Advanced neoliberal governance and Australian rural higher education

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This paper adopts the concept of governmentality to understand a form of power at play within recent policymaking practices relating to rural higher education in Australia. While commonly constructed in terms of equity and the basic rights and opportunities of the Australian population, equity of access to higher education for regional, rural and remote (RRR) communities is one designed from its outset in relation to a broader set of national governance issues. In this work we argue that rural higher education is constructed as part of the solution to a broader problem – that of economic governance. We show how particular forms of reason built into modern approaches to governing work to obliterate difference, and we argue that RRR provision of higher education has become mired within the tensions and contradictions of competing problems of governance and economic interests. The final sections of the paper look to recent moments in Australian higher education policymaking whereby statistical indicators are gathered by consultants to identify 'need' and 'readiness', and we make the case that these sorts of processes, divorced as they are from local knowledges, can help to re-embed the ongoing creation of marginalisation in RRR communities. We close the paper arguing that a genuinely rural higher education requires different imaginations than those in train now, built instead through ethical recognition and inclusion of marginalised rural people within their own modes of governance, and with greater autonomy over the conditions by which rural higher education is constructed and enacted.

Keywords: rural; neoliberal; policy; governmentality; higher education

Introduction

There is a rapidly increasing volume of scholarship exploring rural, regional and remote (RRR) higher education policy and practice in Australia. This is not surprising given the recent attention and funding on offer through state and federal governments. In adding to this growing field, we (the authors) want to explicitly consider the role played by academic researchers in the processes of knowledge production in relation to governing, including the relationship between researchers and policymakers. We do so in the interests of producing 'research that is aware of and alert to the circumstances of its own production and committed to analysis of the effects of those conditions on the development of perspectives and conceptualisations of policy' (Ozga 2021, p. 292). We worry about research in and on education that simply follows policy agendas rather than interrogating them. The tangled web of practitioners, policymakers, institutional leaders, scholars and politicians produces a set of relations between the field and the ever-shifting problems that it seeks to understand. For us, this offers an opportunity to contribute to the field while examining it and 'the interaction between the production of knowledge and the changing society with which it is concerned, and which it reflects (Ozga 2021, p. 300). We are troubled by a paradigm that positions social scientists as simply delivering evidence on questions and priorities set by governments because this arrangement can structure in a complicitous contribution to the creation of hegemonic representations. This is the 'lemming effect' to which Wacquant (2022) refers, whereby the structure of research funding, debate, discourse and imperative work together to make an arbitrary discursive or conceptual tool into an assumed or taken-for-granted reality. This has the effect of dressing up folk categories as scientific ones, leading into an epistemological or conceptual cul de sac, but one nevertheless made powerful through its reassertion of the same dominant logics structuring of social inequality. Rather, we argue that these representations must be made the subject of scrutiny (Bacchi 2009; Bunn 2021).

As researchers and practitioners enmeshed in fields of research and practice related to equity in higher education in Australia, and with our own ready access to policymaking conversations in this context, we want to acknowledge the somewhat treacherous terrain we inhabit. We therefore want not to present neat findings but to question the development of problems as they have come to be represented in contexts of policymaking, research and practice. These concerns align with the development of Critical Policy Sociology (CPS) in which questions of 'marketisation, corporatisation, new modes of accountability, audit culture, school choice, devolution and other phenomena typically associated with neoliberal forms of governance in education have been ripe areas of critique' (Savage et al. 2021, p. 310). This is not a field of scholarship that seeks to generate solutions, because, as Thomson reminds us, a problem-solving attitude is 'circumscribed by its bounded relation to pre-defined problems, whereas problematisation "forces us into an encounter where something new emerges, new thinking, new possibilities, new understanding"' (Thomson in Savage et al. 2021, p. 46). Our interest here in CPS is specifically tracing the development of 'the contemporary interdependency of governing and knowledge' (Ozga 2021, p. 302) as it pertains to higher education in RRR areas, and in looking to different approaches in which we do not shy away from the political relations at play in the development and navigation of policy problems.

