

Reconnecting Rural and Isolated Youth with Higher Education

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Financial and social difficulties present major constraints for rural and isolated students in higher education, which have an impact on how rural students negotiate their first year at university. The Rural Reconnect Project at the University of South Australia is a pilot study designed to trial and evaluate a range of connected strategies to increase the access and participation of rural and isolated students at UniSA. The evaluation of the Project aims to enhance understanding of the effects of rurality on the experiences of rural students in higher education. In this presentation, the strategies being implemented across the university will be described and preliminary findings from the research presented. Participants will have an opportunity to discuss the project, identify its strengths and gaps and discuss the implications of the research findings for better understanding and addressing the issues rural and isolated students encounter in their first year at university.

Session outline

Presentation (15 mins) Outline of the Project components/strategies and initial insights from research

Group/pair discussion (8 mins)

1. How useful is it to approach the 'first year' experience in its broader and long term context?
2. Do these strategies reflect what is happening in other institutions? Is there anything new, different or particularly helpful for others to use?
3. What aspects of the preliminary research findings are expected and/or surprising?

Whole group discussion (7 mins) What are the implications of this project and its evaluation, for enhancing the first year experiences of rural and isolated students?

Introduction

One of the main dilemmas for rural students contemplating higher education is that, irrespective of their rural location, most will have little choice but to leave home to attend university, which has significant personal, social and financial effects on students, their families and their communities (Alloway et al., 2004; Godden, 2007; James et al., 1999). The first year of transition to higher education is a particularly important milestone in the educational experience of rural students (Krause et al., 2005). Bearing in mind the nature and effects of the educational disadvantages that operate in rural areas and the understanding that educational achievement and aspirations are deeply influenced by peer, family and community expectations and relationships (Alloway et al., 2004; Kenyon, et al., 2001; Human Rights Commission

2000) it is especially important to recognise that the first year in higher education for rural students does not occur in isolation. It is essential to examine and respond to transition experiences through an understanding of students' previous educational experiences, their geographic locations and their social and economic contexts, as well as the particular individual circumstances surrounding relocation.

The Rural Reconnect Project

The Rural Reconnect Project at UniSA synthesises a range of pre-existing institutional programs and practices together with newly devised strategies to form a dedicated and focused University-wide suite of activities to attract and support rural and isolated students to study successfully at UniSA. The Project has been implemented on the assumption that first year university experiences are located on a support continuum that should commence well before students begin to make decisions about their post-school options, and continue throughout their university program to the career and employment decisions they make following graduation. The various components of the Project target Year 10 rural students; students who defer study following an acceptance offer; high merit first year students; and rural students at other stages in their university program who engage in service learning and mentoring activities with rural students and/or rural communities. The Project as it is designed is as much about building awareness and sustainable connections with rural communities and schools as it is about supporting individual students.

The Project has five components.

Orientation: A 3-day University Orientation Program is run twice a year for Year 10 school students from rural areas. A maximum of 10 students from 4 schools (400 students over the life of the Project) spend 3 days in Adelaide, visiting all UniSA campuses. Academic staff from across the University provide interactive introductory sessions to particular programs or courses. There are campus tours, career presentations and a panel discussion with rural students from the University.

Deferring and the GAP year: University staff 'stay in touch' with students who defer their study by keeping them informed and connected with the University through a range of online and face to face experiences. UniSA uses various communication methods to stay in touch with deferring students, including individual contact via phone, mail and email; social networking sites and online resources; surveys, advertising and career information sessions, some of which occur in country locations.

Scholarships: Each year four relocation scholarships valued at \$6000 each are awarded to rural students commencing at UniSA. Named the Jon and Johan Høj Rural Reconnect Scholarships, these were established with a personal gift from the Vice Chancellor and President of UniSA, Professor Peter Høj. The scholarships assist rural and isolated students to better meet the costs of leaving home and relocating in the city to pursue their education. Recipients are expected to contribute a service to their local communities or to other rural students and write a written reflection of their experiences at the end of their study.

Mentoring: Through a range of University-wide and Divisional programs, first year rural students have the opportunity to be mentored by other rural students at the University. Practices vary across the University but include interactions with an assigned mentor, Program and School social and academic orientation activities, planned social activities, opportunities to join clubs and associations and the provision of ‘drop in’ centres.

Service Learning: Jon and Johan Høj Rural Reconnect Scholarship recipients are required to ‘give back’ to their communities by undertaking service learning in their own or a similar rural community and are provided with an extra \$1000 service grant to assist them in this endeavour.

