

A close-up photograph of a young man with a full brown beard and short dark hair, smiling warmly at the camera. He is wearing a light blue t-shirt. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with green grass and trees.

# Informing key influencers of low SES regional, rural and remote students' education and career pathway choices: A whole community approach

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# Informing key influencers of low SES regional, rural and remote students' education and career pathway choices: A whole community approach

## Final report

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## Abbreviations

|     |                                   |
|-----|-----------------------------------|
| TTC | Trade Training Centre             |
| RRR | Rural, regional and remote        |
| SES | socioeconomic status              |
| VET | Vocational education and training |

## Glossary

|                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Key influencers</b>       | Community stakeholders, including parents, families, employers, and other community members, can be <b>key influencers</b> of the career pathway choices of young people and adults.                                                                                                     |
| <b>Neighbourhood houses</b>  | Sometimes known as Community Houses, Neighbourhood houses are places where people come together and find support, belonging and purpose as they work together to support their local community. They typically offer a wide range of activities and programs including training courses. |
| <b>Post-Year 10 students</b> | are those studying Years 11 and 12. This is a time when subject choice can determine eligibility for some immediate post-school university pathways.                                                                                                                                     |
| <b>RRR communities</b>       | This project takes a broad and relative definition of <b>RRR community</b> to include a locale or area centred on one or more towns located at distance from the nearest city, where that distance inhibits ease of access to city-based services.                                       |
| <b>School leavers</b>        | are students who have recently completed Year 12.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| <b>Tertiary education</b>    | Post-school VET and/or higher education.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |

# Executive summary

Education and career pathway decision making in rural, regional and remote (RRR) areas is crucial for building strong societies and economies across RRR Australia, a point made by recent reviews of RRR education (Naphthine et al., 2019; Halsey, 2018). Rather than targeting school students in their education and career pathway decision making, this project developed and piloted a model focussed on working alongside communities to build community capacity to support education and career pathway decisions of school students and adults. Schools currently have limited support from outside the education sector in providing career information and education. There is a need to embed knowledge within communities about careers of today and the future, and the pathways to them, so that this knowledge is readily accessible to those making pathway decisions. This project aimed to establish a model to fill gaps in community knowledge and give confidence to the community members who are key influencers of young people's and others' career and education pathway decisions. The project adopted a placed-based, whole of RRR community approach to targeting and building the capacity of these key influencers.

A community based participatory research (CBPR) approach was used, establishing communities as the central focus of the research, with community members working alongside researchers. Running parallel to the implementation of the project described above was an additional layer of research. Three case study communities in two states presented three different examples of the implementation of the model and provided the basis for an exploration of the factors that impede and promote key influencers' acquiring the information and confidence they need to support the education and career pathway decisions of others; opportunities for interventions to prepare key influencers for this role; and factors that influence the effectiveness of interventions in building the capacity of RRR community key influencers. It should be noted that while the case study communities were low socioeconomic status (SES), a whole-of-community approach meant that people of any SES may have participated. Similarly, it is not possible to foresee who will participate in higher education; this project aimed to expose the full range of education and career pathway options, so that students could be supported in selecting pathways most appropriate for them.

The project addressed the key question:

- How can a whole of community approach best equip key influencers to inform and support low SES RRR student higher education participation?

There were two sub-questions:

- How might a whole of community approach work effectively?
- How can key influencers in RRR areas best be informed and supported?

In addressing these questions, it became apparent that local context, particularly the nature of community culture and community members' skills and willingness to work with the researchers, made a difference. Culture is used in its broadest sense to mean attitudes and behaviour characteristic of a particular social group or society. Superior outcomes were associated with a strong community culture, which manifested in maturity in working together and with external agents, and an external versus internal community orientation, where community orientation is the extent of future planning and focus on what is happening outside the community.

CBPR values and prioritises local input into the design and evaluation of programs and resources, while also providing external expert knowledge that can be applied and adapted for local context. The result is flexible, accessible and authentic programs that are likely to engage RRR key influencers. Findings demonstrate that CBPR is an effective methodology

to underpin research and develop community partnerships. While some RRR communities have an orientation and community culture that makes CBPR easier to apply than others, CBPR can help build the capacity of RRR communities to engage in productive partnerships such as those in this project.

The project findings indicate that whole of RRR community approaches must be cognisant of local context, draw on local expertise and foster community ownership to be successful. The project revealed contextual characteristics that should be taken into account in the design of a sustainable whole of RRR community approach to education and career pathway education. Partnerships must be cognisant of the pragmatic elements of program or resource delivery (timing, location, delivery mode, place-based learning) which will affect engagement and impact. Pragmatic elements should involve good practice in program design but are better driven by the community who are experts in community preferences and 'how things get done', not driven by researchers. Likewise, community are best placed to advise on the authenticity and relevance of interventions for their own context, and what is likely to engage key influencers.

Overall, the findings suggest that while there were a number of factors that influence how a whole of community approach can best equip key influencers to support pathway choices of both young people and adults, the overarching factor is understanding community context and matching program design to context. Generic programs that are not tailored to the nuances of individual communities will not be as effective as flexible programs that understand and take account of individual community need, capability and context. More specifically, findings focus on the following:

- **Community ownership, engagement and inclusion.** Inclusion and engagement of community members who had credibility, visibility, and were well-integrated in their community were critical to successful CBPR and design and implementation of interventions which engaged and built capacity of key influencers.
- **Community pathway working parties.** Community pathway working parties acted as incubators and activators by creating a supportive environment for development of new ideas and promoting connections with other community programs. The working parties assisted in testing ideas, translated secondary data into the local context, shared observations of their lived experience, provided insight and input into findings and progress and, most importantly, identified local contextual factors that might enhance or hinder understanding of education and career pathways in their community and how ideas could be translated into programs and participation.
- **Local pathway brokers as boundary crossers, bringing the community together.** The employment of a locally based pathway broker(s) in each community was critical in connecting community institutions and subgroups within the communities and connecting the researchers with the communities; they were key to the partnership as well as a whole of community approach.
- **Flexibility, accessibility, authenticity and sustainability.** Finding ways in which this project could continue and adapt to changed external contexts but also be responsive to the local context while remaining authentic and relevant, was essential in the context of COVID-19. Three principles, flexibility, accessibility, and authenticity, emerged as central to success of the project. These three principles contribute to sustainability.
- **Community culture.** Community orientation (external/internal) and community maturity in working together and with those from outside the community (the researchers) influenced the implementation and effectiveness of the project in each community. Understanding how orientation and maturity as elements of community culture can be influenced by the qualities and actions of boundary crossers, and

responding to that understanding through the CBPR process is key to successful implementation and project sustainability.

The project aimed to develop a sustainable model that would build capacity and extend beyond the life of the project, leaving communities with a legacy of knowledge and skills in supporting education and career pathway decisions that could be built upon. Step by step recommendations for setting up such a model are reported below and in Chapter 6.

## Recommendations

Recommendations 1-14 collectively constitute a model for communities wanting to work internally and partner with external agents to build community capacity to support the education and career pathway decisions of school students and adults.

1. Involve key local stakeholders early. Include schools and other locally based education providers, e.g. neighbourhood houses, trade training centres (TTCs). Consider including regional education systems, e.g. universities, tertiary and further education (TAFE) providers, and state departments of education.
2. Set up a working party or similar oversight arrangement with the key internal and external stakeholders as members. Draw in and include diverse members from local industry/employers, local government, families, equity groups, sports clubs, non-government organisations and community groups with an interest in young people, education and/or skill development. Ensure the working party has wide-reaching networks into all sectors, subgroups and layers of the community. The working party should be engaged at key stages of any program to: (1) identify the community's needs in terms of education and career pathways knowledge; (2) identify the key influencer groups best placed to address these needs; and (3) select interventions most appropriate to improve the knowledge and confidence of key influencers.
3. Think about shared ownership of the program. Do you need to gradually move ownership from external to internal parties?
4. Appoint a dedicated local human resource to drive the program (a pathway broker in this project). Have that resource employed by a trusted and credible local institution. The broker and/or institution should act as a driver and activator in the program, and make sure that external and internal interventions and programs are coordinated.
5. Consider community needs based on statistical data, local knowledge about changes to the internal and external environment and, crucially, local understanding of contextual factors that act as constraints and enhancers to local people's education and career pathway choices (see Appendix, Template B).
6. Does your community have a shared understanding regarding education and career pathways? If not, think about how your pathway broker and others in the community can act as boundary crossers to help develop shared understandings of community needs and goals in the education and career pathways area.
7. Consider who are key influencers in the community, which key influencers should be targeted to meet your goal, and the types of interventions that may work for your community (see Appendix, Template A).
8. Draw on skills, resources and networks of external and internal working party members and other relevant people/organisations inside and outside the community in selecting, designing, or adapting programs from elsewhere. Consider the skills of people who may have recently moved in as well as longer established residents. Ensure programs are translated to the local context (see Appendix, Template C).
9. Interventions should be accessible to community members – time, place, delivery format. They should be approachable, welcoming and translated to happen organically in the local context. Ensure opportunities for community members to ask

questions, engage in feedback mechanisms as part of interventions. Online resources that are accessible beyond the intervention leave a legacy for community use and should be part of any community's diverse suite of interventions.

10. Interventions must be authentic and ideally place-based, and delivered by people who are part of the community, have come from the community or understand the community, e.g. are closely aligned with the community or similar communities.
11. Any program must be flexible and responsive to internal or external change.
12. How interventions and programs are promoted matters. Word of mouth is particularly effective. Use the networks of the working party – make sure all sections of the community are covered through the diversity of formal and informal communication channels.
13. Monitor and evaluate the interventions and your overall progress. Involve the working party. Make changes according to evaluation results.
14. A sustainable model has community ownership, is a partnership between community and relevant external parties, is driven from within the community, resourced on an ongoing basis, and monitored to anticipate future needs and external changes.

The second set of recommendations (15-18) apply more generally to education and career pathway research in RRR communities.

15. When designing RRR education and careers pathway information or advice programs, rural regions centred on rural service centres appear to be an appropriate scale, rather than small communities or large regions with several major service centres.
16. There should be a focus on education and careers pathway information programs for key influencers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student pathway choice which are culturally appropriately designed for RRR settings in partnership with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.
17. CBPR should be a methodology of choice to engage RRR communities in education and career pathway research.
18. Universities should partner with RRR communities to deliver interventions which focus on education and career pathways and use placed based learning principles.

# Chapter 1 Introduction

Effective career education is crucial in preparing rural, regional and remote (RRR) people of all ages for life and work in the increasingly globalised economy. Evidence shows that schools alone, are not well equipped to create locally relevant programs that facilitate, promote and enable students to actively understand, negotiate and feel supported in their choice of careers (Woodroffe et al 2017). Schools currently have limited support from outside the education sector in providing career education. There is a need to embed knowledge within communities about careers of today and the future, and the pathways to them, so that this knowledge is readily accessible to those making pathway decisions. Community stakeholders, including parents, families, employers, and other community members, can be key influencers of the career pathway choices of young people and adults.

This project addresses a key question:

- How can a whole of community approach best equip key influencers to inform and support low SES and RRR student higher education participation?

It also addresses two sub-questions:

- How might a whole of community approach work effectively?
- How can key influencers best be informed and supported in RRR areas?

This project designed, trialled and evaluated whole of community, place-based career and education pathway information programs for adults in three RRR communities who are the key influencers of young peoples' and others' education and career pathway decisions. Place-based learning is an approach that takes advantage of geography to create authentic, meaningful and engaging learning (Gruenewald, 2003; Gruenewald & Smith, 2008). Rather than targeting school students in their education and career pathway decision making, this project developed and piloted a model focussed on working alongside communities to build community capacity to support education and career pathway decisions of school students and adults. The aim was to increase whole of community understanding of career and education pathways and the resources available to support post-Year 10 pathway choices, and to increase the confidence of key influencers of young people (and others) in supporting them as they make education and career pathway decisions.

The NCSEHE funded project on rural community influences on higher education participation (Barnes et al., 2019), surveyed 3,180 students from regional and remote home postcodes enrolled in six Australian universities with high proportions of regional students. Results confirmed that family, friends, school staff, and universities are important influencers of rural student aspirations, perceptions of attainability of higher education and eventual participation in higher education. Other community members, employers, industry and local media, also made contributions (Barnes et al., 2019). Case studies carried out as part of the project found that higher education influencers are active across the community. Other research has found that a people-rich, partnership approach is most effective in informing key influencers of post-school education pathway choice such as parents and carers (Fischer, Barnes & Kilpatrick, 2017). Taken together, this previous research suggests that a whole of community approach to equipping key influencers with an understanding of education and career pathways and relevant resources is likely to be most effective to promote and support RRR student higher education participation. This project takes a broad and relative definition of rural community (Bæck, 2015) to include a locale or area centred on one or more towns located at distance from the nearest city, where that distance inhibits ease of access to city-based services.

The overall project design was informed by community based participatory research (CBPR) in which communities and researchers work as partners (Liamputtong 2020; Woodroffe et

al., forthcoming). The project used knowledge and resources of the partners to identify the key influencers of student career and education pathways decisions within case study communities. It explored the nature and timing of, and motivation for, key influencers support and advice, barriers to providing timely and well-informed advice and opportunities for intervention to prepare key influencers for this role through mapping existing programs against key influencer needs.

Career and education pathway working parties were established in three case study communities in two states, each resourced with a pathway broker(s). Working parties and communities were made aware of a suite of programs and interventions (Appendix D) found to be successful in informing and influencing key influencers of student pathway choice. They were assisted through a process led by the researchers to select and/or modify interventions aligned with community needs. The selected interventions were trialled and evaluated. The project targeted key influencers of the two critical prerequisites for student participation in higher education: aspiration for a higher education pathway; and understanding that higher education participation is an attainable, achievable goal (James, 2001; Kilpatrick et al., 2019). Research (Fischer, Barnes, & Kilpatrick, 2017; Kilpatrick et al., 2019; Woodroffe, Kilpatrick, Williams, & Jago, 2017) has established that families, friends, teachers and other school staff, employers, university outreach programs and campus visits are key influencers of RRR low SES student career and education aspirations, as well as of students' understanding that higher education is attainable. They are, therefore, key influencers of student education and career pathway choices (Fischer et al., 2017; Kilpatrick et al., 2019; Woodroffe et al., 2017).

