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THE IMPACT OF A UNIVERSITY EXPERIENCE PROGRAM ON RURAL AND REGIONAL SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS: KEEPING THE FLAME BURNING

Joy Penman* Monash University, Melbourne, Australia joy.penman@monash.edu
Jyothi Thalluri University of South Australia, Adelaide, jyothi.thalluri@unisa.edu.au
Australia

* Corresponding author

ABSTRACT

Aim/Purpose	The uptake of university by regional students has been problematic for various reasons. This paper discusses a program, initiated by a South Australian regional university campus, aimed at attracting regional students into higher education.
Background	A qualitative descriptive approach to study was used to determine the value of the program on participating students and school staff. Year 10 students from Roxby Downs, Port Augusta and Port Lincoln high schools were invited to participate in a two-day regionally-focused school-university engagement program that linked students with the university campus and local employers.
Methodology	A survey was administered to determine the impact of the program. Perceptions about the program by school staff were gathered using a modified One-Minute Harvard questionnaire. While 38 Year 10 students and 5 school staff members participated, 37 students and 3 staff evaluated the program.
Findings	The findings revealed that the majority of the students would like to attend university, but financial and social issues were important barriers. The students learned about the regional university, what it can offer in terms of programs and support, and the employment prospect following university. The school staff benefited by developing a closer relationship with students and becoming better informed about the regional university.
Recommendation for Practitioners	One way by which university uptake may be increased is to provide similar immersion programs featuring engagement with employers, our recommendation to other regional universities. In increasing the levels of education, individuals, communities and the society in general are benefited.
Keywords	university participation, increasing university aspirations, Year 10 students, regional university experience

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INTRODUCTION

Post-modern times saw higher education assuming much significance in providing countries their source of “intelligentsia” for innovations in science and technology, expert knowledge and skills in various professions, education of future leaders and managers, and well-informed community members (Bok, 2015). Higher education contributes to individuals’ quality of life, improves communities, and is paramount for national progress (Baum, Ma, & Payae, 2013; Bok, 2015). However, with this successful development in tertiary education, new problems arise in many sectors including those who are not able to access nor participate in university. Poor participation in higher education is due to many interacting factors, specifically family income, cultural background, interests and personality, social background characteristics, geographic location, and parents' educational attainment (Penman & Oliver, 2011).

In year 2012, the former Centre for Regional Engagement at Whyalla conducted a program titled University Regional Experience (Further Afield), which grew from the university’s orientation program. It was developed to introduce regional students to university studies. It was a regionally-focused school-university engagement program that linked students from local high schools with the regional campus and local employers, boosting student aspirations to attend university and their capacity to succeed at study. The objectives of the program were to provide students an experience of university; raise their motivation to attend university; explore pathways and plan for the future; and to collaborate with schools, parents, and future employers to increase participation in university studies (Penman & Goel, 2013; Penman & Oliver, 2011).

Following a successful application for university’s Community Engagement Award, the program organisers made a commitment to increase the scope of this program to include other regional high schools and interest groups. The program was expanded to include schools from Port Augusta, Port Lincoln, and Roxby Downs. Employer partners were also expanded to include OneSteel, Resources and Engineering Skills Alliance (RESA), Arafura, BHP Billiton, and the Whyalla Hospital and Health Services. However, the primary objective remained the same – to attract regional students into higher education by introducing them to university life and highlighting the programs and support available. Thus, the program involved not only Whyalla students, but other rural and regional high schools, which is the focus of this paper. The purpose of this paper is to determine the impact of the Regional Experience (Farther Afield) Program on participating students and school staff.

BACKGROUND

The University Regional Experience (Farther Afield) Program responds directly to the challenges set out in the Australian Government’s Review of Australian Higher Education that was undertaken by Professor Denise Bradley (Bradley Review) with a view to increasing the number of regional students attending university (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008). A recommendation of the Bradley Review is to achieve about 40% of the 25 to 34 year old cohort having at least a bachelor’s degree by 2020. The review covers also special attention for certain groups currently under-represented in the tertiary sector, such as Indigenous people, people with low socio-economic status, and those from regional and remote areas. Participation by these groups had been static or decreasing, and it was projected that there will be a decrease in the 15 to 24 year age group in many regional areas. Another target in the Bradley Review is “to ensure that those from disadvantaged backgrounds aspire to and are able to participate in higher education” so that by 2020 20% of undergraduate enrolments are students from low socio-economic backgrounds (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008).

