Factors impacting on student aspirations and expectations in regional Australia

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Disclaimer
In all cases, personal names used in quotations in this report are fictitious.

Dedication
Pam Gilbert (1946-2002)
An activist educator, an educational reformer, an inspirational scholar, and other heart-felt epithets too personal to mention.

Nola, Rob and Sandy.
Chapter 1

Factors Impacting On Student Aspirations and Expectations in Regional Australia:

Introduction
This report provides a detailed coverage of research on *Factors impacting on student aspirations and expectations in regional Australia* that was contracted and funded by the Department of Education, Science and Training (2002). Within the terms of the contract, the term ‘regional’ referred to regional, rural and remote areas of Australia and is used in this way in this report.

Quite specifically, the study set out to:

- Provide a better understanding of the aspirations and expectations of students in regional areas of Australia
- Identify the underlying factors that drive those aspirations and expectations, in particular, any factors differentiating the aspirations and expectations of students in regional areas from those of their urban counterparts – the ‘rurality’ factor(s)
- Identify barriers that might hinder students’ pursuit of their aspirations, and
- Identify strategies that have proven effective in enhancing and sustaining the aspirations and expectations of students in regional areas.

This first chapter provides a framework for understanding why, where and how the study was conducted and the problems that were faced in achieving its goals. The chapters that follow provide a more detailed understanding about issues related to rurality and schooling and student aspirations and expectations for their futures.

**The rationale for the study**

This study was funded in recognition that rural disadvantage is a major concern for Australia as a nation. Young people in rural and remote areas are often more vulnerable to the impact of economic restructuring and the education-hungry global economic environment (Kenyon, Sercombe, Black and Lhuede, 2001: p.1), and more vulnerable to the shifting demographics and community restructurings of the Australian economy (Ainley and McKenzie, 1999; Spierings, 2001). This vulnerability is compounded by the educational disadvantage young people in regional Australia often experience: in access (both to schools and reasonable curriculum choice, to a stable and capable teaching force, to higher education programmes, to TAFE courses, and to other training programmes), and in the
employment and training opportunities available in the move from school to adult life (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission [HREOC], 1999, 2000a).

Studies into students’ educational pathways have identified a range of contributing factors, including the interaction between rural location and socioeconomic status, gender, the quality of the school experience, and the cost of overcoming the tyranny of distance (Alloway and Gilbert, 2001; James et al 1999; Kenyon et al, 2001). However, Marks, Fleming, Long and McMillan (2000) have shown that the role of attitudes, motivations and aspirations is just as influential, and their work points to the need for research which considers the narratives young people use when they imagine and aspire to particular futures and pathways.

The Higher Education Council (James et al, 1999, p. i) has also indicated the significance of “local social and cultural networks and values” in post-school pathways, claiming that “aspirations for higher education . . . are influenced by a subtle web of interwoven characteristics including the collective values of the local community culture” (p. ii). The Council noted that there had been little research into “attitudinal factors influencing student choice among population subgroups” (p. 13). In fact, the use of single categories of rurality or isolation in large scale studies has meant an almost complete dearth of studies which might capture any local community variations in these cultural influences.

This report presents the results of a series of focus group interviews that sought to address these issues. By interviewing students, teachers and parents, the study aimed to give voice to the experience of people in regional areas – their aspirations and expectations, and the webs of discourses and narratives within which these views of the future are formed. The following sections provide detailed information about the interview locations, about where and how the interviews were conducted.

**Interview locations**

A significant problem for research into regional and rural education has been the failure to focus on the diversity of contexts in these areas, with many studies regarding as comparable any community which is non-metropolitan. This study aimed
to capture the diversity of regional communities, and the sites were selected accordingly.

The study garnered the voices of young adults and others from 15 different communities across the country. The sites ranged from Broome, Katherine and Cloncurry in the north, to Burnie, Mt Gambier and Sale in the south; from Biloela, Tamworth and Young in the east, to Karratha in the west; and from Cloncurry with a population of 3000 to Melbourne, with a population of over 3 million. Thirteen regional research sites were drawn from all States and Territories (except the ACT) and were chosen to produce a mix on a range of criteria which are outlined below. In addition, the project included 2 metropolitan sites in Melbourne, to provide points of comparison with the regional sites.

Selection criteria included:

- **State coverage**: The selection of sites ensured input to the study from all States and Territories, except the ACT.
- **Population size**: The sites included a range of small to medium sized towns and their hinterlands, as well as a large metropolitan city.
- **Accessibility/Remoteness**: Sites were selected to reflect the range of degrees of accessibility/ remoteness, using the Accessibility/ Remoteness Index of Australia from the Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care. The list of proposed sites includes locations across the range of ARIA categories from Highly Accessible (0-1.84) to Very Remote (9.08-12).
- **Settlement type**: Sites were selected to represent a variety of settlement types which have been shown to indicate differences in the experiences of young people (Kenyon et al., 2001), i.e. coastal strip or closely settled areas, traditional inland agricultural communities, and remote regional or mining communities.
- **Impact of socioeconomic change**: Stimson and Baum (2001) have presented an analysis which identifies the impact of socioeconomic change on regional communities in terms of work and industry, household and demographic structure and public policy and investment. They identified a series of clusters of communities which can be distinguished on a continuum of opportunity to vulnerability. To capture the diversity of the dynamics of socioeconomic change
and its likely relevance to young people's aspirations, sites have been selected to represent both sides of this continuum.

The original research proposal included a plan for 16 sites selected on these grounds. In the event, three sites originally identified for the project were excluded, as the schools in those sites were unable to accommodate the research as a result of pressures of time and other demands on staff. From the list of sites originally proposed, schools in Hughenden, Kalgoorlie and Albany indicated that they were unable to assist the project. Alternative sites were found in Cloncurry and Karratha, providing a total of 15 sites.

The resulting list of communities is provided in Table 1.1 on the following page, and the distribution shown on the accompanying map.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City or town</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>ARIA score</th>
<th>Opportunity/Vulnerability</th>
<th>Settlement type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cloncurry, Qld</td>
<td>4800</td>
<td>8.22</td>
<td>Not available</td>
<td>Remote</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biloela, Qld*</td>
<td>5100</td>
<td>2.72</td>
<td>Vulnerable</td>
<td>Inland agricultural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tamworth, NSW</td>
<td>35500</td>
<td>1.71</td>
<td>Opportunity</td>
<td>Coastal rural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young, NSW</td>
<td>11300</td>
<td>2.02</td>
<td>Vulnerable</td>
<td>Inland agricultural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broken Hill NSW</td>
<td>20400</td>
<td>3.24</td>
<td>Vulnerable</td>
<td>Remote</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moe, Vic.</td>
<td>17600</td>
<td>1.10</td>
<td>Vulnerable</td>
<td>Coastal rural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sale, Vic.</td>
<td>12900</td>
<td>1.76</td>
<td>Opportunity</td>
<td>Coastal rural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burnie, Tas.</td>
<td>18100</td>
<td>2.08</td>
<td>Vulnerable</td>
<td>Coastal rural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mt Gambier, SA</td>
<td>22800</td>
<td>2.24</td>
<td>Opportunity</td>
<td>Coastal rural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whyalla, SA</td>
<td>21600</td>
<td>2.45</td>
<td>Vulnerable</td>
<td>Remote</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broome, WA</td>
<td>18500</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Opportunity</td>
<td>Remote</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karratha, WA*</td>
<td>11000</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Opportunity</td>
<td>Remote</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katherine, NT</td>
<td>10000</td>
<td>6.75</td>
<td>Opportunity</td>
<td>Remote</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melbourne, Vic*</td>
<td>3, 138, 000</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Not available</td>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 1.1: Research sites and characteristics**

Note: Figures are Statistical Local Area totals from the ABS 2001 Census, except for asterisked locations, which are approximations based on other government sources.
Map 1: Location of research sites

Interview group creation and composition

The research proposal pointed out that aspirations and expectations are formed over a considerable period of time. Two key points for students are at the end of compulsory schooling (Year 10 in most States), where decisions about continuing to Year 12 will crystallize, and the end of Year 12, where participation in work or further or higher education will be at issue. Students in both year groups were to be interviewed, and their views of their past experience and future opportunities obtained.
In communities where numbers and types of schools allowed, student interviews were to be conducted in two schools to include State and Catholic or Independent schools. The Longitudinal Studies of Australian Youth have noted the influence of school type on student outcomes (see, for example, Marks, McMillan, Hillman, 2001). Consequently the study sought to include (where possible) both State and non-State schools in the sites selected. In sites where only one school was available, interviews were to be held with two groups in each of the two year levels (4 groups per school). In sites where two schools were involved, interviews were to be conducted with one group from each year level. The total number of student groups was to be 64. Each focus group was to include between 6 and 8 students – the standard number for work of this complex nature (Krueger and Casey, 2000).

Given that young adults can be influenced by the gender composition of interview groups (see discussion in Gilbert and Gilbert, 1998), it was proposed to use a variety of gender groupings for the project. The selection of groups across the sites aimed to produce a balance of all male groups, all female groups and mixed sex groups. Selection of groups also ensured inclusion of Indigenous students. In sites with significant numbers of Indigenous students, additional focus group interviews were sought with these students. In addition, there were to be one parent and one teacher focus group interview at each site, involving teachers and parents of students in both year levels.

The complexities of negotiating suitable times with schools and the tight timelines involved made it impossible to fulfil all these parameters for interview group selection. In particular, schools found it especially difficult to recruit and schedule parents to participate in the interviews. This was a cause for concern for the research team, but there was little that could be done. An attempt was made to canvas parents’ views through a short open-ended questionnaire inviting parents to comment on the issues of the study. (See Appendix 1.) In schools where parent interviews could not be arranged, schools were asked to distribute these invitations to comment, and to ask parents to return them to the school. Again, however, the response was disappointing. A total of eighteen parent replies were received from four schools.
Another problem was that the demands on student time (especially the varying end of the year examination schedules for final year students) meant that it was not possible to interview Year 12 students in all schools. Where this occurred, Year 11 students were substituted, reducing to some extent the effectiveness of the comparison on the two decision points at Years 10 and 12. Similar scheduling difficulties meant that schools found it difficult to arrange separate male and female groups. It was less disruptive to organise mixed groups, and these became the predominant interview format.

Another minor variation was that the difficulties of scheduling interviews with groups of teachers meant that individual interviews with teachers were held in some sites.

Despite these qualifications, the resulting corpus of interviews comprised a very large, diverse and informative data base. The interviews provided an excellent and rare opportunity to identify and analyse the aspirations and expectations of young people and significant others in a range of regional locations.

Details of the interview groups are shown in Table 1.2 on the following page.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Interview groups and survey responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Biloela</td>
<td>State: 1 Year 10 mixed, 1 Year 11 mixed, 1 guidance officer, 1 dep. Principal, 1 teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cloncurry</td>
<td>State: 1 Year 10 boys, 1 Year 10 girls, 1 Year 11 mixed, 1 Indigenous group, 1 teacher group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broken Hill</td>
<td>State: 1 Year 10 mixed, 1 Year 11 mixed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tamworth</td>
<td>State: 1 Year 10 mixed, 1 Year 11 mixed, 1 teacher group, 1 parent survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Indep.: 1 Year 10 mixed, 1 Year 11 mixed, 1 teacher group, 8 parent surveys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young</td>
<td>State: 1 Year 11 mixed, 1 teacher group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Indep.: 1 Year 12 mixed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mt Gambier</td>
<td>State: 1 Year 11 mixed, 1 Year 12 mixed, 8 parent surveys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Indep.: 1 Year 12 mixed, 1 teacher group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whyalla</td>
<td>State (2): 1 Year 12 mixed, 1 Year 13 mixed, 2 Year 10 mixed, 1 counsellor, 1 tchr/librarian, 1 teacher, 2 dep. principals, 1 principal, 1 parent, 1 parent survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katherine</td>
<td>State: 1 Year 10 mixed, 1 Indigenous group, 1 teacher group, 1 parent group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Indep.: 1 principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other: Boarding hostel staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broome</td>
<td>State: 1 Year 10 boys, 1 Year 10 girls, 1 Year 11 mixed, 1 dep. Principal, 2 teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karratha</td>
<td>State: 1 Year 10 mixed, 1 Year 11 mixed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location</td>
<td>State/Independent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>-------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burnie</td>
<td>State:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moe</td>
<td>State:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sale</td>
<td>State:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Indep.:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melbourne</td>
<td>2 State:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1.2: Completed interviews by type and location

This range of interviews produced the following overall pattern in the data.

**Interview Breakdown**

- **Students**
  - Boys: 2
  - Girls: 2
  - Mixed: 37
  - Indigenous: 3
  - Total Yr 10: 17
  - Total Yr 11-13: 23

- **Teachers (individual and group)**: 23
- **Parents (individual and group)**: 3
- **Parent survey responses**: 18
- **Other**: 1
- **Total State**: 61
- **Total Independent**: 10

**Overall total interviews**: 72
Materials and questions used

The research proposal argued that students' aspirations and expectations are developed continuously over the life course, and are based on a range of considerations, including:

- beliefs about their own aptitudes and abilities,
- their developing sense of themselves as people and the interests which they perceive as relevant to that image (including cultural and gender identities),
- their knowledge and beliefs about available opportunities and constraints, either in their communities or elsewhere (and how they assess their potential mobility in accessing them), and
- the suggestions and support provided by significant others in their families, schools and broader social networks.

The last three of these were considered to be particularly relevant to the possibility of a distinctive 'rurality' factor in explaining rural-urban differences in aspirations and expectations.

These issues generated the following research questions:

*What does it mean to grow up in particular communities as a young man, or as a young woman? What expectations and aspirations are developed? What expectations and aspirations are less readily available? How do schooling experiences influence these expectations and aspirations?*

*How is a future imagined and constructed? How do various community expectations and lived realities contribute to these imagined futures?*

*What narratives and explanations are most commonly drawn upon to organise and articulate experience? What narratives are edited out, or silenced, in the articulation and explanation of the past, the present and the future?*
To answer these questions, the research plan designed the focus group interviews to identify students', parents' and teachers' views about aspirations and expectations for educational participation and outcomes, and the influences on them.

The interviews were semi-structured and interactive, with open-ended questions aimed to provide as much scope as possible for respondents to identify significant issues. The interviews were therefore flexible and negotiated in the course of the group interactions in each site. However, the overarching interview schedule which guided the research was as follows:

- **Growing up in this community.**
  - How is life here different?
  - What special experiences do young men and young women have here which will be important in influencing their future?
  - What are students’ experiences of leisure, part time work, family responsibilities, etc.?
  - How do these activities relate to their involvement in school?
  - What are their experiences of school?

- **Future destinations.**
  - What options for future life and work do most young men and young women imagine?
  - How does the issue of staying or leaving the district figure in this?
  - What role does education play in these futures?
  - What major considerations influence decisions about continuing education?

- **The school-community relationship.**
  - How do friends, parents and community members regard the school?
  - How important or highly valued is education/ the school in the local community?
  - Are there different expectations/ aspirations for young men and young women?

This list was further developed into a set of guidelines to ensure that the interactions were following a consistent set of interests and interpretations. These guidelines,
which were used by the project team during the interviews, are presented in Appendix 2.

Interviews were arranged by school personnel and conducted primarily on the school sites. Interviews ranged from approximately 30 minutes in length to over an hour and a half, and were tape recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Problems encountered in conducting the interviews

The research design for this project was complex, involving 15 locations around Australia, 20 schools, and hundreds of participants. Seven different education authorities were also involved in authorising the research.

It was probably inevitable that such a complex design would face difficulties, but some of the problems encountered were a serious threat to the research design, and required very time consuming and urgent remedy from members of the research team. Despite this, some of the problems were insurmountable. In the hope that these obstacles can be prevented, and that other research projects may be spared these problems, they are listed here along with recommendations for their solution.

1. Delays in receiving research approval from education authorities.

The research team was advised that contact with schools needed to be arranged through the relevant section of the various State Departments or Ministries. DEST staff involved in the project undertook to arrange letters of introduction to the relevant State personnel. The intention of this arrangement was to facilitate access to schools and the requirements of the various systems for research approval. In the event, the responses from the States varied considerably. For two states, the letter and the information on the project supplied were sufficient for immediate approval. For two others, approval was granted on this basis but only after considerable delay. Two States required a completely new application process, despite the fact that the research had been approved by MCEETYA; this resulted in further delay. The difficulties in gaining approval to work in the State systems was a serious hindrance to the research, since the research team was unable to approach schools until these
bureaucratic hurdles had been overcome. The result was that by the time we were authorised to approach schools in some States, much time had been lost, and the research ran foul of the demands and disruptions which confront schools in the last term of school. Problems which followed included: year 12 students were unavailable in many sites; since there was less time to choose sites which met the design parameters, it became necessary to visit the first available school; there was little time to find alternative sites when the originally proposed site was unable to cooperate in the study; schools had less time to arrange for the research visits than they would otherwise have had.

State authorities clearly have a right to expect that research in their schools will meet certain standards. However, it might be thought that the process would be easier in the case of projects which had already been approved by MCEETYA. The different requirements across the States and Territories further complicate the process. Some consideration needs to be given to how this process can be facilitated.

2. Difficulties in accessing schools.

Schools are busy places, and research projects such as this one can appear to be of marginal relevance to the daily demands of school life. The research team met with excellent cooperation from the majority of schools, and is indebted to many school personnel for the hours spent in organising and participating in the research. In the great majority of cases, preparations at the school level were prompt, expert and cordial. However, in some schools initial approaches were met with a distinctly jaundiced view that research was intrusive and distracting. Some schools simply said they didn't have time; others said that they had been host to too many research projects in recent times. To some extent, these difficulties may have been exacerbated by the short timelines previously mentioned. While the solution to this problem is obviously not a simple one, it occurred sufficiently frequently to be a real obstacle to the study, and warrants consideration by bodies such as MCEETYA and its constituent authorities who commission such research.
3. Parent involvement

The difficulty in gaining parental input into the research has already been mentioned, but it was the main aspect of the research plan which was not successfully achieved. Schools were apologetic at being unable to arrange parent interviews, but spoke as if this was not unusual, and said there was little they could do about it. It is impossible to tell if this issue is particularly related to the regional locations of the study, but if it reflects parent interest in schooling, it is a cause for concern.

Conclusion

The field work based on the research design outlined here was conducted on short timelines, and relied on the goodwill and professionalism of many school administrators, teachers and parents, as well as the young people themselves. The researchers greatly appreciate the assistance and cooperation provided. The report that follows tries to capture much of this spirit, and is dedicated to these people of regional Australia.

The chapters that ensue have been designed specifically to meet the requirements of the contract research. What follows in Chapter 2 is a three-part focus on literature that operates as a background to this study, namely: a critical review and analysis of relevant literature; a systematic review and analysis of available statistical data on related topics; and a comprehensive survey of strategies that were found in the literature to support student aspirations and expectations for their futures. Thereafter there follows a series of chapters covering the findings of the study related to its major foci, namely: the nature of young people's aspirations and expectations (Chapter 3); factors that influence student aspirations and expectations (Chapters 4 and 5); obstacles students are likely to confront in realising their aspirations (Chapter 6); and strategies identified in the field that may offer valuable models for further investigation of how student aspirations and expectations might be enhanced and sustained (Chapter 7).

Finally, Chapter 8 provides a summary statement, a number of conclusions, and a set of recommendations as drawn from the research. Importantly, the limitations of the
study are identified in Chapter 8. The final chapter also offers a reasoned response to the question of whether there was a distinctive ‘rurality’ factor at play that might differentiate the expectations and aspirations of students in regional areas from those of their urban counterparts.
Chapter 2

Review of Literature
The DEST consultancy contract for this project requested three specific aspects of a literature review: a coverage of existing research literature relevant to the consultancy objectives identified in Chapter 1; a systematic review and interpretation of available statistical data related to the topic; and a review of strategies that have proven to be successful in enhancing and supporting student aspirations and expectations for their futures. In response to the requirements of the consultancy contract this chapter provides a review of literature and, for ease of reference, is set out in three parts as follows:

Part A: A review of literature contextualising the research field.

Part B: An analysis of data relevant to the research question.

Part C: A review of strategies pertaining to the research topic.
PART A

The Research Context
Introduction
Part A of this report provides a survey of literature that both directly and indirectly contextualises the project’s aim of examining factors impacting on student aspirations and expectations in regional Australia. Particular attention has been paid to key issues for the project, including definitions and theorisations of rurality; educational difficulties faced by rural communities; ways of conceptualising and describing youth ‘transitions’ from school to adult life; issues affecting young people’s post-school decision-making; and the way in which particular factors influence the formation of rural students’ aspirations and expectations.

Throughout this process, attention has been paid to identifying studies that listened to the voices of young adults – through surveys, interviews and questionnaires – and to considering how ‘rurality’ and location affected young people’s aspirations and expectations. Studies drawing upon both national and international research have been used.

Rurality
James et al (1999, p.5) have noted that the definition and measurement of rurality is “notoriously difficult” and most of the studies investigating the effect of rurality on student aspirations, expectations and achievement, make similar claims (see, for example, Looker and Dwyer, 1998a; Henry, 1998; McMillan and Durrington, 1998; Wyn, Stokes and Stafford, 1998). Looker and Dwyer (1998a) have observed, for example, that “there is surprisingly little attention paid to the conceptualisation of ‘rurality’”(p.9), and in many studies, ‘rural’ is predominantly used as a synonym for ‘non-metro’. Henry (1998), for instance, has made the point that the New South Wales Department of Education defines rural schooling as that which takes place anywhere outside the metropolitan area – a category so broad that it effectively includes approximately 42% of the students in government schools (1998, p.401).

The uniquely remote nature of many Australian rural communities, and their low density of population, make them very different from rural communities in Europe, North America or almost any other industrialised country. In addition, as Kenyon et al (2001) have noted, the diversity of rural Australia is quite remarkable. Rural Australia
can include farming areas, agricultural and pastoral service centre areas, mining
towns, coastal resorts, remote Aboriginal communities and stations, isolated islands,
alternative communities, wilderness and desert areas, and major regional centres. Given this, the concepts of rural, remote, non-metropolitan and the ‘outback’ have specific meanings in the Australian context, and, as Kenyon et al observe, “often differ from those used in other countries” (2001, p.4).

As a result of national differences in definitions, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has proposed a working definition based on the primary criterion of population density. Within this definition, rural areas have no more than 150 inhabitants per square kilometre. In Australia, federal government departments often use other definitions, where rural applies to areas outside of metropolitan cities - and includes cities with fewer than 100,000 residents - and remoteness is conceptualised in terms of those areas where there is both a low population density and long distances to large populations (Kenyon et al, 2001, p.4)

Geographical measures have, however, tended to predominate in definitions of rurality, largely because of the ease with which they can be used. For instance, the rurality scale now used by the Australian Bureau of Statistics - the ARIA scale - is a geographical scale developed by the Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care (2001). The Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA) calculates remoteness as accessibility to some 201 service centres, based on road distances. ARIA values have been grouped into five categories:

- **Highly Accessible**: Relatively unrestricted accessibility to a wide range of goods and services and opportunities for social interaction.
- **Accessible**: Some restrictions to accessibility of some goods, services and opportunities for social interaction.
- **Moderately Accessible**: Significantly restricted accessibility of goods, services and opportunities for social interaction.
- **Remote**: Very restricted accessibility of goods, services and opportunities for social interaction.
- **Very Remote**: Very little accessibility of goods, services and opportunities for social interaction.
ARIA was designed to be an “unambiguously geographical approach to defining remoteness” (Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care, 2001, p.3). Socio-economic, urban/rural and population size factors were not considered for incorporation into the measure, although the potential for doing so has been shown by the work of Stimson and Baum (2001). Stimson and Baum have presented an analysis of regional communities that identifies the impact of socio-economic change in terms of work and industry, household and demographic structure and public policy and investment. Their work identified a series of clusters of communities that can be distinguished on a continuum of opportunity to vulnerability – thereby acknowledging the differences between communities, despite their geographical similarities.

On the whole, however, most measures of rurality within educational studies, have tended to rely upon relatively simple and straightforward measures: the size of place in which the student lives; the population density of the Census district or the postcode of the student’s residence, or simply distinguishing between metropolitan and non-metropolitan students (Marks, Fleming, Long and McMillan, 2000, p.22).

**Definitions of ‘rurality’**

An interesting discussion of the variety of ways in which rurality has been defined and discussed, has been provided by Western, McMillan and Durrington (1998). Western et al reviewed definitions of ‘rural’, and suggested that there were four broad types of definitions commonly in use: social representational definitions; descriptive definitions; sociocultural definitions; and definitions based around theories of political economy.

**Social representational definitions:** Western et al suggested that definitions like these were likely to fall into the trap of stereotyping ‘the country’. They claimed that such definitions often demonstrated the ways in which rurality had been stereotyped and constructed, predominantly through the stories and narratives of popular television and movies, popular fiction, music and clothing styles. For example, within these definitions, ‘rural’ became synonymous with farming, with agriculture, and with ‘the country’ – an association which, as Sher and Sher (1994) have clearly documented, is heavily romanticised and mythological – and usually far from accurate. Sher and
Sher have demonstrated that the vast majority of Australia’s rural communities, for example, have their economic foundation in something other than farming: and that no more than 17% of rural Australians are farmers (1994, p.11).

In Australia, this concept is often quite unrealistic, in that it is not inclusive of the major occupations and industries currently found in rural areas. As Western et al have suggested, a more representative occupational definition would need to draw upon a range of industries: to accommodate other primary industries, as well as the variety of additional industries and occupations increasingly becoming associated with rural areas, such as transport, recreation and tourism industries.

_Descriptive definitions:_ Rurality may also be defined from a descriptive or ecological orientation – where spatial measures, such as distance factors and population density, and economic activities can be included. Postcode regions are commonly used to indicate rurality, as are Census Collection Districts. Within this group of definitions, distinctions are often drawn between urban, rural and remote locations in terms of population size as well as distance from major centres – and, within educational contexts, distance from higher education institutions is often a critical factor. The James et al (1999) study, for instance, used the postcode of students’ permanent home address, as self-reported for the annual statistical data collection of the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, to calculate students’ geographic status as urban, rural or isolated. Rurality and isolation were also assessed on population density and distance from provincial centres – notably centres that had higher education institutions. Using Western et al’s model (1998), James et al worked with four classifications:

- low access (more than 300 kms to a university)
- medium access (151 – 300 kms to a university)
- high access / rural (less than 150 kms to a university and home postcode classified as rural)
- high access/ urban (less than 150 kms to a university and home postcode classified as urban) (1999, p. 15).

_Sociocultural definitions:_ Sociocultural definitions focus predominantly upon the social structures and cultures of rural residents: the values and behavioural attributes
of people who live in rural and isolated areas. Rural Australians, as Western et al (1998) note, have often been characterised by particular sociocultural features, such as traditional values, close personal ties based on friendship and kinship, consensus and informality (p.44). As Henry (1998) has observed:

There is little dispute about what the concept ‘rural’ means to the ordinary Australian, though it is an image embellished and bolstered by romantic ideology. Rural people, according to traditional wisdom, are set apart by their different world view … Country people, with their old-fashioned charm and conservatism, supposedly avoid the pitfalls of urban life. Geographical isolation is given as a reason for each community to develop an incredibly strong sense of friendship and loyalty. (p.401)

The potential danger of stereotyping ‘rural’ in this way, is that expectations might then be made about rural students: about their interests, their intelligence, their aptitude for academic, theoretical work. Teachers, for instance, might fall into the trap of assuming there are identifiable sociocultural features of rural students that mark them out as different from ‘urban’ students.

However, on the other hand, Looker and Dwyer (1998a) have pointed to the advantages of identifying the social characteristics of communities, in terms of identifying differences between rural and urban areas, and understanding what it might mean for rural youth to have to leave their rural communities in search of employment, or to enrol in education and training programmes. They have suggested that the social networks that exist in rural areas are an important characteristic of difference between rural and urban life.

What makes a rural community different from an urban sub-community is access to resources. Rural communities are often portrayed in terms of what they lack – particularly access to various private and public facilities. It is important to recognise that there are other resources that rural communities are more likely than urban communities to have. These include some ‘pastoral’ physical characteristics – space and isolation …, possibly cleaner water and air. Community and family identification with ‘place’ may also be different in rural areas … (R)ural areas are also more likely to have long-standing family ties to the community. (p.10)
Looker and Dwyer emphasise that rurality is not a constant – that it means different things in different social and historical contexts – but their work indicates that sociocultural factors play an important role in differentiating rural life from urban life.

**Political economy as a base for definitions:** Debates about ‘rurality’ have sometimes rejected a rural-urban distinction, and argued instead that the important concept is socio-economic status, not rurality. Within this particular definition, social and economic problems are seen to stem from underlying inequalities of wealth and power in environments.

Consequently, a distinction between urban and rural contexts is not seen to be particularly relevant or helpful in understanding differential attainment, access, power or economic success. Young people’s socio-economic status is considered to be a more powerful predictor of success at school, and of aspirations towards post-school education and training, than is their geographical location. For instance, the Senior Secondary Assessment Board of South Australia, in a study of early school leavers (1999), claimed that “the causes [of early school-leaving] could be as easily attributable to socio-economic status of the regions as to their geographic location” (p.38). This position has been a frequent topic of debate and discussion, and studies of rural students’ educational aspirations frequently collect data about the students’ socio-economic status as well as their rurality (as in, for example, James et al, 1999).

After reviewing these four broad approaches to defining and classifying rurality, Western et al (1998) concluded that, for educational purposes, definitions of rurality which incorporate elements of the descriptive approach – and take account of the economic factors incorporated within political economy models – are likely to be the most productive and most accessible. They noted the importance of physical distance as a factor affecting participation in higher education, for instance, and how the cost of travel to and from higher education institutions is obviously much higher for rural and isolated students than for urban students. There are also likely to be schooling barriers that impact in educational ways. Rural schools may well have inadequate support services and curricula choices, and rural students are less likely to stay on to the final years of secondary school, and therefore to meet the entry requirements of higher education institutions. Western et al noted that sociocultural factors, such as
the value rural families and communities place upon higher education, will also impact upon young people’s interest in and commitment to acquiring higher education, but they are, of course, more difficult to quantify.

**The Australian context: Countering myths and deficit discourses**

The way in which particular concepts of rurality have achieved prominence and authority within Australia has been the focus of a paper by Sher and Sher (1994). In this paper Sher and Sher have suggested that “Australia appears to be the quintessential example of a nation having dominant urban ‘planets’ orbited by numerous little rural ‘moons’”. (p.6). They have argued that this mental map of powerful urban centres and relatively powerless hinterland communities has guided the development of rural policies, and engendered sympathy for rural people and places. As a result, government initiatives have been predicated on a deficit model of Australian rurality. Initiatives aimed at overcoming or compensating for numerous perceived forms of rural ‘disadvantage’ have become dominant.

Sher and Sher (1994) have suggested that this concept of disadvantage has relied upon the circulation and acceptance of three myths about rural life.

*Myth 1:* Rural Australia and rural Australians are peripheral to the national interest, the national economy and the nation’s future.

*Myth 2:* Farmers and farming communities are the alpha and omega of rural Australia.

*Myth 3:* Whatever is best for the agricultural industry is the same as what is best for rural Australia and rural Australians as a whole.

In their paper, Sher and Sher unpacked each of these myths, indicating how each one needs to be reconceptualized in terms of a more realistic and factual appraisal of Australian life. By so doing, they offer a contribution to discussions about ‘rurality’ – particularly in terms of how rurality affects young people’s aspirations and expectations. How and why ‘rurality’ impacts upon young people’s lives is obviously a complex and contested field of inquiry. Reassessing the ways in which rural life has been mythologised and constructed in Australian debates offers an important initial framework for further analysis.
• **Myth 1: Rural Australia and rural Australians are peripheral to the national interest, the national economy and the nation’s future.**

Sher and Sher’s argument here is that, on the contrary, rural Australia and rural Australians are **central** to the national interest, the national economy and the nation’s future, and their arguments in support of this position include the following:

- Rural Australia is the source of food self-sufficiency for the entire nation.
- Rural Australia is the wellspring of national self-sufficiency in terms of virtually all other raw materials/natural resources.
- Rural Australia is the cornerstone of Australia’s export economy.
- Rural Australia is the foundation of a disproportionately high share of Australia’s economic assets and economically productive activity.
- Rural Australia is the safety valve taking pressure off the cities – and the preferred place for Australian city-dwellers seeking to change their residence.
- Rural Australia is the primary location of renewal and recreation for most Australians.
- Rural Australia is the touchstone of Australia’s international identity and cultural distinctiveness.

• **Myth 2: Farmers and farming communities are the alpha and omega of rural Australia.**

Sher and Sher’s objection to this ‘myth’, is that farmers are only a small fraction of Australia’s rural population: that the majority of rural people are not farmers.

Even the most generous interpretation of the data indicates that no more than 17% of rural Australians are farmers. (Sher and Sher, 1994, p.11)

The promulgation and circulation of this myth marginalises and obscures the vast number of Australians who live in rural communities. It hides their perspectives, their interests and their life styles, and glosses over the diversity and variety of rural areas within Australia.

• **Myth 3: Whatever is best for the agricultural industry is the same as what is best for rural Australia and rural Australians as a whole.**

Most rural communities have an economy based on something other than farming, and like Myth 2, this myth perpetuates the stereotype of farming and farmers being the archetype of the rural Australian.
Most rural people, like most urban dwellers, are employed in fairly universal, service occupations. (Sher and Sher, 1994, p.13)

The diversity of rural Australia needs to be better understood and appreciated in analyses of rural issues – particularly in analyses of the needs of young people living in rural and remote regions within Australia.

The Sher and Sher paper has provided an important precursor to discussion and debate about concepts and definitions of rurality. By forcing a reassessment of basic assumptions made about rural life and rural people, the paper urges a reconsideration of the distinctiveness of rurality, as well as its key features.

**Educational Difficulties Experienced by Rural Communities**

Young people raised in rural communities are under-represented in post-compulsory education (James et al, 1999; Lamb, Dwyer and Wyn, 2000) and over-represented in what Kilpatrick and Abbott-Chapman (2002) call “the most disadvantaged labour market group” – those who have not participated in post-school training and who have been unemployed for more than 25 percent of the time since leaving school (Ainley and McKenzie, 1999). Differential access to educational opportunity is a major concern for rural Australians, given that many rural and remote Australian localities lack local access to secondary education (especially in the senior secondary years), and post-school education and training usually requires students to relocate to larger urban centres.

Key educational difficulties many rural communities face are connected with issues of access, but there are also important financial issues involved, as well as issues to do with the quality of educational provision in rural areas. In addition, some rural Australians are not necessarily convinced of the value of post-compulsory education for their children – nor are they necessarily aware of the way in which changes in the world of work and in rural economies have given an added urgency to the need for young people to acquire skills and qualifications.

**Issues of Access**

The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission [HREOC] report, *Bush Talks*(1999) has documented community satisfaction levels with the full range of
educational provision – early childhood education, primary schooling and secondary schooling. While early childhood and pre-school education are not compulsory in all states and territories, the report has noted the importance for many remote community children to have access to early literacy programmes. National research studies have repeatedly documented the significance of literacy competence for all forms of educational success, as well as the way in which literacy competence has become an indicator of school completion, higher education entry and likely employability (Lamb, 1997; Lamb and McKenzie, 2001). Lack of access to early childhood education can be identified as a potential disadvantage for rural children, and as a factor likely to affect young people’s aspirations and expectations.

However the most obvious educational access problem for rural families lies in the difficulties of accessing satisfactory secondary education (HREOC, 2000a). Many rural towns have limited or no access to post-compulsory secondary education, and young Australians wishing to further pursue these levels of secondary education have either to spend considerable time travelling to the nearest high school centre, or relocating to boarding schools. Local high schools obviously struggle to provide a full curriculum range and to staff and resource this range. The HREOC (1999; 2000b) has again documented the extent of community dissatisfaction with current offerings – particularly noting the impact on Indigenous communities.

**Financial barriers**
The costs and practical difficulties associated with providing a full range of educational services in rural areas have been identified as a significant factor affecting young people’s educational aspirations. It is obviously costly for education systems to provide a full range of subject options, with a full range of experienced and specialist teachers, for rural and remote locations. The maintenance of science laboratories, specialist Arts and Music programmes, Language facilities, computer and information technology facilities, for instance, incurs significant cost and has required considerable planning and ingenuity (see discussion in MCEETYA, 2001). In addition, government financial support is required to maintain distance education, particularly in terms of subsidies to families who try to provide good support for children whose learning must predominantly occur in this way through their primary years (Kenyon et al, 2001, p.62).
The costs to families, however, are also a key issue to confront for rural education. Costs are incurred in the secondary years with travel to the nearest high school – or boarding school fees – but it is the costs incurred for higher education programmes, or training programmes, that are most substantial. Later sections of this report document the effect this has upon rural students and their families, where university study, for instance, is regarded as only for ‘rich kids’. The cost of further education and training is frequently documented as a major deterrent for rural young people and their families, and is a key factor influencing young people’s aspirations and expectations in the post-school years. (James et al, 1999; Collins, Kenway and McLeod, 2000; Looker and Dwyer, 1998a).

**Rural attitudes to education**

Kenyon et al (2001) have documented that few rural families have engaged in post-compulsory education, and even fewer have tertiary qualifications (p.34), and community attitudes to education in rural areas can be negative. Rural students are often convinced that their parents are not supportive of higher education and training – that they do not consider that there are advantages to be gained by their children going to university or acquiring post-school qualifications (James et al, 1999, p.xv).

Within rural communities, it is often difficult for young people to access contemporary information about university life, career options, training programmes, or to have access to role models within a variety of post-school education and training fields (Office of Youth Affairs, 1997; Lester, 2000; Kenyon et al, 2001). In addition, several studies have documented the anxiety many rural young people feel about relocation to larger urban areas given the lack of positive encouragement and advice often available within their communities (Kilpatrick and Abbott-Chapman, 2002; Ley et al, 1996).

**Recruiting and retaining quality teachers**

The difficulties of attracting, retaining and then providing continual professional development for rural teachers, has been frequently documented as a particular problem for rural education (MCEETYA, 2001; Kenyon et al, 2001; HREOC, 1999, 2000b). Many university education programmes do not necessarily prepare students
well for rural teaching, and the majority of university graduates do not have a rural background. Consequently, many teachers have little knowledge of life in rural communities, or of the particular issues they are likely to confront that are specific to teaching and learning in rural and remote Australian locations. In addition, the cost of working in rural locations, the lack of access to social and cultural amenities and resources, the isolation from colleagues, and the lack of opportunity to participate in professional forums and communities, can make rural teaching unattractive.

Yarrow, Ballantyne, Hansford, Herschel l and Millwater (1999) have provided a detailed and helpful research review of the difficulties associated with teaching in rural and remote schools. Their review has surveyed research on pre-service preparation, barriers to attraction and retention, and teacher perceptions of rural community life. They have documented the major barriers to the retention of teachers in rural and remote areas as:

- the desire or need to return ‘home’.
- professional advancement.
- dissatisfaction with teaching and or living in rural and remote areas.
- lack of appropriate initiatives to retain teaching personnel in rural and remote locations.
- the selection of teaching personnel for appointment to rural and remote areas. (Lunn, 1997, in Yarrow et al, 1999, p.6).

In addition, their review has identified the major barriers to the attraction of teachers in rural and remote areas.

- a negative perception of teaching as an attractive and viable career.
- the improved employment prospects in urban schools in time of teacher shortages, especially for subject specific and specialist teachers.
- the predominance of students from urban-suburban environments in teacher preparation courses.
- the personal and professional consideration of experienced teachers, particularly couples, residing in metropolitan or large provincial centres that dislocation to a rural or remote area incurs.
- the lack of personal and professional incentives to accept a teaching position in rural and remote areas. (Lunn, 1997, in Yarrow et al, 1999, p.6).
The Yarrow et al review has provided a clear overview of how difficult it is for teachers to consider rural teaching as an attractive option, but the review has also surveyed a range of studies that were designed to effect change. In particular, the review documents studies that have been aimed at improving understanding of rural communities and rural life, and at breaking down the ‘myths’ so often associated with such communities. The review has made the case that many rural teachers feel socially ‘dislocated’, and that community mentorships, and a closer study of the social and cultural practices of rural communities, would help to improve this ‘dislocation’.

**Student dissatisfaction with educational provision in rural areas**

Student and community dissatisfaction with the quality and availability of teachers, and of learning facilities and resources, have been constantly documented, and rural students have the highest rates of school non-completion in Australia (Lamb, Dwyer, and Wyn, 2000). Richer et al (1998) have reported on the dissatisfaction many Aboriginal students have, both with the teachers in rural schools, as well as with the inappropriateness of the curriculum – observations also noted by Mercurio and Clayton (2001). The Office of Youth Affairs (1997) has also described young people’s dissatisfaction with the educational provisions within country schools, and the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission report – *Bush Talks* (1999) – has listed many incidences of community dissatisfaction with educational provisions.

Undoubtedly young adults’ experiences of education in rural communities are often critical – although, as later aspects of this report will document, this is not necessarily uncommon for young Australians. Many young Australians are dissatisfied with their schooling experiences, although not necessarily for these same reasons. Rural young Australians, however, as James et al (1999) document, are more likely than urban students to experience barriers to schooling, such as high costs, forced social dislocation, inexperienced teachers, and narrow curriculum choice – and, in many cases, little family or community encouragement to continue with their education, and little help in negotiating and understanding the possibilities and opportunities available through higher education and training.
Transitions and Pathways: Post-School Decision-Making
Research on factors influencing young people’s aspirations and expectations has long been of national and international interest, and – in general terms – such research has focused on young people’s hopes and plans for their futures, most notably their educational and employment futures. Such studies have considered how various factors impact upon young people’s educational and employment aspirations – family factors, school factors, socio-economic factors, geographical factors, ethnicity factors, gender factors.

Recently, however, research work on the trajectories that young people take in the years once they leave school, has raised important questions about how young people make decisions about their futures. Important Australian work by Dwyer, Harwood and Tyler (1998; 1999) has developed several ‘typologies’ of transition which indicate that there are many different pathways that students take once they leave school – that young people’s aspirations and expectations do not necessarily fall narrowly into two basic trajectories of education and employment.

This change in post-school trajectories can be best understood as young people’s response to the changing social and economic world within which they now live out their lives. The reality for many young people is that ‘work’ is now differently conceptualised. Employment is certainly not guaranteed; jobs are likely to be casualised and part-time; unemployment is a reality; apprenticeships and job-training are difficult to obtain; and many students commence part-time work before they leave school (see, for instance, Curtain, 1999; Dusseldorp Skills Forum, 1999).

More is now understood of the rapidly changing world that young people inhabit, of the rapidly changing social and cultural frameworks, and of the ways in which these changes impact upon young people’s aspirations and expectations. Furlong and Cartmel (1997), for instance, have observed that the life experiences of young people have changed significantly over the last two decades: that relationships with friends and family, experiences in education and the labour market, leisure and lifestyles have undergone quite dramatic readjustments. They have argued that, as a result of changes like these, “young people today have to negotiate a set of risks which were largely unknown to their parents …” (p.1) – regardless of their social background or
their gender. Young people, Furlong and Cartmel have argued, enter a ‘risk society’, and their aspirations and expectations for the future have to be constructed from within new and constantly changing paradigms.

Furlong and Cartmel’s position has been supported by Abbott-Chapman (2000) who has argued that the pace of change and the multiple uncertainties of contemporary life have placed young adults in difficult and stressful situations which they are often unable to handle.

Instead of progression through the ‘lifecycle’ over time, between clearly distinguishable markers of youth and adulthood and the stages of the family cycle, young people are confronted, especially through the media, with uncharted pathways into an increasingly unknowable future … (2000: p.22)

Research on the transitions that young adults made, from their situations as students towards the establishment of their future career paths, had generally accepted a developmental image or model of transition “that assumed a predictable end-point defined in terms of arrival at or achievement of adult status” (Looker and Dwyer, 1998b, p.5). However changes in the social and economic conditions now confronting young people have called such a linear model into question, and made its limitations more obvious. Not only does a linear model fail to acknowledge the social dimensions of schooling, and the changing social and cultural practices of contemporary life, but it also focuses attention on only one particular subset of young people.

It implied a linear progression from school to work, whereby work was seen as the predictable end point of schooling, and the transition was often cast in male terms with the expectation that one moved from education into full-time and uninterrupted participation in the paid labour force. (1998b, p.8)

This linear model can be compared, as Furlong and Cartmel (1997) have suggested, to a railway journey. In a railway journey, destinations are pre-determined and passengers do not have to make decisions. The train cannot go off the tracks. However the journeys that today’s young adults are engaged upon are better compared with a car trip – where drivers can navigate and negotiate their own journey, choosing the roads they want, the speed they want, but aware, at the same
time, that individual skills and decisions are crucial to the determination of the outcomes, and the car that they commence their journey in will affect their journey’s ultimate outcome (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997, pp.6-7).

Looker and Dwyer’s research (1998b) has proposed that an appropriate model of student transition for today would need to be much broader than a linear model, and would need to address more fully the variations and changes within young people’s lives. Their suggestion is that researchers would need to cover at least the following five variations or patterns “both to incorporate and to extend the customary frameworks for analysis” (p. 13).

**Vocational**: Many young adults give priority to post-compulsory education – to obtaining a career - as a primary part of their transition to adulthood. This pattern is obviously still a central aspect of many young people’s transitions to adult life.

**Occupational**: Obtaining a job is central to many young people’s definitions of adulthood, and ‘work’ becomes a defining characteristic of adult life.

**Contextual**: Within a contextual framework, the influence of particular contexts on young adults’ decision-making is acknowledged. Choices that rural students, for instance, make, are related to the particular context within which they live.

**Altered**: This variation recognises that some young adults will change their plans and move in different directions – “but still with a sense of searching for something that can express or fulfil their image of themselves” (p.15).

**Mixed**: Some students are interested in varying their priorities as they move on in life. As Looker and Dwyer have described, these students “prefer to have a more complex or varied pattern to their lives rather than being narrowly defined as ‘students’ or confined to one life path. Variety, choice and a balance of commitments is the way they see their lives unfolding.”(p.15)

This five-fold typology was employed by Dwyer, Harwood and Tyler (1998) in their longitudinal work with young Australians. Dwyer, Harwood and Tyler followed approximately 30,000 young Australians who completed school in 1991. At the end of 1996, they analysed the life-patterns of a representative sample of almost 2000 of these young adults in terms of the transitions they had made in the intervening years. As can be seen from the data in Table 2.1, the largest group turned out to have followed a ‘Mixed Patterns’ variation. As Dwyer, Harwood and Tyler observed, as
many as 60% of the respondents did not follow the standard ‘linear’ – traditional - biographies associated with a vocational or occupational focus.