To interrogate some of the effects of this work commissioned and deployed by the federal government, we use the concept of governmentality to understand a form of power at play within recent policymaking practices. We explore aspects of these policymaking practices that we see as sitting uncomfortably with claims to equity of access, participation and success for community members in RRR contexts. While often seen in terms of equity and the basic rights and opportunities of the Australian population, equity of access to higher education for RRR communities is nevertheless one designed from its outset in relation to a broader set of national

governance issues. In particular, rural higher education itself is constructed as part of the solution to a broader problem – that of economic governance. Building on this, we show how particular forms of reason built into modern approaches to governing can help to obliterate difference, and, in this case, we argue that RRR provision of higher education has become mired within the tensions and contradictions of competing problems of governance and economic interests. The final sections of the paper look to specific recent moments in Australian higher education policymaking whereby statistical indicators are gathered by consultants to identify 'need' and 'readiness', and we make the case that these sorts of processes, divorced as they are from local knowledges, can help to re-embed the ongoing creation of marginalisation in RRR communities.

Governmentality

The focus on RRR access and participation within Australian higher education policy has been present in different forms for many decades (Dawkins & Kerin 1989; James, Wyn, Baldwin, Hepworth, McInnis & Stephanou 1999; Halsey 2017, 2018). Recent attention to RRR concerns has tended quite starkly at times towards a modern governance practice whereby parts of a population are made visible to bureaucracy only through their construction as a problem demanding a solution. This requires a narrow group of parameters – permissible or sanctioned definitions, measurements and so on, that provide a means for specific forms of intervention. RRR access and participation is produced to appear as a singular governing issue, one which must extend across a series of asymmetric and contradictory policy initiatives. Through these practices, bodies within populations are rendered legible in new ways that enhance their alignment with contemporary governance arrangements. The relations of power we want to interrogate here are complex, messy and highly context-specific. In paying attention to who benefits and who might experience 'representational violence' (Bunn 2021), we aim to consider how framings of policy problems 'stigmatise some, exonerate others […] keeping change within limits' (Bacchi 2009, p. 42). Representational violence is invoked to refer to the construction of categories and representations that hide the asymmetric and unequal relations, both within a category and across categories, denying access to the structure and form of the representation to all but the most privileged. The category of RRR, for example, is concerned with producing a particular *evenness* that masks the origins of forms of stratification in spaces beyond the metropole and to maintain governance through urban-orientated logics and solutions.

Governmentality is a concept that we work with here to consider how the art of governing is practiced in the modern era by advanced liberal states. Detailed and different explications on the concept of governmentality are available (for example: Foucault 1991; Rose & Miller 1992; Rabinow & Rose 2003) and are beyond the scope of this paper. We draw briefly on the concept however to explain aspects of how modern state governance involves the representation of a population as citizens who need assistance to experience a particular legitimated form of productive and enjoyable life, and how, in a justification of the state, policymaking is understood as working to facilitate this outcome. Yet, to do this policymaking, new forms of knowing the population become necessary. Commonly, statistical indicators become essential in the construction of the citizenry, making the population 'legible' in ways now available via these forms of statistical visibility previously unavailable. Arbitrary boundaries are constructed which help to categorise and represent. Difference is then made across these arbitrary lines as new identities enter discourse to become normalised and naturalised. Statistical representations are brought into a process of understanding the problems of 'the population', and bodies are constructed in particular ways by the bureaucratic gaze. This form of surveillance helps to render the population 'docile' and 'productive' in Foucault's explanation (Foucault 1991), in that to be legible to the state, people are guided towards conducting themselves in ways that are readable by the bureaucracy. While Foucault was interested in manifold processes of governing (for

example, that of the self, that of others, that by the state) we draw here specifically on the concept of governmentality as a way of understanding the connections between advanced neoliberal state governance practices and how this relates to the construction of, and subsequent orientation to, social problems taken up by members of a population that come under the gaze of the state.