Aspirations are typically formed in primary and early secondary years, when parents, families and teachers are key influencers (Naylor, Baik, & James, 2013). There is evidence that enhancements to school curriculum also influence aspirations (Naylor et al., 2013). Our previous research has found that teachers feel ill-equipped to give careers advice and welcome the involvement of other stakeholders in raising their own awareness, as well as the knowledge of their students (Woodroffe et al., 2017).

An understanding of the attainability of higher education is essential to convert aspiration to expectation of participation for young people in mid to later years of secondary school, and to eventual participation; an understanding of attainability is also a necessary prerequisite for students accessing higher education as older adults (Khattab, 2015; Kilpatrick et al., 2019). There is strong theoretical evidence for pathway and articulation programs, including from vocational education and training (VET), in influencing both aspiration and attainability (Naylor et al., 2013). Employers play a role in influencing employees and other adults in rural communities to upskill for increasingly sophisticated rural jobs (Houghton, 2019). Recent major changes to the Tasmanian Year 9-12 curriculum, which aim to embed career planning into the curriculum rather than have it as a separate activity, have also shone light on the need for well-considered career advice from teachers who are not specialist careers teachers (Tasmanian Department of Education, 2021).

## Chapter 2 Literature review and background

To situate the research, we provide examples of recent developments in Australian policy on education and career pathways and review the literature on influencers of career and education pathways for RRR students, drawing on recent research from Australia and a range of countries discussing who are key influencers of students, the role of communities, resources and structural factors.

### Recent Australian policy

In Australia, there is a strong mandate to strengthen career education, supported by two recent RRR education policy reviews (Naphthine et al., 2019; Halsey, 2018). In particular, Naphthine Review (2019) asserts that halving the gap in attainment and participation rates in RRR areas would increase Australia's GDP by approximately \$25 billion by 2050. The Halsey Review (2018) notes declining rates of transition to university with increasing remoteness and a persistent gap in educational attainment of RRR students compared to their urban counterparts. Halsey notes that contextual factors and relationships interact to influence learning and post school pathways of RRR students. The two Reviews make a raft of recommendations about supporting RRR students and providing improved school and tertiary education options. The Naphthine Review makes an explicit recommendation about building aspirations and improving careers advice for RRR students, including 'implementing a regionally- based model for independent, professional career advice' (2019, p.65). There have been a number of initiatives aimed at improving access to higher education for RRR students, including funding of Regional University Centres (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2021a) and a package aimed to encourage RRR students to study degrees aligned with areas of need, including in RRR areas (Department of Education, Skills and Employment (2021b).

In response to calls to strengthen career education nationally, two recently released documents outline a commitment to helping young people make informed decisions about their study, training and career options. *Future Ready: A student focused national career education strategy* (Department of Education and Training, 2019) was followed by the Education Council's *Looking to the Future*, the report of the review of senior secondary pathways into work, further education and training (Shergold et al., 2020). More recently the Tasmanian Government announced a suite of reforms to support recovery from COVID-19, including a statewide *Jobs Tasmania Local Networks* program to link Tasmanians of all ages with available jobs through education and training and careers advice (Premier's Economic and Social Recovery Advisory Council, 2021).

The *National Career Education Strategy* (Department of Education and Training, 2019) identifies how local communities and partnerships are critical in career education in promoting pathways into work and further education and training, particularly in rural areas. Communities can contribute to program design and delivery to ensure programs meet local needs and expose young people to local employment opportunities and pathways. Drawing on local resources is important for authentic learning experiences that young people see as relevant (Department of Education and Training, 2019). The strategy identifies several places where partnerships can be used in career education and within communities. Career education partnerships should: involve collaboration with parents and carers, employers and the local community; reflect the diversity of employer needs and the many pathways available; and work in partnership with higher education and vocational education and training providers to ensure career education places equal value on all pathways (Department of Education and Training, 2019).

## Literature on influencers

A comprehensive literature review spanning 25 years focused on key influences on Australian school students' aspirations for higher education in regional and remote locations found home and community had a significant role shaping aspirations (Fray, Gore, Harris & North, 2020). They identified that much of the research in the period focussed on barriers and enablers including home and community factors, financial capacity, distance to university, emotional cost of relocation, supportive school environments, teacher encouragement and school experiences; and a lack of certainty regarding post-school options (Fray et al. 2020). More recent research has similar themes, Turner (2020) argues that the role of community influence can be important in students' pathway decisions, but that it is different for each student as other factors including financial resources also influence decisions. International research has similar themes, for example, Rönnlund, Rosvall and Johansson (2018) found that social, cultural and financial resources were not only important in Swedish students' decision making processes, but these resources were more important for rural young people than for their urban peers.

### Peers, parents, family, teachers and others as influencers

It has long been known that peers, parents, family and teachers have an influence on students' aspirations (Bordua, 1960; Epstein, 1995; Jeynes, 2005; Krause et al., 2009). Recently, Fray, Gore, Harris, and North (2020) conducted a comprehensive review of literature from 1991 to 2016 focused on key influences of RRR Australian school students' aspirations for higher education. They identify the support of home and community as one of the major research themes over the period. Home and community support is also important for formation of aspirations in other countries. Hallinan and Williams (1990) conducted a study in the United States and found that peers have a strong influence on other students' aspirations. Kiuru, Aunola, Vuori and Nurmi (2007) found the same to be true in Finland.

Key influencers can play a role in motivating students to achieve. The concept of 'relatedness', or how well a student feels connected to peers, parents, family and teachers is relevant. In a study of Filipino students, King (2015) found that when students felt a strong sense of relatedness, their levels of engagement and achievement increased. Similarly, in a Canadian study, Ricard and Pelletier (2016) found that reciprocal relationships influenced whether or not a student would drop out of high school. Guay, Ratelle, Larose, Vallerand and Vitaro (2013) examined the importance of relationships on motivation and achievement and found that while parental support is important, all significant relationships are beneficial for students' academic competence, motivation and achievement. In Australia, (McInerney, 2008, p. 870) found that a "sense of self (sense of purpose, self-reliance, negative self-concept, positive self-concept), and facilitating conditions (parent support, teacher support, peer support), engage students in the process of learning."

Employers play a role in influencing employees and other adults in rural communities to upskill for increasingly sophisticated rural jobs (Houghton, 2019). The research reviewed in this section implies that relationships that students form with people outside their families, such as teachers, employers and other community members, can influence their pathway decisions.

### The role of communities

The concept of 'ecologies of learning', can be used to explore how communities influence decisions and how community members, particularly young people, are impacted by the 'knowledge production' which features in their social contexts. This might include the influence of schools, family and friends, peer groups and wider networks—it is here where associations are made about values and norms of education, training and work in their future including, pathways to higher education (Corbett, 2007; Krause et al., 2009; Harwood et al.,

2017). As Harwood, Hickey-Moody, McMahon and O'Shea (2017) argue "where we live and who we interact with have a big impact on what we do" (p. 36). Other equity cohorts such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and people with disability live in low socioeconomic RRR communities. Factors associated with membership of other equity cohorts combine with RRR status to compound disadvantage and increase the challenge of higher education participation (Cardak et al., 2017). The factors discussed in this section may have greater impact on members of multiple equity groups.

Personal choices are significantly influenced by "sets of routine practices related to structural relations such as social class, gender, ethnicity- that are embodied or dispositions or habitus" (Southgate & Bennett, 2016, p. 231). At the same time, a person's dispositions (physical, practical, emotional, cognitive as well as discursive) are strongly influenced by the world they inhabit but that in turn, the person also has a strong influence on the career decisions and progression they make (Hodkinson, 2008). Shah, Bennett, and Southgate (2015) unpack the arguments around structure and agency in relation to people's capacity to choose career pathways in the broader social context of their lives. They suggest that personal choice is actually a complicated, relational dynamic in which many factors can have a 'knock-on' effect and where structure and agency are in continuous interaction. This draws on Hodkinson and Sparkes's (1997) theory of 'careership', based on Bourdieu's notions of habitus and social capital, which argues that routines, turning points and happenstance influence educational and career pathways. Career and educational choices are mostly pragmatic, determined from interactions with others in their social fields and local context.

People living in communities and families with limited experience of higher education are less likely to aspire to a university pathway (Cardak et al., 2017), and often struggle to imagine studying at university and working in the kinds of jobs a degree would qualify them to do (Woodroffe et al., 2017). They also lack navigational capital to negotiate the academic and practical steps to get to university (Appadurai, 2004; Krause et al., 2009). The role of communities is therefore important. Community influence on pathways is consistent with Thornton and Nardi's (1975) theory of the dynamics of role acquisition, which explains that as an individual passes through the stages of role acquisition, various interactions with other individuals around them shape the role that is acquired including the individual's expectations. The actualisation of the imagined future is just the final part of the process.

The impact of influencers on transition to tertiary and higher education has been a key topic within the literature for some time (Hinton-Smith, 2012; Shah, Bennett & Southgate, 2015; Shah & Whiteford, 2016). Several international studies analyse how rural communities shape young people's options in transitions to post-school education and careers. For example, Rosvall (2020) found that factors affecting young people's decisions in rural Sweden included career counsellors promoting 'learning to leave', gendered socialisation factors such as the local promotion of male-dominated trades and more visible examples of male role models, and students' financial and other resources. In a study focused on Icelandic youth in a rural fishing community, Bjarnason and Thorlindsson (2006) found that migration intentions for the purposes of education and careers were linked to growing up in the community, parental support and control, and willingness to work in the main community industry. Similar to Rosvall (2020), Bjarnason and Thorlindsson (2006) found that gendered socialisation factors played a large role in decision making with local, well-paid jobs being highly gendered and male-dominated resulting in young women being more likely to leave their communities for education and career purposes. Corbett (2010) looked at school and career pathway decision making for rural Canadian youth and found that those who had the luxury of flexibility in both time and space, so being able to take their time to make decisions and had the option to be mobile, were more successful in their educational pursuits (Corbett, 2007; Corbett & Forsey, 2017).

## Education-community partnerships

Effective partnerships between schools, universities, VET, industry and community organisations can act as powerful structures to support change through programs which prepare students and their parents for further education and new worlds of work (Herlina, Widodo, & Madhakomala, 2019; Machimana et al., 2020; Santarossa & Woodruff, 2020; Woodroffe et al., 2017; Zimmerman, 2019). School-community partnerships serve a variety of purposes including providing students with authentic learning opportunities and exposing career pathways (Kilpatrick et al., 2002). Machimana, Sefotho, Ebersöhn and Shultz (2020) explain that utilising education-community partnerships can lead to a radical shift in attitudes and practice. University outreach programs should work in partnership with rural communities to inform student aspirations and reveal the practical steps that make higher education attainable (Kilpatrick et al., 2019). They describe how university-community partnerships can create bridges to realisation of previously unimagined ideas and opportunities for students. Kilpatrick and colleagues explain how university-rural community partnerships can help to create connections and interactions with new networks, opening doors to new possibilities and the practical steps to achieve them. Proximity of a RRR community to a university campus is related to higher education participation (Barnes et al, 2019), suggesting that effectively education-community partnerships could be formed more readily when there is a presence such as a Regional University Centre.

'Boundary crossers' or 'boundary spanners' are key in making education-community partnerships work. Miller (2008) describes boundary spanners as people who are participating in a type of non-traditional educational leadership which extends well beyond the walls of schools and the more traditional 'structural leadership' (Young, 1991) of school leaders, taking various forms such as community-based leadership. Miller argues that this type of leadership is necessary to facilitate academic and social transformation. This is consistent with Johns, Kilpatrick, Falk, and Mulford (2000) who investigated the nature of school-community partnerships and explain "a leadership philosophy which supports community participation and shared decision making ensures that relevant solutions are found to meet local community needs." Kilpatrick et al. (2002) describe boundary crossers in the context of RRR school-community partnerships for schools of all levels. They are people or groups who have credibility within two or more community domains and speak the language of all, build trust and dialogue between domains, and provide partnership continuity. Miller (2008) suggests that boundary spanners possess a combination of contextual knowledge, interpersonal skills, trust and connectedness that they rely on to lead rather than acting in the name of an organisation. Miller further indicates that 'boundary spanners' are most successful when they are operating in supportive communities. Kilpatrick, Burns, Barnes, Kerrison, and Fischer (2020) and Barnes, Shore, Mayhead, Fry, Disney and Hampshire (2016) describe similar attributes and characteristics that contribute to successful 'boundary crossers' in the context of programs for parents and families which aim to engage and inform them about so they can better support their children's educational aspirations. This research uses the term 'boundary crosser'. Table 1 below provides an overview of key boundary crosser attributes identified by various authors.