Table 2.1: Life Patterns of Respondents: 1996 – Dwyer, Harwood and Tyler (1998)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Life Patterns</th>
<th>Persons</th>
<th>Female %</th>
<th>Male %</th>
<th>Total %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vocational focus</td>
<td>519</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupational focus</td>
<td>254</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contextual focus</td>
<td>191</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Altered patterns</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed patterns</td>
<td>808</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,908</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This research has not only emphasised the multi-dimensional aspects of young adults’ lives, but also the necessity to move beyond work and study and to ensure that leisure and quality of life are given due consideration in an understanding of the aspirations and expectations young adults construct.

**Influences upon Young Adults’ Aspirations and Expectations**

This following section will briefly outline research that has addressed factors seen generally to affect the formation of aspirations and expectations of young people. It will then be followed by section 5, which considers the interaction between rurality and aspirations and expectations: a section which examines how the issues outlined below have particular significance for young people growing up in regional Australia.
Experiences of schooling

Young people’s aspirations to stay at school, and to continue with education once they leave school, have frequently been linked with their experiences of school. In a study of factors leading to under-age school leaving, Brooks et al (1997) have identified the following school-based issues as highly significant.

- Continual experiences of academic failure
- Schools not responsive to student needs
- Alienating school environment
- Poor student/teacher relations
- Disinterest in education
- Disruptive behaviour

(p.16)

Similar issues have been identified in research conducted by Gilbert and Gilbert (1995) with girls in regional North Queensland, by Trent and Slade (2001) in their South Australian research on boys’ disengagement with schooling, and in research conducted by Alloway and Gilbert (2001) on male school-leavers in regional North Queensland. Statements like these from the boys in Alloway and Gilbert’s research were common:

“By the time year 12 is over we are sick of school. Why spend another 3-5 years at school when you can get a job or apprenticeship and be earning money?” (2001, p.8)

Difficulties with school seem to be particularly significant factors for Indigenous young people. Questionnaire research from Richer et al (1998) in Western Australia has indicated that Aboriginal young people feel neglected by and uncomfortable with many of their teachers. In this research, the Aboriginal young people did not believe that teachers encouraged them or had high expectations of their educational futures. 42% of the students did not like their teacher, 37% believed that their teacher didn’t care about them, and 20% felt that their teachers ‘ganged’ up on them.

Poor experiences of school may also lead to a failure to acquire competent literacy and numeracy skills, a problem constantly identified within national research studies as a strong predictor of student school retention and participation (Lamb and
McKenzie, 2001). Experiences of schooling - both in terms of experiences of success with school assessment as well as successful encounters with teachers and peers - have commonly been identified as factors influencing young people’s attitudes towards continuing with further education (James et al, 1999; Mercurio and Clayton, 2001; Lamb, 1997; Marks and Fleming, 1999; Lamb, Dwyer and Wyn, 2000; Lamb and McKenzie, 2001).

Families
Research on aspirations and expectations has also examined the importance of young people’s families in planning for and constructing possible pathways for post-school lives. Maxwell et al (2000) have documented how family influence was the most important factor affecting students’ decisions to participate in VET programmes (p.8), and in a study of interpersonal influences and educational aspirations in 12 countries, Buchman and Dalton (2002) have reported on the significance of parents in shaping, guiding, and supporting this process.

Abbott-Chapman (2000) has also noted how important it is in contemporary times for young people to have a “safe haven”: a private ‘space in time’ where the pressures of modern life can be more successfully handled. For many young people with little or no money, this ‘safe haven’ can often be found – according to Abbott-Chapman - within the sanctuary of the family.

… we have found in our research, they [young people] seek the “safe haven” of home and family in order to mull everything over and to consult with trusted adults. … Family supports, both financial and emotional, continue to be very important for most young people … including support in finding and keeping a job. (2000, p. 23)

88% of respondents in Abbott-Chapman’s research indicated that their mother’s advice (and 76% their father’s) was important in making study and work decisions and in planning the future.

Mercurio and Clayton (2001, p. 103) have also provided evidence of the importance of family support for Aboriginal students aspiring to complete senior schooling.

Well, mum and dad firstly
Because they always had faith in me
They always knew I could pass and that ...  
Because I know she loves me.  
And I don’t know how I’ll be able to finish it  
And she’s going  
‘Well you’ve put in the hard yards there, you might as well put a bit more in!’  
They were always just nagging me about it and stuff  
But they really helped. (David)

However, as research by Brooks et al (1997) has demonstrated, family conflict and/or breakdown can have very negative effects on young people’s schooling aspirations. It can often account for why young people leave school, and why they do not aspire to higher education or training.

Ethnicity and race
The impact of ethnicity and race needs also to be considered in research on aspirations and expectations. In Australia, the low participation of Aboriginal students in post year 10 schooling, and in higher education and training, has been well documented (Yunupingu, 1995; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Unit, Education Queensland, 1998; Kenyon et al, 2001). Reasons for this have been tabled in research, with factors such as the domination of Eurocentric curricula, language difficulties and the absence of Indigenous role models emerging as highly significant (Kenyon et al, 2001).

However, as Kenyon et al (2001) have also noted, racism and prejudice emerge as important considerations impacting upon young Indigenous Australians’ aspirations and expectation for their futures – particularly in their access to education, training and employment (p. 41) (See also Richer et al, 1998). Lester’s work (2000) has demonstrated how strongly racism and racist perceptions and attitudes impact upon the educational and employment aspirations of Aboriginal young people.

Mercurio and Clayton (2001) have documented the success of working to shift these attitudes – both for young people and for their teachers – by having Aboriginal students and their teachers ‘imagine’ themselves as successful students and begin to act as if they were. Yowell (2000) has developed a similar approach to investigating improvement in educational aspirations for American Latino students, by considering
how theoretical and methodological approaches to future orientation and possible selves can be integrated. This study showed interesting differences between boys and girls, and, like many of the studies on educational expectations and aspirations, indicates the significance of gender as a social factor of importance.

**Gender**

Dwyer et al (1998) – in a research report of a longitudinal study of young Victorians planning to finish school in 1991 - observed that gender remained a key factor in determining education and career pathways. In follow-up interviews with the young people in 1997, 34% of the women claimed that the main reason for determining either their study or career pathways was their need to marry or plan for children. Dwyer et al reported that the consistent theme for these women was that education and career took second place, whereas young men had markedly different priorities. Only 9% of the male cohort mentioned marriage, and even then it did not have the dominating power that it clearly had for the women.

These strongly gendered differences in aspirations for the future have also been identified in young people’s schooling lives. Collins et al (2000) have argued that “there are indeed major gender differences in educational participation, performance and outcomes”(p.2) for young Australians, and their report considers when it is that these differences turn into disadvantages. They have considered ways in which particular social constructions of femininity and masculinity impact upon young people’s constructions of desirable futures and adult lives, and, implicitly, their behaviour in, and attitude to, school; the subject and curriculum choices they make; and their attitudes to higher education compared to the attraction of financial independence.

The Collins et al report has provided a clear overview of how young men and young women experience aspects of schooling differently, and have different aspirations and expectations about their futures as a result. However the report has also demonstrated that it is in the interaction with other social factors, that these differences may become disadvantages. Socio-economic status, along with location and Indigeneity, are powerful factors that work with gender to make significant differences to the aspirations and expectations that young Australians construct.
**Socio-economic factors**

Socio-economic factors have been frequently identified as a significant influence on young people’s post-school aspirations and expectations. Poverty and economic difficulties interact with other social factors to seriously influence young people’s hopes and plans and make it impossible for some young people to consider aspiring towards expensive pathways. Considerations of economic costs have weighed heavily for many young people: the cost of travelling to employment or training venues; the cost of living away from home; the cost of university or TAFE fees; the costs to families of a son or daughter as a student for several years. Many families clearly are not able to afford higher education aspirations for their children, or to support them to look for employment opportunities in different locations.

In a report for DETYA analysing the factors influencing the educational performance of males and females in school and their initial destinations after leaving school, Collins et al (2000) have documented the significance of socio-economic factors to other factors. Their report concluded that:

- SES and gender have a strong effect on Year 12 performance …
- SES makes a large difference to educational participation … Poverty is a major indicator of likely low participation and performance for both genders
- Some rural, remote and urban localities have high concentrations of poverty and disadvantage for both sexes … with rural males more negatively affected than rural females
- Differences in subject choice clusters between males and females intersect with socio-economic differences in participation and performance. The lower-middle (skilled) and highest SES (professional/managerial) groups have the greatest differences between male and female patterns and male students in these groups show the most traditional patterns for their SES backgrounds.
- Indigeneity intersects with poverty, locality and SES disadvantage to make the chances of poor schooling participation and performance extremely high for Indigenous students. (p. 4)
Similarly, the James et al (1999) study for the Higher Education Council documented how students from low socio-economic backgrounds were more likely to view cost as a deterrent or an obstacle to higher education aspirations.

*Uni! Unless your parents are rich you don’t have the opportunity to go there.*  
*(Year 10 student, Northern Victoria). (James et al, 1999, p.69)*

**The Rural Context and Young Adults’ Aspirations and Expectations**

These broad-based factors are likely to impact upon the aspirations and expectations of all young Australians, but they interact in particular ways with young people who come from rural locations. As has been discussed earlier, the term ‘rural’ is not without its own complexities – and it is clearly a mistake to assume that all young people who live outside of metropolitan areas experience life similarly. There is a wide diversity of community life within any ‘rural’ clustering, and it is important to recognise this at the outset. Rural communities vary enormously in size, resources, social relationships, economic status and access to services and facilities. And rural people can vary enormously in their occupational engagement, their educational levels, their social attitudes and values, and their aspirations and expectations.

The particular complexity, however, for research on rural young people’s expectations and aspirations, lies in the way that factors such as the ones identified in the previous section intersect and interact with potential aspects of rurality: the interaction, for instance, between rurality and socio-economic status, between rurality and gender, and between rurality and ethnicity. Rural and urban differences between families and communities, and between schools and experiences of school need also to be considered, as do ways in which the social capital of rural communities may contribute to the formation of young people’s aspirations and expectations.

It is also important at the outset to be aware of the pervasiveness of ‘deficit’ discourses and romanticised myths about rurality (Sher and Sher, 1994), and to keep in mind some of the potentially rich experiences that rural young people may experience – as well as idealised views of these experiences. Wyn et al (1998) have noted how rural young Australians can often experience a continuity of lifestyle that links generations and communities in complex ways (p. 7), and suggest that belief in
the positive aspects of their lifestyle, even when it involves poverty, is often a common perspective in rural communities.

Similarly, Looker and Dwyer (1998a) have observed that, to assume that rural communities suffer from a lack of access to resources, is to assume that some resources - as in, for example, space and clean air - have no value. In countries like Australia, where urban populations may be highly mobile, rural areas may have different and more satisfying community and family identification with ‘place’, and long-standing family ties to a community may be well-developed (Looker and Dwyer, 1998a, p.10) However, again, these possibilities vary from one rural area to another. As Looker and Dwyer (1998a) remind readers, “rurality is not a constant – it means different things in different social and historical contexts” (p. 10). Some rural areas may not have spatial resources and cleaner air; some rural people may have no identification with the community they live in.

**Socio-economic issues and rural students**

Research on educational aspirations and expectations for all young Australians has, as this report has already noted, indicated quite clearly that socio-economic factors are significant factors affecting the education of young Australians, and it is important to consider how SES factors might particularly affect the development of aspirations and expectations of young people in rural locations. Many rural areas are struggling economically and have often been hardest hit by contemporary economic shifts and reshaping. Employment opportunities have shrunk and, as a study from the Monash Regional Australia Project claims, “the bush is hurting” (Birrell et al, 2000).

Economic difficulties in rural communities can affect young people’s aspirations and expectations in a number of different ways. Looker and Dwyer (1998a), for instance, have provided evidence that most rural youth do not have a post-secondary institution in or near their community, so educational decisions frequently involve financial costs. They must find affordable housing and transport, as well as bear the cost of University fees and equipment. As one respondent in Looker and Dwyer’s study remarked, it is difficult to survive, let alone study (1998a, p. 15). This picture is also supported by work from James et al (1999), Alloway and Gilbert (2001), and the Office of Youth Affairs (1997).
In addition, rural areas often do not provide as many opportunities for part-time work for young people, as do urban areas (Kenton et al, 2001), so rural young people have difficulty acquiring any financial independence while they are still at school. This, coupled with the poorer full-time employment opportunities in rural areas (Wyn et al, 1998, p.14), particularly for Indigenous young people (Lester, 2000), means that rural young people often have to confront serious economic considerations in planning and preparing for their post-school lives.

In terms of choices regarding participation in higher education, James et al (1999) claimed that “Rurality and socio-economic status combine to produce the greatest educational disadvantage” (p.xvi). James et al developed a ‘conceptual framework’ for their questionnaire study which presupposed that decisions about higher education were influenced by a complex range of interrelated factors including family expectations and support, the range and level of local employment opportunities, perceptions of one’s abilities and talents, images of university life, degree of familiarity with the higher education system and alternatives, income levels, and perceptions of costs and cost benefits (p. 16). The conceptual model they devised began with the students’ current hopes, expectations and specific intentions, then established a three-dimensional framework for examining influences upon these expectations. The first dimension considered broader aspirations and beliefs – life and career; school; higher education and alternatives. The second examined the influence of ‘others’: family, school, community. And the third addressed the student’s personal context: socio-economic background, sex, language background, type of schooling, geographical location.

The James et al study concluded that:

Differences in socio-economic background are clearly the dominant factor in student perspectives on higher education. In descending order of influence, their attitudes are shaped by:

- family socio-economic background;
- whether students are living in urban or rural communities; and
- the distance from home to the nearest campus. (p.xv)
The study documented that rural students – especially those from lower socio-economic backgrounds – were significantly less likely than urban students to believe that a university course would offer them the chance of an interesting and rewarding career; or that their parents would want them to do a university course (1999, p.xv). In addition, James et al noted that rural students were significantly more likely than urban students to believe that:

- a university qualification is not necessary for the jobs they want;
- their families cannot afford the costs of supporting them at university;
- the cost of university fees may stop them attending; and
- there is no point in their going to university. (p.xv)

While socio-economic factors are obviously critical in understanding influences upon rural young people’s aspirations, there are, as the James’ study has indicated, a range of other factors relating to the expectations these rural young Australians had developed about higher education that need to be understood and addressed.

**Social capital in rural communities**

Kilpatrick, Field and Falk (2001) have defined social capital as a “resource based on relationships among people” (p.4), and have argued that social capital is a highly appropriate analytical tool for analysing a community’s social assets. The concept is a useful one to consider in reviewing research on educational aspirations, where the social capital of rural families, rural schools and rural communities has often been interpreted in different ways.

For instance, it is commonly assumed that rural communities lack social capital: that they have ‘less’ social capital than do urban communities. Kenyon et al (2001) have noted how the value of education is not necessarily obvious to many rural people; how few family members have engaged in post-compulsory education, and even fewer have tertiary qualifications (p.34). Kenyon et al reported that young people commented that they had no relevant role models in their communities who would emphasise the importance, benefits and value of education and learning – no ‘voice’ that would or could challenge family traditions and understandings (2001, p.35). Many of these observations were also borne out by the James et al study (1999).
Similarly, Israel et al (2001) have found that low-capacity rural communities in the USA, where educational attainment, income levels and job-related skills are lower, do not support educational success, and may reduce students’ educational aspirations. Their study has suggested that the conservatism of many rural family arrangements, the limited education levels within many rural communities, and the lower income levels often common in rural communities, have shaped the quality and quantity of interactions between children and their parents, as well as the children’s academic achievement and educational aspirations.

Kilpatrick and Abbott-Chapman (2002) have regarded this family influence upon social capital as critical. From their Australian study they note that:

Incomplete understanding and trust of educational institutions and labour markets in urban centres, associated with low levels of relevant family identity resources and limited family educational and employment experience, may be transmitted through the advice of family and friends and influence young people toward current work rather than longer term and more open-ended post-compulsory education goals. (p.63)

Yates (1994), for instance, observed the surprisingly limited range of ambitions professed by children at the most rural of the primary schools in her study, and Johnson (2002) documented how students from rural communities were likely to be more conservative than their urban counterparts. However this “conservatism” of rural students might need to be carefully considered. Several studies have documented the fears and uncertainties rural young people experience about leaving home and moving to “the city”, and these fears and uncertainties may be read as conservatism. In research conducted in rural high schools in the USA, Ley, Nelson and Beltyukoa (1996) have documented how rural students “have fears about their own abilities and awareness of career choices along with the limited economic opportunities and the vast distances associated with the countryside” (p.140). They noted the students’ uncertainty of “growing up rural” – uncertainties that have also been documented by Kilpatrick and Abbott-Chapman (2002). The mythologies associated with “the bush” – and the populist images of rural versus urban people – must make it difficult for rural young adults to have confidence about social dislocation.
Kilpatrick and Abbott-Chapman used the term social capital to designate “a set of social resources of individuals and communities that, when combined with other forms of capital, facilitates achieving social, educational, economic and employment goals” (2002, p.47). They claimed that the impact of family and school/community social capital was observed through the importance the young people placed on the views and advice of family members, school teachers, careers advisors and others. The study identified two kinds of resources: knowledge resources (who to contact; how to get things done), and identity resources (who to trust; who shares your values), and observed that those students with bounded and cohesive local networks were often more likely to be trapped in the rural labour market without the educational qualifications to escape (2002, p.63).

They argued that the social capital available in the rural community had a direct impact on the formation of young people’s aspirations and expectations, and their research investigated ways in which family and school/community social capital influenced young people’s work/study values and priorities, with regard to post-school pathways. For instance they observed how family networks were more inclined to focus on helping young people find work in the local area, rather than encouraging them to finish school and consider further education and training, or to work in urban areas.

A more broadly based concept of rural ‘social capital’ has been examined within an Australian ethnographic study by Henry (1998). Henry claimed that students in rural areas faced serious problems with regard to achieving equality of opportunity in education or employment largely because of “the township’s rural conservative ethos” (p. 400). Henry concluded that:

Country school leavers will continue to be forced into less prestigious unskilled employment, Aborigines will remain alienated from schooling and rural youth will aspire to gender stereotyped occupations … unless school-community socialisation is understood and conscious intervention programme implemented. Schools can and must accept the challenge of not simply responding to the community’s needs and goals … but preparing young people to transcend the parochial and limited situation in which they frequently find themselves. (p. 408)
Similarly, James et al (1999) noted the “absence of the incentive that derives from a family and community tradition of valuing higher education, of knowing the options, and of being aware of the possibilities for personal development and careers - the encouraging effects of ‘cultural capital’” (p.90)

The conservatism of teachers in rural communities has often been documented. Ley et al (1996) considered the difficulties that arose when teachers sometimes held substantially different views about the value of the local community than did students and their parents. As Ley et al commented:

In this regard, teachers’ expectations may be more limiting than those of students and parents who value their community but also recognise their probable mobility. (p. 139).

This concern was also raised by Henry (1998) who noted that parents and students were sometimes more aware of the conservative limitations of their rural communities, and more attuned to necessary measures that would need to be taken, than were teachers.

**Gender issues in rural communities**

Gender is an important meaning-making framework young people use in their navigation of the transition from school to post-school lives – and an important framework influencing the formation of young people’s aspirations and expectations. It can also have particular implications for young people in small, closely-knit rural locations, where conservative values and lower education levels may dominate.

Young women and young men in rural and remote locations experience educational, social and economic disadvantage (in comparison with many urban cohorts), but they experience this disadvantage differently, and this has been demonstrated in the different aspirations and expectations exhibited by young women and young men (Collins, Kenway and MacLeod, 2000; Kenyon et al, 2001; HREOC, 2000b). James et al (1999), for instance, in their study of rural and isolated students and their higher education choices have noted “striking” differences between young men and young women in attitudes, aspirations and plans (p. 21).
Data on the statistical differences between rural male and female retention rates at school, higher education entry, and work destinations, have indicated that young men are more likely to leave school than are young women; less likely to follow a pathway to higher education; and more likely to look for employment straight from school (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2000; James et al, 1999; Collins, Kenway and MacLeod, 2000).

Data have also indicated that while young women are more likely to choose higher education pathways than are young men, they have different educational and employment aspirations. Young women are more likely to enrol in the mass, ‘feminised’ degree programmes, less likely to gain an apprenticeship, and more at risk of being unemployed, (Curtain, 1999; Hayes, 1999; King, 1999; Lamb, 1997; Wooden and Vandenheuvel, 1999). Young men and young women in rural and remote locations experience school and working lives differently, and insert themselves - and are inserted into - different regimes of knowledge and understanding as they negotiate post-school experience.

These different ways of negotiating and operating upon experience affect the trajectories that young men and young women then feel able to draw for themselves in their transition from school lives to adult lives. They affect the way young men and women imagine futures for themselves; the way they make sense of their immediate experiences; and the way they order earlier sets of experience. Alloway and Gilbert (2001), for instance, have documented the traditional masculinist stances of rural young men in regional North Queensland, and how this affected their attitudes to higher education. Young North Queensland men from regional areas regarded higher education as non-masculine: something for girls to do. Getting a job and being financially independent were high on their list of desirable aspirations for the future, where extended ‘schooling’ time was not.

In their study of the life choices and aspirations of rural young women, Warner-Smith and Lee (2001) have provided similar evidence about the gendered choices rural young women made. These young women chose relatively stereotypically feminine pathways in their shift to adult life, and were more likely to be married or in
permanent relationships, and more likely to have children, than were urban young women. This evidence was similar to that presented by Looker and Dwyer (1998a), in their study of Australian and Canadian young women.

Warner-Smith and Lee (2001) also document difficulties that many rural young women confront when they seek employment in rural areas. Compared with young men, they find it far more difficult to obtain work that pays well and is relatively stable. This issue was also documented in Alloway and Gilbert’s (2001; 2002 in press) research with young women in regional North Queensland.

Warner-Smith and Lee’s research also indicates that rural young women are more liable to be caught up in a developing female polarisation: between young women who have an interest in getting higher education, pursuing a career and deferring motherhood, and “young women who have not been particularly interested in school, or who see femininity as equated with demonstrable sexuality and motherhood and do not aspire to further education.“ (2001, p.34). They have argued that young rural women are disproportionately represented in this latter group of women, and are therefore at risk of being locked into the secondary labour market or out of the work force.

Young women in rural areas are also more likely than are young men to experience potentially hazardous experiences that impact upon the formation of aspirations and expectations. Domestic violence has been documented as a greater problem in rural areas because of the lack of alternative accommodation, the lack of professional help and the tendency for local police to be influenced by the community values which ‘turn a blind eye’ to violence in domestic relationships (Coorey (1990) cited in Wyn et al, 1998, p. 15). Wyn et al have also reported how narrow conceptions of femininity and masculinity impact upon girls and young women in rural communities, marginalizing them and negatively labelling them unless they are in a relationship with a boy (1998, pp. 15-16). Wyn et al have also noted that in some rural communities there appears to be a systematic subordination of women.

The size of many rural communities also means that there is little opportunity for young women or young men to have privacy in their sexual affairs, and this can have
particularly dangerous effects on gay young men and gay young women. The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission in Bush Talks (1999) has reported that

Gay and lesbian people get a hard time. One couple was hounded out of town. And another couple was harassed with eggs thrown at the house and their rubbish bins overturned. [Peterborough SA, September 1998] (p.26)

In relation to this, Wyn et al (1998) have referred to research which links the high rate of rural male youth suicide with the marginalizing effects of rural homophobia. (p.17)

The lack of a wide range of leisure activities and recreation possibilities in rural areas has been well documented (see, for example, Office of Youth Affairs, 1997, p.32; Wyn et al, 1998, p.17; Crocker et al, 2001, p. 44), and the result tends to be that there is little opportunity for young women or young men to explore and develop more alternative leisure and recreational pursuits. The dominant leisure and recreational discourses in rural areas revolve around sport, with its highly stereotypical – often sexist - portrayals of men and women, and its strong association with alcohol. From their study, Wyn et al observed:

Young people commented that the strong commitment to sports such as football and netball tended to reinforce gender stereotypes. Although sport was often mentioned as a very positive aspect of their lives, at the same time, some were less enthusiastic about the expectation that football frequently included a heavy (‘macho’) drinking culture. Associated with this culture is the practice of ‘bonnet surfing’ and ‘dirt surfing’ in some communities, which put young men’s health at risk. (p. 16)

For many young men and young women in rural communities, it is difficult to construct aspirations and expectations that can move beyond the gendered culture of the communities within which they live. Where gendered stereotypes impact upon educational and employment aspirations, and upon relationship possibilities, this can be particularly disadvantageous for rural young Australians.

**Indigeneity and rural contexts**

Indigenous people continue to constitute well above 2% of the population of many rural and remote areas, and make up 25% of the population of the NT (HREOC, 1999, p. 24). However Indigenous students have very few experiences of educational
success. In rural areas particularly, inadequate housing and support, early parenthood, poor health and substance abuse, lack of mentoring, financial restrictions and high arrest rates contribute to the construction of a limited set of expectations and aspirations for the future (see, for example, Kenyon et al, 2001, p.40-42).

Lester (2000) has drawn particular attention to the lack of knowledge about opportunities for further education and training and career structures amongst Aboriginal young adults, and the importance of involving families and Aboriginal communities in the process of providing this knowledge. His research has demonstrated the close links between educational attainment and employment, the necessity to improve schooling outcomes for Indigenous people, and the ways in which young Indigenous students living in the more remote communities were the young adults most desperately in need of assistance.

Racism within rural communities has seriously affected the aspirations and expectations of Indigenous young adults, and has impacted severely upon employment and educational opportunities. The HREOC report, *Bush Talks* (1999), has documented various reports of these experiences.

They’ll only employ Aboriginal people if they get money from ATSIC. Or if it’s a traineeship. As soon as the traineeship’s over, that’s it. They pick up somebody else. [Cairns Qld, November 1998] (p.24)

There are a small number of Aboriginal people employed by the local and State Government Services. In the retail sector and in manufacturing, there are few, if any, Aboriginal people. This lack of employment of Aboriginal people in the Greater Taree City Council area has serious consequences for their communities. Aboriginal children often do not see any reason to finish their education. It is a rare few who finish high school. The confidence of young Aboriginal people is often low. [Submission from H. Hannah, Glenthorne NSW] (p.24)

The story that I am hearing all the time from Indigenous students is that no matter how well they do at school there is a subtle message which gets through
to them that says ‘because you are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander or South Sea Islander you won’t do well’. I recently have been to an Indigenous Education (Women’s) conference in Adelaide. The majority of the presenters were Aboriginal or Islander women who had done very well. But again when they were going through school they had got that message and even though they had done extremely well at school they all opted not to go on to tertiary education straight away. They had to have a buffer time where their own community had to build up their confidence and encourage them to come and try tertiary education. [School counsellor, Rockhampton Qld, August 1998] (p.12)

These experiences of racism are also supported by data collected by Wyn et al (1998), Lester (2000), and Mercurio, A. and Clayton, L. (2001).

**Experiences of schooling in rural communities**

In their consideration of factors influencing rural students’ participation in higher education, James et al (1999) have concluded that:

> Overall, the educational disadvantage of rural students is the result of twin effects: they are more likely than urban students to perceive ‘discouraging’ inhibitors and barriers, such as the cost of living away from home or losing touch with friends, while at the same time they are likely to experience lower levels of ‘encouraging’ factors, such as parental encouragement or the belief that a university course will offer them an interesting and rewarding career. (p. xvi)

Various studies have documented how rural students have often limited their educational aspirations to accept the fact that travel – either to boarding schools, larger centres, or Universities – is too expensive (James et al, 1999). They are then forced to work within the available curriculum choices in local schools or distance education, and with the available educational resources, such as teachers, educational infrastructures, materials and technology.

Many of these issues were reported in the national HREOC Bush Talks (1999), and in Kenyon et al’s report (2001): *Creating Better Educational and Employment Opportunities for Rural Young People*. A good set of educational experiences –
particularly in terms of acquiring good literacy and numeracy skills – does seem, however, to be of critical importance for young people, particularly young people who may already be experiencing other potential forms of social disadvantage. Several major national reports have confirmed that:

- strong literacy and numeracy skills are crucial in the transition from school to full-time employment or training; in acquiring well-paid employment; in maintaining employment (Lamb, 1997; Lamb and McKenzie, 2001),
- negative experiences of school and negative experiences of school success are strong factors influencing school failure and school drop-out (Marks and Fleming, 1999; Lamb, Dwyer, Wyn, 2000)

Consequently, the quality of educational experiences rural young people have are of significance in the formation of aspirations and expectations about the future. However, as section 2 has documented, there are particular issues associated with providing equitable and satisfactory education for rural young people that require major financial, structural and social change. Attitudes to education in rural communities, the cost of providing equitable education in rural community, and the difficulties of preparing, retaining and maintaining a quality teaching force in rural communities, are major considerations.

Facilities and resources in rural communities
Several major studies have documented young people’s views on the facilities and resources that are missing from their communities and indicated how significant these omissions and restrictions can be upon the formation of young people’s aspirations and expectations. After extensive surveying of young Tasmanians, The Office of Youth Affairs (1997) identified the following issues as significant to young people: isolation; small community life; transport; ‘something to do and somewhere to go’; drugs and alcohol; access to service provision, information and support; education; ‘to be informed, heard and resourced’; employment and training; promotion and development.

Similar issues were identified in a report prepared by Wyn, Stokes and Stafford (1998) from focus group interview research in five rural areas across Australia, and

Many young adults have clear views about what they like about their communities, but also what needs to be changed – and they also are able to make recommendations as to how some of those changes might be implemented. The impact, however, of many of these identified issues upon the quality of life for young rural Australians is significant, and provides an important contextual framework for understanding how young adults in rural communities may navigate and negotiate their transitions in the years beyond school.

Conclusion
Research studies surveyed in this review have indicated that young people make the shift from their schooling lives to their post-schooling lives in a variety of ways: that the transition to adult life is not necessarily linear or predictable; that many young people do not necessarily aspire to move directly from school to further education or training or employment. Rather, the review has indicated the complex mix of work, study and leisure that constitutes young people’s lives as they negotiate and navigate their way through a rapidly changing set of social, family and employment conditions typical of the twenty-first century.

Given that young people’s navigations occur in rural contexts, the review documents several definitions and attempts to measure rurality, noting the particular difficulty of this task in Australia. Australian rural communities are diverse and include a wide variety of community types. They cannot be treated as if they were the same. The review also considers the ways in which the concept of rurality has often been mythologised and romanticised. Both romantic and deficit discourses about rurality need to be considered as influences upon the ways in which rural young people construct images of their futures.

The bulk of the review has documented research on factors impacting upon the formation of aspirations and expectations in young adults. Notable amongst these are young adults’ experiences of school and of schooling; family values, attitudes and
support; gender; ethnicity; and socio-economic circumstances. The review demonstrates that these factors impact upon the formation of aspirations and expectations for most young people, but it particularly refers to the impact these factors have upon young people in rural communities.

Rural education, for instance - as the review has documented – has often been considered to be inadequate in key areas, and some young people in regional communities have more difficulty accessing quality education than do their urban counterparts. As well, research studies have documented that rural families do not necessarily see the value of further education and training for their children – particularly when such education and training is likely to involve student relocation and additional financial burdens – and that role models and information about higher education, training programmes and career planning are often less accessible in rural communities.

Research reviewed here has also indicated that many rural communities have conservative gender relationships and attitudes, which impact upon the formation of young people’s plans and visions for their futures. The research also indicates that Aboriginal young people often experience particular educational and social difficulties in regional areas through racism and bias.

Perhaps the most crippling factor that the research studies demonstrate, however, is the impact of poverty and financial security upon young people’s aspirations and expectations. Socio-economic factors impact heavily upon many young Australians, but for young adults in rural areas, financial issues emerge as a particularly powerful influence upon the construction of plans for the future. For young people to access education, training and employment opportunities, they need first to overcome the financial barriers of distance.

The review indicates several factors likely to impact upon the formation of young people’s aspirations and expectations in rural communities, but it also suggests that, given the diversity of Australian rural communities, caution would need to taken before this impact could be generalised.
PART B

Data Analysis
Introduction

In the past decade a number of large-scale, national research projects have been undertaken that attempt to identify the impact of various factors - including the impact of living in particular geographical regions - on student outcomes. Most notable amongst these research projects are the national Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) which endeavour to measure, *inter alia*, the influence of attending school in particular geographical locations on student outcomes such as leaving school early, continuation at school, participation in educational services such as Vocational Education and Training (VET), successful transition from school to work, tertiary entrance performance, and participation in the labour market.

State Education Departments, too, collect data, particularly on student performance and participation. In some cases, States have analysed their data with a view to identifying and tracking students’ and systems’ performance in relation to a range of variables including students’ gender, language background and cultural identification, as well as with broad categorisations associated with the socio-economic status and the geographical location of students and schools.

This data analysis section proceeds by drawing on national and state-level research studies and data sources with the aim of reviewing the impact of geographical location on an array of student outcomes – outcomes often considered to be significant predictors of the kinds of life chances that will be afforded to students. This section offers an interpretation of selected data on the association of geographical location with, and its influence on, student outcome variables, namely, early school leaving; non-completion of year 12; participation in Year 12; post-school destinations; and academic performance at school. It also focuses on the importance of student aspirations as they impact on the kinds of futures that students imagine for themselves and some of the important factors that help shape student aspirations.

Geographical Location and Student Outcome Variables: Associations and Influences

It is important to note from the outset that different levels of data analysis can be offered to argue the case for the impact of geographical location on student outcomes.
At a minimalist level, arguments can be mounted, for instance, on the basis of percentage differences in outcomes between groups of students identified according to geographical location. For example, some of the data reported below simply compare the percentage of students from metropolitan areas with those from other areas who meet the benchmarks for reading and writing – who leave school early – who participate in Year 12 – or who make successful transitions from school to work. Each of these outcome variables is assumed to be of theoretical significance and practical relevance to young people’s lives. However, it should be acknowledge here that where statistical analyses rest at the level of percentage difference between groups, then all that can be said is that one variable may be associated with the other: it cannot be argued that one influences or impacts on the other. As a ‘first trawl’ of data, percentage differences between groups can be an important starting point indicating that further analyses may be useful.

Psycho-social phenomena like the decisions and choices that students make and the aspirations and expectations that guide them are generally accepted to be complex rather than simple to interpret and are likely to be more properly located in multi-factor, rather than single-factor, explanations. As Marks, Fleming, Long and McMillan (2000) explain, it is unlikely that any one variable will explain why students behave as they do, or why they make the choices that they do. There are likely to be multiple influences on student outcomes however those outcomes are defined.

In recognition of the complexity of the issues under investigation, many research studies offer sophisticated levels of statistical analyses based on multivariate approaches. By taking into account the influence of multiple variables, multivariate approaches avoid simplistic interpretations that run the risk of misleadingly suggesting that one variable in isolation is likely to be associated with a complex social outcome.

Where multivariate approaches are adopted it is possible to examine the ways in which particular variables are not only associated with, but influence, the dependent or outcome variable. Multivariate analyses seek to investigate the ‘net influence’ of a particular variable by controlling for the variance associated with other variables and
their inter-relationships – that is, by establishing the situation of ‘other things being equal’. As Marks and Fleming (1999) explain, by incorporating ‘a range of possible influences’ and by controlling for ‘inter-relationships between influences’, multivariate methods ‘allow conclusions on which are the most important influence’ (p.13).

As Marks et al (2000) elaborate, multivariate methods are important in addressing the issue of ‘spuriousness’. The researchers explain:

It is important at a theoretical level to know if a factor’s influence is spurious, that is, if its influence can be attributed to the influence of other factors (Marks, Fleming, Long and McMillan, 2000, p.5).

Multivariate analyses allow such claims to be tested.

Studies cited in this section present arguments based both on percentage differences between groups and multivariate approaches to data analysis. Most of the studies employ regression analysis as a multivariate approach that allows for the estimation of net effects by controlling for the magnitude of different sources of influence. In doing so, the studies generally distinguish between patterns of association and ‘net influences’ on outcome variables.

The focus of this data analysis section is on the extent to which available statistical data support the proposition that geographical location may be associated with, and may influence, a range of outcomes for young people.

**Early School Leaving**

An important decision that all students make, either consciously or unconsciously, is whether they will continue at school or whether they will leave school early and negotiate a different topology of life choices and priorities. In identifying which students are most likely to be early school leavers, Marks and Fleming (1999) offered a careful analysis of differences associated with students living in metropolitan, regional and rural and remote areas. In this large-scale national study of students who were in Year 9 in 1995, early school leavers were defined as students ‘who leave
school before the beginning of Year 11’ (Marks and Fleming, 1999, v). In addition, geographical categorizations into metropolitan, regional, and rural and remote regions were made on the basis of cohort populations of the relative sizes shown in Table 2.2.

Table 2.2: Early School Leavers by Region (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>All (N=11624)</th>
<th>Male (N=5613)</th>
<th>Female (N=6011)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Cohort Population</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metropolitan (&gt;100,000)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional (10,000-99,000)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural/Remote (&lt;10,000)</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Adapted from Marks and Fleming, 1999, p. 8)

Table 2.2 shows that substantial differences in percentages of students leaving school before reaching Year 11 were associated with students living in metropolitan, regional or rural and remote regions at the time of the data collection. While 6 per cent of all metropolitan students left school early, 10 percent of all students from regional areas, and 14 per cent of all students from rural and remote areas left school before Year 11.

While regional differences are noteworthy, gender differences are equally so. From the data presented in Table 2.2, it seems that girls and boys in metropolitan regions were nearly as likely as one another to leave school early. However, when it came to living outside of metropolitan regions the likelihood of boys and girls making the same decisions about schooling seemed to diminish. In this instance, 12 per cent of boys, compared with 8 per cent of girls in regional areas, and 17 percent of boys, compared with 10 per cent of girls, in rural and remote regions left school early. Boys living in rural and remote regions as defined in this study were over-represented in relation to girls living in the same region, and they were over-represented in relation to boys living in every other region. Ten per cent more boys who were living in rural and remote areas than boys who were living in metropolitan areas left school early.
By contrast with the emerging pattern for boys, only 4 per cent more girls who were living in rural and remote areas than girls who were living in metropolitan areas made the decision to leave school without the benefit of senior secondary schooling.

While identifying an apparent association between the region in which students live and their practice of leaving school early – most notably amongst rural boys – Marks and Fleming (1999) also investigated the ‘net influence’ that living in particular regions had on such student choices. Using logistic regression analysis to account for the influence of other variables, the researchers concluded:

Overall, students living in non-metropolitan areas are more likely to leave school early than those in metropolitan areas, other things being equal… When controlling for school achievement and other factors [individual-level social background and demographic factors] … the regional effects remain but only for boys. Boys living in regional areas (defined as centres with populations between 10,000 and 100,000 persons) in Year 9 are about 1.4 times as likely to leave school as boys living in metropolitan areas … This effect is net of differences in social background, school and demographic factors (Marks and Fleming, 1999, p.19)

The researchers noted that the effects of living in rural areas, compared with regional and metropolitan areas, were ‘even stronger’:

Again the effect was confined to boys. Male students living in remote rural centres (defined as having populations of less than 10,000) in Year 9 were about twice as likely to leave school early than not leave school compared to students living in metropolitan areas net of social background, school and other demographic factors (Marks and Fleming, 1999, p.19).

What is particularly important about this study is that it identified boys who lived in rural and remote regions as having significantly higher odds of leaving school early than any other group of students. The odds that it would be these boys rather than boys living in other regions, or girls in any region, persisted over and above the effects of prior school achievement, parents’ occupational status and educational levels, and the school sector (State, Catholic of Independent) attended by the students.
With respect to results of the logistic regression analyses, Marks and Fleming concluded (1999):

Students living in regional and rural areas are more likely to leave school early than students living in major metropolitan areas. The effect of regional background is confined to male students and is stronger for those in rural and remote areas. The multivariate analyses show that these differences cannot be fully explained by difference in school achievement, school sector, individual schools in these areas, or to social background. Furthermore, students living in rural and regional areas are unlikely to leave school early because of the opportunities for full-time work in these areas. It is unclear why students living in these areas tend to leave school early at a higher rate, but again it may be due to social norms about early school leaving (pp.26-27).

That is, the results of the analyses were sufficiently robust to dismiss any suggestion that the outcome for these boys might, for instance, be equally explicable in terms of the economic and social resources available to their families, or to their parents’ educational background, or to their own prior achievement at school. Living in rural and remote areas seemed to have a particular effect on these boys’ decisions not to proceed into the post-compulsory years of schooling.

**Non-Completion of School**

Closely related to students’ decisions to leave school before Year 11 is their decision not to complete school to Year 12. ‘Non-completion of school’ is the term used by Lamb, Dwyer and Wyn (2000) to refer ‘to the numbers of young people who do not complete Year 12. It includes the young people who do not continue at secondary school beyond Year 10 and Year 11 as well as those who leave during Year 12 without obtaining a Year 12 certificate’ (Lamb, Dwyer, Wyn, 2000, vii). To some extent, the terms ‘early school leaving’ and ‘non-completion of school’ overlap but research into non-completion extends the research vision to all students who leave school without a senior secondary certificate, whether or not they had begun to study at the senior secondary level. Thus, the common denominator for these students is that they leave school without the benefit a senior secondary certificate.
First level analyses offered by Lamb et al (2000) in their longitudinal national study showed that absolute differences in non-completion of school were associated with students’ geographical location. As displayed in Table 2.3, the researchers collated data on rates of non-completion by urban and rural location over three points of data collection – the early 1980s, the late 1980s and the mid-1990s.

**Table 2.3: Rates of non-completion by location (%)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th></th>
<th>Females</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Early</td>
<td>Late</td>
<td>Mid –</td>
<td>Early</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Adapted from Lamb, Dwyer and Wyn, 2000, p.18)

As indicated in Table 2.3, the practice of not competing Year 12 declined for all groups from the early 1980s to the mid-1990s. Between the period of the early 1980s and the mid-1990s, the rate of non-completion for boys in urban areas dropped from 60 per cent to 28 per cent, and for urban girls the rate dropped from 49 per cent to 14 percent. Correspondingly, for the same time period, the rate of non-completion for rural boys declined from 69 per cent to 43 percent, and for rural girls the decline rate was from 58 per cent to 25 per cent.

While the overall trend in non-completion indicated a decline in absolute rates for everyone – for boys and girls living in urban and rural areas – it is important to note that the rates of decline were steeper for some than for others. From the early 1980s to the mid-1990s, there was a 32 per cent decline in non-completion of Year 12 studies for urban boys compared with a 35 per cent decline in non-completion for urban girls. By comparison with urban students, there was a decline of only 11 per cent in non-completion of Year 12 for rural boys and of 18 per cent for rural girls. It should also be noted that by the mid-1990s 43 per cent of rural boys, compared with 25 per cent of rural girls, did not complete year 12.
In moving away from inferences based on absolute differences between groups, Lamb et al (2000) applied logistic regression analyses to the non-completion data to determine the net effect of living in a particular location. The regression analyses that controlled for variance associated with other variables including parents’ education and socio-economic status indicated that for boys ‘the effect of rural place of residence increased over the period from the early 1980s to the mid-1990s’ (p.28). With specific reference to boys, the researchers reported that all else being equal:

Living in a rural area became a strong predictor of non-completion. In the early 1980s the effect of living in a rural area was negligible … but by the mid-1990s had become significant … (Lamb, Dwyer and Wyn, 2000, p.28)

By contrast, the logistic regression model of non-completion for females indicated that the effect of location on girls weakened over this time frame. In the early and late 1980s, living in a rural location had a significant influence on girls’ non-completion of Year 12. By the mid-1990s, this was no longer the case. In terms of the logistic regression analysis, by the mid-1990s, girls’ place of residence no longer featured as a significant variable in explaining why some might choose not to complete Year 12.

As with early school leaving, when it came to not completing Year 12, it was rural boys for whom the effects of geographical location were strongest. Other things being equal, rural boys were more likely than other boys, or girls, to exit school without a senior certificate.

Results like those found by Lamb et al (2000) in their national study are reflected in state-level studies as well. For instance, the Senior Secondary Assessment Board of South Australia (SSABSA) researched State-completion rates for the Year 12 South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE). The SSABSA study reported on the association of a range of student and school variables, including geographical location, with completion of the SACE (SSABSA, 1999). The analyses presented in the report depend on disaggregation of data and comparison of percentage scores for students in different groups rather than the kinds of multivariate analyses that lead to claims about net effects.
Notwithstanding the level of statistical analyses, the SSABSA report (1999) showed patterns of completion of the SACE that were associated with the location of the school and the residential address of the student. In the SSABSA study, location was conceptualised as students living in, and/or attending school in metropolitan or country areas.

The South Australian report concluded that overall, SACE completion ‘was dependent on location of the school, with those in the country areas less likely to complete the SACE than metropolitan students’ (p.40). However while making this claim, SSABSA issued a cautionary note that geographical location as a variable might, in some situations, be confounded with the socio-economic circumstances of particular regions. By disaggregating completion data into socio-economic quartiles it was possible to conclude that completion of Year 12 was associated, to an extent, with an overlap between wealth and geographical location although the net effect of each was not determined. As the report cautioned:

> When comparisons are made within each socio-economic quartile, however, the dependence of SACE completion on school location seems to diminish. This is probably due to the fact that there are proportionally more schools in the two most affluent socio-economic quartiles in the metropolitan area than in the country, which provides another example of variables confounding the data (SSABSA, 1999, p.41)

The study also showed that students who attended schools that were identified as part of the Disadvantaged Schools Programme (DSP) – an indicator or poverty – had lower completion rates than those who did not attend DSP schools, irrespective of whether the DSP schools were in metropolitan or country areas. The importance of a school’s designation in relation to wealth and poverty was strongly indicated in the report and supported by association with completion data.

