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Development**

Regional Development Australia
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HUME

Higher Education Information Navigation

An Exploration of Parent Information Needs in the Hume Region

June 2015



An Australian Government Initiative



The document is the Report of the Hume Region Higher Education Information Navigation Project 2015.

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DEFINITION OF TERMS

Careers advisors

Careers advisors are staff employed by schools to deliver careers information, advice and support. They are also known as careers teachers, careers practitioners and careers professionals.

Higher education

Higher education is defined as that portion of tertiary education that has traditionally been delivered by universities. Now also provided by some TAFE institutes and a small number of private providers, higher education normally commences with a Bachelor degree at undergraduate level and may continue to a postgraduate degree such as a Masters or Doctorate.

Parents

At times, this report uses the term 'parents' to refer to the adults who care for young people. Such carers may well have a relationship other than that of parent to the people for whom they care. For that reason, the term 'carer' is used in this report also. The terms may be used interchangeably for the purposes of this report, its findings and recommendations.

TAFE

Technical and Further Education (TAFE) institutions provide a range of predominantly vocational tertiary education courses. TAFE colleges or institutes are publically owned and financially supported by state and territory governments. Individual TAFE institutions often have a number of campuses. Some TAFEs have partnered with universities to offer locally based pathway programs that provide credit towards university degrees.

Tertiary education

Tertiary education is post-secondary education. It includes both Vocational Education and Training (VET) that is traditionally offered by TAFEs and higher education that is traditionally offered by universities. There are also private providers of both VET and higher education.

Universities

Universities are institutions that undertake both research and teaching. The vast majority of Australian universities are public institutions. They receive the bulk of their funding from the Commonwealth Government (for teaching and research) and through fees for teaching local and international students.

VET

Vocational Education and Training (VET) is training and education that is traditionally vocational in focus. VET courses are provided by TAFEs and private educational providers.

1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1 Hume Region Higher Education Information Navigation Project

Sponsored by the Hume Regional Development Australia (RDA) Committee, the 'Hume Region Higher Education Information Navigation Project' (the project) was undertaken by Abingdon Advisory in 2014-2015 and focused on identifying informational barriers faced by families in Victoria's Hume Region seeking to assist a young person enter higher education.

A number of research studies, including a study commissioned by the Hume RDA Committee in 2012, have identified a range of barriers that are impacting on student achievement of educational aspirations, including difficulties accessing information about higher education opportunities and navigating application processes.

It is also of concern that the region has some of the lowest educational outcomes in Victoria.

The aim of the project was to find out what action would most assist parents in the Hume Region to access and use information that supports student transition into higher education following completion of Year 12.

The project included a literature review, consultation with regional education sector stakeholders and input from parents, carers and schools to help identify the barriers and possible solutions.

Consequently, the project has identified a number of opportunities to improve the provision of information to parents and carers, about higher education options, pathways and related supports, such as financial assistance and accommodation services.

This project report provides recommendations that aim to build the capacity of parents and carers in the Hume Region to effectively access and use information about entry to higher education.

A key conclusion from the project is that parents and carers be recognised as an important stakeholder group with distinct demands, expectations, needs and communications styles.

Recommendations identified by the project and detailed in the report relate to:

- strengthening the role of careers advisors in schools within the Hume Region
- improving the provision of information to families about university study
- raising educational aspirations in the region
- increasing the understanding of higher education pathways by families
- providing improved information about the costs of university study for families in the region.

1.2 Key messages from parents and carers

The findings detailed in this report reflect consultation with families in the Hume Region about the role that information provision to parents and carers is able to play in reducing the barriers to university entry. The key messages below reflect those consultation responses that were most strongly expressed by parents and carers across the region.

Careers advisers play a key role

The project identified benefits to the families whose children attend those schools in the region that have outwardly focused careers advisers who actively engage families and help them to navigate the pathways to university. Families involved in the project identified the crucial role played by careers advisors as a source of information.

In the course of undertaking the project, many school based careers advisors in the region were found to be highly engaged with the challenge of assisting families to support student access to university education. These careers advisors expressed a strong interest in the project and encouraged the involvement of parents, carers and other family members. It is also notable that a number of careers advisors in the region expressed no interest in the project and were unwilling to provide information to families that would have enabled them to contribute to the parent survey and attend the forums.

There was unity amongst stakeholders across the region, including from the school principals who attended the forums, about the existence of significant resource challenges that limit the provision of careers advice by schools.

Families involved in the project expressed a strong desire for a single source of trusted, relevant information about higher education and identified the important role played by careers advisors.

Families have a poor understanding about university pathways

Parents and their student children demonstrated a lack of knowledge about the multiple pathways to university, with many believing that students would be excluded from pursuing studies for their chosen career if they did not achieve a particular Australian Tertiary Admissions Ranking (ATAR) in Year 12. There was keen interest and a strong appreciation for information provided in the forums about pathway options and participants expressed a desire for further information about the multiple pathways into higher education.

There is a strong demand for university information – particularly about costs

There was a strong desire expressed by parents and carers for more information about attending university. This included information on things such as course pre-requisites, the VTAC applications process and what it is like to be a university student.

However, by far the most strident calls were for information about the costs of attending university and the support available. In particular, there was a strong demand expressed for information around the costs associated with accommodation at each major university campus.

Lack of aspiration is a serious problem for some students

Parents, carers, teachers and principals agreed that the Hume Region includes many families who are disengaged from education and have very limited educational aspirations, allied with a focus on immediate vocational or employment outcomes.

Improving awareness of the benefits of ongoing education can be expected to shift attitudes toward higher education within the region. These benefits include: higher incomes, higher employment rates and improved eligibility for jobs that are fulfilling.

The opinion of the families, teachers and principals who attended the forums was that the building of aspirations is a long process that should commence in primary schools and be maintained throughout secondary school.

1.3 Overview of recommendations

Strengthening the role of careers advisers in Hume Region

Provide greater recognition, resources and professional development opportunities to school based careers advisers.

In part, this could be achieved by:

- Making use of existing careers advisers networks within the Hume Region to promote the importance of their relationship to parents by briefing them on the findings from this study.
- Further developing and strengthening the career advisor networks that already operate within the region.

Improving the provision of information to Hume Region families about university study

Recognise parents and carers as an important stakeholder group with distinct demands, expectations, needs and communications styles; and provide them directly with more information.

There is a need for more information about university study, including information about study options and related support (such as financial assistance and accommodation services) to be provided directly to parents and carers.

As an initial step for improving the provision of information to families and carers, it is recommended that:

- A low cost standard website or portal template be developed and made available to careers advisors in the Hume Region and that it incorporate links for both parents and students to key information sources on navigating pathways to university.
- Careers advisors be supported to further develop such a website or portal, creating two separate resources for parents and students which link to information sources for courses, accommodation and financial assistance, including those hosted by:
 - tertiary education providers
 - government departments
 - other providers of information about higher education.
- Further investigation occur regarding local initiatives for families to develop and share information about university study such as accommodation options, relocation information, Year 12 subject choices and so on. Such initiatives might include the creation of a virtual community using social media or the creation of a physical place where families can gather and share information about university study.

Raising educational aspirations in the Hume Region

Build educational aspiration earlier in life, with provision of information to families about higher education commencing in primary school and continuing throughout secondary school.

The Careers Curriculum Framework provided by the Victorian Department of Education and Training, particularly the Engaging Parents in Career Conversations (EPICC) portion of that program, encourages parental involvement, but is mostly focused on secondary school students. There are also a small number of educational programs in the Hume Region that target the primary school years, with the aim of increasing longer term educational outcomes.

It is recommended that:

- Discussions be initiated which bring together careers advisors and primary school staff to focus on opportunities for engaging with parents during primary school years.
- A tailored information program for parents of primary school students be developed and implemented, initially as a pilot program in a small number of locations within the Hume Region.
- All Hume Region families be encouraged to visit at least one university campus before their children reach the middle of secondary school.
- Families be provided with more information about university life and value of the deferred benefits of university study. This will help mitigate against the tendency for students and their families to limit their focus to the more immediate benefits of getting a job or pursuing a restricted number of vocational pathways.

Increasing the understanding of university pathways by families

Challenge common misconceptions and reduce information gaps by providing improved access to specific information about higher education pathways.

The over reliance on the Year 12 ATAR as a single 'one off' determinant of eligibility for higher education can act as a disincentive and also directly limit the opportunity for students to achieve their educational aspirations.

It is recommended that:

- There be greater availability of advice and resources to Hume Region parents and carers specifically on the navigation of university options by young people.
- University pathways information sessions be held across the Hume Region in the 'change of preference week', after Year 12 students have received their ATAR and before families must finalise their university options for the following year.

Providing improved information about the costs of university study for families

Assist families to access information about the cost of supporting a student to undertake university study, available financial support and options for reducing the financial burden.

Families in the Hume Region face significant costs when supporting their students to attend university, as most students are required to live away from home in order to pursue higher education. There was a strong demand evident in the region for greater information provision about Youth Allowance eligibility and other forms of financial assistance.

It is recommended that:

- Improvements be made to the provision of information to families in Hume Region about:
 - anticipated total costs associated with university study, including accommodation and other costs associated with young people leaving home
 - Commonwealth Government financial support through the Youth Allowance and the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) systems
 - university scholarship opportunities
 - online study options
 - alternate, lower cost further education pathways.

2 BACKGROUND

2.1 The Hume Region

The Hume Region extends over 40,000 square kilometres of north east Victoria and the Goulburn valley. The region has an estimated resident population of 280,000¹ and comprises four distinct sub regions and 12 local government areas:

Upper Hume:	Indigo, Towong and Wodonga
Goulburn Valley:	Greater Shepparton, Moira and Strathbogie
Central Hume:	Alpine, Benalla, Mansfield and Wangaratta
Lower Hume:	Mitchell and Murrindindi.

It is a multi-centred region with a number of regional cities and centres located along major transport routes. Unlike other non-metropolitan regions in Victoria, the Hume Region does not have a single, dominant major regional city and consequently has a relatively dispersed population and multiple service hubs. This is a key point of difference for the region which has implications for service access and delivery models, including for education.

2.2 Regional educational attainment

Allied with its central role in providing an effective workforce, educational attainment has long been recognised as a key factor in determining the economic prosperity of individuals, families and communities. Education has an important social function as well. It is well established that educational attainment is also positively correlated with the wellbeing and health of individuals and regions.²

It is of concern, therefore, that the Hume Region has some of the lowest educational outcomes in Victoria. For example, the region shows lower retention rates for Years 7-12 than the average for non-metropolitan regions. The region also has an estimated 22%³ of young people leaving school through years 10-12, in comparison to metropolitan Melbourne where only 15% of this cohort leaves school.⁴

The percentage of people aged between 25-34 years in the Hume Region in 2006 with a Bachelor degree or higher was 17.35% compared to the Victorian rate of 30.4%. Hence, the region has just over half the Victorian average of people aged under 34 years with a university degree⁵.

¹ Victoria in Future Population and Household Projections for Victoria and its Regions 2011-2031, Department of Planning and Community Development, 2012.

² Lochner, L. Non-Production Benefits of Education: Crime, Health, and Good Citizenship, National Bureau of Economic Research, 2011.

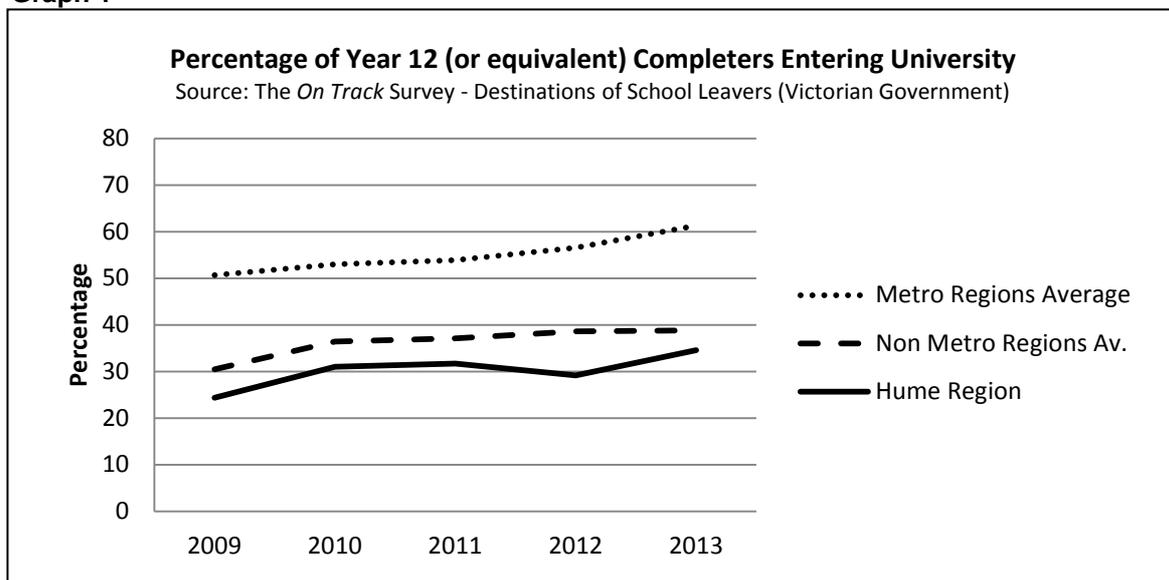
³ Hume Regional Development Australia, Aspirations and Destinations of Young People: A study of four towns and their communities and schools in Central Hume, University of Ballarat, 2012.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid p.13.

The region also has a lower than average proportion of students entering university after completion of Year 12 (refer Graph 1).

Graph 1



Hume Region’s relatively low educational outcomes have been identified in previous regional strategies and studies, including the *Hume Strategy for Sustainable Communities 2010-2020* regional plan which included ‘expanding quality opportunities in education and promoting a culture of excellence and aspiration in learning’ as a focus under its communities theme.⁶

The Central Hume educational aspirations and destinations study, commissioned by the Hume RDA Committee and completed by the University of Ballarat in 2012, identified a number of barriers to educational attainment in the region.⁷

Research that was commissioned by Regional Development Victoria (RDV) on behalf of the Regional Policy Advisory Committee and completed in 2013, examined regional education aspiration across Victoria, including the Hume Region.⁸

In 2014, the Hume Region hosted a small Parents As Career Transition Support (PACTS) program. Developed by Youth Connect, a Melbourne based not-for-profit organisation, PACTS provides workshops designed to help provide parents, guardians, grandparents and carers with up to date information about educational pathways, that enables them to support their children effectively when making career transition decisions within the secondary school system and beyond.

⁶ The Hume Strategy for Sustainable Communities 2010-2020, Department of Planning and Community Development, Victoria, 2010.

⁷ Hume Regional Development Australia, Aspirations and Destinations of Young People: A study of four towns and their communities and schools in Central Hume, University of Ballarat, 2012. p.11.

⁸ Research Into Education Aspiration for Regional Victoria. Regional Policy Advisory Committee, Victoria, 2013.

In mid-2014, the Victorian Government launched the parent focused Engaging Parents in Career Conversations (EPiCC) program. This online resource supports parents and carers to talk to their children about subject choices, courses and career opportunities.⁹

Regional Career Development Officers employed by the Victorian Department of Education and Training have been delivering EPiCC workshops to build the capability and capacity of:

- career practitioners to deliver improved career development services to young people and to better engage with parents on the subject
- parents to engage in more meaningful career conversations
- young people to make better informed decisions about career pathways and options.

In addition, a number of place based initiatives are being implemented across the region which aim to improve educational outcomes in disadvantaged communities by targeting families and children during early years and primary school.

⁹ EPiCC can be accessed at <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/careerconversations>

3 PROJECT METHODOLOGY

The Hume RDA Committee sponsored the 'Higher Education Information Navigation Project' and engaged Abingdon Advisory with the aim of expanding on previous studies to identify 'what' information is needed by parents (and carers) and 'how' this advice can be provided, so that they can help young people make the step into higher education.

At the commencement of the project, Abingdon Advisory undertook a literature review and findings from the literature have been incorporated into this report. The literature review has also been made available to the RDA Committee as a separate report.

Throughout the project, Abingdon Advisory drew on input from the Hume RDA Committee Project Steering Group. Early in the project, discussion also took place with careers advisors and school principals at forums hosted by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (now the Department of Education and Training) – North Eastern Victoria Region, in Wodonga and Shepparton.

In order to gain as much direct input as possible from parents and carers across the region, the project used two mechanisms to receive stakeholder views. These were a survey of parents and carers, along with face-to-face discussions with parents and carers (as well as students, principals and teachers) in forums arranged through contact with career advisor networks and schools.

Survey

The parent survey was made available for online completion from mid-December 2014 to early April 2015 via the UniOptions website. This website is a publically available higher education resource operated by Abingdon Advisory which was already familiar to some stakeholders in the Hume Region. Mansfield Secondary College and Tallangatta Secondary College, for example, have long included a weblink to UniOptions on their own websites to assist student and parents to access information when considering university options and pathways.

The survey was also provided in hardcopy format to some of the parents and carers who attended forums.

The survey was completed by 88 people residing within the region. Information about the findings and some specific responses from parents and carers are contained in this report. Detailed survey results were provided to the Hume RDA Committee as a separate report.

Forums

Face-to-face discussions were considered necessary for developing a deep understanding of complex issues such as the nature of barriers to educational information and opportunity in the Hume Region.

In particular, the forums were used to ask parents and carers in the Hume Region about the information that would assist them in guiding young people in the region to university.