**Table 1. Key attributes of boundary crossers from literature**

| AUTHOR(S)                | KEY ATTRIBUTES                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|--------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Kilpatrick et al. (2002) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• can be individuals or groups</li> <li>• has credibility within two or more community 'domains' or sectors, and speaks the language of both/all</li> <li>• are important in building trust and dialogue between sectors, building and maintaining education–community partnerships</li> <li>• provide a sense of continuity that is important to partnership sustainability.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| Miller (2008)            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• have a wide array of contacts</li> <li>• are effective collectors and disseminators of information</li> <li>• are trusted and respected by diverse university, school and community constituents</li> <li>• understand and appreciate the social and organisational complexities associated with university-community-school collaboration</li> <li>• possess exceptional interpersonal skills</li> <li>• convene diverse, resourceful and often unfamiliar partners</li> <li>• unite seemingly disparate groups around a common cause</li> <li>• move freely and flexibly within and between organisations and communities</li> <li>• well connected through lifetimes of relationships</li> <li>• real, true, loved and respected</li> <li>• action, not just talk.</li> </ul> |
| Barnes et al. (2016)     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• have the right skills at the right place at the right time</li> <li>• be willing and able to work across stakeholder groups</li> <li>• be “audacious” (Barnes, 2016, p.38) in contacting and inviting parent involvement</li> <li>• act as a catalyst for accessing others to draw in expertise through contacts and funding.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| Kilpatrick et al. (2020) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a trusted connector</li> <li>• can communicate effectively with community partners, schools and industry partners</li> <li>• can build trust among parents in the disadvantaged communities</li> <li>• has excellent knowledge and skills base and the ability to engage adult learners</li> <li>• able to connect with parents and tailor information to their needs.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |

In addition to attributes of the boundary crosser, research suggests that success in partnerships is more likely when the boundary crosser is motivated by an underlying community loyalty or commitment and the community is supportive (Kilpatrick et al., 2002; Miller, 2008). Actions of boundary crossers can reduce tensions between groups or subcultures in a community to bring about mutual benefit, including in school-community partnerships (Kilpatrick et al., 2002). Subcultures have been studied particularly in organisational theory. Space prevents in-depth review of this literature, but Sporn's (1996) study of culture in universities as loosely constituted groups of people with competing objectives and strong external influences is relevant in understanding the features of rural community culture which can enhance or hinder working together and with external industry or education partners to build capacity to support education and career pathway decisions.

Sporn's (1996) model is built on the basic assumptions that strong cultures are more effective than weak cultures, and that people or groups with an external orientation are better positioned than those with an internal orientation, to adapt to a changing environment and/or to respond to emerging needs. Culture is used in its broadest sense to mean attitudes and behaviour characteristic of a particular social group or society. Strong community cultures encompass subcultures which share attitudes, values, beliefs. These groups/communities are more capable of reacting flexibly to change and can coordinate and accommodate subcultures to reach common goals (Sporn, 1996). They exhibit characteristics of 'mature' communities, are more likely to engage in participatory processes (Fischer, Miller, & Sidney, 2007), and can harness the skills and capacity that skilled mobile

workers bring to their new communities (Kilpatrick et al., 2011). Communities with strong cultures also have access to boundary crossers who are able to facilitate liaisons between and across subcultures. However, in a 'weak' culture, subcultures have divergent views, values, beliefs and attitudes, and do not work well together. Gaps in skills and resources within the community may arise with each subculture concentrating on their own work and not identifying as part of a larger group and/or purpose. Generally, few group members are willing to adapt to changing conditions (Sporn, 1996) and communication between subcultures does not flow well.

External/internal orientation is defined as a binary attribute, indicating a community's willingness and/or ability to focus on future planning and an awareness of what is happening beyond community boundaries (Sporn, 1996). Externally oriented communities are better positioned to adapt and better able to harness the skills of mobile workers. They have a capability to function in changing environments and become sustainable. Internal orientation indicates a community whose primary focus on an individual or group's own affairs and having less awareness of the larger context in which the people and community is positioned. Internally oriented communities are able to function best in stable environments.

Kilpatrick, Auckland, Johns and Whelan (2008, p. 220) discuss the concept of community maturity and describe where a community sits on a spectrum of maturity indicators which include "local leadership that empowers the community, a willingness of community coalitions to take risks and mould opportunities to meet their vision, and a culture of critical reflection and evaluation of past actions." Certain aspects of RRR community demographics also contribute to community maturity. For example, Kilpatrick, Johns, Vitartas, and Homisan (2011) point out that mobile skilled workers are often more motivated and willing to step up within communities even though they have not lived in the community very long. Newcomers tend to have a higher average level of education, are more open-minded and tend to have

*a commitment to the community; flexibility and adaptability; calculated risk taking, and high-level information-seeking skills... A common theme running through many of the mobile skilled worker stories was their desire to make a difference. They made a conscious decision to commit to the community, and in a number of cases, encouraged others to do the same* (Kilpatrick et al., 2011, p. 185).

RRR communities that make the most of the skills of their mobile skilled workers are likely to sit higher on the maturity spectrum. Community maturity and community culture should be considered along with the nature and characteristics of the boundary crosser when creating a tailored, holistic approach to the partnership process.

### **Resource availability and structural factors**

Efforts to widen higher education participation are underpinned by themes of equity, social inclusion and the importance of education in fostering economic growth and a better society. There is strong theoretical evidence for pathway and articulation programs, including from VET, in influencing both aspiration and attainability (Naylor et al., 2013). As Cupitt and Trinidad (2017, p. 26) argue, widening participation and complementary interventions are needed "to ameliorate some of the more pervasive aspects of compounding disadvantage and systematic inequalities, such as low academic achievement, low rates of secondary school completion, one size fits all university entry pathways and exclusionary institutional practices". An understanding of the attainability of higher education is also essential to convert aspiration to participation (Kilpatrick et al., 2019).

It is widely accepted that students in RRR areas experience locational disadvantage with relatively more severe economic and social hardship than equivalent urban areas (Harvey, Burnheim, Joschko & Luckman, 2012; Halsey, 2018; Napthine et al., 2019), and that

proximity to a university campus or other university presence promotes higher education participation (Harvey et al., 2012; Barnes et al., 2019).

Locational disadvantage is not unique to Australia, but rather can be seen in literature from a diverse range of countries including Australia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, South Africa, and Sweden. (Abbott-Chapman, 2011; Chankseliani, Gorgodze, Janashia, & Kurakbayev, 2020; Fray et al., 2020; Mgwashu, Timmis, Wet, & Madondo, 2020; Polesel, 2009; Rönnlund, Rosvall, & Johansson, 2018; Shergold et al., 2020). Compounding this disadvantage, RRR areas often have fewer resources for people seeking educational and career opportunities as outlined below.

According to Woodroffe, Kilpatrick, Williams, & Jago (2017), schools are most often charged with most of the responsibility for providing a curriculum that equips students with the necessary skills, knowledge and attributes to navigate the work environment. However, there is evidence that rural youth are often not given the information and skills they need at school to “make an informed choice about where they wish to live and work” Calabrese (2006) argues that schools alone are “unable to successfully respond to social and economic changes such as the new global economy and work order” (p. 176).

A crucial barrier to education and career pathway decision making discussed by many authors is knowledge of the pathways (da Silva Cardoso et al., 2013; Hawley, Cardoso & McMahon, 2013). In the United States, da Silva Cardoso et al. (2013) identify the lack of ability to participate in relevant activities as a barrier for gaining knowledge and connections that facilitate pathway knowledge acquisition and career preparation. By participating in activities, students are able to not only improve their skills, but also build their social capital (Yosso, 2005) and navigational capacity (Appadurai, 2004; Gale & Parker, 2013; Kilpatrick et al., 2019).

Financial resources weigh heavily in pathway decision making. Harvey and colleagues (2012) and earlier, Polesel (2009), studied rural school completers in Australia who had been accepted to university, but chose to defer their placement. The main factors in their decisions were cost-related issues such as the requirement for income to support themselves and the costs of university study, as well as costs of travel and living away from home. Because of these pressures, Polesel (2009) found that students from higher SES backgrounds were more likely than their peers from low SES backgrounds to take up their deferred university positions the following year. Quin, Stone, and Trinidad (2017) also found that cost was one of the main reasons that regional higher achieving students in New South Wales were transitioning to university at lower rates than students in metropolitan areas.

Further illustrating the complex array of factors affecting students' decisions, Gulczyńska (2019) identifies physical structural factors within school buildings as affecting pathway decisions of disadvantaged students in Poland. This study documents what the paper terms “spatially embedded discriminatory practices” (p. 413) and shows how the organisation of a school's spaces can affect students' actions and decision making. For example, Gulczyńska (2019) describes how the waiting area of a school social worker's office had a stigmatising effect on students due to long wait times and reading options limited to a message board with notices for children of alcoholics and other ‘families with problems’. The author argues that this environment contributes to shaping students' identities and thus, affects their career and study decisions.

### *Deciding to 'stay or go'*

Rönnlund et al. (2018) explored how RRR students in Sweden choose between vocational and academic pathways and found that complex interactions between structural factors and individual dispositions affected these choices. In terms of structural factors, students' choices reflected the local labour markets with students choosing academic pathways in towns where the local labour market was dominated by ‘middle-class’ jobs (municipal

administration, small businesses) and many people in the towns had higher education degrees. Likewise, in towns where vocational jobs were more abundant, students tended to choose vocational pathways and where there was strong gender division in the labour market, students' choices reflected this. In addition to structural factors, Rönnlund et al. (2018) assert that an individual's outlook (anxious, confident, etc.) and cultural capital affect their choices. Students with more cultural capital are better able to make choices that may not reflect the local labour market, highlighting the role of communities and key influencers discussed above.

Factors of rurality can impact on awareness of possibilities as well as on actual or perceived ability to realise educational aspiration (Woodroffe et al., 2017) and the perception of the attainability of higher education (James, 2001; Kilpatrick et al., 2019; Robinson, 2012). Often, young people's pathway decisions include making a choice between staying in their familiar local community with limited options or moving away to a new community in order to widen possibilities. While some young people embrace the opportunity to learn in order to leave their rural place and experience the wider world (Corbett, 2007), these young people are in the minority as evidenced by the relatively low higher education participation on the part of rural youth (Quin et al., 2017; Woodroffe et al., 2017).

Pedersen and Gram (2018) studied pathway decision making by rural youth in Denmark. They explored the relationships between academically-oriented young people and their local rural places. Their findings show that the young people had conflicting feelings of attachment, pride, detachment and entrapment and that this affected their future migration intentions. Considerable stress is placed on young people as they decide whether to stay home with their families and friends or move away for educational purposes. A sense of place and identity construction should not be underestimated when developing policies and programs to support pathway decision making (Pedersen & Gram, 2018).

Young people can in fact be discouraged from choosing an 'unimagined' educational pathway or career that is different from their family's (Woodroffe et al., 2017, p. 160) or that is likely to lead to a job and life away from their home (Mills & Gale, 2007). Community norms, values and attitudes can work with family norms and values and serve to either reinforce or deter aspirations for further education, training and career aspiration outside their rural communities (Haas & Nachtigal, 1998). While families and communities can positively sway students' decisions, it is important to acknowledge that they can negatively influence decisions as well.

### *Geopolitical factors*

Benwell (2019) points out that it is important to remember that young people are making decisions about their futures alongside much larger geopolitical events. Larger geopolitical factors affect young people's sense of security (Ansell, Hajdu, van Blerk, & Robson, 2019; Benwell, 2019; Botterill, Hopkins, & Sanghera, 2019) and belonging (Yarker, 2019) and thus, contribute to shaping their lives (Hopkins, Hörschelmann, Benwell, & Studemeyer, 2019). Ansell et al. (2019) assert that (in)security is an important element that shapes young people's orientation towards the future. They focus on young people in Lesotho and Malawi who have faced food and health security issues. The authors argue that policy makers must consider security at the scale of the body in addition to a global scale. Fear and uncertainty complicate young people's outlook to the future and affects the decisions they make about their future including chosen livelihoods and access to education. In a similar vein, Benwell (2019) focused on the Falkland Islands, an area that has had its status and sovereignty disputed, creating uncertainty for the people who live there. In this case, young people are taught allegiance to the UK and thus, choose to continue their education in the UK after the age of 16.

Most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic is a geopolitical factor that is affecting pathway decisions, with the ultimate impact of the pandemic still emerging. While recent research (Agasisti & Soncin, 2020; Le, 2020; Perrotta, 2020; Schalkwyk, 2020) has addressed various aspects of impacts to higher education, at the time of writing few studies have addressed in depth the pandemic's impact on RRR students and their pathway decisions.

## Conclusion

Many of the factors that have been found to influence RRR students' education and career pathway decisions are related to the communities in which they live. Some are related to distance and isolation, including limited exposure to higher education and its benefits and restricted employment opportunities, which hinder ability to imagine a different future outside the community. As well as acting independently, distance and isolation can interact with attachment to place and community and financial capacity to limit choice.

Importantly for designing interventions to inform student choice and improve their decision making, many factors which influence students' education and career pathway decisions are related to the people with whom they interact. The literature reviewed above strongly suggests that the capacity of RRR families, teachers, employers and other community members to provide relevant up to date information about the realities of a wide range of careers and education pathways impacts on student pathway choice. These RRR key influencers need sufficient information and confidence to support students as they form aspirations, and knowledge of available resources to support students as they develop and apply navigational capacity (Appadurai, 2004; Gale & Parker, 2013; Kilpatrick et al., 2019) to move from aspiration to participation in their chosen education and career pathways.

More research is required on the role that communities play in shaping aspirations according to Fray and colleagues (2020). They note a lack of attention to detail when identifying the nuanced differences between communities and that specific location-based factors are often overlooked in research. This research attempts to fill this gap. It explicitly does not focus on students themselves, instead taking a whole of community approach to upskilling and equipping RRR key influencers with information, resources and confidence to support education and career pathway choice by students of all ages.

## Chapter 3 Project design and approach

This chapter outlines the project methodology, including the research design, activities undertaken by stage, and the methods that were used to gather and analyse data to address the research questions.

### Community based participatory research

This project was informed by CBPR. Used predominantly in health research (Leavy, 2017), CBPR is situated within the methodological research tradition of Participatory Action Research (PAR) which aims to “combine research, education and action in one endeavour” (Liamputtong, 2020, p. 205). CBPR is best described as a partnership approach to research (Israel et al., 1998; Israel, Schulz & Parker, 2012). It is characterised by the involvement of different stakeholders such as community members, industry or organisational representatives, researchers, policy makers or service providers in the research process. CBPR methodology seeks to build partnerships between researchers and local communities which foster a better understanding of existing needs and community based influences to improve outcomes that become community driven (Blumenthal et al., 2013).

CBPR is underpinned by the sharing of resources, decision making and collaboration – but most importantly, situates all project stakeholders, particularly those community members with the lived experience of the phenomena under study, as the experts. In this project, employing CBPR methodology allowed the researchers to move beyond positivist research traditions towards an educational and social research approach that actively created and fostered “dialogue and collaboration” (Burke, 2013, p. 82) through the involvement of the community sites and local key influencers of education and career choices. The case study communities were partners whose members contributed to and had a shared interest in, the direction, findings, and outcomes of the research (Woodroffe et al., forthcoming).