However, one more caveat from the report is noteworthy with respect to investigating factors associated with students located in metropolitan and country areas. That is:

> Within all of the socio-economic quartiles, males in country schools tended to be less likely to complete the SACE than those in metropolitan schools, an
effect which requires more detailed investigation. For females, however, SACE completion seemed to be less dependent on location (SSABSA, 1999, p.41)

This result highlights again the situation for boys who did not live in metropolitan areas. It seems that the decision to leave school before Year 11, or to leave school without a Year 12 certificate, may somehow have been peculiarly related to being a young man – a young man who lived in a rural or country region.

**Participation in Year 12 at School**

In another of the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth, Marks, Fleming, Long and McMillan (2000) investigated a range of variables in terms of their patterns of association and influences on young people’s participation in Year 12. In this study, participation rates referred to the proportion of student cohort populations, estimated at a particular time, which advanced to Year 12 at school. Participation in Year 12 did not imply that the students necessarily completed their secondary studies but it did mean that the students were still at school at the time of data collection.

Table 2.4 shows rates of participation for three cohorts of students against two different measures of location – one, a broad categorisation of location as metropolitan or non-metropolitan – the other, according to quartiles of population density ranging from the most rural to the most urban quartile.
Table 2.4: Participation in Year 12, by year and location (per cent of group)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-metropolitan</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Most rural quartile</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second quartile</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third quartile</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most urban quartile</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Adapted from Marks, Fleming, Long and McMillan, 2000, p.10)

As the researchers noted, both measures of region showed a persistent gap of approximately 10 percentage points between students living in the most urban/metropolitan regions and those living in non-metropolitan/rural regions. While overall, Year 12 participation rates for students improved between 1980 and 1994, there appeared to be some plateauing of improvement in the most rural quartile and regression to lower participation rates in the other three quartiles between 1994 and 1998.

Multivariate analyses of the influence of a range of factors on Year 12 participation identified the region in which young people lived as having a net effect on participation, albeit, not a strong one. With respect to the influence of geographical location, Marks et al (2000) reported:

Non-metropolitan students are less likely to participate in Year 12 compared to metropolitan students … In 1980, 1994 and 1998 the odds of non-metropolitan student participating in Year 12 (relative to non-participating) were between 0.6 and 0.7 times that of metropolitan students (p.13).

The researchers also reported that the situation had not improved over time for young people living in non-metropolitan regions:
There is no discernible time trend, although it is clear that the odds of non-metropolitan students reaching Year 12 relative to metropolitan students have not improved since the early 1980s (Marks et al, 2000, p.13).

While it was true that living in non-metropolitan regions with low population densities reduced the odds that young people would participate in Year 12, results of the logistic regression analysis indicated that the overall effect was not particularly strong. The researchers noted:

The relationship is in the expected direction but is weaker than the effects of other factors such as socio-economic status and gender (Marks, Fleming, Long and McMillan, 2000, p.22).

In this study, stronger odds that a young person would participate in Year 12 were associated with having parents employed in professional occupations and with being female than they were with geographical location. Given the way that gender featured in the studies of early school leaving (Marks and Fleming, 1999) and non-completion of school (Lamb et al, 2000), it is important to note here that the same interactive effect of gender and location was not noted in the study of participation. Marks et al (2000) reported that, other things being equal, more girls than boys advanced to Year 12, and a gender effect that favoured girls increased over the time period between 1980 to 1998. However, it did not appear to be the case that locality impacted differentially on particular groups of boys as was the case in the studies of early school leaving and of non-completion of school. In the Marks et al study (2000), boys participated in Year 12 at lower rates than girls, and young people in non-metropolitan regions participated at lower rates than those in metropolitan areas. In this instance, the negative effect of location on Year 12 participation appeared to be diminished by the impact of other variables.

**Post-School Destinations**

It is clear from the research cited in this review that not all young people choose recognisable linear pathways now considered, by some, to be more reminiscent of an industrialised era. Rather, many young people negotiate their realities and work their
way through a diversity of life patterns (Dwyer, Harwood and Tyler, 1998, 1999). This section draws on research studies aimed at tracking students’ progression from school and examines a range of decisions they make that help shape their futures. The section focuses particularly on choices related to higher education, vocational education and training, other education and training options, and transitions to work.

**Higher Education**

For those students who follow relatively uninterrupted linear pathways through school, the option is sometimes to continue higher-level study at university. The national picture of participation in Higher Education mirrors quite closely the patterns of participation in Year 12 witnessed amongst young people. With respect to the impact of location, Marks, Fleming, Long and McMillan’s study (2000) identified young people living in rural areas as having lower participation rates in Higher Education than those living in urban areas. As shown in 2.5, this trend was evident regardless of whether the measure of location was based on broad categorisation into metropolitan and non-metropolitan regions or whether the measure more finely dissected location into quartiles of population density.

As with participation in Year 12, the researchers showed that there were approximately 10 percentage points difference favouring metropolitan students’ participation in Higher Education over non-metropolitan students. In this case, it should be noted that participation in Higher Education represented a straight, uninterrupted transition from school to university as the sample for the study drew form a cohort of students who were in Year 12 in 1998 and advanced to higher education studies in 1999.

In this study, the researchers also noted that the broad division into metropolitan and non-metropolitan regions was sufficient to identify how location might be implicated in students’ decisions to progress, or not, to university. According to Marks et al (2000) there was no evidence that ‘young people attending school in the most remote areas are substantially less likely to participate in Year 12 and higher education compared to young people in slightly less remote areas … the major difference is between the 55 per cent of students living in metropolitan areas and the rest who live in non-metropolitan areas’ (p.23).
Table 2.5: Participation in Higher Education by location (1999) (per cent of group)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year participation measured</th>
<th>1999</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Region</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-metropolitan</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region (Population density)</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Most rural quartile</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second quartile</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third quartile</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most urban quartile</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Adapted from Marks, Fleming, Long and McMillan, 2000, p.17)

In testing for the net effect of location on the national Year 12 cohort’s movement to Higher Education, Marks et al (2000) noted that, as for Year 12 participation, location had a net effect but that the overall effect was weak. The logistic regression coefficient for location in relation to higher education participation was lower than it was for participation in Year 12. The lower regression coefficient indicated that while it was still significant, location was a less powerful and less useful factor in predicting whether students would move seamlessly from school to university than whether they would participate in Year 12.

Vocational Education and Training

Students who do not follow linear pathways through school and exit with a senior secondary certificate may do so for a number of reasons, the consequences of which are varied. As the Senior Secondary Assessment Board of South Australia (1999) reflected, students sometimes leave school because they feel alienated from the system while others make positive life choices relying on opportunities and resources found outside of schools. One of those resources is the Vocational Education and Training sector that offers more applied studies, more ‘hands-on’ experiences, a more
To recall from the preceding discussion, Marks and Fleming (1999) indicated that boys living in rural areas had significantly higher odds than metropolitan boys of leaving school without attempting Year 11. Likewise, Lamb et al (2000) showed that students living in rural areas were more likely than students from urban regions not to complete school, an effect that strengthened from the early 1980s to the mid-1990s. Again, it was rural boys for whom the effects of geographical location were strongest. Other things being equal, rural boys were more likely than other boys, or girls, to exit school without a senior certificate.

Ball and Lamb’s (2001) study tracked participation rates in VET amongst students who left school either without attempting Year 11 studies or who left sometime during Year 11 or Year 12 without a certificate. Interestingly, young people living in rural locations witnessed a higher rate of participation in VET studies than did their urban counterparts. As indicated in Table 2.6, 44 per cent of young people living in rural areas compared with 35 per cent of those living in urban locations participated in VET. Boys, too, experienced higher rates of participation in VET (42 per cent) than did girls (30 percent).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Geographic location</th>
<th>Participated in VET %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural or remote</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Adapted from Ball and Lamb, 2001, p.10)

Patterns of participation in school (Marks & Fleming, 1999; Marks et al, 2000; Lamb et al, 2000) and in VET (Ball & Lamb, 2001) suggest that young people living in rural and urban locations may envision different futures for themselves, that they may have
different life priorities and adopt different life patterns (Dwyer et al, 1999). Nevertheless, it should be noted that while the percentage difference between the groups signals that more rural than urban students decided to leave school early and to take up VET studies, there is considerable overlap between the groups. Students in urban areas who did not complete school also decided to extend their studies through VET. The statistical picture is of patterns of variation and of influences on those variations but the picture is not of homogeneity within location.

**Other education and training options**

State Education systems sometimes collect a variety of destination data on their students in an effort to identify patterns and trends amongst students as they exit from school. In this regard, the Education Department of Western Australia tracks the destinations of Year 11 and of Year 12 students in that State. Data supplied through courtesy of the Department are displayed in Tables 2.7 and 2.8.

As indicated in Table 2.7, students identified as metropolitan or country students in Western Australia, who were in Year 11 in the year 2000, demonstrated similar destinations during the year 2001. Regardless of where they lived, most of this cohort of Western Australian students returned to school in the following year. Of those who did not return, there appeared to be no discernible trends that distinguished one group from the other.
Table 2.7: Education Department of Western Australia Destination Data (2001) for Year 11 students (2000) by Location (metropolitan and country)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Destination</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Metro</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apprenticeship</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traineeship</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TAFE</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other training</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Return to school</td>
<td>83.0%</td>
<td>85.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FT employment</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PT employment</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment assistance</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lost contact</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-participation</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Adapted from data supplied by the Department of Education, Western Australia)

By contrast with the Year 11 cohort, students in Year 12 in the year 2000 demonstrated marked differences in their choice of destination during the following year. Table 2.8 shows that a higher proportion of metropolitan (34.6 per cent) than country students (21.8 per cent) went from school to university. By contrast, a higher proportion of country students than metropolitan students went from school into apprenticeships (3.3 per cent compared with 1.3 per cent), traineeships (3.4 per cent compared with 1.2 per cent), full-time employment (12.2 per cent compared with 7.5 per cent), and into part-time employment (9.2 per cent compared with 4.8 per cent). Western Australian students appeared to make different patterns of choices about post-school destinations at the end of Year 12 depending on whether they lived in country or metropolitan areas.
Table 2.8: Education Department of Western Australia Destination Data (2001) for Year 12 students (2000) by Location (metropolitan and country)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Destination</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Metro</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University</td>
<td>21.8%</td>
<td>34.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apprenticeship</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traineeship</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TAFE</td>
<td>24.5%</td>
<td>28.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other training</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Return to school</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FT employment</td>
<td>12.2%</td>
<td>7.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PT employment</td>
<td>9.2%</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment assistance</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lost contact</td>
<td>9.4%</td>
<td>7.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-participation</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Adapted from data supplied by the WA Department of Education)

It should be noted that inferences drawn from Table 2.6 are based on differences in percentage scores only. Data in Table 2.6 do not allow an estimation of the net effect of location, that is, given these data it is not possible to determine whether differences between metropolitan and country students might be attributable to other variables or to their interactions. In this regard, Lamb and McKenzie’s (2001) national study of student transitions is instructive. Lamb and McKenzie (2001) examined young people’s transitions from school to a variety of post-school activities namely: apprenticeships and traineeships; full-time employment; part-time work and no study; part-time work and study; full-time study; unemployment; and not being in the labour force. The study showed small differences associated with whether students attended secondary schools in urban or rural locations. However, logistic regression analysis failed to identify locality as having a significant net effect on student transitions. Gender, early school leaving and socio-economic status, for instance, were more
likely to impact on students’ decisions to take up particular post-school activities than were their experiences of attending secondary school in an urban or rural location.

**Transition from school to work**

Lamb and McKenzie (2001) noted in their study of transitions from school to work that “The majority of young Australians (around 60 per cent) do not enrol for a university degree or a TAFE associate diploma course after leaving school” (p.1). For most of these students the major goal is to find successful employment.

In pursuing the issue of transition from school to work, Lamb and McKenzie’s study identified only small differences in patterns between students who had attended school in rural and urban locations. For instance, rural, compared with urban, school leavers were more likely to move from school to apprenticeships and then into full-time work. And urban, compared with rural, school leavers were more likely to move from school to full-time work after a period of study. Given that the differences in rates of successful transition from school to work were small, the researchers asked the necessary questions:

… what are the rates for different groups after controlling for the effects of other influences, and do the differences between groups vary significantly? (Lamb and McKenzie, 2000, p.34).

As with the variety of other transitional activities that Lamb and McKenzie (2000) examined, more sophisticated analyses of the data employing a multivariate logistic regression model failed to identify a net effect of location, specifically, on students’ success in transiting from school to work.

**Academic Performance at School**

Like the patterns of participation outlined above, this section now examines whether there are differences in students’ academic performance that are associated with, and influenced by, the geographical regions in which they attend school. The following discussion focuses firstly on state-level performance data and then on a national study.
of tertiary entrance performance to explore whether there might be a link between academic performance and the choices students make.

**State performance data**

State departments of education generally collect performance data on the students that they serve so that they know where resources should be targeted. Data are often disaggregated according to gender, language and cultural background of students, socio-economic status of school populations and school regions, and geographical divisions.

To provide an illustrative case, the Department of Education, Western Australia provided 2001 benchmark data for Years 3, 5 and 7 students related to the Western Australian Literacy and Numeracy Assessment (WALNA). Table 2.9 shows the percentage of students at each year level who scored above the State benchmarks for the corresponding level for reading, writing, spelling, and numeracy.
Table 2.9: 2001 Western Australian Literacy and Numeracy Assessment (WALNA)

Year 3: % of students above the WALNA benchmarks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Metro</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>90.7</td>
<td>93.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>78.6</td>
<td>83.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spelling</td>
<td>75.5</td>
<td>82.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Numeracy</td>
<td>88.4</td>
<td>90.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Year 5: % of students above the WALNA benchmarks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Metro</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>89.0</td>
<td>94.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>75.7</td>
<td>83.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spelling</td>
<td>72.9</td>
<td>82.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Numeracy</td>
<td>82.3</td>
<td>88.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Year 7: % of students above the WALNA benchmarks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Metro</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>76.0</td>
<td>84.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>70.4</td>
<td>77.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spelling</td>
<td>70.5</td>
<td>80.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Numeracy</td>
<td>70.2</td>
<td>78.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Adapted from data supplied through courtesy of the Department of Education, WA)
Data like these are generally considered by State departments to be public-domain information and are published on their web sites or are available on request (see for instance SSABSA website and Education Queensland website as listed in the References).

As indicated in Table 2.9, for every year, for every domain of learning – for reading, writing, spelling and numeracy – it appears that in the year 2001, Western Australian students attending school in metropolitan areas outscored their counterparts living in country areas. What’s more, differences between metropolitan and country students augmented between Years 3, 5 and 7 for each assessment domain with the one exception that the gap between metropolitan and country students did not widen for students in Year 5 and Year 7 on the writing assessment. To extrapolate from Table 2.9, while there was a 2.5 per cent gap between metropolitan and country students in the Year 3 cohort who met the reading benchmark, the gap widened to 8.1 percent favouring metropolitan students in Year 7. For writing, the gap at Year 3 was 4.9 per cent increasing to 7.3 per cent for Year 5 students and plateauing at 7.1 per cent for the Year 7 cohort. Similarly, differences favouring metropolitan students were evident for numeracy assessment for the three student cohorts and the difference between those meeting the numeracy benchmark augmented from 2.3 per cent at Year 3 to 7.8 per cent at Year 7.

While data like these are commonly reported by education departments, as emphasized in this data analysis section, they do not allow for conclusions about the net effect of living in a particular location because they do not control for the confounding effects of other variables. The Western Australian data were specifically chosen for illustrative purposes for this section because the Department has previously published a study of student performance that took into account the effects of other variables.

A 1993 study by the (then) Ministry of Education, Western Australia, showed similar patterns of differences in performance that generally favoured metropolitan students over those living in rural and remote areas of the state. While there were some variations in achievement patterns the trend was for metropolitan students at Years 3, 7 and 10 to outperform other students on a range of assessments. However, the
analyses of results moved beyond bivariate analyses to a sophisticated mathematical approach using Hierarchical Linear Modelling (HLM). The HLM analyses examined the relative influence of five variables: the socio-economic status of the school; the location of the school (metropolitan, rural or remote); the size of the school; the sex of the student; and whether or not the student identified as Indigenous (Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander). With respect to the effects of these variables, the project report concluded:

When all five variables were analysed using a sophisticated mathematical model (HLM), the results showed it was not the location of the school which had the most significant influence on students’ performances, but rather whether the student was Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and whether the student attended a school in a low socioeconomic status area (Ministry of Education, Western Australia, 1993, p.13).

Elaborating on data analyses from the same sample of 12,000 Western Australian students, Young (1994) claimed:

... it was clear from these analyses that school location was not a statistically significant factor in influencing student performance in mathematics, reading and writing, once an appropriate statistical model was used and other variables accounted for in the model (Young, 1994, p.102).

Drawing on a different data set, graphs presented in Figures 1 to 4 serve to illustrate visually how the effect of a variable like geographical location might be confounded by the effect of the socio-economic circumstances of school populations. The graphs are based on data provided through courtesy of Education Queensland and were prepared by Sandy Muspratt for this project. Figures 1, 2, 3 and 4 show Queensland Year 5 and Year 7 students’ scores for reading and writing graphed by gender, disadvantaged schools index\(^1\) (DSI), and location. The lower the numerical index of disadvantage, the higher the level of social and economic disadvantage of the school population.

---

\(^1\) The Disadvantaged School Index is an SES-like measure that applies to schools, rather than to individuals, families or suburbs. The original measure has been re-scaled to equally spaced increments.
Figure 1. Reading Year 5: Gender x Disadvantaged Schools Index x Location of School

Reading Score

Disadvantaged Schools Index

Legend:
- ■ Female, Urban
- □ Male, Urban
- ■ Female, Rural
- □ Male, Rural
Figure 3. Writing, Year 5:
Gender X Disadvantaged Schools Index X Location of School

Disadvantaged Schools Index

Writing Score

- Female, Urban
- Male, Urban
- Female, Rural
- Male, Rural
Figure 4. Writing, Year 7:
Gender X Disadvantaged Schools Index X Location of School
Figures 1, 2, 3 and 4 each displays a pattern of improvement in achievement scores associated with an improvement in the social and economic circumstances of the school population. That is, the linear trajectory of scores is from lower to higher achievement that correlates closely with stepwise improvements in students’ socio-economic backgrounds.

By contrast, in each of the graphs it is apparent that male and female achievement scores for reading and writing followed similar linear pathways with only small variations associated with living in urban and rural locations, with one exception only: In both reading and in writing, at both Year 5 and in Year 7, rural students in the most socio-economically disadvantaged school in the State achieved lower scores than those in urban schools. The social and economic circumstances of populations attending schools designated with a DSI of 1 appear to impact disproportionately on rural students’ reading and writing achievement, both at Year 5 and at Year 7. While this might seem puzzling given the available information, further inspection of school populations at these sites showed that rural schools experiencing this level of disadvantage drew disproportionately from Indigenous communities compared with like-schools in urban areas. To this extent, these graphic depictions of the Queensland performance data corroborate the findings related to the academic performance of Western Australian students living in different locations. In examining possible influences of rurality, it will be important to ensure that ‘rurality’ as a factor is not confounded with the socio-economic status of student populations or with particular issues associated with the provision of education for Indigenous populations.

**Tertiary Entrance scores**

As another measure of student performance at school, education systems rank eligible students in relation to their overall performance at school, mainly to prioritise access to places at tertiary institutions. In their study of tertiary entrance performance, Marks, McMillan and Hillman (2001) converted the tertiary entrance scores provided by education systems into an Equivalent National Tertiary Entrance Rank, or ENTER score to examine, from a national perspective, patterns of association and influence on students’ tertiary entrance performance.
In brief, the researchers showed from the national data that ‘Non-metropolitan students’ tertiary entrance performance is marginally lower than that of metropolitan students’ (Marks, McMillan and Hillman, 2001, viii). Students who attended schools in non-metropolitan schools and areas with low population densities scored 3 to 4 ENTER points lower than those students who attended schools in metropolitan areas and areas with higher population densities.

Compared with where students lived, the most important influences on their tertiary entrance performance were their literacy and numeracy achievement in Year 9 followed by individual school factors, the socio-economic background of their family, and the school sector that they attended.

Performance data reported in this section suggest that there may be only small differences in academic performance that can be attributed to the region in which students live. Given that students in different regions make different decisions, for instance, about leaving school early and not completing school, it is important to note that these decisions are unlikely to be associated with levels of academic performance that differentiate students according to region. In their report, Marks et al (2001) made the following critical observation on this issue:

Other reports in the LSAY series have found that non-metropolitan students are less likely to complete school and participate in higher education (Marks et al., 2000). On the other hand, differences between metropolitan and non-metropolitan students in Year 9 achievement and ENTER scores are considerably smaller. Therefore, the reasons for the lower participation rates of non-metropolitan students are to do with factors other than performance. (Marks, McMillan and Hillman, 2001, p.60

**Student Aspirations**

The discussion of student aspirations in this data analysis section complements what has already been presented in the body of the literature review. The focus here is specifically on exploring available statistical data and associated commentary on student aspirations.
The longitudinal surveys by Marks and Fleming (1999) on early school leaving and Marks et al (2001) on tertiary entrance performance each incorporated a measure of student aspirations as a focus of the research. Student aspirations in the early school leaving study were identified simply in terms of responses from the Year 9 student cohort as to whether or not they intended to leave school before Year 11. In the longitudinal survey of tertiary entrance performance, student aspirations were identified in similar fashion according to students’ stated intentions about undertaking full-time study in the year after leaving school.

These measures of students’ aspirations proved to have strong correlations with and to be powerfully predictive of the student variables of leaving school early and of tertiary entrance performance. From their multivariate analysis of data on early school leaving, Marks and Fleming (1999) concluded:

… student aspirations have the largest effect on early school leaving … Students who in Year 9 believed that they would not be at school in Year 11 were over 8 times more likely to have left school by the beginning of that year than remain at school compared to students with higher aspirations (p.22).

Similarly, those who said in Year 9 that they intended to study full-time the year after leaving school achieved higher tertiary entrance scores than those who did not express an early intention to study. The effect of this measure of students’ aspirations was net of the effects of other factors.

While these data are interesting, what is obvious is that the measures of student aspirations were narrowly confined to future academic study. Equally important from the perspective of the current DEST study is the fact that students’ aspirations were used to predict other outcomes, that is, aspirations were treated in the regression models as an independent variable. The focus was not on identifying factors that influenced aspirations in the first instance. The questions asked by Marks and Fleming (1999) and Marks et al (2001) were quite different, both in scope and intent, from the questions that are posed about aspirations in the current DEST study.

More helpful with regard to the DEST research is Peck’s study of factors influencing Year 12 Western Australia students’ aspirations. Peck’s study broadened the definition of students’ aspirations to include educational aspirations based on
students’ plans for the coming year as well as occupational aspirations related to both the skills involved in, and the prestige attached to, students’ chosen occupations. In this study, Peck used students’ aspirations as the dependent variable and examined potential influences on the ways that final year students envisioned their educational and occupational futures.

Logistic regression analyses applied to the three kinds of students’ aspirations (educational, occupational skills and occupational prestige) showed that students living in metropolitan locations had significantly higher educational and occupational aspirations than students living in country areas. According to Peck (2000):

When SES was represented by variables relating to the educational attainments of parents, the odds of rural students having higher aspirations are about two thirds of those for metropolitan students … This difference is statistically significant and remains almost constant over all aspect of aspirations (pp. 222-3).

Living in a metropolitan area had similar beneficial effects in shaping students’ aspirations as having parents in high status occupations, having parents with high levels of education and being a member of particular ethnic groups (p. 221).

Conclusions

Students negotiate for themselves a range of possible futures by making the decisions that they do – to leave school early, to take up other forms of study and training, to stay on at school and earn a secondary school certificate, to participate in higher education studies, to move into the world of employment or unemployment. And for whatever reasons that young people in metropolitan, regional and rural areas make different decisions about issues like these, they do not seem to be associated with inferior academic performance.

The studies and data sources referred to in this section suggest that living in different locations is likely to impact differentially on critical decisions that students make during their school years that, in turn, are likely to impact on their life trajectories. The fact that boys living in regional and rural areas, for instance, are more likely than
those living in metropolitan areas to leave school without attempting Year 11 – and that these same boys are more likely not to complete Year 12 – suggests that there may be a rurality factor at play in their decisions. Likewise, data suggesting that rural girls more often decide to stay on at school than do rural boys may be a variation of the same kind of rurality factor – a corollary to the situation for their brothers. Given their knowledge and experiences, rural girls may decide that staying on at school offers a safer and more predictable trajectory to the futures that are available to them in rural communities that hold fewer prospects for them than for their brothers. Issues like these will be taken up in the DEST project to investigate whether there is a special rural factor at play that helps shape and coerce students’ aspirations for their futures – not only educational and occupational futures – but the futures and realities that they negotiate, the biographical spaces that they claim, as discussed in the body of the literature review.
PART C

Strategies Review
Introduction

Very rarely do educational programmes address young people's life aspirations and expectations as a direct focus. Rather, most work relevant to aspirations and expectations has arisen from projects which see them as contributing factors to some more concrete outcome deemed important at the programme and policy level. These policy outcomes include school retention, school-to-work transitions, participation in vocational education, youth development for at-risk or alienated youth, and the role of young people in community development.

As a result, strategies relevant to the aspirations and expectations of young people have been developed in a range of contexts and for a range of purposes, but they have generally addressed these aspects of young people's experience indirectly, incidentally or implicitly. This raises the question of how broadly a review of strategies should define what is relevant.

An illustration in the case of educational aspirations can be found in the review by Brooks et al. (1997) of approaches to assisting young people at risk of leaving school early. The authors found that practitioners identified as the most common contributors to early leaving: the experience of academic failure; inflexible school curriculum and teaching strategies; alienating school environments; and family conflict and breakdown. Additional factors, which were seen as consequences of the first set, included low self-esteem; poor student/teacher relations; lack of interest in education; and disruptive behaviour. Clearly, these factors contributing to early school leaving will affect and be affected by students' educational aspirations, to the point where it seems difficult to separate them; yet aspiration itself is not mentioned in the list.

It follows that strategies which address issues like these are likely to affect educational aspirations also, even though this is not their direct aim. However, if this connection is taken as grounds for including such strategies in this review, it is difficult to imagine what educational strategy might not in some way affect students' aspirations for education.
For instance, in discussing policies relevant to under-age school leaving, Brooks et al. (1997) identify policies and programmes on youth, social justice and equity, anti-discrimination, school attendance, student conduct, disadvantaged schools, students with English as a Second Language, special education, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, guidance and counselling, police liaison, among others. While these factors and associated strategies are connected in various ways to the issue of aspirations and expectations, to consider them all would require a treatment so general as to be of little value. For this reason, this review focuses only on those strategies where the impact of aspirations or expectations are more direct, even though, as mentioned above, they may not be part of the explicit goals of the strategies.

Consequently, this review includes programmes which are significant in scale or scope, sufficiently well documented to be available to other interested parties, and containing some aspects of relevance to young people's aspirations and expectations about their futures, including education and work, but also other aspects of life which will impinge on their life plans. The resulting selection includes programmes in personal development in a context of community involvement or employment, school to work transition or pathways, and school retention and participation in post-compulsory, vocational or higher education.

Australian and overseas policy and practice has developed a rich base of studies on development, pathways and transition for young people. An increasingly popular approach in such studies is to describe in case study form the experience of various schools and communities who have addressed these needs in a wide variety of ways (Australian Curriculum Studies Association, 1992; Centre for Research and Learning for Regional Australia, 2001; Dwyer, 1996; Funkhouser, Gonzales and Moles 1997; Kenyon, Sercombe, Black and Lhuede, 2001; Keys Young, 2000; Prime Minister's Youth Pathways Action Plan Taskforce, 2001; Miller and Hahn, 1997; Mulraney and Turner, 2001; School to Work Programme, 2000a, 2000b; Spierings, 2001; Stokes and Wyn, 1998; Strategic Partners, 2001a, 2001b). This study draws together the various recommendations from these studies, but the case reports are well worth reading in themselves as illustration of the general principles considered here.
The findings from these studies and programmes will be reviewed in three main categories reflecting the key focus of the programmes in which the strategies have been developed. These are youth development, school retention and participation, and community development. There is considerable overlap in the features of the programmes in these categories, which confirms their validity. However, their focus is sufficiently different to warrant the distinction. In addition to these categories, specific mention will be made of certain issues which cut across the categories, and which seem particularly pertinent to strategies for working with rural young people, viz. personal development, parental involvement, and issues for Indigenous students.

**Youth Development Strategies**

Youth development programmes are broad-ranging projects typically focusing on the transition from school to adulthood, especially work and training. They may involve schools as partners, but are generally not school centred, and are often targeted at young people who have left school.

The Dusseldorp Skills Foundation (n. d.) has developed a National Youth Commitment Resource Kit, which aims to support early school leavers or others facing disadvantages in completing a year 12 or equivalent qualification or obtaining full-time work linked to education or training. The community partnership strategy includes the development of 'personal action plans for all secondary students', and the provision of careers advice, guidance and mentoring linked to employment opportunities. The programme has a range of performance indicators focusing on participation in education and employment, but includes also an assessment of school leavers' social competence (physically and emotionally), self-reliance and engagement.

The kit provides a plan and associated guidelines and documentation for establishing the programme in a school-community partnership, where the school identifies a 'Transition Manager' to assist the student in making a managed transition from school, in collaboration with a Youth Commitment Community Team. The documentation includes worksheets to assist students in evaluating their career path and work experiences, and in setting and achieving personal goals. Programmes such as this one
have the value of strengthening the link between schools, employers and other community members, especially in combining further education and training with work.

Another set of relevant programmes is the youth development programmes established by state governments such as those in Queensland, South Australia, Victoria and Western Australia, including those with links to the Australian Services Cadet Scheme (Ausyouth, 2000). These programmes have led to the MCEETYA National Youth Development Strategy, and include projects in which host organizations provide structured programmes in skill development, personal development and connection with the community, usually through some form of community service.

There is a focus on developing a sense of identity through shared experiences, values and goals, by providing increased opportunities and challenges for young people, and encouraging them 'to take an active role/participate in their community through developing a sense of community service (community spirit) and responsibility' (Ausyouth, 2000, p. 4). Empowerment of young people is a primary goal, as is the development of personal skills such as teamwork, leadership, self-discipline, self-reliance, self-confidence, individual responsibility and active citizenship. Evaluations of several of the programmes suggest that participants and other stakeholders see the programmes as successful in enhancing personal skills. Given that the experience of community work and qualities of self-discipline, self-reliance and self-confidence would be valuable for young people in determining their aspirations and expectations, these programmes offer useful models.

The general model of youth development suggests some valuable principles for working with young people, which would be important to any programme aimed at developing their resources for planning their futures, including their aspirations and expectations. Ausyouth (2002, p. 15) identified the following guiding principles for good practice in youth development:

1. Strengths based, positive youth development as the foundation for policy and programme development.
2. Participation of young people in all levels of planning and decision making.
3. An inclusive ethos.
4. An experiential model of learning that builds on capabilities and skills while maximising opportunities for fun and recognising age and developmental phases.
5. Respecting community voice and identity.
6. Encouraging communities to value and engage young people.
7. Partnerships.
8. Quality outcomes.
10. Recognising the contribution of all stakeholders.
11. Promotion that is ethical, honest and non-patronising (that is, that young people themselves have a clear understanding of what is being offered and what they can expect to get out of it).
12. Providing opportunities for service to the community that are meaningful for both young people and the community.

In elaborating these principles, Ausyouth explained their importance in orienting young people to the future:

For young people, believing in and having the confidence in themselves and in their ability to influence and take some control over the future will assist in their vision for a positive future. Setting and working towards goals, being motivated and able to take voluntary action are another part of this process.

Youth development activities offer the opportunity for young people to broaden their range of experiences, increasing access and exposure to activities that they may not have otherwise. Young people gain confidence in their ability to cope with varied and challenging situations and experiences.

(Ausyouth, 2001, p.13)
School Retention and Participation Strategies

The most active area of policy development and research on strategies relevant to this review has been associated with the problem of 'at risk' young people. These programmes include a concern for transition to employment, but their main focus is on promoting retention and participation in schooling, with the school as the centre of such programmes.

In a report on the perspectives of young people identified as being at risk (Australian Centre for Equity through Education and the Australian Youth Research Centre, 2001), the authors note that the notion of risk has been defined in a variety of ways, but suggest that a useful definition sees students at risk as 'those who are likely to fail, drop out or not successfully complete school or its equivalent, and consequently are unlikely to possess sufficient skills or qualifications to acquire well paid secure employment or become integrated into an accepted pattern of social responsibility' (p. 22).

However, these risks can apply in some degree to a large proportion of students, and should not be seen as a discrete minority who are somehow qualitatively different from the 'mainstream'. While students in rural and remote schools are often identified as being subject to risk to a greater degree than elsewhere, the factors involved in putting students at risk, or protecting them from it, are numerous and wide ranging, and change over the age range and in particular biographies. Consequently, the research and development motivated by the policy focus on 'at risk' youth is a valuable source of information for working with young people in general.

In his review of early school leaving, Dwyer (1996) describes the mismatch between the early adolescent student and the school environment as a major factor in early school leaving. He reviews successful school practices which address the needs of students at risk, and identifies a series of factors which are central to them. The review is a useful basis for developing strategies which promote student retention and involvement.
Similar strategies have been identified by Batten and Russell (1995, p. xi) in their study of recurring features of effective programmes leading to real achievement by young people. Further, a study conducted for the Full Service Schools programme surveyed the views of young people around Australia on issues related to leaving or staying at school (Australian Centre for Equity through Education and Australian Youth Research Centre, 2001). The study made a range of recommendations for practice in supporting young people. Finally, a review of innovation and best practice for the Full Service Schools programme studied interventions for young people at risk of not completing school (Strategic Partners in Association with the Centre for Youth Affairs and Development, 2001a). This review also identified the characteristics of best practice which offer useful suggestions for strategies to promote school participation.

The recommendations from these studies have been drawn together in the following list of characteristics of successful programmes.

Student involvement

- active engagement of students, which research suggests is a difficult move for schools, where traditional school cultures might doubt students' maturity and capacity to exercise responsibility;
- encouragement of students to take responsibility for their own learning and behaviour, and to be involved in decisions about the learning process, including the use of incentives and negotiated contracts;
- active participation of young people, particularly those at risk, in the governance of programmes and of schools, and support for young people in real and relevant decision-making.

Student support

- establishment of a supportive school culture/structure and a caring, supportive environment, including open teacher/student relationships, and staff/student units or teams;
- monitoring of student progress;
support networks through pastoral care programmes based in house systems or home groups, personal development programmes, and inter-agency cooperation;

provision of appropriate mentoring options for young people;

school organisation, curriculum, and teaching practices that create an environment in which all young people feel secure and valued and where their individual needs and points of view are taken into account;

positive reinforcement of achievement, building on student strengths;

decreased student-adult ratios and class sizes;

time allocation for all staff to provide pastoral care within their teaching allocations;

a student centred philosophy which gives priority to student needs and interests;

an integrated approach to curriculum development and student support, including case management, peer support, mentoring and/or counselling, and curriculum designed and delivered in formats and locations to meet individual needs;

concern for students at risk that extends beyond the programme through the use of follow-up contact and monitoring.

Flexible arrangements

flexibility in areas like school hours, part-time study, vertical grouping, senior college environments, negotiated curriculum, cooperative learning;

organisational and operational flexibility in order to be able to respond to individual needs;

open and flexible arrangements for the final years of schooling, such as senior college arrangements, extended time periods, part-time schooling/part-time work, flexible attendance (including late starts), cross-age tutoring flexibility, vertical grouping, negotiated curriculum, cooperative learning.
**Authentic curriculum**

- practical orientation in the school curriculum and a focus on authentic learning, action learning including work experience, an emphasis on reflecting on experience and integrated studies;
- initiatives to engage and re-engage ‘at risk’ young people which have real life and work applications, and opportunities to work and learn outside the classroom and the school;
- flexible pacing which allows young people to learn at their own rate;
- staffing by people who are relaxed and non-judgemental, including opportunities and assistance for students to talk with staff about future aspirations and goal-setting;
- providing students with the opportunity to work cooperatively with others, both inside and outside the classroom;
- mainstreaming interventions and keeping high expectations of student achievement, while also providing non-school options where appropriate;
- attention to the whole person, incorporating social and personal as well as academic and vocational development;
- appropriate evaluation of student progress by the use of assessment that matches the learning that has taken place, and evaluation of the effectiveness of programmes.

**Staff involvement**

- careful selection of programme teachers and leaders, and the provision of professional development opportunities for people in those roles;
- professional development for teachers in supporting the needs of all students (including inclusive teaching methods, recognition of diverse learning styles, student-teacher relationships, student welfare and school-agency collaboration);
- recognition of the time taken for staff and students to develop trusting relationships as an element of teachers' workload;
- committed staff with broader expertise developed through planned professional development, collaborative planning and/or team building.
Parent and community involvement

- involvement of parents and community in a collaborative endeavour for young people at risk, and a fostering of links with agencies outside the school or programme;
- building working relationships and networks between schools and other community agencies, including the appointment of ‘pathways negotiators’ who would facilitate the creation of ‘bridging’ links among these agencies and enable the continuity of relationships and support across sectors;
- local level development of approaches appropriate to the location and to the nature and cultural background of the group of young people;
- collaboration and community linkages ranging from informal referral arrangements, through detailed partnering agreements between agencies and schools, to co-location of some services with schools;
- involvement of families in finding solutions.

School organizational climate

- exemplary leadership committed to best practice and excellence;
- a change-oriented school climate;
- a broader policy and community climate that supports innovation and change and collaboration among school, community organizations and families;
- a vision for action which is 'authentically owned' by participants and which is developed at school and system levels;
- policy support which avoids competition among schools based on academic results but focuses on the development of a learning community through collaboration.

A similar review by Brooks et al. (1997) of initiatives targeting students at risk of leaving school before the minimum legal age, discusses various aspects of programmes, which represent best practice in the field. While under-age leavers are a special case of low aspirations and expectations in terms of school education, research suggests that similar factors affect the completion of both compulsory and post-compulsory education (Brooks et al., 1997, p. 2). Aspects of these programmes are therefore likely to be valuable in helping students in general develop and enhance
their aspirations and expectations. The review found that successful initiatives shared a range of principles which grouped around key themes or elements (Brooks et al., 1997, p. viii). These themes are closely related to the categories listed above, but their different perspective warrants listing them separately: They can be summarized as follows:

1 **Explicit, planned response**
   This involved strong links between schools and other service providers in developing regional approaches in which collaboration led to optimal use of resources. Interventions were focused early on potential under-age leavers, and were based on clear monitoring and evaluation.

2 **Non-mainstream school options and support services**
   Combines programmes as part of normal school functions with alternative options and specialist services.

3 **Holistic, multidisciplinary approach**
   Develops climate of care and support, with positive reinforcement of achievement, and incentives and environments which encourage participation and reduce alienation. Uses an integrated approach to personal, social and educational welfare of students.

4 **Focus on individual success and development**
   Provides opportunities for participants to experience success, and involves setting personal milestones for social and independent living skills, and providing intensive support where necessary for basic educational skills like literacy and numeracy.

5 **Focus on personal responsibility**
   Encourages students to take responsibility for their learning and behaviour through voluntary participation.
6 Flexibility to respond to individual needs

Flexibility will accommodate individual participants with various levels and types of need.

7 Professional and personal quality of staff

Programmes need qualified, experienced and committed staff with access to professional development and other support.

8 Involvement of parents

Involves good communication with parents/carers about the initiative, and opportunities for them to be involved.

The programmes reviewed by Brooks et al. used a range of strategies to promote literacy, numeracy and personal and social skills, including timetabled group meetings of at-risk students, individual tutoring, camps and outdoor activities, alternative or home-based schooling, counselling, family therapy and mediation, meetings with parents/carers, contract learning, case management, mentoring, peer support networks and work placements. Programmes focused on literacy and numeracy, self-esteem, social skills like anger management and conflict resolution, craft, living skills like cooking and budgeting, and enterprise skills.

The EREC project (Educational Resources for Enterprising Communities in Rural Australia) identified a range of best practice examples in school-industry-community collaboration in rural areas, with a focus on promoting 'rural student participation as an effective means of changing attitudes and behaviour and generating productive project outcomes' (Australian Curriculum Studies Association, 1992).

Lending further support to the features identified above, critical factors in the success of these projects were:

- detailed programme structure;
practical support from both business and education sectors;
commitment, expertise and enthusiasm of the project coordinator;
incorporation in mainstream activities, such as accreditation of project work towards school or TAFE qualification;
the use of the media to promote awareness and recognition of the project;
collaboration across education, training and work sectors.

An important aspect of these programmes is the extent to which they reflect a broad view of the potential of schools in promoting participation and transition. The Full Service Schools review illustrates this point in the following warning:

Part of a productive school climate is that educational outcomes are seen more broadly than only academic achievement, standardised scores, and attendance and retention rates. A shift in focus would include social measures, building connectedness, emotional connectedness and resilience, which may in the longer term be more important than academic attainment.

(Strategic Partners in Association with the Centre for Youth Affairs and Development, 2001a, p.112)

Such an approach is clearly an important need if these programmes are to touch on student aspirations.

Community Development Strategies
It is important to avoid a deficit view of rural young people, to recognize that they are not necessarily lacking in the resources needed for rewarding and successful futures. Rather, it is also likely (and a more positive way to view these issues) that they may lack the opportunities to use and extend the personal and group resources that they already have. One approach which acknowledges this aspect of young people's experience is to see them as an important part of rural and regional economic and community development.

Collins (2001) identifies four models of school-community relationships which offer
opportunities for community development:

- the school as community centre, a lifelong learning center, and a center for delivering a range of services;
- the community as a resource for the curriculum, built on ideas of the place-based curriculum (Haas and Nachtigal, 1998);
- the school as a developer of entrepreneurial skills;
- the school as a site for using new technologies to build and preserve community while linking it to the outside world.

In reporting outcomes of projects which focus on the development possibilities of school-community relationships, Collins (2001, p. 22) notes that 'Youth can be a powerful and enthusiastic force in promoting community revitalization when they become partners with their schools and communities in contributing their ideas, energies, and talents in planning for the future'.

Mulraney and Turner (2001) also discuss the potential of this approach, which they argue is promoted through a culture of enterprise in community, industry and schools. Enterprise education involving authentic learning experiences, business mentors, training and on-the-job experience is one way of harnessing and developing this potential. Carter (1999) emphasizes the potential of student involvement in community capacity building, including projects which develop new avenues for civic engagement (e.g. contributing to the media), build on cultural and historical assets, and identify uses for new technologies.

Information and communication technologies offer new opportunities for schools to become important sites for community development and capacity building (Simpson, Wood, Daws and Seinen, 2001), and young people can become genuine leaders in these activities. They also provide opportunities for young people to communicate and develop online communities to share their views and experiences and relate to students from other places and cultures, with particularly valuable potential for students in remote and isolated areas (Odasz, 2002; Wheeler et al., 1999).

The community development approach aims to generate commitment and initiative among young people by giving them the opportunity to make a real contribution to
their community. By enhancing collaborative skills, broadening experience and providing a sense of achievement, such strategies have potential to be a valuable context for developing students' aspirations.

**Personal Development Strategies**

Retention studies have identified a range of factors which place students at risk of dropping out of school, but counteracting these is a set of protective factors which help young people cope with whatever pressures and problems they might face, making them less vulnerable to leaving school early. Grouped under the general notion of resilience, these factors include 'personal factors such as social competence, problem solving, autonomy and sense of purpose, as well as family connectedness and positive relationships, and peer and adult support beyond the home' (Strategic Partners, 2001a, p.21).

If aspirations are to be a focus of school strategies, programmes aimed at developing resilience, including the personal capacities which contribute to it, would seem important. Personal development programmes address these issues, and are common in the youth and community development and retention and transition programmes already discussed. A significant example of a programme which attempts this is the MindMatters project, a national curriculum project which has developed strategies and materials to promote mental health and well-being among young people (Curriculum Corporation, 2001). While the project includes material on the more pathological aspects of these issues, such as mental illness, bullying and suicide prevention, a considerable proportion of the materials and strategies focus on general aspects of well-being and resilience important in everyday life.

The MindMatters material reiterates that promoting social and emotional well-being is achieved by enhancing protective factors which contribute to an individual’s capacity to be resilient. The project notes that while some of these factors are beyond the reach of schools, others are within their sphere of influence. The protective factors include:

- connectedness to family, friends and school
relationship with a caring adult
support, belonging and role-models
self-esteem
handling the demands of school
belief in one’s own ability to cope
sense of control
individual disposition.
(Curriculum Corporation, 2001, p. 5)

The strategies and materials developed in the project promote skills and understandings relating to coping, dealing with stress, promoting friendships and a sense of belonging, and dealing with aspects of alienation, such as powerlessness, meaninglessness and a sense of estrangement.

Other work relevant to helping students develop a sense of direction and the confidence to follow through on their aspirations is in the field of enterprise and career education. The Enterprise and Career Education Foundation (2002, p. 1) defines enterprise education as:

. . . learning directed towards developing in young people those skills, competencies, understandings and attributes which equip them to be innovative, and to identify, create, initiate, and successfully manage personal, community and business and work opportunities, including working for themselves.

The Foundation is promoting work in schools through action research projects and professional development, aimed at fostering in students such skills and values as adaptability, creativity and self-reliance, the ability to generate, recognize and seize opportunities, and an appreciation of life-long learning.

Related work on career education emphasizes awareness of personal strengths and aspirations, opportunities for education, training and employment, and action plans which focus on lifelong learning and career transitions and change. Approaches to career education are recognizing the changing nature and context of school to work
transitions, leading to programmes which are broad in scope and developmental in design (Patton, 2001; McMahon and Carroll, 1999a, 1999b).

Personal development and career and enterprise programmes provide the most direct opportunity for assisting students to address their aspirations for the future. However, such approaches are also likely to be abstract and hypothetical if not combined with the experiential components of strategies in other sections of this review. An integrated approach is clearly recommended.

**Parental Involvement Strategies**

The relationship between home and school is crucial to young people's decisions about education and the future (Abbott-Chapman, 2001). In a time of major social and economic change, the experiences of previous generations may be less useful than before in providing guidance and support in dealing with new demands on the resources of young people. Changing job opportunities, new technologies and increasing demands for education are some examples of these demands. Consequently, the role of parents and family in supporting young people in constructing and achieving their aspirations needs attention.