In order to achieve the outcomes required of the project, Abingdon Advisory was contracted to undertake forums in Wodonga, Shepparton and Myrtleford. In addition, a presentation was given at the VCE Information Night at Marian College Myrtleford in February 2015. A further forum was held in March 2015 at Seymour College.

A key objective of the project was to encourage attendance at forums in order to obtain advice from parents and to provide benefit to those families who volunteered their time to be part of the discussions. Hence, at each of the forums Abingdon Advisory gave a presentation on 14 pathways to university and answered questions from participants about accessing university and using pathways to higher education.

The Shepparton forum involved nine participants. There were a number of people from the immediate area as well as two families who had travelled nearly an hour each way to participate. As with the Wodonga forum, where there were seven attendees, there was a very high level of engagement from participants, with discussions lasting two hours or more. The Seymour forum, where engagement levels with the discussion were lowest, was preceded by a 40 minute session on study skills delivered by teachers from Seymour College.

Each forum was intended, as far as possible, to attract a wide audience from across the region. For example, the Myrtleford forum gathered information from families who attended from the Alpine cluster of schools. This forum at Myrtleford was a particular success with 53 attendees, despite there being a Year 12 English School Assessed Coursework (SAC) due the following day. Two families travelled an hour and a half to attend and another group travelled over 30 kilometres from Bright. The key factor in the high level of attendance was the existence of a strong network of careers advisors in local schools who were willing to engage students and families across the Alpine cluster.

The presence and active contribution of families, some of whom travelled over an hour each way to attend the various forums held as part of this study, clearly demonstrated that such families were highly engaged with the task of gaining access to university studies. This high level of engagement was evident in a number of families who attended the forums, but cannot be assumed to be typical of parents in the region.

The feedback received from participants about the pathways information provided at the forums was extremely positive. In addition, very useful information was received about the information needs of parents and carers who are assisting young people in the Hume Region with the task of accessing university.

4 PROJECT FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 Understanding the web of educational disadvantage

4.1.1 Barriers to higher education

Recognising the challenge posed by the Hume Region's low levels of higher education attainment, the Hume RDA Committee commissioned a team from the University of Ballarat (now Federation University) to examine four towns, their communities and their schools in Central Hume during 2012. The focus of that study was the educational aspirations and destinations of young people.

The University of Ballarat study identified a number of hurdles to higher education attainment in the Central Hume sub region, including:

- *Economic barriers* associated with relatively low family household incomes and high costs of relocation for regional students.
- *Geographic barriers* linked to the need to move from home and community to undertake higher education.
- *Class barriers* related to lack of family background and familiarity with higher education associated predominantly with relatively low socio-economic status.
- *Informational barriers* which made it difficult to access information and navigate through complex processes relating to higher education.¹⁰

While the particular circumstances of each student differs, there is a large quantity of evidence indicating that the educational achievement of a young person in the region is likely to be largely determined by the factors identified in the Ballarat University study, usually in combination, but sometimes separately. The way in which these factors interact differs for each student and for each geographic area. Nonetheless, in examining the problem of the Hume Region's low levels of higher education attainment, it is helpful to draw out each of these causal issues and consider them separately with a focus on their relationship to information needs. At the same time, the interwoven nature of these factors should not be overlooked.

The inconsistencies in the levels of higher education attainment across Australia have been subject to investigation over a long period. Different studies have characterised barriers to education in similar ways. Terminology and emphasis vary across studies and there are some distinctions in the way in which the complex web of socio-economic factors,

¹⁰ Hume Regional Development Australia, Aspirations and Destinations of Young People: A study of four towns and their communities and schools in Central Hume, University of Ballarat, 2012, p.11.

understanding of higher education, affordability and distance interact. However, there is a consensus that the same group of factors combine to cause lower levels of university attainment in regional and remote areas than is typical across metropolitan areas.

For example, a study by James, Wyn, Baldwin, Hepworth, McInnis and Stephanou published in 1999 concluded that university educational outcomes are mostly the result of three factors. These were family socio-economic status, the attitudes of the community in which young people reside and the distance they live from a university campus.¹¹

More recently, Lamb, Walstab, Teese, Vickers and Rumber saw some of the differences in school retention rates across rural and regional Australia as being particularly determined by the varying economic situations of the respective regions, with factors such as the availability of jobs being especially important.¹²

This employment based geographic variation is a factor within the Hume Region. It is also relevant when comparing the region to other districts. One forum participant contended that university educational attainment in Hume remains low because the region (and Albury-Wodonga, in particular) has plenty of part-time work available. The same participant reported that, in contrast to the Hume Region, in Victoria's Mallee, where tertiary education attainments rates are higher, difficult farming conditions have led to many school leavers, particularly young women, leaving the region to undertake university studies.

Reflecting this type of regional variation and other differences, some studies have tended to emphasise the relative importance of particular factors in shaping levels of higher education attainment. Despite this, the same list of educational barriers, or some similar variation, remains the commonly recognised determinants of educational outcomes cited in most of the available literature.

The project, like the more general studies that have been undertaken previously, found that in the Hume Region, there is a web of social, economic and geographic disadvantage that operates against higher education attainment. With its specific focus on the Hume Region, and its direct engagement with parents and carers, the project has enabled a deeper study of the way in which the closely associated issues of distance, socio-economic factors, cost, limited aspirations and a lack of information act, frequently in combination, to discourage university attendance.

This report deals with each of these matters separately, but stresses that these factors are closely associated and usually act in concert, frequently compounding their adverse effect on the educational achievement of young people. The report is particularly focused on the way in which improved provision of information can assist in tackling these barriers in the Hume Region.

¹¹ James, R., Wyn, J., Baldwin, G., Hepworth, G., McInnis, C., & Stephanou, A. Rural and Isolated School Students and their Higher Education Choices: A re-examination of students location, socioeconomic background, and educational advantage and disadvantage. Commissioned Report No. 62. Canberra: Higher Education Council, 1999.

¹² Lamb, S., Walstab, A., Teese, R., Vickers, M., & Rumberger, R. Staying on at School: Improving student retention in Australia. Brisbane: Department of Education and the Arts, 2004.

4.1.2 The tyranny of distance

Travel and Relocation Requirements

In 2009, on behalf of the Australian Government's Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, Roy Morgan Research carried out an extensive survey based study of factors influencing Year 12 decision making on post-school options.¹³ Not surprisingly, this study found that distance played a particularly important role in the decision making of remote respondents. Just over a quarter (26%) of remote respondents said that one of the reasons that they were not planning to undertake higher education was because they considered university to be located too far from where they lived.

By way of comparison, 12% of regional respondents and a mere 4% of metropolitan respondents cited this reason. Year 12 students from a non-metropolitan region were found to be twice as likely to report that there was too much travel involved in comparison with their metropolitan counterparts (13% of provincial respondents and 14% of remote respondents, in comparison with 7% of metropolitan respondents).¹⁴

Supporting such findings, OnTrack survey results have found that non-metropolitan young people who completed school had a greater tendency than their urban counterparts to cite the need to travel long distances to access higher education. Young people in regional and remote areas also cited the need to move away from home as a reason for not undertaking tertiary education.¹⁵

In their 2003 study, Blakers et al found that the incidence of moving away from home to study was significantly higher for young people from regional and remote areas. Where a mere 4% of metropolitan students had relocated to attend university, the rate was ten times higher for non-metropolitan students.¹⁶

The report produced on behalf of the Hume RDA Committee in 2012 by Ballarat University determined that moving away from home brought with it both financial and emotional challenges. Illustrating this, the authors quoted a member of the Wangaratta community describing the experiences of a young person from that district:

She felt that she had lost her nerve in a way, and she had formed bonds and her comfort zone around the community and then decided that she wouldn't go because it was all getting a bit hard. . . . All of her peer group had formed relationships and she had basically lost her nerve and confidence around going there because there was no peer group going with her.¹⁷

¹³ Roy Morgan Research, Year 12 choices: a survey of factors influencing year 12 decision-making on post-school destination, choice of university and preferred subject. Australian Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009.

¹⁴ Ibid p.96.

¹⁵ Teese, R., Clarke, K., & Polesel, J. The Destinations of School Leavers in Victoria: Report of the 2007 On Track Project. Melbourne: Department of Education and Early Childhood Education, 2007. See also the subsequent On Track Reports available on the Victorian Department of Education and Training website.

¹⁶ Blakers, Ross and Australia. Department of Education, Science and Training. Research, Analysis and Evaluation Group. Mobility why do university students move? Department of Education, Science and Training, Canberra, 2003.

¹⁷ Hume Regional Development Australia, Aspirations and Destinations of Young People: A study of four towns and their communities and schools in Central Hume, University of Ballarat, 2012, p.11.

Reflecting such experiences, there is a consistent message in the secondary literature on higher education attainment that school students who attend non-metropolitan schools are less likely to complete Year 12 or continue on to tertiary education than their metropolitan counterparts.¹⁸

Even among those young people who express a desire to undertake higher education, there are differences between urban and regional students.

For example, metropolitan survey respondents place greater importance on being able to live at home and travel easily to university than students from outside metropolitan areas. In related outcomes, metropolitan students are more reluctant to attend regional campuses than students from remote areas.¹⁹

The key factor affecting participation in higher education identified in the project was the need for students to leave home to undertake university study.

Regional campuses

Previous research is divided on the significance of local higher education provision in regional areas. Stevenson et al determined that, although access to a university campus was a significant factor in university participation, local provision did not 'play a major role in explaining the variation in participation rates'.²⁰

With a somewhat different conclusion, Jones observed increased university participation in those regional areas with proximity to a large university campus. However, Jones saw access to a small campus as having no significant impact on participation levels.²¹ This is a particularly important finding for the Hume Region. This is because, unlike many regional areas, the region does not have a large dominant regional city and lacks a large university campus. Whereas the Hunter Region of New South Wales, for example, has both a large regional city in Newcastle and a large university, the Hume Region has no city nor campus of such scale. In Victoria, in particular, there are other regional areas that have both large cities and very significant university campuses. The most obvious examples are Geelong, with Deakin University, and Ballarat, with Federation University.

The absence of an equivalent regional city and university presence in the Hume Region has a number of effects. For example, there is no higher education provider that is able to offer a

¹⁸ Curtis, D., & McMillan, J. School Non-Completers: Profiles and initial destinations. LSAY Research Reports (2008): Marks, G., Fleming, N., Long, M., & McMillan, J. Patterns of Participation in Year 12 and Higher Education in Australia: Trends and Issues. LSAY Research Report No. 17. Melbourne: Australian Council for Educational Research, 2000 and Hume Regional Development Australia, Aspirations and Destinations of Young People, p.35.

¹⁹ James, R., Baldwin, G., & McInnis, C. Which University?: The factors influencing the choices of prospective undergraduates. Canberra: Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 1999.

²⁰ Stevenson, S., Evens, C., Maclachlan, M., Karmel, T., & Blakers, R. Access: Effect of campus proximity and socio-economic status on university participation rates in regions. Occasional Series Paper 01/C. Canberra: Department of Education and Early Childhood Education. 2001 p.17, cited in Roy Morgan Research, Year 12 choices: a survey of factors influencing year 12 decision-making on post-school destination, choice of university and preferred subject, Australian Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009, p.31.

²¹ Jones, R. Identifying higher education students from low socio-economic status backgrounds and regional and remote areas. Canberra: Department of Education, Science and Training, 2002.

broad, comprehensive range of university courses for local delivery. While Charles Sturt University, Latrobe University and the University of Melbourne do deliver courses within the region, there are many sought after disciplines that are not taught within the Hume Region.

Many of the region's students feel that they have the choice of moving to Melbourne to attend university or foregoing higher education altogether. In other regions, where students have access to regional cities such as Ballarat, Bendigo and Geelong, they have university options that are likely to be supported by local public transport systems, involve a move (if required) to nearby regional city that is closer to home, have lower living costs and are more familiar to families who live in the region. For many Hume Region students, there is no such accessible, familiar and affordable option.

A school principal who attended one of the forums spoke about students who earned an ATAR of 80 or above which would have gained them access to universities in Melbourne. However, in a number of situations, the parents of such students are unwilling to allow their children to leave their home town for religious reasons. Another school principal also mentioned parental anxiety about their child's safety in a large metropolitan city such as Melbourne.

The University of Ballarat study, which looked at the aspirations and destinations of young people in Central Hume, found that moving away from home to undertake further education presents a major obstacle for students living in the region. Some students in the Hume Region were reported as seeing moving away from home to study as 'an adventure'.²² Others, however, were reported as choosing to study at regional universities because these institutions are seen as offering a more comfortable environment.²³ Evidence on the impact of proximity to a campus on participation in higher education within the literature is conflicting and some in the field have suggested that the different aspirations of non-metropolitan students reflect the absence of close proximity.²⁴

In forums, the presence, or absence, of nearby provision of higher education was seen as particularly significant to some families. The geographically dispersed nature of the Hume Region population means that even where there is local provision of higher education, by Charles Sturt University, for example, attendance can still require significant travel without access to public transport. Such travel will typically involve significant upfront costs, such as purchase of a car, as well as ongoing expenses for fuel, maintenance and so on. With the region's population spread over 40,000 square kilometres, typically in relatively modestly sized cities and towns, even attendance at a campus within the Hume Region might involve two hours of driving in each direction. This factor compounds underlying issues of aspiration and affordability.

²² Hume Regional Development Australia, *Aspirations and Destinations of Young People: A study of four towns and their communities and schools in Central Hume*, University of Ballarat, 2012, p.105.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Roy Morgan Research, *Year 12 choices: a survey of factors influencing year 12 decision-making on post-school destination, choice of university and preferred subject*, Australian Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009, p.31.

There was a clear view expressed in forums that many young people in the region, particularly school leavers, do not want to travel a significant distance to study. Consequently, these students enrol in courses provided by nearby TAFE institutes rather than taking up more distant university study opportunities. Although there was a call from some families for greater regional provision of higher education opportunities in the Hume Region, there seemed an acceptance by most families that the provision of university places would remain largely concentrated in large cities, particularly in Melbourne.

Garlick and Pryor examined the hurdles that limit greater provision of tertiary education in regional Australia.²⁵ Their findings were confirmed by studies undertaken by Charles Sturt University²⁶ and others.²⁷ In short, there is a common list of issues cited as barriers to the expansion of higher education delivery at a regional level. This list includes inadequate funding, the reduced capacity of regional students to finance their tertiary studies, competitiveness between institutions, high establishment costs, cultural issues in regional communities, challenges with regional engagement and the lower aspirations of regional students when compared their metropolitan counterparts.²⁸

Accommodation challenges

The forums discovered that, in some cases, there are informal arrangements in place where students and families in the region are able to access information and accommodation through contacts based in the region. In the past, for example, Tallangatta has had a contingent of students attending the University of Ballarat (now Federation University). Newly arriving students have been able to benefit from the experiences, connections and even accommodation of other Tallangatta students in the City of Ballarat. According to the former principal of Tallangatta Secondary College, this has seen a greater number of Tallangatta students undertake university courses in Ballarat than would otherwise be the case.

In some forums, the idea of having access to a facility in Melbourne that could provide support, perhaps even accommodation, to Hume Region university students was raised. This may enable a broader range of students and their families to access university by reducing the level of discomfort and fear associated with moving from a 'safe' community to a large unfamiliar city.

In response, the principal of one of the region's schools advised that, in the past, there were hostels of this type that were operated by the Victorian department of education. However, he reported that these were closed and the buildings sold off two decades ago.

²⁵ Garlick, S., & Pryor, G. "Universities and their communities: Creative regional development through knowledge-based engagement." Canberra, ACT: Department of Transport and Regional Services, 2002.

²⁶ Charles Sturt University and Southern Cross University, A new national university in regional Australia: Preliminary Staff and Student Consultation Report, 2009.

²⁷ See publications by the Regional Universities Network (www.run.edu.au)

²⁸ Alfred Deakin Research Institute, Barwon South West Tertiary Education Attainment Strategy – Stage 2 Report Deakin University Australia, 2012, p.2-3.

Recommendation 1:

That there be further investigation of local initiatives to develop and share information about university study such as accommodation options, relocation information and subject choices. Such initiatives might include the creation of a virtual community using social media or the creation of a physical place where families can gather and share information about university study.

Alternative education delivery mechanisms

Recent years have seen a dramatic increase in the provision of online education – the delivery of topics and courses using the internet as the major medium of delivery. An online course typically involves recorded lectures or presentations, as well electronic interaction between students and between students and educators. While some courses use basic tools to do this, many online courses use sophisticated video and data presentations, a range of communications and discussion technologies and other advanced techniques for aiding learning, undertaking assessment and other tasks.

Increasingly common in universities is ‘lecture capture’ which describes the recordings of classroom based activities that are then made available for review after the class. Typically, students are able to download lectures that they then play, stop and review as they require. Such technologies can reduce the impact of distance because it can allow students to watch lectures off-campus. Recognising the effectiveness, popularity and cost savings of such approaches, many universities and other higher education providers are moving towards educational provision by using ‘flipped classrooms’. Under this approach, students view a lecture or other material online and then travel to a classroom to discuss issues and share face-to-face interaction with educators and classmates. The ‘flip’ refers to the idea that traditional lecture attendance is replaced by viewing the lecture from home and the assigned problems that used to be worked on at home are now done in the classroom.

Despite the dramatic growth in post-secondary study possibilities, it is clear that many Hume Region families are unaware of the current online study options available to them.