CBPR was employed in the selection, trial and evaluation of whole community, place-based, coordinated career education interventions which targeted key influencers in three RRR case study sites in two Australian states. Place-based approaches acknowledge that geographical context matters, where context is understood as social, cultural, and institutional characteristics. Interventions adopting a place-based approach focus on the issue of knowledge, who knows what to do where and when (Barca, McCann, & Rodríguez-Pose, 2012). The researchers and communities worked together to select and/or modify and deliver career education interventions for key influencers. Community involvement aimed to ensure local issues were understood and considered in the selection and delivery of interventions, and to optimise key influencer participation in the selected interventions.

### Research design

*“There are times we wish to know not how many or how well, but simply how”  
(Shulman, 1988, p. 7).*

The project addressed the key research question:

- How can a whole of community approach best equip key influencers to inform and support low SES RRR student higher education participation?

There were two research sub-questions:

- How might a whole of community approach work effectively?
- How can key influencers in RRR areas best be informed and supported?

Given the CBPR methodology, and its requirement to involve community in selection/modification of interventions, their delivery and evaluation, the research design

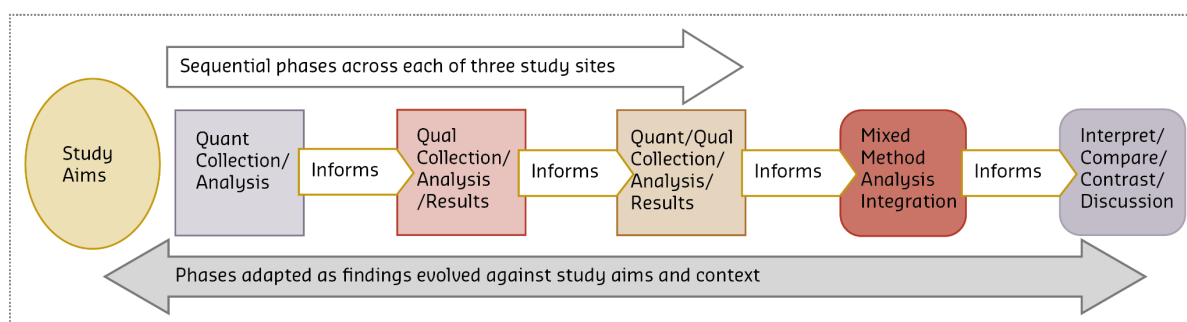
needed to be flexible, with ongoing built-in evaluation so modifications could be made as the project progressed. There were six phases that guided the project (Figure 2 below).

Research evaluation was on two levels (1) overall, to answer the key research question and sub-questions, and (2) consistent with CBPR, for phases 3, 4 and 5 to inform the delivery of subsequent project phases.

### Mixed method multi-phase design

Given the scope of the study and its multiple sites, a mixed method, multi-phase, triangulation design (Creswell, Plano Clark, et al., 2003) was chosen. This design aims “to obtain different but complementary data on the same topic” (Morse, 1991, p. 122), often including quantitative and qualitative data collection (Johnson & Christensen, 2017). One of the lesser-known variants of triangulation design referred to as multilevel research (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998, p.48) was adapted. In this approach, different quantitative and qualitative methods were used across the study sites. A sequential multiphase design was embedded, where different data collection methods were employed at different phases (surveys, individual and group interviews, focus groups, community meetings) to evaluate the interventions as well as the community itself as a source of influence on career education and partnerships from the perspective of community stakeholders. Figure 1 below shows the research design. Appendix L provides details of data collection methods and number of evaluation participants by community.

Findings from each phase across sites were first analysed individually and a summary of themes and results prepared. Findings from all sites were then analysed and merged into one integrated interpretation which informed the project’s overall findings (see Chapter 4).



**Figure 1. Project research design**

Ethics approvals were obtained from the Tasmania Social Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee (H0018302) and the University of Wollongong Social Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee (2019401).

## Project phases

The project was made up of six key phases as shown below, each stage informed the next with process evaluation (e.g. researchers' reflections and field notes,) involved in that phase.

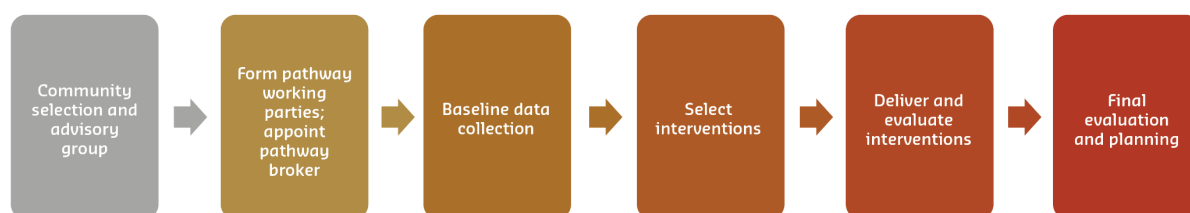


Figure 2. Project phases

### Phase 1: selection of community sites/establishment of project advisory group

Three Australian rural communities in two states were selected as project case study sites. Selection of these communities was based on: (1) consultation with the relevant state department of education, schools, local government, Regional Development Australia Committees, neighbourhood houses, libraries, local business groups and industry stakeholders, and (2) significant interest shown by local government and community stakeholders in education and career pathways/partnerships. The original intention was to select rural towns with populations of between 2,000-5,000, however during the selection process it became apparent that the regions surrounding rural service-centre towns are an integral part of the rural community to which the town belongs. In addition, the concept of rurality is relative (Bæck, 2015). As such, the case study rural regional communities had populations between 6,000 and 38,000.

An overall project advisory group was established that included state education departments, university partner outreach units and major stakeholders such as Regional Australia Institute and industry representatives from, for example, Dairy Australia. This group was used as a guide and check for the project as it progressed.

### Phase 2: establishment of working parties/appointment of pathway brokers

Education and career pathway working parties, known as pathway working parties were established in each community between October and December 2019. Organisations that had assisted in the site selection process were invited to join the working party and/or nominate others active in education and career sectors to be members, utilising a snowball recruitment technique whereby members were asked to invite others to fill perceived gaps in the working parties' expertise and networks (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

The working parties consisted of between 11 and 19 members, and included representatives nominated by schools and other education providers, parents and families, employers/industry, university outreach, and other organisations such as neighbourhood houses, Rotary International and public libraries. Many working party members held multiple roles within the community. Membership of each of the three case study site working parties is described in Chapter 4.

Terms of reference were developed for each pathway working party based on consultation with the community and the project advisory group. These included:

- assisting with the identification of local key influencers of student education and career pathway choice
- providing input into the information and support needs of key influencers
- assisting with the selection and/or modification of 1-2 program interventions aligned with local community needs

- providing general support of and input into the program implementation and evaluation
- participating in the evaluation of the project.

Each community was resourced with a part-time locally-based pathway broker. Support of local government was sought to assist with recruitment. Local government in Rural Community 2 partnered with the researchers to employ the pathway broker to work on this project alongside a council employment project. In Rural Community 3, two local university campus staff took on the pathway broker role. In Rural Community 1 the pathway broker was employed by the university, though the university did not have a presence in the community. The pathway brokers were familiar with the local community context and were responsible for coordinating the project within their community. Each community was also resourced with a small budget to be used for interventions, for example to purchase training, develop resources and/or put on events.

Evaluation was built into the structure of the working party meetings. Notes from these meetings including researcher reflections and field notes which assisted in informing the choice of evaluation techniques. Within the CBPR framework, working party meetings assisted in legitimising decisions and in guiding both the activities in the project and the evaluation, for example, through mapping of community needs, identification of existing programs situated in the community and identification of potential opportunities for intervention (gaps). It was anticipated that working party members' understanding of local context increased the likelihood of interventions being successful (Israel, Schulz, Parker, & Becker, 1998).

A template to assist other communities to identify key influencers was developed (see Appendix A).

### **Phase 3: collection of baseline community data**

The first working party meetings in each community were organised between October and December 2019. The meetings served to capture 'baseline' evaluation research data about the community which would assist in informing the selection of career and education pathway interventions. Community data related to demographics, employment and skills, local industry profile and projected skill needs, future education and local employment opportunities, gathered through the desktop research, were presented to the working parties (see Appendix B for a template for community data sources). The working parties reflected on the data, adding relevant information about existing programs and information sources that could inform key influencers about education and career pathways, and provided advice about community understandings and culture (Sporn, 1996) that should be considered in designing interventions to fill gaps. This was an essential part of the CBPR methodology, in that the working parties were able to provide the expertise and guidance to the researchers, through the provision of local information and experience around what might work or not in their own community context.

In addition, a focus group style session gathered baseline data about working party members' knowledge of career and education pathways and their influencing roles within the community (see Appendix B for baseline interview questions and Appendix L for numbers of participants). Once again, community members provided expert insight and knowledge into the community, where the researchers were able to share information and ask questions about community context so that a shared understanding of the needs, priorities and strengths of the community could be used in selecting and implementing interventions.

### **Phase 4: selection of interventions**

The second working party meetings, held approximately one month after the first meetings, discussed a suite of interventions that had been found to be successful in informing and

influencing key influencers of education and career pathway choices in similar community contexts (see Appendix D). Researchers and working party members collaboratively identified one or two interventions that would fit each community's context and need, with interventions modified to fit community requirements. Chosen interventions are identified in each case study.

### **Phase 5: delivery and evaluation of interventions**

The selected interventions in each community were delivered and evaluated between March and November 2020. They were identified, delivered and evaluated as described in Chapter 4 and Appendix D. COVID-19 disrupted planned delivery of all interventions, with some not going ahead as planned; while others were modified in consultation with working parties to reflect the need for a more flexible, online approach. Consistent with our mixed method triangulation design, we used a variety of research evaluation methods including face to face and phone interviews, pre and post intervention surveys, community meetings and field notes to inform our evaluation (see Appendix L). Consistent with CBPR, pathway brokers and working parties had input into the design and content of data collection tools used to evaluate interventions. Data collection was flexible across study sites, responding to the impacts of COVID-19.

### **Phase 6: additional data collection, analysis and final evaluation**

Final evaluation interviews and focus groups were conducted as interventions concluded in each site from August 2020 to February 2021. Interviews and focus groups were conducted in person when possible and via Zoom when in person interviews were not possible, and audio recorded. Working parties met and reflected on relevant evaluation data provided by the researchers. The focus group style session gathered further evaluation data - members' reflections of what worked, what could have been done differently, match with communities' needs, and what should and could be continued in their community. Interviews with pathway brokers and working party members unable to attend the working party meeting completed the evaluation data collection.

In addition, further interviews were conducted with key project stakeholders to further reflect on education and career partnerships and future directions, as well as the efficacy of CBPR as a research partnership approach.

A sequential iterative approach was used for data analysis across sites. Once data collection for a phase or intervention was completed, preliminary analysis was conducted to inform the project and subsequent evaluation data collection (e.g. pre- and post-intervention surveys were administered to participants before interviews were conducted to optimise relevance of questions).

Quantitative data analysis used Excel. Interviews and focus groups were transcribed. Transcripts were sent for member checking where requested. Transcripts and reflection notes of pathway brokers and researchers were analysed using an interpretive approach and inductive thematic coding (Bhattacharya, 2008; Sandberg, 2005; Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012) to identify themes in view of the key research question and sub-questions:

- How can a whole of community approach best equip key influencers to inform and support low SES RRR student higher education participation?
- How might a whole of community approach work effectively?
- How can key influencers in RRR areas best be informed and supported?

While data analysis was led by the researchers, a participant confirmatory approach was used to inform findings (Curry & Nunez-Smith, 2014; Woodroffe et al., forthcoming). This included discussing findings with pathways brokers and at final working party meetings, held

in the three communities between August and December 2020, when almost all interventions were completed.

### **Phase 7: final community meetings and future directions**

Once overall findings from the project were discussed and finalised, joint working party - community meetings were held to present project findings, celebrate the achievements of those involved in each community and discuss community plans for continuing education career pathway learning opportunities for key influencers.

## Chapter 4 Findings

This chapter presents the findings from implementation and evaluation of a model to build community capacity to support education and career pathway decisions of school students and adults in three RRR communities. The chapter is divided into two sections: The first presents findings for each of the three case study rural communities under the following headings:

- Community demographics and characteristics.
- Pathway working party and pathway broker.
- Intervention/s.
- Case study findings and brief discussion.

Evaluation data collection was built into the structure of the first and third working party meetings, as described in Chapter 3 and Appendix L. The second section looks across the cases to distil cross case findings.

### Rural Community 1 case study

#### Community demographics and characteristics

Rural Community 1 is a rural local government area with a mix of rural-residential and holiday dwellings. It is growing rapidly in response to new tourism infrastructure. It includes two major service centres and two smaller towns and is located between 200 and 250 kms from the state's capital city (.idcommunity 2020). The nearest university campus is over 100 km away. Only a limited range of VET courses and a restricted range of other subjects are available in the community to post-Year 10 students.

