

Creating Stronger Ties and Engagements with Secondary and Primary Schools: A Way Forward for Regional Universities

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Abstract

The higher education data for enrolment of regional and remote students in proportion to all domestic students has declined between 2001 and 2008. The declining trend has become a major concern, especially for certain regional universities. This paper examines a local solution that originates from the staff of the Centre for Regional Engagement, University of South Australia at Whyalla, who put into action various initiatives with the goal of improving university uptake by local school students. Particular attention is given to the following five initiatives: (1) *Year 10 university experience*; (2) *How science is utilised by health professionals*; (3) *First-generation program*; (4) *Nursing career expositions*; and (5) primary student visits to university.

By using a mixed method research design, the learning outcomes and perceptions of the implemented initiatives by participating school students were determined. Findings highlight the students' positive attitude about future university studies, as well as the gaining of a better understanding of science, health, nursing, other health professions and career alternatives. Findings suggest that partnering with primary and secondary schools, hospitals, community organisations and a rural health school is a promising strategy to effectively meet the educational needs of regional students and communities. Furthermore, partnering increases participation in higher education, encourages community engagements, and impacts positively regional university futures.

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Introduction

Participation in education and training is important for personal and economic success, but, more than that, it is crucial for Australia's knowledge base and economic prosperity (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2005). The level of educational attainment of a population is an important indicator of the wealth of knowledge, skills and competencies available in the population. Of the 21 million total population calculated in 2005 in Australia, approximately 3.2 million people aged 15-69 years were enrolled to study; about 25% were pursuing a bachelor's degree, 4% a graduate diploma and 5% a post-graduate degree (ABS, 2005). The

highest educational attainment recorded for the year 2005 was 18% bachelor degree or higher qualification. Of those who were studying, 73% were living in the major cities. As can be gathered from this survey, only a modest percentage of the total population pursued tertiary education. The latter statistic of 73% of the individuals studying is concerning as it highlights the disparity in education participation in metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas in Australia. Earlier reports by Cumpston, Blakers, Evans, Maclachlan, Karmel, and Garlick (2001) and Stevenson, Evans, Maclachlan, Karmel, and Blakers (2001) have underscored a growing difference in higher education participation between urban and regional areas.

The Bradley Review of Australian Higher Education, which was reported recently (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2008), expressed the same concern for inequality in higher education. It was found that the participation in education leading to a qualification was declining within regional Australia. According to DEEWR (2009, p.), “enrolment of students from regional areas has declined from 19.0% (2001) to 17.8% (2008), while enrolment of students from remote areas has declined from 1.4% (2001) to 1.1% (2008).” The Bradley Review (2008) stresses the need for regional students to have the same rate of access to and completion of higher education degrees as their metropolitan counterparts. Recommendations as to how equality may be achieved include: rationalisation of some small regional campuses; collaboration or merging for some campuses or institutions; introduction of a new national university for regional areas; and local solutions through a range of partnerships with other providers of education (DEEWR, 2008, 2009).

In direct response to the Bradley Review, this paper contends that a centralised educational system that systematically addresses the barriers to higher education may not be the best strategy in addressing the inequality in higher education. The development of a ‘superuniversity’ specialising in the provision of higher education across regional and remote Australia may not be the answer, considering that only a third of the widely distant university campuses are in regional areas. The answer lies in supporting existing regional universities that already offer distinctive contributions to achieving desired educational outcomes and responding to the current challenges of delivering effective higher education in non-metropolitan areas. These universities have been flexible, innovative and responsive to local needs, partnering with local communities, similar to those that were emphasised in the Bradley Review (DEEWR, 2009).

A case in point is the deliberate strategy of a regional campus in response to the challenge of inequality in higher education. The Centre for Regional Engagement (CRE), University of South Australia, mobilises its Whyalla staff members to undertake various outreach programs with the goal of improving university uptake by local school students. Of the many early intervention initiatives conducted, particular attention is given to the following five: (1) *Year 10 university experience*; (2) *How science is utilised by health professionals*; (3) *First-generation program*; (4) *Nursing career expositions*; and (5) primary student visits to university. This is due to the fact that the author has organised and/or implemented these initiatives in collaboration with university staff and community partners.