This form of modern disciplinary power was famously expressed via the metaphor of the *panopticon*, a conceptual model for a prison designed by philosopher Jeremy Bentham to solve the challenge of efficient surveillance of prisoners and taken up by Foucault in his studies of the treatment of deviance in capitalist societies. Almost three decades ago, Shore and Roberts (1993) argued that one way to gain insight into the epistemologies by which higher education was increasingly being governed was through the lens of a *panopticism*. The conceptual model of the panopticon consisted of a tower at the centre of a courtyard surrounded by buildings divided into cells on numerous levels. The window in each cell fell under the direct gaze of the tower only. Importantly, this helps to construct people primarily as individuals and reinforce their individuation as important to modern society. Shore and Roberts (1993) suggested that the panopticon design is useful for understanding not only the processes by which higher education was being restructured and controlled, but also the rationalist epistemology upon which government notions of 'administrative efficiency' and 'good management' were increasingly founded. For our purposes in terms of working with the concept of governmentality, the panopticon metaphor helps to explain a mode of modern era governance whereby 'control at a distance' produces self-surveillance and how this can be achieved in an efficient, depersonalised, depoliticised manner. As this explanation of modern power goes, our bodies need not be disciplined if we have taken on the correct governable *mentalities*. We henceforth govern ourselves effectively via the imaginaries we carry forward and to which we have become disposed.

We are not suggesting here that this form of power is ever 'complete', or that it necessarily directly and neatly determines action. It must be acknowledged that degrees of awareness of and resistance to this dynamic continually disrupt its smooth operation. Nevertheless, modern governance is in part achieved via forms of collection of information and production of knowledge of populations (the primary form being statistics – the science of the state) to create new technologies of self-governance and obedience. Thus, a certain percentage of the population in areas designated to be RRR have undergraduate degrees must be first constructed as a problem of governance, particularly as the science of the state is immediately used to legitimate new interventions and infrastructure aimed at creating governance solutions. Yet, in doing so, this representation of RRR communities obliterates place, local interests, even the idea of community. Certainly, the continuing, if not growing, urgency of the problem of rural higher education governance has thrust non-metropolitan places firmly into the gaze of the state 'savoir' – the knowledge created by and through bureaucracy.

To produce a legible population, RRR issues of governance require a flattening and simplification. To understand this, we turn to the notion of 'metonymic reason' (Santos 2014, p. 165). While this is one of four forms of 'lazy reason' that Santos identifies perpetuating a Western epistemology, it best encapsulates some of the key issues associated with current rural higher education policy in Australia. Metonymic reason refers to the need to create monocultural forms of reason, in this case to produce coherent means for interpreting the wide range of contexts, difference and irregularities that exist across RRR places and populations. Metonymic reason 'asserts itself as a thorough, complete and exclusive reason' (Santos in Oliveira 2017, p. 45). However, there are differences, pluralities and alternatives to how things are known, what kind of thing they are and what kind of reason to which they adhere, if having reason at all. To

make the assertion of its exclusivity, metonymic reason is imposed through 'non-recognition, silencing' and making invisible forms of knowledge and being that do not fit to its reason. 'The idea of totality with which Boaventura says the metonymic is obsessed leads to the belief that there is one logic that alone governs the behaviours of the whole and all of its parts and leads to whole/part homogenisation' (Oliveira 2017, p. 45). This system of reason thus makes little space for idiosyncrasies, contradictions and erratic characteristics. As it structures knowledge to a singular totality, the 'parts', and/or the things that fall outside of its reason, are made absent. Metonymic reason displaces forms of knowledge and being that do not suit the internal structure of its logic, effectively producing 'non-existence'. This is because, despite something 'being', it cannot be known given that the representational forms used have excluded the possibility of it being known. This produces a dominant form of knowledge that displaces the very people ostensibly represented within it.

The emergence of rural higher education as an issue of governance

Liberal democracies including the United Kingdom, New Zealand and Australia have *produced* the idea of the rural through 'technologies such as the collation of agricultural, environmental and population statistics, and various forms of cartography' that allow for the idea of RRR to be understood 'as a single quantified national unit that could be viewed and understood by a small policy community' (Woods 2011, p. 240). 'The economic interests of farmers, foresters and miners' – primary industries and key Australian exports – 'have been seen as the interests of all rural people, while groups such as women and Indigenous peoples – together with issues such as rural inequality, economic diversification and environmental decline – have largely been ignored' (Lockie, Lawrence & Cheshire 2006, p. 29). This allows for RRR policy across numerous siloed policy areas to be viewed and organised homogenously according to broader national and economic terms.