Parental involvement in education has been the subject of considerable research, including studies in rural areas, which have identified a range of useful strategies and recommendations (Flaxman, 2001; Funkhouser, Gonzales, and Moles, 1997; Maynard and Howley, 1997). Strategies for promoting parent involvement include:

- cooperative strategies for extending the school curriculum beyond the school walls;
- support for parents providing learning experiences at home, such as workshops and classes to further develop their skills in supporting literacy and computer literacy, and to prepare them to take a role in school decision making;
- home visits by personnel trained to facilitate home-school communication;
- in-class involvement of parents, community and business leaders and citizens;
- vacation enrichment programmes for parents and children;
• community-based learning;
• use of school facilities for community activities;
• overcoming time and resource constraints (for example, through the use of parent volunteers to handle time-consuming, routine tasks and release time for teachers);
• holding parent conferences near the home rather than just at school; and providing transport and child care for activities, meetings etc. on evenings and week-ends;
• providing parents and school staff involved in collaborative efforts with information and training that historically they both have lacked, which can overcome their misperceptions of each other’s attitudes and motives;
• devising mechanisms to keep parents regularly informed about school affairs;
• running professional development for staff in the practice of parent involvement and, especially, to remove any misperceptions and stereotypes they may have about parents and families, which could interfere with forging effective partnerships;
• restructuring schools to support parent involvement by making them less bureaucratic and more responsive to family needs and to make parents full partners in school decision making;
• bridging family-school language and cultural differences or the misperception that parents with little formal education cannot be full partners in their children’s education (for example, by including specific efforts to promote cultural understanding);
• drawing on external agencies such as local businesses, social and health agencies, and colleges and universities to support the partnerships;
• seeking district and state assistance in the form of policies and funding to support training and services that can contribute to effective family-school partnerships.

If opportunities for students in regional communities are to be expanded, and if their aspirations to take them up are to be enhanced, they will need new forms of support from a range of sources. Family support will be an important part of this, and parental involvement strategies such as these will be crucial in achieving such change.
Strategies for Indigenous Students

Indigenous students in rural areas develop their aspirations and expectations in contexts which are similar in many respects to those of all rural students. However, their situation is also unique in combining these experiences with the significant cultural issues associated with a history of cultural domination, deprivation and exclusion. For these reasons, the strategies identified in this review, while all important for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous young people, require particular attention and additional steps to be successful in the education of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander youth.

The Prime Minister's Youth Pathways Action Plan Taskforce (2001, p. 54) identified a series of 'attitudes and mindsets' and 'a clash of cultures' which, in combination with major material disadvantages, inhibit progress for Indigenous young people. The effects of these problems on the aspirations and expectations of these young people are serious and often tragic.

Considerable attention has been given to these issues, and many of the projects already reviewed contain valuable material relevant to the needs of Indigenous students. (See, in particular, Ausyouth, 2001, 2002; Keys Young, 2000; School to Work Programme, 2000a, 2000b; Strategic Partners, 2001b.)

A recent report of models of delivery of vocational education in rural and remote areas of the Northern Territory noted that some community members questioned the validity of vocational education and training because of the limited employment opportunities (School to Work Programme, 2000a, p. 42). On the other hand, the MCEETYA Taskforce on Indigenous Education (2001) notes that numerous studies have demonstrated that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people place a high priority on education. Yet the Taskforce comments that 'many young Indigenous Australians have a poor understanding of the pathways within and between school and post-school options, and their Indigenous cultures and experiences, because the connections are often not apparent or available to them' (p. 10). If students are not aware of what options are available, they can hardly be factored in to their aspirations.
and expectations. Equally important for Indigenous students is the high priority which
their parents give to combining these educational aspirations with the need for them
to remain strong in their own culture and its language (Northern Territory Department

The MCEETYA Taskforce lists strategies to address key aspects of promoting
Indigenous education, such as improving attendance and retention, and supporting
transitions from primary to secondary school to work. In many respects, the strategies
parallel those listed earlier to promote youth and community development and school
retention and participation. However, in all cases there are the additional factors of
cultural difference and domination, requiring special consideration and strategies. In
particular, the Taskforce recommended the need to foster support for cultural identity
and self-esteem and to reduce the level of cultural alienation, including the
development of strong supportive bonds among Indigenous students. Community
liaison and the presence of Indigenous adults also take on special importance in this
context.

The 'What Works' programme is an excellent resource for developing strategies for
Indigenous students (McRae et al., 2002). The programme emphasizes cultural
recognition, acknowledgement and support as a key element of a 'culturally friendly'
school, along with the development of skills and participation. The MindMatters
project material also contains useful recommendations for involving Indigenous
communities in the education of young people (Curriculum Corporation, 2001).

**Conclusion**

This review has considered a wide variety of programmes and strategies which have
sought to enhance the options for young people in deciding and acting on their life
aspirations. Current practice attempts this through programmes which promote
educational retention and participation, support students in the transition to post-
school education, training and employment, and involve them in a range of
community and personal development programmes.
It is fair to say, however, that the direct consideration of aspirations and expectations in these programmes has been limited. While making school programmes more attractive to young people is valuable in enhancing their resources on which future options will be based, there is also a need to make them aware of how these options can be evaluated and acted on. Similarly, while transitions to post-school education, training and work are crucial decision points in the life trajectories of young people, guiding them through this process will be most useful if it assists them to consider alternatives, rather than channel them by default into avenues not chosen through a genuinely critical consideration of alternatives.

The message from this review is that, if the aspirations of young people in rural areas are to be expanded, a combination of the strategies discussed here will be important. The issue remains, however, of how the integration of strategies can be clearly linked to enhancing the aspirations of young people, and to providing them with the personal resources and external support to achieve them.

Having provided this three-part review of relevant literature, the remaining chapters are devoted to detailing the outcomes of the research project. The next chapter begins by investigating broad aspects of student aspirations and expectations as evidenced within the focus group interviews.
Chapter 3

Student Aspirations and Expectations for their Futures
I just want to be something – like a label – so I can say, ‘I do this’. It makes you seem really cool. (Year 12 Student: South Australia)

The most obvious and consistent theme that emerged from interviews with students who participated in this study was that the vast majority of them wanted ‘to be something’ – they wanted to make something of their lives – they did not want to be caught in what they perceived to be dead-end jobs that would rob them of opportunities to explore life in ways that had not been available to many of their parents. Many of the students who were interviewed considered their futures within an implicit framework of ‘New Times’, of restructured communities and economies, of changing landscapes and of meta-narratives that had begun to shape and coerce what they imagined and expected of themselves. Features of their talk demonstrated clearly that many students had thought about their futures in detailed ways and that they had accumulated know-how and ‘street-savvy’ that would assist them in navigating their futures. Most importantly, when asked about their futures, most students conceptualised their responses in terms of work and careers that appeared to be foremost in their thinking.

However, the generally buoyant levels of aspirations and expectations of students in the focus groups were not reflected in all students’ talk nor were they consistently reflected in teachers’ and parents’ views of what would become of the student body. As discussed in this chapter, a minority of students were ambivalent, apprehensive even, in imagining that their lives might transcend the borders of what they already knew. For them, staying at home within their communities assumed much greater importance than pursuing work or careers elsewhere. Moreover, amidst the certain and the vacillating voices exploring imagined and planned futures, there were the marginalised voices of some students whose sights were more firmly set on survival than on career prospects.

In embellishing on these points, this chapter explores important themes that emerged from focus group interviews with students and teachers, and from interview and survey responses from parents. The chapter looks firstly at the nature of students’ aspirations relating to work and careers and the kinds of discourses about education
and training that supported them. The chapter then focuses on student voices expressing different kinds of aspirations. These voices were marginalised within a dominant narrative of work and career options that emerged amongst all of the focus groups. Finally the chapter touches briefly on teachers’ and parents’ more sceptical perceptions of students’ futures – perceptions that were set in tension with students’ more buoyant aspirations and expectations of their future prospects. More detailed aspects of teacher and parent talk are taken up in the next chapter and the important issue of the tension between student, compared with teachers and parent, views is explored more fully in the final chapter.

**Student Aspirations: Work and Careers**

The majority of rural students from across Australia who were interviewed for this study expressed high-level aspirations, most of which centred on future careers. Like their metropolitan counterparts in Melbourne, rural students spoke of their desires, and of their plans, to continue their studies at Universities and at TAFE colleges and to take up traineeships and apprenticeships within and outside of their communities.

In general, rural students’ choices of careers were rich and varied as evidenced in their reports that they wanted to become aeronautical and computer engineers, technology specialists, doctors, lawyers, psychologists, farmers, professional sport stars, television and radio personalities, secretaries, hospitality workers, construction workers and so on. While some students, like those in the following quote, had settled on dedicated career goals, others expressed interest in pursuing varied options, and a few students simply did not know what they wanted of their lives:

*S:*  *I want to be a pilot. I just want to be a female pilot. You’ve got to be smart. I’ve just got to pick up my maths at the moment. I want to get my private licence first, even though it costs a bundle, and then go in to the army and fly. Iroquois or something to start me off…*

*S:*  *Yeah, I want to do sports therapy.*

*S:*  *I want to do physio, sports rehab.*

*S:*  *I would like to work within the law somewhere, but preferably working with juveniles before they go in to court, like juvenile law.*

*S:*  *Social work.*
S:  I don’t know. (Northern Territory Year 10 Students)

For some students, fulfilment of their aspirations involved high-level support and flexibility from their families that they appeared confident they could assume:

S:  I’m going to Perth for year 11 and 12. I’ve accepted my school and paid.
I:  Is this boarding school?
S:  No, my family is moving. And I’m doing TEE and I want to go to uni.
I:  Do you know what you want to do?
S:  Medicine or some health career. (Western Australia Year 10 Indigenous Student)

For other students, high-level aspirations requiring financial backing were couched in more tentative terms as the likelihood of fulfilment fluctuated along with their family’s fortunes:

S:  Well my parents are making us take a year off school to work. Because they have money saved for me but they spent it all on my sister. Because she goes to trade school and you have to pay it all before you go. And like, dad got retrenched from the mine and you know, he used most of his payout for her. So now they’re making me work. (New South Wales Year 11 Student)

Almost regardless of family fortunes, a recurrent theme that echoed through student voices from across Australia was that they did not want to work, on a long-term basis at least, in low-paid, low status retail positions. Students generally saw those in the community who worked in such positions as counter-models to their own aspirations. As typified in the following quote, such students were adamant that they expected more from their lives. And for some, the idea of being bound to mundane jobs was inextricably linked to staying in their community:

S:  If I’m still here in twenty years, I’ll be disappointed.
S:  Still here in twenty years I’ll be in the graveyard.
S:  You just see some of the people that, you know, have their life based around, like Woolworths and Big W and you just go, ‘Oh. I’m never going to be like that’. It’s just wrong. (New South Wales Year 10 Students)
What was striking in many of the interviews was the determination that students expressed in securing long-term work that would sustain their personal goals. Equally striking was the spirit that some students expressed in accepting the competitive nature of the world of work, the need to be flexible in the face of competition, and the value-adding effect of more education and training. For the Indigenous student represented in the following quote, the value of life-long learning appeared self-evident, and the opportunity to continue training for a longer period of time counted as good luck rather than a chore:

I: And have you just put in for one traineeship?
S: I put in for all of them.
I: How many?
S: Three.
I: And how much training do they give you?
S: About a year. If you're lucky, you'll get two.
I: So you're seeing yourself as continuing?
S: Yeah. Because I don't want to stop, just keep going. (Western Australia Indigenous Student)

In brief, rural communities, in all their diversity, seemed to accommodate many students whose aspirations and expectations were firmly targeted at furthering their education and training. For the most part, the desire to continue learning in a variety of forms and forums after completing school appeared to be the norm amongst rural students. As discussed in the following section, talk about transitions from school to work and the necessity for further education and training seemed to have been naturalised in student discourse about their futures.

**Further Education and Training as Naturalised Discourse**

While some students were certain of what they wanted to do when they left school, and others vacillated amongst desirable and achievable options, most were quite certain that whatever they wanted to do required that they do well at school and that they progress to further education and training. It is no overstatement to claim from the interviews that the idea of further education and training had taken a firm grip on students’ aspirations for their futures. Student talk about the changing context of the
world of work and the inescapability of further education and training is identified here as a naturalised discourse because of the regularity of its use amongst students in justifying their future plans.

In every focus group interview that we conducted, in every State and in the Northern Territory, students regularly declared the need for further education and training to the point where it appeared to have become a taken-for-granted ‘fact’ related to contemporary times and the realities associated with achieving their aspirations:

S: I think a lot of people our age want to do so much. Like they want to do so much in their lives, all different things. Like I want to go in the air force and be a pilot for a while and I want to go to Uni.
S: I want to travel.
S: Yeah, but definitely have to go to Uni...
S: A lot of people that still haven’t an idea what they’re going to do and they know they want to go on to a higher study such as university, but they don’t know where that’s going to take them or what’s going to happen after that.
S: Half the time you don’t even know what you’re going to study at uni. You just sort of want to go. (New South Wales Independent Year 10 Students)

The naturalness of the discourse drawing on extended study and training was supported strongly in instances where students had seen the model within their families and the discourse had been effectively naturalised by their own family practices. It was also supported in instances where students spoke about taking time off, of deferring studies for a time while still accepting the persuasiveness of the argument embedded in the discourse that further study eventually would be necessary:

S: Yeah, I want to come back to school next year. Haven’t thought twice about it. I always wanted to go and finish year 12. And after that I’d like to go to University in Brisbane. That’s where most of the people, most of the people from my generation from my family tend to go. That’s just where I want to go, study a course on Science.
S: Yeah, I’m coming back next year. When I finish year 12, I’ll probably leave, take a year off from study. Then hopefully go to uni in Brisbane. I’m not sure what I want to do as yet. But once I finish I’d like to travel
and settle back. Like I’d like to travel and get a job in Europe or somewhere. (Queensland Year 11 Students)

For many students further education and training symbolised the prospect of a life with options; it represented the infrastructure that would support multiple pathways to their desired futures:

S: I’m not sure that everyone wants to leave North-West Tasmania, depending on what they want to do, but most people when they go through year 12 will get at least that, if not go on to TAFE or university or something else.

S: Education will give you a fairly strong backbone. Once you’ve got that you can basically do anything. (Tasmania Year 10 Students)

Students’ aspirations and expectations appeared to be underpinned by a clear understanding that education did not stop at Year 10 or Year 12 but that to ‘be something’ required evidence of further study or training and the ability to demonstrate a competitive edge in gaining a desired position:

S: Without school you don’t really have much choice to choose what you want to do really...

S: And also if you’re better qualified than the person next to you, you’ll probably get the job instead of them.

S: You’ve got to keep on going to do what you want to do for the rest of your life. (Queensland Year 10 Boys)

Even in the apparently smooth transition offered to some students in taking over family businesses, students expected that further study or training of some kind would be necessary. In many examples of student talk like the following, students came to an agreed conclusion that almost anything that was worth pursuing would require further application to study and training, and adoption of the principle of on-going learning:

I: I’m just trying to check that how many of you, are actually planning to go in to further training or education.

S: Everyone here is.

S: No, Carl has got a family business to take over.
In this focus group as in others, students required little persuasion from one another that ‘Carl’ s’ business would be better served, and the prospect of a smooth succession would be improved, if he enrolled for study as he learnt ‘on-the-job’ from his father.

In brief, most students believed that individual effort involving further education and training would be necessary to achieve their goals. Most of the focus group students seemed to accept this as a fundamental truth of living in the 21st century with its changing social and economic structures. While everyone knew of some community members doing well without qualifications (a theme that is taken up in the following chapter), students generally viewed these cases as exceptions rather than the rule. From most students’ perspectives, it was education and training, rather than good fortune or good luck, that would sustain them. The wily student whose voice is heard in the following quote was able to resist the resilient story line – sometimes promoted even by teachers – that post-compulsory education may not be necessary in making a fortune:

S: And our careers teacher ... said that he had friends that dropped out in Year 10 and now they’re millionaires. So you think, ‘Why am I going to uni? Why am I planning to go to uni?’ Because it’s probably one in about 3 million that gets to be a millionaire! That’s why! (Victoria Independent Year 12 Student).

Education and Training as a Means to an End

While the need for post-compulsory education and training was naturalised in student talk about their futures, commitment to further education and training was also represented in instrumental and pragmatic terms, as stipulations of achievable means to desirable ends.

For some students, aspirations were driven by the realisation that the world of work had changed fundamentally and that they now had to take into account the inevitability of a ‘credentialing creep’ in employment prospects:
S: ... half the reason all these people want to leave town, I reckon, is because you used to be able to just get a job like that. Now everything is money orientated. You need a degree. You need papers. Even the farmers here now, they find that they have to go away and do an Associate Diploma, or something like that, to enhance their business or their property ... a lot of the farmers with the beef have to go and learn these IT things - like go to uni and get a degree so they can actually make money and enhance their property. And with the drought, they need to do that. (Queensland Year 10 Student)

For other students, their aspirations were driven by pragmatic considerations of how they could escape from what they perceived to be restrictive futures within their communities. According to students in varying locations, further education and training represented a ‘ticket out of town’, without which their horizons would be severely limited. Throughout the focus group interviews, students reiterated the instrumental value of education in allowing them to escape from rural communities where they could see little hope of employment:

S: I’m just here so I can get in to uni.
S: Yes. Exactly. It’s like I always say, it’s my free ticket out of [here].
S: And if you don’t do your HSC you just, it reduces your options so much. (New South Wales Independent Year 12 Student)

S: Basically, uni is your ticket to get out of here. Like if you can get to uni, you can leave [here], that’s basically it I reckon. (South Australia Year 12 Student)

S: A lot of kids do want to do university. That’s because they want to go to university to get out of [here]. (Queensland Year 11 student)

S: Most of the people sort of living in this town have already dropped out of school. There’s no jobs around town, apprentices and that. And if you do that, it’s going to be really hard to get out ...
S: If you don’t leave like straight away, it’s pretty hard to get away. (New South Wales Year 11 students)
While commitment to further education and training was often grounded in ideas of escape, it was also born of undisguised aspirations for a higher standard of living, material wealth, and the desire for personal recognition:

\[ S: \text{A lot of people want money too and a better lifestyle.} \]
\[ S: \text{That’s what it’s all about, money. A good lifestyle. Big house.} \]
\[ S: \text{People want to be famous, or like, it’s you just want to be high profile.} \]
\[(New \ South \ Wales \ Independent \ Year \ 11 \ Students)\]

A generalised fear amongst students was that if they did not capitalise on the instrumental value of further study and training, if they did not continue to learn and to develop, then they would suffer the fate of their peers who did not ascribe to such principles:

\[ I: \text{And what of those who choose not to go on?} \]
\[ S: \text{They end up a bum.} \]
\[ S: \text{They end up check out chicks.} \]
\[ S: \text{There’s no other options, just sort of labouring jobs. I don’t think people want to do those jobs anymore. Most people are brought up thinking that these days you can do whatever you want to do...} \]
\[ S: \text{No one wants to be a no-hoper bum.} \](Victoria Independent Year 10 Student)

**Students Knowing the Ropes**

Amongst many of the rural students who participated in the study there was a sense that they had accumulated a degree of ‘street savvy’ that would allow them to buffer rejections by investigating alternative routes to their desired outcomes. Some students understood that they would need to start at the bottom. What was striking was that they already had a view to the top. Others understood the notion of ‘backdoor’ entry to courses that would allow them to achieve what they wanted in the long-term. Where ‘backdoor’ entry was unlikely to eventuate, some students were realistic enough to have a second preference ready to pursue rather than give up hope of advancing their prospects. All of these aspects of street savvy, of knowing the ropes, are apparent in the following quotations from the focus group interviews.
For instance, students like this one demonstrated that they had already investigated the long-term prospects of the traineeships that they had taken up. Their aspirations were sufficiently focused to emphasise the possibilities of advancement and the way that they could progress to the top:

S: I’m doing a retail traineeship through Safeway and mid next year I’m going to turn that in to a management course which they are offering and they said I can just progress further. That’s what I’ll put in to it – that’s what I’ll get out of it. (Victoria Year 12 Student)

Likewise, students with aspirations for tertiary studies also demonstrated a streetwiseness, particularly where they understood that courses were difficult to get into either because the courses required higher entry scores than they were likely to achieve or because of tight quotas on entry. Many students knew of the articulated pathways between TAFE colleges and Universities that would allow them to start their study at TAFE and progress to a degree programme at a University. Students who intended to access the pathways spoke with confidence that the articulation between institutions would allow them to realise their aspirations, Their confidence was generally justified as those who intended to make use of articulated institutional pathways had usually confirmed the possibilities and knew where they were headed:

S: I’m doing a certificate IV in photography. And I’m going to get my entrance to university.

I: OK. And have you checked to see the uni courses that are available?

S: Yeah.

I: Can you tell me why you’ll go through TAFE and do a certificate rather than go straight to uni?

S: I was in TE and I found it too hard coping with all the subjects and that. And so yeah, there was another option which was to go through TAFE. And it’s a one year course and then you go to uni after that. (Western Australia Indigenous Students)

S: I want to go to Darwin for work experience in plant nursery and then go interstate. I was going to work there for a couple of years and then go to TAFE for a year or so and get a transfer to Gatton University to do a
course in agriculture or horticulture and plant science. And maybe go in to the breeding programmes. (Northern Territory Year12 Student)

In general, students who thought that they would not gain the requisite score to gain direct entry to university sought alternative pathways through TAFE or other forms of education and training. However, students who could gain direct university entrance also spoke about ‘backdoor’ entries to high-status courses for which they might not be eligible in the first instance. In these cases, students spoke with conviction that their aspirations need not be dampened with a first time refusal of a place. Their aspirations were kept afloat by what they knew of universities that allowed students to cross-over from one course to another, sometimes dependent on them demonstrating sufficiently high levels of success in their initial studies:

S: You can usually get in, like with physio you do human movement which is a lot lower. You only have to do that for a year and get a C, which is a credit, and you can go straight up to physio after that.

S: Transfer between uni courses. Yeah. (New South Wales Year 11 Students)

S: I want to do physiotherapy but I think I’ll probably have to do OT first and then, like a year later, try and get in that way. (New South Wales Independent Year 11 Student).

Students who were aspiring to higher education studies also had sufficient savvy to understand that universities across the country require different entry scores. Refusal at one university need not mean that students could not pursue their aspirations elsewhere:

S: I want to be a human rights defence lawyer and perhaps work in the United Nations or another international aid group. To do that I think I will be going – not in Melbourne – I’ll probably have to travel interstate because the entrance score is too high here. (Victoria Independent Year 12 Student)

Resilient students generally saw their futures in terms of moving ahead steadily to realise their aspirations. In some cases this required accepting interim steps that may, or may not, lead to the original goal:
If I couldn’t do what I wanted in the defence force, then I would go in as something else, do the training for that and then say, ‘Look I’ve been here. I want to try this’. And either they say yes or no.

So you are willing to take a second choice and then work your way through?

Yeah, and basically if they say no you can’t fly, and I am in the defence force, then with the money that I am earning I can always learn to fly privately, so then I am still doing what I want to do. (South Australia Year13 Students)

In the event that their aspirations were completely stymied by institutional entry requirements that they could not meet, many students understood the wisdom of having a backup plan. But having a backup plan did not mean that they would lose sight of their first option. And warnings about the difficulty of achieving their goals did not necessarily dissuade them from trying:

Well, when I say to the teachers that I want to go to NIDA it’s always ‘Oh, you’ve got to have a backup plan because you know how hard it is to get in to that’. That’s pretty much the most common thing they’ll say back to you. You just have to be set on what you want to do ... just be more determined and have a backup plan, but you have to be set on, that’s what you want to do, and that’s how hard you’re going to have to try to get there. You’ve got to be focussed to get there, even if people do put you down and that. (New South Wales Independent Year 11 Student)

Students whose aspirations focussed on work and career options represented the dominant voice within the focus groups at every site, at every school that we visited. As in the illustrative cases quoted to this point, some students vacillated amongst a range of options but, for the most part, students’ voices could be characterised as strong and informed and, oftentimes, determined. Nevertheless, in amongst those voices were the marginalised voices of students whose aspirations were located within a framework of community and family considerations and, in a particular case, within a framework of staying alive, out of harm’s way. In the following two sections we attempt to recover some of those marginalised voices and make them audible.
Student Aspirations: Community and Family Life

I’d probably stay here. Because you know everyone here. It’s like ‘Summer Bay’. (Victoria Independent Year 10 Student).

For a minority of students in the focus groups, aspirations revolved around community and family life rather than work and careers. In these cases, the importance attached to staying within the comfort zone afforded by family and community outweighed considerations of the career options available within those communities. For some, living in the rural community was equated with living in Summer Bay, a dramaturgical reference to the television serial Home and Away that centres on domestic life and relationships in a small country town.

In stark comparison to the Summer Bay image, many students spoke despairingly about the prospects of staying within their communities and were committed to broadening their opportunities by moving elsewhere. (See the quotations in the section above on Education and Training as a Means to an End). Some even spoke of the option of moving or staying as a binary opposition directly associated with winners and losers. Those who moved out improved their chances of being winners while those who remained rooted in communities, particularly those with declining economies, were considered to be setting themselves up as long-term losers. Even in the face of such strong talk within the focus groups, some students articulated their desire to stay within the community that they knew rather than to venture forth into unknown territory that did not guarantee a better life than they already knew. Life in Summer Bay was not such a bad life after all.

One student explained with a sense of assurance the advantages of staying in the community:

S: I’m definitely staying local. Like, I can’t stand moving, having to make new friends, trying to find my way around. Like I know Sale like the back of my hand, I know where everything is. I know a lot of people so to me it’s not worth it, losing all your friends. (Victoria Year 12 Student)
Similarly, an Indigenous student who was competing successfully in a top academic stream at school, and who was thinking of enrolling in pharmacy or biomedical sciences at university, further elaborated on the dilemma she faced in choosing between ‘home and away’:

\[ S: \text{If you’re really close to family it’s hard to move. ...once you get close friends and stuff, and your family all lives in the one place, it’s hard to move because you don’t want to leave your friends or your family. And like, a lot of families out here are really, really close. So a lot of people wouldn’t want to move. Like a lot of people, like my mother was born here and she’s still here.} \]

\[ I: \text{Okay, so that might make it hard for you to move?} \]

\[ S: \text{Definitely. Yeah. (Queensland Indigenous Student)} \]

While it was not at all evident amongst the students we interviewed in the focus groups, a few students guessed that there was an even split within the wider student body of those who would aspire to stay and those who would plan to leave their communities:

\[ S: \text{Like fifty, fifty. There’s like half of us want to stay and just don’t want to leave and there’s others that say, ‘Oh, I’m leaving, getting out, don’t want to stay in this hole’.} \]

\[ S: \text{And then there’s the small percentage who say, ‘I don’t know what I’m doing here’.} \]

\[ S: \text{Yeah, but half of us want to move off to Melbourne, or move somewhere else, do further education, and start our own life. And the other half are happy where they are and don’t want to go anywhere. (Victoria Year 12 Students)} \]

Other students were more conservative in their claims and couched their guesses in more provisional terms:

\[ S: \text{I’m not sure that everyone wants to leave North-West Tasmania, depending on what they want to do ... (Tasmania Year 10 Student).} \]

In terms of tapping into rural students’ aspirations these voices are important to consider along with those that were focussed on work and careers. The point to note is
that rural students did not speak with one voice. Their aspirations could not be essentialised in terms of a ‘rural experience’. Undoubtedly, some rural students valued what they had experienced within their communities and aspired to keep those experiences alive. But talk about family and community as a high priority was easily marginalised in the thrust of student talk about transitions and trajectories to work and careers.

In the next section we consider a different order of aspiration altogether, one that centred on more immediate concerns of improving life outcomes by staying out of dangerous situations.

**Student Aspirations: Staying Alive and Out of Trouble**

All students in the focus groups were forthcoming in their talk about their aspirations for their futures. However, in all but two cases, student talk was not considered to be intimately revealing or confronting in any way. In this respect, the project benefited greatly from two Indigenous students who, in a focus group of three, offered a personal and somewhat confronting account of their aspirations, reminding us that in this project important aspects of students’ personal lives, their desires and aspirations, would remain concealed.

At interview, the two girls reported that their families’ driving aspirations for them – aspirations that they had adopted for themselves – were to get an education and to improve their life by escaping from what they viewed as a dangerous community. Most importantly, they were to stay out of trouble. In transferring from an isolated Indigenous community to a rural school some distance away, the girls expected that they would get a better education and valued the opportunity to do so. In response to a question about their aspirations the girls responded:

\[ S: \text{Get an education. Better than just staying home.} \]
\[ S: \text{Staying home you’re learning nothing.} \]
\[ S: \text{Better to come to school.} \]

As the girls spoke about their aspirations, they listed numerous concerns that had motivated their families to move them to a new location where they had been
accommodated by extended family. Personal safety, staying out of trouble and staying alive featured strongly amongst the goals to which the girls repeatedly referred. From the interview data, it was clear that the girls’ families had been proactive in facilitating their move to a location where they would not only get a better education but where they would be sure that the girls would be physically safe as well.

The girls talked poignantly of their earlier experiences in an isolated community where people were ‘beating up and breaking up the house’ and of their families’ interventions in keeping them safe:

S: My Aunty wanted us to come over here anyway, to get out of trouble from over there. Because when they start on a Friday night, they chuck bottles.

S: My grandmother sent me away – to get away from the place because of all the drugs.

S: To get out of trouble ...

S: Because some people up there just drink and use drugs.

S: We would get a big hiding. That’s why they wanted to get us out of all the trouble.

S: Yeah. Otherwise, if we would have stayed there, we would have been in trouble. Big, big trouble.


I: Is it safer for you here?

S: Yeah.

The girls appeared deeply appreciative of the opportunity afforded by their families in moving them to a safer place and the refuge offered by an extended family network. The two, together, were united and steadfast in their aspiration to stay out of trouble and to stay alive:

S: Yes. So I don’t ever mix with them – the bad ones. I don’t want to mix with them.

While the girls were clear that their ambition was to keep out of trouble, to stay away from bad influences, and to avoid a hiding for any transgressions of these principles, they were less clear about what they would do once they had finished school. Both girls intended to continue to Year 12 at which point one thought she might return to
the station from whence she had come to be a cleaner or a cook. The other thought she might work in a chemist shop if she did not return home.

Documenting the two girls’ voices reminds us that stories like these can be marginalised in a situation where so many students report that they are looking ahead to work and careers. It also reminds us that many voices will remain unheard because of the personal nature of students’ aspirations that they may choose to conceal rather than reveal to an interviewer whom they do not know.

**Teacher Perceptions of Student Aspirations**

In terms of providing an overall picture of students’ aspirations for their futures, teachers could be seen to occupy a prime position from which to comment. Nevertheless, their views about students’ aspirations and expectations varied widely, from outright pessimism to considered optimism, depending, perhaps, on the groups of students who came to mind and about whom they were being asked to generalise.

Some teachers thought that in their particular community the student body had no expectations:

*T:*  *Our problem is trying to get them to have expectations.*  *(South Australia)*

And in another school, in another community, a teacher thought that it was sheer boredom, and sometimes Centrelink requirements, that convinced students that school was an inhabitable place:

*T:*  *During the day, if they are awake, there is nothing else to do but to go to school, so they come to school.*  
... *we do have a group of kids who are only here because they are forced by Centrelink to come to school, and they are absentee problems. They are not really interested in anything we do, and yeah, it causes us problems.*  *(South Australia)*

In another State where student life was viewed as ‘cruisy’ because of the laid-back local culture, teachers expressed similar concerns about students being unmotivated as well as having no desire to move out of town to pursue their goals. They believed that
the culture within the community would seal students’ aspirations through lack of example and lack of opportunity:

T: A lot of the kids that I teach think about the options that they have available and, for some of them, the limiting factor is that they don’t want to leave town. So then they look for things that are within the town itself. And there are some of them who would like to go away to study but have the apprehension that perhaps they’ll get homesick and they will come back. It’s a country kids thing.

T: Yeah, they’re not highly motivated. They don’t see a lot of extra education. They don’t see a lot of tertiary education type thing. They don’t have access to tertiary education people coming through and that sort of stuff and they don’t get motivated. So they don’t recognise the need for tertiary education, a lot of them. (Western Australia)

Some teachers were quite pessimistic about the impact of their own career guidance programmes on many students whom they viewed as apathetic to advice. Others were concerned that students who did express high-level aspirations were insufficiently informed to be more than romantically attached to their aspirations:

T: I think there is a lot of apathy by a lot of students out here. Even though we’ve got the information, for instance, in the library, on careers and pathways and everything, they don’t go and look at it. They’re just not aware of the range of opportunities. Like, we have started this year with the nines, year nines and year tens, career education. But I know that from running the Year 12 Core Skills test, and university applications, and a bit of career counselling, that they’re just not aware. They don’t want to be aware. (Queensland)

T: They want to go to University. But I think they are in love with the idea of going to University initially more than, well, what they are going to do. (New South Wales Teacher)

While some teachers provided a bleak view, even of their own efforts at career guidance, others provided a more encouraging perspective of what was happening amongst students in terms of them genuinely pursuing their aspirations:
T: I think a lot of them realise that their options for employment in town aren’t that great. I think most of the kids with ambition will go. (New South Wales Independent Teacher)

T: I think there are also kids who do have horizons, who do have aspirations and who meet those aspirations. (South Australia)

Some teachers were more firmly of the view that ‘word was out’, that education and training were necessary aspects of contemporary living wherever you lived, and whatever you chose to do. Views like those typified in the following interchange were more consistent with the responses that students in the focus groups offered to questions about their aspirations:

T: I guess the word is getting out a bit that whatever they do they are going to have to do more training.

I: You think they are getting that message?

T: They are getting that message. I mean even when One Steel came and gave a little talk, you know, about opportunities there, the message comes across that even if they are production trainees they still have to study. So everything involves study. It doesn’t make any difference now what you do, you have to go on and do some more training or study. (South Australia)

The depressed view that some teachers had of student populations as having ‘no expectations’ was certainly at odds with responses that students in the focus groups provided at interview. In reflecting on the inconsistency between students’ and teachers’ views, it is important to realise that teachers were perhaps considering the corpus of students – those who had already left school – truants – absentees – and those who may not have agreed to be part of a focus group interview as well as those who did. The project did not seek to enlist early school leavers to consider their expectations or aspirations. The sample for this study is clearly drawn from students whom the system had retained.

In contrast to teachers’ broader view of the student body, students who participated in the interviews were indeed the ‘stayers’ in the system and the illustrative quotes
provided in this chapter testify to their positive orientations to their futures. The focus group students were not only positive about what they could achieve, they were generally knowledgeable about how they might go about setting their goals in motion. Many, too, were praising of teachers’ and guidance officers’ efforts in helping them to pursue their goals. They also appeared wiser for the assistance.

Parent Perceptions of Student Aspirations
Parents who participated in focus groups and those who responded by survey, while a very small group in total, expressed concern about rural students’ expectations and aspirations for their futures and agreed that the most likely dampener was the financial difficulty students were likely to experience in realising their goals. According to parents, costs to rural parents were considerable where students wished to advance their opportunities outside of their communities before they were financially independent. Parents also expressed concern about a range of other issues including subject selection at their local schools, turn-over of teachers, the state of the rural economy and other important factors that potentially impact on the ways that young people come to think about their futures. All of these issues are taken up in detail from a range of perspectives in the following chapter.

Summary and Conclusions
Interviews with students from across Australia provided a strong sense of them having high-level aspirations for their futures. While most students’ aspirations focussed on work and career options, there were also the marginalised voices of students to consider – those that prioritised staying at home in the community, and others that spoke of more basic goals of ensuring their physical safety.

Given the detail of many students’ plans for their futures, it was unlikely that their self-reports were vacuous expressions aimed at pleasing the interviewers. It was impressive to realise that the idea of further education and training had taken a grip with students to the point where it had become a naturalised discourse amongst them. Equally impressive was students’ demonstration of genuine savvy in navigating varying institutional requirements and their knowledge of institutional articulations and cross-overs that allowed them to map their own life topographies. The focus
group students appeared to know how to manipulate systems in legitimate ways in order to optimise their chances of realising their aspirations. Their working knowledge of how systems operated would be a bonus as they approached the border crossings between school and other institutions.

In contrast with the high-level aspirations expressed by the majority of students, rural teachers generally provided a more varied view of the futures to which students aspired. While some teachers viewed the student body in negative terms – as having no expectations – others believed that students were acknowledging the need for further education and training to support their aspirations. Teachers also expressed consistent concerns about community cultures that did not support students in aspiring to lives outside of what they had experienced as small town residents.

As for parents, their prime concern was the cost involved in pursuing their children’s aspirations. Parents also listed a variety of other concerns related to provision of resources and quality of schooling within the community that could dampen students’ high-level aspirations and lower their long-term expectations of what they could achieve in life. These issues are addressed in the following chapter.

While this chapter focussed on reports of students’ aspirations, the next chapter investigates factors that potentially impact on student aspirations by shaping their understandings of what is possible for them to achieve.
Chapter 4

Influences on Student Aspirations and Expectations for their Futures:
The Personal Dimension
This chapter investigates personal influences on student aspirations and expectations by isolating factors that students, teachers and parents considered to be critical in shaping what was imaginable of students’ futures. In considering the personal dimension of influence on student aspirations and expectations, this chapter focuses on the potential impact of

- significant others – families, friends and teachers
- students’ personal experiences, and
- students’ perceptions of their personal attributes and desires.

Each of these factors emerged from the interview data as important considerations in understanding how students talked of their aspirations and expectations shaping and coalescing into views of their futures. The factors are conceptualised in this chapter as operating along a personal dimension because of the individual level at which they functioned. The next chapter considers how student aspirations and expectations were also shaped by a number of factors that operated in a less personal way – for instance, the state of the local economy – conceptualised in that chapter as a social dimension.

While the factors are considered separately and are divided between two chapters, it is important to state from the outset that factors were unlikely to operate in isolation, independently of one another. Complex interplays amongst personal and social factors – for instance, students’ personal experiences and the state of the local economy – must be considered as acting together, in concert. To an extent, the division of factors into personal and social dimensions is artificial but it serves the purpose of ordering a massive data bank into manageable portions.

**Significant Others: Family, Friends and Teachers**

*S:* *I’m going on to year 12. I’ve got no choice.*

*I:* *Why is that?*

*S:* *It’s my father (Western Australia Indigenous Year 10 Student)*

According to students, amongst the most important influences on their aspirations were their parents, immediate and extended families, friends and teachers. As iterated throughout the interview data, the personal dimension of influence was indeed
important and ‘significant others’, like the father cited in the above quote, featured strongly amongst those attributed with power to persuade, and sometimes, to coerce.

The Influence of Family

Parents featured strongly amongst student reports as being important influences on what they aspired to do with their lives. Many students reported that their parents promoted the idea that further study and training would be necessary for future prosperity and, in many instances, the message appeared to have won through:

S: Yeah. My parents are pretty big on further education.
S: Yeah so are mine.
S: For a job, you need to be competitive. You need to be able to have the education and training to be successful in what you want to do. There’s more competition now. (Western Australia Year 12 Students)

Other family members also featured in students’ reflections on who had influenced their ideas and desires with respect to what they wanted to do with their lives. In response to questions about the formation of their aspirations, many students gave specific examples of family members influencing them and acting as positive role models. With this line of questioning in mind, students proceeded to identify family members as important:

S: Parents.
S: Families as well. Extended family because I’ve got lots of older cousins who did the same thing, finished Year 12 and went to university. (Queensland, Year 11 Students)
S: My cousin Noah ... he’s like older than me and he was kind of a whiz at computer games. So I thought, ‘Oh’, then later, like last year, he went to TAFE and got an IT course and he completed that and now he’s doing IT at the Centre. And so yeah, he’s kind of my encouragement to go towards IT. (Northern Territory Indigenous Student)

Apart from the direct advice and encouragement from which they benefited, students regularly noted the powerful influence of images of success amongst family members.
For the students, these images became symbolic assertions of what was likely to be achievable within particular fields:

S: I’ve never thought about not going to uni. Because both my parents, like, went to uni and my brother went to uni. My sister didn’t, but she let the team down. (New South Wales Year 11 Student)

S: Nearly my whole family has been through the army one way or another. That’s where I got it [the desire] from. I’ve grown up in the army environment. Just used to go out and play war in the bush when I was a kid, and I don’t know, just grown up with it.

S: I’ve had aunties in the family doing nursing, and ever since, I’ve always wanted to do nursing. (Victoria Year 10 Students)

Students regarded parents and significant others as particularly influential where they demonstrated first hand knowledge in manipulating systems and networks in ways that would advantage their children and make their quest easier to pursue:

S: What my dad’s done is rung the TAFE, and because there’s an aboriginal person that works there, I’ve got access through that. I don’t actually have to go there and ask. I’ve got that one person – that link – where I can ask my dad to ring up and they’ll organise stuff for me. (Western Australia Indigenous Student)

S: One of my aunties is a teacher … we have a woman teacher who is qualified, an aboriginal teacher as well, so they can help us aboriginals as well I think. (Northern Territory Indigenous Student)

In special incidents, parents were self-consciously reflective about the restrictive model that their own lives might represent to their children. In full acknowledgement that they did not want their children to imitate them, some parents offered themselves to their children as counter-models of what was desirable, of what they wanted their children to achieve:

S: My mum and dad have never left [here]. They were born here and never left. And sometimes they regret it, so they really want me to go away and
have a life. Get out of here and do stuff that they never got to do. (New South Wales Year 11 Student)

For the most part, students regarded their parents as encouraging them to actualise their potential, to achieve what was possible, and to realise their aspirations as fully as they might. At the same time, there was a sense in which students were quite critical of their parents’ advice and encouragement. Many students, while acknowledging their parents’ ambitions for them, were critical of the inadvertent and, sometimes detrimental, pressure that parents exerted on them. To add to this criticism, some teachers viewed parents as being less than helpful when it came to offering career advice as their knowledge was often out-of-date and counter-productive to their children’s interests.

Students’ criticisms of their parents’ efforts are apparent in the following quotations where they made repeated reference to parents’ lack of understanding, to parents expecting too much of them without realising the pressure that they were applying:

S: They expect so much because you’ve got to be focused on school. But then you’ve got to get a job because they’re not going to pay for everything. They expect you to do that. And with me, I was also doing TAFE two nights a week. So they want me to focus on school, on TAFE, and on work. So then if I go out one or two nights a week, they’d get annoyed that I was always out. They wouldn’t take into consideration TAFE and work.

S: I think it’s a lack of understanding, especially for our parents, because, like, many of them grew up here and left school in Year 10 or 11.

S: But that’s because they could. You know it wasn’t really important to go to uni then.

S: Yeah, and they don’t understand how much it’s changed and all the stresses that are involved and that. (New South Wales Year 11 Students)

Similar criticisms were echoed across State borders and amongst students at independent, as well as at government, schools:

S: But they don’t understand. My parents didn’t do VCE and they’re telling me, ‘Oh, it’s easy. You’ll get through it.’ They don’t realise how hard it
is and like times have changed, 30, 40 years ago, doing HSC or whatever they called it. But it’s still more demanding I’d say.

S: Yeah, and it is a lot of stress too that they don’t understand. (Victoria Year 12 Students)

S: My father is a major influence … he’s a truck driver but it’s obvious that he’s smarter than, like, being a truck driver … but he’s always saying, ‘Don’t waste your education ability’. There’s a lot of pressure placed on me to do well. And he’s always saying that.

S: But sometimes they just don’t realise that they’re doing it and it makes it worse. (New South Wales Independent Year 10 Students)

In the same way that so many students saw their parents as not understanding the changing context of learning or the increased pressure on students at school, some teachers were critical of the information that parents were able to offer their children. In what amounted to a self-parodying critique of parents’ grasp of contemporary career options, one teacher, who was also a parent, provided an example of the inept advice he would have offered his own child with regards to her future:

T: Parents are important for aspirations but the whole workforce environment is so different from what it was when most parents went into it… I mean, when my daughter chose Cultural Tourism I said, ‘What on earth is that?’ And it’s fabulous, and it’s the perfect thing for her, and she’ll do brilliantly at it, but I mean, we were thinking more along the lines of Accountancy, or Medicine. (South Australia)

Overall, students in the focus groups generally viewed their parents as highly salient in influencing the decisions that they made regarding their futures. Nevertheless well-intentioned parents were also regarded by students and by teachers as sometimes being out-of-touch with the demands of advanced school studies and out-of-date with the changing nature of work and careers.

Teachers’ perspectives on the influence of family

In their efforts to generalise about influences on students’ aspirations and expectations, teachers were more critical of parents as a source of influence than were the students we interviewed. Teachers referred to students ‘getting lost along the
way’, to having ‘a lot of lost souls’ at school, and to parents in their town as ‘not caring’ (New South Wales). They told stories of ‘particular girls’, with high tertiary entrance potential who, because of lack of parent support, ended up ‘leaning behind the counter of a shop’ (Tasmania). And they told of significant numbers of students from fifteen years of age who were living independently, less from choice than from a local culture that had developed wherein parents felt comfortable in declaring ‘that their kids were on their own.’ Students in this town were often advised by their parents to get a job even when they demonstrated sufficient ‘nous’ to follow their dream of tertiary studies (South Australia).

The more negative comments of teachers about parent influence reflected the pattern that emerged in the previous chapter. In chapter 3 we reported that teachers provided a less positive view of students’ aspirations than did students in the focus groups. Again it must be acknowledged that the teachers we interviewed were likely to be reflecting on the entire corpus of students, on those whose parents were supportive and those whose parents were not. This is not to say that all students in the focus groups claimed that their parents had been supportive, or that their parents’ influence had been inspirational. Indeed, at one site, a disproportionate number of students appeared to be working towards school completion on their own. The stories of these students are taken up in the section on ‘Personal Experiences.’

At interview, one teacher offered a particularly instructive story that demonstrated his view of the powerful impact that parents exerted in shaping the lives of their children. His story, presented in case format in Extract 4.1, encapsulates his idea of children’s varying fortunes being associated with the support that is offered within families. In many ways, the story is evocative of the recent movie metaphor of ‘Sliding Doors’ where lives and destinies are ultimately shaped by the fortuitous, and sometimes serendipitous, opening and closing of doors. In this event, it is parents who open or close the door on their children’s aspirations. Nevertheless, the story is not one of complete determinism associated with family support; rather it highlights how some students are positioned firmly against the odds in pursuing their aspirations even when they do have drive.
Extract 4.1

Family Influence: A Case of Sliding Doors

A teacher, who was also a parent, told a powerful story in which he detailed the life trajectories of his children’s closest friends alongside the success that his own children had experienced in pursuing tertiary studies and interesting careers. The story alludes to what he viewed as the power of parental influence:

T: There was a family that had a girl my daughter’s age and a boy my son’s age, and they were close friends right through primary school. The boy and my boy went to pre-school together and they just went right through the system, through the same primary school, through the same secondary school. And this boy – I can say because I taught him – this boy was clearly brighter than my son, and my son is pretty cluey. He had an active thinking mind and wanted to get out and about and be in the world, but he never made it.