Efforts by local academic staff to tailor the program to the particular needs of regional students sought to meet the challenges outlined in the Bradley Review, which reported that participation in education leading to a tertiary qualification was declining within regional Australia. The Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2009) also reported that enrolment of students from regional areas

had declined. Furthermore, post-Bradley, there was the Rudd/Gillard reform agenda and more recently cuts in education funding have resulted in continuing problems in relation to access and equity for regional students.

Allen, Bonous-Hammarth, and Teranishi (2005), when discussing access to and opportunity in higher education, refer to distinct transition points that become blockages for under-represented groups. They identify the transition from secondary to post-secondary education as a “critical juncture” at which students may be diverted from the path to tertiary education. These authors acknowledge that lack of access to higher education is also associated with social conditions, such as structural inequality and gender norms, with significant implications for the likelihood of minority students accessing certain careers. Education programs, such as the program described in this paper, attempt to redress some of these issues. The program also aligns with the university’s mission pertaining to teaching excellence, knowledge creation, engagement with communities, and promotion of core values of scholarship and social justice (University of South Australia, 2007).

There is a clear need for university engagement with regional students, especially those from low socioeconomic backgrounds and families whose members may never have attended university, in order to increase aspirations for and access to higher education participation. The motivation and significance of this initiative and study is increasing the possibility of regional secondary students attending university and assisting them in planning for their future. Consequently, this program could potentially benefit the participating students, school and university staff, university, other organisations, industry, and the wider community.

This initiative is similar to other strategies implemented by universities within Australia and abroad. For instance, the state government’s First Generation Program is a targeted intervention specifically for students whose parents have not attended university (University of Adelaide, 2009). Healy (2010) speaks about outreach programs that attract non-traditional individuals to university. Akin to targeted interventions are early intervention programs, the purpose of which includes debunking myths about university, matching students’ interests with career pathways, and gaining a better understanding of university (University of Adelaide, 2009). These programs tie in closely with foundation (or bridging) programs where eligible Australian students are given a conditional admission offer to their preferred program, after achieving success in the Foundation Studies Program. Assessment is based on work completed throughout the year (Foundation Studies Program, n.d.). While the program conducted by the former Centre for Regional Engagement at Whyalla engages a much younger cohort of students and for a shorter duration of time, it has the same fundamental purpose of introducing potential students to university life and study. Thus, our research question is: “What are the perceptions of school students and school staff on the intervention program undertaken by the regional campus?”

THE REGIONAL EXPERIENCE (FARTHER AFIELD) PROGRAM

The program involved Year 10 students from regional schools. Year 10 level was targeted because it was during this level that students were making firmer decisions about careers and deciding on courses to take for Years 11 and 12. Letters of invitation were coursed through school principals who encouraged their students to participate in the two-day event to be held at the Whyalla campus. A total of thirty-eight (n=38) Year 10 students indicated an interest in the program. Specifically these students were from the South Australian regional centres of Port Augusta (n= 9), Roxby Downs (n=15), and Port Lincoln (n=14).

Port Augusta is situated at the head of the Spencer Gulf and has a population of approximately 14,000 people. It is known as Australia’s crossroads for both rail and road transport, supplies 30% of South Australia’s power, and is a culturally diverse city with strong connections to the regional Aboriginal communities (Port Augusta City Council, 2013). Port Augusta Secondary School is co-educational, catering for a range of students from Years 8 to 12. Its enrolments are steadily increasing: 2011 – 550, 2012 – 555, 2013 – 616. Approximately 40% of the students are Aboriginal; a dis-

tinct feature is that it has the largest number of Aboriginal secondary school students in a South Australian state school (Port Augusta Secondary School, 2012).

