feb/20/gifted-children-generation-gifted-bbctalented-struggling

Gale, T. & Tranter, D. (2011). Social justice in Australian higher education policy: an historical and conceptual account of student participation, *Critical Studies in Education, 52*(1), 29–46

Gilbert, G. & Mulkay, M. (1984). *Opening Pandora's Box: A Sociological Analytics of Scientist's Discourse*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Given, L. (Ed). (2008). *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications

Halsey, J. (2018). *Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education*. Canberra: Department of Education and Training.

James, R., Wyn, J., Baldwin, G., Hepworth, G., McInnis, C. & Stephanou, A. (1999). *Rural and Isolated School Students and their Higher Education Choices. A re-examination of student location, socioeconomic background, and educational advantage and disadvantage.* Commissioned Report No. 62. Canberra, ACT: National Board of Employment, Education and Training Higher Education Council.

Jones, R. & Thomas, L. (2005). The 2003 UK government higher education white paper: A critical assessment of its implications for the access and widening participation agenda. *Journal of Education Policy, 20*(5), 615–630.

Ledger, S. & Downey, J. (2018). Aligning AIJRE Research with the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education. *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education, 28*(1), 1–11.

Long, M., Carpenter, P. & Hayden, M. (1999). Participation in Education and Training 1980–1994. *Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth.* Commonwealth Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs.

Norton, A. (30 April 2019). More regional Australians are moving to the city to study. Few return when they've finished [Blog post]. Retrieved from https://blog.grattan.edu.au/2019/04/more-regional-australians-are-moving-to-the-city-to-study-few-return-when-theyve-finished/

O'Shea, S. (2019). *Literature Review: 'Mind the Gap!' Exploring the post-graduation outcomes and employment mobility of individuals who are first in their family to complete a university degree.* National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, Curtin University, Perth.

O'Shea, S., Southgate, E., Jardine, A. & Delahunty, J. (2019). 'Learning to leave' or 'striving to stay': Considering the desires and decision of rural young people in relation to post-schooling futures. *Emotion, Space and Society, 32,* 1–8.

Poretti, L. (2019). Increasing regional student participation in higher education through innovative university outreach. *International Studies in Widening Participation (6)*1, 80–95.

Reay, D. (2013). Social mobility, a panacea for austere times: tales of emperors, frogs, and tadpoles. *British Journal of Sociology of Education, 34*(5–6), 660–677.

Schroeter, M. & Taylor, C. (2018). *Exploring Silence and Absence in Discourse: Empirical Approaches*. UK: Springer.

Smith, C., Fraser, S. & Corbett, M. (2017). Liquid modernity, emplacement and education for the Anthropocene: challenges for rural education in Tasmania. *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education, 27*(3), 196–212.

Tamboukou, M. (1999). Writing Genealogies: an exploration of Foucault's strategies for doing research. *Discourse: studies in the cultural politics of education*, *20*(2), 101–217.

Tamboukou, M. (2003). *Women, Education and the Self: A Foucauldian Perspective.* Springer.

Tunstall, P. (2001). Assessment discourse and constructions of social reality in infant classrooms. *Journal of Education Policy*, *16*(3), 215–231.

Weedon, C. (1987). *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Williams, J. (1997). Institutional rhetorics and realities. In J. Williams (Ed.), *Negotiating Access to Higher Education: The Discourse of Selectivity and Equity.* Buckingham: The Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.

Zacharias, N. & Brett, M. (2019). *The Best Chance for All: Student Equity 2030 – A long-term vision for student equity in higher education*. National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education. Curtin University, Perth.