I: So what influenced him? What stopped him? What interfered?

T: My answer would have to be family, his parents.

I: Was it money?

T: Well, both parents had part time jobs, yeah, but the most important thing was when the kids were fifteen or sixteen the parents pretty well said, openly, bluntly, ‘You’re on your own. OK, we’ve done our bit, now it’s over to you.’ To some extent the parents of these two kids said, ‘We’re not interested in you anymore’, and the parents got on a bus and they drove off to tour Australia.

I: And neither of the kids has gone ahead?

T: No.

I: It’s an interesting parallel isn’t it. You’ve got the same kind of schooling, and you mentioned the boy had at least the same intellect as your son

T: And aspirations too ... but the real tragic thing is that the girl got into the sidelines of criminal and sex industry stuff, and yet she had aspirations to go to university. But she’ll probably finish up quite successful.

I: Why do you say that? Is she studying or something?

T: Well, she’s got drive. She’ll make it back.
Parents’ perspectives on the influence of family

The parents that we interviewed, and those who returned the survey, believed that they were critical influences on their children’s lives. Apart from being generally encouraging and supportive, some parents told how they employed deliberate strategies to broaden their children’s horizons. They sometimes worked towards this by financing opportunities to visit cities and capitalising on experiences that were not available within their rural setting. In the face of the hardship incurred in supporting their children’s aspirations, some parents adopted self-sacrificing views. The case of ‘Self-Sacrifice’ presented in Extract 4.2 is offered as testimony to the kinds of personal sacrifice that some rural parents thought would be necessary to support their children’s aspirations. This case of parental dedication to students’ aspirations contrasts starkly with the one presented in Extract 3.1.

Extract 4.2
Family Influence: A Case of Self-Sacrifice

This case study serves as an example of the extreme lengths to which parents would go to support their children and to assist them in realising their dreams. In terms of planning ahead for her children’s success, this parent spoke about gaining equity in their house to sustain them financially, rearranging her own work commitments to settle her children into university, and doing whatever it took to optimise their chances of fulfilling their dreams:

P:  [In considering our children’s futures] we thought, we’d just have to get equity in the new house. Yeah, and if they ask, they can have the opportunity, and I’ll be there to pick up the pieces or provide whatever they need to get more stuff done...

We might move down to Adelaide with our son for a while, you know, using long service leave, just to get him started down in Adelaide. If the worst comes to the worst we’d move back to Adelaide ...

I mean that is one of the reasons why I also chose my job because of the flexibility. My husband can’t move with his job easily, so we’d have to
separate for a while, do whatever, but you know, you do what you can, but it is not always that easy...

[As for budgeting] you just work it out, like, we’ll find a way to do it, ...I mean you don’t start saying, ‘I don’t know where the money is for you to do it’, which is what a lot of kids get, so they are already sort of narrowing their pathways I guess.

I: So you are saying that you will do it?

P: That’s right, exactly.

I: You’ll work it out?

P: We’ll work it out. You know if you have to sell something, change, move, whatever, then you do it.

In one way or another, for better or worse, family featured strongly as an influence on students’ aspirations and expectations for their futures. While students, teachers and parents considered the family to be a critically influential factor, as discussed in the following sections, friends and teachers also featured prominently in this respect.

**The Influence of Friends**

When they were deciding on particular opportunities that they might investigate, apart from drawing on families, some students reached out to friends and associates to help decide what they might pursue, and how they might pursue it, without relinquishing responsibility for the final decision:

S: Tourism and hospitality. A friend of mine did that and she went overseas. She was working and travelling at the same time. That’s the sort of thing that I’d like to do. (Northern Territory Year 10 Student)

S: You talk to people you respect – people who seem to have made the right decision in their life and to have a decent education. Find out the people who have been to different unis and get inside knowledge of that uni, and you can do some research yourself before you really make up your own mind.

S: Ultimately, it’s up to you though. (New South Wales Year 11 Students)
The importance of friends featured as a source of inspiration and information amongst students. Nevertheless, for some students, friendship assumed a more fundamental importance in ensuring that they felt comfortable at school, and that they were agreeable and disposed to work and study. The availability of friends, the willingness of other students to be inclusive, were prime considerations in determining whether school was a tolerable place to be in the first place. Without this fundamental consideration, staying at school became a less palatable option. In the students’ words, ‘if you don’t have friends in a small school, you’re stuffed’ – not to establish a network of friends at school would have ‘a huge impact on your schooling’ – and to find yourself at school without such support would really leave you ‘up shit’s creek without a paddle’. (New South Wales Independent Year 12 Students) From the sheer volume of talk amongst students about school as a social place, and the importance of friendship at school, it was clear that school would become an unattractive option where support networks were not available or forthcoming.

The Influence of Teachers

S: Like, I had this old bird who was really, really, good. She taught you everything. Then I had this one, Mr Mills, and he just dribbles on about anything. No idea! He reads straight out of the textbook. He tells you different things that you don’t need to know and by the end of it you haven’t learnt anything. (Northern Territory Year 10 Student)

Just as friends assumed a critical importance in students’ willingness to stay at school, so did their teachers. Stories like this one, of the ‘old bird’ who was really good and the teacher who had ‘no idea’, flowed abundantly through student talk. Students were quick to name teachers who ‘knew how to teach’ and those who did not; those who were personable and approachable, and those who were less tolerant of student requests for additional assistance:

S: Some teachers don’t have any inclination to help us at all...
S: But then there’s other teachers, like, if you don’t understand, [they say] ‘I haven’t done my job properly’. There’s one teacher that says that. ‘Make me earn my money,’ she says, and she’s great. And if I had a problem, I’d go to her about it. (New South Wales Independent Year 12 Students)
Students were generally highly discerning about quality of teacher input and described teacher qualities in blunt terms:

*S:* Some teachers I don’t think should be teaching.

*I:* Why is that?

*S:* I don’t think that they’re all there. They’re crazy. (Victoria Year 11 Students)

General criticisms like these were accompanied by extended and detailed talk about teachers not having command of the subject matter that students were expected to learn, of teachers being singularly unhelpful, and of them being inconsistent in what they expected of students. In these ways, some teachers undoubtedly dampened students’ enthusiasm for learning, and reduced what students expected to learn at school.

By comparison with this dampening effect, other teachers assisted students in keeping their aspirations and expectations for successful futures afloat. A theme that ran strongly through the interview data was that many rural teachers had assumed responsibility for encouraging and elevating ambition amongst the student body. Students in various locations spoke of teachers who instructed them directly about the virtues of sustaining their efforts, of not falling into the trap of early school leaving, and of considering the options and futures that opened to them when they set their sights on furthering their education and training. In some instances, students complained that an overtly proselytising approach operated as a pressure. Nevertheless, it appeared that teachers had become an important source for extending student thinking about rural communities as situated within globalised economies and of the demands that would be made of them in restructured societies. Teachers clearly enunciated the message that students’ fates depended heavily on the choice they made in adopting, or rejecting, the principle of life-long learning as a tenet of ‘new times’:

*S:* And we’ve sort of been taught here that if you don’t go to university you’ve got nothing.

*S:* Teachers say, ‘Are you going on to university?’ If not, then you’re pretty much going to be a deadbeat.
S: Yeah, you either get an apprenticeship or you go to uni.

S: If you get a job in say, sales ... it’s looked upon that ‘Oh, you don’t want anything of your life.’

S: Even the guidance officer, he’s pretty unbiased, but he said, ‘Look, you’ve really got to go to uni. I mean if you want to do anything sort of above an apprenticeship or just part-time work, you’ve got to work hard to get the good OP and get into uni’. (Queensland Year 10 Students)

While individual classroom teachers were reported as pressing the message about further education and training, guidance officers – at schools that could support them – were often positioned as purveyors of information responding directly to students’ expressions of aspirations for desired futures. With respect to the guidance advice made available to them, some students reported that they had experienced the most perfunctory of efforts from ‘unreliable’ staff that had offered them no more than ‘a photocopy of the UAC guide’. In small schools with restricted resources, students recognised that such minimalist effort was sometimes born of the guidance activity being a ‘spare-time thing’ for the teacher involved. While students expressed disappointment when advice and support were not available through the guidance office, they were genuinely grateful when they received the kind of assistance that they needed in keeping their ambitions alive:

S: Well the careers advisors have been pretty good with me because I had to apply for all of my things direct to the TAFE and stuff. So yeah, they’ve been pretty good. You’ve just got to make sure you ask a lot of questions because otherwise they don’t really know what to tell you. But yeah, it’s all been pretty good as far as I can tell. (Victoria Year 12 Student)

From the interview data, it was evident that it was always individual teachers who were attributed with credit for assistance in enabling students to plan their futures with more certainty and confidence. This is not surprising given the level of dedication demonstrated by some teachers in the most challenging of interpersonal and pedagogical circumstances. In particular cases, teachers spoke with considerable understanding of students for whom academic studies were unsuitable because the students were either unwilling, or unable, to accommodate the intellectual demands of the programme.
In situations like these, teachers spoke of customising curriculum offerings and designing ‘real life’ programmes of study that were intended to maintain students at school, specifically to optimise their skill development. In an effort to capture a fragment of this spirit, Extract 4.3 offers a very brief glimpse of one teacher’s reflection on his ongoing work with a group of Year 10 boys who had been identified as low academic achievers. Notably, the group of boys were considered to be within the highest-risk category for leaving school early, partly because of their personal circumstances, and partly because of their formal literacy skills that were benchmarked at about Year 4 level. For this teacher and others with whom he worked, the motto was ‘incremental not monumental’ steps to improved outcomes for students who, in one of the poorest regions in the country, were at risk of not completing school. At the same school site, other teachers exerted the same kinds of efforts with girls who also were considered to be at risk of leaving school without completing. Boys and girls who were marginally attached to school and study were also encouraged by these teachers to participate in programmes like Operation Flinders, organized by the army and sponsored by the Department of Education and Training, to allow them time-out to reflect on their futures and to learn about taking command of their lives and decisions. According to the teachers, the personalised interventions had been successful and without them, the school may have exercised less magnetism in keeping the students at school, with the hope of expanding their skill base.

Extract 4.3:
Teacher Influence: A Case of Incremental Steps

This teacher demonstrated a remarkable level of effort with respect to a group of boys for whom traditional study was not an attractive option. In particular, he demonstrated commitment and professionalism in redefining the situation and in re-positioning the students in ways that made it likely for them to experience success and value learning at school:

Some of these kids live by themselves, independently. So I mean they are at risk, and we’ve got a couple of lads who have left home for various reasons, and so we link up with all the support networks that are available to us to make sure that these students don’t leave school. One of the things we say here is
‘incremental not monumental’, so everything has to be a little step at a time. Like today it was just getting them to do the right thing, like not swear, and I lead through example.

You know, their behaviour management problems stem from the fact that a lot of these guys, if they don’t know how to do something, instead of appearing stupid, they would rather say, ‘No. Stick it’, or ‘This is crap’, not because they don’t want to do it but because they can’t do it. So, I’ve taken on these lads. They really do stand out as students at risk and we’re able to tailor the curriculum to fit these guys with real life learning.

So the group was basically designed for me to act as a male role model. And we’ve got a car project that they do – they work with a car – with a mentor – and they’ve learned to spray paint. We’re also looking at agriculture at the moment and getting a boat licence, car licence all that sort of stuff. So that is what I provide and we negotiate the curriculum. We look at the things that they can do, the positives instead of the negatives, and then build on them.

With those guys you can’t sit down and have a chalk and talk. Like yesterday, we were talking about relationships, and their perception of women, and we sort of talked about relationship stuff. A lot of them have got anger management problems, so we talk about it.

Other teachers run a girls’ group here as well. We’ve got girls who are working on furniture restoration. So we work with the kids and see if we can accommodate their needs.

Careful trawling of the focus group interviews threw up patterns of response amongst students that suggested that family, friends and teachers were powerfully influential in keeping students at school, in providing them with models that they might choose to emulate or reject, and in offering varying levels of support for their aspirations. In addition, teachers and guidance officers provided an important source of information and advice on changing economic and social structures that would inform student lives.

While the quotations in this section are drawn mainly from the students themselves, teachers and parents were in agreement that each of these sets of personal
relationships was important in helping students project themselves into their futures. Similarly, the interviews with the students at the two metropolitan locations yielded the same kinds of patterns of influence on their aspirations for their futures. There was no disagreement that the personal dimension of influence was critical – it was a dimension that could persuasively enable or gravely hinder students’ attempts at realising their hopes of transition to contexts and lives beyond school.

In addition to these summary comments, it is important to add one more. It is usual to consider the effect of parents and teachers as ‘influences’ on students’ lives rather than as strategies like those that are discussed in the chapter on strategies. However, it is important to recognise that some parents and teachers that we met in visiting the sites adopted highly proactive roles in shaping students’ aspirations and expectations, in setting their sails, in keeping them afloat. In many respects, their advice, their actions and their labour were as deliberate and as strategic as any education system or government agency could engineer for the wider population. In this respect, influence and strategy could be seen as coalescing as students declared parents and teachers to be important in shaping their aspirations and mapping their futures.

**Personal Experience**

*‘It’s sort of like a kick in the backside, telling you.’*

In talking about their aspirations and in rationalising their decisions, students drew heavily on their personal experiences. The resounding message throughout the interviews was that experience teaches. Interestingly, while most students were clear that further education and training were essential features of their future lives, none were more certain than those who faced extreme economic difficulty in their lives. The more vulnerable that students considered themselves to be in their home-town communities, the more powerful were their claims that they were determined to ensure more affluent futures for themselves. This section focuses on students’ personal observations that motivated them to continue at school and to pursue post-school study and training options.
The cost of a mop and other compelling stories

S: I went searching for a cheap mop the other day and I couldn’t find one. A cheap mop, a mop! But you’re paying like ten to twelve dollars maybe, for a mop!

I: Was that a critical realization for you, that a mop costs a lot?

S: Everything costs a lot. People still living with their parents don’t really realize how hard it is trying to live, and then they move out and they get bills and have to pay for food, and they’ve got to pay uni fees and then they realize ‘Oh, shit’.

S: And you just need a decent job with a decent pay, not even to be like real wealthy, just to survive (South Australia Year 12 Students)

This Year 12 student, who was living independently, experienced the frustration of budgeting on a small payment from Centrelink that supported her in continuing her studies at school. She, like other students we interviewed, had returned to school with the express purpose of working her way out of what she viewed as an unsatisfactory situation for the long-term. At this same school other students spoke of returning to study after leaving school early and entering the workforce only to discover that their life-long options for a career were severely limited:

S: I’ve been out and had a job. I left school after Year 10 and I went out and got a job. I was working at Holden and I sort of realised while I was there that that is probably the best job I am going to be able to ever get, type thing, unless I go back to school and do more. (South Australia Year 13 Student)

Without having necessarily left school and experienced the impact of supporting themselves, some students seemed to have learnt their lesson vicariously by witnessing the changing circumstances of employment and wealth creation:

S: Well these days where are you going to go without further study? Back in the day of my father, you could finish school in Year 9 and still get a decent trade which he has got now. And he is earning something like, at least $80,000 a year, and he didn’t even bother finishing Year 9.

I: And is that going to happen for you?
S: No, you have to finish Year 12. You have to pass your HSC. You have to do everything just to even earn half of what he earns. (South Australia Year 10 Student)

And so students in this group eagerly swapped stories of whose grandfather finished at Year 5 and earned a large salary at the mines – an episode that could not be repeated today, and whose parents had enhanced their earning capacity through mature age entry to university. At this particular site, students also had the advantage of seeing students who were attempting their senior secondary programme over a three-year period (Years 11 through to 13), thereby allowing them to work and to study part-time. They also saw numbers of adult students re-entering school after having re-thought their former decision to leave school without a senior secondary certificate:

S: I reckon it sort of helps, you sort of see ‘em, and it makes you try harder. I’m not being mean about them or anything but you know, you think, ‘Oh my God, in this many years time, I could be back at school’.

S: Yeah, like they couldn’t even get a career. They are back at school and it makes you just think, ‘If I just put in that effort’.

S: It is sort of like a kick in the backside, telling you.

S: It sort of shows you that they might think at the time like, you know, they don’t need Year 12 or anything. And then you see years and years later they end up having to come back. And it’s very hard for them and, like, it makes you realize that it is really important (South Australia Year 12 Students)

As for the Year 13 students themselves, they needed no convincing that further study was essential to their current and future lives:

S: The thing is you look around and there’s a lot of people that like don’t have jobs that are on welfare and stuff, and it makes you think, I don’t want to grow up like this – I want to be able to support a family – I want to have a good job – I want to have a good life, and if I don’t work at it, if I don’t go out and get the education and get the training and get the job, then you feel like you might end up like the people around you. (South Australia Year 13 Student).
These students explained that a few of their peers enrolled in Year 13 ‘to pass the time’ and ‘to get paid from Centrelink’. However, most students had returned with a sense of mission to advance their own prospects. Some were even working part-time to support their independent efforts to graduate. In one student’s view, the interview process was unlikely to uncover ‘Year 13s that aren’t determined to do something’ because after all, that was ‘sort of the whole reason’ they came back. The message about completing school and continuing study was accepted by ‘people with a brain’ although there were ‘still plenty of people’ who didn’t seem to realise the importance.

**Mirror, mirror on the wall?**

For students from across Australia there appeared to be a powerful mirroring effect when students were regularly exposed in their communities to models that they did not want to emulate. Students saw mirrored in less-successful community members the possibility of their own demise and they struggled deliberately to erase that possibility from view. Amongst the focus group students there was a strong sense in which they would strive for fulfilling lives – for work that they would look forward to rather than regret – and for social status that would remove any hint of them having failed in their own terms:

*S:* No, I look at people in this town and that makes me more determined to want to leave. That’s the truth.

*S:* I look at people my age, or only a couple of years older than me, and they’re still driving around in cars.

*S:* I look at what people have here, and I don’t want that. That’s what makes me so determined to move. (New South Wales Independent Year 12 Students)

*S:* At school you see so many people not going anywhere and, I don’t know, just looking at that, I couldn’t be one of those. Like, I want to get somewhere. (Northern Territory Year 12 Student)

In some communities with particularly vulnerable economies, focus group students imagined their futures in binary terms – they could drop out of school or they could
continue with their studies. For these students, the choice was not genuinely open for anyone who dreamt of being more than a ‘bum.’

S: It’s pretty much what you have to do [study] if you don’t want to be a bum.

S: Some people know right from the start what they want to be and that they want to go on and study and all. And some, they just don’t know.

I: What are the options then for these other people?

S: One’s that drop out?

I: Yeah.

S: They don’t have any options. (Victoria Year 11 Students)

The stories that flowed so freely from students at interview read like precautionary tales. They told of an inimitable past that belonged to former generations for whom further education and training was not a necessary condition of finding satisfying employment. And they spoke of a foreboding future that demanded of them extra effort, and extra attention to study if they were to live the good life. These kinds of stories echoed through rural and metropolitan student interviews alike. Regardless of where they lived, focus group students were wary of being tied to work that would not yield personal satisfaction. They were acutely aware of peers and of community members who represented success and of those who, in the students’ terms, had set themselves up for a failed life. These kinds of personal experience that developed into personal narratives about life were instrumental in shaping students’ aspirations.

**Student Perceptions of Personal Attributes and Desires**

‘I hate cows.’

Students’ perceptions of their personal attributes – their perception of their strengths and weaknesses, their likes and dislikes – coerced their desires and impacted on what they were willing to contemplate of their futures. In articulating their views of themselves and of what they were like as persons, students considered their destinies to be already partially determined. Students valued their personal qualities and saw them as important clues as to what they might successfully pursue in terms of careers:
S: I’ve always wanted to be a lawyer. I’m really not sure why but I think it’s mainly because I like arguing. (Northern Territory Year 10 Student)

Sometimes, perceptions of weaknesses were as important in the formation of aspirations as were strengths. The process seemed to be one of eliminating weakness and then capitalising on what might still be an attractive option:

S: I’m not that smart so I can’t get into any high paying business job. Can’t stand blood, so I can’t be a doctor or a nurse or something. And I’ve always wanted to, like, do a trade or something. So I just thought, hospitality, it’s easy, I like cooking. (Victoria Year 10 Student)

S: I always liked art and I really wanted to do that. But my family have tried to pressure me into following their footsteps. Because my mum and all her sisters and the extended family are all childcare workers. But I really like art, hey.

I: Not looking for work in childcare?

S: I don’t really like that. I can’t look after kids. I’m useless. (Northern Territory Indigenous Student)

Personal aversions – whether to cows or to working behind a desk – were also important in determining how students could begin to imagine their futures and where those futures would be likely to be located:

S: I couldn’t stand farming. I hate it. I hate cows. (Queensland Year 10 Boy)

S: I want a farm job. I’m a big farm person. I hate being behind a desk. (Victoria Year 12 Student)

Students’ perceptions of their strengths and weaknesses sometimes underpinned quite firm determinations of what they believed they could achieve, of what they thought was worthwhile aspiring to. For students in rural and metropolitan sites, this dimension of individual experience was shared alike.
Summary
Student expectations and aspirations for their futures were at least partially shaped by personal influences in their lives. Significant others, including parents, family members, friends and individual teachers featured strongly in students’ stories of who influenced them. Parents and teachers agreed that the family was a critical variable influencing the choices that students ultimately made. But students’ personal experiences in their communities, instances of success and of failure that they witnessed before them, also impacted on what they desired of their lives, as did the personal qualities that they perceived in themselves. In these respects rural and metropolitan students shared similar stories of significant and compelling personal influences that operated as they contemplated transitions from school to post-school options.

In moving from the personal dimension of influence the following chapter examines the broader picture of a social dimension.
Chapter 5

Influences on Student Aspirations and Expectations for their Futures: The Social Dimension
This chapter further explores the issue of influences on student aspirations and expectations by examining the social dimension through which influences operated. While the previous chapter looked at the issue through a personal dimension, this chapter focuses on the broader social impact of factors, namely:

- quality of schooling available within communities
- recognition of ‘New Times’, involving new social and economic structures
- the state of local economies
- student involvement in work outside of school, and
- understandings about gender.

As stated in the previous chapter, the division into personal and social dimensions is somewhat artificial and serves as an organising device for discussion of the data. Influential factors, though listed separately, should not be considered as having acted independently of each other. Rather than acting in isolation, personal and social influences on student aspirations and expectations were most likely to be played out through complex inter-relation, through webs of personal and social relationships. While the chapter begins with a discussion of each factor in turn, the issue of the interplay of factors should be kept in mind.

**Quality of Schooling**

*S:* It’s true. Yeah it’s true. We get the worst teachers up here. Seriously, they hand out sheets to you and don’t explain it.

*S:* My social teacher is an arts teacher and she’s never done it at uni. She used to be a substitute and now she’s a teacher for S and E and Health. And she’s not qualified in those areas. (Western Australia Year 10 Students)

Students, teachers and parents all expressed opinions on the quality of schooling available within rural communities. While some of these opinions differed in intensity and in direction, students and teachers most often focused on issues related to the availability of specialist teachers, the range of subjects from which students could choose, the high turnover of teachers in rural communities and, invariably, the quality of subject offerings in particular, and of schooling in general. Parents too were concerned about the quality of schooling available to their children but their
perspective revolved more around the individual needs of their children than particular features of rural education.

**Student perspectives**

When students expressed concern about the lack of specialist teachers available to them, it was often born out of sheer anxiety about doing well at school and optimising their chances of success in highly competitive secondary schooling systems. In reviewing the interview data, many students appeared extremely concerned about the prospect of facing final school-based assessment and public examinations when specialist teachers had not been available to them:

*S:* Some - half the teachers aren’t qualified in, like, what they’re doing.

*S:* They may be teachers. They might be a science teacher but they teach maths too just to make up teachers.

*S:* So my maths teacher he’s like, he’s a qualified science teacher, but not qualified at maths but, like, he just teaches maths.

*S:* All the maths classes this year, they’re not qualified.

*S:* I think when it comes to the exams when other teachers are marking it, we’re all going to do pretty badly because we haven’t really learnt a whole lot this year in maths.

*S:* Maths is where you really need a good teacher. (Year 12 Students)

This concern about the lack of specialist teachers was echoed amongst students at independent, as well as at government, schools. Regardless of the system in which they were being educated, students responded with a sense of personal affront as they contemplated the injustices of the systems to which they were subjected. Uncertainty and unpredictability associated with staffing of specialist areas featured alongside concerns about qualified teachers not being available in the first instance:

*S:* There’s teachers teaching subjects they’re not even qualified for because it is so difficult to get teachers.

*S:* Yeah and that’s bullshit. (New South Wales Independent Year 12 Students)

*S:* We’ve got a physics teacher and we’re going to lose him.
S: Is he going? I only joined physics because he was going to be teaching it next year. (Victoria Independent Year 12 Students)

The problem of learning from non-specialist teachers was intensified in students’ perceptions where they believed that they, as rural students, had lesser access to specialist teachers than did students in metropolitan schools. Given their conviction that this was the case, rural students claimed that their opportunities to learn were diminished by comparison with metropolitan students:

S: No. Just compared to, like, the big city and big schools. And teachers tell you straight up that we don’t have the same subjects that you would in a city school.
S: You don’t have the same opportunities.
S: You don’t have the range. Limited subjects. (Western Australia Year 10 Girls)

Students from across Australia offered numerous examples of how they believed attending school in their rural communities disadvantaged them. The unavailability of specialist teachers often meant that someone who was unfamiliar with a particular subject area attempted to teach them difficult content. Sometimes it meant that the subject would not be offered at all. Other times, the option was to study through distance mode, an option that many students claimed was not as satisfactory as learning through face-to-face delivery by a qualified teacher:

S: I wanted to keep up with accounting but they wouldn’t offer it in Year 12 so I just couldn’t keep on with it.
S: There was a lot of movement and teachers going. (Northern Territory Year 12 Students)

S: The school is just not big enough to get everything that people want. Like Rebecca couldn’t do drama and I couldn’t do music.
S: Distance Ed is always there but it’s not the same.
S: And the practicals! They say, ‘Oh yeah, you can do it by Distance Ed.’ But trying to do dance auditions by tape would give her a disadvantage. (New South Wales Year 11 Students)
Students who experienced these kinds of learning conditions were quick to explain how their aspirations to work towards particular goals could be attenuated, or negated, depending on the response of the school to the difficult circumstances:

S: Yeah. And maybe that affects our career choice a little bit. Like I would have liked to do stage performing and get into theatre. But now that I can’t choose drama that’s really disadvantaged my choices and things.

I: Can’t you do any courses at TAFE?

S: Not really. It’s not very equipped. (New South Wales State Year 10)

Apart from talking about the availability of specialist teachers and the range of subject choice available to them, students spoke spiritedly about teacher turnover as a quality issue related to their schooling. Students were critical about the conditions under which they were sometimes expected to learn and they complained that a high turnover of teachers was disruptive to their learning. In some remote locations this appeared especially to be the case:

S: It happened last year and this year. We’ve had teachers that have left and stuffed up all our English work and we’ve had to redo it all. It’s happened twice now. We had 3 different English teachers last year and we’ve had 2 this year.

S: Last year we weren’t sure what teacher we would have. We’d have one for two weeks and one for another. And then we had our last teacher, last year, he came from overseas - that teacher didn’t last too long.

S: It’s very disruptive too. (Northern Territory Year 12 Students)

At the Year 10 level at the same school in a remote location, the boys’ focus group claimed that in the previous year they had had five different English teachers and three different science teachers. And another group of students complained that their dance teacher had remained for only a month and that they had not had access to a dance teacher since.

The issue of teacher recruitment and retention often flowed over into student concerns about the quality of the teaching that they were likely to receive under these circumstances:
S: I was talking to my teachers and they said they hate being here too because as soon as they can, they will get out of here. They all want to transfer and we’re losing like 6 teachers to transfers next year and we can’t get any one to teach us. So I had a junior maths teacher teaching me Maths B earlier in the year because we didn’t have anyone. (Queensland Year 10 Student)

Students were very concerned about these issues. They wanted specialist teachers to teach them specialist subjects. There was evidence from the interview data that students understood the concept of economies of scale – they knew that when class sizes ‘collapsed’ that subjects were likely to be cancelled – but they also insisted that their interests would be better served if they had access to the kinds of teacher resources that they believed were available to their metropolitan counterparts. Interestingly, interviews with the metropolitan students did not reveal the kinds of concerns about quality of teaching that were expressed by the rural students.

Teacher perspectives
Teachers too were concerned about recruitment and retention of teachers but the extent of concern seemed to depend on the remoteness, and the attractiveness of the location, to prospective teachers. For some, the task of attracting and retaining teachers was inordinately difficult and represented a genuine challenge to the school:

T: Yes. It’s incredibly difficult to get specialist teachers. Music is one. We have a teacher on contract at the moment but we haven’t been able to fill that position. We tried really hard with the sciences, specifically biology, physics, chemistry. But maths and science teachers are just incredibly difficult to get. (Queensland)

T: From my point of view – and I’ve got kids growing up in this town – their educational opportunities are limited ... Our size doesn’t allow us to offer as much as kids would have access to in the city. So they might miss out on, for example, history, geography, economics. They might be able to do only two of those and they will vary from year to year. In the sciences, it’s generally a choice between biology and human biology. In English, it’s a choice between English and English literature. Generally we run physics and chemistry and the two hard maths courses. (Western Australia)
At the same school another teacher offered a more positive view, in particular of the computing resources that the school had been able to build, a resource that the teacher thought was more impressive than a ‘good school in Perth’ could boast:

S:  I’ve worked at a very good school in Perth, probably one of the top schools in the northern suburbs for sure, [name of school]. I rate the education students get here as good as, if not better than, they get there, ... Look at the computing network that we have at this school. I mean, I was at [name of school] which was meant to be the pilot school for computing and the be-all and end-all of computing networks and systems and facilities. Here is far better. Far better than that. (Western Australia)

Variation in teacher comments pointed to the fact that the schools we visited were not all limited in terms of size or of being able to attract teachers to the region. Larger schools fared better than smaller schools in being able to provide wider subject choice for students. And locations that were more physically attractive to outsiders fared better in drawing to them a prospective teaching force that they more easily retained:

T:  Yeah, I think we are well protected because we are a larger school so we have got a lot of different subject offerings that keep kids going along. So I think kids tend to stay on. And also, we’ve got fairly good links with job providers and all the advice is to stay at school until you get a job or get into an apprenticeships or stuff like that. But I think that is a function of the fact that we have got a large school. If we were a smaller school we wouldn’t add on the same sort of subject offerings and I think we could be in trouble there. (South Australia)

T:  I believe that schooling in Whyalla is actually quite good. I think it’s because, as I was saying, you have to recruit young people. And I mean one of the jokes that has been around for some years is that Port Augusta and Whyalla actually trained all the teachers in the State, so history has it. ... The easiest place to get a job is Whyalla or Port Augusta, so lots of young people will come here, will start here...and in terms of what you are getting in the schools, you are getting fresh people with energy, interested. So over the years I have certainly seen high levels of teaching.
Certainly we were very pleased for our kids to go through here and certainly they got all they wanted and were able to go on. (South Australia)

In view of teachers’ comments, it seemed that the perception of quality of schooling varied according to the geographical location. Again, there could be no essentialised ‘rural experience’ of schooling as schools differed with respect to the range of subjects that they could offer and the teaching force that they could attract and retain. For instance, one of the rural schools in Victoria, with approximately 1,000 students, catered to the needs of approximately twice the number of students than did one of the metropolitan schools in the project. While some locations had natural geographical features that drew visitors to the community, others struggled to maintain a workforce. Hence, schools differed in the range of subject they could tender and in the staff that they could present to students for sustained periods of time.

Parent perspectives
Of the parents who responded, most seemed satisfied with the overall quality of schooling that their children received in rural schools. At schools where teachers had claimed that there was wide subject choice, parents too noted the fact with commendations. A few parents did express concern about the issue of specialist teachers:

P: I think the education my daughter receives is satisfactory when comparing it with other schools but I do think that some of the staff are not qualified enough for the teaching positions they have eg. teachers teaching a specific class/ subject that they are not fully qualified for, or haven’t taught for years. This is probably due to lack of staff which is of concern. Also, some of the school resources and equipment available are pretty standard and I think all schools should have proper and good quality equipment/ resources if children are to fully succeed.

Some parents commented that there was too little challenge at school for their children and that ‘no one wanted to know about the handful of kids who were obviously smarter than the rest.’ Other parent comments revolved around there being too little discipline at school and too few teachers who could deal with behaviour
management issues so that the 'good' students could move ahead uninterrupted by poorly behaving students. Students 'with bad attitudes' were seen to 'prohibit the learning of the good kids and make them feel uncomfortable with their talent and interests.' One parent wanted 'more discipline and more community involvement and awareness' along with 'equal opportunities offered to all children not just the more academic kids.' Another wanted 'more specialised teaching for kids who struggle a bit.'

In summary, when rural parents were asked if they were satisfied with the schooling available to their sons and daughters, they made the kinds of individually-focussed responses that could have been expected from parents living anywhere. They did not make the kinds of comments that would identify a rural perspective on quality of schooling. A larger sample size may have allowed for closer examination of the issue from a parent perspective. Alternatively, it is possible that parents everywhere share concerns about quality of schooling with respect to broad issues like behaviour management and the tailoring of curriculum and pedagogy to meet the individual needs of their children, whether their children be amongst the ‘struggling’ or amongst those who are ‘obviously smarter than the rest’.

**Recognition of ‘New Times’**

*There really has to be a sort of paradigm shift – a change from the chop it down, shoot it, and put it in the back of the Ute type approach... primary industry isn’t delivering the jobs that it used to. It isn’t the way of the future. We have to look at other techniques to attract employment. (Tasmanian Teacher)*

Over the past decade, literature about ‘New Times’ involving new social and economic structures has seeped into Education. The New Times discourse centres on changing patterns of life associated with globalizing trends that are moving societies from an agricultural and secondary production base to service and knowledge-based economies. Within what is recognised as a ‘paradigm shift’, technological and organisational transformations exert an influence as skills associated with service and
knowledge industries assume greater importance and demand higher levels of education and training. In brief, within the state of evolution of new economic and social forms, skills associated with knowledge production and the brokerage of knowledge attract premium value while manual skills depreciate in value.

In analysing the interview data it became apparent that teachers like the one quoted above were certain that ‘New Times’ involving newly configured social and economic structures were rapidly evolving before their eyes. Teachers in the focus groups were sufficiently au fait with aspects of the New Times discourse to draw on it frequently, albeit implicitly, in their discussions about student aspirations. They recognised that if students were to sustain realistic aspirations for their futures, they needed to grasp the idea that their communities were changing fundamentally. Teachers also recognised that they were the ones most likely to disseminate information that would help students realise that change was at hand. What’s more, most teachers reported that they were working hard to inform students and to moderate their expectations and aspirations in view of such elemental transformations.

Teachers like the one represented in the following quote provided detailed observations of how newly emerging social and economic trends impacted on what was available to students and on what they could aspire to for their futures. They appeared to have a firm grasp of the changing conditions of employment that students faced:

*T:* You know that old idea that management down to unskilled labour was a pyramid? Well, now, of course, in the workforce it’s a diamond or kite shape, and that kite sometimes has a great big head and a very thin tail – and there is very little demand for unskilled labour – and that means that except for perhaps half a dozen kids who will go into traineeships with BHP, there is no longer any apprenticeship intake. All the apprenticeship work in the town is done through the new apprenticeship schemes, and we don’t feed into that much. (South Australia)

According to this teacher’s observations, organizations that ran the apprenticeship schemes were less interested in school students than they had been in the past. It was
often the case that students with the greatest desire to pursue apprenticeships by leaving school were the ones least likely to be awarded them. Those targeted for new apprenticeships needed to demonstrate high levels of maturity, competence and skills. Many companies were more interested in high-performing students than they were in those who demonstrated less discipline in meeting the institutional requirements of the school. Beside this issue of increasing selectiveness of candidates for apprenticeships, teachers were concerned that the number of staff needed for unskilled labour, for the ‘tail of the kite’, was a shadow of what it had been in the past.

Other teachers at other sites also reflected on the transformation of their communities in terms of the downsizing of workplaces, the centralizing of services away from rural communities, the computerizing of skills and the inevitable loss of jobs within their communities. They were convinced that new times, heralded in these ways, would have an impact on the choices that students could reasonably make for their futures:

T: Well agriculture has come and gone. There used to be a large regional office. But now the agriculture office, they downsized and moved everyone out ... I don’t think there’s anything much in town anymore.

T: Tax Office – it’s gone. A lot of the insurance offices have basically closed their branches in the town and moved, centralised. So there’s been a big trend towards centralisation. Everyone thought computerisation would be the saviour for jobs and so on, but it’s really been the reverse. Been a lot of job losses through computers. It’s a little bit hard in country centres to see where your job is going to come from...

T: And I think too a lot of the children will go away after Year 12 and go to university. They know, and their parents know, that they won’t be able to come back here to get a job. (New South Wales)

In Tasmania too teachers were convinced that the material reality of living in rural communities with their changing economic structures was enough to influence student aspirations in informed ways:

T: This community has changed quite dramatically from an industrial town – industry is now just about closed up. Kids growing up here today have completely different aspirations from what they did 10 years ago. Their opportunities here are far less...
T: One of the certainties though is that most students will go on past Year 10 which is something that wasn’t always the case. So there’s an expectation that education will continue for many of those students into Year 11 and 12. (Tasmania)

Some of these teachers believed strongly that life in rural communities had transformed in such a deep sense that young people growing up in these communities were also transforming. Accordingly, young people were different from what they had been in the past. They were exhibiting different character traits and qualities that were responsive to living in new times, in new rural spaces, borne of globalised societies and economies:

T: There’s a completely different attitude from my children to employment, to life, than we had. Like when I joined the education department, that was a job for life, right? Whereas that’s not in my children’s thinking at all. And they have to operate in a world where they don’t make long-term decisions because they can’t. And I think they’re risk takers in the way that we never were. And going to London or whatever doesn’t phase them one jolt. Yeah, different world. (Tasmania)

Having made such strong comments, some teachers were acutely aware that while they themselves thought that the changing nature and conditions of work were plainly visible, nevertheless, competing discourses about the world of work existed in their communities. In this regard, parents’ generally out-dated visions of what their children could accomplish by leaving school were seen to compete with the visions that teachers were trying to promote amongst the student body. Teachers often complained that parents believed that their children could follow in their steps without recognising that, within a single generation, the steps had been eroded by new conditions of entry to work:

T: But there’s still parents out there, and you hear it at parent teacher interviews, particularly for kids in Years 9 and 10. The parents have the expectation, ‘Well, I left school at the end of Year 9 and got a job. I got a trade.’ And it’s a hard road I think, particularly for the boys. They go through Year 10 and then find out that they still haven’t got any way of getting an apprenticeship – and they have to go on to VCE – and they
struggle – and they don’t want to be here. They’re totally unmotivated. They get cross. They’re disruptive in classes. But they’re just angry because their dads and uncles got their apprenticeships and didn’t have to stay at school. And there’s quite a significant number of students that are really angry and they stay here because there’s nothing else that they can do. And there isn’t anything else that they can do either. (Victoria)

Here it may be helpful to introduce the image of a palimpsest, not as a digression, but as a way of exploring the extent to which New Times thinking was acknowledged within rural communities. In Greek tradition a palimpsest was a parchment from which writing was erased to make room for a new layer of writing. In the process of erasure and re-writing, the original text sometimes remained visible as the new text was laid down and intermingled with the old. This image has been used before by Davies (1993) to illustrate how a discourse, as it is over-laid by another, might continue to exert its own logic even as a more compelling and contemporary discourse assumes ascendancy. ‘New discourses do not simply replace the old as on a clean sheet. They generally interrupt one another, though they may also exist in parallel, remaining separate, undermining each other perhaps, but in an unexamined way.’ And so, throughout the interview data there was evidence that some students were hearing from their families and communities that they could make their fortunes without investing in further education and training. Superimposed on this discourse was a more contemporary discourse focussing on education and training that exerted its influence through the demands of industry and of employing authorities, and through the efforts that teachers made in informing students:

T: ...there’s no education egg in this town. Because parents didn’t need an education, they don’t support education the way in which people in other towns or in the city do. That’s very clear. It’s a major problem.

I: So they think their kids can make it without education?

T: Yeah they think they can make it without education, whereas now they can’t. Woodside won’t take apprentices on unless they’ve done their TE. ... we’ve got kids who graduated from here last year to go on to university that Woodside wanted as apprentices. They won’t take the kids out of Year 10 or Year 11. Hammersley might take the exceptional kid from Year 11, but they want them to graduate from high school. So the kids who do the
VET courses don’t necessarily get the apprenticeships. It’s the Tertiary Education that they are after (Western Australia).

In the tradition of the palimpsest, it became apparent that this talk about employers wanting smart, skilled, well-educated staff – and of new economies demanding it – sat alongside stories about individuals who had ‘made it’ without credentials in a credential-hungry world of work. There were a lot of stories of men – and they were all men – who had made their fortune, or who had earned more than a professional, without the benefit of education or training. There were stories like the one of the grandfather who had been expelled in primary school who made his way to personal fortune as a business magnate, and there were teachers’ stories of friends and former students who were employed as groundsmen and ‘shit-kickers’ who earned higher salaries than principals of schools. Sometimes these stories appeared like texts from the past that were in the process of being overlaid by new talk about new times. At other times the stories seemed to apply to the present. Whether the stories were from the past or the present, whether they represented possible or exceptional circumstances, seemed to depend almost entirely on the state of the local economy and they were always based on gender. The emergence of these competing discourses is explored further in the sections on the ‘state of local economies’ and ‘understandings about gender.’

Parent perspectives

While teachers thought that parents were the main perpetrators of out-dated ideas about future employment, one focus group of parents spoke as confidently about the evolution of new times as did the teachers. This very vocal group of parents were aware of the competing narratives that circulated amongst students and of the models of economic success that students witnessed in their community. In this affluent rural setting, there was a tension for students between narratives about earning money quickly, as their parents had been able to do, and furthering their education and training in response to the changing realities of employment.

P: Something I’ve noticed, because we’ve only moved here recently, is the different sort of mentality from the town and from the kids. They don’t look upon a tertiary education as being important in the way kids in Perth or Albany or elsewhere do. Because they look at people that have done a
four year course, or five years, and they’re teaching here, earning $48,000 a year. Whereas their dad did Year 10, and he’s out at Hammersley or whatever, earning $100,000 ... they can see people out there that didn’t succeed at school and that’s great, I think it’s wonderful that they can do that, but they don’t have that incentive to achieve [academically] because they don’t see that it is necessary.

P: There’s not that focus on tertiary education. That’s why we find it difficult in the school. As a parent I see that lack of incentive.

P: My hubby works at Woodside and our son said, ‘Dad, what are you earning a year? $90,000, $100,000 whatever. Well, I want to be an electrician too’.

P: But they still don’t realise that they can’t get in. Yeah. So you’ve got parental expectations and parental experiences being thrust upon the kids I guess. And the whole world of work has changed. (Western Australia)

In summary, the interview data yielded interesting perspectives on the transformation of economic and social structures and, more importantly, on how those transformations were beginning to shape student expectations and aspirations for their futures. Teachers were generally very aware, and some parents were aware too, of these changes. While student quotations are not provided in this section, given the commitment to further education and training that we witnessed amongst them in the focus groups (see Chapter 3), and the precautionary tales that they told (see Chapter 4), it would seem reasonable to suggest that they too were familiar with the advent of new times and were responding accordingly.

The State of Local Economies

The state of rural economies in the sites that we visited ranged widely and had the potential to exert an important influence on student aspirations for their futures. While focus group students generally expressed buoyant aspirations – sometimes increasing inversely in relation to the state of the local economy – teachers expressed less uniform interpretations of how student expectations and aspirations were affected.
Extract 5.1, *A Tale of Two Towns*, presented in two parts, provides a glimpse of the very different rural environments within which students were growing-up, attending school, connecting with others, and imagining their futures. In each case, teachers provided their personal views of the state of the town economy and its potential impact on students. The composite picture of each has been extracted from interviews with several teachers.

**Extract 5.1**

*A Tale of Two Towns: Whyalla and Karratha*

Whyalla

*T:* When I arrived in 1971, kids knew that they could be apprentices at BHP. In '71 BHP had a workforce of over 6,000 — no sub-contracting — everyone worked for BHP. The fact of the matter was they were always recruiting. Kids grew up and went straight to work if they chose to. It was a different culture.

*I:* So what has happened in the interim?

*T:* In the interim? BHP has downsized, and downsized and downsized from more than 6,000 to about 1,000 workers. It has now become One Steel, so it is a separate steel industry. It’s reportedly doing reasonably well so we’re not hearing the rumours that we were hearing a few years ago that it is going to close. But many of their services are contracted out, and the contractors and sub-contractors don’t offer stability or long-term employment to anybody. Most of the work is casual – there is no guarantee of perpetual jobs.

When the ship works closed, and BHP downsized, a town that had grown to about 35,000 shrank to 21,000 leaving a lot of vacant accommodation. And people who were on benefits and were looking for a place to live found that one of their cheapest and best options was to move into Whyalla. So there was a movement at that time of long-term unemployed into all the empty housing in Whyalla. That cycle has been perpetuated. The children of long term-unemployed tend not to go and look for jobs. It’s not that they don’t have the necessary intellect; it’s just that the tendency is to repeat the pattern that you see. The cheap accommodation...
has allowed for the growth in the number of students who are living independently as well.

The reality is that 35% of the population in Whyalla is on some form of benefit. There is a high level of welfare dependency. But there are extremes of wealth – there are a lot of people who are on benefits and there are people like tradespeople at One Steel who are quite well paid, in fact, paid more than teachers are paid. It’s a bit of a weird situation, but overall this is a poor community. The data that I looked at about twelve months ago – the SEIFA poverty index – identified Whyalla as amongst the most poverty-stricken areas in the State.