Roxby Downs is a mining town located in northern South Australia that was purposely built to service the Olympic Dam mine, which contains one of the largest known iron ore bodies in the world. It has excellent facilities for leisure, culture and recreation, and comprehensive health and education services (Roxby Downs, 2015). Roxby Downs Area School has high rates of transition; its enrolments being the following: 2010 – 235, 2011 – 217, 2012 – 232. The challenges presented by the transience in the community are largely overcome by the relative youth and resilience of the population, having to establish themselves in a new community without extended families and friends (Roxby Downs Area School, 2013).

Port Lincoln is a coastal city with a population of approximately 14,500 and is located at the southern tip of Eyre Peninsula. Its economy is based on grain-handling, lambs, wool, beef, tuna farming, and fish processing. The Port Lincoln High School caters for students from Years 8 to 12 and is divided into a Year 8-10 Sub-School and a Year 11-12 Sub-School. The students come from a wide geographic area and varied socio-economic and cultural backgrounds; of the 736 students enrolled in 2013, 17% are Indigenous and 30% are school card recipients (Port Lincoln High School, 2014).

The special features of the program that was implemented were student focused, partnering approach, driven by university students and academics, and promoting a “can do university” attitude. Also, the program took into account the unique needs of high school students in regional areas. It was tailored to meet the needs of ‘disadvantaged’ students (low socioeconomic backgrounds, family members have never attended university, and diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds). The Australian Social Trends (2102) showed that of the 1,069,000 higher education students in 2011, 57% were women. Thus, in trying to balance the current male/female ratio in university enrolments, the program organisers targeted more male high school students than females.

The program partnered the regional campus with regional schools and employers to encourage university participation of regional students. The emphasis was on the academic programs available locally. The content was covered by local academic staff, with the assistance of local university students and major regional employers. Meeting future employers was deemed important so that students might link university with greater prospect for employment. The program also linked with the South Australian Certificate of Education Personal Learning Plan (PLP), a compulsory 10-credit subject that helped high school students plan for their future by enabling them to make informed decisions about the subjects they would study in Years 11 and 12, and/or outside of school.

Current university students and past graduates were involved to assist and motivate the high school students as they learnt about life at university. Academics from various local campus disciplines were integral to the program’s success. They shared their passion for their respective professions and encouraged and inspired the school students to pursue university study. Students were supported in developing a belief that attendance at university was achievable and that the regional campus had the resources and mechanisms necessary to help them succeed in their studies.

Because the school students lived a considerable distance from the Whyalla campus, accommodation was provided for the students and accompanying teachers at the on-campus university village. The schedule of activities over the two days included a campus tour, introduction, information on pathways to university study, followed by sessions with health/nursing, business, social work, engineering lecturers, inspirational speeches from past graduates, sessions with local employers and a pizza celebration at the program’s conclusion where certificates of completion were awarded. The certificates were submitted for their PLP.

METHOD

To gain information about school students’ perceptions and experiences about the program, a survey was conducted. At the conclusion of the program, questionnaires were administered to both the par-

ticipating students and the teachers who accompanied the high school students. The effectiveness of the program and its perceived impact on the students were assessed using a two-page post-intervention survey instrument consisting of twenty-two (22) open-ended and closed questions especially developed for the purpose. In addition, the students were requested to complete the 3-2-1 reflection exercise, which gathered students' responses on the three most important points learned, two main facts learned, and one question raised.

A modified One-Minute Harvard questionnaire (Drummond, 2007; Stead, 2005) was used to gather perceptions about the program by school staff. They were asked:

1. What was the most important outcome gained from participating in the program?
2. What were the best aspects of the program?
3. What aspects could be added, expanded, or excluded for future program offerings?
4. How did this program impact on you?
5. Other comments

Descriptive and frequency analyses were undertaken to present quantitative descriptions on various measures, such as intentions to pursue university, facilitators and barriers in pursuing university, and program experiences (Creswell, 2003).