The literature pertinent to this paper will cover the intrinsic and extrinsic factors that enhance or hinder participation in higher education. More importantly, a review of the literature will consider effective strategies undertaken by various

sectors of society both in Australia and abroad to increase undergraduate enrolments, especially in regional universities. Some of these strategies have been adopted by the Nursing and Rural Health Unit, which is a part of CRE.

Factors impacting on participation in higher education

Students' access and participation in higher education are influenced by many factors. In their research, Lynch and O'Riordan (1998) identified three principal barriers facing working-class Irish students: economic, sociocultural and educational factors, and state that these need to be addressed systematically. Family income and other resources through adolescent years have also been found to impact on the decision to participate in higher education and the choice of type of tertiary education in New Zealand (Maani, 2006). In addition, social background characteristics have been linked to students' taking advantage of the opportunity to enter higher education in Germany (Maaz & Watermann, 2007) and in China (Jingming, 2007). Similarly in Canada, family structure variables and social class and gender differences have been linked to choices about higher education (Andres & Adamuti-Trache, 2008). Gender is an important factor to consider. A case in point is a survey of Greek high school students' intentions and motivation towards and against pursuing academic studies in computer science. In Papastergiou's (2008) research, the lack of opportunities for early familiarisation with computing in the home and scholastic environment is a factor differentiating boys from girls.

The factors influencing the increased or decreased uptake of higher education in studies abroad are no different in Australia. Despite higher education availability, there are still some groups in Australia, specifically the socioeconomically disadvantaged, who are underrepresented (DEEWR, 2009; McMillan, 2000). Other factors such as student dissatisfaction and low achievement present themselves as barriers (Polesel, 2002). In addition to proximity, access and availability of courses and support, DEEWR (2009) reports that parental levels of educational attainment and income levels, family and student attitudes and aspirations are also important determinants in participation in higher education. The next section examines literature relating to how participation in higher education can be enhanced.

Strategies to improve participation in higher education

At a global level, a number of strategies, including responses at national, state or local levels, have been devised to improve participation in higher education. These strategies fall under several categories, including (a) targeted interventions, (b) joint initiatives and partnerships and (c) education service delivery models of provision. CRE has adopted similar strategies.

Targeted interventions refer to activities that will ensure equal access opportunities for higher education participation. The state government's First Generation Program directed at students whose parents have not attended university (First taste, 2009), and outreach programs to attract more disadvantaged people to university (Healy, 2010), are concrete examples of targeted interventions. Another intervention is expanding information sources, specifically information about support services, scholarships, housing, relocation support and the like for high school students from regional and remote areas. Law and Arthur (2002), after studying the factors that influence Hong Kong school students in their choice of a

career in nursing, concluded that expanded relevant information sources can facilitate the university recruitment process.

In turning to joint initiatives and partnerships, Eschenbach, Virnoche, Grafman, Stamper, Atkins, Raymond, and Mills (2009) emphasise the value of creating partnerships between universities, Year 12 teachers and their students, and engineers. Their ‘Design your future’ project was a multi-campus engineering academic initiative with the goal of increasing student enrolment in engineering programs in California. With a similar approach, Michigan Technological University faculty and a school district partner strongly believed that in order to increase the number of students who pursue technical programs, students must be introduced to engineering and science as early as elementary school (Oppliger, Oppliger, Raber, & Warrington, 2007).

Other models that support transition to post-secondary education have been designed. In Australia, Polesel (2002) argued that there is a need to look beyond current structures of provision for models of schooling to better deal with higher education issues. The schooling approach that facilitated the provision of a broad and relevant curriculum including vocational education and training (VET) provided a more appropriate environment for some students. The Dual admission model in New Zealand provides a merit-based admission system, which could potentially increase the number of underrepresented students, while maintaining their success in university academic programs (Shulruf, Turner, & Hattie, 2009). The American TRIO educational opportunity programs remain an effective pathway for ensuring college preparedness and access for all students; the programs have been successful in increasing attendance rates and educational attainment of students from low-income, first-generation college, and underrepresented ethnic minority backgrounds (Pitre & Pitre, 2009).

Following are the aims and descriptions of CRE’s five initiatives to entice school students to pursue university education. Elaborations of these school-university campus activities are now presented.