You know, there is nothing in Whyalla that really leads on to huge success in Whyalla. You can’t really put your finger on anything where a kid can say, ‘That’s what I am going to do’, and they can make that a lifelong local career – unless, of course, their aspirations don’t include reasonable financial rewards.

Karratha

T: Karratha basically began as a town in 1970. It was built as a company town by Hammersley Iron. They owned it, they controlled it, and employees lived here and didn’t pay rent. Since 1970 we’ve been through a few boom and bust cycles and we’re currently in a sort of boom. Building has been going on for two or three years so a lot here is new. Half of the shopping centre is brand new. It’s less than 12 months old. And as Karratha has grown, the shire buildings have been shifted from Roebourne into here. All the government agencies have come in. The army has come in from Port Hedland. Telstra and other agencies in the outlying areas have all come in to the centre

I: And the cost of living here now?

T: It’s expensive. House prices here are about double the price in Perth. Rents here are high. Not many come to Karratha to work unless they are employed by a company that will subsidise their housing. They’d have to be a private contractor and make big money, or their employer would pay a rent subsidy. Kids can’t live independently. A duplex here, a 2-bedroom duplex will cost you $350 a week. Kids can’t afford that.
I think the nature of the industry that’s going on up here has an enormous effect on kids. Just the money within the town, I think Karratha income per capita is one of the highest of any shire in Australia. We’ve got the highest boat ownership per person in Australia. And we’ve got the highest four-wheel drive ownership per person in Australia as well. So to be able to own those things, you have to have a fair bit of money and I think the money in the town is very important and might affect students’ aspirations. And that can be positive. I mean a lot of kids who want to go to study actually want to come back because they know that the money here is very good. Having said that, I also think that, the employment prospects for teenagers are far higher than any other towns or places that I have been to, and that’s good. But it might also mean that some students will settle for what’s here.

Clearly, students’ experiences of rurality differed in each of these towns as Karratha projected multiple examples of opportunity and affluence, and Whyalla of vulnerability and poverty. In Whyalla, because of depressed real estate values, a concerning number of students lived independently without family support; in Karratha, because of inflated real estate values, it was not a conceivable option. In Whyalla, many of the students came from poor families and held ‘School Cards’, which in South Australia is a ready index of low family income; in Karratha, many of the students lived in families that had high salaries and access to four wheel drives and boats for recreation. The material differences associated with the state of the local economy in these two towns reflected the very real differences in what students’ experiences of rurality might mean.

During the focus group interviews students often associated their aspirations with the opportunities available within their communities. While student aspirations were generally buoyant (see Chapter 3), there appeared to be an inverse relationship between the opportunities that students perceived to be available within their communities and the strength of their aspirations. In particular, where students expressed strong opinions about opportunities in their towns and regions being restricted, they also expressed strong determination to further their education and
training. They wanted to avoid what they viewed as the unacceptable, and almost inevitable, consequences of not diversifying their options, especially in towns with a vulnerable economic base:

S: No, there’s nothing here, there’s no opportunity. You’d be working in your local takeaway store, IGA for the rest of your life.

S: The people who are going to stay here have already left school. (New South Wales Independent Year 12 Students)

And in other sites where local economies were identified as languishing, students expressed determination to create their own possibilities. According to students who found themselves in these situations, their hometowns offered them no future and, almost by default, coerced their decisions to envision alternative prospects:

S: We’ll be leaving [here] because you don’t really want to stay around here.

S: Well, you don’t. You have no future in [this town]. You’ve got to be pretty lucky if you get a decent job in the mines or something, as an apprentice or something. (Queensland Year 10 Students)

S: If you want opportunities you’re not going to find them here so you’ve got to go away.

S: Well if you don’t get enough education in [this town] you don’t go anywhere. You stay here for the rest of your life pretty much. Because when we had the mines, they were good jobs. Like you got paid good money. The boys left school to work in the mines and the girls got their dads to open up hairdressing studios and stuff. Or they became nurses or teachers.

S: You’ve got to have goals for the future because a lot of people that are dropping out, are dropping out because they don’t have goals. But most of the people that want to leave [here] have wanted it for a long time. They said, ‘This is what I want to do with my life and I’m getting out of [this town].’ And they’re working towards it. (New South Wales Year 11 Students)

Sentiments like these resonated amongst student voices, and were most clearly audible in communities that were struggling economically.
**Teacher perspectives**

While focus group students responded to poor circumstances by aspiring to a better life, some of the teachers we interviewed were convinced that generally this was not the case. They did not sense that an inverse relationship operated between the state of local economies and the state of student aspirations. In their view, a more direct relationship existed in that the more depressed the state of the local economy, the more depressed were student aspirations:

*T:* If I was to look at students in the early ’90s I would say many of those kids still thought that they would be able to get some sort of job somewhere, and their attitude to school was that they could see some purpose in what they were doing, and therefore they would work hard, etc. These days I find there are very, very few students who have any clear concept of where they might be going with their lives and what they might do, very few. That inevitably spins off into the classroom because if you don't see a purpose in life, or any hope in your life, what's the purpose of being here at school? I’m not sure if that is different in a big city or not but it is blatantly obvious here that there really isn’t anything for them to do locally, to make it big time. So why would you aim to make it big time? (South Australia)

*T:* I noticed that last year was a boom year around here for the farmers and there was a lot of money made and expectations could be higher. Whereas a few years ago, when times weren’t good, the pressure was that students come back and help in the family business and, you know, that’s difficult. (Victoria)

Other teachers were more optimistic about students being proactive in organising their lives when local economies were staggering:

*T:* Employment opportunities aren’t growing. They’re stable or dropping. So they are looking at going somewhere else anyway (New South Wales)
In economically vulnerable communities teachers appeared divided in their perspectives on what would become of the student body. While some teachers thought local economies and student aspirations rose and sank together, others attributed to students – as the students did to themselves – a more positive resolve in engineering their own futures.

In drawing conclusions about the influence of the state of local economies on student aspirations, a comment made in Chapter 3 must be reiterated. That is, when teachers were asked to make general statements about ‘students,’ they were likely to have been thinking more broadly of the entire corpus of students – of those who had already left school, of those whom the system was unlikely to retain, as well as of those who participated in the focus groups. The students themselves made reference to their peers who ‘were dropping out because they don’t have goals’ as though early school leavers were a different category of student altogether. To this extent, it is understandable that some teachers expressed different perspectives at interview than did students who interacted in the focus groups. While students envisaged themselves breaking free, some teachers were concerned that student fortunes were inescapably tied to fluctuations in market economies.

**Work Commitments Outside of School**

Students who participated in the focus groups were involved to varying degrees in work outside of school. While none of the students complained of being over-
burdened by work obligations within their families, many talked of their commitment to paid employment outside of their homes.

According to most students, work outside of school hours was not onerous and happened within the normal course of their week. For these students, the attraction of paid employment lay in the independence it offered, in the luxuries that it afforded and in the social networks that it generated. They frequently justified part-time work commitments in terms of paying for extravagant items as well as contributing to their family’s budget by paying for their own phone bills, ‘brand-label’ clothes, CDs, petrol, and entertainment. One student aptly summarised the spirit of consumption that thrived amongst them, ‘If you’ve got no money here you can’t have fun’ (Northern Territory Year 10 Student). Teachers agreed that for most students paid work was pursued voluntarily although the uptake of work was not always unproblematic as students complied with workplace pressure to increase their hours:

T: They don’t work because they have to. They do it because they want to. They want the money. They like the disposable income but the employers tend to put more pressure on them to do more hours. And they don’t say no. Some of them are working up to 18 hours. (Western Australia)

In stark contrast to most students’ voluntary participation in paid employment that financed ‘the extras’ that they desired, there was a concentration of students at one site who worked to support themselves in the most basic sense. These students deserve special mention because part-time work for them meant paying for food and accommodation as they attempted to maintain their lives independently, without any financial support from their families. As one teacher explained:

T: We have quite a number of independent students here who have moved out from home and are supporting themselves, so as well as any Austudy or any kind of payment like that, they also rely on part-time work. We’ve got sixteen year olds supporting themselves. Yes. That means that they need to work while the others just like to have money in their own pockets that is not given to them by their parents. (South Australia)

Given the dominant response that work was a value-adding exercise to what students could reasonably expect from their families, the influence of work on students who
worked to support themselves is duly recognised here rather than being omitted. Importantly, students who were living independently referenced the difficulties that they faced in meeting their commitments to paid work and to school and in reconciling the tensions between the two. Some spoke about the distractions that they faced in shopping and preparing meals and completing homework and assignments. For some, days off school due to fatigue were an inevitable consequence of too many commitments and over-reliance on themselves, at 16, in difficult situations. Amongst the student body that we interviewed across Australia, the effort that these students made to maintain schedules of employment and study seemed extraordinary. Further reference is made to these students in Chapter 7 on Strategies.

Regardless of the level of choice that students exercised in taking up paid employment, teachers expressed concern at the influence of excessive part-time work on students’ study habits:

T: Some of our best students are working up to 25 hours a week, even though they are only part time, and this means that something suffers, and it is usually school that suffers. (South Australia)

Teachers also gave specific examples of how a part-time wage could assume a primary position in students’ lives to the point where they would not take time off work to accommodate extra-curricular activities that were organised by the school. Students regularly rejected the activities on the basis of work obligations rather than on cost (South Australia).

While some teachers worried about the influence of work on study, others adopted a more philosophical stance in relation to the issue assuming something of a sea-change in students’ thinking about work and school relations. This was particularly evident in South Australia where it was possible for students to undertake a course of senior secondary study over 2 or 3 years. In the context of extended study, part-time work became a likely outcome. And with students staying on at school for an extra year, the borders between child and adult, and work and study were further blurred. As the teachers quoted here acknowledged, the student body was changing its perspective as students reached more certain adult status while still at school:

T: I think the climate of youth has changed. They actually want to have their income as well as their study as well as their social life. They are not as
focussed as what perhaps our generation was, which is fair enough. It is just the way they view the world now. Kids want to have their job and so they don’t worry about doing their senior over three years.

T: You’ve got to remember, a lot of them have got cars. I mean that is why my son needs a job. He’s got a car and he’s got to put petrol in it.

T: Yeah and it’s huge here. When they get their licence it’s just huge. It’s what they all look forward to. Hence our student car park. (South Australia)

In the most accepting and generous of spirits, these teachers in particular accepted the inevitability of change and acknowledged that neither the school system nor the student body had yet mastered the task of adjustment:

T: And it’s just a management issue. It’s not negative in terms of Education. It’s just saying ‘Well let’s do it differently’.

I: And the schools are able to cope with that?

T: I don’t think we cope with it very well, and I don’t think the kids cope with it very well. I think they are very tired because of this extra part-time work that they do, and very often they give their part-time job priority over what they might have due at school. I mean, I’ve got a couple of boys who don’t start working until eleven o’clock at night at Pizza Hut, and I think it does create problems for teachers but I think it is going to be a problem and it will always be there.

T: That is what I mean. It’s a management issue. We are never going to wind that clock back to change kids’ ways of viewing things.

T: And I think we accept it as teachers and accommodate it. I mean we accept that most of them have to have jobs, and they are going to have jobs, so it is just something you work around. It might be frustrating but you do it. (South Australia)

One other observation is important to make here with respect to the influence of work on student aspirations and expectations. Importantly, the spread of multi-national companies into rural spaces, as a globalising trend, impacted on rural students’ lives and provided them with a shared cultural experience of working at places like: Woolworths, Coles, Safeway, Pizza Hut, McDonald’s, Kentucky Fried Chicken and
the like. While students were generally grateful for the money that they earned through these venues, the experience also gave the majority of students we interviewed a sense of what it would be like to continue in those lines of work for a life-time. While work in supermarkets and fast-food outlets complemented their needs at the time, it became a catalyst to moving on, to aspiring to other occupational outcomes. Because of the spread of these enterprises into rural communities, the experience was as common to many rural students as it was to their metropolitan peers. Lived lessons on the need for further education and training seeped into rural students’ lives through experiences like these in the workforce.

In summary, the majority of students enjoyed the opportunity of working part-time, and employment and school commitments appeared to sit comfortably together. This was not the case for students who were living independently and supplementing supporting benefits with part-time work. Teachers were concerned only where time spent at work became excessive and diminished students’ opportunities to learn. In this event, work commitments outside of school were viewed as an important influence determining the level at which students would achieve and the goals that would be within their reach. It is worth contemplating that as more students seek part-time work to support themselves through extended periods of study and training, paid employment may exert an ever-increasing influence on what students expect of schools and what they expect of their lives. While work may sometimes function as a distraction, it may also operate as a support, and as a catalyst to seek other long-term options, depending on the ways that students, teachers and school systems manage the tension. As the South Australian teacher reminded us, it is likely to be a management issue.

**Understandings about Gender**

The review of literature for this project indicated that, when other variables were taken into account, it was rural boys who were most at risk of early school leaving. Rural boys, compared with metropolitan boys, and with rural and metropolitan girls, left school early in disproportionate numbers. Given this finding, the focus group interviews included a question about what life was like for boys and girls in their communities – how their experiences of life in rural communities might be different.
Students, teachers and parents were asked this question and frequently reported that gender was not a factor that influenced students’ lives. In their communities, boys and girls were treated equally. As the interviews probed deeper into the issue, it became clear that the interviewees were drawing largely from a liberal discourse about gender where opportunity and choice featured heavily and principles of anti-discrimination were acknowledged. Nevertheless, as students and teachers spoke about life for girls and boys in their communities, detail unravelled about the multiple ways in which gender was made relevant in their daily lives. There was no sense in which direct discrimination was practised; rather it was the ways in which traditional values, modes of thinking, and processes of enculturation had taken root in the communities that delivered unambiguous messages about what was appropriate practice for boys, and what was appropriate for girls.

**Student perspective**

*Guys can’t do girlie jobs or anything like that. They’ve got to be a man.*

*(New South Wales Year 11 Student)*

Apart from their generally declarative claim that life was the same for them, girls and boys at interview offered many examples of rural communities offering them different experiences which they had come to consider as a natural part of life. While rural communities were overwhelmingly referred to as ‘boring’ by boys and by girls, boys agreed that activities that were available were designed with them in mind. Organised sport focussed on ‘male sports’ like football while girls complained that they could get little assistance in organising netball and touch football competitions that centred on their desires. According to girls at one school where football was highly prized, the whole community’s attention was devoted to boys: *‘They, like, get everything and we hardly get anything’* *(Queensland Year 10 Girl).* And across State borders, girls made similar claims that rural spaces were empty spaces for them:

*S:*  
*There needs to be more girls’ stuff, because the guys have got it all.*

*S:*  
*There was a skate park built.*

*S:*  
*Girls don’t skate.*
S: Everything is built for the guys. They’re not doing anything for us. And you know, there’s nothing for girls to do except hang out at Maccas. (Western Australia Year 10 Students)

As for employment prospects, girls and boys seemed to agree that rural communities offered more to boys than to girls as highly traditional values determined what was available to them. :

S: I reckon on farms it’s...
S: It’s a male job.
S: Yeah, it’s more like a male job on the farms. Yeah that’s what I’m trying to say. (Victoria Year 12 Students)

In spite of the skills girls might demonstrate in working on farms, and their willingness to do so, there was a clear mindset associating boys with farming that privileged boys’ fortunes over their sisters’:

S: I have looked at staying but then there’s not much to do here if you do stay.
I: Do you see any life there for you on the farm taking over from your parents?
S: No, because I have an older brother and he’s better than me.
I: In what way is he better than you?
S: He can do more. He’s big and strong and stuff. The work favours the boys with farming. I’m included in all the farm work, like yesterday I was mustering and stuff. But it’s just, because I’m a girl I can’t ...
I: What can’t you do?
S: He’s got more power.
I: Are we talking muscle power or intellectual power?
S: I just don’t think dad would trust me to go off and fix a pipe. I can drive a tractor and slash and everything. (Queensland Year 10 Student)

At another site in the same State, girls also reported that boys were more likely to work in the family businesses driving trucks and running stations. Based on the presumption of superior capacity for physical work and endurance, boys were preferred for these positions:
S: They’re just more wanted I guess, out at the stations.
S: Their bodies, yeah. They’re harder workers and they can endure it more than we can. That’s how society looks at it. (Queensland Year 10 Girls)

Comments about boys’ monopoly on jobs in rural communities were not restricted to farming and work on stations but included specific references to jobs like building, mechanical fitters and electricians. And there were more general reference to boys monopolising apprenticeships and traineeships and having, overall, ‘more opportunities for jobs.’ (Queensland Year 11 Students)

S: Boys have got more options, I think.
S: Apprenticeships. There’s lots of boys take apprenticeships.
S: Yeah. And they move onto fishing boats. It’s like a craze.
S: They know from a young age what they are going to do. (South Australia Year 12 Students)

S: There seems to be more jobs for the boys because of the pearling industry here and girls probably wouldn’t go for the ‘let’s pull up nets’ stuff. (Western Australia Year 10 Student)

Across Australia rural students agreed that ‘it’s easier for boys, it’s much easier to get a job or apprenticeship’ (Western Australia Year 11 Student). They also agreed that privileging boys in these contexts was predictable given their upbringing – ‘It’s just like you’re brought up that way I suppose’ (Queensland Year 10 Student) – and considering that boys wanted the jobs – ‘It’s also the guys that actually want the apprenticeships as far as I know’ (Queensland Year 11 Student) – and that girls generally were not interested – ‘Most girls just don’t like those jobs. They have other things in mind’ (Western Australia Year 11 Student).

Given students’ comments about recreational and job opportunities favouring boys in rural communities, it was not surprising that students also reported that girls were more likely to leave their hometowns in pursuit of more attractive options and that boys would be more content to stay:

S: A lot of people are planning to leave [here].
S: More the girls tend to go away than the boys.
S: That’s right. Most of the boys would be happy to settle here.

S: Because they get jobs like plumbing and stuff and they can get an apprenticeship or traineeship, where girls can’t really get the jobs like that. (New South Wales Independent Year 12)

S: Guys tend to like [here] much more than girls. A lot of girls would prefer to leave as quick as they can whereas a lot of guys want to live here forever in general.

S: A lot of girls generally want to go to a big city where there’s like shopping and people and things like that.

S: Because guys have everything, fishing and stuff.

S: Guys are generally more outdoors than girls and girls get sick of it I suppose.

S: There’s not a lot of opportunities. If you don’t want to get into mining or anything, there’s not really much point in staying here after you finish school. (Western Australia Year 12 Students)

The comments that students made about the gendered division of labour, and the opportunities that they believed were available to them in their communities, may help explain why more rural boys than girls leave school early. It may also explain why more girls decide that their futures are better served by staying on at school and furthering their studies.

**Teacher perspectives**

Teachers, like students, agreed that life in rural communities offered more attractions and more opportunities to boys than to girls. In teachers’ perceptions, girls could experience rural living as an empty space as there was too little available to occupy their interests:

T: And for boys, sometimes the way it goes is that the rural community centres strongly around the football cultures. But I’m not sure about the girls in those communities. There’s less there for girls. They’re more isolated. (Victoria)
T: There's a bit of a void for girls in particular country areas. (Western Australia)

Some teachers were also concerned that schools often failed to provide the kinds of cultural activities that many girls liked to pursue. Teachers at one site expressed concern that they were not able to more fully engage girls, and boys, in artistic and cultural exercises:

T: And even having the culture things like the piano playing and all those things that girls really like to get involved in are very limited. We don’t have expertise here.

T: Because now there’s no artistic, dramatic art type of thing going on, which girls are very heavily involved in.

T: I mean that affects both boys and girls.

T: But it affects girls more. (Queensland)

Teachers also considered that girls might experience chauvinistic attitudes within the community, which could add to their sense of isolation. While attitudes were changing – particularly at the level of industry that was responsive to sex-discrimination legislation – communities themselves often continued to reflect the kinds of gender relations that promoted men’s rights to dominate and excluded women:

T: It’s a very macho town. I’ve noticed over the last 3 or 4 years that things are changing for girls. The big companies will now take on girls as trainees and apprentices for traditionally male occupations. But traditionally – it’s just my observation – the way women are treated in this town by men is still very chauvinistic in general. (Western Australia)

As for employment prospects, teachers understood that while anti-discrimination laws encouraged equal opportunity in selection practices, it was not so easy to transmute the culture of what was, traditionally, a highly masculinized workplace to a gender-neutral space:

T: I think that as much as one still tries to encourage girls to be involved in trade and plant operation, the culture of One Steel is heavily male dominated. And the boys, if they can, they get a job there. Then they see
that as being something that they could do. But girls don’t see One Steel as being much of an opportunity for them when they leave school. (South Australia)

The next extract from a focus group interview is quoted at length because it demonstrates clearly how gender can operate as an important influence on students’ aspirations. The extract also calls to mind the previous reference to the palimpsest (see the section in this chapter ‘Recognition of New Times’), wherein old and new discourses can rest in parallel. In this community – perceived by teachers to be one of economic opportunity – stories about New Times were silenced by the resilient storyline about the value of manual labour and the bountiful opportunities that awaited an unskilled labour force. In the discussion that follows, teachers were trying to explain why boys were more difficulty to retain at school.

T: I would say that there’s not that push from parents to do well at school. The reality in this community is that you don’t have to do well at school because you can go out and drive trucks for the mine and make $60,000 - $70,000 a year.

I: Now is that a rural myth or is it really genuinely true?

T: That is a reality ... And the bottom line is you don’t have to get good marks at school to go out into the mine.

T: No. You just have to get a truck license. And they’ll even train you to get your truck license.

T: Well, all they basically need is a car license and that’s it. And they can go out to the mine and get that job - $65,000 a year ... Queensland Rail train operators get $65,000 a year as well. All they’ve got to do is their training. Main Roads have come and approached us and said, ‘Please, please, please, we want your year 12s. We’ve got jobs for them’

I: Are there opportunities like that for girls? Could you fairly confidently say, a girl leaves in grade 12 with a prospect of a $65-85,000 job?

T: Well there’s a few who might, like ‘Gemma’.

I: What would they do?

T: They’d have to go to Uni and then they go out – like ‘Gemma’ wants to be a Vet.
Despite strong talk throughout the transcript data about the advent of a new economic order and the need for further education and training, there were instances like these where teachers observed an exodus of boys from classes, precisely because the opportunities were there, because they could get jobs that weren’t ‘girlie jobs or anything like that’ and because they could earn high wages without additional study. Some boys at school in this region were reputed to have ‘600-1,000 head of cattle already’ that had been given to them. According to their teachers, for these boys schooling beyond Year 10 was an irrelevance. They had real prospects on the land. For the girls, this was not the case. After a string of anecdotes of boys doing well without further study, teachers struggled to think of girls who could do the same.

In at least one other site identified as offering opportunities, teachers observed that a class of boys studying industrial subjects was constantly ‘decimated’ as the boys left school early to take up readily available positions in the workforce (Victoria). These kinds of observations help explain why retention rates might be lower for boys than for girls, and why this might be especially so in rural areas that offer them the opportunity.

**Parent perspectives**
Parents generally believed that girls and boys had equal opportunities to do what they chose. Most said that there were no differences for their sons and their daughters. Boys were sometimes regarded as more difficult to manage, as getting bored more easily, and as being more difficult to motivate. However, parents were generally convinced that life was much the same regardless of gender.

In summary, parents had little to add to this aspect of the discussion. However, teachers and students provided compelling examples of the way that gender operated as an important meaning-making framework from which young people drew in navigating their transitions from school to post-school lives. In view of the statistics that show lower retention rates for rural boys than for other cohorts of students, it will be important to consider, and to contest, rural boys’ understanding of what they have
to do ‘to be a man’ and what is required of them in avoiding doing ‘girlie jobs or anything like that’.

Summary and Conclusion

Each factor considered in this chapter appeared to influence student expectations and aspirations for their futures in important ways. Unlike the overlap in experience between rural and metropolitan students in relation to the personal dimension of influence, the social dimension drew attention to features of rurality that might be more distinctive. While the project focussed on only two metropolitan sites, there appeared to be two important distinctions between the comments that rural and metropolitan students made in relation to the social dimension: metropolitan students did not talk at length about turn-over of teachers or lack of specialist teaching staff; and they did not talk about gender in the markedly traditional ways that rural students did. Another distinction, made by a rural teacher, should also be noted: that is, the state of the local economy in rural communities, unlike in cities, often relies on a narrow economic base. The fluctuating fortunes of a community, hinged on the major industry, may prove an important influence on student expectations and aspirations for their futures in ways that are not apparent for metropolitan students. In terms of similarities with rural students, metropolitan students recognised the importance of further education and training as implicit in a New Times discourse, and they engaged in paid employment that offered them independence at the same time as threatening to disrupt their studies.

As foreshadowed in the introduction to this chapter, further considerations should also be given to the ways in which each of these separately listed influences interacts in complex ways. And so, for example, it is apparent that patterns of gendered attrition from school might best be considered in relation to the local economy. The extent to which new times thinking is recognised within communities might also be investigated in relation to the opportunities that local economies allow. And given that the personal and the social dimensions of influence also interact in complex webs, they should be considered together to offer a comprehensive picture of the formation of student expectations and aspirations for their futures.
Chapter 6

Obstacles to Aspirations and Expectations
Chapter 3 of this report demonstrated a considerable degree of optimism among students, evidenced in their generally positive attitude to the future, and their apparent willingness to apply themselves to whatever was needed to fulfil their ambitions. In particular, there was agreement among the majority of students that a rewarding future required further education and training. Many also seemed well informed about pathways and options, and strategic in their calculations about how to achieve their goals. While teachers and parents had more pessimistic assessments of students' aspirations and prospects, students themselves were quite positive.

Underlying this generally positive situation was a tension which was obviously a salient issue for the students, and especially in the views of teachers and parents – the decision to leave or stay in the community. For some students staying was a desired end; for others it was seen as failure to get ahead. Equally, leaving the home town was a sign of progress to some; for others an accepted cost of getting their desired job, and for yet others a choice they rejected. As one group of students put it:

S: There's a select few who would rather stay on the family farm, but the majority...

S: Most of them want to get out.

S: Yeah. Get out, go to uni, get a job.

S: Only because that's the way, the thing to do. Because it's looked down upon if you stay [here] and just give up.

S: Yeah the people come here if their parents get a job, or the mine transfer.

(Queensland Year 10 students)

Financial costs, issues of family relationships, images of the good life, and in some cases personal safety, were closely entwined with this central issue. The diverse range of views illustrated the complexity of identifying the obstacles facing students and their families. While material financial cost was clearly a disincentive, and for some a barrier strong enough to rule out any real consideration of leaving town for further education, it is also true that leaving the community meant different things for different people. The implications of leaving were likely to be seen by many students and families as significant costs of a move they felt was forced on them. However, those who saw leaving as an opportunity to progress and broaden life experience generally viewed these costs as acceptable means to a much more positive end. In this
way, weighing up the costs was a function of the material costs and resources available, but also the subjective frame in which the move was viewed.

The following discussion reviews the focus group comments on issues which are clearly seen as obstacles to the achievement of students' aspirations and expectations. As indicated above, the key question for those interviewed was the decision to leave town to further one's goals, and the associated issues of family income and the costs of education, parents' and students' apprehension over this move, the attachment to home, and the perceptions of available opportunities. In all cases it must be remembered that views expressed in the focus groups were diverse. Those reviewed here bear in important ways on the formation and outcomes of students' aspirations and expectations.

Financial resources as obstacles
The financial cost of achieving the futures aspired to was the most frequent obstacle mentioned in the focus groups. The students saw this in quite simple terms:

S: Like yeah, because it costs a lot to go to university. Because country kids they just don’t have to go to uni, they’ve got to pay the extra costs and stuff like that. There’s a lot of really smart ones too that aren’t like from a really well off family and they can’t really afford to go to university. I think you need a lot of scholarships and bursaries and stuff. You need to apply for everything you can get your hands on. (Queensland Year 10 student)

S: Well if you want to go to uni you’ve got to have money. HECS and fees and if you want to get a better education in year 11 and 12 you might want to go down to Perth but if there’s no money you can’t. Not enough scholarships. (Western Australia Year 10 girls)

S: I think everyone is worried about money and a lot of people finishing high school definitely worry about it because they say ‘I want to do this but do I have the funds to be able to do it?’ and ‘will I be able to get the funds, eventually?’(South Australia Year13 student)
S: It’s really hard because not only do we have to pay for the cost of university, we also have to do living costs and everything like that so it would help if you’ve got family around. (Queensland Year 10 girl)

This concern over the costs of further study, and its corollary of relocating, placed students in a difficult position, since it was their parents who had to bear the cost. While students regretted this burden on their parents, they also felt the loss of independence involved:

S: Finance is very serious to me. For the simple factor that it will involve my parents. And I can’t save so I’ll just have to live off my parents the rest of my life. (Victoria Year 12 student)

For others, the implications were not only reliance on parents, but also the added burden and sheer hard work involved in earning money for themselves:

S: The big disadvantage is if you want to go to uni there is a lot more cost involved, having to move and then pay for accommodation living up there. You’d have to have a part-time job. (South Australia Year 12 student)

S: Money is the biggest thing. University costs like a lot of money. And the more prestigious the uni, the more money it costs. Like we all want to go to the best uni to get the best degree and the best futures and that but it costs a lot of money. And even though we’ve got HECS and stuff, we’ve got to work our butt off to try and pay for this HECS as well as live at the same time and study. That’s like way hard. That’s the only thing that is deterring me and that’s why I want to go in to the army. That’s why I didn’t want to choose a mainstream job. (Northern Territory Year 10 student)

S: I think that is the one thing that stops heaps of people, because you think about it and you have to go to Adelaide and you have to find somewhere to live, you’ve got to find a job, and then you’ve got to, you know if you want to have decent money, and you’ve got to go to uni and get your way
around and everything like that, like that is the main thing that stops people I reckon. (South Australia Year 12 student)

Students said that it was harder to live in large urban centres if you come from a small place, and referred to people they knew who had tried and returned, as illustrated by a South Australian student who referred to 'people who go up there and they can’t handle it and they come back'. A similar case was reported by a teacher in New South Wales:

T: As an example, there’s a boy who got an apprenticeship with Qantas. It was a very good apprenticeship but he was struggling to survive in Sydney.

I: Financially?

T: Financially, yes. And so the easiest thing for him to do and the easiest thing for his parents to do, rather than prop him up there, was for him to come home. So that’s another problem in that you get a higher, I would consider, drop out rate because these kids aren’t surviving away from home. The parents aren’t surviving with them away from home. So they’re not discouraging them from coming home, and they’re not encouraging them to keep going. (New South Wales)

Of course, individual circumstances vary widely, and family relationships affect the support available to students, sometimes in complex ways:

S: . . . my dad has a trust fund for me that will get me started, and I can live there, I don’t have to pay board, I don’t have to pay for food or anything, because my mum has brought me up for eighteen years and now it’s dad’s turn, so I don’t really need to worry about much of that stuff, just yet. (South Australia Year 13 student)

Teachers also referred to the financial impediments to students continuing their education when this meant having to leave town. Teachers in Victoria referred to this financial burden as 'the struggle that the rural community has to deal with', and felt that this was a big constraint. This view was widely held:

T: I am still saying that people from high economic backgrounds tend to generate young people who want to have the same kind of aspirations,
and I think the playing field is not even at all and I think the financial constraints are for country students certainly a major factor in preventing further education. (South Australia)

Teachers, sometimes from their own personal experience, pointed to the unequal opportunities for rural students from different income and family backgrounds, and to the strategies rural young people adopt to save the required funds:

_T_: I think more and more people are taking a year off to work to go [to university] because I know that when I went down to uni. I was lucky that my parents paid for me to do that but a lot of my friends didn’t go because they didn’t have the money to, and I guess they didn’t really, really, really want to go but some of their parents would never have been able to afford to send them to uni for board and then pay fees and things like that. (South Australia)

Of course, some teachers were also parents, and their observations were particularly valuable, since they were able to see the issues from two different perspectives:

_T_: So it is very, very difficult financially, either for those who don’t get Austudy, because their parents earn too much, it is a drain on the family, and as I said I mean we are really quite, our total income is really quite high, and it is a real drain on us, so anybody who is over the allowance, trying to maintain even one kid out of town would be, I think, prohibitive for a family. (South Australia)

_T_: Quite a few families do opt for that extra year to get the independent youth allowance and it is also another year in which they can have the kids around for one more year and they feel a bit more comfortable at letting them go then. It is certainly true in my case. (South Australia teacher/parent)

_T_: It’s quite absurd really because I’m a single mother and I have put two students through uni. They can’t get Austudy because they can’t get living away from home allowance. Which is absurd because how can they
possibly live in Sale and complete a degree in Melbourne? But that’s how it’s laid down. (Victoria teacher/parent)

The following exchange with one teacher/parent encapsulated many of the obstacles and opportunities referred to here. The commitment of many young people from rural areas, itself influenced by the encouragement of parents and the value they placed on education, sat uneasily beside the challenges of maintaining the life of a student in a distant place, both for the family and the students themselves. The comment concluded with a challenge which can not be taken lightly:

T: That for us is really difficult and we, I have to work, there’s no Austudy for my children. They struggle in Melbourne, trying to find jobs and at the same time attend uni. But they had the aspiration, they had the dream to go on and do more than just stay in this small community because they’ve got my background and my husband’s background and we’re not from this region. So we’ve come in with eyes opened and shown them other parts and other ways of doing things. And so we’ve challenged and they’ve been highly motivated to be achievers.

I: If you didn’t have two parents working, how can you do it?

T: It’s too hard, it’s a huge cost. We’ve had to find accommodation for both of them. There’s no Austudy. There’s no government assistance at all. We’ve got to hand them out pocket money which they loathe since they’re still dependent on us for pocket money. So then they find jobs then that sort of takes into their uni time. It’s really unjust. (Victoria teacher/parent)

The material cost of moving to take up further work or study opportunities was the main obstacle identified in the focus group discussions. It was a significant concern for students, both for what it meant for their own independence and the pressure to find work, but more importantly for its impact on their parents. The challenge of finding sufficient material resources to support students' aspirations is a pervasive concern in regional areas, but other obstacles of a more personal kind were also mentioned.
Apprehension and fear

It has already been noted that relocating in order to continue education was seen by some in the focus groups as an opportunity to enlarge one's life experience, so that the costs incurred seemed more acceptable. However, for some students and parents, going to the city for further education meant moving to a strange, unpleasant, even threatening environment. City life was not only costly, but for some it lacked the comfort and security of one's own community, and was itself an obstacle for those who sought to continue their education. This was manifest in three main ways: a dislike for the hectic lifestyle, anxiety at moving to an unknown environment, and a real fear for one's safety.

A hectic lifestyle

At the most concrete level, city life was viewed as hectic and stressful, especially the traffic. As Year 10 students from Biloela put it, 'you probably see one car when you’re driving around the street. There you’ve got traffic jams and stuff. And traffic lights'. One report claimed that this feature of the city environment was a key reason for students not continuing their studies:

S:  I know about four or five people who have gone from year 12 here and have gone to Adelaide university or Sydney university or somewhere and have just come back the next year. And a lot of them have tried again. I know three who have tried again, the other two just stayed here. It was just too much for them. It’s too fast. (New South Wales Year 10 student)

Traffic and speed were also referred to in this comment from a teacher:

T:  And in terms of insecurity too, I find it interesting that you often come across these students and/or their parents, and they’ll say to you, 'Oh I wouldn’t drive in the city. Oh, I couldn’t take the city'. Or 'I never drive in the city.' Then obviously that message gets put to the children too. They don’t drive in the city and therefore the city’s got this, there’s a bit to do with 'I can’t cope with it. It’s too fast for me. I’m just a country person'. I’m a little bit more comfortable in this surrounding and so I found that wasn't difficult with my two. But I said to parents that they’re in the city, and they walk home at 12 o’clock at night through the city streets, and
they say to me, 'You wouldn’t do that. Oh I wouldn’t be game enough to walk in the city', and that’s an adult. A parent. So if they put that sentiment to the child . . .(New South Wales)

**Fearing the Unknown**

While particular aspects of the city appeared undesirable for some students, there was also an apprehension about dealing with the uncertainties of a new environment. It should not be surprising that some young people would find dealing with the unknown a risky and even frightening experience, and this was seen by some as just another problem to deal with in considering relocating to achieve their goals:

*S:* when I leave here my difficulty I think is going to be because we’re so far away from our family. It’s going to be, oh we just go to a place, this whole new place, because you don’t know what University you are going to end up at. You don’t know who you are going to live with, where you are going to stay, where you are going to get a job, who your flatmate is going to be. All that sort of thing. (Victoria Year 12 student)

*S:* Most of the people that live in the territory, especially Katherine, haven’t really travelled out, like especially with their families. They don’t really travel out of the territory much. So leaving in a way, from what they know, it’s scary. I don’t want to go to Melbourne but I have to because the university down in Melbourne has the course. (Northern Territory Year 10 student)

Teachers spoke even more firmly about what they viewed as a fear among rural students (and even among parents) of leaving home and facing life in the city away from the support of family and community.

*T:* I really think they just don’t get out of town enough. A lot of them would only have gone to Townsville and that might be once or twice in 18-19 years. And that’s a significant thing I think. Because they actually have a fear of taking that next step out, so that’s pretty significant. (Queensland)

*T:* They’re actually scared and so that fear is passed on to the kids and quite often you’ll find a number of kids that will actually get in to university and
then give it away in the first twelve months and come back ... (New South Wales)

As the Queensland teacher pointed out, fear of the unknown in any environment is clearly related to one's experience, and this varies considerably. Again this obstacle is associated with the resources and support available to particular students:

T: I think part of it is the socio-economic link too you know. You’ve got educated parents who travel and take their kids to Sydney to see a show, or go to the zoo or whatever. It’s not as big a step for somebody who hasn’t taken their kids to the city and introduced them to things in the city. (New South Wales)

The extent of this particular obstacle will vary greatly, and one comment was that it was not a major issue:

T: I don’t think parents are overly concerned about the kids going to the big bad smoke. There are some people worried about it but I think that most of them just say that it’s going to happen and let’s live with it. (New South Wales)

Nonetheless, there is sufficient evidence that the anxiety associated with moving to an unknown environment is a limiting factor for some young people and their families. In some cases, however, this fear was attributed to a more identifiable cause, the fear for one's safety:

Safety

The image of city life for some in regional areas seems to include a mistrust of the people there and a fear of violence, crime and general threats to one's welfare. This ranges from a minor concern to a serious worry in the comments from students.

S: And we don’t have much experience like living in the bigger city. It would be hard, because you trust everyone here but I mean you can’t really trust everyone there. (Queensland Year 10 student)

S: I think your parents want you to go and get the best out of life that you can, but to themselves they’re a bit worried. You know, what happens if
this happens and I can’t get to them in time and that. Bit like, but they still want us to go and get the best out of life. (Tasmania Year 10 student)

S: Around here you’re free, like you can do what you want. Go out and not get worried about being poked up the ass and stuff ...

S: Everything’s so scary.

S: You don’t feel safe. (New South Wales Year 10 students)

Teachers were also aware of this concern. In their view it was a real issue for students and their parents:

T: But even when I go up to Melbourne and I walk down, I can’t remember what street it was, but I was walking down one street a couple of weeks ago and it was something like 6 o’clock at night and we had gone to get take out and there was a blonde girl lying on the pavement against a lamp post, completely out of it. And I remember the panic, because you don’t see that here. So you can see how the kids, and I’ve been living here a couple of years, if they’ve grown up not seeing that, how that could be, ‘Oh, how do you deal with this?’ (Victoria)

T: I’ve got two teenage daughters who . . . they expect to leave home. And the wife and I both did, so that’s the family expectation. But we’ve got family members whose kids are going, and those parents are very nervous because they never left home and they seem to think it’s a big bad world out there for their kids to step into. Whereas, we don’t share those fears. (Tasmania)

It seems that for some students and their families, and particularly in the view of teachers, moving to the urban environment was fraught with anxiety and risk. Like the financial resources discussed in the previous section, and clearly related in many ways, the importance of this issue was affected by the extent of people's experience outside the community. Those familiar with city life placed these issues in a broader context, and had learned to deal with them. For those whose experience was limited, confronting these aspects of the urban environment was a matter of some trepidation, and just one more obstacle to be overcome.
Attachment to home

Perhaps the most powerful and pervasive consideration for young people in regional areas was balancing the emotional ties and social support of family and friends with any press to move away for study or work. Continuing education and broader work opportunities typically require that students set off, often alone, to a distant place, where relationships, if they exist at all, are unknown and untried. The support of family and friends figures largely in the lives of adolescents, their relative significance varying from case to case, but one or both are powerful needs, and the thought of living apart from them is a major concern:

I:  So is that true for all the girls?  They’re concerned about coming back visiting family and that’s an extra cost.
S:  It is for me.
S:  Not visiting, just moving away from them.
S:  And friends and stuff.
S:  Because we’re so closely knit and everything it would be hard to separate.
  I’d just be worried about my friends. (Queensland Year 10 students)

T:  . . . it is a close-knit community, and kids find it difficult to break, and
  I’ve seen so many examples of this both with my own kids and with other kids. It is really something quite special for a kid to have to leave what is pretty well their whole world, but . . . it is not like moving from a suburb to a different suburb, or from a high school in a big town to the university in that town, where ... it can be done gradually. People can, I mean, you have some control in a big town of the degree to which you move into new circles. There is absolutely no control that the kids have over that, the degree to which that occurs. It is an absolute break, because as I said, if you live in Whyalla, you might have some relations, some friends in Adelaide, but that for most people is not very important in their lives.
  (South Australia)

The term 'close-knit' in these comments was repeated in other ways in the interviews. The closeness of family was mentioned as being particularly strong in the rural cultures of these communities. As a result, not only were students at a disadvantage in
having to forsake friends and family in order to follow up opportunities elsewhere, but there was a sense that these ties were stronger in regional communities, compounding the significance of this issue:

S: If you’re really close to family it’s hard to move . . . once you get close friends and stuff and your family all lives in the one place, it’s hard to move, because you don’t want to leave your friends or your family. And like, a lot of families out here are really, really close. So a lot of people wouldn’t want to move. Like a lot of people, like my mother was born here and she’s still here.

I: Okay, so that might make it hard for you to move?

S: Definitely yeah. (Queensland Indigenous student)

T: I think in our town, the pull to actually become a Cloncurry member with a family is stronger. So that’s the biggest influential factor here. People won’t choose to go away, even if they’re extremely bright and talented, mainly because they want to stay where family is. So if you can overstep that hurdle and somehow build the confidence to get away and experience what it’s like outside of Cloncurry, because not a lot of them actually do get to go outside of Cloncurry, then maybe some of those pathways and opportunities would be created more. (Queensland)

T: Too expensive and they haven’t got their support networks, like family. I mean here the support networks are quite extensive in the sense of friends, not so much family, but in friends. You know they have got quite a reasonable support group amongst themselves, you know and their peers. (South Australia)

These concerns are not only obstacles to leaving home in the first place; they are also continuing issues for students who do initially set off for work or further study. There were frequent references to students who had left home to find work or continue their studies, only to find that life away from home was too great a loss. Returning after some time away was further evidence of the difficulties students faced:
S: ... they just found it too hard without their family. ... a lot of people have like extended families here and they are so used to that support unit and they get thrown out in to the open . . . (New South Wales Year 10 student)

T: It is a big move to go away from here and go somewhere else. Other students can’t wait to get away. You know, they have aspirations and they want to move, and they want to go onto Adelaide, and they want to do this and that and the other thing.

I: Do they make it, do you know, in terms of follow through?

T: We have quite a few. I mean we have a lot of students that make it. I guess that, I don’t know the proportion, but from what you hear, because you hear of them coming back and things like that, that we have quite a significant drop out rate, and that’s mainly because they can’t adjust to living in Adelaide. They are away from their family. They are away from their friends. If they can hang on for a year they have usually made new friends, but it is the first year that is so critical. That is very difficult for them to handle. (South Australia counsellor)

T: It would be my guess that perhaps a third of all those who actually do make it out of here to go to university come back. I had one of the girls come in on Monday who had gone to Adelaide to do [a professional degree], and she came back after the first term.

I: And did she say why?

T: Yeah, ... she didn't have any friends. She found it difficult to adjust to city life. She was away from her parents. You know acute homesickness basically.

I: Now could she have afforded to have stopped there. Could the family support her anyway?

T: That family, yes. Finance was not the issue, it was social relations. (South Australia)

While this last comment referred to girls affected by this concern, there were suggestions from focus group members that the separation from family and friends
was particularly difficult for boys. This is clearly relevant to the gendered nature of educational retention and post-school study mentioned elsewhere in this report.

*S:* My sister had to go to Darwin. She wants to be a teacher but that has worked out alright.

*S:* My brother didn’t want to leave here. He’s gone down to Sydney to do fisheries, to go to school to get a degree or something. He’s on leave here. Like, he wants to stay here and he gets all angry at mum because mum makes him go down to school. He likes it here so much. It’s one of the things he doesn’t like, it’s leaving. (Northern Territory Year 10)

*T:* A lot of the boys come back home.

*I:* To do what? Have they got jobs?

*T:* No, not necessarily. They’ve just, it’s all too hard, and they’re not equipped and they’ve come back. Quit uni.

*T:* No, they haven’t finished. They’ve just come back. It’s not the lifestyle they want.

*T:* They go fishing down the beach or surf club, and they’ve got that camaraderie, that, that group of friends, that are very influential. One of the boys I was talking to was saying it’s so much easier here. You know where to go and get your hair cut. You don’t have to hunt around to find, you know, where to go and get your studies, and interestingly enough, they’re all males. The girls have stayed away. (Victoria)

Attachment to home was a powerful consideration in students' decisions about their future. For some, it was strong enough to discourage a move away. What was also particularly noticeable were the references to those who left to seek further opportunities, but returned because the separation was too difficult. This latter experience was clearly quite common, and yet it has not been widely recorded in the various statistical data relevant to these issues. Statistical evidence has focused comprehensively on such questions as school retention and transition to work and further study, but less on the experience of students from regional areas after they have attempted such a move.
Limited opportunities: Work

A significant set of issues raised by focus groups revolved around the small scale of rural economies, and the consequent limited range of careers which students saw modelled in their communities. This meant that there was little contact with some occupations and professions, and that the opportunities for working in these more diverse fields were not available if students envisaged working in their community.

Many respondents commented on these issues:

S: The opportunities. I mean, even Hobart, compared to somewhere like Melbourne or Sydney or Perth, there’s just not the opportunity that they have. Unless you want to go into something like forestry or something like that, there’s not really much for you...