The University's Ethics Committee has assessed and approved this study. As this was an inaugural program, it is acknowledged that the small number of participants is a limitation of this research. Thirty-eight (38) students participated in the University Regional Experience (Farther Afield) Program. The feedback questionnaire was completed by 37 students – 9 from Port Augusta Secondary School, 14 from Port Lincoln High School, and 14 from Roxby Downs Area School, giving a response rate of 97%. Three (3) completed surveys were received from those distributed to the 5 school staff members (teachers) who accompanied the students throughout the program, giving a response rate of 60% for staff.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The first question in the students' survey asked whether they would like to go to university. Their responses are given in Table 1.

Table 1. Number and percentage of respondents wanting to attend University

Response	Pt Augusta SS n=9	Pt Lincoln HS n=14	Roxby Downs AS n= 14	Total
Yes	9	13	7	29
No	0	0	0	0
Maybe	0	1	7	8
Total	9	14	14	37

These results showing a high percentage of the students wanting to attend university (78%) are not unexpected given that students interested in university studies would normally be those volunteering to join the program. However, it is interesting to note the breakdown in relation to the three geographical areas with Port Augusta students recording 100%, Port Lincoln students 93%, and Roxby Downs student "yes" responses much less at 50%. These results could be explained from the differences in the sociocultural and economic backgrounds of the regions, as well as their proximity to the university.

STUDENT RESPONSES

Following this initial response, the students were requested to explain why they would like to go to university. The general theme of the replies was “so that I can do the career I want and become successful and earn lots of money”. Other students, unsure of the career they wanted, believed university would be “enjoyable” and offer them “endless possibilities”. Some students referred to their desire to study at university level and the “self-pride” they would gain. One mentioned that they would be the first member of their family to attend university. Some of the comments received in relation to this additional question were:

“I want a good education and to gain a degree that will give me opportunities.”

“To expand my knowledge and increase my chances of getting a job.”

“Because I strive for a higher education and I’d be the first member of family to go.”

The next question asked the students to rank their perception of how likely it was that they would go to university on a 7-point scale (1 representing very likely; 7 representing not likely at all). As shown in Figure 1, students from Port Lincoln High School were clearly the most confident that they would be attending university in the future. This finding is perhaps not unusual given that these students are from an older established city that has a rich aquaculture industry and is reputed to have the most millionaires per capita in Australia (Fyfe, 2008). Despite all Port Augusta Secondary School students reporting that they would like to attend university, many more of this group of students believed it was unlikely that this would happen.