The current iteration of rurality as a problem of higher education governance was established in the mid to late 1980s under the then Minister for Employment, Education and Training, Dr John Dawkins. In the process of establishing the currently used equity groups, several key strategy and policy documents were developed that constructed rural higher education as a particular kind of problem, one that was necessarily addressed at a time when Australia began the process of neoliberal reform. We turn to these times now as they demonstrate the reasoning used to construct 'the rural' as an education problem that seeks a distinctive, and subsequently binary, mode of policy and governance for the needs of people beyond major metropolitan cities. The document *A fair go: the federal government's strategy for rural education and training* (Dawkins & Kerin 1989) was co-delivered by the Minister of Education, Employment and Training and the Minister of Primary Industries and Energy, demonstrating the clear emphasis on national governance of the economy. In this document, the emphasis on rural education was starkly focussed on the need to increase the level of skills and training in rural areas as the Australian economy underwent substantial structural change:

> It is widely recognised that a skilled workforce is the cornerstone of a successful economy. It provides an environment which encourages increased investment in new technologies, as well as the adoption of more safe and efficient work practices. As the rural sector has a key role in the process of structural adjustment, it is important to ensure that rural Australians have adequate access to education and training. (Dawkins & Kerin 1989, p. 1)

It continues:

> These objectives recognise the role of education and training in providing all Australians with the skills they need for a rewarding, full and productive life. It is important for rural Australians to acquire these skills if rural industries are to maintain their efficiency and competitiveness in the world market. (Dawkins & Kerin 1989, p. 3).

Despite the acknowledgment of personal or civic growth, rural education is positioned as a priority of national economic governance. The aim to bring equity, equal educational opportunity, personal prosperity and general growth of industry (and primary industry in particular) demonstrates an ambivalence at the heart of the establishment of rural higher education policy and strategy. It at once seeks to appeal to social ideals (such as egalitarianism and equality) while maintaining economic interests as the foundational framing of the problem of rural higher education.

This ambivalence is perhaps most clearly articulated in defining the background for rural equity in *A Fair Chance For All* (DEET 1990):

> If rural areas are to prosper, their industries must be prosperous and efficient, so people from rural areas must have access to the opportunities offered by higher education.
>
> It is also important that young people living in rural areas should be encouraged to consider the whole range of careers, not just those related to rural industries. (DEET 1990, p. 44)

The pressure of competing interests enacts a metonymic reason of governance, establishing the rural as a legible problem across multiple siloed government departments. Yet, equity does not necessarily flow on from economic investment, as nearly four decades of neoliberalism attests. At the very least, there are contradictions between different values and purposes associated with education and higher education. While this policy ambivalence has been established as a problem more broadly for equity strategies (Gale & Tranter 2011), rurality is established as a blanket category for anyone outside of the cities, and predominantly for a much more specific relationship between industry and education. The aim might be to produce a seamless policy platform for rural governance. However, 'rural' space and its needs are asymmetric, and, at times, directly opposing fields of concern.

Metro vs. Rural

Rural participation in higher education as a particular kind of policy problem is commonly constructed using the persistent statistical discrepancy between metropolitan and rural participation. As the *National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy final report* (from here referred to as the 'Napthine review') indicates, 'the rate of increase has been faster in metropolitan areas than RRR areas, resulting in a widening of the disparity in attainment between metropolitan and RRR areas' (DESE 2019, p. 12). Yet these types of statements too often maintain that cultural and educational values remain evenly distributed across diverse rural and metropolitan contexts. As Corbett and Forsey (2017, p. 429) argue, 'educational thought and policy are shaped through lenses that naturalise and normalise

middle-class urban life, particularly through idealised aspirational values government leaders are keen to instil in young people'.

As a result of these predominant national interests, a primary orientation of higher education policy and the research and reporting that surround and inform its production, is the need for employment outcomes for rural students that align with the needs of the national economic interest. This is exemplified by the stated purpose of the *Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education* where it is suggested that drawing rural students into higher education is 'to improve the education of country students so they can reach their full potential and participate in Australia's economy' (DESE 2020). As has been discussed more fully above, higher education and the construction of employment in RRR areas comes down to decisions being made across other areas of employment and governance/regulation. The structuring of certain kinds of industries, including their ongoing regulation and support, play a significant role in the shaping of rural space and the subsequent possibilities and limitations open to RRR populations (see Woods 2011). RRR higher education is thus shaped instrumentally without recognition of the more substantive, contextual and experiential elements that lead to student choice-making processes. Higher education policy instead tends to focus more commonly on the simple equation of education = employment as the modus operandi of students. However, students' orientations to study do not fit this narrative. Little research, rural or otherwise, suggests that students make such stark 'choices', but rather attempt to draw together a connection between their interests and employment possibilities (Threadgold, Burke & Bunn 2018; Brynin 2012). These are not necessarily made as crude rational calculations, rather, they can be based on hope that opportunities will present themselves.