**Table 2. Rural Community 1 demographics and characteristics**

| DEMOGRAPHICS                                                         |                                                                                               |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Population                                                           | Approximately 6,000                                                                           |
| Identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander                 | Approximately 4%, State 4.6%                                                                  |
| Born in Australia                                                    | Approximately 90%, State 80.7%                                                                |
| Aged over 65                                                         | Approximately 40%, State 19%                                                                  |
| Major Industries by employment                                       | Agriculture, forestry and fishing; health care and social assistance; retail; mining; tourism |
| Unemployment rate at project commencement, March 2019                | Approximately 9.5%, State 6.1%                                                                |
| Youth unemployment (aged 15-24)                                      | Approximately 15%, State 15.7%                                                                |
| Index of Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage (IRSD)                 | Between 890 and 900                                                                           |
| Education Attainment                                                 |                                                                                               |
| Bachelor Degree                                                      | Approximately 10.5%, State 16.2%                                                              |
| Year 12 completion                                                   | Approximately 28.5%, State 38.3%                                                              |
| Education Facilities                                                 |                                                                                               |
| Trade Training Centre (TTC)                                          | 1                                                                                             |
| Combined primary and secondary schools, termed District High Schools | 2                                                                                             |

(Source: .idcommunity 2020)

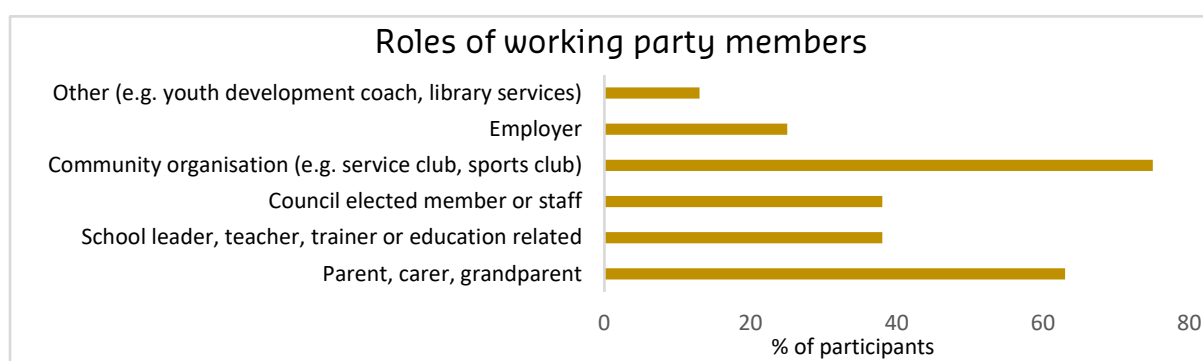
## Pathway working party and pathway broker

The Rural Community 1 working party was recruited from local education, government, industry and community organisations as described in Chapter 3. It consisted of 10 members. The working party met face to face four times over a period of 17 months. The fourth meeting was open to members of the wider community. Members also received email correspondence from project staff providing updates and were invited to provide additional feedback and input into intervention design and implementation. Meetings covered:

- project overview and purpose, discussion of community demographics and industry characteristics, feedback from members on education and career pathway opportunities and barriers
- potential interventions presented, discussed, and interventions selected
- feedback on delivered interventions/programs
- dissemination of project findings and discussion of progress.

Evaluation data collection was built into the structure of the first and third working party meetings, as described in Chapter 3. Eight members completed surveys at the start of the project, and four at the third, post-intervention delivery meeting. Eleven members participated in a group or individual interview at the start of the project, and five did so at or after the third meeting. This section draws on these data.

As shown in Figure 3, the working party members were parents, representatives of local high schools, the trade training centre, local government, employers/industries (agriculture, aquaculture and tourism) and community organisations such as neighbourhood houses and Rotary. Many working party members had overlapping roles. For example, a working party member who was a representative of the local government was also a parent, the coordinator of learner driver mentor program and a sport's coach in the community. Another member who was a representative of a community organisation was also chair of a school association.



**Figure 3. Roles of Rural Community 1 working party members (n=8)**

In their multiple overlapping roles, working party members connected with a range of groups within their community. They had conversations about education and career pathway with their own children, grandchildren, young relatives; friends; employees; students; unemployed people and other adults. They were well positioned to be key influencers themselves.

At the start of the project, working party members collectively reported that they had a good understanding of local context, barriers and job opportunities in their community regarding education and career pathways, with all but one saying they had 'some' or 'quite a lot of' knowledge of education and career pathways at the start of the project. They identified barriers in their community in relation to careers and further education: lack of ambition towards higher education, disengagement, too much emphasis on higher education at the expense of VET pathways and not getting the education required to match future job needs.

### *Working party expectations*

Expectations identified at the first meeting were that the project would build community connections and networks, including between the school and community; engage disengaged parents and children; increase community understanding of post-year 10 education and career pathways, including for careers in local industries; and support local place-based opportunities for both education and careers for students as well as key influencers.

### *Pathway broker*

The working party was consulted about identifying and employing a part-time, locally based pathway broker to assist with delivery and promotion of interventions in the community. It was agreed that the position be advertised locally, and that the pathway broker be employed by the university. The pathway broker commenced shortly before the second working party meeting.

### **Interventions**

The working party identified parents and families as the main influencers of local students' education and career pathway choices; and therefore parents and families were seen as important to target:

*Parent education is key to getting better results in terms of linking high school students with better options for tertiary education and career pathways that are meaningful to them. (working party member)*

Teachers/VET providers, employers/industries, job service agencies and community organisations (e.g. neighbourhood houses, public libraries) were identified as other important local influencers. The relatively high overall unemployment rate in the local government area suggested that key influencers of adults' pathway choices should be targeted in addition to influencers of school student choice.

There was general agreement among the working party members that parental engagement, industry engagement and the connections between local industries and education and training systems were the main areas which should be addressed by the project. The working party selected two interventions to trial in their community: *Parents Matter* and *Warm Connections* (see Appendix D). Both programs were previously trialled and found successful in similar rural communities in the state (Kilpatrick et al., 2020, 2019).

The *Parents Matter* program acknowledges the influence that parents have on a child's education and career pathway and aims to address the gap between parental aspirations for their children and parental knowledge about the options that are available. The program is rolled out in three stages: Stage one involves recruiting volunteer parents and carers (termed 'lead parents') to lead and facilitate community-based learning around future growth industries in the community and education pathways to careers in these industries. Stage two sees the lead parents complete training in disseminating the information. In Stage three, they facilitate increased parental understanding of post-year 10 educational and career options around the community (Kilpatrick et al., 2020). *Parents Matter* was modified for this project to include other key influencer community members in addition to parents as listed above.

The *Warm Connections* program provides access to existing available information resources about post-school education, such as university course guides and training options, for the local library, neighbourhood house and other community organisations. It delivers training, known as *Learning First Aid*, to staff and volunteers working in community facilities such as public libraries, neighbourhood houses and online access centres, to assist rural adults to

make decisions about undertaking further and higher education and training (Douglas, Kilpatrick, Katersky Barnes, Alderson & Flittner, 2020).

### ***Parents Matter***

The project team recruited five 'lead parents' from the community with the assistance of the pathway broker, local advertisements, personal networks of the working party members, as well as community organisations. All but one were parents of current school students.

Towards the end of the project, interviewed lead parents were asked about their reasons for participating in the *Parents Matter* program. Responses were similar and included feeling passionate about school/education; being interested in learning on behalf of their own children; wanting improved information; and feeling that they were a good fit for the skill set required and felt they had something to offer to the program. Lead parents commented:

*[I am] very interested in education and I know the challenges that are faced by the school and others in this community with respect to education.*

*Firstly, I was interested for my own child as well, and I didn't feel there was enough information of what was happening in the area, when they get to that Grade 11, 12 age. ... And I didn't understand about the VET subjects. I didn't know what the options were.*

*... this school is not geared towards getting kids university ready... Part of the reason that myself and some other people mentor at the school is to try and get their level of understanding in maths and English up closer to where it needs to be. But I think there are opportunities for online education in the more academic studies.*

*When I was part of the school association, I guess we were always looking for different ways to help out the kids, to do different things within the school. This seemed like a good fit for my skill set, as well as having a bit of inside knowledge with school at the time was kind of helpful. So, there were a combination of factors in terms of wanting to be able to do something different, something positive, but also being, feeling like I had something to offer.*

### ***Lead parent training***

The researchers' university subcontracted with a business organisation with experience in delivering training programs in Rural Community 1. to deliver three VET-accredited units from the *National Business Services Training Package* (see <https://training.gov.au/training/details/bsb>) to the lead parent group. The units included content on organising meetings/events, communicating, and working safely with others. The trainer was highly experienced and familiar with the local community.

Although the initial plan was to deliver four face-to-face training sessions (at six hours each), restrictions associated with COVID-19 made face to face meetings impossible. The lead parents and trainer came up with an alternative online course plan. This was the first experience of online learning and training for many lead parents, as well as the trainer. However, the parents quickly engaged with the training, learning to use Zoom to access it. Only one parent did not have access to a computer and internet but participated in training at another member's home, allowable under state COVID-19 restrictions at the time.

Most of the lead parent volunteers reported greater flexibility in their availability to participate in online training and project-related work and meetings compared to face-to-face. For instance, they could participate in online training while supporting their children in learning at home. Interviews showed that some parents were working from home; others did not have a job. The online training also saved travel time, with some lead parents originally

having to travel over 40kms to attend face-to-face training. The final session was able to be held face-to-face. One lead parent stepped down after the first training and another lead parent dropped out once COVID restrictions eased and her business became busy. She stepped back in to help at the Careers Expo in October.

As part of their intervention training, lead parents first analysed community needs. They conducted desktop research to understand post-Year 10 education and career opportunities available locally and across the state. They invited the Trade Training Centre (TTC) manager to one of their training sessions and discussed courses TTC was offering and had potential to offer. They interviewed some parents and students to identify community information needs.

When asked during interviews about what worked well in terms of lead parent training, most lead parents stated that the live online sessions, although an unplanned COVID-19 adjustment, provided flexibility to participate. They qualified that statement saying that face-to-face sessions may have assisted with communication and project planning/management.

*We did one face-to-face session and that's always my preference. But having come from a business background and working for a multinational company, I'd been doing Zoom type meetings for years. So, for me, it's kind of second nature, even if I don't like them all that much.*

*Having the training through Zoom, it made it harder to connect with the other participants doing the Parents Matter course, and to get to know them. And then when we had to start organising what are we going to do ... that was quite difficult.*

*So, I did all of mine either online or through video content, which wasn't a problem for me. In some ways, that worked better, because I could fit that in around all of my other demands.*

*When COVID, like it was, I could easily do all the training because I was at home with my own child while she was at, home, schooling.*

After their preliminary explorations, the lead parent group agreed that after completing Year 10 many students wanted to move out of this rural area mainly because they and their parents were not aware of further study options available within the community. Addressing this lack of awareness was identified as a main issue the lead parents wanted to address. The group also identified a disconnection between the community's understanding of what the TTC offers and what it has potential to offer. They determined that their main aim was to optimise the retention of post-Year 10 students in the community. They agreed to develop resources and information on post-Year 10 education and career options tailored for the specific needs of their community.

### *Videos and Careers Expo*

The lead parent group decided to produce videos about local careers and conduct a Careers Expo. They interviewed a dozen people from local industries, small businesses and education providers and developed videos focusing on five key areas: advice for school leavers, post-Year 10 options, career pathways, local careers and choices. The *Parents Matter* videos were published on a YouTube channel and launched at the Careers Expo. They have also been uploaded by the local council, neighbourhood house, online access centre, and the two district high schools for public viewing on their websites and Facebook pages.

The Careers Expo was organised for late October at the TTC. The date was later than originally planned because of COVID-19 restrictions and therefore clashed with other community events and activities, many also postponed because of COVID-19. The videos

were displayed on a large digital screen in the same area as the light refreshments provided for those who attended. In total 36 people participated in the Careers Expo including parents, school leaders/teachers, community clubs and organisations, local employers and students.

Twenty-seven Careers Expo participants completed evaluation surveys as they left the event. Most heard about the event through word of mouth or via the Facebook page. Demographic data showed most had multiple roles in the community that gave them opportunities to be key influencers and have conversations with others about education and career pathways.

After attending, most who completed the survey agreed that the Careers Expo had improved their knowledge and confidence to act as key influencers (Table 3).

Reflection notes from the pathway broker and researchers indicated they observed that the education providers, employment service organisations and industry representatives who had displays at the Expo, engaged in discussion with each other, which they reported to be highly useful. Many said they had made new connections, which they planned to follow up after the expo.

**Table 3. Careers Expo attendee responses**

| THE CAREERS EXPO:<br>(N=27)                                                                                             | % AGREEING |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|
| Provided me with improved knowledge about the world of work                                                             | 92%        |
| Provided me with improved knowledge of career options after school                                                      | 96%        |
| Provided me with improved knowledge of education pathways after grade 10                                                | 92%        |
| Gave me more confidence about speaking to my children/employees/students/others about career options after school       | 96%        |
| Gave me more confidence about speaking to my children/employees/students/others about education pathways after grade 10 | 92%        |

### *How Parents Matter could be improved for Rural Community 1*

In interviews, some lead parents reported a lack of clear expectations in terms of time commitment and their role. *Parents Matter* was designed to appeal to people wanting to gain some new qualifications while learning about education and career pathways and helping others in their community to do the same. Some of the lead parents reported that they were not interested in formal recognition of the VET units of competence, which reduced their incentive to volunteer the time that training and event organisation demanded.

*We were told we'll do three events at the start. So, that was going to be a careers expo, and then maybe just a visit to Launceston. And so, I guess, it seemed quite manageable at the start. And then, we had to shift to digital. And then we all thought we were putting in so much work to that... I guess that comes back to getting as many people as you can involved, because the more people you have, then the easier it is to divvy up the workload. But small communities, that's not always possible .... we muddled through that and we all got on with it... a little bit of, perhaps, tension between volunteers and the paid employee from uni [the pathway broker] ... just in terms of who was doing what kind of work.*

*I don't think ... expectations were set correctly at the outset. So, I think [the] view was that one of the lead parents would pick up and run the project, if you like. I don't think that was ever going to happen.*

Lead parents and stakeholders offered suggestions as to how *Parents Matter* could be improved to better serve the community. They suggested that the conversation about career pathways should start earlier as Year 6 is a time for big pathway decisions for country families, with families deciding whether or not to send their children to boarding schools, and so parents of primary school age children should also have been targeted.

*And I think one of the things about some of the kids down here is that they make some really mature decisions really quite early on. They don't just automatically seamlessly flow into Year 11. It has to be a really conscious choice for them.*  
(Stakeholder)

*So, all farming children have to make that decision as to where they're going to go and what they're going to do, because primary school finishes and then you have to make that decision.* (Lead parent)

Finally, both lead parents and a stakeholder suggested that the local council should play a larger role in facilitating the understanding of career pathway options for students.