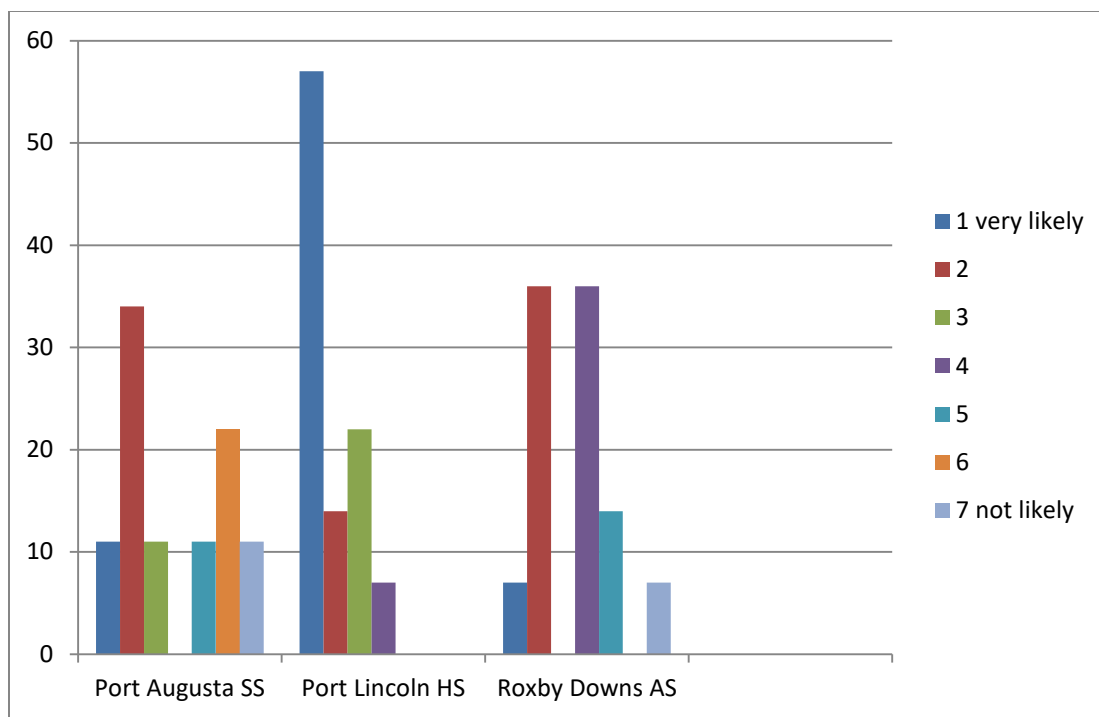


Figure 1. Rankings of perceived likelihood of attendance at university

The students were also asked whether they would be willing to undertake additional programs to help them gain entrance to university if they were available. While over a third were unsure, the students were generally interested in taking part in further programs (59%). It is noteworthy that the participating students from Port Augusta Secondary School appeared to be especially keen to do so with 78% responding positively.

The students were requested to write down three things that would encourage them to go to university and three things they thought would stop them from attending university. Table 2 and Table 3 summarise the items identified:

Table 2. Factors that would encourage the students to attend university

Response	N*
Opportunity to have chosen career, get where want to be	14
Learn new things, new experiences and knowledge	11
Meet new people, new friends, social aspects	10
Parents, family, friends, school, teachers	9
Money, ability to earn good pay	7
Pride, self-worth, gaining confidence	3
Prestige, respect by others	2
Programs like the University Regional Experience	2
Good grades	1
Work Experience	1

* Number of times the item was identified

Table 3. Factors that would prevent the students from attending university

Response	N*
Costs, financial issues, can't get enough money	30
Family, friends, missing home and family	12
Grades, low Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR), my skills	10
Moving away from home	9
Fear of not being good enough, lack of confidence, being scared, stressful	6
Being unsure of what I want to do, change of career path	5
Living in a rural town, where I live	3
Too much work, the length of time needed to spend	3
Nothing	2
Excessive class sizes	1

* Number of times the item was identified

The ability to achieve their chosen career, gain new knowledge and experiences, and meet new people, were given as the main factors that would encourage these students to attend university. The financial cost of attending university, missing family and friends, and having to move away from home and not receiving the necessary entry requirements were the key items the students identified that would prevent them from going to university. It is clear that students might like to pursue university studies, however, they might be discouraged for various reasons.

The literature supports these findings, revealing that economic, sociocultural, and educational factors indeed play crucial roles in determining university participation (Ashby & Schoon, 2010; Maani, 2006; Maaz & Watermann, 2007). Lack of confidence from low ATAR, relocation, fear of inadequacy/failure (Gore et al., 2016), and problems associated with living in an isolated area were also factors. Some of these issues were addressed by the program, specifically the opportunities that could potentially open for students support available and career pathways and assurance that the university was accessible and manageable. The program would still be successful for the organisers even if students decided to pursue university elsewhere.

PATHWAYS TO UNIVERSITY

When asked to list the pathways into university that they were aware of, the students were able to identify the various forms of entrance. Most indicated application from school using their Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) score as the pathway, but many were also aware of the Foundation Studies program as a pathway, as well as gaining entrance to university using a TAFE award. It appears that there may be a need to further promote use of the special tertiary admission test (STAT) as a possible pathway.

COST AND FINANCIAL SUPPORT

The students were also asked to indicate how much money they thought it cost to go to University per year by selecting an item from a list of pre-determined possible responses. Approximately one-third of the students identified that it costs around \$10,000 per year to attend university. This question was followed by an open-ended question requesting the students to identify how help might be obtained to pay for university.