S: Tassie is probably good to go and get an education and then go out and see the real world.

S: I think Tasmania’s got a pretty good education system. Once you finish your education there’s not much here for you. (Tasmania Year 10 students)

Very clear evidence of this was presented in the following account of the concrete effects of a single event. Teachers reported that a firm's relocation affected students' perception of work opportunities, which in turn fed back into their curriculum choice:

T: They don’t see the variety of jobs that are here, the big companies. I mean the prime example I think you can think of: I work in the business faculty area and business was really booming in the curriculum when Esso had its headquarters here. But when Esso left and went back to Melbourne, we could see a lot of the subjects falling. Because the kids, aspirations wise, thought maybe they were happy to do business if they could come back here because there was a multi national company here. But there just aren’t those possibilities for them now to come back here.

I: But they also saw that career more closely.

T: Yeah, they saw what was involved, what people did. And they could, you know, talk to them somewhere. (Victoria)
The view was widely held that occupations and careers needed to be visible in the community if students were to envisage them as future options. Career aspirations were thought to be worked out in a kind of sorting process, in which students observed local examples of particular occupations and contemplated the various careers associated with them.

*T:* Geographic isolation, being 1500km from a capital city, they don’t see the range of occupations that they can aspire to. (Western Australia)

*T:* Teachers, nurses, doctors. There’s a couple of lawyers here now. There’s a couple of accountants in town. They wouldn’t see the accountants. They only see the doctors and the teachers. I guess the people who run the bigger hotels and that have probably got some sort of management qualification.

*I:* But on the whole you’re saying that the professions are not visible?

*T:* Yeah, the professional occupations aren’t as visible. (Western Australia)

The process of forming one's aspirations and making choices about future careers is a complex one, involving a balancing of information, experience, understanding one's aptitudes and interests, and considering the available alternatives. Entering this equation is a series of probabilities which weight the desired futures in terms of the available opportunities, where the most likely outcomes will be those where the path is clearest, the support most relevant and effective, and the resulting commitment strongest. In this way, inchoate and abstract developing aspirations become guiding expectations and then real pathways to a specific end. There is a tendency to see this as a rational process of decision-making, and its professional versions of career guidance, study counselling and employment advice follow such a process, where information is provided, assessments made and guidance given within an explicit and systematic framework.

However, alongside this formal process sits the complex experience of life, where decisions are assumed as much as made, where opportunities become available fortuitously rather than as a result of systematic assessment, and where aspirations can be influenced by chance meetings and experiences rather than systematic job
searches. This is akin to an informal career guidance process, where social support networks assist students in considering options and evaluating available opportunities:

T: The main thing I think impacts on their aspirations the parents [who] have a huge impact. They are the biggest impact totally, and if they don’t see their parents or other friends or relatives or whatever doing professional jobs they often don’t think of it, because they are encouraged to do the ones they are doing, and that is not so bad for some kids, but you know, for others they could go further. (South Australia teacher/counsellor)

T: Well, I don’t think they see the role models that you would see in another district, either you know with their parents, their neighbours, their uncles and aunties, that sort of thing, because you know the number of professional people in the town is limited to a few special groups. (South Australia)

These comments bear in very concrete and direct ways on the formation of students' aspirations and expectations through the availability of visible models, the opportunities to practise particular occupations in the home town, and the networks of contacts which can assist in linking students to images of particular futures. This was an important obstacle to a more diverse range of options for students.

**Limited opportunities: Education**

Just as small economies were seen to limit opportunities in forming career aspirations, and despite the fact that focus groups mentioned considerable advantages in the close attention and relationships that schools in small communities can provide, it was also the case that schools in these places were seen to be limited in a number of ways.

There was concern about a limited range of curriculum and extra-curricular opportunities, both in the school and the wider community:

S: We just haven’t got as many opportunities as they do, like in with the school, like performing arts. We don’t have very many opportunities in that.
S:  *In the bigger cities, they have like after school things like dance, drama classes, and we don’t have anything like that here.* (Northern Territory Year 10 students)

T:  *They don’t get the exposure to cultural opportunities. You can walk into a year 12 English class and say how many of you kids have seen a play and none of them would put their hand up. We can’t afford to take them to Perth to see plays and plays don’t come here, because there’s not a big enough audience to make it worthwhile.* (Western Australia)

For one teacher this was summed up as a general sense of a narrow range of cultural experiences in small communities, which needed to be compensated for by visits to the metropolis:

T:  *My 21 year old boy and my eighteen-year-old girl were born in Whyalla and both have grown up in Whyalla. They have both now gone off to university in Adelaide . . . they came up through local primary schools and they both went to High School (here). So I perceive their relationships with all their friends. I saw what was going on, and we were very aware that their horizons were narrow. We, obviously we have got a lot of relations in Adelaide and we regularly go to Adelaide, and so we regularly took them there, and so they did develop some sort of different understanding, and I guess there was always expectations from us that Whyalla would not be the permanent place of residence . . .* (South Australia)

Another interesting limitation in the eyes of some interviewees was the lack of competition in the small schools in regional areas. Teachers in particular felt that there was a lack of competitiveness which told against students when they moved to the larger world of the city university.

One group of students felt that the lack of competition which seemed to prevail in a small school put them at a disadvantage in that it led them to underestimate the importance of competing at a high standard:
S: Because here you only compete against your class. But if you were in Perth there’s like millions of other people that you have to compete against.

S: You realise how important it is. (Western Australia Year 12)

A similar view was voiced by teachers. In schools with small numbers, students have fewer colleagues with whom they can compare themselves. In the opinion of some teachers, this could lead students to form an inflated impression of their ability:

T: . . . down in Perth there are 30 or 40 schools within the metropolitan area and there might be 3 or 4 within the suburb the student is living in. And they know that competition aspect. That is a real thing for them. They talk to five or six kids from different schools just about every day. And therefore, that competition aspect is inherited. They know that 'OK I’m against that person there'. Where some of our TE students, we've only got 5 in a class and that competition aspect is 'Well I've only got to beat the person beside me'. They don't see that that is on a whole statewide scale. And that does create, seriously affects, not necessarily their aspirations, but their perception of what they are trying to achieve and how they have to achieve it. (Karratha student services coordinator)

T: I think one of the problems is that the students here, because it is like an insular community, are competing against their own community and so they think they are doing well, and they are doing well in their own community, but they have no idea of what the expectations and aspirations are like (elsewhere). (South Australia counsellor)

T: The kids aren’t realistic about what they want to do because they don’t know how Tamworth and education in Tamworth compares with the aspirations of kids in Sydney. So they, a lot of them don’t do much work for the HSC. They sort of still think that they’ll get in to University. Whereas if they could see how hard lots of kids in Sydney worked and then perhaps they’d realise what the competition was. And you know, work a bit harder. (New South Wales)
While some interviewees held the view that students in regional schools were disadvantaged, there was comment that this disadvantage applied also to the process of entering post-school education. In a number of ways focus group members felt that students in their schools missed out on some of the support available to metropolitan students, and this made it more difficult for them to access further educational opportunities.

Most obvious among these was the fact that few regional towns involved in the study had any form of higher education. This was nicely put by one teacher who said 'I think the only thing that is specific to the regional issue with further study is actually being able to reach out and touch it.' (South Australia teacher/counsellor)

While some of the centres participating in the study did have a university presence, even this did not solve the problem, since only a limited number of courses was available:

   *I*: Now what about your high academic achievers? Do any of them stay or see any prospect for them here?

   *T*: Very few because the courses that the university offers are not the courses that will keep any of the high academic achievers here. So if you wanted to become a doctor you can't here. You've got to move out. My son wanted to do geographic information systems, and so he went to Perth. Son number two wanted to do science. There is no science degree here, had to leave town. (South Australia)

One rather lengthy comment provides a valuable picture of the many detailed ways in which opportunities for support in small centres are limited. Provision of information, access to university campuses for familiarisation experiences, revision courses for competitive exams and private tutoring are all mentioned as examples of support available to metropolitan students but not to students in more remote centres.

   *T*: It is a geographically isolated place. It may have 11,000 people but it is still geographically isolated. In a simple sense I’ve got 20 kids doing TE this year to try and get in to university. I’ve had one university person come and speak to them for an hour. So that’s, other than the information
that I give them, that is the only information they have on tertiary education.

I: And what university was that?

T: University of Western Australia. And they do it every year. They will send a person up here. Now if I was in Perth doing the same job, my kids would have a visit from every tertiary institution, TAFE. They would have open days at uni that you would be able to take them to and they’d go through every department, every university. And that is a huge motivational factor and a knowledge factor of what you find out. Add to that the fact that their access to TE revision courses that they run via the Universities or via tutors. . . in the last set of holidays you would see in the newspaper, I get flyers sent to me saying that groups are running revision courses in Physics, Chemistry, maths, whatever for kids doing their entrance exams. Now these kids don’t get access to that unless they fly to Perth and enrol in one of those courses.

I: Are they private companies?

T: Some would be. Some are run through universities. Some are run through private groups. Add to that, the fact that if I’m at school in Perth and I’m having trouble in maths, I could probably get a maths tutor. There’s places in Perth that are set up just to tutor groups where you ring up and you get, and they say we’ll give you a tutor for $40 an hour. These kids don’t have access to any of that sort of stuff here So they are behind the eight ball as far as that goes. (Western Australia)

The same teacher illustrated the difficulty of remedying these problems by reporting a case where official financial support was available to pay for assistance, but no one was available to provide it. Again, the community was too small to be able to provide people with the expertise needed who were willing to do the work:

T: (Take the) Aboriginal Tutorial Assistance Scheme. OK, so I have kids, Indigenous kids who I think are pretty good ... I put them in because they’ve got tertiary aspirations. They might say they want to go to uni. I go down and get them to fill in an ATAS form. And they try and find me a tutor. They had trouble finding people to tutor the kids. So even though I’ve got a kid who might aspire to go to uni, and wants to get the
additional help, quite often the teachers just don’t want to do the extra hours after the day. They’ve got enough after the day and there's not enough people out in the community here around to do it. If you were in Perth then you would have access to that sort of stuff as well. (Western Australia)

Conclusion
The combination of views quoted here is a daunting list of obstacles which focus groups felt were important issues for students and their families. At the level of concrete provision and the taking up of opportunities, the pervasive influence of material resources and finance was very apparent. More specific issues of limited educational opportunity and the occupational models and experiences of small economies were also important. On a different plane were the personal and emotional issues associated with the anxieties of moving to the city, and the powerful sense of loss of family and friends which this implies.

These views provide valuable insights into what issues need to be addressed to expand students' opportunities in regional areas. They also raise some interesting points which warrant further consideration.

First, these discussions were dominated by the issue of leaving home to pursue further opportunities for work and study. It seems that aspirations and leaving town, at least temporarily, are synonymous in the minds of many. This is a key underlying issue. Second, teachers were a powerful source of advice on these questions. They were astute observers of students' experience, and showed considerable insight into the system of further study with which students were confronted. As many of the teachers were themselves parents, their views were often based on a range of professional but also personal experience. Of course, they may also tend to particular views about desirable futures as a result of their professional role. As teachers are powerful influences on students' school experiences and their contribution to the formation of aspirations and expectations, the views of teachers are especially important. A third issue relates to those students who did leave town to follow their aspirations, for they too must deal with the obstacles reviewed here, but their experiences are perhaps less
widely recognised. The evidence here is that they faced the same range of obstacles, and that they represent a more important problem than official statistics may indicate.

The focus group accounts provided here are an important challenge to those responsible for the welfare of students in regional areas. The obstacles they refer to are diverse, and will require an equally diverse range of responses if they are to be addressed. Some possible strategies are reviewed in the following chapter.
Chapter 7

Strategies that Sustain
Student Aspirations and Expectations for their Futures
Focus group interviews for this project identified a range of ways in which student expectations and aspirations for their futures were enhanced, in sustainable ways, through the initiatives taken by a number of agencies. School and university systems, industry and community groups and governments initiated strategies that could be seen as enhancing student expectations of achieving higher levels of education and training, and their desires to achieve their goals. In this respect, the forces of globalisation and information and communication technologies also existed as a strategic element in sustaining student expectations and aspirations for their futures.

In this chapter, the strategies that emerged from the focus group interviews are listed according to the following headings and are discussed in turn:

- Education system initiatives
- Institutional networking
- Industry initiatives
- Community initiatives
- Government arrangements and incentives, and
- Forces of globalisation and information and communication technologies.

It will be noted that there is considerable overlap between what might be conceptualised as an ‘influence’ on student aspirations and expectations as reviewed in Chapters 4 and 5, and what might be conceived as a strategy as reviewed in this chapter. As commented in Chapter 4, some parents and teachers worked in highly strategic ways to enhance students’ ideas of what they might become, and of what they might expect from life. Likewise, all of the strategies listed here could be considered to operate as influences that further manipulate and sway student aspirations for their futures. For instance, industry and community initiatives, and institutional networking with student interests in mind, could be (re)viewed as influences, or as strategies. In making the distinction, we have worked with the idea that strategies focus more on macro-level interventions that are often purposely designed to manoeuvre a population in particular directions.
**Education System Initiatives**

Education systems from across Australia offer a variety of approaches to schooling their populations. From amongst the interview data, the most apparent initiatives that had been taken at an education system level involved one State’s approach to ‘second chance’ schooling; all State’s attempts at broadening the base of curriculum offerings to include vocational education and training; the physical re-configuration of rural schools, including the forging of links with TAFE, to allow for more specialist, as well as more diversified, curriculum offerings; and the provision of distance and virtual schooling. While it was not strictly a ‘system’ level initiative, some schools’ whole-of-school approach to enhancing and sustaining student expectations and aspirations, in deliberately strategic ways, are also referenced in this section.

*‘Second Chance’ Schooling*

The education system that operates in South Australia now allows for students to undertake their senior secondary studies over a two, or a three, year period. The inclusion of Year 13 meant that some students returned for an extra year of study to improve their overall rating for tertiary selection. It also meant that some students, who by choice or circumstance decided to work and study part-time, were able to pace their studies to suit their needs. From the focus group interviews it seemed that this arrangement was particularly important to students who were living independently and supporting themselves as they returned to school with the determined expectation of improving the circumstances in which they lived. It was also important to students with high aspirations who had not met their own targets for academic success. Year 13 offered all of these students a second chance at realising their aspirations and, from their comments, it appeared that they appreciated the opportunity:

*I:* How many Year 13s are there at the school?

*S:* Yeah, there’s quite a few.

*I:* So do you think that this is actually a positive step that the government has taken? Not all states have this.

*S:* Yeah, I reckon.

*S:* Definitely. Everyone deserves a second chance basically.
S: Sometimes you don’t know what you want to do, and you sort of might decide and it’s too late.

S: You do your subjects one year and then you think, ‘Oh well, maybe my TER is not good enough – the better my TER the more chances I’ve got of doing something.’ And so it’s good that they let you come back and give you the chance to do different subjects and heighten your TER, so you’ve got more of a range to choose from.

S: Yeah, I’d rather come to school here than pretty much any school in Adelaide. (South Australia Year 13 Students)

Broadening the Base of Schooling

Teachers from across Australia acknowledged system-wide moves to broaden the base of education on offer to students, especially at senior secondary level. Secondary schooling has been roundly criticised as elitist, as catering almost exclusively to the needs of academic students, and of operating as a sorting system for tertiary institutions. In response to these kinds of criticisms, education systems have attempted to promote a new vision of secondary schooling as one that is inclusive of the needs for further education and training of a diverse clientele. Where communities were large enough to provide the infrastructure, some schools achieved this re-visioning through articulation with TAFE colleges in their communities:

T: ... we have special programmes for those students [with low-level literacy and numeracy achievements] in Years 11 and 12 that we call our TAFE Pathways Programme. We provide special curriculum – varied subjects. And when they get to stage 2, Year 12, then we have an arrangement with TAFE. They do subjects here that are called our Community Studies subjects. They do enough of those to be able to satisfy their SACE requirements. Then they do two days a week at TAFE where they do the preparatory education certificate... If they pass it all they get their certificate from TAFE. And if they finish their Community Studies unit, they gain their SACE... So then they’ve got the entry requirement to go onto a higher certificate level at TAFE. (South Australia)
In other instances, schools provided their own smorgasbord of vocational education and training (VET) studies that were proving so successful that they often led to further training outside of school in apprenticeship schemes:

T: And the courses that we offer are attractive. We offer national courses in business administration, Certificate I in engineering, Certificate II in engineering. And, for example, the levels course in Year 11 started off with eighteen kids. By the time they got to Year 12, there were 5 left. Thirteen had gone to apprenticeships. So they seem to go. (Western Australia)

Teachers at schools like this one reported that their efforts at diversifying their curriculum offerings had been highly successful in retaining students who otherwise might not have stayed on at school. The important point was made that retention figures were ‘slippery statistics’ offering misleading information when they indicated only that students had left school before completing Year 12. What such figures failed to do was to indicate the success that schools were experiencing in setting students up for success, in assisting them in their transition from school to work, and in giving non-academic students hope of realising their aspirations:

I: Do you know what your retention rates are? Like, say Year 10, how many kids just drop out?
T: None.
I: None?
T: Our retention rate last year in Years 10 and 11 was 101%.
I: What have you done?
T: It’s our expansion of our vocational education training that has retained kids... With VET courses starting up in about 96, 97, we had about 50 kids in VET courses. Now 160 of 240 are in VET. We’ve got about 32 in Year 12 doing TE and about 50 in VET... And our retention rate from Year 11 to Year 12 is around 90%. It’s higher than that if you count the kids who get picked off at the end of Year 11 to go to apprenticeships and traineeships. So if we can count that as being a decent education, our retention rate into Year 12 would be about 95%. Again that’s purely vocational education and training. (Western Australia)
The teacher quoted here was concerned about the undeserved adverse coverage that schools often attracted with respect to retention rates. As the teacher explained, in the case of his school where thirteen of eighteen students ‘in the levels course’ moved successfully from VET studies in Year 11 to apprenticeship training, State statistics on retention were likely to be deceptive. The statistics misconstrued successful transition – from one site of education and training to another – as school drop-out:

*T:* You can say that the retention rate in that course from Year 11 to Year 12 was 25% and it’s not. It’s 100%, because 13 of them are in apprenticeships. The figures are just useless. (Western Australia)

While the movement of VET into schools appeared to achieve what it had set out to – to revision the purpose of schooling to include a more diverse clientele – the initiative was not without its critics. Some teachers and some parents expressed concern about the allure of VET studies for students who otherwise would have been successful in the higher education sector:

*T:* Yeah, look I think VET and careers are pushed extremely high – sometimes to the detriment to the students. And I don’t mean that in a negative sense. I just think that’s in terms of their aspirations – some students would take a traineeship where I believe that they could have gone to university. (Western Australia Teacher)

*P:* There’s huge focus on VET, so there’s a lot of kids who do VET studies and they move from construction work placement into a job with the host employer which is great. But I’ve sort of thought for the last couple of years that we should have a focus, more of a focus, on TE because of the jobs that are coming up here now – they’re all technology based. It’s all process engineering and those sorts of jobs. That’s where the next lot of job opportunities are going to come from. (Western Australia Parent)

Whether the movement was toward VET or tertiary studies, some teachers thought that State senior certificates were outdated and irrelevant in contemporary times. Teachers in one focus group in particular argued that further system-level reform would be necessary to provide additional support to students who were aspiring to a variety of outcomes:
T: We could talk about the value of the SACE certificate as being, to my mind, an outmoded concept... here we try to lock them into a 22 unit, two or three year course to get some certificate right at the end. And I think that is something that has been generated by people who have been thinking in an older generation. You know, you get a certificate at the end as a ticket, whereas, nowadays, the kids want lots and lots of skills achievement things so they can build up a portfolio.

T: I think one of my concerns is the motivation for senior students to actually value their studies, and sometimes I think we could improve that if only we gave them greater recognition for what they are doing. (South Australia)

In brief, it seemed that some schools had moved successfully in the direction of diversifying their curriculum offerings, of retaining students at school as a direct consequence, and of sometimes acting as a conduit to other forms of education and training. Some teachers and parents suggested that systems needed to be vigilant in monitoring the movement from programmes of study based on academics to those based on vocational education and training. Some teachers also suggested that Education systems should begin profiling student skills and accomplishments as an additional strategy that would help sustain student expectations and aspirations for their futures.

The Physical Reconfiguration of Schools
At some sites that we visited where there was more than one State high school, teachers spoke of the efforts made by schools in the area to rationalise their offerings. At one site in South Australia, for instance, where three State high schools competed for an ever shrinking population of students, the schools resolved to reconfigure their physical space as two high schools serving students from Years 8 to 10, and as a senior secondary high school serving the needs of students from Years 11 through to 13. This reconfiguration meant that the senior secondary school, as the only State school serving the community at those year levels, was able to draw a larger population and, consequently, make a more generous range of curriculum offerings available to students, which it did successfully. The senior secondary school also forged a TAFE Pathways Programme with its local TAFE college thereby increasing
its curriculum offerings and serving the needs, and the aspirations, of a wider range of students.

Since we visited the project sites it has been noted that similar moves are afoot, for instance, in Mt Isa and on Thursday Island in Queensland where ‘education precincts’ have been designed to rationalise use of space and resources and to establish tighter links with TAFE colleges. While this is being heralded as a new move for rural schooling in Australia, the focus group interviews revealed that similar moves to reshuffle and reconfigure space and to co-locate educational resources have been made already in some rural communities.

**Distance Education and Virtual Schooling**

Where opportunities were limited because of small numbers of students wishing to study a subject, or because of the lack of a specialist teacher in the area, teachers and students spoke about the options of studying through schools of isolated distance education, and they spoke of the advent of virtual schooling.

With respect to delivery of subjects via distance mode, students were often critical, claiming that they much preferred face-to-face delivery. From the point of view of managing their studies, they complained that there was ‘no one there to push you’; and from a relational and pedagogical perspective they protested that teachers did not know what it was like to live in the community, and they did not know the standards they had reached (Western Australia Year 10 Girls). Other criticisms like these were reported in the section on ‘quality of schooling’ in Chapter 5.

Notwithstanding such criticisms, distance education represented an system-level initiative to improve student access to programmes of study and to sustain student expectations and aspirations for their futures. Accordingly, teachers recognised the benefits, the limitations, and the improvements that were being made to distance delivery of education:

\[
T:\ We\ can\ have\ 8\ students\ enrolled\ in\ our\ school\ in\ isolated\ and\ distance\ education.\ So\ that’s\ basically\ by\ correspondence...\ that\ school\ has\ got\ about\ 2,000\ students\ around\ the\ state\ who\ do\ distance\ education.\ We\ do\ have\ video\ conferencing\ here\ and\ the\ kids\ use\ that\ for\ distance\ education
\]
maybe once a week for the lesson, interactive video lesson, a live lesson...if they say we can offer a video-conference facility for an hour a week for your Biology kids, then we take advantage of that. So they do get some face-to-face contact with their teacher. There are projects where they get 4 hours a week for a tertiary entrance subjects via video conferencing. But that’s only on the drawing board at this stage and it will be offered out of Geraldton Secondary College. (Western Australia)

While schools of isolated distance education were introducing video-conferencing and more face-to-face delivery, the move to virtual schooling created interest among some students as advanced technologies increased the possible of interactivity and connectivity amongst students in rural and remote areas:

I: Some of you study by distance-ed?
S: Next year we do it. What’s the other one?
S: Virtual School.
I: Tell me about that.
S: It’s just on the computer. You’re hooked up to the Internet.
S: They have you like hooked up with the teacher at that time, you know, to the Internet. And other students from other schools are going in the same way.
S: And they talk via the Internet. But with distance-ed they send the work out. (Queensland Year 10 Girls)

Distance and virtual schooling did not cater to everyone’s needs, nor did it operate to everyone’s satisfaction, however, the strategies that education systems had put in place supported the learning needs of many students who otherwise would not have had the chance to pursue their special interests.

A Whole-of-School Approach

Education initiatives also operated in quite distinct ways when they were introduced as a whole-of-school approach. Several schools in the project were working towards the development and promotion of particular philosophical and pedagogical positions to teaching and learning, ones that sought to ‘read’ students positively, to work with their strengths, to keep them at school, and to deliberately and explicitly sustain
student expectations of what they might achieve from life. And so at one school, for instance, the message to those who did not fit the mould as being self-regulating and compliant students was one of acceptance and perseverance rather than rejection. A common culture was encouraged amongst staff with respect to retaining – and working with – difficult students in the system:

T: [we say] ‘You know, as much as you play up and do the wrong thing, we still want you to stay on at the school, grow out of that and move on, and make a success of yourself’. And you know that’s what I’ve been trying to sort of promote, and I think most of us do as well – just that culture of getting the most out of your education. (South Australia)

At another school where programmes of Indigenous education featured strongly, a whole-of-school approach was adopted through a cultural training programme. Training of new teachers focussed on a range of issues, including teacher expectations for Aboriginal students who attended the school. Under its management, the school adopted a proactive stance in inducting new teachers into a system designed to support and nurture the expectations and aspirations of its students, with a particular focus on aboriginal students:

T: We put all our teachers through a cultural training programme every year. Every new one has to do a 5-day cultural awareness programme, and part of that are the expectations. Because they’re aboriginal doesn’t mean to say that they won’t succeed. If they’ve got problems we can fix the problems. But there is the expectation that if they’re aboriginal they won’t succeed ... that’s the only reason a lot of these kids haven’t succeeded in the past. (Western Australia)

A whole-of-school approach to sustaining student expectations and aspirations was not immediately apparent in every school; where it was apparent, teachers talked with commitment about the benefits of moving beyond individual and isolated efforts to a position within the school where a concerted effort was exerted amongst staff.
In reviewing the interview transcripts, another important strategy that emerged was the institutional networking that was happening to support student expectations and aspirations across the rural sites. Networks were sometimes created by schools reaching outwards to engage with facilities and resources outside of their communities and it sometimes happened when other agencies, notably tertiary institutions, reached into rural communities to support and attract students at school. Each of these versions of institutional networking is discussed below.

Schools Reaching Outwards
Teachers in rural areas appeared to be consciously aware of the need to broaden student horizons by capitalising on opportunities that existed outside of their communities. They talked freely about the need to transport students into different contexts as a deliberate strategy for expanding, as well as supporting, student visions of how their lives might evolve. And they appeared resolute in encouraging self-determination amongst students by allowing them the opportunity to re-vision their futures, based on fuller understandings of the kinds of lives that were possible.

In some cases, broadening student horizons meant that schools took their students on field trips to cities and other regions as a way of diversifying their experiential base:

*T:* The school does do a very good job of field trips to Brisbane and the Gold Coast and even to Rockhampton. So there are a lot of opportunities to experience life in larger cities and have a look at facilities there. There’s a lot effort. The Year 12’s for example do a skiing trip every year. So they go to the snowfields and Canberra and so forth. But very often, departments will organise field trips to Brisbane. For example from our year, we’ll organise their history and geography so that SOSE students go to Brisbane for a week and see all the different facilities like the museum and so forth. So, there is a lot of effort put into exposing them to what’s available in the city. (*Queensland*)

The deliberate strategy of blending recreation and pleasure with educational outcomes was apparent in these kinds of references to taking students outside of their communities. And so while Queensland rural students went to museums on their visit
to the city, teachers in Western Australia made sure that the ‘English Lit kids’ went to ‘plays rather than a movie or ten-pin bowling’ when they visited Perth as a school activity.

With a more concentrated focus on educational aspirations, some schools reported organising ‘career expos’ to ensure that students were aware of the range of opportunities accessible to them. One teacher drew attention to the fact that while the strategy was important in expanding and supporting student aspirations, there was a clear inequity in access between metropolitan and rural students. Students in Perth had access to ‘a huge centre’ where there would be ‘150 occupations on display’ whereas in their remote area, students in the previous year got a ‘road show with probably 30 or 40 occupations’ presented ‘out on the oval – in the truck’. In an effort to improve the quality of the experience, the school invested more in the idea of a ‘career expo’ but was unable to recoup its costs:

T: This year it was at the TAFE college. We hired rooms up there so it was open to the whole town... But the money that our central office gives us to cope or combat the isolation doesn’t go anywhere near to combating it because it’s just so expensive. (Western Australia)

Staff at some school also raised the issue of supporting the aspirations and expectations of Indigenous students. Staff at these sites noted the value of being able to access dedicated funds to support and encourage Indigenous students’ studies, to develop their sense of who they were, and to expand their experiences beyond their communities:

T: A group of aboriginal girls have just been on a leadership camp to Argyle ... We sent two girls to Alice Springs this year for a science talent programme that was purely for aboriginal kids. (Western Australia)

And for some, there was access to money through a Vocational Education Grants scheme that allowed Indigenous students to visit a university campus and investigate their career and study options. Teachers who accessed the grants on behalf of the students reported that the strategy was highly successful, partly because students experienced life on a university campus while they were there, and partly because the
universities that they visited were well networked with the schools and were responsive to individual students:

T: It works. It works in the sense that you go down to the university and they take the name of every kid who goes down there on that trip so they can contact every one of those kids personally, individually. Their application forms are due to the unis on the 27 September, so prior to that they would have contacted each of those kids individually and said, ‘Do you want to come down?’ Now all the unis down there run aboriginal access bridging courses. So they would be setting those kids up to get into one of those if they want to go down. We’ve got two Indigenous kids who aspire to go to uni and I believe both of those will get in. (Western Australia)

For this strategy as with others, students confirmed teachers’ comments about the success of the networking opportunity. For instance, an Indigenous student who had just visited ‘UWA and Curtin to look at all the health careers like medicine, dentistry and physiotherapy’ reported that she now was more interested in pursuing ‘medicine or some health career’ (Western Australia Indigenous Year 10 Girl). According to those who taught her, the student’s aspirations were not unrealistic or unrealisable. She had school and family support, and the personal capacity to achieve her ambitions.

When schools dedicated efforts to reaching outwards, to drawing on resources that were not readily available within their rural communities, students were generally receptive. Sometimes the opportunity was limited to inviting people into the school to talk about career opportunities. Even then, from a student perspective, the strategy was an improvement over the only other option of relying solely on their own efforts:

S: Schools organised like a couple of open days, like for unis and TAFE, and they have people come down here and give us talks. That’s basically the only source we’ve got unless we go and check it up ourselves. (Tasmania Year 10 Student)

Tertiary Institutions Reaching Into Rural Communities
As schools have looked outwards from their communities to ensure that students are aware of opportunities that exist elsewhere, tertiary institutions have begun
expansionary programmes to increase their enrolment of students from non-metropolitan areas. Larger rural areas sometimes have their own TAFE colleges and some towns are marked by the presence of a university campus, albeit ones that offer a limited range of high-demand courses only. And so, for instance, teachers in Whyalla talked about the positive effect on student aspirations and expectations of having a university campus providing programmes in business, information technology, nursing and education. Even the existence of a near-by campus represented a step towards expanding and supporting student aspirations, as was the case for Tasmanian students with the university campus at Smithton in the northwest of Tasmania:

T: The northwest is a stepping-stone that wasn’t there before.
T: It should be here because without it quite a number of young people would not get onto that pathway.
T: I think it’s a safer option for some people too, particularly from a family where nobody’s ever been to university before. It is a safe stepping-stone to start off there. And it is a safe stepping-stone in terms of working out how much is it going to cost me to have my child at university. (Tasmania Teachers)

Teachers in other sites made similar comments about the strategic advantage of having a near-by university campus:

T: But for some students though, what’s becoming very popular in this region, is that RMIT runs a degree in business through Bairnsdale. And they can live at home, and they can get in the car, and they can go up 3 days a week. They attend their classes and come home. And we’ve watched that grow over the last 5 years. It’s very, very popular. It’s a lovely introduction to that first year of doing tertiary studies at that university level without them having to leave home.
T: So they want to go away, but they still only want to be about 2 and a-half hours away from home. They’re not prepared to make that next step to go interstate. (Victoria Teachers)

In some instances, particular universities were reported as discriminating positively in favour of rural students to support them in their quest to enter tertiary level studies.
'Some, but not all universities’ were said to ‘bump up students’ UAI if they come from rural areas’ (New South Wales Teacher). And some were applauded for offering individualised attention to country students precisely ‘because they were country kids’ (New South Wales Independent Teachers). Teachers also commented that university preparation and bridging courses were particularly successful strategies for sustaining students’ hopes of achieving their goals. For those who did not make it into the first cut of university offerings, there were often alternative institutional pathways to success:

T:  A lot of kids are using alternative ways of getting into uni which is good. So they use the early entry schemes. The University of Canberra has told us that this year, one student from Young High has been given a scholarship. They will give them six months at what they call ‘UC Start’ and then they just automatically go on to the uni course. So that if the kid doesn’t get into Uni [according to normal entry requirements]... then a lot of kids use those sorts of means to get into university. And once they get there, they perform brilliantly – they’re good. (New South Wales Teacher)

Many universities have programmes that are specifically designed to attract and support students from non-metropolitan areas and some, notably regional universities, assume a measure of responsibility for doing so. Interest in higher education is fostered in rural areas by regional universities like James Cook University through dedicated programmes like Aspire that create live networks between participating schools in rural and remote areas and university information and equity services.

And apart from universities, other institutions including TAFE and private providers also sought to network with schools by offering them articulated pathways to a range of futures:

T:  And the TAFE works very much hand-in-hand with the high school. There’s also a private provider, a private training provider who also works very much hand-in-hand with the high school.

I:  And what do they offer?

T:  I think it’s mainly the traditional sort of male apprenticeships, mechanics and electricians and so forth.

I:  So your school is connecting up with other trainers?
T: That’s right yes. I know from having conversation with our guidance officer that the school hasn’t bought career guidance software because they go to the private provider who has the software and the Year 11 and 12s literally walk down to the service provider and use their computers and their software. Yes, so it’s very much working hand-in-hand. (Queensland Teacher)

In brief, the focus group interviews showed a consistent pattern across Australia wherein schools reached outwards from their communities to engage students more fully in a range of experiences, and tertiary providers implemented expansionary programmes making inroads into rural communities. By improving student knowledge of what was available to them, and by making access to further education and training easier, these strategies were seen as enhancing and sustaining students’ visions of their futures.

Industry Initiatives

While there may have been others amongst the schools that we visited, one initiative taken by an industry group stood out as supporting student aspirations and expectations for their futures. In Karratha, Western Australia, teachers spoke about the Gumala Mirnuwarni Education Project as an industry initiative designed to support Indigenous students at school.

As teachers recalled, the project began with discussions between politicians and industry leaders and progressed to involvement of education authorities. In the first instance, Hammersley Iron, Woodside and Dampier Salt, as the industry partners in the project, injected an initial sum of $1.2 million dollars, with an annual budget of $400,000, to improve educational outcomes for Indigenous students in the area. In 1998 Karratha High School became the main site for the implementation of the project. According to teachers, the mining, gas and salt companies in the region wanted particularly to attract Indigenous people to their workforce for a range of reasons. There were equity issues to be considered that were partially driven by state and federal government pressure on industries to employ Indigenous people, and there was the important issue of land rights that was at stake. The Gumala Mirnuwarni
*Education Project* was said to be a strategic industry initiative to ensure that the pool of Indigenous young people in the region attained entry-level requirements set by the industries to allow a smooth transition from school to work. The initial investment by the companies was considered a success and so funding of the project continued. Extract 7.1 provides an extract of comments about the project that were made at interview.

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**Extract 7.1**

**Industry Initiative: *Gumala Mirnuwarni Education Project***

This is an account of the *Gumala Mirnuwarni Education Project* operating out of Karratha as told by one the key players since the project’s inception.

* T: 2 or 3 years ago, the Gumala Mirnuwarni project was listed as the best Indigenous project in Australia. Originally it was a 1.2 million dollar project with an annual budget of $400,000. The twenty highest performing aboriginal kids were selected from Years 8, 9 and 10. So we took the kids who were identified as having the potential to succeed – not that they necessarily would succeed – but they had the potential.

Because of the barriers that Indigenous students face in terms of literacy and numeracy and education, we virtually had an unlimited budget to get these twenty kids through. So we had mentors for the kids. We set up an off-site enrichment centre – we didn’t call it a homework centre – it was an enrichment centre. We put state of the art computers in there at the time. We appointed a project officer, and we’ve had people to basically pick them up after school everyday in a bus which the project provides. We take them to the enrichment centre. We access aboriginal tutorial assistance through DEST – it’s good access, up to 5 hours a week of tutoring per kid. And we involve the parents all the way along. We got the parents in and explained the project – explained how the school system works, and we concentrated on attendance. The kids and the parents got a project pack where all the responsibilities for each kid were outlined along with the parental responsibilities and the project responsibilities. So if any kids contravene the contract they are just removed from the project.
There had been only one Indigenous kid since 1972 in Karratha who had made it to Year 12. In the first year of operation of the project we had 3 more, the second year we had 4 more. We’ve currently got 8 Indigenous kids in Year 12 and, in total, there’s always between 20 and 25 kids in the programme. We’ve dropped the per capita costs from about $23,000 per kid down to about $6,000. We’re much more efficient now in the way we do it. If they look like they’re not succeeding they get very, very individual, personalised support. And their aspirations have gone from ‘I’m going to live and die in Roebourne’ to ‘Now the world is open to me’.

Teachers reported that the industry strategy as enacted by the school was a success. They cited specific examples of Indigenous students realising their aspirations including a graduate from the programme who was currently studying second year law at university and another who had recently been acknowledged as the national Indigenous apprentice of the year through an award of that name. According to the teachers, the programme changed Indigenous students’ expectations of what they could achieve.

Indigenous students at the school confirmed teacher reports in their own claims about the success of the industry initiative:

- **S:** We’ve got tutors to help us with our homework – improving our grades and stuff.
- **S:** I joined last year and my grades weren’t so great but last year my grades went up from Bs to As and Bs. I used to be just C grade. (Western Australia Indigenous students)

The students recognised that the *Gumala Mirnuwarni Education Project* was funded by industries that were proactive in attracting successful Indigenous students to their workforce. To this extent, students were convinced that success at school was closely linked with success in the world outside of school. There was a real sense amongst students that their efforts at school would reap tangible rewards and help them achieve their goals. They were also consciously aware of the extent of the assistance that they had attracted from the industries:
S: Woodside, Hamersley Iron and Dampier Salt fund most of the things, like our events. Like if we go on camp, they provide funding for us to go. And yeah.

S: Because they want more aboriginal or Indigenous people in their workforce. Because like, HI has got about 8 trainees out there at the moment ... They put on about 8 to 10 every year.

S: I think a lot of them have got apprenticeships now through the traineeships they’ve done. It helps out.

S: Just that it helps. It supports us.

S: Helps us through school.

S: And there’s more Indigenous kids do graduate instead of dropping out. (Western Australia Indigenous students)

It is important to add that the industry-supported programme was not restricted in any way to Indigenous students who were interested in working in those industries. The programme functioned to support further education and training for Indigenous students who aspired to take up the opportunities, which were available through industry sponsorship.

Community Initiatives

This report has quoted extensive comments in the focus group interviews about the challenge of having to leave one's home town to pursue post-school educational opportunities. However, it should be remembered that many students live in isolated areas or in family work contexts which make even a small town domicile impossible. For these students, the obstacles to educational aspirations which arise from the need to leave home apply not only to higher education, but to school education itself.

None of the schools participating in the study included a boarding school component. However, one institution of interest seemed to be filling an important need, and may offer interesting possibilities for addressing this issue.

Callistamon House is a student hostel in Katherine in the Northern Territory. It was opened in 1997 following a decision to upgrade and expand an earlier hostel in the town. The hostel provides accommodation for up to 40 students, 20 boys and 20 girls
in years 8 to 12, though occasionally Year 7 students are admitted. The hostel is administered and funded by the Territory Education Department, with the involvement of the Isolated Children's Parents Association, who played an important role in the establishment of the hostel. On a day-to-day basis, the hostel is run by four house parents of whom two are rostered on at any time.

Students apply for places, following what appears to be an informal 'word of mouth' notification process. The house parents interviewed described the clientele of the hostel in the following terms:

And it’s students from all over the territory. It’s a combination of Indigenous communities, isolated properties, communities, families who are transient, families who transfer. There’s all sorts of people staying in a place for one year or two or this and that. There might be parents who, because of their work conditions, they have to work the sort of hours that don’t make it possible for them to provide the care for the students. And it’s just the nature of the territory working here in the territory. Some times for example some of the parents might be working shift work, might start say 10 o’clock at night and go through to the early hours of the morning, so it makes sense that they have the children somewhere else, somewhere where they are looked after. You’ve got other families who are working in some of the smaller towns ... Timber Creek would be an example. Timber Creek is about 2 and a half hours travel from here. So it’s, there’s a very clear definition of what the criteria of the child who’s living in a remote area so many miles from the local school, or so many travelling hours.

Students come to the hostel for a variety of reasons. Some come because there is simply no school with hundreds of kilometres of home; others because the commuting distance and time to get to school is too great; yet others because their parents have transient work in mining or the military. As the informants put it,

That’s the nature of being up here. People get transferred. They need somewhere for the child to stay to finish Year 11 or 12 or something like that.
The typical experience is that students enter the hostel in Year 8 and remain through to the end of their schooling. It is common for siblings to attend. About half the students are from Indigenous communities.

The hostel collaborates with the local schools, and has close contacts with the school administrations and teachers. Teachers from the schools act as tutors and attend the hostel four nights a week:

*We work in closely with the high school, with for example, the tutors come in 4 nights a week and also just keeping in touch, just the communication, know all the teachers and so on, and following up so we’ve got a bit of an idea if someone is having a rough time at the moment then both parties know.*

........

*There’s a close connection between the tutors and .... so they’re in a position to have a strong support, academic support as well as a home setting.*

........

*... if we picked up that any of the students were having academic problems, or having a rough spell and motivation is going down, then we’ll make a concerted effort with school to try and get to where the trouble is coming from. And let the school know so we can have some correct way of dealing with it. At the moment we’ve got a few, and it’s only just happened. One of the students, the school have organised for him to get, like a work placement, one day a week. Because motivation, he needs it. So we’re in a position to be able to pick up on our students with problems that they’re having and seeing, and being able to resource school or resource what we’ve got or resource the community and do it in a proactive way. So I think it’s something that we’re in a good position to do, because that’s a big issue with students from remote areas.*

The house parents describe the hostel as unique; in particular, they distinguish it from boarding schools, believing that the separation from school enables them to develop an atmosphere which is closer to a home environment. They felt this would be difficult in a boarding school.
But also very aware of not being a boarding school and the benefits in that. Being able to work closely with the school to the benefit of everyone, but at the same time with the students being able to come away from school and come to a home base.

………

If the kids weren’t here they’d probably be doing correspondence or they’d be going to a boarding school. Whereas with this … when they can go home on weekends, they do. An hour or so travelling time. And I think this gives them like a home base type thing. They can escape from school, get away from school, where if it’s boarding school, you tend to be there 24/7.

………

Some of the students just want week day quarters, and that’s fine, and go home on weekends. Some of them take time for adjustment and come in here a few nights a week until they sort of adjust to it. We’ve got more flexibility than a boarding school has. There are benefits in it.

There were other benefits of such an environment in the view of the house parents. They felt that the hostel was a kind of half way house between home and school, providing a gradual introduction to town life and to the routines of institutions:

I think we’ve seen, students are varied. For example you know some of the students come from families who are quite transient because of work. And we have students who have lived in large urban areas so you know their experience is quite good. We’ve got others who are very much bush kids, you know really come off properties and they need their space and they really do need to adjust to socialise even here. Living with up to 40 students you’ve got to work out ways, the people skills have to be used or developed. And that I think is an important part of being here and parents do mention that on a regular basis, that it’s quite something for them having to live with so many others. It’s an obvious one. So we take that into account with behaviour. But with that range it’s also important that their range of experiences in most cases need to be broadened and we go out of our way to actually do that.
Callistamon House provided an interesting insight into a context which tried to create a home away from home. It provided a secure and caring environment that must have done much to allay the fears of young people involved in moving to a new and strange place. Its close contact with the schools meant that the encouragement for students to commit to education was clear and consistent, and it was able to work on the students' behalf in relating to the school's demands. Yet in institutional terms, it retained a sufficient distance from school for students to feel that there was a disinterested and supportive person on whom they could rely to assist with a broad range of personal and educational issues. The model may have potential for use in a broader range of contexts.

**Government Arrangements and Incentives**

As they steer and implement policies that underpin the skilling of young people for the anticipated needs of a national workforce, State and Federal governments have a vested interest in enhancing and supporting student aspirations and expectations for their futures. The arrangements that governments put in place and the incentives that they offer for observing those arrangements can be seen as deliberate strategies that shape student aspirations and expectation and manoeuvre a potential workforce in a predetermined direction. The regulations that governments introduce regarding, for instance, school leaving age and eligibility for welfare payments, and the pathways that they create within and through their education systems, produce particularised contexts that drive the ways that students think about what is possible. Government moves like these potentially coerce new understandings of what it means to be a valued citizen in contemporary Australian society and, as evidenced in the transcript data, they begin to shape student behaviours.