It should be noted that online education is unsuitable for the entire delivery of many disciplines and that it has very high attrition rates compared to face-to-face delivery. Nonetheless, it is possible that such distance learning offerings will provide some families with an effective means to remove, or at least mitigate, the effect of distance that can act as a significant hurdle to young people in the Hume Region attaining a university education.

One respondent noted in the online survey indicated that there is the potential for the region to use local resources to improve the online learning experience:

For regional areas there may also be the potential to support online remote learners in the NE Region. We do not access or use the on campus facilities (despite being charged for them) but it would be good to have a local group of online students for social contact, network/study support etc. This cannot just be left to the individual unis as they do not address this issue, however in NE Vic there may be a large number of online students (across various unis) who together need support.

In the future, online education may become even more effective, particularly with the provision of local support, tutorials in regional cities and so on. It is possible that Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), may provide a longer term solution to some of the higher education attainment issues faced in the Hume Region. MOOCs are online courses available on an 'open access' basis to anyone, regardless of their academic background. Typically, these courses do not lead to a qualification. However, there are models in which successful completion of a MOOC will be recognised as part of a qualification.

Recommendation 2:

That efforts be made to increase awareness in Hume Region of online study options.

4.1.3 Socio-economic status

Despite the influence of distance on cost, attitudes and other important determinants of educational outcomes, the available literature suggests that distance alone may be less influential than economic and cultural factors in determining educational outcomes. For example, the results from the studies undertaken by James, Wyn, Baldwin, Hepworth, McInnis and Stephanou indicate that regional imbalances in university participation are affected less by distance from a university campus than by socio-economic status (SES).²⁹

There is plenty of evidence to support the notion that SES and distance are closely linked. Morgan's study showed that 17% of respondents from low Socio-Economic Status – Index of Education and Occupation (SES-IEO) areas said university was too far away from where they lived. In comparison, a mere 1% of respondents from high SES-IEO areas reported the same view.³⁰ As might be expected, a very similar trend was found among those who said that there was too much travel involved in going to university. Roy Morgan Research found 14% of respondents from low SES-IEO areas reporting this as a reason for not attending university in comparison with just 3% of those surveyed from high SES-IEO areas.³¹

Using the alternative, Socio-Economic Status – Parental Education (SES-PE) measure, the same study found respondents from low SES-PE backgrounds were twice as likely to report these factors discouraging entry to university than their high SES-PE counterparts. As the Roy Morgan Research pointed out 'this may, in part, reflect an association between geographical location and SES background but may also reflect differences in the willingness to travel and in the ability to afford the cost of relocation'.³²

James found that SES was the most significant factor correlated with the variation in student perspectives on the importance and benefits of higher education. Comparing students from

²⁹ James, R., Wyn, J., Baldwin, G., Hepworth, G., McInnis, C., & Stephanou, A. 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: Higher Education Council, 1999.

³⁰ Roy Morgan Research, Year 12 choices: a survey of factors influencing year 12 decision-making on post-school destination, choice of university and preferred subject. Australian Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009, p.96.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

higher SES and lower SES backgrounds, a significant difference in attitudes is evident.³³ For example, in the Roy Morgan Research study undertaken for the Department of Education and Workplace Relations, students from lower SES backgrounds were found to be more likely to believe that a TAFE course would be more useful (30% in comparison with 14% of students from a higher SES background).³⁴

The same study found that students from lower SES backgrounds were more than twice as likely as students from wealthier backgrounds to believe that 'there was no point to going to university' (19% and 8%, respectively) and that a university qualification was not necessary for the job they wanted (26% and 16%). When considering further job prospects, students from low SES backgrounds were less likely than students from high SES backgrounds to believe that university would improve their chances of getting a job (80% and 88%). Similarly, where 82% of students from high SES backgrounds felt that a university degree would lead to an interesting and rewarding career, 71% of students from low SES backgrounds held this view.

Data from the 1995 Longitudinal Survey of Australian Youth (LSAY) cohort showed that by age 20, 68% of people of high SES backgrounds had attended university in comparison with only 32% of persons from low SES backgrounds.³⁵ The 2008 Bradley Review of Higher Education found that, despite the expansion of the higher education system during the previous two decades, there had been no significant increase in the proportion of students from low SES backgrounds attending Australian universities.³⁶ Indeed, the proportion of students from low SES backgrounds at Australian universities actually declined between 2001 and 2008, although it has increased since.³⁷

One of the difficulties with examining the relationship between relative affluence and educational attainment is that the establishment of effective SES measures and indicators is fraught.³⁸ People's financial situation can change rapidly over time. Some indicators of wealth can give a false impression of a family's economic situation. For example, a family's income may be low and extremely variable. However in relation to assets, the family may own (or have debts against) large and valuable assets, such as farms. In addition, in agricultural communities, educational attainment may not be a particularly effective measure of social or economic disadvantage, particularly for older people.³⁹

³³ James, R. Socioeconomic Background and Higher Education Participation: An analysis of students' aspirations and expectations. Canberra: Department of Education, Science and Training, 2002.

³⁴ Roy Morgan Research, Year 12 choices: a survey of factors influencing year 12 decision-making on post-school destination, choice of university and preferred subject. Australian Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009, p.29.

³⁵ Ibid, p.vi.

³⁶ Bradley, D., Noonan, P., Nugent, H., & Scales, B. Review of Australian higher education: final report [Bradley review] 2008, p.30-34.

³⁷ Universities Australia. A Smarter Australia, An Agenda for Australian Higher Education 2013-2016. Canberra, 2013, p.15: Norton, A. 'The online evolution: when technology meets tradition in higher education' Grattan Institute, 2013.

³⁸ See for example, James, R, Socioeconomic Background and Higher Education Participation: An analysis of students' aspirations and expectations. Canberra: Department of Education, Science and Training, 2002. See also Roy Morgan Research, Year 12 choices: a survey of factors influencing year 12 decision-making on post-school destination, choice of university and preferred subject, Australian Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009, p.28.

³⁹ Barry, M., Gabhainn, S. N., Hope, A., Kelleher, C. C., Sixsmith, J., & Tay, J. B. 'Influence of sociodemographic and neighbourhood factors on self-rated health and quality of life in rural communities: findings from the Agriproject in the Republic of Ireland'. Journal of Epidemiology & Community Health, 58(11), 2004, p.904.

For these and other reasons, there are a number of SES indices that are used in the relevant literature.

Reflecting this range of indices, James analysed three common measures of SES. These were parental education, parental occupation and the ABS Index of Education and Occupation (IEO) that is tied to the postcode of a students' home address. This work found that while each measure showed similar results, parental education levels revealed the clearest correlation with variation in student post-school aspirations.⁴⁰

Curtis found that by the age of 20 years, 90% of young people from a high SES background had participated in tertiary education with more than two thirds having undertaken higher education study and less than a third having studied in a VET course.⁴¹ Of those from a low SES background, 74% had undertaken tertiary education. Less than a third of these students had enrolled in higher education, but almost half had enrolled in a VET course. A small number of the sample had undertaken study in both the university and VET sector.⁴²

Regardless of which measure of SES is used, research into university participation rates clearly shows that post-secondary educational involvement by students from families with a low SES is substantially less than their proportion of the population.

The Roy Morgan Research work undertaken for the then Department of Education, Science and Training found that the cost of university was not a significant deterrent to respondents from a high SES background, with 13% of respondents from high SES-IEO areas citing that they were not attending university because it was not affordable to them. The rate for respondents from low SES-IEO areas was 31%. The figures using the SES-PE measure were 18% and 39%, respectively.⁴³

4.1.4 Costs associated with university attendance

Foregone income

In addition to the direct expenditure involved in undertaking higher education, there is the matter of the cost of income foregone while studying. This a significant consideration for students, particularly those from poorer families and non-metropolitan areas. One study found that, 'university is too far from where I live' was cited often by remote respondents as a reason for not going to university. However, the reason given most often by remote respondents for not going to university was 'I want to earn a proper income as soon as possible' (51%).⁴⁴

⁴⁰ James, R. Socioeconomic Background and Higher Education Participation: An analysis of students' aspirations and expectations. Canberra: Department of Education, Science and Training, 2002.

⁴¹ Curtis, D. VET Pathways Taken by School Leavers. LSAY Research Report No. 52. Melbourne, Australian Council for Educational Research, 2008.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Roy Morgan Research, Year 12 choices: a survey of factors influencing year 12 decision-making on post-school destination, choice of university and preferred subject. Australian Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009, p.96.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

This indicates that many young people, particularly in regional areas, are focused on maximising their earnings in the immediate post-school years. Such students may be unaware, unconcerned or unconvinced by evidence demonstrating that university graduates typically have higher earning potential in the longer term, even if that study comes with its own costs. Rasmussen found that, although some students indicated that in preparation for attending university, they had begun to save their part-time employment earnings, the majority students showed very limited financial planning for their future.⁴⁵

Recognising this issue, there was discussion within the project forums of young people being unwilling to leave part-time work in hospitality to undertake study. Teachers in the Hume Region expressed frustration at students who preferred to earn a minimal wage at a fast food outlet, rather than undertake further study – notwithstanding the long term economic and social benefits that typically arise from holding a university qualification. Some school students in the region are concerned that, if they attend university (particularly at a distant campus) they will lose their existing part-time jobs in retail and hospitality. There was a view expressed that the relative abundance of low level, part-time work in Wodonga, for example, meant that young people believed that they had adequate employment opportunities within the town and, in taking up university study, they would suffer an immediate fall in earnings. Allied to this, some forum participants commented that ‘there are stories of young people from the area doing it tough’ while studying in Melbourne, indicating that this was a disincentive for local students to undertake further studies.

Living away from home costs

It is well established that regionally located students and their families incur greater costs associated with accessing higher education than their urban peers. There are costs resulting from the distance-derived needs such as travel, accommodation and living expenses that can place a significant burden on students and their families. These costs have been referred to as a ‘major deterrent’ for regional young people and their families.⁴⁶

The University of Ballarat study of the aspirations and destinations of young people in the Central Hume sub region found that the main barrier identified, particularly by Year 12 students during interviews, was ‘the cost of leaving home to participate in higher education in Melbourne’.⁴⁷ In their study, James et al found that most rural students reported that they would need to leave home to attend university, regardless of whether there was a regional university campus in their region. The same study reported that ‘the actual costs of education, such as the cost of tuition, books and materials were seen as secondary to the enormous costs of living away from home’.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Rasmussen, C. ‘Effective cost-sharing models in higher education: Insights from low-income students in Australian universities’. Higher Education, 51, 2006, p.1-25.

⁴⁶ Alloway, N., Gilbert, P., Gilbert, R., & Muspratt, S. Factors Impacting on Student Aspirations and Expectations in Regional Australia. Canberra: Department of Education, Science and Training, 2004, p.32.

⁴⁷ Hume Regional Development Australia, Aspirations and Destinations of Young People: A study of four towns and their communities and schools in Central Hume, University of Ballarat, 2012, p.55.

⁴⁸ James, R., Wyn, J., Baldwin, G., Hepworth, G., McInnis, C., & Stephanou, A. Rural and Isolated School Students and their Higher Education Choices: A re-examination of students location, socioeconomic background, and educational advantage and disadvantage. Commissioned Report No. 62. Canberra: Higher Education Council, 1999, p.71.

Rural students were found to be significantly more likely than metropolitan students to believe that their families could not afford the expenses associated with attending university and that these costs may prevent them from attending university.⁴⁹ A substantial proportion of students from lower SES backgrounds (36%) indicated that they would have to support themselves financially if they went to university. The cost of accessing higher education means that, for many regional students, it is seen as an option only readily available to wealthy people.⁵⁰

A wide range of research conducted within Australia confirms that the costs associated with university study are of particular significance to regional students. This is strongly supported by the findings from the forums and survey results that show a strong focus on such matters by families in the Hume Region. For example, one survey respondent described the issues that they wanted improved information about:

...the cost of further education (is it upfront or delayed payments), accommodation options, Centrelink options, scholarship options (what's on offer and when to apply), help to rural students.

In the survey, the question was asked 'If your child goes on to further education, where will they live?' Only 8% of Hume Region respondents indicated that their child would continue to live at home while undertaking further studies.

Gooden's 2007 work found that the financial cost of moving away from home is a significant issue for regional students considering their post-school options.⁵¹ In 1999, James et al noted that the relatively high cost of accommodation in capital cities was a reason given by some students for choosing to study at a regional university.⁵²

The University of Ballarat study cited one interviewee, who said of young people in the Wangaratta district:

They want to stay in the region for a range of reasons and one big reason is affordability. For a young person leaving the region to go to a metro area to university, a barrier immediately for many of them is the fact that their family can't afford it. And that immediately becomes a restriction on opportunities for young people living in the region.⁵³

There was particular discussion in the forums about the greater costs of study for regional students when compared to metropolitan students. Despite some anxiety being expressed about tuition costs (which parents tended to describe as 'fees') parents and carers were much more concerned about the living costs associated with their children leaving home for study, particularly in Melbourne.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Godden, N. Regional Young People and Youth Allowance: Access to tertiary education. Wagga Wagga: Centre for Rural Social Research, 2007.

http://www.academia.edu/4908935/Regional_Young_People_and_Youth-Allowance_Access_to_Tertiary_Education

⁵² James, R., Baldwin, G., & McInnis, C. Which University? The factors influencing the choices of prospective undergraduates. Canberra: Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 1999.

⁵³ Hume Regional Development Australia, Aspirations and Destinations of Young People: A study of four towns and their communities and schools in Central Hume, University of Ballarat, 2012, p.105.

One couple reported that they had a daughter in Melbourne attending university and that they had calculated that it cost them \$30,000 a year for her to attend her metropolitan university. With more children in the final years of school, they expressed deep concern about their ability to support their children through the costs associated with university study.

A number of families from the region stated in forums that they are finding it difficult financially to fund further education for young family members who are attending university. Other families with school age children, made clear their anxiety about the forthcoming expenses that they saw as associated with future university study by their children. A very consistent call made at all the forums was for much improved access to information about the costs associated with studying at university, including an indication of living costs that arise for university students in metropolitan Melbourne.

It is possible that Hume Region students are particularly impacted by 'living away from home costs' when compared to students from other Victorian non-metropolitan regions. As discussed above, Hume, unlike other non-metropolitan regions, does not have a large dominant regional city, which provides their regional residents with ready access to large regional university campuses in a more familiar location that is supported by effective local transport links.

There was a strong desire expressed by parents and carers for more information about attending university. This included information on things such as pre-requisites, the VTAC applications process and what it is like to be a university student. However, by far the most strident calls were for information about the costs of attending university, in particular the costs associated with accommodation at different campuses.

There was a desire expressed in the survey answers and forum discussions for information about accommodation options for students attending university, particularly in Melbourne.

There was no enthusiasm shown in forums for the creation of an income contingent loan scheme to assist with student living costs associated with university study. Instead, families felt that regional students suffered an unjust financial burden with having to relocate for study and that having to repay a loan to cover these costs was not an appropriate solution.

Despite the wariness of families towards taking on a greater debt to support further education for their children, improved information about lower cost loan options could allow some students to borrow a proportion of their living costs while undertaking further education, thus reducing the upfront barriers to university study faced by regional students and offering a more attractive financial option than credit card debt.

Recommendation 3:

That there be improved provision of information to families about accommodation options for students who are seeking to relocate to undertake higher education.

Recommendation 4:

That improved university study living cost information be provided to families.

Recommendation 5:

That information about the options for low cost loans to assist with student living costs be provided to families to mitigate against the risk of incurring high cost credit card debt.

Deferral as a response to financial pressures

Deferral of university commencement and taking a 'gap year' is now more common than it once was.⁵⁴ In examining deferrals, Curtis et al found that those taking a 'gap year' were more likely to be those students who had achieved lower academic results at school.⁵⁵

In 2006, the Victorian Parliament's Rural and Regional Services and Development Committee undertook an enquiry into retaining young people in rural towns and communities. The committee examined tertiary education opportunities for young people in rural and regional areas of Victoria. The two most significant matters identified in that enquiry were the lower rates of participation in tertiary education by young people from rural and regional areas and high rates of deferral by regional students.

Other research demonstrates that regional students are much more likely to defer their first offer of a university place than their metropolitan counterparts. In 2007, 15.7% of regional Victorian Year 12 completers deferred a place at university. This was two and a half times the rate of deferral by students from metropolitan areas.⁵⁶

Using the parental education attainment measure of SES, respondents from lower SES-PE backgrounds were found to be more likely to report that they are deferring in order to save money to pay for future university study.⁵⁷

The issue is not merely a socio-economic matter, it is also of particular significance to regional and remote students. According to the published research, students from outside metropolitan areas are more likely to report that they intended to defer in order to save money to pay for future university study.

One study indicates that this applies to 64% of deferring students in regional areas and 79% of remotely located deferees. The figure is much lower, at just 39%, for metropolitan deferees.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Curtis, D., Mlotkowski, P., & Lumsden, M. Bridging the Gap: Who Takes a Gap Year and Why? Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth. Research Report. National Centre for Vocational Education Research, Australia, 2012.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Polesel, J., Klatt, M., & O'Hanlon, C. Deferring a university offer in regional Victoria. Youth Affairs Council of Victoria, 2012, p.4.

⁵⁷ Roy Morgan Research, Year 12 choices: a survey of factors influencing year 12 decision-making on post-school destination, choice of university and preferred subject. Australian Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009, p.vi.

⁵⁸ Ibid, p.5.