More Port Lincoln students identified scholarships and government assistance as a means to fund university studies than students from Port Augusta and Roxby Downs. It is noteworthy that only students from Roxby Downs listed parents as a possible source of finance. Students from Roxby Downs also included employment as a means to finance university studies such as undertaking part-time work or working for organisations, for example, the Army or a mining company that may fund studies for employees. One student acknowledged that study in the Foundation Studies program is free to students.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN SCHOOL AND UNIVERSITY

The next question asked the students what they thought were the differences between university and school. Many mentioned the freedom university studies allow to individual students, but most also recognised the independence and personal responsibility this involves. It was acknowledged that university studies were more complex and required commitment. Many also described how at school they were “forced” to study a range of subjects that could include some they may not be interested in, whereas at university they were able to choose to focus on the program specific to their chosen career.

SUPPORT

The students were then asked where they would go if they were at university and needed help with a study or personal issue. Most replied that they would seek out a counsellor at the university or approach their lecturer/tutor. However, having several non-responses suggests that detail of the support available, particularly support provided by university’s Learning and Teaching Unit, requires clearer emphasis within the program.

PROGRAM EVALUATION

The students were also requested to rate the various sessions included in the program on a scale of 1 to 7, where 1 = “excellent” and 7 = “not useful”, and in between the scale 4 = “good”. The highest

ranking sessions were Engineering, Nursing, Support services / inspirational speeches / awarding of certificates session, and the Careers session. It is noteworthy that the lowest ranking session related to the Business degrees, which is consistent with the currently low demand regionally for this area of study. The responses are set out below in Table 4.

Table 4. Student rating of the program sessions (Questions 13 - 20)

Scale: 1=Excellent, 4 = Good, 7=Not Useful

Session	Median
Careers session	2
Pathways into University	4
Nursing	2
Foundation Studies and Education	3
Business	5
Social Work	3
Engineering	1
Support Services, Inspirational speeches, Awarding of Certificates	2

The most popular component of the program was clearly identified by the students as the Engineering session followed by the Nursing session, both being desirable career options and favourites. The presentations of these courses included interactive practical activities that were more about “doing” and “less talking”. Some of the comments received were: “Engineering and Nursing because they were very hands on.”

“I liked making the gadgets in Engineering.”

“Engineering because that might be one of my pathways.”

Other well-received sessions were the support services and inspirational speeches. A wide variety of services and resources to enhance the university experience of students, such as study support, counselling, disabilities, career advice, and library, were explained. This was followed by inspirational presentations of potential employers including representatives from the local hospital, Centacare, and the mining industry. Meeting potential employers demonstrated the reality for employment amongst those who complete university studies. They explained the jobs thoroughly, provided information, and shared first-hand experiences on how university has paved the way for their careers (Gavin, 2015; Princeton University, 2016). Soutar and Turner (2002) corroborated this finding in their study by identifying course suitability and employment prospects as major determinants for university preference. A student remarked, “It was cool to hear them talk about potential for work because many are uncertain with their jobs today. They were encouraging ... “

STAFF RESPONSES

The teachers accompanying the students were asked to indicate what they thought was the most important outcome of the program. Their feedback generally aligned with the views of their students in terms of the value of the experience, the learning that transpired, and the recommendations for improvement. The success of the program was evidenced by the following responses:

“The opportunity to experience a day in the life of a uni student.”

“Students were able to experience what University was like and that it is not a scary experience but one that is valuable and fun.”

“It was great to get away with a group of students who were genuine in their desire to find out about university options and to see them realise that these things were within their grasp with a little focus and application.”

The teachers reported the best aspects of the program as spending an extended time at the campus and experiencing living in the on-campus student accommodation. The engineering and nursing sessions, the library activity, and the good food at the on-campus café were also mentioned. The comments below indicate some of the benefits gained and the importance of involving the students undertaking the program in practical activities.

“Students really enjoyed the hands on practical aspects of many of the workshops. Engineering and Nursing in particular were favourites and they found the career profiles very interesting and useful.”

“The best part of the exercise was to be on campus and to sit in a lecture theatre to get a feel for campus life whilst living in the campus accommodation. It also gave students a broader range of potential choices to consider, with the possibility of a more gradual transitioning to living away from home, but still being able to get back regularly without the huge expense that airfares impose.”