The school-university campus activities

The first initiative is *The Year 10 university experience*, a co-sponsored program between the Spencer Gulf Rural Health School (a project of the University of South Australia and The University of Adelaide) and the Nursing and Rural Health Unit. The program aims to demystify university education by providing opportunities for local high school students to experience university learning contexts under the direction of experienced academics. The objectives of the three-day program are to: (a) expose students to university life; (b) stimulate their interest in learning more about the programs offered by the university; (c) provide information about health careers, entry pathways incorporating TAFE; (d) meet health professionals from various community organisations; (e) inform potential students of the support provided to university students; and (f) encourage them to pursue tertiary studies after graduation from high school.

The second initiative is *How science is utilised by health professionals*, a program piloted in 2008 by the Nursing and Rural Health Unit, to heighten local high school students’ interest in science, increase their aspirations and confidence in pursuing university studies and dispel myths about science and university. The one-day program includes the explication of some science concepts and their applications to

health professions, the conduct of science laboratory experiments, interaction with current university students and an introduction to university life.

The third initiative is the *First-generation program* which focuses on school-to-work pathways through university, targeting secondary students whose family members have never attended university. The program is offered over a six-week period with students attending the university campus for two hours each week. The interactive student-centred program includes orientation, sessions on health, business, social work, engineering and maths, and a celebration at the conclusion of the program. The participating local Year 10 students are accompanied on campus by their teachers and are assisted by undergraduate students acting as mentors. During the concluding celebration, past university graduates working in various community organisations deliver inspirational speeches to the students.

Another project akin to the ‘First Generation Program’ is the very new South Australian Certificate of Education Research Ready Program offered to Year 11 students undertaking a research subject with the assistance of university lecturers and resources. While the primary purpose of this joint venture between a local school and the university is to help students understand the research process, CRE also hopes to market its programs to potential students.

Nursing career expositions is the fourth initiative, conducted by the Nursing and Rural Health Unit and regional hospitals. This collaborative program is designed for nursing degree students to meet with representatives of regional hospitals and health care services to talk directly with each other about job prospects and engage in discussions about the benefits of working in the country. This initiative evolved in direct response to prospective employers wanting to meet with students in an attempt to alleviate regional recruitment and retention problems. A part of this program, undertaken by clinicians and university staff, is a project with the local hospital. Through its Clinical Placement Coordinator, physical visits are organised to country high schools in order to introduce secondary students to the nursing profession.

The fifth and final initiative is university academic visits by primary students from various rural and regional schools. For ten years these educational fieldtrips are aimed at providing students with the opportunity to experience the university campus and thereby strengthen the ties between the campus and the primary schools. The activities the students engage in vary, but common to all are meeting staff members, touring the facilities, partaking in a health talk (e.g., substance abuse, good nutrition), engaging in hands-on activities in the nursing and science skills laboratories and being part of a debrief/summary. The recent *Scientists in Schools* program initiated by the Australian Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO, 2007–2009) formalised this link between the regional university and schools. This entails some lecturers functioning as scientists, sharing their knowledge in Physics, Chemistry and Biology and engaging young minds in understanding how these sciences apply to the practice of nursing.

Evaluation of initiatives

Evaluations were conducted for the five initiatives using a range of methods, depending on the objectives of each initiative. Data collection sources included questionnaires, interviews, anecdotal accounts and critical reflection. The feedback of participating students, teachers and staff is essential to determine whether

objectives are being met and whether improvements are necessary. The participating students were informed about the voluntary nature of their participation in the evaluations and were assured of the confidentiality of information provided. Participation in the evaluation was taken as consent.

A 30-item online questionnaire was used to evaluate the *Year 10 university experience* program. The participating high school students from within Whyalla were invited to complete a Web-based questionnaire at the conclusion of the program (Penman, Ellis, White, & Misan, 2007). The students were queried about their: sociodemographic details; overall experience of the academic visit; opinions as to how a similar university experience might benefit other high school students; feedback about activities that they had found most engaging; future career plans after high school; suggestions as to how the three-day program might be improved; and, additional comments. The items querying the students' perceived value of the learning experience required them to respond to a set of criteria using a Likert scale ranked from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'. The remaining items were open-ended questions that sought opinions without pre-determined choices.