Regional students who defer have been described as facing ‘significant challenges in negotiating a pathway from school to university’.⁵⁹ In addition, previous research shows that regional students who defer are ‘much more likely to be from a low socio-economic background’ than their metropolitan counterparts.⁶⁰ It is not surprising, therefore, that high deferral rates correlate with levels of lower higher education attainment seen in regional areas.⁶¹ In the project survey, the question was asked ‘What does your child expect to do after leaving school?’ A total of 21% of respondents (18 of 86) in the Hume Region indicated that their child anticipated taking a gap year before attending university.

4.1.5 Financial assistance and liabilities

Youth Allowance

Youth Allowance, provided by the Commonwealth Government through Centrelink, gives financial assistance to full time students undertaking approved courses. Eligibility and payment rates are based on student status (dependent or independent), parental means test (for dependent students), where you live and whether you are required to move away from home to study. A key reason given for deferring is to establish ‘independent’ status for the purpose of claiming the Youth Allowance. This reason for delaying university study has been cited by 41% of deferees in regional areas and 37% of deferees in remote areas. In metropolitan areas, just 13% of deferees cited this reason for postponing study.⁶²

Consultation with parents and students in the region indicated that many were keen to meet the prescribed Youth Allowance employment requirements in order to qualify for independent status and the higher rate of regular Youth Allowance payment. This is considered to have significant adverse impacts on students in the Hume Region. In many cases, students are unable to take up study options for which they are eligible because of the costs associated with living closer to campus. The high deferral rates in the Hume Region and the low university attainment rates in the area suggest that, once they defer, young people in the Hume Region are then much less likely to go on to complete a university qualification.

Indeed, aware of this issue, forum attendees asked ‘why would a student want to go to back to further study when they have been working for up to eighteen months while waiting to be eligible for Youth Allowance?’

A number of parents stated that, to reduce costs, they were actively encouraging their children to delay, or forego, the opportunity to immediately commence further education and instead find employment until they are eligible for Youth Allowance as an ‘independent’

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Polese, J., Klatt, M., & O'Hanlon, C. Deferring a university offer in regional Victoria. Youth Affairs Council of Victoria, 2012, p.24-25.

⁶¹ Ibid, p.25.

⁶² Curtis, D., Mlotkowski, P., & Lumsden, M. Bridging the Gap: Who Takes a Gap Year and Why? Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth. Research Report. National Centre for Vocational Education Research, Australia, 2012.

student. Some of the survey responses indicated that while students had a desire to attend university directly after completing school, their parents were intending their child to undertake a gap year to enable the young person to work in order to become eligible for higher Youth Allowance payments.

There was also discussion in forums about the definition of 'independence' that applies for receipt of the government's Youth Allowance, particularly the work requirement.

It was not recognised, however, that the Youth Allowance Relocation Scholarship, which commences with a payment of over \$4,000 in the first year of study and reduces annually, is not available to 'independent' students.

There was an evident demand for information about Youth Allowance eligibility and the associated payments and benefits. Provision of such information at forums was as seen by participants as the most effective means of attracting disengaged families to attend future forums and information sessions.

There was strong demand expressed through the consultation process for Centrelink information. The project survey gave an ambiguous result when respondents answered the question 'Of the information obtained so far about support options, was it easy to access?' Of those that answered this question, 40% said that information that they had used was 'somewhat easy to access'. Half that rate, or 20% of respondents, said that the information about support options for young people studying was somewhat difficult to access.

Recommendation 6:

That Centrelink be requested to provide relevant information about accessing financial assistance in a clearer manner to families in the Hume Region.

HECS – HELP Scheme

A few families who contributed to the forum discussions were focused on the tuition fees debt that was likely to arise from a young person undertaking university study. A number of parents expressed confusion about the operation of the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) and related Higher Education Loans Program (HELP), referred to as HECS. Some parents wanted much clearer information about tuition fees to be made available. 'I just don't know where to find the information' was a frequent refrain from project participants.

The forums found a range of responses to the issue of university tuition fees with some families seemingly reasonably comfortable with tuition costs, particularly once Abingdon Advisory gave them a brief explanation of the income contingent government loan scheme, HECS model, during forums. When a short explanation of the HECS arrangements was offered in forums, even anxious parents seemed comforted by the idea that students would not face upfront tuition fees, but instead would repay approximately half the cost of their tuition through a higher tax rate once they reach a salary of about the average wage earner.

In showing relative acceptance of the loan scheme, those families who attended forums were not unlike families in other regional areas who are interested in young people proceeding to university study. In a previous study, Rasmussen found, like James et al,⁶³ that students faced with the prospect of relocating to attend university were more concerned with the associated living costs than they were with tuition fees. For example, Rasmussen found no evidence of students making a decision to pursue a particular academic course based on differential HECS changes, with some students even admitting that they were unaware that HECS charges differed by course.⁶⁴

Rasmussen's 2006 qualitative study of 16 students who were studying at four Australian higher education institutions found that students in the study's sample expressed, at most, marginal concern about the HECS debt they would incur through undertaking higher education. It was clear that incurring such a debt, which is repaid through what is best characterised as an income contingent graduate tax, was not a significant factor in the students' decision making about entering higher education. Rasmussen found that the majority of current university students involved in that research project were, at the time when that they had commenced planning to attend university, unaware of the costs associated with undertaking higher education.⁶⁵ This is despite the HECS system having been introduced more than a decade and a half before Rasmussen's study.

It is important to note that Rasmussen's research examined the views of students who had already made the decision to attend university and therefore had decided (rightly or wrongly, on the basis of a good understanding or not), that the burden of tuition fees, with repayment deferrable through HECS, was worth carrying.

Despite this caveat, there is other evidence to support the view that HECS rates are not a major barrier to study. Andrews examined whether the 1996 HECS changes, that introducing a differential HECS rate for different disciplines, impacted on subject choice and found 'little evidence of any systematic pattern in the changes in applications according to the HECS band in which the discipline was placed'.⁶⁶ James et al found that the level of HECS fees was of minor importance when choosing a preferred field of education. The level of HECS fees was an influence for only 13% and of little or no importance to 72% of school leaver applicants.⁶⁷ This demonstrates one of the great benefits of the HECS model – it entails an income contingent loan rather than requiring that tuition fees be paid before, or during, study.

⁶³ James, R., Wyn, J., Baldwin, G., Hepworth, G., McLinnis, C., & Stephanou, A. Rural and Isolated School Students and their Higher Education Choices: A re-examination of students location, socioeconomic background, and educational advantage and disadvantage. Commissioned Report No. 62. Canberra: Higher Education Council, 1999.

⁶⁴ Rasmussen, C. 'Effective cost-sharing models in higher education: Insights from low-income students in Australian universities' Higher Education, 51, 2006, p.1-25.

⁶⁵ Roy Morgan Research, Year 12 choices: a survey of factors influencing year 12 decision-making on post-school destination, choice of university and preferred subject. Australian Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009, p.21.

⁶⁶ Andrews L. The Effects of HECS on Interest in Undertaking Higher Education. Canberra: Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 1997, p.17.

⁶⁷ James, R., Baldwin, G., & McLinnis, C. Which University?: The factors influencing the choices of prospective undergraduates, 1999, p.21.

Currently, there is a great deal of media attention being paid to the probable increase in tuition fees (i.e. the HECS rate) that would follow the Commonwealth Government's proposed plan to further deregulate the Australian higher education system. It is not known what (if any) impact such deregulation would have on attitudes to higher education participation. However, media discussion about such reforms has paid relatively little attention to the importance of the more immediate costs faced by students. In particular, these include the expenses associated with travel and leaving home, which have long been a barrier to young people from regional and remote areas entering higher education. These hurdles are particularly challenging to those young people from families with low-SES backgrounds in regional areas.

Recommendation 7:

That there be improved provision of information about the HECS system to families in the Hume Region.

Recommendation 8:

That there be improved provision of information to families in the Hume Region about the total costs associated with university study.

Scholarships

A number of Hume Region parents expressed a desire for information about the scholarships that may be available for rural students to undertake further study.

Recommendation 9:

That there be improved provision of information to families about the university scholarship opportunities available to students from the Hume Region, with a particular focus on scholarships targeting access and equity, in addition to those linked to academic excellence.

4.1.6 Navigating complex pathways

Adding to the challenge faced by those seeking to increase higher education attainment rates in regional areas, families must decide on their post-school pathway in an increasingly complex environment.⁶⁸

More than a decade ago, Moogan and Baron found students had difficulty making decisions about tertiary education because of the large volume of information available to them.⁶⁹ This volume has increased significantly in the time since, coinciding with the expansion of the public university system and the dramatic growth of private providers in the tertiary sector.

⁶⁸ Roy Morgan Research, Year 12 choices: a survey of factors influencing year 12 decision-making on post-school destination, choice of university and preferred subject. Australian Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009. p.6.

⁶⁹ Ibid, p.10.

The Australian higher education market has become increasingly complex, partly as a result of government policy intended to bring about a competitive market for educational services. As universities compete vigorously for students, marketing and other actions by universities (particularly the apparent maintenance of high entrance scores) can give students a false impression of the exclusivity, or relative inaccessibility, of institutions. There is now a plethora of promotional information about university study, particularly through university websites. However, little of the available information is independent and it varies in reliability.

The difficulty faced by some Hume Region families when dealing with information about higher education was shown in the project survey result, where 16% of respondents described the information that they have used about further education courses as 'difficult to understand'. More positively, more than half of the respondents described the information that they have used as 'somewhat easy to understand'.

A very frequent request by survey respondents was for pathway information. Families included requests for information 'about different pathways' and 'pathways to university'. Others asked specific questions such as 'Engineering has many pathway options. Which pathway suits our child?'

Recommendation 10:

That a list of recommended information higher education websites be made available to Hume Region families.

4.1.7 Views on educational aspiration

The University of Ballarat study of students found that overall young people in Central Hume had significant higher education aspirations, with a strong desire to complete Year 12 and engage in higher education. The study concluded that aspiration was not a problem, but that there appeared to be 'a problem with conversion of this aspiration to active participation. Consequently, the study proposed that it may be more appropriate to think of the 'higher education problem' in terms of barriers to participation rather than an aspirational issue.⁷⁰

Most of the families who completed the survey and/or attended the forums demonstrated strong aspirations for their young people to study at university. A number of families admitted that they did not really know where to start, but they were clearly extremely – even desperately – keen to get their children into university. The enthusiasm of survey participants for their children to undertake higher education is clear from the survey response that saw 76 of 86 respondents indicate that they think that university education would benefit their child.

In contrast to the majority of the respondents showing a belief in the benefits of university education, there are clearly some students in the region who have no aspiration to

⁷⁰ Hume Regional Development Australia, Aspirations and Destinations of Young People: A study of four towns and their communities and schools in Central Hume, University of Ballarat, 2012. p.11

undertake further education. The opinion of the families, teachers and principals who attended the forums was that the building of aspirations is a long process and that it should commence in primary school and be maintained throughout secondary school.

Parents, carers, teachers and principals agreed that the Hume Region includes many families who are disengaged from education and have very limited aspirations.

Research suggests that the attitudes and values that families and students from low SES backgrounds hold towards higher education are a major barrier to their participation in higher education. Andrews suggests that lack of a family history of undertaking higher education is a hurdle for students from low SES backgrounds as it results in reduced aspirations and more limited family support for entering higher education.⁷¹ The results from the studies undertaken by James et al indicate that regional variations in university participation rates are caused less by differing distances to university campuses than by variations in attitudes and aspirations towards further education.⁷²

As one principal of a school in the region said in reference to aspirations:

There are a lot of myths out there about higher education.

4.2 Supporting educational attainment

4.2.1 Engage the disengaged

Direct support from schools was found to be the most effective way to engage families in forums providing information about university pathways.

The advantages of having a strong, capable, outward looking community of school based careers advisers to distribute information, engage families and provide practical support for attendance was clear from the university pathways presentation element of the forum in Myrtleford. This forum was attended by a relatively large number of families and careers advisers who travelled from across the Alpine area to attend.

There was a strongly expressed view from participants that some otherwise disengaged parents would be likely to attend a Centrelink presentation at which Youth Allowance eligibility information was provided.

4.2.2 Start early

Hume Region parents consulted through the project strongly favoured an early start to

⁷¹ Andrews, L. Does HECS Deter? Factors affecting university participation by low SES groups. Occasional Series Paper 99/F. Canberra: Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 1999.

⁷² James, R., Wyn, J., Baldwin, G., Hepworth, G., McInnis, C., & Stephanou, A. Rural and Isolated School Students and their Higher Education Choices: A re-examination of students location, socioeconomic background, and educational advantage and disadvantage. Commissioned Report No. 62. Canberra: Higher Education Council, 1999.

preparing school students to make the optimum subject choices in school. There was an appeal for information about further education to be provided to parents and children in primary school, not merely in secondary school and particularly not in the final years of secondary school only.

The benefit of adopting such an approach is well supported by an examination of previous work. In particular, the Roy Morgan Research study reported that the majority of its survey respondents had already decided on what they wanted to do after school and had made this decision before commencing their final school year. Of the group surveyed, Roy Morgan Research found that 16% of young people had decided on their post-school choice before finishing primary school. Of the same students, 29% had made up their minds about their future intentions at the beginning of their secondary school education.⁷³

International research⁷⁴ and wide range of similar work within Australia⁷⁵ has found many school students make decisions about university study long before they finish school.

Alloway et al's research showed that a large number of students commence this process in the early years of secondary school.⁷⁶ Further adding to the evidence favouring the early provision of information about university, the work of James found that students intending to go on to university had often reached this decision about their future at an earlier age than those students intending to undertake a VET course or enter the workforce directly after they leave school.⁷⁷

Even some years before they are old enough to complete school, the intentions of children influence their patterns of participation as young adults. For example, Khoo and Ainley found that 52% of those who planned to enter university in Year 9 achieved their aim.⁷⁸ Only 14% of those that indicated they did not intend to go to university eventually participated in university study.⁷⁹ In a similar vein, Curtis and McMillan found that those who did not have an intention to go on to further education were less likely to complete Year 12, with 20% of those with no post-school intention dropping out compared to 15% of those who had a post-school educational intention.⁸⁰

⁷³ Roy Morgan Research, Year 12 choices: a survey of factors influencing year 12 decision-making on post-school destination, choice of university and preferred subject. Australian Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009, p.50.

⁷⁴ For example, Connor, H., Burton, R., Pearson, R., Pollard, E., & Regan, J. Making the right choice: how students choose universities and colleges London, 1999.

⁷⁵ See, for example, Rasmussen, C. Effective cost-sharing models in higher education: Insights from low-income students in Australian universities. Higher Education, 51, 2006; James, R. Socioeconomic Background and Higher Education Participation: An analysis of student' aspirations and expectations. Canberra: Department of Education, Science and Training, 2002 and Alloway, N., Dalley, L., Patterson, A., Walker, K., & Lenoy, M. School students making education and career decisions: Aspirations, attitudes and influences, Canberra, DEST, 2004.

⁷⁶ Alloway, N., Dalley, L., Patterson, A., Walker, K., & Lenoy, M. School students making education and career decisions: Aspirations, attitudes and influences. Canberra: DEST, 2004.

⁷⁷ James, R. TAFE, University or Work? The early preferences and choices of students in Years 10, 11 and 12. Adelaide: National Centre for Vocational Education Research, 2000.

⁷⁸ Khoo, S., & Ainley J. Attitudes, Intentions and Participation. LSAY Research Report No. 41. Victoria: Australian Council for Educational Research, 2005.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Curtis, D., & McMillan, J. School Non-Completers: Profiles and initial destinations. LSAY Research Report No. 54. Melbourne: Australian Council for Educational Research, 2008.

Work done by James and Roy Morgan Research indicated that those young people who intended to go to university made their decision much earlier in their lives than those intending to undertake VET or enter the workforce. Of the respondents to the Roy Morgan survey, 80% had decided before entering the final year of school to go to university.⁸¹ Perhaps more significantly, nearly half, or 48%, of respondents made the decision to go to university by the beginning of secondary school. In contrast, those young people that expressed a preference to undertake VET or work after school were less decisive. Of those who indicated a preference for VET, 54% had made that decision in the final year of their secondary education.⁸² Of those intended to join the workforce, 60% had made that decision in the final year of schooling.⁸³

It seems that those people who choose not to progress to university tend to leave key decisions about their future until their final years of school. The evidence suggests that students who have been inspired to do so early are more likely to attend university.⁸⁴ The available research strongly indicates that decisions made as early as primary school are significant in post-secondary school educational choices and outcomes. This finding illustrates one of the limitations of the established Careers Curriculum Framework, currently provided by the Victorian Department of Education and Training, which is focused on secondary school students and is reported to have relatively little take up in Hume Region primary schools.

Recommendation 11:

That an information strategy be developed that encourages parents and carers to specifically promote the benefits of university study to their children from a younger age.

Recommendation 12:

That consideration be given to the development of an information program aimed at growing higher education aspirations in Hume Region families, consistent with the Careers Curriculum Framework, commencing with children in primary school and continuing throughout secondary school.

4.2.3 Understand the deferred benefits

There was broad agreement in the forums that there is a considerable problem in getting Hume Region students to appreciate that some life choices bring deferred benefits. As one forum participant pointed out, 'a three year degree represents a very long time in the minds of teenagers'.

⁸¹ Roy Morgan Research, Year 12 choices: a survey of factors influencing year 12 decision-making on post-school destination, choice of university and preferred subject. Australian Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009, p.6.