When asked what could be added, expanded, or excluded in relation to the program, there were few changes suggested: that a demonstration of video-conferencing giving lectures to remote sites be included, and that the Business session be less complex, not so late in the day, and contain more small practical activities. As indicated by the following response, the key factors related to scheduling shorter sessions and the inclusion of more hand-on tasks:

“There was in my opinion too much information given at one sitting on a couple of occasions. When working with year 10 students the time needs to be broken up with more hands on/physical tasks between information presenters or they switch off after 30 minutes.”

Generally the staff agreed with the aims and objectives of the program and appreciated the opportunity to spend some quality time with their students in the university environment. They realised that the program was only possible because of the funding made available by the university and industry sponsorships, which could reach up to \$20,000 to cover yearly outreach programs. The availability of this funding was subject to many variables.

Importantly, the teachers believed they were better equipped to be able to promote the degrees available regionally at the campus. The teachers commented that they enjoyed the experience and reported the impacts of the program for them as follows:

“Made me far more aware of the opportunities near to Port Augusta and made it highly likely for me to recommend studying at Whyalla as an option for my students.”

“I bonded with some students I would not otherwise work closely with and it also gave me a better idea of what Whyalla campus has to offer in terms of courses and expertise. It broadened my arsenal as a counselor to recommend Whyalla as a Uni option for students studying the subjects offered as a viable more personalised placement.”

When asked for “any other comments” the staff provided the following useful feedback that generally added support to their previous responses in relation to scheduling, inclusion of more practical activities, and the overall value of the program:

“The first day was too long by about an hour, and left us feeling quite rushed.”

“The lecture style sessions should be earlier in the day.”

“The engineering workshop was certainly one of the highlights for many of the students, because it was a practical skill learning exercise as a taste of the exciting things they might do at Whyalla if they were to be part of this program. More of these kinds of activities rather than facts and aspects would certainly attract more interest from your target group.”

“Thank you very much. We all found the trip a worthwhile experience.”

IMPACT OF THE PROGRAM

The Bradley Review of Higher Education (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008) highlighted inequities in higher education participation, noting that participation rates in non-metropolitan areas are much lower than in large Australian cities, and that innovative solutions are called for in order to increase higher education participation in areas of lower population and among lower socioeconomic groups (Sawyer & Ellis, 2011). The program was introduced at the Whyalla campus in an effort to counteract this rural disadvantage and provide support for regional students who often feel isolated and lack a family tradition of university attendance.

The findings collated from the student and staff surveys administered upon completion of the program revealed that the majority of these high school students would like to attend university to achieve the career of their choice, a higher income and self-development, but there were important barriers to this, in particular the high costs involved in studying at university and of relocating away from home, family, and friends. Students from the affluent city of Port Lincoln were more confident of the likelihood of going to university. Over half of the participants were interested in undertaking additional programs that may assist them to attend university, with students from Port Augusta being particularly keen. Students were generally aware of the pathways to university, fees involved, and the differences between studying at school and university, noting an advantage of being able to choose to study in an area of their interest. Feedback suggested the university extend the program over a longer period, with shorter, less intense days, and increase the number of hands-on activities. It appeared that the promotion of the Business degrees required close attention to make them more attractive to potential students and that there was a need for greater promotion of the STAT test as an alternative pathway to university. The program has shown that the school staff benefited as they developed a closer relationship with students and became better informed about the regional university.

The findings from the 3-2-1 reflections shed further light to the impact of the program on students. The popular important learnings for the combined groups were:

“University is important.”

“University is accessible.”

“University opens opportunities for individuals.”

“There are many ways of getting into university. I learnt how to get to uni.”

“There are many options for me and I could choose. University is one option.”

“Only you can decide what you want to do.”