In South Australia, for instance, teachers spoke about students coming back to school to comply with government regulations regarding Centrelink payments. As in other states, young people who were not seeking employment were required to be full-time students, at school, at TAFE, at university or at another training provider service. Sometimes young people returned to school specifically because of the regulation governing their payments:
T: I guess that at beginning of each year we know we are going to get 20 or 30 kids rock up who haven’t finished their schooling who Centrelink have sent across saying, ‘You don’t get your money unless you enrol, right?’ (South Australia)

The school and Centrelink maintained close links to ensure that those who claimed student status were, in fact, attending school. Staff at the school notified Centrelink of any breach of regulations with regard to attendance to avoid the possibility of students being caught in a system that would demand repayment for fraudulent claims:

T: Centrelink stops their money, because we keep closely in contact with Centrelink ... The kid goes straight into Centrelink and says ‘Where’s my money?’ Centrelink says, ‘Well we understand that you are no longer attending school’. And so the kid rocks up the next day and we have to enrol them again. (South Australia)

In the same town, teachers spoke with some concern about the State government strategy of lifting the school leaving age from fifteen to sixteen. Most teachers accepted the proposition that an evolving society demanded higher levels of education and training for its future workforce, that it needed a multi-skilled, flexible populace to drive smart states and clever countries. Nevertheless, some teachers expressed concern about the students who did not want to be at school and they expressed concern about what they could do to accommodate them. For low-achieving, non-academic students there was particular concern amongst teachers:

T: Next year has implications with the leaving age becoming sixteen, what we do with these kids, now we cater for them with alternative type, real life type programmes is what we are looking at. (South Australia)

As teachers in the focus groups thought through the implications of government-driven issues like extended compulsory schooling, and of students returning to school because they could not access Centrelink payments, the very nature of schooling was invested with new meaning. The tenor of teacher talk was to pursue more vehemently a programme of diversified schooling that would serve students’ interests by preparing them for a rapidly advancing knowledge economy. This kind of teacher talk was reported in the section on ‘recognition of New Times’ in Chapter 5.
It is interesting to note here that in its education and training reforms programme, the Queensland government has planned for all students to complete Year 10 and to then gain a Senior Certificate, or a Certificate 111 level vocational qualification, or a full-time job. According to its white paper on *Education and Training Reforms for the Future*, the Queensland government will change the law to require young people to participate in education and training beyond Year 10. Likewise, Ministers of Education have generally agreed to improve the pathways through school and to ensure smoother transitions to work for all students across Australia. These final comments did not come from the focus group interviews and, in the case of Queensland, apply to the future. Nevertheless, they are important comments to consider as they illustrate the ways in which macro-level government strategies are envisioned and implemented, and begin to shape the production of citizenship. At a micro-political level, students’ lives at school, their aspirations and expectations for their futures, are likely to be at least partially formed, enhanced and sustained by such government strategies.

**Forces of Globalisation and Information and Communication Technologies.**

Introducing students to information and communication technologies (ICTs) can operate as an ‘influence’ on their lives and it can function as a ‘strategy’ employed by schools to sustain aspirations and expectations. As a strategy, schools used ICTs to connect students from the most isolated, to the most densely populated, areas across Australia with the same information sources. While they may have been physically and geographically isolated, the introduction of ICTs meant that students in rural and remote areas shared many experiences with their metropolitan counterparts; they were more connected than they had been in the past. They watched the same videos, listened to the same CDs and radio stations, tuned into the same news breaking events on television and accessed the same Internet sources:

\[ T: \text{I guess that the students, they're a little bit more worldly-wise than they may have been in the past. Mainly through movies and videos and so forth. My comments are basically about the positive aspects of globalisation, especially in relation to information technology. It has} \]


benefited the students in Biloela. As I say, they’re just as aware of September 11 or world affairs as what city students are. (Queensland)

This teacher’s comment about the effects of globalisation was important and was born out in the kinds of comments that students made at interview. For instance, a Year 11 Indigenous girl in a remote area in Queensland demonstrated her sense of connection with what was happening outside of her community, because she had access to technology. The student was not at all fazed at the thought of retrieving specialised career information, and her first thought was of using the Internet:

S: [I want to do] Biomedical Science or Environmental Engineering.
I: Okay. Did you check those out?
S: Yeah. I haven’t got all the information. I really don’t know much or anything, but I’ve got to get on to the Internet at some stage. (Queensland Indigenous Year 11 Girl)

The use of ICTs as a globalising force – as a deliberate strategy to allow access to information – was evident in the schools that we visited.

**Conclusion**

Focus group interviews with teachers and students revealed a range of strategies that, to varying extents, shaped, enhanced, coerced and sustained student aspirations and expectations for their futures. It was recognised that individual teachers and parents worked on their own ‘strategies’ to enhance and sustain students’ ideas of what they might become. However, this chapter reviewed only macro-level strategies that functioned through a range of education system initiatives; institutional networking; industry and community initiatives; government arrangements and incentives; and the forces of globalisation and information and communication technologies. In all events, student aspirations and expectations for their futures were conceived as relating to work and careers.

It should be noted that strategies like ‘second chance’ schooling, the diversification of school curriculum through the inclusion of VET studies, and government laws and
incentives for students to stay on at school applied to rural and to metropolitan students alike. Furthermore, the globalising force associated with introducing ICTs operated to equalise information flows amongst all students wherever they lived. However, some strategies applied to rural students in particular. The reconfiguration of schools and the advance of education precincts, community and industry initiatives, the provision of distance and virtual schooling, and the networks that were forged between schools and other agencies, all functioned as deliberate strategies to enhance and support, in sustainable ways, rural students’ aspirations and expectations for their futures. The strategies were clearly directed at optimising students’ chances of being successful, and of remaining competitive, in a workforce that was recognised as rapidly transforming along with the transformation of global economies.
Chapter 8

Summary, Conclusions and Recommendations
Summary
This DEST-funded study set out to investigate the aspirations and expectations of students in regional areas where ‘regional’ referred to regional, rural and remote areas of Australia. More particularly, the study set out to:

- Provide a better understanding of the expectations and aspirations of students in regional areas of Australia
- Identify the underlying factors that drive those aspirations and expectations, in particular, any factors differentiating the expectations and aspirations of student in regional areas from those of their urban counterparts – the ‘rurality’ factor(s)
- Identify barriers that might hinder students’ pursuit of their aspirations, and
- Identify strategies that have proven effective in enhancing and sustaining the expectations and aspirations of student in regional areas.

In pursuing these goals, the researchers selected schools from 15 sites from across Australia so that every State and the Northern Territory were represented in the sample. Two metropolitan sites in Melbourne were included with 13 regional sites to allow for the possible emergence of factors impacting on student aspirations and expectations that could be considered to be distinctly ‘rural’ in nature, or in effect. This issue is considered in the ‘Conclusions’ section of this chapter.

Student aspirations and expectations for their futures
Focus group interviews with students from Years 10, 11 and 12 from across Australia suggested strongly that students were aware of ‘New Times’ talk; that, in fact, their awareness of changing economic and social structures and the need for further education and training was naturalised in student discourse. In general, focus group students appeared to have high-level aspirations and expressed considerable transparency of purpose and clarity of vision in relation to their futures. In this respect, most students were quite certain that Year 12 did not signal the end of study; rather, it represented a transition point to further education and training.

Interestingly, rural teachers and parents expressed more negative views of what lay ahead for the student body. The contrast in views between focus group students and their teachers and parents was attributed to the fact that teachers and parents were
likely to be considering the whole corpus of students – those like the focus group students who were continuing at school and those who were early leavers – whereas the focus group students spoke mostly about their own expectations and aspirations. Focus group students were, after all, the stayers in the system. The difference in perspectives on student aspirations and expectations was discussed more fully in Chapter 3 of this report.

While focus-group students’ ambitions were articulated in terms of progression in career and work opportunities, it was also the case that their aspirations and expectations – their strongly held desires ‘to be something’ – became synonymous with leaving their communities. In more economically vulnerable rural communities this was particularly so. Close textual analysis of the transcript data suggested that an inverse relationship existed between the strength of the local economy and the determination of students to pursue their lives and careers elsewhere. That is, there was more of a sense of urgency about leaving local communities amongst students for whom the experience of rurality was marked by absence of opportunity, lack of lifestyle, a sense that their community offered them little to look forward to socially or economically, than there was amongst students who experienced life in their communities as ‘cruisy’ – as offering them lifestyle, work opportunities and prospects of advancement.

Detail about the nature of student aspirations and expectations from students’, teachers’ and parents’ perspectives was documented in Chapter 3 of this report. Chapter 3 also focused on the marginalised voices of students who wanted to remain within their communities, and on two students who provided more confronting and personalised accounts of their aspirations to stay out of trouble and to stay alive. The identification of the marginalised voices of students was an important reminder that students did not speak with one voice and that no one story could suffice to re-tell student accounts of their aspirations and expectations.

**Influences on student aspirations and expectations for their futures**

For the purpose of framing discussion, students’ accounts of the influences on their aspirations and expectations were divided into personal and social dimensions and were dealt with separately in Chapters 4 and 5 respectively. The personal dimension
of influence focussed on the impact of significant others (families, friends and teachers); students’ personal experiences; and students’ perception of their personal attributes and desires. In these events, students told a myriad of stories of how personal experiences, interpersonal interactions, and their views of their own strengths and weaknesses served to shape their visions of possible and probable futures.

By contrast with the personal, the social dimension of influence, discussed in Chapter 5, focussed on the broader social impact on students’ aspirations and expectations of factors like the quality of schooling available to students; students’ recognition of ‘New Times’ discourse and its promotion of further education and training; the state of local economies; students’ involvement in paid work; and social understandings about gender. Each of these factors featured amongst student talk as being important influences on the decisions that they made for their futures, the dreams that they had of what they might become, and their expectations of what was possible.

As might be expected from the already abundant literature on the issue, students, parents and teachers were particularly concerned about the availability of specialist teachers, the range of subject choice, recruitment and retention of teachers, and the variable quality of schooling available to students in rural and remote areas. Teachers were also concerned about the growing trend amongst students of gaining paid employment while completing their school studies, and they were concerned about how they might support students by re-thinking schooling practices in more accommodating ways. In addition, the social dimension highlighted the impact of New Times discourse and the state of local economies as discussed in the section above. It also highlighted the gendered ways that many girls and boys viewed their futures as being located within or outside of rural communities. Importantly, in Chapter 5 we discussed how students’ accounts of their developing sense of gendered identities may help explain why, as noted in the review of literature, more boys than girls become early school leavers and find work in their local communities. The common belief that rural communities symbolise male spaces – a belief held by boys and by girls in the focus groups – may ultimately explain why more rural girls than rural boys see their futures inscribed in tertiary studies – oftentimes outside of the communities – and more rural boys than rural girls see the inscriptions of their futures in local offerings of trades and apprenticeships.
Obstacles to student aspirations and expectations

When students were asked what might hinder their pursuit of their aspirations, they, like their parents, spoke compellingly about the financial resources that would be necessary to support them, and that might yet obstruct them. Some saw the prospect as absolutely daunting while others suggested ways of supporting themselves as they moved to new locations, found accommodation, and assumed a life of study and of part-time paid employment. While financial considerations dominated student responses, some also spoke about matters of the heart, of what it would mean to them to leave their homes, their families and their communities. Sometimes this sense of loss was accompanied by a sense of fear and of apprehension in taking up their lives in unfamiliar circumstances, in untried locations.

Teachers and parents often added to the list of obstacles by claiming that a lack of occupational models in rural communities meant that students had fewer images from which to draw in envisioning what they might become. Equally salient was the lack of educational opportunities that rural students faced compared with their metropolitan counterparts. For example, some teachers expressed concern at the lack of specialist tuition and public examination preparation that was available to rural, compared with metropolitan, students. Availability of resources – financial, personal, occupational, educational, semiotic even – seemed to be the key to understanding the obstacles that students faced in actualising their aspirations and expectations for their futures.

Strategies that sustain student aspirations and expectations for their futures

While students faced genuine obstacles to achieving their goals, numerous strategies were in place to support students’ efforts to live out their ambitions. Chapter 7 of this report provided a detailed account of the ways that student aspirations and expectations were sustained through:

- Educational system initiatives
- Institutional networking
- Industry initiatives
- Community initiatives
- Government arrangements and incentives, and
- Forces of globalisation and information and communication technologies.
As an education system initiative, for instance, the South Australian Education Department invested in ‘second chance’ schooling by allowing students to complete their senior secondary studies over a two or three year period. The inclusion of Year 13 meant that students had the opportunity to return to school to improve their learning outcomes and their scores. For students who wanted or needed paid employment, the Education Department’s efforts at normalising a 2- or 3-year progression through senior secondary studies meant that the combination of work and study was a more realistic option. On this basis, the system attracted adult re-entrants as well.

Across Australia, another important education system initiative was evident in the way that schools worked to broaden the base of education through the inclusion of studies in vocational education and training. Collaborative ventures were achieved through articulations with TAFE and other education and training providers who assumed responsibility for delivery of particular learning modules that otherwise were not available within the school. And so, it was noted that the borders between schools and other training and education providers are being disrupted as schools move to democratise curriculum offerings by providing more choices to more students, particularly to those whose post-school aspirations are not centred on university entry.

It was also noted that some teachers and parents did not view this move as being unproblematically couched in terms of democratising schooling. Some expressed concern about the possible digression of academically capable students to ‘easier options’ and the dilution of numbers of students who would elect to study demanding academic subjects – the kinds of subjects, they claimed, that would better prepare students for innovative careers in evolving knowledge-based and technology-driven economies.

We would add our concern that the division into academic and vocational streams could unintentionally fall out along socio-economic lines deepening the divide between students from different family backgrounds as they sort themselves into academic and vocational programmes. Unless staff are highly proactive in advising and counselling students – unless they carefully monitor and invigilate the process of
change – schools could unwittingly exacerbate the state of play wherein students from professional and managerial family backgrounds continue with academic studies while equally academically-able students from families with lower levels of education and/or income self-sort into a vocational education and training stream. In making their choices students need to be clear that academic and VET streams lead to vocational outcomes; and they need to be clear about the predicted long-term salary differentials that are associated with these kinds of choices.

In brief, teachers agreed with the move to broaden the base of schooling and saw many potential benefits in terms of: retaining students and offering them more education; widening curriculum choice by articulating with different education and training providers; and, ultimately, enabling a smoother transition to an array of post-school options. Teachers were, however, sufficiently insightful to see the potential dangers and to qualify their statements with cautions of the kind mentioned here. With respect to adding provisos and caveats to otherwise good ideas, we would add that education systems and schools need to closely track the process of change and, where indicated, adopt strategic measures to counteract streaming of students along socio-economic lines.

As well as considering how they could broaden the base of curriculum offerings, some schools within a district considered their collective offerings, and rethought the prospects of a specialised focus for each. As a result, some schools entered joint ventures to re-configure physical resources and rationalise Year level and subject offerings across schools. In some cases, this meant the regrouping of school populations and redesignation of schools as junior or senior-secondary campuses – an idea that is gathering momentum in the development of educational precincts where educational resources are concentrated and rationalised rather than being diluted through duplication and dispersion across sites. Where physical reconfiguration was not possible to increase subject choice at the rural sites that we visited, most schools capitalised on opportunities available through distance education and embraced the possibilities of virtual schooling. In reflecting on the success of education system initiatives, staff at some schools reported on the necessity of adopting a whole-of-school approach to any such strategic initiative.
As education systems worked to promote strategic initiatives of the kinds discussed in this section, institutional networking also operated to sustain student aspirations and expectations for their futures. Schools looked beyond their local communities to increase the array of physical, human, social and cultural resources available to students and to broaden their imagining of possible futures. And so, in some rural communities, students reported that participating in ‘on-campus’ university experiences heightened their awareness of what life would be like at university, just as visits to city theatres and museums allowed them to imagine life in another context.

Likewise, as schools reached outwards to sustain student aspirations and expectations, education and training institutions, in their expansionary modes, reached inwards to rural communities to attract more students and to tap unmet demand. Universities and other training and education providers have been extending their networks of operations into the rural sector and in regions where this has happened, focus group students spoke about the positive way in which their dreams had been supported. The presence of TAFE colleges and nearby university campuses – the investment in career markets and expositions – the dedication demonstrated particularly by regional universities in mentoring ‘out-of-town’ students and students from the bush, all featured as strategies that sustained students in their quest to broaden their visions and pursue their ambitions.

Further detailed attention was provided in Chapter 7 to the way that industry initiatives like the Gumala Mirnuwarni Education Project operating out of Karratha, and community initiatives like Callistamon House operating out of Katherine, reflected successful strategic plans that supported and sustained student aspirations and expectations for their futures. The chapter also focused on the way that government regulations with respect to school-leaving age and eligibility for welfare payments, for instance, begin to coerce new understanding of what it means to be a valued citizen in contemporary Australian society, and to impact on student decision-making regarding their futures.

The final strategy detailed in Chapter 7 referred to the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and the productive harnessing of the forces of globalisation. As powerful drivers of globalisation, ICTs represent widening-nets of
speedy communication, the possibility of ‘webucation’, and an evolving sense of connectivity that is defiant of time and distance. Staff at some schools recognised the potential to harness the globalising impact of ICTs that ensured delivery of learning options to rural and metropolitan students alike, and firmed a place for rural students in a knowledge-based economy and information society. Some teachers believed that as students engaged more fully in multi-modal learning, and capitalised on the use of ICTs, a stronger sense of global connection would develop in rural and isolated communities. In some schools, staff claimed that harnessing these forces was already considered as a strategic element in school plans to support and sustain student aspirations and expectations for their futures.

Conclusions

In drawing this report to a conclusion it is important to recognise the limitations of the research and to consider the proposition that there may be a ‘distinctive’ rurality factor that impacts on student aspirations and expectations for their futures. Each of these issues is addressed in turn in this section.

The limitations of the research

*I always think of myself as living in a big mansion and driving a big car. Buying every single dress in every shop. I know it’s not going to happen but I can’t get the thought out of my head. She’s dreaming again! Every single kid has this dream. Everyone has big dreams and everything, like I’m going to be a pilot ...* (Western Australia Year 10 Girl)

The Western Australian girl in the above quote aptly captured a spirit of critique that should be adopted in evaluating claims made in this research report about student aspirations and expectations for their futures. The most obvious issue that must be considered is whether the interviewees knowingly projected unrealisable dreams or whether they reported on aspirations that, at the time of interview at least, they expected to be able to enact sometime in the future.

In interrogating this issue, it is important to note that students were cooperative and willing participants in the focus group interviews. Schools were asked to draw widely
from their corpus of students with the only caveat being that students were to be selected with consideration for their general willingness to contribute to discussion in a group of peers, with an outsider conducting the interview. Once selected, student participation was entirely voluntary and students signed a consent form to confirm that was the case.

It is our general view that students engaged reliably with interview questions and reflected thoughtfully on their claims when they were asked about their aspirations and expectations for their futures. While focus groups sometimes slipped sideways into frippery, and reasonably so, the students generally were cooperative and responsible. They seemed to enjoy the opportunity to speak about their plans for their futures and to have a responsive and receptive audience that included the interviewer. Nevertheless, the possibility exists that student claims were more fanciful than real, that their aspirations were no more than ‘pie in the sky’, that their dreams that incorporated further education and training could never be realised – like the girl said: ‘I know it’s not going to happen but I can’t get the thought out of my head’. But even this comment was offered within the context of the interview as a critical reflection on the nature of the research, as an intelligent warning to the interviewer to beware of vacuous expressions of unrealisable expectations. Throughout the interview this Year 10 girl showed herself to be a wary and wily producer of information and she encouraged the interviewer to adopt a similarly critical position in relation to knowledge production, which is what is intended here in re-viewing the limitations of the research. We have, in fact, heeded her advice in reflecting on the interview process, and analysing the data.

In brief, the possibility that students engaged in spurious or whimsical talk cannot be dismissed outright. However, the detailed accounts and planning that so many of the focus group students provided, their street-wise accounts of how they could eventually access the training and education options to which they aspired, the steps that they had taken to gain information prior to leaving school, convinced us that their aspirations and expectations generally were faithfully held. Impressively, many students held detailed knowledge of ‘backdoor’ entry to prestigious courses where entry requirements were prohibitively high; they understood that different institutions had different entry requirements and that they could apply for advanced standing with
their preferred institution once they had demonstrated success elsewhere; and they knew about articulated pathways between TAFE, other registered training providers, and universities. Their conversations with us did not sound vacuous; rather, they sounded surprisingly well informed.

In drawing messages, lessons and future directions from this report, it must also be explicitly acknowledged that the task of the research team was to interview students who were at school – in Year 10, 11 or 12 – at the time the interviews were conducted which was late in third and fourth term. The very fact that these students were still at school introduced an element of selectivity in sampling in relation to the research focus. The topic, *Factors impacting on student aspirations and expectations in regional Australia*, was investigated in relation to those students who had made the decision to continue at school, at the very least, until the near end of Year 10. While some of this cohort undoubtedly were still making choices about staying or leaving, the earnestly disenfranchised ‘early leavers’ and the committed ‘non-completers’ were likely to have exited the system. There was no attempt to track students who had given up on school and left the system earlier in the year.

Within the parameters of the research there was no way of tapping into the aspirations and expectations of those who demonstrated by leaving school early that they did not value what schools had to offer or, perhaps, that their aspirations and expectations were constituted outside of a schooling framework. It is important to reiterate here that the analysis of statistical data reported in Chapter 2 indicated that rural boys were more likely to leave school before beginning Year 11 than were rural girls, and they were more likely to leave school early than were metropolitan girls or boys. According to the literature, in terms of demonstrated dedication to staying at school beyond Year 10, rural boys behaved differently from rural girls, and they behaved differently from metropolitan boys and girls. This significant sample of boys was never part of the focus of the study. Consequently, what the study offers is an abstracted re-telling of student accounts of their aspirations and expectations for their futures – specifically, of students who were still in the system at the end of Year 10, 11 and 12. Accounts of student aspirations and expectations for their futures provided in this report must be viewed and evaluated within these known parameters.
Is there a distinctive ‘rurality factor’?

_I think the only thing that is specific to the regional issue with further study is actually being able to reach it and touch it._ (South Australian Teacher/Counsellor)

An important question posed in the DEST consultancy contract was whether a distinctive rurality factor could be abstracted from other influences such as socio-economic background, economic development and labour market conditions. The question is a complex one and the findings of this research suggest a complex answer.

It is our view that the teacher-counsellor quoted above crystallised much of the debate about the commonalities that bind rural and remote residents, particularly with respect to accessing further education and training opportunities: that is, a fundamental difference between those living in metropolitan as opposed to rural and remote areas was the difference in being able ‘to reach it and touch it’. Apart from this important consideration, focus group interviews did not provide evidence of core values, orientations to life, or world-views that might be expected if a case for a ‘distinctive rurality factor’ were to be argued. Students in this study generally valued the prospects of further education and training regardless of whether they were from rural, remote or metropolitan regions. Having said that, when it came to the point of pursuing their dreams of post-school education and training, those living in rural and remote communities were (unevenly) united in their (in)capacity to ‘reach it and touch it’. Given the difficulties involved in ‘actually being able to reach it and touch it’, rural parents and teachers were often less buoyant than were the students themselves in their views of what the student body could aspire to, or reasonably expect to achieve in the future.

As a way of more fully interrogating the possibility of there being a distinctive rurality factor operating to influence student aspirations and expectations for their futures, two issues are addressed: regional communities as ‘different’ from one another; and the material realities that, to some extent, distinguished those living in rural and remote areas from those living in metropolitan areas.
Regional communities as different from one another

The geographical regions that we visited were quite diverse and offered students and their communities very different sets of experience to the point where the notion of a distinctive rurality factor appeared to be a spurious proposition.

As an example of the diversity of experience associated with broad contextual backgrounds, we indicated in Chapter 5 that the wealth of rural communities – the state of their local economies – varied widely amongst locations. To illustrate this point, in Extract 5.1, *A Tale of Two Towns: Karratha and Whyalla*, we detailed how students’ experiences of rurality differed between these towns as Karratha projected multiple examples of opportunity and affluence, and Whyalla offered experiences of vulnerability and poverty. In Whyalla, because of depressed real estate values, a concerning number of students lived independently without family support; in Karratha, because of inflated real estate values, it was not a conceivable option for a student to live alone. In Whyalla, many of the students came from poor families and held ‘School Cards’, which in South Australia is a ready index of low family income; in Karratha, many of the students lived in families that had high salaries and access to four wheel drives and boats for recreation. As mining continued to flourish in Karratha, the local community benefited from Hammersley Iron, Woodside and Dampier Salt’s industry initiative – *Gumala Mirnuwarni* – with its substantial financial investment in the education of local Indigenous students and the opening out of opportunities for work; in Whyalla, as One Steel rationalised and downsized its mining operation, opportunities for local students to work in the town, and the flow of income to the community, diminished. The material differences associated with the state of the local economy in these two towns reflected very real difference in what students’ experiences of rurality might mean. As an example of the diversity that existed amongst sites, a ‘rural life’ and a ‘rural experience’ in these two communities offered very different terms of engagement. Other rural and remote communities could be similarly contrasted.

Apart from offering different levels of opportunity to students in terms of their futures, the focus group interviews also made us aware that rural and remote communities differed in other ways that seriously contested the notion of a distinctive rurality factor being at play in the formation of student aspirations and expectations.
for their futures. For example, it has sometimes been argued that a rural experience is one that is built around family, of connection amongst families living in the same area sharing the same kinds of lives. However, this representation of rurality was challenged by some of the interviewees. Parents in Western Australia, for instance, spoke of ‘separation from family’ – of having to ‘leave their families behind’ – as a key feature of their lives. For those who flew into mining towns to earn high incomes, the personal cost often was to family connections. They, and their children, left behind in their former places of residence extended families and networks of friends. According to these parents, many young people faced the lonely prospect of settling into communities that were characterised by a high-turn over of skilled workers and, consequently, by an under-developed sense of connection within their community that was more loosely linked through the supply of an industry workforce. Similarly, at a Queensland site, teachers spoke of transience as a marker of the population as local industries drew heavily from a fly-in, fly-out workforce. This was a similar experience for students in a Northern Territory community with its transient population of Airforce workers and their families. And in New South Wales teachers spoke of students living in out-lying properties who were isolated from the centre of the community; rather than being warmed by the experience of a connected rural community, these students experienced a life of fringe dwellers, inside and outside of school. From the interview data, it seemed that connection within or to the community was not a necessary feature of living in rural sites just as it was not in metropolitan sites.

Similarly, while many rural students spoke in comparative terms about the physical freedom they experienced in rural as opposed to metropolitan locations, some spoke of freedom in contested terms. Some rural students who were familiar with life in the city spoke of the lack of freedom ‘to do what you want’ in rural communities and contrasted their sense of restriction with the freedom demonstrated by young people in the city who were less conforming, particularly in the ways they presented themselves bodily, with outlandish hairstyles and the like. Within the context of student talk, freedom was inflected with different meanings and did not serve unproblematically to separate one geographical region from another.
So too, rural schools, like those in metropolitan locations, were described by students as having exemplary as well as unsatisfactory teachers and guidance officers, and to be led by a similar array of management staff. Not even the size of the schools presented an essential unifying theme. One rural site that we visited with a student population of over 1,000 was more than twice the size of one of the metropolitan schools that we visited.

Likewise, rural and metropolitan students shared in life’s lottery in drawing on supportive and unsupportive families – on parents who would leave their children to their own devices and those who would mortgage their house, if necessary, in their children’s educational interests. In rural and metropolitan sites, students variously revealed that they had rich and poor parents – ones who had set up investment funds that would allow them to pursue their dreams, and those who had nothing to bequeath to them.

As for the physical geography of the rural and remote sites, some were characterised by natural features and attractions that effortlessly drew a flourishing tourism market, some struggled to attract outsiders to buoy their economies, and financially-thriving communities did not need to attract outsiders to sustain them economically. Some rural communities had developed a commercially viable culture revolving around the arts while others had not yet managed or invested in doing so. Ironically, it was difference and diversity, rather than a distinctive rurality factor, which functioned as a unifying theme amongst the selection of rural and remote sites in the study.

Apart from acknowledging diversity amongst rural communities, some teachers in rural sites saw real connections and similarities between living in rural and metropolitan areas. Some viewed life for many city dwellers as being no more sophisticated or urbane, no less parochial or insular, than life in a rural community. As these Tasmanian teachers explained, suburban life in a city could be as close-minded as life in a village:

T: *My family came from Brisbane and they live in the suburbs and when I go there I’m horrified because they live village life in the suburbs. And they don’t take advantage of all the things that are in the city. They may as well be living [here]. That’s how I view cities. We use the cities when we*
go there. They live there and they’re living in a small town in the city. They just feel superior about it.

T: My brother in law lives in [name of place] on the eastern shore of Hobart. He says they rarely go in to the CBD in Hobart. They’ve got no real reason to. They’ve got the same sort of interest in the suburbs as we have in our regional town here on the coast.

While they were critical of the level of boredom that they experienced in their towns, rural students sometimes echoed similar sentiments about life in a city like Adelaide that was ‘full of churches’ and was as ‘boring’ as life could be in the rural location in which they lived. Adelaide was simply a ‘bigger version’ of where they lived (New South Wales Year 11 Students).

In considering whether a distinctive rurality factor was at play in shaping student aspirations and expectations for their futures, it is important to acknowledge the multi-dimensional heterogeneity of the communities in this study that was subsumed under the apparently homogenising terms ‘rural’ and ‘remote’. What’s more, it is important to recognise that students living in rural and remote areas shared aspirations and expectations in common with their peers who were educated in metropolitan schools: the greater majority of students at each site recognised the need, and aspired to work towards, further education and training. At the very bottom line, they wanted to ensure that their futures were not bound in the shallows of mundane, soul-destroying work that, in their words, would identify them unambiguously as ‘drop kicks’ and ‘no-hoper bums’.

The material realities that bind

For people – like kids living in all areas – to do better than metropolitan people is hard, and it’s due to access to facilities, teachers and, like, variety. Parts of everything we’ve said. (New South Wales Year 12 Student)

While the sites that we visited were diverse in their composition, they were united by a number of material realities that should be considered in determining whether a distinctive rurality factor existed in relation to student aspirations and expectations for their futures. As reported in this study (see Chapter 6), as commonly reported
elsewhere (see Review of Literature, Chapter 2), and as noted in the New South Wales Year 12 student comment quoted above, ‘access to facilities’ and availability of resources including teacher supply were common sources of tension and disappointment experienced by schools in rural and remote areas. This study bore out concerns widely documented in available literature that students, teachers and parents in rural and remote sites were deeply troubled about a number of issues including: the recruitment and retention of teachers and the level of ‘teacher churn’ within the system; the availability of qualified specialist teachers; the sometimes narrow range of curriculum offerings; and, as a compounding effect, the overall quality of schooling available within their communities. As some Year 12 students explained, the problems stemmed from the material reality of not having the kinds of resources desirable to draw a professional population to their locations:

    S: Look at the teachers we’ve got now. They obviously don’t like to come [here].
    S: Because we haven’t got much. (New South Wales Year 12 Students)

Teachers were equally committed to the notion that the material realities of life featured most strongly in distinguishing rural and remote, from metropolitan, communities. For example, with only small populations from which to draw, some rural towns experienced organisational difficulties expressed in the lack of volunteer labour to supervise extra-curricular activities. The task of broadening opportunities for students was sometimes a chore that could not be met by the school, or by parents, because of the lack of resources within the community, because of the limited supply of labour, and sometimes because of the distances that had to be travelled to ensure that opportunities materialised. As one Queensland teacher explained, because so many parents in these communities worked around the clock (as did many metropolitan parents) too few were left to volunteer their labour:

    ... there’s really nothing for them to do recreationally at all. School’s pretty much the hub of all activities for them... The side that’s missing is a structured development process, you know, like in a lot of small country towns I suppose what’s missing is the volunteers to run committees... The facilities are here but it falls back to the school to organise things again and the teachers won’t do it... Well there is football, but we have to go to Mount Isa or we have to go to Longreach. There’s no games held in town,
so to speak, on the weekend... I must say I think the climate and the shift work impacts on what we can do here too. Like you’ve got parents who work around the clock. They work 12 hours shifts; they don’t have time on the weekend to do things. So the type of work people are doing here impacts on recreation. (Queensland Teacher)

Along with teachers, students also spoke about the material realities of living outside of the metropolis that impacted on their lives. As one student explained, rural residents experienced in the daily lives the material reality of being ‘restricted’, an experience that was counterpoised with city dwellers having ‘options’:

*S:* I don’t want to have to live in the country because I’ve been through my life being restricted in everything. Like I don’t want to have to raise my family being restricted. I want them to have all the options. And in the city you’ve got options. In the country you don’t. (New South Wales Independent Year 10 Student)

For other rural students, the material reality of life that revolved so heavily around resource issues was expressed in more menacing and extreme circumstances. As the effects of prolonged drought bit into some inland towns, students expressed concern that their community might cease to exist altogether, that it might evaporate along with the prospects of rain, representing the most serious of resource issues:

*S:* There’s no water here. This town is going to get shut down because we’ve got no water.

*S* We’re just going to run out...

*S* We need water. You can’t have a town with no water. (Queensland Year 10 Students)

For most rural students and for their parents, the most persistent and problematic of realities was the likely cost involved in pursuing aspirations, especially where those aspirations committed students to leaving town to enact their dreams of achieving higher levels of education and training. In sites where TAFE, recognised training organisations and university campuses were established, concerns were generally limited to the range of subject offerings and to desired courses being available on-site. But the final reality for students was the realisation that fulfilment of their aspirations and expectations was bound inevitably to their capacity to finance them. As was the
case with city students, rural students varied in their capacity to finance their dreams: what’s more, the families of rural students, just like the families of city students, varied in their capacity, and their willingness, to support students in their quest to fulfil their ambitions.

In conclusion, we have attempted to address the issue of whether a distinctive rurality factor operated in relation to student aspirations and expectations by looking at the differences that distinguished rural and remote communities from one another as well as the material realities that provided them with a common language of critique, particularly with respect to educational provisions and services in their regions. The rural sites that we visited were united, albeit unevenly, by the material realities that they faced in providing resources and allowing students an (un)easy ride as they moved towards the realisation of their aspirations. In this respect, rural sites did appear to differ in important ways from metropolitan sites where access to a range of resources was more readily available – where metropolitan students were able to ‘reach it and touch it’ and rural students were not.

Nevertheless, the rural sites were also sufficiently different in composition and in the experience of rurality they evoked as to problematise any claim that a distinctive rurality factor operated to coerce student aspirations and expectations for their futures. Most importantly, in reviewing the evidence drawn from the focus group interviews – conducted across 15 sites, crossing state and territory borders – there appeared to be little support for the notion that a distinctive rurality factor operated in differentiating rural student aspirations and expectations for their futures from their metropolitan peers’. Students across the sites appeared to have adopted aspects of New Times discourse that dictate the need in newly emerging knowledge-based economies and information societies for further education and training.

Furthermore, in understanding the formation of student aspirations and expectations for the future, the interview data strongly suggested that a distinctive rurality factor could not be abstracted from other influences such as socio-economic background, economic development and labour market conditions. Quite the contrary appeared to be the case: student aspirations and expectations seemed to be deeply enmeshed in the economic circumstances and labour market conditions in which communities were
embedded. For instance, given the frequency and intensity of their comments, we have claimed that student determination to further their education and training was inversely related to the state of the local economy and to labour market conditions (See Chapter 5). The more vulnerable the economy, the more adamant were students that they would leave town to escape what they saw as unpromising and untenable futures. Where career prospects were perceived to be severely limited, and where quality of life was viewed as restricted within rural communities, many focus group students reported that they would pursue their aspirations and that they expected to fulfil their ambitions elsewhere. Whether they would ever ‘reach it and touch it’ was another question altogether – a question that is well worth pursuing.
Recommendations

The following recommendations are distilled from the content of this report. The recommendations are aimed at teachers, education systems, education and training providers, researchers and governments. A large number of recommendations could be extracted from the report; only those considered for immediate follow-up are grouped here according to the focus of the recommendation.

Without any systems directions to do so, many teachers in this study had taken it on themselves to inform students about the changing nature of work precipitated by transforming social and economic structures. Students reported that teachers and guidance officers were responsible for encouraging them to view senior secondary studies as a transition point to further education and training rather than as an end point to learning. Teachers, as purveyors and facilitators of knowledge and skills, are in a prime position to inform students about New Times.

Recommendation 1: Continuing education about New Times and its consequences

- That teachers continue to inform students about changes in social and economic structures and the value of having higher levels of skills and knowledge that will enhance their lives and allow them to compete successfully for work opportunities in the future.

- That teachers and guidance officers continue to provide students with information about post-school options and advise them of specific education and training requirements that will assist them in realising their aspirations for their futures.

- That teachers continue to promote the message that New Times require students to adopt a positive orientation to life-long learning in order to
optimise their chances of flexibly, and successfully, negotiating post-school transitions.

Important networks have been created amongst education and training providers wherein the focus on student learning has been broadened and shared. Liaisons between schools and TAFE, for instance, have allowed students to remain at school to pursue academic studies as well as courses in vocational education and training. Given the concerns raised at interview by some teachers and parents, education systems are advised to track whether academically-able students migrate to what they perceive to be easier VET options now available in the senior secondary years. Similar concerns and advice are also offered in relation to investigating whether academic and vocational choices made by students fall out along socio-economic lines. If this is the case, then education systems will need to consider how they might counter the emergence of a socio-economic divide.

**Recommendation 2: Tracking the demographics and outcomes of subject choice**

- That education systems continue to collect, analyse, and make publicly available data on student choice related to academic or vocational and education courses.

- That education systems constantly update students and their parents with information on how subject choices at school may influence their access to further education and training and determine the post-school options available to them.

- That, as the VET sector moves more resolutely into senior secondary programmes, education systems analyse student choices in relation to their backgrounds to determine whether socio-economic divides unwittingly are being authorised and legitimated by the process of schooling.
That, in the event that socio-economic divides are being consolidated through curriculum choice, education systems provide feedback to schools that will enable staff to address the issue in informed ways, to encourage students to choose courses appropriate to their ability and talent, and to formulate strategic plans that operate in students interests in achieving the very best of which they are capable.

Students and teachers reported positively on schools’ attempts to broaden students’ experiences by engaging with communities outside of their own. At the same time, they agreed that student aspirations were buoyed and their expectations were firmed when education and training providers reached inwards to schools by supplying guest speakers and promotional visits; when they worked with schools to provide career markets; and when they offered on-campus experiences for students who were in the process of determining their futures.

**Recommendation 3: Expanding networks of opportunity**

- That schools maintain and expand opportunities for students to widen their life experiences, and to broaden their knowledge of education and training options, by accessing resources and visiting locations outside of their own communities.

- That education and training providers, including TAFE colleges, universities, and recognised training organizations, be encouraged to expand their presence in schools and make themselves more visible to students early in their education, before students make critical decisions that shape their future directions.

- That all education and training providers be made aware of issues that often present as obstacle to successful realisation of aspirations amongst rural students who have to move from their communities to assume their studies.
That education and training providers be encouraged to continue improving services aimed at supporting students in their transition to less familiar environments.

That education and training providers continue their expansionary programmes by making more programmes available to more rural students through more rural campuses.

Some education systems and schools have been successful in attracting industry and community support that, according to student and teacher accounts, have been highly significant in supporting student aspirations and expectations for the future. Gumala Mirnuwarni, as an example of industry support, and Callistamon House, as an example of community support, represent the kinds of networks that link communities and agencies together through their mutual interests in producing an informed and educated citizenry. Cases like these could be showcased to demonstrate how an investment in human capital and wealth creation, and an investment in the lives of young people and community capacity building, can be realised simultaneously through the processes of schooling.

Recommendation 4: Promoting and expanding industry and community initiatives

That education systems and schools actively pursue, promote and expand partnerships with industry and community agencies in the interests of working together to produce a population with the level of skills and knowledge necessary to accommodate life and work in New Times.
Schools in some rural sites have been successful in pooling resources and, in some cases, reconfiguring themselves into junior and secondary colleges as a means of expanding curriculum offerings to students. These schools have worked collaboratively rather than competitively in expanding student access to specialist teachers and offering them a wider range of subject choice. Students at one site recommended that government and non-government schools also attempt to share resources in these ways to optimise students’ study opportunities where resources were limited.

Where such rationalisation and reconfiguration of resources is not possible, then education systems and schools need to continue to improve access and delivery of learning opportunities through ICTs. It may even be timely for education systems to more clearly articulate the benefits to secondary students and teachers of using ICTs as preparation for technology and knowledge-driven economies and societies. Many schools have lagged behind in preparing teachers and students for technological change and it could be that rural and remote students are well served by developing a facility with multi-modal technologies of knowledge production and delivery.

**Recommendation 5: Expanding curriculum choice by rationalising resources and capitalising on the use of ICTs**

- That education systems and schools (government and non-government) in the one district investigate the possibilities of rationalising resources to improve the provision of specialist teachers and the range of subject choices available to students.

- That education systems improve and promote the use of multi-modal delivery of learning opportunities through more sophisticated use of Information and Communication Technologies.
This research project has been important in investigating factors that impact on student aspirations and expectations in regional Australia. Given the parameters of the study, it was not possible to provide any information on whether student aspiration and expectations were realised.

Of great interest were the students who, in the most economically vulnerable sites, expressed a determined will to improve their lot in life. They aspired to a better life and believed that they could achieve it through further education and training. They did not want their lives to be bound in the miseries of the ‘cost of a mop’ or to be locked forever into low-pay, low-status work (See Chapter 5). It is important now to know more about the influence the local economy has, not only on the expression but on the realisation of student aspirations. Finally, in the interests of equity, it is important to know the characteristics of students who realise their aspirations and of those who do not.

**Recommendation 6: Continuing the research**

- That future research investigate more closely whether differences associated with the vulnerability or sustainability of local regional economies are associated with students realising their aspirations and expectations for further education and training.

- That future research map the biographies of students living in economically vulnerable communities who aspire to further education and training to determine whether, and how, their dreams are realised.

- That research focus specifically on identifying whether factors like gender, Indigeneity, and family background are associated with the realisation of these students’ aspirations and expectations for further education and training.
An analysis of available statistical data, reported in Chapter 2, identified rural boys as being most at risk of leaving school early, that is, before beginning Year 11. The statistics indicated that when it came to leaving school early, boys living in rural and remote regions of Australia were over-represented in relation to girls living the same region, and they were over-represented in relation to girls and boys living in metropolitan regions. In this respect, rural boys represent an interesting case of the interplay between gender and geographical location. Early school leaving rural males are an obvious focus for further investigation. It is important to understand what it is about rural life for a young male that shapes and differentiates his decisions about the value of school, about pursuing life options outside of formal schooling, about negotiating different typologies of life choices, and carving out different biographical spaces.

Recommendation 7: Focussing on the interplay between gender and geographical location

- That research begin to investigate the interplay between gender and geography by focussing on what it means to boys – particularly those who leave school early – to live in rural and remote communities of Australia, and what distinguishes them from rural girls, and from metropolitan girls and boys, in terms of their desired futures.

- That research further investigate how early school leaving rural males negotiate typographies of life choices and priorities while rural girls map out different biographical spaces.

- That research investigate whether the choices that early school leaving rural males make are personally satisfying and productive in terms of the lives and the work opportunities that open out to them and whether the same can be said for their sisters who out-stay boys at school.
Students, parents and teachers reported that finance would be the most likely obstacle to students realising their aspirations and expectations for their futures. Within the context of the focus group interviews and the parent surveys, merit based scholarships were recommended for rural students who, without the support, would not be able to sustain themselves through further education and training that they would otherwise willingly and energetically pursue.

**Recommendation 8: Investigating rural scholarships**

- That governments revisit the issue of equity scholarships paying particular attention to students in rural and remote regions of Australia who otherwise would not be able ‘to reach it and touch it’.
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Abbreviations Used

ATAS    Aboriginal Tutorial Assistance Scheme
BHP     Broken Hill Proprietary
DEST    Department of Education, Science and Training
HECS    Higher Education Contribution Scheme
HI      Hammersley Iron
HSC     High School Certificate
IT      Information Technology
NIDA    National Institute of Dramatic Art
OT      Occupational Therapy
RMIT    Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology
S and E Society and Environment
SACE    South Australian Certificate of Education
SEIFA   Socio-Economic Index for Area
SOSE    Studies of Society and Environment
TAFE    Technical and Further Education
TE      Tertiary Entrance
TEE     Tertiary Entrance Examination
TER     Tertiary Entrance Rank
UAC     Universities' Admissions Centre
UAII    Universities' Admissions Index
VCE     Victorian Certificate of Education
VET     Vocational Education and Training
Appendix 1: Parent questionnaire
Dear Parent / Caregiver,

We are members of a research team which is investigating how location influences student aspirations and expectations about their future lives – particularly for young people who live in rural Australia. The project is funded by the federal Department of Education, Science and Training, and our research team is based at James Cook University in Townsville.

As part of the research, we are talking to students and teachers from many different areas across Australia. In addition, we really want to hear from parents about this issue. If you have time to jot down your comments about the questions on the attached page, we would be very grateful. All comments will be treated as confidential and you do not need to record your name on the question sheet.

Could you please return your comments to the school within the next week?

Yours sincerely

The Project Team

Associate Professor Nola Alloway
Professor Pam Gilbert
Associate Professor Rob Gilbert
Mr Sandy Muspratt
RESEARCH PROJECT: STUDENT ASPIRATIONS AND EXPECTATIONS

Is your child: Male Female In what grade?

What is life like for young people in your community? What do you see as some good things about growing up here? What are some not-so-good things?

Are there any differences about life here for boys compared with life here for girls?

Are you satisfied with the schooling available to your son or daughter? Are there any changes you would like to see?

Has your son or daughter made plans about the future they would like? Will these plans involve any further education and training?

Will these plans be difficult to manage – with travel, or cost, or moving away from home, for example?

What do you think are important influences on your son or daughter as they think about their future?

Thank you. If you have any other comments to make about these issues, we would be very glad to hear them.
Appendix 2: A Guideline for Focus Group Questions
Theme A: Tapping into life in the community – pleasure, fun, part-time work, sport, attitudes to young people etc. Looking for: attitudes to country/city life – any complaints or dissatisfactions with what’s available; any difficulties some young people might face living here. Observe any gender or cultural differences in perceptions and comments.

Sample questions:
What is life like for young people in this community? Is this community different from other places? What are some good things about growing up here? What are some not-so-good things? Do you think that young people who live in the country are different from young people who live in the city?

What do young people here do to have fun? What could be added to this community to make it a more lively and interesting place for young people like you to live in?

Are there different groups of young people in this community? Do some groups get a hard time? Can you explain why?

Do young people who live here have to help their families out – look after younger brothers and sisters; work around the house ...? Do many of you have part-time jobs? Is it easy or hard to get part-time work around here?

Are there any differences about life here for boys compared with life here for girls? Can you tell us more about that?

Theme B: Tapping into young adults’ aspirations and expectations – the futures they’d like and the difficulties they see connected with achieving their goals; factors they see as important in influencing their plans: where they live; their experiences of school, money, ethnicity. Observe any gender or cultural differences in perceptions and comments.
Sample questions:

What would you like to be doing in ten years' time? Do you think this is possible? What things might help you achieve these goals? What things might interfere with your plans?

Do your plans involve further education and training? Will there be any difficulties in this (cost, travel, family, accommodation, etc.)? How could these difficulties be reduced for you?

Do you think that your plans are typical of the plans other people in your community might make?

Who or what are the most important influences on you in making plans for the future? Whose advice do you really value? Do you have access to good advice?

What do you like best about being at school? What do you like least? Which experiences at school have been most important to you? Looking back on your experiences, is there anything you wish had been different?