⁸² Ibid, p.51.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid

Recommendation 13:

That families be provided with more examples of how enjoyable the university experience can be, in order to demonstrate that university study provides immediate benefits.

Recommendation 14:

That all Hume Region families be encouraged to visit at least one university campus before their children reach the middle of secondary school.

Recommendation 15:

That families be provided with more information about the economic value of jobs requiring a university qualification to demonstrate that university study provides deferred benefits.

4.2.4 Improve Year 12 completion rates

Over recent decades, the challenge of improving Year 12 completion rates has been tackled with considerable success in Australia.⁸⁵ Between 1984 and 1992, the proportion of Australian students progressing through Year 12 increased from 45% to 77%. The national Year 12 attainment rate has remains a little below 80%.⁸⁶ This long term improvement has been the result of a concerted policy effort and reflects a strong commitment within schools to raising the Year 12 completion rate. It is also a result of the inclusion of vocational learning based subjects and school based apprenticeships with school curricula.⁸⁷

Despite such a significant increase in Year 12 completion rates, regional areas continue to lag behind metropolitan areas in this important area. This issue has long been a challenge.

Ten years ago, Lamb et al noted that boys in regional Queensland showed a much greater rate of intention to leave school at the end of Year 10. The authors of that report suggested that different rates of early leaving intentions were a consequence of 'way of life differences', with economic and cultural differences between metropolitan and regional areas making it more acceptable for rural students, in particular, to leave school at a young age to commence work.⁸⁸

The issue of low Year 12 completion rates is a challenge in the Hume Region, with the region having the lowest Year 12 retention rate in Victoria (refer Graph 2).

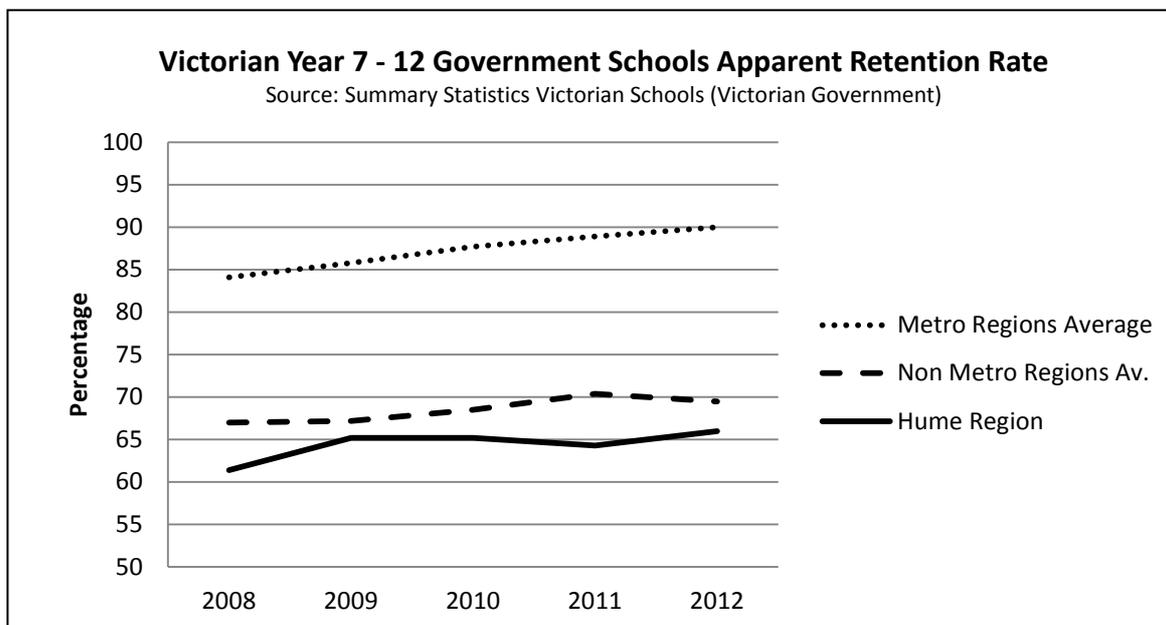
⁸⁵ Fleming, N., Long, M., & McMillan, J. Patterns of Participation in Year 12 and Higher Education in Australia: Trends and issues. LSAY Research Report No. 17. Melbourne: Australian Council for Educational Research, 2000. See also Hume Regional Development Australia, Aspirations and Destinations of Young People: A study of four towns and their communities and schools in Central Hume, University of Ballarat, 2012. p.25.

⁸⁶ Australian Bureau of Statistics, Cat no. 4102.0 - Australian Social Trends, Mar 2011.

⁸⁷ Curtis, D., & McMillan, J. School Non-Completers: Profiles and initial destinations. LSAY Research Report No. 54. Melbourne: Australian Council of Educational Research, 2008. Hume Regional Development Australia, Aspirations and Destinations of Young People: A study of four towns and their communities and schools in Central Hume, University of Ballarat, 2012, p.25.

⁸⁸ Lamb, S., Walstab, A., Teese, R., Vickers, M., & Rumberger, R. Staying on at School: Improving student retention in Australia. Brisbane: Department of Education and the Arts, 2004.

Graph 2



The principal of a secondary school in the region who attended a forum stated that, typically 250 students undertake Year 12 at his school each year. However, completion of Year 12 does not entail an intention to go on to university study. Indeed, it seems that a number of Year 12 completers in the region do not apply for a VCE score or submit a VTAC or UAC application form. Providing an indication of the scale of this issue, the same school principal said that, at one school in the region, generally only 60% of those students who do complete Year 12 apply for a VCE score. Of that 60%, only a further 60% or so submit a VTAC or UAC preference form. There are suggestions that the rate may be even lower at some other schools. It is also likely to be considerably higher at many schools. These rough figures, although of limited use for extrapolation, underline that the region has significant pockets of students who do not aspire to higher education.

4.2.5 Reduce self-exclusion on the basis of tertiary entry scores

Along with expectations of their likely academic results, there is evidence that apparent university entry requirements influence student decision making. Without access to other information, families make judgments as to their likely success of gaining access to higher education, particular universities, or specific courses. For example, the 1994 Anop Survey found the main barrier to realising university aspirations in the minds of students was a perceived gap between their expected results and what they understood to be university entry score requirements.⁸⁹ Similarly, Alloway et al found that a student's expectation of attaining the necessary results to gain entry to a course shaped the kind of careers to which students believed they could aspire.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ 1990 Anop Survey cited by Roy Morgan Research, Year 12 choices: a survey of factors influencing year 12 decision-making on post-school destination, choice of university and preferred subject. Australian Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009, p.25.

⁹⁰ Alloway, N., Dalley, L., Patterson, A., Walker, K., & Lenoy, M. School students making education and career decisions: Aspirations, attitudes and influences. Canberra: DEST, 2004.

This is significant because a student's school results can be fundamental to determining whether students consider themselves as academically strong enough to attend university. Commonwealth Government data on university applications indicates that the lower their tertiary entrance rank, the less likely a student is to apply for a university place.⁹¹ The work of Marks also confirms that the principle reason why Year 12 students do not apply or do not receive an offer is that they achieved a low tertiary entrance rank.⁹²

Although a significant issue when it comes to aspirations, this perception of courses being accessible only to school leavers with high Year 12 scores is largely illusory. As illustrated by the UniOptions website, there are 14 pathways to a university course, of which achieving an ATAR above the 'clearly in' or 'cut off' is merely the most obvious. Although there are many other pathways to a university course, it was clear from the forums that families (and schools) in the Hume Region were unaware of many of these options.

The project also involved discussions with careers advisers across the Hume Region about university pathways. In those discussions, no careers adviser claimed to be fully aware of all the pathway options available to school leavers. Indeed, many careers advisers spoke of their surprise at the range of pathways described in the forums and on the UniOptions website. This is not surprising given the complex and dynamic nature of many of these university entrance options. There is a strong indication that further professional development for careers advisers about navigating university pathways would assist careers advisers in the task of providing valuable information to families in the Hume Region about accessing university.

Self-exclusion from higher education on the basis of a student having results that indicate they may not be given a first round university offer is a particularly frustrating hurdle to university attainment. This could be readily resolved if families had a better understanding of the many pathways to university.

Recommendation 16:

That university pathways information sessions be held across the Hume Region in the 'change of preference week', after Year 12 students have received their Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank (ATAR).

4.2.6 Recognise the complexity of student decision making

There have been a range of studies into the decision making that surrounds the choices young people make with regard to post-school options. As would be expected, these studies conclude that there is a range of factors that shape the choices of young people in this regard.

⁹¹ DEEWR, Undergraduate applications, offers and acceptances Department of Education, Employment & Workplace Relations, 2010.

⁹² Marks, G. Unmet demand? Characteristics and activities of university applicants not offered a place LSAY Research Report No. 46. Melbourne: Australian Council of Educational Research, 2005.

Heath, Fuller and Paton's work examined the various conceptual models used to analyse the educational decision making of young people.⁹³ Paton looked at three broad types of conceptual models of choice in education decision making literature. These are an economically rationalist model, a structuralist model and a hybrid model that combines the two.⁹⁴

Much of the more traditional literature on marketing (like classical economics) assumes that rational use of individual choice and self-interest can be taken as basic assumption. As Davies pointed out in 2003, the key weakness in this approach is that students may well lack appropriate information and advice at the points at which they make key decisions about their educational future.⁹⁵ In addition, it is clear that not all the issues considered by a family in making educational decisions are based around factors such as career potential or economic return.

Hybrid models of decision making seek to combine both the more objective rational assumptions with the subjective and social components favoured by structuralist models.⁹⁶ Such models recognise the cultural context of decision making and contend that, while decisions are never entirely rational, they are very rarely random or irrational.⁹⁷

James has undertaken research based on hybrid models that aimed to explain the relationship of the factors that shape choice and focused on Australian students.⁹⁸ These studies looked at the range of factors influencing thinking, aspirations and beliefs about tertiary study. The work was then combined with analysis of the impact of personal and cultural influences on choices. These included geographic location, family expectations and the availability of information about further education. James' work demonstrates that there are a range of influences on student decision making and many distinct factors are likely to be considered when young people and their families make choices about educational pathways.⁹⁹

⁹³ Heath, S., Fuller, A., & Paton, K. 'Network-based ambivalence and educational decision-making: A case study of 'non-participation' in higher education.' *Research Papers in Education*, 23(2), 2008, p.219-229.

⁹⁴ Paton, K. *Models of Educational Decision-Making*, Southampton: Economic and Social Research Council, 2007, cited in Roy Morgan Research, *Year 12 choices: a survey of factors influencing year 12 decision-making on post-school destination, choice of university and preferred subject*. Australian Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009, p.3.

⁹⁵ Davies, J. A Taste of Further Education: The meaning of 'coming to college' for a group of 14-16 year olds. Paper presented at BERA Research Student Symposium. Heriot-Watt University, UK September 2003 cited in Roy Morgan Research, *Year 12 choices: a survey of factors influencing year 12 decision-making on post-school destination, choice of university and preferred subject*, Australian Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009, p.3.

⁹⁶ Somers, P., Haines, K., Keene, B., Bauer, J., Pfeiffer, M., McCluskey, J., & Sparks, B. Towards a theory of choice for community college students. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 30(1), 2006, p.53-67.

⁹⁷ Foskett, N., & Hemsley-Brown, J. *Choosing futures: young people's decision-making in education, training, and careers markets*. Psychology Press, 2001.

⁹⁸ James, R. *TAFE, University or Work? The early preferences and choices of students in Years 10, 11 and 12*. Adelaide: National Centre for Vocational Education Research, 2000.

James, R. 'Participation disadvantage in Australian higher education: An analysis of some effects of geographic location and socioeconomic status' *Higher Education*, 42, 2001, p.455-472.

James, R. *Socioeconomic Background and Higher Education Participation: An analysis of students' aspirations and expectations*. Canberra: Department of Education, Science and Training, 2002.

James, R., Baldwin, G., & McInnis, C., *Which University? The factors influencing the choices of prospective undergraduates*. Canberra: Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 1999.

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

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

Unfortunately, all of these factors may be operating as barriers for some of the young people in the Hume Region. This is because some families in the region typically suffer from a combination of factors, including socio-economic challenges, low educational aspirations, distance and high costs, that discourage choosing further study as a post-school activity.

4.2.7 Reduce the impact of cultural barriers

Through the project survey results and forum discussions, there was evidence to support James' conclusion that young people from lower SES backgrounds are hindered from attending higher education by 'relative absence of encouraging factors combined with the stronger presence of various inhibiting factors'.¹⁰⁰ James found that students from lower SES backgrounds were also more likely to report that they suffered from financial, academic and social support barriers to university study than were students from higher SES backgrounds. In this study, 39% of students from lower SES backgrounds reported that the cost of higher education might be a barrier to their entry to university. This compares with only 23% of students from a higher SES background who saw cost as barrier to higher education.¹⁰¹ The discussions undertaken during the project indicated that cost was very clearly expressed as a barrier by parents who attended forums in the Hume Region.

James also reported that students from lower SES backgrounds were less confident that they would have academic results necessary for entry to courses of interest (25% in comparison with 38% of students from higher SES backgrounds). Lower SES students also had a weaker belief that their parents wanted them to study at university (44% and 68%, respectively).¹⁰² While 58% of higher SES students reported that they had been encouraged by their school teachers to aim for university entry, only 44% of financially poorer students reported the same experience.¹⁰³

Cardak and Ryan found that SES had a major influence on conversion of Year 9 students' ability to obtain a tertiary entrance score. In other words, for students of similar ability in Year 9, those from higher SES backgrounds achieve higher tertiary entrance ranks and were more likely to enter tertiary study than their lower SES counterparts.¹⁰⁴

It is clear that attitudes and aspirations regarding higher education differ significantly across different parts of Australia and, in particular, between urban and rural or regional areas. James et al found that rural students are less likely than urban students to believe that their parents wanted them to do a university course or that a university course would offer them the chance of an interesting and rewarding career.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁰ James, R. Socioeconomic Background and Higher Education Participation: An analysis of students' aspirations and expectations. Canberra: Department of Education, Science and Training, 2002, p.34.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Cardak, B. A., & Ryan, C. Why are high ability individuals from poor backgrounds under-represented at university? La Trobe University, School of Business, 2006.
<http://www.unisa.edu.au/Global/business/centres/crma/docs/conferences/lew06/bulychris09.pdf>

¹⁰⁵ James, R., Wyn, J., Baldwin, G., Hepworth, G., McInnis, C., & Stephanou, A. Rural and Isolated School Students and their Higher Education Choices: A re-examination of students location, socioeconomic background, and educational advantage and disadvantage. Commissioned Report No. 62. Canberra: Higher Education Council, 1999.

There is clearly a complex, shifting and interwoven relationship between distance, wealth and parental education levels. For many people in the Hume Region, as across much of regional and remote Australia, there is a very strong correlation between these factors. Where this occurs, it tends to be self-reinforcing.

As Lamb, Walstab, Teese, Vickers, and Rumber noted, 'family needs, customs and cultural experiences, such as a family's need for young adults to enter the workforce early due to low SES, may also play a role in students' decisions to continue at school or leave early'.¹⁰⁶ In 2011, Lupton and Kintrea noted that the educational aspirations of young people are influenced by a range of factors, including their experience of schooling, family financial circumstances, their local job market and connections within their community as well as that student's access to information about higher education.¹⁰⁷

The 'customs and cultural experiences' highlighted by Lamb, Walstab, Teese, Vickers and Rumber hints at the significance of family and student attitudes to matters such as completing school and going on to higher education. In 2007, Godden published the results of qualitative research that involved a number of case studies of school and higher education students, as well as parents and community members in regional and remote Australia. Participants in that study identified a collection of issues affecting regional participation in higher education including: matters related to 'rurality and rural culture'; the availability and quality of secondary school education; the expectations of family; distance; accommodation demands; finances; transition issues, including emotional support; and the availability of effective pathways to higher education.¹⁰⁸ A wide range of research indicates that undertaking higher education is particularly challenging for young people who live in regional areas.

In order to study at university, regional students are likely to have to overcome a range of social and emotional hurdles that tend to be lower for students who live relatively close to their chosen higher education provider.¹⁰⁹

4.2.8 Balance the vocational focus

A distinctive feature of the Australian tertiary sector is the strong cultural focus of Australian families on direct vocational outcomes. In many other countries, such as the United States of America and the United Kingdom, there is a greater willingness to undertake generalist university degrees, particularly at the undergraduate level. In contrast, Australian students are typically most attracted to courses that they believe have a direct vocational outcome.

¹⁰⁶ Lamb, S., Walstab, A., Teese, R., Vickers, M., & Rumberger, R. *Staying on at School: Improving student retention in Australia*. Brisbane: Department of Education and the Arts, 2004.

¹⁰⁷ Lupton, R., & Kintrea, K. Can Community-Based Interventions on Aspirations Raise Young People's Attainment? *Social Policy and Society*, 10(3), 2011, p.321-335.

¹⁰⁸ Godden, N. *Regional Young People and Youth Allowance: Access to tertiary education*. Wagga Wagga: Centre for Rural Social Research, 2007, p.30.

¹⁰⁹ Abbott-Chapman, J. 'Making the most of the mosaic: Facilitating post-school transitions to higher education of disadvantaged students.' *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 38(1), 2011, p.57-71.