Employment and 'employability' discourses also rest within the restrictions of the business orientations (that is, the corporate university, see Marginson & Considine 2000) of higher education provision. The movement towards a corporate university and 'academic capitalism' (Slaughter & Rhoades 2004) sits at odds with quality rural higher education provision, as it does not fit within the business interest of providers. For example, the Napthine review points out that 'RRR areas are often "thin markets" for education provision', where educational providers see operations as 'unsustainable' to 'provide a large suite of academic programs' (DESE 2019, p. 18). This has contributed to the rapid expansion, neglect and collapse of physical higher education campuses in RRR towns, and a growth in the reliance on distance education for those unable or unwilling to move into a town or city with physical higher education infrastructure. RRR provision is thus mired within the tensions and contradictions of competing governance and economic interests. Untangling these socio-economic dynamics is critical to differentiating how RRR can be imagined and adapted for respective RRR spaces, towns and cultures.

Getting 'the needy' 'ready' for higher education

To initiate the *Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education*, Emeritus Professor John Halsey presented a discussion paper and literature review alongside the review's terms of reference. The discussion paper (Halsey 2017) contains a compelling moment in which five 'convictions' framing the document are offered, as the work seeks to engage the field and invite submissions to the review. The opening two convictions we quote here below as we believe they give insight into the pressures of a federal government review, and an author attempting to welcome engagement that might move beyond some of the solution-obsessed policy orientations of the metropole:

> vibrant and productive rural communities are integral to Australia's
> sustainability   and   prosperity   –   socially,   economically   and

> environmentally [and] focussing on ideas and options for re-thinking and reframing education in regional, rural and remote areas is likely to be more productive than simply concentrating on "the problems" (Halsey 2017, p. 9).

Increasingly however, the Australian population in non-metropolitan places are being endlessly represented as deficient in a new way. The Napthine review was commissioned by federal Minister for Education, Dan Tehan, in response to the independent review conducted by Halsey. The Napthine review strategy document reminds us that 'individuals who grow up in regional, rural and remote (RRR) areas are around 40 per cent less likely to gain a higher-level tertiary education qualification and less than half as likely to gain a bachelor and above qualification by the time they are 35 years old, compared to individuals from metropolitan areas' (DESE 2019, p. 5). One way to read this statement is as a relatively benign identification of entrenched inequality in the Australian educational landscape. There are however other interpretations to be made. We would for example want to interrogate some of the assumptions at play and the generalisations that help to make the comparisons contained in the above statement between RRR and metropolitan areas. A more critical assessment would include consideration of how governments never simply respond to pre-existing problems that have popped into existence. They are always involved in *producing* problems. The language in this quoted statement above is however a somewhat glib imperative to widen access and participation in higher education, without considering the contexts, experiences and consequences of these processes.

The types of issues identified above can be seen throughout many of the reports and research used to inform rural higher education policy and governance. We offer below an illustrative example relating to what are known as Regional University Centres (RUC) – physical and social infrastructure established in RRR contexts that students can use to study tertiary courses locally delivered by distance from any Australian institution. As part of a recent process inviting applications for funding to establish new RUCs, the federal government commissioned Deloitte Access Economics to develop a report called *Informing future locations for Regional University Centres* (DAE 2021). The stated intent of the report is to deliver analysis of the 'need' for an RUC, and something described as 'community readiness' to then operate an RUC. It explains how the document works as a tool that 'provides a stronger empirical evidence base for systematically comparing the needs of communities across all of regional Australia. By providing this evidence base, it supports the capacity for the Department and others to focus efforts in examining the complexities and diversity of regional Australia' (DAE 2021, p. 7).