The two main facts learned related to “Foundation Studies is a back plan” and facts relating to discipline-specific information, e.g., “There are many kinds of engineering”; “Washing hands remove microbes”; “Only 14 teaspoons of sugar a day is recommended”; “The starting salary of teachers is about \$55,000”, and “There are jobs for students nurses at the local hospital.” In addition, there were many varied questions raised, but many of them related to pre-requisites for getting into a program and queries about double degrees, and these questions were addressed during the conclusion of the program.

The responses to the above reflection exercise provided a glimpse of the learning that transpired during the program. The best outcome for the participants was that they learnt about the university environment in general and that, while they had a range of alternatives available, university was a real option for them after high school. Pearsall, Hawthorne, Block, Walker, and Masucci (2015) emphasised likewise the importance of being able to identify with campus spaces or place. Equally important was the students’ learning about how to get to university and what ATAR score meant, as well as the realisation that it was only the individual who could decide on which path to take for his/her future. Moreover, the students expressed some understanding of university disciplines or programs and ca-

reer options. Student awareness of the economic advantages of studying locally was raised, as was an understanding of the scholarships and cadetships available to assist them financially. Meeting with graduates and local employers demonstrated the real potential for employment among those who complete university studies. The motivations of industry partners' involvement might be explained in terms of civic interdependence (Barrera, 2015), vital for community outreach programs.

CONCLUSIONS

The University Regional Experience (Farther Afield) Program is a worthwhile project exposing students to university culture and to opportunities a university education can deliver to graduates. It increased students' awareness of the possibility of attending university and of the different pathways available, assisting them in planning for their future and identifying goals to achieve these. The program allowed students to experience different learning contexts, such as lectures, tutorials, and practical activities. In addition, it unpacked the criteria for admission to the university and academic disciplines, and made students cognisant of the support available for them to succeed. More importantly, it brought potential employers, academics, graduates, and undergraduate students to meet with the school students to share with them the importance of university education. The program engaged the students, deepening their connection with a university and allowing them to become comfortable within the university environment. Thus, the program was responsive to the call of the Bradley Review to increase higher education participation in rural and regional areas.

The factors that would facilitate university participation for majority of the participants were the following: opportunity to have a chosen career; learn new things, new experiences and knowledge; and meet new people, and new friends. The majority of the participating students wished to pursue to university, but were hesitant because of finances, the need to relocate, and personal abilities. There were differences in students' confidence in going to university observed amongst the schools. Feedback suggested also positive and encouraging perceptions about the program from both students and school staff.

The program organisers plan to continue conducting the initiative to benefit other rural and regional high school students, subject to funding and management support. In expanding to more rural and regional schools, a robust information base could be achieved that would affirm the program's effectiveness and usefulness. This program is not only useful for Whyalla and surrounding regions, but for other regions as well. Other engagement programs could be better informed as the program is transportable. Transportability is a key aspect of the progression from research to its dissemination, after considering variables such as geographical location, school-university engagement, employer/industry involvement, university staff commitment, and available funding and support. Moreover, another future direction is following-up on students who expressed interest in pursuing university to determine if in fact they did take up the challenge.

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BIOGRAPHIES



Dr Joy Penman is currently a Senior Lecturer in Nursing and Midwifery at the Monash University. She has over thirty years teaching experience locally and abroad and many years nursing experience in various health care facilities. Joy has extensive experience in research and community engagement. In recognition of her contribution to these areas, she has been a recipient of various teaching, research and community service awards. Joy has been involved in various research projects. She is well published in peer reviewed journals and books, and has presented her work in national and international conferences.



Dr Jyothi Thalluri is a Senior Lecturer and has extensive experience in 'service teaching' Human Anatomy/Physiology, Neurosciences and Pathology courses to various allied health science programs in the Division of Health Sciences, UniSA. Jyothi has a strong interest in the learning and teaching dynamics associated with student academic, social and cultural diversity. She has a strong belief that students need various learning options and appropriate support, particularly when transitioning into university study. She has demonstrated ongoing commitment in the implementation of a number of innovative initiatives, in order to engage, support and provide flexible and student-centred learning options. She has used these to enhance outcomes within a diverse range of student cohorts. Jyothi has won many teaching awards and has published several papers in peer reviewed international teaching and learning journals.