This strong vocational focus was evident among parents and carers who responded to the project survey and participated in the forums. There was a demand expressed for information about the links between particular career outcomes and associated university courses. Hume Region families who attended the forums wanted to know about the employment opportunities after students complete degrees. With an eye on future employment outcomes, there was a strong demand expressed in the forums for information about the courses that lead to careers where there are skills shortages.

There was no express desire in forum discussions for young people to develop improved critical thinking skills or a broader world view. There was certainly no sense of participants sharing GK Chesterton's view that 'Education is simply the soul of a society as it passes from one generation to another'.¹¹⁰

The extremely vocational focus of many parents in the Hume Region results in families limiting the career options of young people. It demonstrates a linear perception of career development and ignores the dynamism of the Australian economy, increasing technology and the probability that young people will, throughout their life, work in a range of roles in different sectors. An excessively vocational approach to education decision making is unlikely to maximise a student's future options or resilience to change.

The project involved discussion with a number of careers advisers working within the region. It is evident that some of these advisers are working with a deep understanding of the advantages for young people in developing the knowledge and skills to be resilient in the face of future challenges and opportunities. However, there remains a hurdle for the region in getting young people and, in particular, their families to see post-secondary education as anything other than 'job training'. Of particular concern, is the limited understanding by some regional families of the dynamism of the jobs market and the range of skills that will be required in a changing workforce.

Vocational Education and Training (VET)

TAFE is important education provider in the Hume Region. Among other things, it offers many young people in the region a relatively geographically accessible and affordable source of industry relevant training through VET courses. Clearly, VET offers many students an unambiguously vocational learning option. With strong industry links, many VET providers are able to provide employment opportunities to students and graduates.

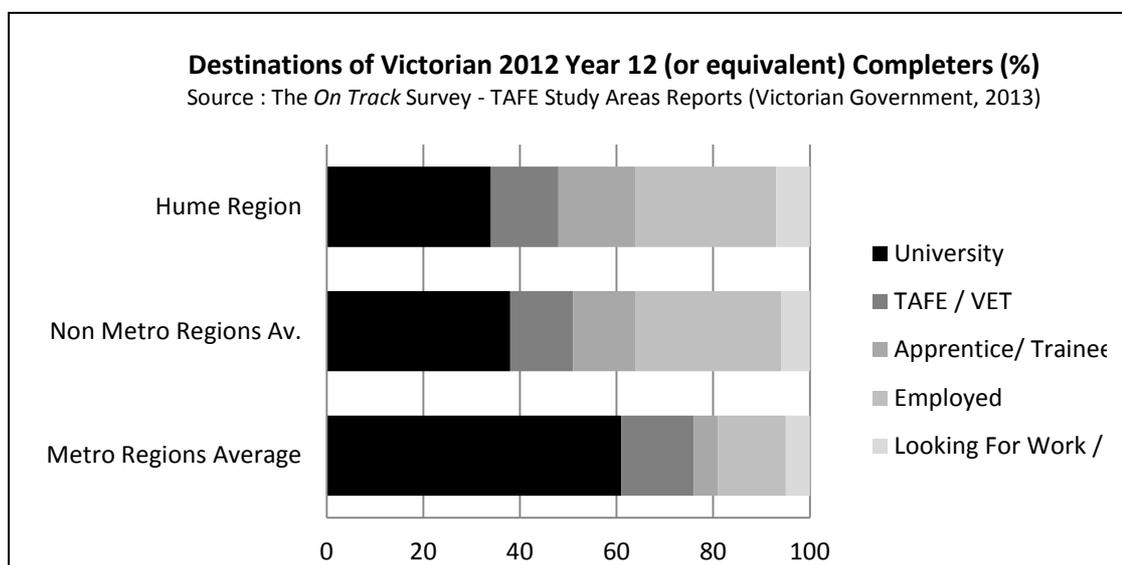
For many students, particularly in regional areas, VET provides the opportunity to learn a trade or other skill that is likely to provide employment in their district. VET makes this available to students in a format that is relatively low cost. VET also provides communities and industry with trained workers who are able to undertake trades and other roles that are of social and economic importance and are usually familiar to families in the region.

¹¹⁰ Illustrated London News 7 May 1924.

Furthermore, TAFE may provide an effective stepping stone to university. In this role, a number of TAFE and other VET providers offer the advantage of geographic proximity, relatively low fees and a supportive environment.

In short, TAFE is important to the Hume Region students because it is low cost and geographically convenient. In addition, because the vocational focus of TAFE aligns with their own very vocational approach to education, some families believe that TAFE offers graduates better employment opportunities than university study. On the other hand, because VET provides many students with an option that is affordable, convenient and expressly vocational, it may divert students who could otherwise have undertaken higher learning at a university. This dilemma is also considered in the secondary literature and has broad policy ramifications.

Graph 3



Students, regardless of their family background, should be able to participate in the courses and careers that best suit their capabilities and interests. However, the On Track data and many other studies, show that the VET sector overwhelmingly draws its students from families who are disadvantaged financially or socially.¹¹¹ On the other hand, universities see an over representation of young people from metropolitan cities and from families who enjoy a range of economic and social benefits (refer Graph 3).

There is significant evidence that this issue is cultural. James investigated the post-school intentions of Year 10-12 students and their attitudes towards the possibility of studying at university or TAFE. The attitudes of students who intend to enrol in a TAFE course were found by James to be very similar to the attitudes of those students who intended to proceed directly to work after leaving school.¹¹²

¹¹¹ See, in particular, Polesel., J. Vocational education and training (VET) and young people: The pathway of the poor? *Education & Training*, 52(5), 2010, p.415-426.

¹¹² James, R. *Socioeconomic Background and Higher Education Participation: An analysis of students' aspirations and expectations*. Canberra: Department of Education, Science and Training, 2002.

The availability of the income contingent loan schemes (HECS-HELP) prevents students from facing up-front fees when enrolling at university. The introduction of such an arrangement, despite its advantages in reducing cost barriers to university, has not seen the elimination (or even a substantial reduction) of the socio-economic divide between those who enrol in TAFE courses and those who enrol in university courses.

This project, like previous studies, has seen evidence that a strongly vocational culture and limited awareness of the benefits of university study means that a number of students from regional areas, in particular, are not choosing to undertake higher education. James found that those school students who intended to enrol in a TAFE course or work once leaving school had a shorter term focus in their personal goals than those intending to go on to university. Those not aspiring to university study saw less relevance in education generally and had less belief that higher education would be intrinsically interesting than those intending to go to university.¹¹³

As one person in the Central Hume study observed:

...they see young tradies with a new ute and see this as being significant.¹¹⁴

According to the Australian Council for Educational Research, the students who undertake 'VET in Schools' programs tend to have parents without a tertiary qualification, be regionally based, have poor school results and attend government schools.¹¹⁵ For many such students, VET in Schools offers an important educational choice and one that has the important benefit that it is likely to encourage them to stay at school. For these reasons, a number of schools in the Hume Region (and elsewhere across Australia) offer programs such as School Based Apprenticeships. Despite their successes, these programs have been criticised by some for diverting students from an academic track that might have seen them go on to university study.¹¹⁶

A narrowly vocational approach to education brings with it a number of other educational disadvantages for the people of the Hume Region. These include a focus on entering courses that, although vocational, have limited employment outcomes. In the current employment market, this might include some popular vocational university courses. A vocational focus may also exaggerate the benefits of TAFE courses and lead to an underestimation of the course pathways required to achieve some career outcomes.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Hume Regional Development Australia, *Aspirations and Destinations of Young People: A study of four towns and their communities and schools in Central Hume*. University of Ballarat, 2012, p.88.

¹¹⁵ Hume Regional Development Australia, *Aspirations and Destinations of Young People: A study of four towns and their communities and schools in Central Hume*, University of Ballarat, 2012. p.41. See also Polesel, J. 'Vocational education and training (VET) and young people: The pathway of the poor?' *Education & Training*, 52(5), 2010, p.415-426.

¹¹⁶ Hume Regional Development Australia, *Aspirations and Destinations of Young People: A study of four towns and their communities and schools in Central Hume*. University of Ballarat, 2012.

University courses that appear vocational

The extremely vocational view expressed by Hume Region families may cause them to overlook a broad range of university offerings that could maximise job prospects. While Australian universities offer a range of subjects, the manner in which these are bundled up into degrees and offered to students often reflects what the market wants, more than it reflects good educational or employment outcomes. In the past, Australian universities offered a relatively limited number of undergraduate and graduate degrees. Although a number of students commenced a vocational or professional degree in areas such as medicine, law or architecture, many more enrolled in generalist undergraduate qualifications such as a Bachelor of Science and Bachelor of Arts. Similarly, postgraduate students would often enrol in a broad qualification such as Master of Arts or a Master of Science degree.

As an example, institutions have looked through the subjects offered in their Bachelor of Arts to find any subject connected to communications. They have then bundled these together to create degrees called 'Bachelor of Communications' and 'Bachelor of Arts (Communications)'. In many cases, these courses contain little or no content that is not available to students undertaking a broader Bachelor of Arts. The main difference is that students doing the communications degree may have a reduced opportunity to study a broader range of subjects.

A forum attendee from a university that serves the Hume Region said that many people in the region had difficulty in understanding that, for example, enrolling in a Bachelor of Nanotechnology as a school leaver was likely to be a less effective pathway to eventually working in the nanotechnology field than undertaking a more general Bachelor of Science and then completing a postgraduate degree. An extremely vocational approach to viewing post-secondary study may also lead to the false expectation that a three year undergraduate degree is likely to lead directly into a job in nanotechnology research.

The forums demonstrated that many Hume Region families had a limited understanding that powerful vocational outcomes may be best pursued through a longer term approach to higher education commencing from a broad base with many choices rather than limiting career options by specialising early.

Students who specialise early may also risk having to pay full fees if they decide to undertake another course at the same level to enable a change of career path after completing a higher education qualification.

Over time, students, particularly those from more disadvantaged backgrounds, or whose families had no experience of tertiary education, have shown themselves to be particularly attracted to more vocationally focused undergraduate degrees. Universities have responded to this market demand and, in many cases, simply renamed restricted versions of their generalist degrees to meet this demand from prospective students.

By holding to a very strong vocational focus, some students from the Hume Region are more likely to enrol in specialist degrees, risking their access to broader subject choices and associated career opportunities. Instead, provision of improved information about tertiary education and employment should encourage young people in the region to take a broader approach to further education. In particular, completing a generalist qualification is likely to create more resilient community members who are better able to succeed in a changing job market over a long period. Families in the region would benefit from the provision of further information about the full range of studies relevant to attaining a job in a range of fields.

A further disadvantage with the extremely vocational focus of parents and young people is that it may exaggerate the value of a young person's local, part-time employment and undervalue the significantly longer term employment benefits of undertaking university study.

Recommendation 17:

That efforts be made to mitigate the limiting effects of the extremely vocational focus of Hume Region families through provision of information containing examples of generalist degrees leading to successful career outcomes.

4.3 Families shape aspirations

4.3.1 Parents influence student decision making

Consistent with the evidence that families are very important in shaping the aspirations of young people, the Hume RDA Committee sponsored Central Hume study reported that 'participants indicated that their families and teachers were influential in decision making about their futures and supportive of their decisions'.¹¹⁷ The same study found that in Wangaratta, 83% of Year 12 students who responded to the survey indicated that the views of their parents were influential in them deciding when to leave school. Of survey respondents in Year 9, 91% indicated that their parents' views on education influenced them to some extent.¹¹⁸

Such evidence strongly indicates that public policy and other approaches that assist parents in their roles of encouraging and informing young people may be particularly effective in increasing the rates and levels of educational achievement in the Hume Region of Victoria. The opportunity to bring about improvement is particularly illustrated by the report on the aspirations and destinations of young people in Central Hume. This study reported the view of one resident that 'some parents don't have the skills to help their children, and even though they were disappointed with their child's disengagement from education, they don't know how to address it'.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ Hume Regional Development Australia, *Aspirations and Destinations of Young People: A study of four towns and their communities and schools in Central Hume*. University of Ballarat, 2012, p.11.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid*, p.95.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid*, p.103.

Even more succinctly, one contributor to the study described the circumstances that prevail when a local child needs help and advice in order to continue their education:

‘Mum’s usually really keen but doesn’t have the skills to do it’.¹²⁰

An Anop survey found that amongst young people aged 15-24 years, the major influence on decisions about employment of careers was their parents (nominated by 57% of respondents).¹²¹ Responses to that survey indicated that parents were an important influence in encouraging students to complete their education. Friends were an influence to a lesser degree (27%), as were girlfriends, boyfriends or partners (19%).

Early research in the United States of America showed that mothers were more influential than fathers¹²² and that parents were a stronger influence than best friends.¹²³ These findings have since been replicated in a number of studies in Australia. In 2000, James found that parents were the main influence on students’ plans for the future, with mothers more influential for 81% of those that preferred university, 82% of those that preferred TAFE and 79% of those that preferred work. By way of comparison, the proportion of students stating their father influenced them was 74%, 75% and 72% respectively.¹²⁴

In the four distinct Australian geographic areas examined by a recent NCVER report,¹²⁵ young people were found to be heavily influenced by their educational and career ‘inheritance’ with young people imagining that they would follow in the career footsteps of their parents. The report noted that boys behave differently from girls, with young men following the traditions of their fathers, while young women are more likely to leave an area to pursue opportunities. Finally, supporting findings from many studies undertaken in Australia and elsewhere, the NCVER noted that students from families with a history of tertiary education were more likely to consider this as an option.

4.3.2 Parent education levels make a difference

The importance of parental education levels in shaping the higher education participation of students has long been clear. For example, in 2000, Marks et al examined the LSAY cohort and found students who had a parent with a higher education qualification were considerably more likely to participate in higher education in comparison with students whose parents had no previous experience of higher education.¹²⁶

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ 1990 Anop Survey cited by Roy Morgan Research, Year 12 choices: a survey of factors influencing year 12 decision-making on post-school destination, choice of university and preferred subject. Australian Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009, p.22.

¹²² Bennett, W. S., & Gist, N. P. ‘Class and family influences on student aspirations’ *Social Forces*, 43(2), 1964, p.167-173.

¹²³ Davies, M., & Kandel, D. Parental and peer influences on adolescents’ educational plans: Some further evidence. *The American Journal of Sociology*, 87 (2), 1981, p. 363-387 cited in Roy Morgan Research, Year 12 choices: a survey of factors influencing year 12 decision-making on post-school destination, p.96.

¹²⁴ James, R. *Socioeconomic Background and Higher Education Participation: An analysis of students’ aspirations and expectations*. Canberra: Department of Education, Science and Training, 2002.

¹²⁵ Webb, S., Black, R., Plowright, S., & Reshmi, R. *Geographical and place dimensions of post-school participation in education and work* NCVER, February 2015.

¹²⁶ 51% compared to 29% - see Marks, G., Fleming, N., Long, M., & McMillan, J. *Patterns of Participation in Year 12*

James used parental educational attainment as the preferred measure of SES in his studies.¹²⁷ This measure was chosen as an appropriate indicator of the likely encouragement and commitment of families to their children's education.¹²⁸

There is also very strong link between a parent's educational attainment and their aspirations for their children. Perhaps the starkest figures on parental preference for their children's future study came when the level of parental educational achievement was examined. There was a preference for their children to attend university held by 74% of parents who had completed a university Bachelor or postgraduate degree. This rate fell to 56% of those parents whose highest level of education was Year 12. Only 25% of those who had left school before completing Year 10 reported that they would like their child to attend university when they finished school.¹²⁹

Parental educational attainment influences the views of the young people themselves to tertiary education, not merely the aspirations of those parents for their children. James found that those students who had parents with a university education (high SES) were both more interested in attending university and, not surprisingly, more likely to see themselves as benefiting from completing a university degree.¹³⁰ Laming also found that those students whose father had not completed secondary education were unsure about the benefits of going to university.¹³¹

Results of previous studies also show that a parent's highest level of education has a substantial impact on respondents' impressions and expectations about university. The surveys and analysis by Roy Morgan Research found that students with at least one parent with a university education were much more likely to agree with the statement that 'completing a university degree is a good investment in the future'.¹³² Where 41% of students whose parents had not undertaken higher education agreed with the statement 'it seems to be the natural thing to go onto university after school', this number rose to 59% among those with at least one parent who had undertaken higher education.¹³³

and Higher Education in Australia: Trends and issues. LSAY Research Report No. 17. Melbourne: Australian Council for Educational Research, 2000.

¹²⁷ James, R. TAFE, University or Work? The early preferences and choices of students in Years 10, 11 and 12. Adelaide: National Centre for Vocational Education Research, 2000.

James, R. 'Participation disadvantage in Australian higher education: An analysis of some effects of geographic location and socioeconomic status' Higher Education, 42, 2001, p.455-472.

James, R. Socioeconomic Background and Higher Education Participation: An analysis of students' aspirations and expectations. Canberra: Department of Education, Science and Training, 2002.

James, R., Baldwin, G., & McInnis, C. Which University? The factors influencing the choices of prospective undergraduates. Canberra: Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 1999.

¹²⁸ James, R., Wyn, J., Baldwin, G., Hepworth, G., McInnis, C., & Stephanou, A. Rural and Isolated School Students and their Higher Education Choices: A re-examination of students location, socioeconomic background, and educational advantage and disadvantage. Commissioned Report No. 62. Canberra: Higher Education Council, 1999.

¹²⁹ DEST 2007 cited in Roy Morgan Research, Year 12 choices: a survey of factors influencing year 12 decision-making on post-school destination, choice of university and preferred subject. Australian Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009, p.23.