A 30-item questionnaire was administered after the program *How science is utilised by health professionals* (White, Watkinson, & Penman, 2009). This questionnaire sought sociodemographic information and a question was posted to determine whether the student would be the first person to attend university if he/she should decide to pursue tertiary education. Interest and family involvement in TAFE and university were also queried. Perceptions about the program (i.e., learning opportunities, understanding science and health and how science can be applied to health) and future intentions about university and future career plans were sought. The factors that made it easier or more difficult to attend university were elicited as were the best things about the university experience. Suggestions about how to improve future visits to university were requested and additional comments were sought in the last items of the questionnaire.

A survey approach using variations of the Harvard one-minute evaluation was used to assess the *First-generation program*, *Nursing career expositions*, and the primary school student visits to university. This evaluation provided an avenue to gain quick impressions about the initiatives, covering the most important information gained from participation, the best aspects of the initiative, suggestions for improvement and any other comments (Griffith University, 2010; Light, 2006). Responses were requested verbally or in writing. The *First-generation program* was also evaluated via electronic means.

Findings

The evaluations provided rich information about the participating students, the learning that transpired as a result of the five initiatives. However, only the findings pertinent to students' views on the initiatives and their perceptions of higher education are reported on in this paper. Overall, the findings highlight the students' positive attitude about possible future university studies, as well as gaining a better understanding of science, health, health professions – especially nursing – and career alternatives. In terms of the perceptions of the 16 students who responded to the *Year 10 university experience* program, all students responded in a positive and encouraging way (Penman et al., 2007). All students 'agreed' (5) or 'strongly agreed' (9) that the university experience was a pleasant one and that there were many learning opportunities in the visit (6 strongly agreed). The experience gave them a better understanding of what universities are all about

(5 agreed, 9 agreed strongly). Most significant for academic staff was that, as a result of their experience, all students felt positive about university studies (7 agreed, 7 agreed strongly) and might consider pursuing them (3,11). Also, as a consequence of this experience, participants reported that they had a better understanding of health, health services and health professionals (4 agreed, 10 strongly agreed). The majority (13 out of 14) would recommend the program to other students, believing that it would benefit them (9 strongly agreed). Learning about the university was documented as one of the best things about the academic visit. It was also revealed that many factors would facilitate students going to university, including proximity to family and facilities at the university. Additionally, it was revealed that students were worried about meeting the financial costs of going to university and the social sacrifices entailed in pursuing further education away from Whyalla.

The initiative *How science is utilised by health professionals*, evaluated by four students (all Whyalla residents) ‘agreed’ to ‘strongly agreed’ that this program was rich with learning opportunities (1 agreed, 3 strongly agreed), allowing them to understand science and health concepts (1,3) and providing them with an understanding of the roles of health professionals (3,1). The questionnaire revealed that if they pursued university ambitions, three of the four students would be the first person in the family to do so. The students felt positive about the university (2,2) and were seriously considering pursuing a degree program in the future (1,3). The best things about this initiative were the practical exercises and finding out more about courses offered. Additional comments documented were that: “I loved it” and “It was very informative and really helps me to get to uni.”

Fifty-seven (57) Year 10 students from the local secondary schools attended the *First-generation program* in 2009. During the debriefing session, students identified that team building, developing communication skills, learning about the human body, and bacteria, were important pieces of information. The best aspects of the educational session were revealed as: the enjoyable activities, specifically learning about microorganisms; taking their pulse; learning about asthma; and how they solved problems, cooperated and interacted with each other. When asked what information could be included or expanded upon for future sessions, the majority of students said ‘none’, but some indicated that more hands-on activities and more information about the university could be beneficial, signifying their keen interest in the university.

The *Nursing career expositions* were attended by an average of 50 students and community members, plus approximately 10 clinicians per year, during the four years that they were offered. These expositions encouraged nursing students to continue their studies and consider regional areas for employment, while at the same time this initiative opened the university to the public and introduced nursing as a possible career alternative. The school outreach under the same initiative, which involved over 60 high school students in Whyalla alone, was equally successful in raising awareness of the many exciting opportunities in nursing, including career pathways and specialisation. High school students commented on the varied areas of nursing and the attractive pay for novice nurses. The students were invited to attend the university’s open days or talk to key people if interested. This project resulted in several students being recruited for the university and now part of the workforce.