*The council were here. But they didn't really put in very much... they need to be the people who are advertising it, not the school. ...If they want to build the community and build the job avenues in this community, then they need to back it.* (Stakeholder)

### ***Warm Connections***

The *Warm Connections* program commenced in mid-February 2020 with a trip to the nearest city by the pathway broker to collect display stands, pamphlets, brochures and course guides from a university and TAFE, and to meet with the enrolment staff and tour the TAFE campus. In April 2020, information stands, and a digital display were set up in two neighbourhood houses and a public library, and in the online access centre, respectively. The stands displayed course guides, brochures and booklets about VET and higher education pathways. In addition, the pathway broker provided *Learning First Aid Training* in late 2020 and early 2021 to 26 volunteers of neighbourhood houses, public library and the online access centre.

To assist in evaluating the intervention, tick sheets were provided to staff in the sites with the request that volunteers at the sites record public engagement in conversation and with the information displays. However, all the centres closed their doors in late-March 2020 following the onset of COVID-19. Online access centres were re-opened to limited numbers in June and neighbourhood houses did not re-open to the public until November 2020 though they were still operating community support online. The *Learning First Aid* training was converted from a training booklet to a Power Point presentation for cases where face-to-face interaction was not possible.

Evaluation data for *Warm Connections* was gathered in late December 2020 through an interview with a staff member of a participating organisation and observation/reflection notes from the pathway broker. Data from evaluation tick sheet records is still being collected at the time of analysis and will be collated in late-2021.

The interviewed staff member noted the benefits of providing information and skills about education and career pathways to staff and volunteers in central community 'hubs' where people could seek a variety of support services. When an individual comes in for one type of support, they may realise that there are services available that they could use, such as education or training.

*We're quite an active community centre and we provide a lot of resources to communities. So, for instance, oftentimes if somebody comes in looking for a computer, a [specific type of] loan, ... So, quite often, those conversations lead*

*to really big and fruitful things. So, in the past, somebody had called in who wanted to buy a computer. And so, just in talking, going through the application form, you strike up a conversation and you discover their interests and one I'm thinking of last year was a guy that was really tech savvy, self-learned. And so I asked him had he ever explored the idea of making a career out of it and considering further education .... (Community service staff member)*

## Overall Rural Community 1 findings

### *Whole of community approach*

Industry representatives were very keen to join the working party, and remained engaged, despite some being unable to attend some meetings. In working party meetings, working party members reported participating in the project improved their knowledge of education and career pathways and increased their confidence in speaking with children/employees/students/others about education and career options available after Year 10, when local education options become limited.

The working party, *Parents Matter* lead parents, Careers Expo attendees and *Warm Connections* participants all identified that they were key influencers, having multiple roles in the community and having conversations with children, students, and adults about education and careers pathways through those roles. Most contacted through the evaluation reported increased confidence in holding such conversations as a result of their participation in the project. The project could therefore be regarded as successful in identifying and informing key influencers in this community.

Interviews identified pre-existing community social and political tensions that manifested as a lack of trust, and between community factions. Tensions hindered engagement with the *Parents Matter* training and event organisation and deterred some community members from engaging with the Careers Expo and videos. It is apparent that expectations of the volunteers should have been more clearly established from the beginning of the lead parent recruitment and training process.

Support from the schools in Rural Community 1 was more limited than anticipated. This was partly due to the impact of COVID-19 and the pressure on schools to make major changes and move to online learning. Working party members, lead parents and other stakeholders interviewed all noted that a strong school presence was integral to the effectiveness of any program to inform key influencers of education and career pathway choice. Concern was expressed at the third working party meeting that the schools' priorities were not aligned with local industries' employment needs; the limited choice of subjects offered did not align with the employment needs of industry. Limited school engagement reduced access to information channels that would reach and engage parents and may have constrained the project's ability to reach all community sub-groups.

*It seemed it was pivotal that we had to work through the school to get these things happening. And because the school was, not disengaged, but just so hard to access because, you know, kids weren't there and teachers were either teaching from home or in the classrooms in there. And it was very hard to get hold of anyone or any support from the school at that time. I think that dragged it on a lot longer than it needed to be dragged on. (Pathway broker)*

The role of the local council as a trusted, respected community institution was vital in giving the project credibility in the community. The quality of the working relationship between the pathway broker and council appears to be important in engaging the community and its organisations.

Although the pathway broker worked closely with the council, working party and community, the project was driven by the university throughout its duration. While the intention of the project was to move the weight of ownership and leadership from university to community, project design was flexible enough to provide an on the ground local pathway broker who was able to work closely with the university to drive the project.

The final combined working party and community meeting was attended by 21 people from council, industry, university, employment agency, community groups and the Commonwealth Government *Local Jobs Program*. Schools were represented only by the TTC. At the meeting, there was discussion about how to take lessons from the project forward. There was some evidence that the community was prepared to take some ownership of the education and careers space. A recently established local employment agency agreed to apply for funding to appoint a school-community *Employment Connector*, business-people in attendance agreed to look at revitalising the local chamber of commerce so business could present a united voice about education and training for local jobs, and *Local Jobs Program* representatives volunteered to work with them on a plan to do so. Community members report that there have subsequently been some changes at the chamber of commerce.

## Implications

While the project work in Rural Community 1 was successful in providing information to key influencers, and those who engaged with the project reported their participation in the project increased their knowledge and confidence in supporting education and career pathway decisions, it was apparent that the community needed some support to work collaboratively across all sectors. Rural Community 1 has the potential to build capacity in this area; this project should be a step on that journey. Those working with communities on whole of community approaches to education and career pathway information and advice should be mindful of community orientation and community maturity to work together across community sectors, and to engage with external parties, such as universities (Kilpatrick, Auckland, Johns & Whelan, 2008; Sporn, 1996).

## Rural Community 2 case study

### Community demographics and characteristics

Rural Community 2 is a semi-rural local government area located between 40 and 95 km from the state capital. It includes one main service centre, and three smaller towns. There is limited post-Year 10 schooling. The nearest university campus is located in the state capital. This community differs from the other two communities in that the proportion of people who have moved into the community is higher than its state average.

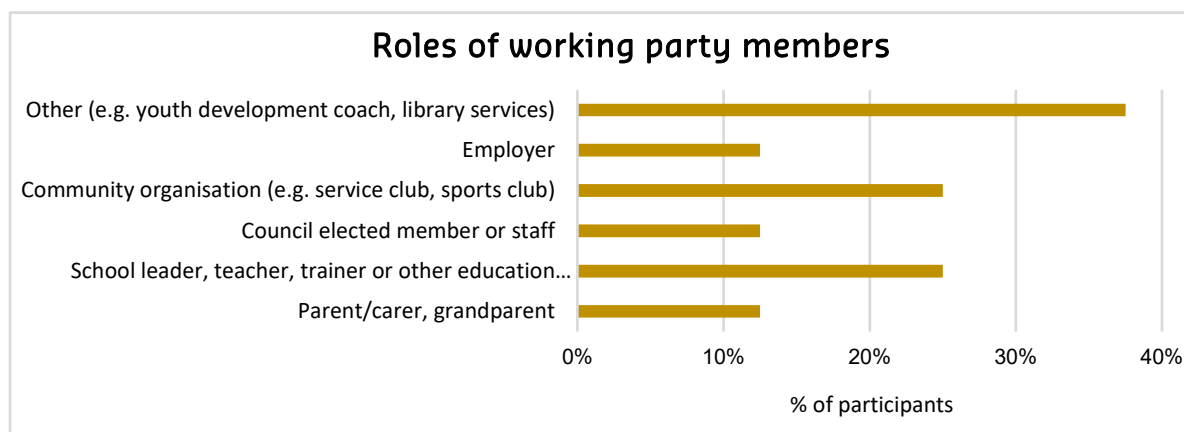
**Table 4. Rural Community 2 demographics and characteristics**

| DEMOGRAPHICS                                                         |                                                                                            |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Population                                                           | Approximately 17,500                                                                       |
| Identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander                 | Approximately 9%, State 4.6%                                                               |
| Born in Australia                                                    | Approximately 75%, State 80.7%                                                             |
| Aged over 65                                                         | Approximately 20%, State 19.5%                                                             |
| Major Industries by employment                                       | Agriculture, forestry and fishing; health care and social assistance; construction; retail |
| Unemployment rate at project commencement, March 2019                | Approximately 6.5%, State 6.1%                                                             |
| Youth unemployment (aged 15-24)                                      | Approximately 15%, State 15.7%                                                             |
| Index of Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage (IRSD)                 | Between 960 and 970                                                                        |
| Education Attainment                                                 |                                                                                            |
| Bachelor Degree                                                      | Approximately 15.5%, State 16.2%                                                           |
| Year 12 completion                                                   | Approximately 38.5%, State 38.3%                                                           |
| Education Facilities                                                 |                                                                                            |
| Trade Training Centre                                                | 1                                                                                          |
| Combined primary and secondary schools, titled District High Schools | 4 (2 government, 2 non-government)                                                         |
| High Schools                                                         | 1                                                                                          |
| Primary Schools                                                      | 6 (5 government, 1 non-government)                                                         |

(Source: .idcommunity 2020; Rural Community 2 Council 2020)

## Pathway working party and pathway broker

The Rural Community 2 working party consisted of 11 members from education, local and Commonwealth government, local industry and community organisations. They had multiple and diverse roles in the community, and, as in Rural Community 1, were well positioned to be key influencers themselves (Figure 4).



**Figure 4. Roles of Rural Community 2 working party members (n=11)**

The Rural Community 2 working party met four times over a period of 18 months. The first three meetings were held as face-to-face meetings at the TTC, the final meeting was held in the youth hub in the main service centre. Working party members also received email correspondence from the university project staff providing written updates about the project and were invited to provide additional feedback and input into the program design. As in Rural Community 1, meetings addressed the following issues:

- project overview and purpose, discussion of community demographics and industry characteristics, feedback from members on education and career pathway opportunities and barriers
- potential interventions presented, discussed, and interventions selected
- feedback on delivered interventions/programs
- dissemination of project findings and discussion of where to next.

Data collected through surveys and interviews at the commencement (8 surveys, 10 interviews) and end (3 surveys, 4 interviews) of the project revealed the working party members had many and diverse connections in their community, across age ranges (children to adults), and social groups (friends, social contacts, employees and employers, unemployed, students). They reported having spoken about careers and educational pathways with a wide variety of people, in both formal and informal circumstances. Most of the working party were very confident of their knowledge of education and career pathways, with only one person saying they had only 'some knowledge' of these.

### *Working party expectations*

Working party members' expectations were gathered at the initial meeting. These could be categorised into two themes: what they might learn as individuals; and what they could do to support other community members to learn more about education and career pathways. They were interested in learning about and building community connections, improving their own understandings of their community and of employment and educational pathways, and then supporting the community to engage in these conversations with others. They also identified the benefit of making connections and building engagement between local industry, local educational institutions and the needs of the community.

### *Pathway broker*

The Rural Community 2 local government was about to employ a part-time project officer to work on an employment related project in the area. The university subcontracted the council to employ the pathway broker and worked with the council to select one person for both part time roles.

### **Interventions**

Rural Community 2 working party described their community as having relatively low aspirations for further education and training. They saw a need to influence parents and agreed that parental engagement would be “better value for money with regards to more long-lasting impact” (Working party member). Like Rural Community 1, the Rural Community 2 working party selected the *Parents Matter* program to address this need (see Rural Community 1 section above for a general description of the program).

In addition, the working party felt that industries such as aged care and aquaculture had many stereotypes attached with regards to employment and roles (e.g. the only jobs were working in small boats in all weathers, or personal care of older people). They believed that any program that engages these industries would be “a real eye opener for participants in breaking down those barriers and myths” (working party member). The Beacon Foundation<sup>1</sup> had offered the Growth Industry Preparation Program (*GrIPP*) for school students in the area. With the assistance of the university researchers, the Beacon Foundation was contracted to modify a one-day program for students to instead target teachers, parents and other adults’ awareness of skills shortages and career opportunities within the local community and around the state.

### ***Parents Matter***

Six lead parents were recruited in Rural Community 2. All were female and all except one had come from outside the state to live in Rural Community 2. Interviews showed that the lead parent volunteers were enthusiastic and motivated to support their community in furthering education and career opportunities for the community. Each lead parent had different strengths and skills with valuable experience in marketing, advertising and education in the group.

Their reasons for volunteering to be lead parents were similar and included being passionate about education and young people having the tendency to volunteer within their communities already and looking to network/connect with others in community. For example:

*I’m very much interested in the transition from school to work, and/or further education. Always have been.*

*I recently moved to [State] ... And I’ve got two children in primary school ... one’s approaching high school. And I was really keen to find out more myself about the whole process of their career pathway planning for going into high school ... because the system’s different ... And I had a lot of skills to offer the program ... I’m just a passionate parent.*

*Because I’m a mum, I’m very interested in education ... I’m also a new member of the community. So, I found it was a good opportunity [for] networking, to do networking. And I always volunteer in my community.*

*I do a lot of community things, generally, and I feel pretty passionately about good outcomes for our youth. So, connected with two things.*

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<sup>1</sup> A national not-for-profit organisation providing programs connecting schools and industry <https://beaconfoundation.org.au/>

### *Lead parent training*

The university subcontracted with the same business organisation as for Rural Community 1 to deliver the three accredited VET units from the Business Services Package. The organisation and trainer had also previously delivered training in Rural Community 2. Timing and COVID-19 meant that all training was online. The training was well received by the lead parents, as all had the educational backgrounds and experience to follow the content and adapt to the online training. For these lead parents, the motivation to commit to the *Parents Matter* program was not in obtaining the accredited training from the three VET units, but to work on a community project. The training gave them the opportunity to develop and deliver a community project. The team used a project management system (Trello) to establish a project plan and a collaborative workflow.