The multi-dimensional nature of the Project means it is relatively complex to put into action and relies for its success on a range of staff and students across the University to implement the various programs. Supporting the Project are academic staff and project officers in the Divisions, staff in the Marketing and Development Unit, staff from the Learning and Teaching Unit and volunteer student mentors across the university.

Research and evaluation

A comprehensive research and evaluation component has been incorporated in the Project and is being conducted by the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education. In response to the multi-dimensional nature and five year term of the Project, the research and evaluation is multi-method and longitudinal in its approach. Data gathering occurs through surveys, focus groups, interviews and case studies with diverse informants/participants, including teachers, school students, parents, deferring students, scholarship recipients, student mentors and staff members. The aim of the research is to evaluate the outcomes of the pilot project and be able to inform students, rural communities, university staff, researchers and policy makers of outcomes evident through a range of quantitative measures as well as qualitative interpretations of the experiences of participants over time. Although the number of participating students in some elements of the Project is relatively small, the diverse groups of informants and the range of research methods used allows a triangulation of data that is already yielding results. There is also an opportunity to compile case studies of individuals from Year 10 through to graduation, which is particularly useful because of the relative dearth of longitudinal qualitative approaches to school/university transition experiences.

Although research findings to this point are based on limited numbers of respondents/informants and should be taken with caution, there is already evidence of common issues emerging from a variety of sources. Some of these are outlined below and relate to the experience and consequences of leaving home to attend university.

Financial costs of leaving home

The cost of living away from home is emerging as a strong concern amongst rural school students, their teachers and parents, as well as deferring and first year university students. A majority of students (67% where n=67) attending the two Year 10 Orientation programs in 2009 indicated they were concerned about the costs of living away from home if they attended university. 80% of students were concerned about the cost of university fees. Teachers accompanying the students also stressed in the focus group conversations that the costs of relocating and living independently, and the impact of this expense on families, was a major concern for students who were contemplating attending university. Their interpretation was that students were most concerned about imposing those costs on their families.

In interviews with first year students, cost was raised as a major concern, either explicitly or by implication in comments interspersed through the conversations. Students indicated that the cost of moving to Adelaide was a strong concern for families and could be 'a source of conflict' for some. Students were 'shocked' at how much things cost, finding 'necessary things' very expensive. Scholarships are an essential source of financial support for students in these circumstances. Those students who had deferred to work to qualify for independent Youth Allowance said they were dipping 'into savings' to make ends meet, while others were working part time to increase their funds.

The survey results of students deferring study in 2009 also indicated the impact of the impending costs of relocation on the decision of rural students to defer. 82% of rural respondents deferred in order to earn money to support themselves at university, compared with 36% of non-rural students and 78% of rural respondents deferred in order to earn money to qualify for independent youth allowance, compared with 18% of non-rural students.

Social costs of leaving home

Data collected from different sources also demonstrated the extent to which rural students experience social disruption when they leave home to live independently. The prospect of leaving families and friends was a prominent concern for Year 10 students and first year university students also referred to being extremely homesick, missing parents, and wondering how difficult it would be to 'make' it through their course. The degree of homesickness was, to some extent, contingent on living arrangements, with those in shared rental accommodation expressing a greater sense of dislocation than those in residential accommodation. The significance of these differences will be important to trace over the life of the project.

Other difficulties faced by first year students related to living independently for the first time and having to balance study with 'grocery shopping, cooking, cleaning'. Losing long term friendships and sporting networks was also an issue. Mention was made of how intimidating it can be to try to 'slip into' already formed 'big groups that went to school together' and of how difficult it was to find simple information such as the locations and membership rules of social sporting clubs.

Academic challenges

Finally, first year students spoke about the academic challenges of making the transition from school to university. They found university study very different to school, where they had very small classes and enjoyed close attention and friendship from teachers in their schools. As well as fitting study into their new independent living responsibilities, they found they had to take more responsibility for study routines and needed to manage with less guidance from lecturers and tutors. Not having friends or peers they could turn to for help made understanding assignments and online study processes especially difficult in the early stages of the year.

Conclusion

Despite the difficulties rural students anticipate and experience, over two thirds of the Year 10 students want to go to University and believe they will enjoy it. Despite the challenge, first year students also enjoy their new independence, city lifestyle and new friends. In dwelling on the concerns there is no suggestion that rural students cannot overcome these issues; rather that they are faced with particular challenges that are not universal and could be better understood by academic staff and better mediated through government and institutional policies. A fitting way to end this paper is with a comment from a first year student who said: 'there's more to it than just coming to study. It's a life experience'.

References

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