¹³⁰ James, R. Socioeconomic Background and Higher Education Participation: An analysis of students' aspirations and expectations, Canberra: Department of Education, Science and Training, 2002.

¹³¹ Laming, M. The place of university in the culture of young people. In 10th Pacific Rim First Year in Higher Education Conference Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, 2007, p. 4-6.

¹³² 91% of respondents who had one parent who had attended university in comparison with 83% among all other respondents) - Roy Morgan Research, Year 12 choices: a survey of factors influencing year 12 decision-making on post-school destination, choice of university and preferred subject. Australian Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009, p.148.

¹³³ Ibid.

Among the students in the Roy Morgan Research study who indicated that they did not have an overall intention to enter university within two years of completing secondary school, 11% indicated that one of the reasons that they had elected not to progress to university was that no member of their family had ever been to university before. When the Socio-Economic Status Parental Education (SES-PE) measure was used, it was found that almost one in four (24%) of respondents from low SES-PE backgrounds cited the absence of anyone else in their family as having been to university as a reason for not going themselves.¹³⁴

Demonstrating the way in which distance, levels of wealth and family educational attainment tend to exacerbate each other, respondents from government schools, respondents from a non-metropolitan region and respondents from a low SES background were found to be more affected by the lack of a family member who had undertaken higher education.¹³⁵ Of those not going to university, 19% of remote respondents cited having no one in their family who had been to university before as a barrier to their own entry. This compared to 9% of metropolitan respondents and 11% of respondents from regional, though not remote, locations.¹³⁶ This means that the Hume Region's low rate of higher education attainment is itself a barrier to improvement in the future. On the other hand, it shows that the achievement of improved university completion rates in the region is likely to bring benefits for future generations. In time, a self-reinforcing effect may see the region lift its educational attainment rate as each generation is better able to inspire and guide the next.

Evidence that educational aspirations are passed on from generation to generation is particularly important for the Hume Region with its low rates of parental educational attainment. The project survey result indicates a very high rate of educational attainment by those who completed the survey. Discussions with forum attendees indicated a tendency to exaggerate (at times unknowingly) their family's educational attainment. Families were keen to cite the qualifications of distant relatives and seemed confused about the hierarchy of post-secondary qualifications.

Recommendation 18:

That steps be taken to improve access to information about scholarships such as 'first in the family scholarships', given their relevance to regional students who are less likely to have a family member who has attended university.

4.3.3 Expectations matter

Despite the intergenerational disadvantages of having no higher education experience, parents without such a background are still able to provide important assistance to the region's young people. Regardless of the level of their own educational attainment, parents are able to strengthen their children's future through a range of factors. One of the most

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid. This applied regardless of the measure of SES that was used.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

significant is the provision of encouragement and by stressing the value of education.¹³⁷

In a Canadian study, it was found that teenagers' aspirations were influenced by how important they thought education was to their parents. Those students who believed that tertiary education was valued by their parents had higher educational aspirations. Among the students who aspired to go to university, there was twice as many who perceived tertiary education as being important to their parents when compared to students who did not aspire to undertake tertiary education.¹³⁸

During the interview process undertaken as part of the work by the University of Ballarat, adults in Central Hume suggested that there were few local role models holding professional or higher education qualifications. Consequently, young people in that area had a narrow perspective of their options because they lacked sources of inspiration beyond that provided by their parents.¹³⁹ Participants in that study were noted as saying:

Parental aspirations drive aspirations young people don't have other role models they don't see high income from graduates.

In 2014, researchers examined data from the LSAY surveys of Australian young people in order to identify the factors that influence plans to complete Year 12 and commence university study.¹⁴⁰ Their findings suggest that parental expectations are particularly influential in educational choices, stating that:

Students whose parents want them to attend university are four times more likely to complete Year 12, and 11 times more likely to plan to attend university compared to those whose parents expect them to choose a non-university pathway.

Davis and Kandel found that parental expectations play an important role in developing and shaping student aspirations toward post-school study.¹⁴¹ In particular, it is well established that a family history of undertaking higher education is strongly correlated with the attitudes and intentions of young people towards higher education. Research by Bowden and Doughney examined the aspirations of secondary students in the western suburbs of Melbourne and found that the views of family, and in particular the views of mothers, tend to be seriously considered by students when making choices about courses and careers.¹⁴²

Fortunately, young people in Central Hume have expressed a very strong opinion that they were encouraged by parents to do well in the middle years of secondary school. However, the sense of having been encouraged declines by Year 12. In Year 9, 100% of students

¹³⁷ Hume Regional Development Australia, *Aspirations and Destinations of Young People: A study of four towns and their communities and schools in Central Hume*, University of Ballarat, 2012, p.40.

¹³⁸ *Aspirations of Canadian Youth for Higher Education*. Quebec, Canada: Department of Human Resources and Skills Development, Canada 2004, p.25.

¹³⁹ Hume Regional Development Australia, *Aspirations and Destinations of Young People: A study of four towns and their communities and schools in Central Hume*, University of Ballarat, 2012, p.88.

¹⁴⁰ Gemici, S., Bednarz, A., Karmel, T., & Lim, P. *The factors affecting the educational and occupational aspirations of young Australians*, 2014.

¹⁴¹ Davies, M., & Kandel, D. B. Parental and peer influences on adolescents' educational plans: Some further evidence. *American Journal of Sociology*, 1981, p.363-387.

¹⁴² Bowden, M. P., & Doughney, J. Socio-economic status, cultural diversity and the aspirations of secondary students in the Western Suburbs of Melbourne, Australia. *Higher Education*, 59(1), 2010.

surveyed felt their parents encouraged them to do well, but in Year 12, the rate was 88%.¹⁴³

4.4 Parents want better information

4.4.1 Effective information and advice supports good decision making

The available literature and research has long underlined the importance of families having effective information when making decisions about post-secondary education. For example, in its broad study undertaken for the Australian government, Roy Morgan Research concluded that 'consistent with other studies, the present results indicate the availability of information to be a crucial factor in influencing . . . respondents' decision making'.¹⁴⁴

Similarly, the study by the University of Ballarat in Central Hume stressed the importance of information in student decision making.¹⁴⁵ The same report evaluated a range of previous research and determined that the key informational issue was one of access, stating:

Many of the barriers facing rural and remote young people continuing on to higher education can be connected with issues of access; not only geographical access to services and facilities but also access to information and knowledge.¹⁴⁶

Memon et al noted that decisions about the post-school future of young people requires them to make important choices at a time when they are likely to lack the experience or maturity to make such decisions.¹⁴⁷ Parents and carers, therefore, are an important source of information and advice in the making of such decisions. The importance of parents in building and shaping the educational aspirations of young people has long been noted in both national and international research. In 2010, a study in the United Kingdom found that when young people want career information, advice and guidance they go first to their parents or carers.¹⁴⁸ Similarly, during recent engagements, Victorian Department of Education and Training officers and others working in the sector have highlighted the important role parents play supporting young people make a transition into higher education.

The evidence from the Hume Region is consistent with this finding. Parents' views were

¹⁴³ Hume Regional Development Australia, *Aspirations and Destinations of Young People: A study of four towns and their communities and schools in Central Hume*. University of Ballarat, 2012, p.56-7.

¹⁴⁴ Roy Morgan Research, *Year 12 choices: a survey of factors influencing year 12 decision-making on post-school destination, choice of university and preferred subject*. Australian Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009, p.58.

¹⁴⁵ Hume Regional Development Australia, *Aspirations and Destinations of Young People: A study of four towns and their communities and schools in Central Hume*. University of Ballarat, 2012. p.36.

¹⁴⁶ Bok, J. The capacity to aspire to higher education: 'It's like making them do a play without a script'. *Critical Studies in Education*, 51(2), 2010, p. 163-178.

Alloway, N., & Dalley-Trim, L. 'High and Dry' in rural Australia: Obstacles to student aspirations and expectations. *Rural Society*, 19(1), 2009, p.49-59.

Goto, S. T., & Martin, C. Psychology of success: Overcoming barriers to pursuing further education. *The Journal of Continuing Higher Education*, 57(1), 2009, p.10-21.

See, in particular, Hume Regional Development Australia, *Aspirations and Destinations of Young People: A study of four towns and their communities and schools in Central Hume*. University of Ballarat, 2012, p.36.

¹⁴⁷ Menon, M. E., Saiti, A., & Socratous, M. Rationality, information search and choice in higher education: Evidence from Greece. *Higher Education*, 54(5), p.705-721, cited in Roy Morgan Research, *Year 12 choices: a survey of factors influencing year 12 decision-making on post-school destination, choice of university and preferred subject*. Australian Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009, p.8.

¹⁴⁸ Hibbert, T. *Face-to-Face: What young people think about information, advice and guidance*. UK National Youth Agency and Local Government Association, 2010.

reported as being either 'very important' or 'important' by 84% of surveyed Year 9 students and 67% of surveyed Year 12 students in Central Hume.¹⁴⁹

Parents had the greatest influence on the key educational decision of when a student should leave school. In Central Hume, 85% of year 12 students and 96% of Year 9 students reported that their parents were influential to some extent on their decision to complete Year 12 or finish earlier.¹⁵⁰

Andrews concluded that, in families with no history of higher education, support for young people to undertake higher education was deficient in a number of ways, including a 'lack of older family role models who have undertaken higher education, a depreciation of the value of higher education by the family and a lack of appreciation of what practical support is required and can be given to family members undertaking higher education'.¹⁵¹

Andrews found that in families where there was no history of family members going on to university, parents often lacked the knowledge and information required to effectively encourage their children or assist their entry into university.¹⁵²

A Human Resources and Skills Development Canada study determined that parents have the potential to contribute to their children's propensity to achieve university entry in three ways.¹⁵³ The first is shaping aspirations toward tertiary study. The second is providing encouragement and the third is acting as role models.¹⁵⁴ This view is incomplete as it overlooks the role of parents in the provision of information about entry to higher education.

Families can, and often do, perform a valuable role as a source of information about tertiary options. The 1994 Anop Survey found that parents and family were a source of information about university for 22% of young people. Parents and family were a less frequent source of TAFE information (12%).¹⁵⁵ Davies et al found that students with parents, siblings or peer groups with experience of study in higher education made more use of these groups as a source of information. In particular, parents can be a crucial source of information for students seeking a pathway to higher education.¹⁵⁶

Unfortunately, many parents are ill-equipped to perform this role. Thomson suggested that well educated parents are better able to provide students with information about the consequences of their school subject selection, including their impact on admission to university.¹⁵⁷ As evidence for this phenomenon, Thomson found that those with poor results

¹⁴⁹ Hume Regional Development Australia, *Aspirations and Destinations of Young People: A study of four towns and their communities and schools in Central Hume*. University of Ballarat, 2012, p.55.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid*, p.77.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid*.

¹⁵² Andrews, L. Does HECS Deter? Factors affecting university participation by low SES groups. Occasional Series Paper 99/F. Canberra: Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 1999, p.21.

¹⁵³ Looker, D., & Thiessen, V. Aspirations of Canadian youth for higher education. Learning Policy Directorate, Strategic Policy and Planning: Human Resources and Skills Canada, 2004.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid*.

¹⁵⁵ Roy Morgan Research, Year 12 choices: a survey of factors influencing year 12 decision-making on post-school destination, choice of university and preferred subject. Australian Dept of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009, p.25.

¹⁵⁶ Davies, P., Slack, K., Hughes, A., Mandan, J., & Vigurs, K. *Knowing Where to Study? Fees, bursaries and fair access*. Staffordshire University, UK: Institute for Educational Policy Research, 2008.

¹⁵⁷ Thomson, S. *Pathways from School to Further Education or Work: Examining the consequences of Year 12 course*

in Year 9 and those from lower SES backgrounds were over represented in Year 12 year courses that provided students with few pathways to higher education.¹⁵⁸ Not surprisingly, therefore, students from lower SES backgrounds have been found to have much less confidence in their ability to secure an effective pathway to university study (42%) than higher SES students (70%).¹⁵⁹

4.4.2 Key information needs

Study options and course information

Families who completed the project survey and attended the forums in Myrtleford, Seymour, Shepparton and Wodonga, demonstrated and openly expressed a lack of understanding about the study options available to young people. The survey included the question, 'was the information about further education that you have used, useful?' Of the 86 respondents, 56 (or 65%), determined the information that they have used to be 'somewhat useful'. This was a much greater number than the 14 respondents who found that the information about further education that they have used to be 'extremely useful'.

One parent said in their survey response:

I really like your Uni Options website. It is easy to navigate and presents a positive approach for students at all levels of aptitude. I like the fact that they can find out (almost by accident, but actually by your good design!) about other courses related to their interests.

Parents and carers stated a desire for information that would assist with selecting courses and institutions. There was an evident demand for information about universities, including ratings and rankings. Previous research findings strongly support the improved provision of such information. For example, in 2010, Bok argued that to enable students to develop aspirations towards higher education, they require an understanding of the range of educational pathways available. Bok noted that this understanding is typically shaped by the 'socio-cultural background and life-world experiences' of students and their families and is often limited by a family's lack of familiarity with universities.¹⁶⁰

Pathway information

The survey results and forum discussions saw repeated demands for improved pathway information in the region because, as parents explained, they do not understand the various options available. Families expressed the view that pathway information that they had received previously had not been clear. They said that they have not understood how students are able to use pathways to university.

choices. LSAY Research Report No. 42. Melbourne: Australian Council for Educational Research, 2005.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Roy Morgan Research, Year 12 choices: a survey of factors influencing year 12 decision-making on post-school destination, choice of university and preferred subject. Australian Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009, p.29.

¹⁶⁰ Bok, J. The capacity to aspire to higher education: 'It's like making them do a play without a script'. *Critical Studies in Education*, 51(2), 2010, p.164.

One survey respondent said that they wanted:

...support if child doesn't get into the course and what are the other options/pathways.

In addition, many parents said that if they had not attended a forum conducted for the project and learned about the existence of pathways and information sources such as the UniOptions website, they would have continued to hold the (false) belief that, if students do not achieve the advertised 'clearly in' ATAR for a course, there is no other entry option.

This view is supported by the University of Ballarat study, which stated:

. . .not only are rural students geographically isolated from higher education institutions, but that much of the knowledge and key information required for achieving entry may also be inaccessible to these students and their families.

There is evidence that students from regional areas are able to access pathways to university if they are provided with the information to enable them to make effective choices.¹⁶¹

Information from Universities

There was a general dissatisfaction with the quantity and quality of information provided by universities to families in the region.

There was criticism of career and university expos in Melbourne for failing to provide enough information on course prerequisites. It was apparent in discussion at the forums that some parents were clearly unaware that this information is readily available through the Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre (VTAC) in Victoria and the University Admissions Centre (UAC) in NSW and the ACT. Allied to this, there was also express desire for improved information about the VTAC preference process for universities.

Parents indicated a wish to better understand basic matters such as university terminology and improved understanding about 'a day in the life' of a university and TAFE student.

Previous studies indicate that there is an uneven use of information about universities across the community. Investigations show that more families from high-SES backgrounds report receiving information about accessing university than families from low-SES backgrounds.¹⁶²

Families in the Hume Region claimed to have limited access to information about university study. In forums, families noted an absence of university marketing within the region. Their perception is supported by previous research.

¹⁶¹ Hume Regional Development Australia, *Aspirations and Destinations of Young People: A study of four towns and their communities and schools in Central Hume*. University of Ballarat, 2012, p.36.

¹⁶² Roy Morgan Research, *Year 12 choices: a survey of factors influencing year 12 decision-making on post-school destination, choice of university and preferred subject*. Australian Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009, p.65.

For example, in the study undertaken by Roy Morgan Research for the Commonwealth Government, 7% of metropolitan respondents reported that they had received no information about university study. This compared with 12% of regional respondents and 16% of those from remote areas.¹⁶³ In the same study, 66% of metropolitan respondents reported attending an open day for a university, in comparison with 50% of regional survey participants and just 19% of those from remote areas. The authors of that report concluded that 'results by geographical location indicate that availability of sources of information and accessibility of tertiary institutions impacts on the information sources used by respondents'.¹⁶⁴

Participants in previous studies who were considering attending university attested to the importance of open days, information sessions and information presented on universities websites for their decision making.¹⁶⁵ However, the current type of careers and university expos undertaken in Melbourne were considered by some parents in the Hume Region to be overwhelming in size. In addition, the locations of such events are typically geographically unhelpful for Hume Region residents, particularly those who reside in the northern part of the region. There was a desire for university information events to be held within the region. It was noted that Seymour College holds such an information evening each August and this event is well regarded. There was no mention in any of the project discussions with families of any other careers or further study information forums held in the Hume Region that involved universities.

There was demand evident for video conferencing by universities to regional schools to overcome the difficulty of attending open days and information expos in Melbourne. Along similar lines, there was a call for 'virtual tours' of universities. This accorded with a general request for more face-to-face information to be provided by universities.

One parent commented:

...funds expended by universities on giveaways (such as pens and notepads) at expos in Melbourne would be better spent on providing advice to regional students.

Families who have travelled to Melbourne to attend university open days, expressed a wish for tours of universities for parents and students that include accommodation options.

The forums saw a pervasive expression that universities should do more to assist regional and financially disadvantaged students. There was quite a strong sense that universities do not make sufficient effort to lower barriers to entry. In some cases, those with such an expectation are doomed to be disappointed. To cite one example, a parent expressed frustration and embarrassment in dealing with the language specific to universities. By way of acknowledging this challenge and providing assistance, the parent was advised that the

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid, p.60.