Many of the primary students who visited the university campus in 2009 (27, accompanied by 2 teachers) considered that the most important information gained

was the value of good nutrition (12), while others highlighted nursing or medical care (9). One felt that knowing about university was important for their future: “It’s good to go to uni and I learnt about what goes on.” Regarding the best aspects of the visit, the children preferred the interactive activities conducted in the laboratories. Comments like “totally awesome” and “it was good all round” were gratifying. Very recently, the staff of the Nursing and Rural Health Unit hosted another 75 Year 7 students. The purpose was to extend the students’ understanding of Physics, explain how the principles of Physics apply in Nursing, and increase their awareness about the university and what it can offer. Feedback from students was extremely positive, with comments that they wished to come back to pursue university studies.

Discussion

The initiatives described are examples of how CRE, specifically the Nursing and Rural Health Unit, attempts to bring primary and secondary students to the university campus to learn about the academic programs offered and give them a positive experience of the university. Many South Australian rural students are not aware of the regional university campus and what it can offer, nor are they aware of nursing and the other academic programs available in Whyalla (Penman, et al., 2007). These initiatives could fill some of these knowledge gaps. As well as the long-term aim of increasing applications and enrolments through CRE, findings suggest that these initiatives have also positively influenced the career aspirations of the students, increased their interest in science and health and informed them about what health professionals do. Moreover, there have been opportunities to demonstrate the work and enthusiasm shown by university staff, boost school students’ scientific, technological and health literacy, and introduce them to new fields of interest and challenge. The initiatives have provided valuable educational experience, opportunities to engage with the community and build partnerships with rural schools, hospitals and community organisations.

Overall, the evaluations indicate that the five initiatives have been successful with a conservative estimate of over 500 primary and secondary students to date. Utilising the materials and facilities on the university campus, the staff engaged the students in: effective use of PowerPoint presentations; open discussions; experiments; demonstrations, models and charts; role plays; Web-based inquiry; YouTube presentations; educational fieldtrips; and simulation. Many learning outcomes were achieved and interaction and active participation were encouraged. Through its five initiatives, CRE succeeded in providing creative and productive learning and teaching environments, similar to those described in the literature. Notable is CREs attempt to increase interest in the sciences (Australian Academy of Science, 2010; Miller, Carrick, Martinez-Sussmann, Levine, Andronicos, & Langford, 2007). The impact of these initiatives has the potential to meet the educational needs of regional students and communities, increase participation in higher education and generate a positive impact on regional university futures.

Meeting the educational needs of regional students and communities

Rural communities offer unique opportunities for the university experience and the limitations in rural areas can actually provide the drive for student learning (Van Hofwegen, Kirkham, & Harwood, 2005). Developing and implementing initiatives such as the five described in this paper were not as difficult as initially perceived

because rural areas have much to offer. Personal and material resources can be mobilised in order to increase participation in higher education. CRE has, through the five initiatives, addressed issues relating to the lack of information regarding course options and career paths by familiarising students with the type of course that would best suit their capabilities and informing students of the availability of on-going support.

The five initiatives implemented have the potential to counteract the so-called ‘urban advantage’, i.e., greater access to schools in urban areas according to Mugisha (2006). There is opportunity to increase aspirations and encourage achievement, as well as boost the self-perception of rural students, all of which are factors influencing participation rates in higher education (Watts & Bridges, 2006). There is also a chance to point out how much more economical it is to study locally, rather than having to relocate to big cities. The university widens participation by providing factual knowledge, motivation, addressing the social and cultural environment and challenging the cultural framing of career choice (Greenhalgh, Seyan, & Boynton, 2004).

The benefits in participating in the five initiatives are many. First, in introducing local secondary and primary school students to the university culture, they are exposed first hand to what is required to succeed at university. Furthermore, they explore opportunities to match their interests and abilities, identify career pathways, and gain a better understanding of higher education (First taste, 2009). Students also gain awareness of the importance of university studies in sciences and rural health care and learn to appreciate their significance and relevance to real life. Providing a conducive learning environment where students can ask questions about how things are, discuss, explore and form new associations, without the pressure of grades or performance reports, shows that university life can be fun and useful for their personal growth. Hence, the notion of tertiary studies as being remote and unfamiliar can be demystified. Through an enriching university experience, participating students may be guided in their decisions about pursuing higher education and spurred to aim for noble and gratifying life goals.

