

Can long distance relationships work? Insights from a partnership with a Regional University Centre

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The Regional University Hub (RUH) model of support is instrumental in mitigating the barriers and enhancing the enablers to learning that regional, rural, and remote students experience. The impact of the RUH model in improving students' educational outcomes has led to a significant need for universities to develop authentic relationships with RUH students and communities to support their engagement with tertiary studies. This paper addresses this need by describing the early findings and initial learnings from a partnership between the University of Southern Queensland and the Goondiwindi Regional University Centre.

Regional, rural and remote students experience a range of barriers to studying at university, such as competing responsibilities, financial hardship, and compounding equity factors. However, they also experience enablers, including resilience, persistence, and connectedness to community and place (Delahunty, 2022; Nelson, et al., 2017). Regional University Study Hubs (RUH) are designed to support access and participation by mitigating these barriers and enhancing these enablers (Naphthine, 2019). This is achieved through the support that RUH's provide, including opportunities for connectedness, assistance with academic skills, access to support services, and access to physical and financial infrastructure (Naphthine, et al., 2019).

The Goondiwindi Regional University Study Centre (RUC) is the geographically closest RUH to the University of Southern Queensland (UniSQ). After running a postcode report, 114 currently enrolled students were identified as living in and around the Goondiwindi RUC. However, none of these students were aware of or accessing the facilities and support provided by the RUC, nor were they aware of the UniSQ scholarships on offer. This was a clear cause for concern as lack of engagement with the support provided could hinder the educational outcomes of those students wanting to stay in their community (Naphthine, et al., 2019).

Course of action

In Semester 2, 2023, UniSQ established a partnership with the Goondiwindi RUC to encourage students to use the available support and services. As none of the UniSQ staff involved had previously visited Goondiwindi or partnered with an RUH, they were mindful to adopt an inclusive pedagogy based on sharing a belief in the value of the student experience, acknowledging that trust building takes time, and 'working with' as opposed to 'acting on' students and their local communities (Gale & Mills, 2013).

In response to feedback from the RUC, the initial outreach focused on proactive phone and email contact with UniSQ students in the area followed by visiting the RUC to connect in person. Through this outreach and consistent with Delahunty's (2022) research, students shared their desire to connect with other students; the impact of poor internet connections on study; life load issues, especially for those with young families; and the value and importance of the close relational network in the local community.

These learnings instigated additional phone, email, and SMS outreach focused on enhancing critical first encounters with 50 commencing students (Nelson, et al, 2017). These interactions

were based on Lizzio's (2006) Five Senses of Success model, including sense of capability, connectedness, purpose, resourcefulness, and academic culture. Each sense included in the model was tailored to cover the topics specific to student's needs in the area: improving access to financial support, access to physical resources, and academic and wellbeing support (Naphthine, et al., 2019).

Findings and recommendations

This proactive outreach has delivered small but positive outcomes, including 36% of UniSQ students immediately registering with the Goondiwindi RUC and 8% of commencing students applying for available regional and equity scholarships. There has also been increased visibility of the RUC in the community through the local news and regional meetings reaching local school principals and Council members. This increased community engagement and utilisation of the RUC facilities has the potential to positively impact widening participation and educational outcomes respectively (Naphthine, et al., 2019). These are critical outcomes considering the renewed attention on the RUH model following the release of The Australian Universities Accord Interim Report. Overall, this experience highlights the value of developing collaborative and authentic relationships with local communities, the significance of connecting with local students to gather contextualised insights into barriers and enablers to learning, and the importance of tailoring support and outreach accordingly.

Questions for audience discussion

1. Considering a whole-of-institution approach, what strategies could your university implement to improve the experiences of regional, rural, and remote students?
2. What can you take away from these findings and apply to support your university to establish a collaborative relationship with an RUH?

References

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