UniOptions website includes a lengthy glossary of university terms, because they can indeed pose a challenge for those unfamiliar with them. In response, another parent angrily objected to the provision of a glossary of university terms, demanding instead that universities modernise their terminology to make it easier for 'ordinary people' to understand. Similarly, many parents could not see why universities could not hold careers information days and recruitment activities in the Hume Region.

Recommendation 19:

That the provision of a range of web based resources about university life be explored to help overcome the distance disadvantage of regional families including:

- web based videos that would help families to understand 'a day in the life' of a current university and TAFE student
- webinars with current university students describing what those students do
- 'live chat' tool that would allow school students and their families to talk with universities about the course offerings and other matters of interest at each institution.

4.5 Recognising the important role of careers advisers

Such an evident lack of understanding about university by parents and carers who contributed to the project may be construed as a criticism of careers advisers. This should not be the case.

The project worked with a number of highly committed, thoughtful, engaging and externally focused careers advisers in the Hume Region. In addition, families who attended the forums spoke extremely favourably of the careers advisers who work at their schools.

On the other hand, the project also encountered significant challenges in engaging with some of the region's schools and their careers advisers. Barriers existed despite the forums providing free, independent information on university pathways.

It is noteworthy that the forums with the best attendance occurred where effective school careers advisers actively worked to engage families and advise them of the forums and information that the presentations would provide. However, such an approach was not universal. This variation underlines the importance of schools in the Hume Region having outwardly focused careers advisers willing to use all available resources to actively engage families and help them to navigate the pathways to university.

Careers advisers face a number of constraints and, at nearly all the forums, parents spoke very positively about the careers professionals at their children's school. There was a very strong awareness of the capacity and resource constraints that hinder the provision of advice about university study within schools.

At two forums there was a specific request that the project report contain express mention of the need for better resourcing of these crucial roles within schools in the region.

The forums revealed another issue that the authors observed to be a factor in hindering the effectiveness of careers advisers in helping parents. A notable feature of some of the forums were some highly engaged parents, desperate to improve their understanding, in contrast to their student children who were present but clearly disengaged and not showing any interest in listening to the many pathways that they might use to achieve entry into a university course.

By and large, careers advisers focus on communicating with students, rather than parents and carers. This is despite some parents demonstrating higher levels of engagement. It was quite evident from the forum outcomes, particularly where careers advisers were present at the discussions, that many school students are very poor at communicating information about further study to their own parents and carers, despite the interest of their parents in receiving such information.

This accords with the experience that Abingdon Advisory has had directly with its UniOptions website and hosting of the Herald Sun newspaper web discussion on the days that VCE results and university offers are released. Often, it is anxious parents who are seeking information. Abingdon Advisory frequently encounters very poor parental understanding about matters such as the VTAC process and course entry. This suggests a lack of communication between students and their families given that these are basic matters almost certain to have been covered on multiple occasions by careers advisers (and others) throughout the school year.

In such cases, direct communication with parents and carers is likely to be very productive. It is clear from the project that there is demand from parents and carers for information to be made more readily (and directly) available to them. Parents expressed dissatisfaction with important information being provided only to students and to parents via students.

Recommendation 20:

That greater ongoing recognition and professional development be available to careers advisers in helping families navigate pathways to university.

Recommendation 21:

That support be provided to develop and strengthen careers advisors networks across the Hume Region and build on the benefits provided by the networks that currently exist in some areas within the region.

Recommendation 22:

That there be greater availability of advice directly to Hume Region parents and carers

on the navigation of university pathways by young people.

4.6 Meeting the desire for a single source of trusted, relevant information

There was a consensus among parents at forums that schools could play a very effective role in providing a single place (such as a website or portal) where parents could go to find up to date, consistent information and links to effective sources.

Whilst some of the feedback from parents who attended forums was contradictory, it served nevertheless to highlight that *information is an issue*.

For example, many parents said 'there is just too much information to absorb' and, in the same forum, others would say 'we need more information'. A similar response was received through the project survey. Despite these frequent calls for specific information to be made available, parents also said things such as 'there is plenty of information, but it all gets very overwhelming'. Another family wrote 'there is so much information available with different options that sorting through all of this is a real problem'. Expressing a similar view, other parents described the information sources that they had used as 'all very confusing'.

This suggests that schools generally, and careers advisers in particular, might work to more effectively direct families to places where they can find information that is up to date, independent, clear and relevant. This would accord with one surveyed family's statement that they 'need info to be easy to access'.

It is also clear from the project that parents and carers have distinct information demands, expectations, needs and communications styles.

Through its own work on UniOptions, Abingdon Advisory is aware that many schools in Victoria and New South Wales, in particular, use a standard template for their careers websites and that these have the potential to reduce the workload of careers advisors and improve information provision to both parents and students.

The strong network of careers advisors in Myrtleford and Bright have recently developed such a website, providing a wide range of well-chosen links to parents and students to assist with decisions about post-school options.

Recommendation 23:

A low cost standard website or portal template be developed and made available to careers advisors in the Hume Region. Each template to be available for use by schools within the region and developed in a format that can be easily customized for each school and incorporate links to key information sources on navigating pathways to university.

Recommendation 24:

Careers advisors be supported to further develop such a website or portal, creating two distinct templates – one for *parents* and one for *students* with links to information sources relating to courses, accommodation and financial assistance, including those hosted by:

- tertiary education providers
- government departments
- other providers of information about higher education.

Recommendation 25:

That all school careers websites contain a collection of recommended weblinks to sources of relevant information, such as VTAC, UAC, Centrelink, student accommodation and support services, UniOptions and university websites.

4.7 Issues outside of project scope

The forum discussions raised a number of matters not related to information needs that were outside the scope of this project but were expressed in such strong terms by participants that they are noted here.

At a Project Steering Group meeting the author of this report summed up the forum participants as:

Highly engaged parents desperately concerned about the financial barriers.

In addition to high levels of concern about the costs of living away from home and associated information needs, referred to in previous sections of the report, parents identified the housing application fees applied by the many universities and accommodation providers that a student from regional Victoria may attend, are discouraging some families in the region from contemplating university study as an option.

For example, parents expressed their objection to the application fees that are applied to students seeking university and student housing. To secure such accommodation, these applications and associated fees must be submitted well before families know which university a student is likely to attend. Because of the likelihood of student relocation, many families pay these fees at multiple universities to secure accommodation.

Parents also identified the disincentive posed by the levying of a fee to lodge a VTAC application for university entry. This fee can be an additional disincentive, particularly for financially disadvantaged school students who are considering applying to attend university.

A number of families and students expressed concern about moving away from a supportive, safe community to an unfamiliar city to attend university. In discussions it was noted that, if support exists at some future point in time, there may be potential for an organisation representing the Hume Region community to form a partnership with an established provider of student accommodation as an alternative to independently

establishing a facility in Melbourne, or elsewhere.

An arrangement with such a provider might involve them giving a commitment to house students from the Hume Region in close proximity to each other, the provision of support tailored to the needs of regional students and possibly a negotiated cost for students from the region. In return, the accommodation provider might be assured a steady stream of Australian domestic students from Hume Region. In the event that there is interest in exploring such an model, an established student accommodation provider could be approached.

Of most concern to families, however, was the gap between costs incurred by regional students who were required to live away from home to undertake higher education and those incurred by metropolitan students who could continue to live at home. Consequently families in the Hume Region were found to be overwhelmingly preoccupied with the cost implications of university attendance and, as a consequence, Youth Allowance eligibility criteria and payment rates.

5 CONCLUSION

At the heart of this report are comments and information provided by parents and carers in the Hume Region, particularly through the project survey and forums held in February and March 2015.

In these forums especially, parents and carers expressed a desire to be able to access information that, unknown to them, is generally already available.

A key finding from the project is that parents and carers are an important stakeholder group with distinct demands, expectations, needs and communications styles.

Consequently, organisations and professionals who provide such information should recognise that the very act of families making such strident calls for information (even where such information is available) indicates a significant communications challenge.

The UniOptions website, operated by Abingdon Advisory, has existed for more than three years and is linked directly from many school websites, yet at all project forums, parents expressed surprise at the site's contents, clarity and usefulness when it was demonstrated to them.

At one forum, a parent called for the provision of a guide to all Victorian university course pre-requisites and was clearly unaware that such information is readily available.

Some parents and carers who attended the forums were very strongly focused on the task of assisting their young people to access university. Nonetheless, even many of those families were, by their own admission, almost entirely ignorant about universities, how to access them and how to assist a young person to succeed in further education.

It is therefore incumbent on all who are seeking to improve the understanding of the families in the Hume Region of the benefits and means of entering university, to recognise that many parents currently lack the basic knowledge needed to effectively encourage and support their student children. This issues remains despite the efforts already made, particularly by schools, to communicate relevant information.

In the United Kingdom, there has been significant policy research based on the view that educationally disadvantaged groups lack access to high quality advice and information on university study. There has been a belief that 'getting more students to university is about providing more information'. There is now acceptance that information alone will not address equity issues due to the socially determined features of decision making.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁶ Roy Morgan Research, Year 12 choices: a survey of factors influencing year 12 decision-making on post-school destination, choice of university and preferred subject. Australian Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009, p.28.

With this in mind, a key finding of the project is that the vocational focus of parents and carers in the Hume Region has the potential to affect outcomes for the young people of the area. For example, such an approach can drive students towards courses that are packaged or marketed as having employment outcomes. This may cause students to forsake university study options to enrol in TAFE courses, because the latter are often expressly targeted at employment outcomes.

Such a strictly vocational approach may also overlook the improved employment opportunities and earning potential that generally come with completion of a university education. It also provides incentive for students to undertake the immediate employment, apprenticeship or vocational training opportunity that presents itself rather than committing to an extended period of study on the basis that it may, in time, lead to better employment opportunities.

For reasons ranging from readily available local employment, family ties and religious affiliation to anxiety about safety in a large urban city like Melbourne, local educational pathways are of particular importance to families in the region.

In some cases, there are informal arrangements in place where students and families in the Hume Region are able to access information and accommodation through contacts based in the region. A less ad hoc approach to the provision of such information would assist families significantly.

It is acknowledged that, whilst they are project owners and sponsors, RDV and the Hume RDA Committee are not the key regional stakeholders in the education sector.

This means that whilst they can play an advocacy and support advocacy role, they are not in a position to drive many of the actions recommended as a result of this project.

Efforts can be made by RDV and the Hume RDA Committee, however to secure support from government authorities, community and philanthropic organisations as well as the private sector for improved parental information provision and the other reforms recommended in this report. As a consequence of this project, members of the Hume Region community will be able to use research to better understand and respond to the challenges faced by regional families in encouraging and enabling young people to take a pathway to university.

Drawing on input from across the Hume Region, this project has recommended a number of practical, low cost actions to reduce the impact of information related barriers that are likely to be contributing to the region's low higher education attainment levels.

Advocacy potential is built on a strong evidence base as the project findings are strongly supported by a review of the secondary literature, including two government enquiries that identified important challenges that are faced in helping young regional Victorians to attend university.

In particular, the Victorian Parliament's Education and Training Committee Inquiry¹⁶⁷ into geographical differences in the rate in which Victorian students participate in higher education was undertaken in response to concerns about the relatively low higher education participation rates of young people from rural and regional Victoria.

This inquiry found:

- lower school completion rates in regional Victoria
- direct challenges posed by geography with regard to regional students travelling to university and these compounded the other economic hurdles facing regional students
- a need to improve aspiration to undertake university study by regional students
- a need for improved provision of information about pathways to university.

Similarly, the report 'Advising on the development of the Victorian Tertiary Education Plan' by Kwong Lee Dow¹⁶⁸ had a strong focus on the issues surrounding rural Victorian students accessing higher education.

This report examined issues such as:

- loss of young people from regional centres and rural areas as a result of them leaving their regional area to attend university in Melbourne
- high rates of deferral by rural and regional students
- benefits of setting goals for educational attainment by regional populations
- benefits of developing regional initiatives and learning communities to increase the higher educational attainment of regional communities.

Kwong Lee Dow's Report also advocated that the Victorian Government undertake research and implement policies, that are aimed at improving the aspirations of rural and regional students with regard to participation in higher education.

Such enquiry reports, along with the large amount of secondary literature and this report, show that regional areas such as Victoria's Hume Region continue to suffer from poor higher educational attainment, compared to metropolitan regions. The reasons for this are well understood. They include a web of distance, socio-economic and cultural factors which act in concert and frequently compound each other's effect.

¹⁶⁷ Dixon, M. F., Elasmr, N., Hall, P. R., Harkness, A., Herbert, S., & Kotsiras, N. Victoria Parliament. Education and Training Committee: Inquiry into geographical differences in the rate in Victorian students participate in higher education, final report. Melbourne, 2009.

¹⁶⁸ Lee Dow, K., & Braithwaite, V. Review of higher education regulation report, Australian Government, 2013.

6 NEXT STEPS

The Hume RDA Committee has recognised that action is required to better understand the barriers to higher education and develop a response to the problem of low educational attainment in the region. For this reason, the project has focused on the role that information provision to parents and carers can play to reduce barriers to university entry.

The findings and recommendations in this report reflect a literature review, consultation with key stakeholders in the region's education sector and input from parents and carers in the Hume Region.

The recommended actions are practical and low in cost, but likely to be effective as they provide crucial information at times when families are making important decisions about the future of young people in the region. In particular, the recommended actions acknowledge and rely on the trust that families have in their school based careers advisors. The proposed responses also recognise the significant resource constraints that face schools in general, and careers advisers, in particular.

It is acknowledged that implementation of specific actions will require engagement, leadership and support at government, school and community levels across the region.

The initial step will require engagement with regional education sector decision makers and the transition from the research phase to implementation will be supported by a regional stakeholder briefing at the conclusion of the project.

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APPENDIX 1: LIST OF RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Further investigation of local initiatives be undertaken to develop and share information about university study such as accommodation options, relocation information and subject choices. Such initiatives might include the creation of a virtual community using social media or the creation of a physical place where families can gather and share information about university study. (page 17)
2. Efforts be made to increase awareness in Hume Region of online study options. (page 18)
3. Improved provision of information to families about accommodation options for students who are seeking to relocate to undertake higher education. (page 23)
4. Improved university study living cost information be provided to families. (page 24)
5. Information about the options for low cost loans to assist with student living costs be provided to families to mitigate against the risk of incurring high cost credit card debt. (page 24)
6. Centrelink be requested to provide relevant information about accessing financial assistance in a clearer manner to families in the Hume Region. (page 26)
7. Improved provision of information about the HECS system to families in the Hume Region. (page 28)
8. Improved provision of information to families in the Hume Region about the total costs associated with university study. (page 28)
9. Improved provision of information to families about the university scholarship opportunities available to students from the Hume Region, with a particular focus on scholarships targeting access and equity, in addition to those linked to academic excellence. (page 28)
10. A list of recommended information higher education websites be made available to Hume Region families. (page 29)
11. An information strategy be developed that encourages parents and carers to specifically promote the benefits of university study to their children from a younger age. (page 32)

12. Consideration be given to the development of an information program aimed at growing higher education aspirations in Hume Region families, consistent with the Careers Curriculum Framework, commencing with children in primary school and continuing throughout secondary school. (page 32)
13. Families be provided with more examples of how enjoyable the university experience can be, in order to demonstrate that university study provides immediate benefits. (page 33)
14. All Hume Region families be encouraged to visit at least one university campus before their children reach the middle of secondary school. (page 33)
15. Families be provided with more information about the economic value of jobs requiring a university qualification to demonstrate that university study provides deferred benefits. (page 33)
16. University pathways information sessions be held across the Hume Region in the 'change of preference week', after Year 12 students have received their Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank (ATAR). (page 35)
17. Efforts be made to mitigate the limiting effects of the extremely vocational focus of Hume Region families through provision of information containing examples of generalist degrees leading to successful career outcomes. (page 43)
18. Steps be taken to improve access to information about scholarships such as 'first in the family scholarships', given their relevance to regional students who are less likely to have a family member who has attended university. (page 46)
19. Provision of a range of web based resources about university life be explored to help overcome the distance disadvantage of regional families, including:
 - web based videos that would help families to understand 'a day in the life' of a current university and TAFE student
 - webinars with current university students describing what those students do
 - 'live chat' tool that would allow school students and their families to talk with universities about the course offerings and other matters of interest at each institution. (page 53)
20. Greater ongoing recognition and professional development be available to careers advisers in helping families navigate pathways to university. (page 54)
21. Support be provided to develop and strengthen careers advisors networks across the Hume Region and build on the benefits provided by the networks that currently exist in some areas within the region. (page 54)

22. There be greater availability of advice directly to Hume Region parents and carers on the navigation of university pathways by young people. (page 54)
23. A low cost standard website or portal template be developed and made available to careers advisors in the Hume Region. Each template to be available for use by schools within the region and developed in a format that can be easily customized for each school and incorporate links to key information sources on navigating pathways to university. (page 55)
24. Careers advisors be supported to further develop such a website or portal, creating two distinct templates – one for *parents* and one for *students* with links to information sources relating to courses, accommodation and financial assistance, including those hosted by:
- tertiary education providers
 - government departments
 - other providers of information about higher education. (page 55)
25. All school careers websites contain a collection of recommended weblinks to sources of relevant information, such as VTAC, UAC, Centrelink, student accommodation and support services, UniOptions and university websites. (page 56)