The idea of 'need' here is elaborated as the extent to which a region is numerically deviant in terms of their access to and achievement of tertiary education. This is shaped by ideas of 'relative need' (a measure of a region's relative disadvantage and relative achievement across three student dimensions: access and participation, retention and engagement, and transitions and outcomes), and a 'needs volume' (an aggregated scale of total disadvantaged and the potential serviceable demand that a region has for a future Centre). These feed into a 'needs ranking' (allocated to a region based on weighted relative needs and needs volume to identify a first-to-last ranking of regions, excluding regions that do not pass the readiness threshold). All up, twenty-five indicators are involved in the creation of a 'needs score'. In relation to the idea of 'readiness', the document speaks to an assessment of the extent to which a community is well-equipped to purse the long-term benefits of a Centre. To be considered 'ready' a region must first meet a threshold readiness (the minimum viable settings that are likely to be necessary for a region to succeed with a RUC (but not sufficient for determining success)). Once considered in scope for further assessment, 'relative readiness' is then constructed through a measure of

community readiness that is used to rank the 30 shortlisted regions whereby a ranking of 'higher', 'medium' or 'lower' is assigned. All up, twelve indicators of 'readiness' are used to assess how well-equipped a local community (left entirely undefined) is to host an RUC. The document does acknowledge some of its own limitations and recommends that 'real consultation and engagement with the community will be critical for decision-makers' (2022, p. 7) yet, with this framing device already lodged in place, we see here how places come to be known as both 'needy' and 'ready' via a metro-centric gaze constructing them as requiring intervention to fix a now 'known' policy problem.

The ongoing creation of marginalisation in RRR communities

Rural higher education policy continues to overlook aspects of Indigeneity and class in particular, a trend reflected in rural sociology more broadly (Rodriguez Castro & Pini 2022). As Pini, Rodriguez Castro and Mayes (2022) elaborate, Australian rural sociological research has been 'unproblematically' reproducing a discourse of an idyllic rural Australia in line with the policy imaginaries noted above. Yet the homogenising effect of this narrative hides from representation people who have very different experiences and trajectories. These dominant imaginings of the rural generally depict it as middle class (Pini, Mayes & Castro 2017) and white (Sierk 2017). As Pini and Mayes (2015) consider:

> The "rural student" who is constituted in such research is distinguished from their urban counterpart but not differentiated according to other aspects of their social location, such as in relation to gender, sexuality, class, disability, or ethnicity. Instead, the identity marker "rural" is given primacy and universalised. (Pini & Mayes 2015, p. 27)

Recognising rurality broadly as an equity group allows for these processes occurring internally in rural communities to escape careful analysis. Research is routinely locked into broad-scale categorisation of the rural, often because of the imperative to provide a general, if not indifferent, access for equity groups that have not 'traditionally' participated in higher education. Indeed, the Napthine review considers rural the first equity concern, with issues such as socioeconomic status (SES) and Indigeneity as secondary. For the Napthine review (DESE 2019) these are referred to as 'sub-populations' who 'experience additional challenges':

> RRR students from low SES backgrounds, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, people with disability and those from remote and very remote areas are of particular interest. These groups experience multiple types of inequity, which combine to exacerbate the challenges of aspiring to, accessing and succeeding in tertiary education. (2019, p. 34)

The extraordinarily loose designation of 'rural' or RRR (which comprises *any* form of SES/class/gender/race) must have other forms of inequalities bolted to it. The notion of rural equity is thus built up through the aforementioned governance architecture without an understanding of the *specific and historical construction* of marginality within RRR regions and places. These differences are crucial, as they speak to how regional inequalities are maintained, subsequently alienating marginalised groups from access. Research and policy too often focus on self-referential forms of evaluating the determinants of success, overlooking other social-structural factors that influence students' capabilities (see Corbett & Forsey 2017, p. 430).
However, there are also substantial efforts to have RRR and rurality remain framed in this way. This is because the current structures of 'rurality' and imagined rural communities work to privilege certain people and groups, enabling forms of power and domination to be retained in

regional formations. As Pini and Leach (2011, p. 1) demonstrate, this 'has been politically advantageous for particular groups to claim rural environments as classless so that they could position their interests and experiences as legitimate, imperative and, ultimately, shared by all'. This helps to explain why the rural is so consistently depicted as idyllic and orientated around petit-bourgeois agriculture despite the decline in family-run farms along with the diverse occupations, needs and identities that make up rural communities (Pini & Mayes 2015). Even the notion of community itself is only accessible to certain parts of a community – usually following classed and raced divisions (see Liepins 2000; Pomeroy 2022). Marginalised populations and transient workers (such as pickers, farmhands) are often framed as lacking an authentic rural identity, subsequently being framed outside of 'the community'.