Lead parents identified the major barrier to accessing education and career pathways in Rural Community 2 as long-held cultural beliefs in the community in relation to further education and career pathways. This applied particularly to parents who were disengaged from education. Identifying, motivating, and connecting with them was identified as a key challenge in the community. The lead parents believed that a large proportion of local parents did not have adequate knowledge about what education and career opportunities are available within and outside the community, and where and how they could find this information. The group collectively agreed on some strategies that might be useful to engage the disengaged parents with the Parent Matter project, principally, involving parents from diverse socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, and building trust and using success stories of young people from the community who have undertaken the tertiary education journey.

Feedback on the training was positive, but many in the group viewed the content as not being particularly relevant as they already had the requisite skills. However, it provided an opportunity for team members to get to know one another and build rapport. Lead parents noted:

*It was kind of nice that we were still able to get to know each other ... I had some experience in. So, it was a good refresher, though, for me to just get in that mindset of operating at that level with committee and community.*

Participants explained that using online sessions for meetings and interventions worked well. The switch to online due to COVID-19 pushed the group to innovate and come with fresh solutions rather than traditional approaches. Notably, online delivery of interventions assisted those who with low literacy levels to engage in interventions organised by lead parents. They could acquire information through listening and viewing.

*Online ... had a big impact on how we gelled together ... sometimes it can be more convenient ... We didn't have many face-to-face meetings to start with, but once we did, it was really nice to actually connect with people. And then [interacting later online] helped the relationship blossom ... Those experiences, then got us in that mindset of, okay, well, this is a new environment to communicate in now, with COVID ... it gave us some really good mindset and a good insight into what other people might be feeling when they're receiving information. So, I think we felt like the videos and Facebooking and the online delivery was really important.*

The lead parents structured the *Parents Matter* program into four phases. Phase 1 aimed to introduce the community to the program. For this, a Facebook page was established, as the group identified that the community is well connected through this social media platform. A website was launched. In Phase 2, the group developed/gathered information, resources and videos about post-school education options, pathways, employment, and training opportunities within the community. The resources and information were added to the

website. As of March 2021, the Facebook page has over 161 followers and over 200 users visited the *Parents Matter* website. Almost 6,500 users viewed the *Parents Matter* videos published on the Facebook page. In Phase 3, the group organised an online question and answer (Q&A) session with education and industry panelists, which was live-streamed on Facebook. Among the panelists were the representatives from the local high school, university, aquaculture and social care industries and local government. There were 12 live viewers of the session. The recorded video was viewed 476 times as of March 2021. Phase 4 involved evaluation.

A benefit of online delivery was being able to easily record the session, allowing community members who had not been able to attend the live-streamed event to view it later. The video remains accessible on the Facebook page and other potential access options are still being considered.

### *Evaluation*

Evaluation of the *Parents Matter* program was through interviews with lead parents (n=6), surveys with participants/viewers of the online panel session (n=9), and observation/reflection notes from the pathway broker. Collection of survey data proved challenging due to the live-stream and recorded format of the event, and only 9 of the 350+ viewers had participated in the survey by the time it closed.

Most participants who attended or viewed the panel had multiple roles in the community such as being parents/carers, teachers, employers and others who supported students. These roles gave them opportunities to be key influencers and have conversations with others about education and career pathways. As in Rural Community 1, most heard about the *Parents Matter* event through Facebook and/or word of mouth. Over three-quarters of those who completed the survey reported that the event had improved their knowledge of, and confidence in speaking about, education and career pathways (Table 5).

**Table 5. *Parents Matter* Q&A participant responses**

| <b>PARENTS MATTER Q&amp;A EVENT:<br/>(N=9)</b>                                                                          | <b>%<br/>AGREEING</b> |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Provided me with improved knowledge about the world of work                                                             | 78%                   |
| Provided me with improved knowledge of career options after school                                                      | 78%                   |
| Provided me with improved knowledge of education pathways after grade 10                                                | 78%                   |
| Gave me more confidence about speaking to my children/employees/students/others about career options after school       | 89%                   |
| Gave me more confidence about speaking to my children/employees/students/others about education pathways after grade 10 | 78%                   |

When asked about what worked well with the *Parents Matter* program, most lead parents indicated that the group's diverse but complementary strengths and skill sets contributed to the success of the program. Strong facilitation skills that provided structure which led to action were highlighted by the lead parents as being key to the success of *Parents Matter*. Lead parents described a collaborative, respectful group dynamic where people listened to each other:

*There was a great mix of local people and then people like myself who are new to the area. So, for me, that, there was some really nice synergy and connections there. But the calibre of people that, and the skills that they had, I think helped us to really gel together as a committee and work through all the steps and the processes. So, it was really enjoyable. I think it was well-managed.*

*Luckily, we had some people who were very skilled at creating a website and creating video content. And then, we had some good people that kept us on track at our meetings ...*

There were a few aspects of the intervention that the lead parents felt could be improved. Because this group had strong professional skill sets already, participants suggested that the content of the training should be more flexible. One lead parent suggested a program at the University of Newcastle as an example:

*We did that training at the beginning, which was pretty basic for me in comparison to what I've been involved with. But what I did do was, I did some extra research, which I found really interesting, and I found a couple of papers. There's a training and work pathways program closure report, which I found .... And I also did a University of Newcastle online training course called When I Grow Up: Supporting Children's Aspirations<sup>2</sup>.*

Lead parents suggested that the title of the program be changed from "Parents Matter" to 'Families Matter' to make it more applicable to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, immigrant and non-traditional families and more explicitly inclusive of other community key influencers:

*We had the challenge around the Parents Matter title. So, not all our volunteers were parents, either ... do I have to be a parent within the current education system? So, we promoted it around, if you're a role model in somebody's life, or you would like to move into that space.*

*And the Indigenous people say Family Matters. And I do think family, yes, I think that's, because English speaking countries are less, we are more nuclear family oriented than others, so it's not just Indigenous people. It's also migrants ...*

Lead parents wanted to evaluate their progress as they went along so they could adapt as needed. They suggested that measurable goals be determined at the start, so as to evaluate effectiveness of the intervention and measure progress:

*We didn't even get into ... clear SMART goals were we going to put in place, so that we could measure the effectiveness of the program at the end of it ... And so consequently, we've got nothing to measure our work by, to say whether we've been successful or not successful. Is it number of Facebook shares and likes? Is it number of people that attended the online Q and A?*

When asked about future directions for *Parents Matter*, lead parents and the pathway broker indicated strong support for continuing the program. They indicated that a strong foundation had been laid and the program needed more time to grow. There was a feeling that this is just the beginning, and it absolutely should be continued.

*I'd love to see the project continue with assisted funding, [and] for a provider to see that there is a valued service here, a needed service ... It'd make me happy to see that that effort that we've all contributed is going to be then taken and developed further .... We've put some infrastructure in for someone to now come and really run with it. And it would be a shame to see it, all that effort and energy to this point just fall by the wayside. (Lead parent)*

*To have a resource like that is, I think, really useful. So it, yeah. It can't stop. It needs to keep going. (Lead parent)*

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.newcastle.edu.au/study/online-learning/when-i-grow-up>

*The project is now ready to be, the seed is planted ... it's an unrealistic expectation to think that a project like this will change things in terms how the perception is about the importance of accredited training or further education, because, as an example, there's a lot of generational mindset that is here. I think we did the hard work. So, we set up a brand, almost. We created some followers on Facebook. There's a website. I think we did a great job. And it's, it would be really important that this project is, that it's going to continue. Because yeah, the job has just started now. (Pathway broker)*

Finally, participants also suggested that there was a need to get schools more closely involved. One lead parent explained:

*It's really paramount to get the schools on board ... It became quite evident that it may have been difficult. I think they see their role as very important and ... it's very tricky to explain to them we're not trying to take over your role. It's very different. But it's, I think what it's more about is your education, the children's education. You're making sure the students are across everything. And we might just go and do something with the parents. And then there could be some crossover. But explaining that in a way that doesn't tell them there's gaps in what they're doing is difficult.*

### **Beacon Foundation *Growth Industry Preparation Program (GrIPP)***

*GrIPP* was originally designed to introduce high school students to careers through visits and real-life experiences in industries such as hospitality and aquaculture. It was modified to target key influencers. As the originally planned face-to-face, bus tour event was not possible due to COVID-19 restrictions, the Beacon Foundation instead developed videos, interviewing people from four key local industries (food manufacturing, aged and community services, aquaculture and hospitality). A two hour live online session was delivered where 17 participants watched the Beacon Foundation's industry videos and engaged in an online live question and answer session with panelists from these industries. The session was recorded and uploaded for later viewing.

The participants were key influencers: teachers/school leaders, employers, community organisations and other service providers. Half the participants learned of the session through word of mouth, with Facebook the next most frequently named source of information.

### ***Evaluation***

The evaluation of the Beacon Foundation's *GrIPP* panel event was conducted through surveys with participants and panellists (n=7) and interviews with panellists (n=2). The majority who completed the survey reported that the event had improved their knowledge of work and career pathways, and most reported increased confidence in speaking about, education and career pathways (Table 6). This result is pleasing because all the survey respondents either worked in education or employment related occupations, were employers, or attended as representatives of community organisations.

**Table 6. Beacon GrIPP participant responses**

| THE BEACON GrIPP PANEL EVENT:<br>(n=7)                                                                                  | %<br>AGREEING |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------|
| Provided me with improved knowledge about the world of work                                                             | 100%          |
| Provided me with improved knowledge of career options after school                                                      | 83%           |
| Provided me with improved knowledge of education pathways after grade 10                                                | 67%           |
| Gave me more confidence about speaking to my children /employees/students/others about career options after school      | 66%           |
| Gave me more confidence about speaking to my children/employees/students/others about education pathways after grade 10 | 50%           |

Interviews with the panelists revealed that they participated in this intervention because of their employers' close ties with the Beacon Foundation and because they were interested in career pathways.

*It was mainly because of the Beacon partnership that we've got as a business. So, at [hotel chain] level, we have strong partnership ties with Beacon. And as a way of engaging with youth and employment and pathways for people.*

Panelists pointed to aspects of the intervention that worked well. Having access to meeting attendees in person was beneficial for one panelist who was able to attend the meeting in person. This panelist described a more positive experience than the panelists who were not on site.

*I actually went to the Trade Training Centre. So, I sat in another room for the video component of it and then just poked my head in and had a bit of a chat with the [audience]. I think there were some really good people in the room. And I think, for a pilot program, it was great.*

Also, panelists speculated that having a pre-recorded talk may be beneficial in the future.

*I think it's been a really good thing because by having a lot of it pre-recorded, it means I've obviously now got that resource sitting there. Whereas, you know, the next time they run it, I may not be available .... it means that they can continue to run it again. So, I think maintaining or saving those resources is a good thing.*

However, overall, panelists expressed the view that they struggled with the live online format for this event. They suggested that communication both prior to, and during, the event could be improved. The panelists described last minute changes, difficulties interacting with the audience, and difficulties knowing if they were communicating effectively:

*I didn't quite understand the audience. So, you know, what we were trying to actually get out of the session was probably not framed up to me earlier on.*

*It's really hard to see [panelist] through a screen. I think you don't get that physical presence, because she is great. And she's really enthusiastic .... So, that's COVID.*

*I wasn't really seeing their faces up on the screen, so I couldn't actually see who it was I was talking to. So, it did make it a bit hard and difficult to know who I was pitching at.*

In terms of future directions and priorities for career and pathway education work, the panelists offered several suggestions. These ideas focused on both the specific intervention

as well as work in this area in general. For the intervention, the central point of the suggestions was to find ways to engage the audience. Panelists proposed having participants join Zoom individually rather than in a group, having the audience drive agenda, and seeding questions to encourage participants to speak up.

Regarding work in career and pathway education in general, panelists suggested the following:

- Focus on mentors. Embed a key influencer within an industry. The influencer will understand the industry better via time spent on site and will be able to better guide and explain options to students who are interested in areas connected to that industry.
- Expand the types of mentors engaged. Reach out to sport coaches and club leaders, such as girl guides, etc. An effort should be made to seek influencers in the community other than teachers who spend time working with children.
- Use connections with existing local community groups to engage community members. By connecting with these groups on a semi-regular basis or coming into the organisation to help with those connections when they are having those conversations with students, opportunities to give instant feedback and have one-on-one conversations will be created.

## Overall Rural Community 2 findings

### *Whole of community approach*

The Rural Community 2 working party, pathway broker and those who volunteered for both *Parents Matter* and the *GrIPP* events highlighted what can be achieved when a group operates with a coherent approach to achieving the goal of informing key influencers of careers and education pathway decisions in their community. The community was generally supportive, including businesses, industries and other community representatives. As the project progressed, it became apparent that project ownership moved from the university to a shared responsibility, then to the community. However, Rural Community 2 has a relatively large Aboriginal population and an active Aboriginal community association, and they were not engaged in the foundation or operation of the working party or either *Parents Matter* or *GrIPP*. The future involvement of the Aboriginal community is a challenge for the ongoing work in education and career pathways in Rural Community 2.

Evaluation data collected from lead parent and panel volunteers and those who participated in *Parents Matter* and *GrIPP* events and detailed above strongly suggested that the working party selected interventions that attracted key influencers of careers and education pathway decisions in their community. The data further demonstrated that participation in the selected interventions increased knowledge of, and confidence in talking about, careers and education pathways. At the project's end working party members identified that they had increased their knowledge of, and confidence in understanding and sharing information about, education and career pathways and believed that the project had helped them in this. Coupled with the overall success of the chosen interventions, the working party's expectations revealed at the start of the project appeared to have been met, that is learning as individuals, and supporting other community members to learn more about education and career pathways.

Rural Community 2's local government council is seen in the community as a trusted, and credible institution. Its commitment and support for the project raised the profile of the key influencers project team in the community. The council's employment of the pathway broker was a clear signal of support. This made communication easier, because the community was familiar with, and tended to listen to, council messages. The pathway broker's skills and personal networks also assisted in the project's success.