Increasing and widening participation in higher education

There is a need to continue genuine conversations between schools and the university about widening participation activities, especially in rural areas. This is because rural underrepresentation in higher education will remain a continuing problem unless rural students perceive higher education as a feasible option. However, far more than conversation is required. There is a need for concrete, local interventions through partnerships that seek to change negative attitudes towards university, increase academic motivation and increase participation in higher education in regional areas. The initiatives described in this paper represent widening participation interventions that have been shown to impact on school students’ attitudes towards higher education. Maras, Carmichael, Patel, and Wills (2007) support this argument in their study wherein they found a significant positive correlation between academic attainment scores of 13–16 year olds (N=2731) and involvement in widening participation activities. Attainment was negatively correlated with perceptions of family views about university. The latter finding alerts staff of the need to involve parents in initiatives aimed at overcoming the “urban advantage.” In addition, Maras (2007) examines the impact of widening participation on the attitudes of students in a longitudinal study involving 3,570 British students aged 13–18. It was found that there were significant sex and cohort

differences and interactions related to widening participation activities. The timing of engaging school students in these initiatives is critical. Universities have long been aware of the importance of engaging with secondary school students, but often this has been restricted to the senior year (Penman, et al., 2007). However, decision-making about possible achievement and aspirations would have been well formed before Year 10, according to Professor Gale, Head of the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (Healy, 2010). It is therefore very important to start early in increasing awareness of university options for high school students.

Positive impact on regional university futures

The various ways in which the Centre's local initiatives contribute to regional university futures are significant. Fair access to higher education must be a goal of all universities and key people such as school career advisers, lecturers, scientists in schools, school teachers and parents of potential students must all be encouraged to initiate and sustain activities that attract students to university. Regional universities should continue to provide opportunity structures that seek to address the persistent social inequalities experienced by underrepresented groups.

Working closely with schools, diversifying school curricula to include experience in tertiary studies and sustaining early intervention strategies are important in this pursuit. Regional universities must continue to find ways of opening their doors to those who have the ability and aspiration to undertake higher education. The five initiatives described and evaluated in this paper provide tangible examples of how partnerships can be forged. However, exploring other approaches may be beneficial. For instance, the impact of an institutional alternative such as vocational training and the possibility of combining vocational and academic education to increase the uptake of higher education has been explored by Hillmert and Jacob (2003). In addition, Miller et al. (2007) cite summer programs as a strategy for increasing interest in geosciences among K-12 students, while a five-week summer residential program for low-income high school students has been found to be instrumental in college degree completions by some ethnic minority groups (Winkleby, Ned, Ahn, Koehler, & Kennedy, 2009).

The majority of the participating students who engaged in the five initiatives in this study hope that there will be more university visits and many students expressed their desire to return one day to study at university. It is hoped that the university becomes an extension of primary and secondary schools and the boundaries between them slowly disappear in the near future. For this to happen, it is vital that future initiatives be well planned and organised, held on a regular basis and not merely conducted in an ad hoc manner. The real test is to conduct a longitudinal study to follow up the students who participated in the initiatives to ascertain whether in fact they decide to pursue tertiary education. There is also a need to evaluate the effectiveness (through short- and long-term participation surveys and changes in attitudes) of the five initiatives.

Moreover, political drivers are required to enhance the efficiency and sustainability of regional universities. The current government policy (Bradley Review) of increasing participation in higher education is justified and necessitates that regional universities must continue to seek incentives from the government to encourage and cater for disadvantaged groups. The latest DEEWR (2009) review of regional loading reflects the attempt of the government to expand enrolment and provide support for socioeconomically disadvantaged groups.

Conclusion

This paper has described five initiatives implemented by CRE that were aimed at increasing participation in higher education by primary and secondary school students. It has also presented the findings of the evaluations of the five initiatives, feedback of which reveals that these initiatives are profitable. It was found that the initiatives provided rich and meaningful learning experiences for the students who engaged in them and there is potential for a significant impact on the regional university's viability. These initiatives are local, cost-effective, creative and engaging. They are strategic, contextualised and have a rural and regional focus allowing for university-based learning and community engagements to happen and partnerships with communities to be established. Future research would consider the recommendations of participating students and the conduct of long-term evaluations. Higher education must be viewed as a realistic option for all students and universities must continue working towards raising participation and completion rates in higher education. This is imperative for a highly qualified workforce of the future and support of regional disadvantaged areas. Equity in higher education is a major challenge for universities and policy makers and the regional university at the centre of this paper has demonstrated that it is ready to take up that challenge.

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