Policymaking in the contexts in question tends to construct a specific classed, raced and gendered form of success that fits the narrow confines of liberal subject formation: all else – other ways meaning and success are brought into metonymic reason through marginalisation, invisibilisation and symbolic violence (Bunn, Threadgold & Burke 2020). Beyond leaning heavily on misrepresentation and/or 'misclassification', rural higher education policy is fraught with sterile representations of social misery, marginalisation, value and success. The social conditions of marginalised rural lives and their intersecting qualities are not easily counted, and subsequently not easily 'properly' recognised, because higher education providers can reach quotas and their economic and symbolic rewards without recruiting students beyond those most conveniently positioned to be adapted for participation. The simple classification of RRR without a coherent theory of marginalisation continues to allow categorisations to misappropriate resources. For example, classifications such as low-SES are extremely dubious in RRR areas, given the broad spatial categorisations used to identity socioeconomic status. The classification of RRR tends to misclassify because of this, and hence even notions such as 'low-SES' are not broadly applicable. As has been reported on in relation to the misclassification of low-SES more generally: 'the implication is that it is an inappropriate measure for programs delivered to low-SES individuals, because the majority of such individuals are, in fact, not low-SES' (Lim & Gemici 2011, p. 24).

Conclusion

The aim of this paper has been to outline the way that rural higher education has become constituted as a problem of higher education governance, often to do with discrepancies of access, participation or attainment. However, even though this has commonly been couched as a problem of equity, a prior policy imperative built over many decades holds in place a contradictory set of problems to do with national governance, largely set in relation to 'the economy'. We argue that this has led to a simplistic, binarised notion of RRR, while also making absent the ways that marginalisation is itself created and perpetuated within RRR spaces. This is perhaps unsurprising given this same era has seen the rise of neoliberal commitments in Australian policymaking, a form of financial capitalism (Fraser 2013) that has become the dominant imaginary for policymaking beyond, but certainly including, higher education. In this paper, to interrogate the effects of these commitments, we adopted the concept of governmentality to analyse the power relations at play within policymaking practices that construct the problem of rural higher education in particular ways; ways that do not necessarily sit comfortably with claims to equity for community members in RRR contexts.

We have aimed to show how forms of reason built into modern governance work to obliterate difference, through the construction of the 'problem' of rural higher education as a complicated site of competing constructions between equity and economic interests. Recent efforts by consultants to Australian higher education bureaucracy are enlisted to enact the science of the

state (statistical indicators) to gather up and represent 'need' and 'readiness' of populations, in processes we argue are clearly divorced from local knowledges, risking a re-embedding of marginalisation in RRR communities. Certainly, the juxtaposition between the metropolitan and the rural requires ongoing challenges to demonstrate how contextualised conditions of space and place cannot be reduced so readily. If equity is to become a more earnest prospect in this arena, higher education for rural areas needs to be conceived *as rural higher education* that moves beyond an urban, or even national, basis for imagining what higher education is or could be.

The positioning of the rural as a decontextualised equity issue ensures that RRR experiences of marginality remain and are possibly even made more invisible through policy that ostensibly is raising it as an issue. Higher education equity policy requires a greater understanding of the historical and structural conditions by which marginalisation occurs within RRR spaces and places. This requires sustained and cooperative investigation of *specific conditions* to understand how marginalisation is generally produced across RRR contexts and how it is produced specifically in different regions, areas and towns. Each different place misrepresented through homogenisation in the smoothing out of policy categorisation has a history that must be respected and responded to. The possibility of a genuinely rural higher education in our view requires very different imaginations than those in train now, built instead through ethical recognition and inclusion of marginalised rural people within their own modes of governance, and with greater autonomy over the conditions by which rural higher education is constructed and enacted.

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