The emergence of COVID-19 forced the pathway broker and lead parents to rethink the events and resources they developed, and the outcomes, especially when considered in terms of numbers of online views, appear to have been successful. Adaptation of the Beacon Foundation's *GrIPP* was impacted more by COVID-19, however the legacy of an online resource means it can continue to help key influencers to learn into the future. Overall, the flexible high level project design that gave community control of project decisions and resource use allowed the project to adapt in the face of unforeseen circumstances.

The final combined working party and community meeting was attended by 23 people from council, industry, university, schools, TTC, community members (some being lead parents), local media, State Department of Education and the Commonwealth Government Local Jobs program. Participants networked extensively, and new connections were made between others from the community and people from external agencies. There was general acknowledgement of the benefit of the project to Rural Community 2.

At the meeting, the local council presented a proposal for external funding for an employment-community-training Connector and some programs that would build on the key influencers' project and its findings. While this was very favourably received by all those attending, lead parents spoke passionately about the benefits of also continuing the *Parents Matter* program. Whilst there was no explicit agreed action to progress this, recent State Government labour market policy changes were acknowledged as a potential vehicle to continue *Parents Matter* in some form.

## **Implications**

Rural Community 2 embraced the project. The community had the skills and shared vision of what was needed in education and career pathway information for key influencers to make the most of the opportunity presented by the project. Incomers to the community were looking for opportunities to connect with other people and contribute to their new home (Kilpatrick et al., 2011). The local council took a leadership role, including employing the pathway broker. Rural Community 2 demonstrated maturity in working together and with external parties. The project design was well suited to this community context.

## Rural Community 3 case study

### Community demographics and characteristics

Rural Community 3 is a regional service centre, predominantly centred around a town located approximately 280 km from the state capital. A small university campus is located in the town. Demographics of Rural Community 3 are summarised in Table 7. While the site originally chosen for the project was the regional service centre, it soon became apparent that the town and its surrounding region were regarded as a community for education and career pathway information and advice purposes.

**Table 7. Rural Community 3 demographics and characteristics**

| DEMOGRAPHICS                                         |                                                    |
|------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|
| Population                                           | Approximately 38,000                               |
| Identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander | Approximately 7.5%, State 2.9%                     |
| Born in Australia                                    | Approximately 75%, State 65.5%                     |
| Aged over 65                                         | Approximately 33%, State 16.2%                     |
| Major Industries by employment                       | Aged care; disability and health services; tourism |
| Unemployment rate                                    | Approximately 10% (ABS 2017)                       |
| Youth unemployment                                   | Approximately 13%, State 13.6%                     |
| Index of Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage (IRSD) | Between 960 and 970                                |
| Education Attainment                                 |                                                    |
| Bachelor Degree                                      | Approximately 9%, State 23.4%                      |
| Year 12 completion                                   | Approximately 46.5%, State 62.4%                   |
| Education Facilities                                 |                                                    |
| University Campus                                    | 1                                                  |
| University Rural Clinical School                     | 1                                                  |
| High Schools                                         | 7                                                  |
| Primary Schools                                      | 12                                                 |

(Source: idcommunity 2020; ABS 2017)

During the time of this project the people of Rural Community 3 experienced significant disruption and trauma due to natural disasters and the COVID-19 pandemic. Late in 2019, extensive and long-lived bushfires forced the residents of Rural Community 3 to evacuate their homes. Many people lost their homes and others were displaced for months, businesses were forced to close as a consequence of this disruption and schooling was interrupted. When the impact of COVID-19 reached the area in early 2020, business, education and daily life was again severely disrupted. The combination of these events ensured that the community in general faced significant stress and uncertainty over the period of this intervention.

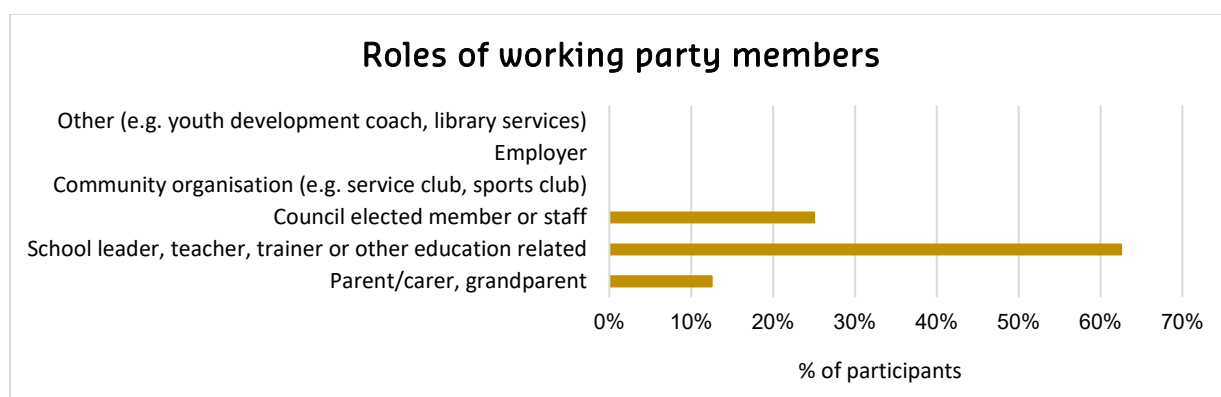
Thus, within this dramatic context, the project continued to pursue the development of a whole of community, place-based, and coordinated education and career pathway pilot program for Rural Community 3. It built upon existing relationships and programs that the Rural Community 3 university campus had developed with local primary schools, high

schools and community organisations, through the implementation of widening participation activities over the last ten years. This project leveraged existing relationships with key individuals and representatives from the public, private and not-for-profit sectors were invited to form a working party tasked with selecting and modifying an education and career pathway program to pilot in their community. The following section provides details about the working party.

### Pathway working party

The Rural Community 3 working party consisted of 12 members from the community, and another four staff members from the university campus in Rural Community 3. The university staff members jointly took on the role of pathway broker for Rural Community 3.

As shown in Figure 5, the working party members represented key education providers in the region including teachers, support officers, and principals in public and private high schools; representatives from the department of education; TAFE teachers and managers; as well as representatives from adult education providers, local council, and local Aboriginal community. Two staff members from the university campus, who were also integral members of the local community, led the working party, and were supported by two other university staff members. The working party included a spread of experience, expertise, and interest across public, private and not-for-profit sectors in the delivery of pathway information and services to the Rural Community 3 area.



**Figure 5. Roles of Rural Community 3 working party members (n=8)**

Within their roles, working party members worked with a range of groups in Rural Community 3, including: high school students and other young people, parents, teachers, career advisers, principals, and business and community groups. Thus, they were well-placed to be key influencers of education and career pathway choices. Given the demographics of the area, much of the work of the working party members was targeted at individuals identified within targeted equity groups, particularly those in regional and rural areas, and individuals from low socioeconomic status backgrounds. For example, one member worked very closely with what she described as “second chance learners”, from “low SES backgrounds” and those with “many challenges and barriers.” Another worked with students from disadvantaged cohorts: “I work with juvenile justice. I work with the Job Actives. I work with mental health. I work with any organisations that people go to for support.” Two members have specific responsibilities for Aboriginal education and support. In addition to students, young people, and unemployed people, working party members also had conversations in their community about pathways with their own children, grandchildren and young relatives, friends, employees, and other adults.

This connection and contact with wide swathes of people in Rural Community 3, particularly those from equity groups meant that the working party was well positioned to represent and plan for a community-wide intervention.

Working party members were also highly knowledgeable about the context and focus of the project, positioning them well to develop an appropriate intervention for Rural Community 3. At the commencement of the project through the pre-evaluation survey, working party members indicated high levels of knowledge about pathways including one's assessment of himself as an 'expert'. Overall, working party members (n=8) self-assessed that they knew 'Quite a lot' or 'Very much' about education and career pathways at the start of the project. However, even those who acknowledged 'knowing a lot', admitted that things in this area are constantly changing, and so their learning had to be ongoing.

A sense that post-school pathway provision was always changing and a feeling that they could never know enough, motivated participants to agree to join the working party. When asked what motivated their involvement in the project, working party members spoke of their desire to stay current or abreast of what was happening in the community in order to help support students, specifically those who were disengaged from education, and provide information to parents and the community about what was available. One member expressed a desire to update her knowledge to help the community:

*Understanding what it is that parents are really looking for, for their kids, what young people are looking for... what the needs really are and how that's being achieved.*

Another wanted to participate in the working party in order to understand how to better support her at-risk high school students:

*You've got all these kids that obviously don't fit into mainstream school... part of my role is to sit with them and talk about their options and try and give them some ideas – and even that is really tricky. It's like, you know, what can you offer some of these students?*

It was hoped that through participation in the project, working party members could update their knowledge about local post-school pathways options. For one member though, participating in the working party was as simple as "I'm actually passionate about pathways. It's what I do".

### *Working party expectations*

Working party members were unified in their expectation for the project to achieve "improved outcomes for young people across the region in transition to employment and post-school opportunities". The primary way in which working party members anticipated that this might happen was via information and strategies targeted at increasing parent knowledge and engagement with pathways information. Specifically, working party members expected that the project would:

- increase "parents/carers capacity to provide accurate post-school pathway information to young people" by providing "more information to engage parents in supporting their students/children"
- increase parents' "awareness of stakeholder roles and responsibilities in career pathways and ... confidence to communicate and request support for their child"
- "provide multiple access points for parents to obtain information/support"
- provide "consistency of messaging to parents around career choice across agencies/stakeholder at a variety of student stages".

Working party members also anticipated that the project might achieve:

- increased student options, particularly “for young people in our community who are isolated”
- “broader perspectives for [students’] future possibilities”
- “increased student confidence in subject selection”.

In pursuit of these goals, the working party met four times over a period of nine months. The initial meeting was held face-to-face and subsequent meetings conducted via Zoom due to COVID-19 restrictions. Working party members also received email correspondence from the university project staff providing written updates about the project and were invited to provide additional feedback and input into the program design.

As with the other two sites, meetings in Rural Community 3 targeted:

- Project overview and purpose, situating the project in the community and work of each working party member.
- Potential interventions/programs presented to the working party for consideration
- Feedback on how the interventions/programs went.
- Dissemination of project findings and where to from here.

As was the case with the other two sites and described in Chapter 3, evaluation was built into working party meetings. There were nine interviews and eight surveys with working party members at the commencement and five interviews and two surveys at the conclusion of the project, plus observations/reflections from university staff (n=2), as described in Chapter 3.

## Intervention

At the initial meeting, working party members agreed to target an intervention at a specific group of ‘key influencers’, parents and supporters of school students, and shared their information about the needs of that group in their community. During the first meeting, the working party established a set of principles to inform the development of a program targeting parents in Rural Community 3, which included:

- Deliver the program where parents are; parents should not be expected to physically attend the university.
- Start with a small pilot with a view to expand the program and implement it longer term.
- Be parent-focussed. Parents should be engaged at the centre of the project and connected with industry, communities, schools and the university.
- Combine face to face and online content.
- Deliver content using other parents as presenters/instructors/mentors where possible.
- Deliver the program over multiple engagements over a period of time.
- Target parents of students transitioning from year 6 to year 7<sup>3</sup>.
- Reflect Rural Community 3 in the content of the program including local career options, e.g. health, disability, community services, aquaculture, tourism.

At the second working party meeting, one of the university staff members presented members of the working party with four models that could be implemented according to the above principles. An overview of the models had been sent via email to the working party

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<sup>3</sup> As detailed later, the pilot program was delivered to parents of Year 12 students due to disruption caused by COVID-19.

prior to the meeting and those members unable to attend had provided feedback to the university staff members. The models included:

- A. Supporter-centred networking: Parent excursions to local business and industries.
- B. Family learning intervention: Peer-to-peer, and expert-to-peer learning. Interactive workshops held by experts, with group peer-to-peer learning and sharing sessions.
- C. Engaging Parents in Careers Conversations Program ([EPICC](#)): Workshop information session.
- D. Excursion series: Parents engaging in short, precise information sessions with multiple experts held off site at various locations. Selection of guest speaker presentations with interactive question and answer sessions.

Feedback from non-attendee working party members was shared and the strengths and weaknesses of the various models debated by those present. During this discussion, the working party established a further set of principles which they saw the Rural Community 3 program aligning with:

- Student-selection of program participants. That is, rather than the university inviting the parents, the students should invite the parents to attend.
- Position the school and career adviser as the expert, supported by other experts from the working party.
- Create a sustainable program that can be continued long-term, beyond the funding of the research project.
- Create a program which is young-person centred but does not necessarily include the young person in the delivery.
- Include parents networking and mentoring each other.
- Provide flexible delivery and options for parents to select content of interest to them.
- Have the program micro-credentialed via a Non-Accredited Statement of Attainment through TAFE.

After the meeting, the university team went forward with designing an intervention for parents of Year 6 students at one school which would align with the principles identified by the working party.

While much of the administration of the meetings was complimented by working party members, there was feedback that the first meeting in particular could have been more effectively delivered, with more clarity about the aim of the project, and what could be achieved.

Early planning for the program by the working party included vigorous discussions around the need for it to be accessible to parents of the students in Rural Community 3, in the context of being a rural community, and with a focus on low SES students. One point of agreement was that the program needed to be 'taken' to the parents rather than 'drawing' the parents to the program. It was important to the group "to meet them in their place" (working part member). It was felt that this was particularly important for Aboriginal communities. In Rural Community 3, such places might have included schools, clubs, libraries and religious community spaces for parents who were disengaged from schools, it was suggested that:

*you access them via other means i.e. public housing, ... community workers, not-for-profits, women's centres – that's where you actually engage those parents. That's where you'll catch them. They won't come to school so you've got to catch them where they're at.*

The working party agreed that multiple approaches must be taken and individualised to the group being targeted. It was suggested that face-to-face and informal delivery, which combines refreshments and information delivery broken up by casual conversation, would be suitable for parents. Prior to the pilot program, working party members suggested that ideally, the mode of delivery should be mixed.

Unfortunately, the process of designing a pilot program for Rural Community 3 experienced significant disruption due to the outbreak of COVID-19 (see Table 8 for summary of COVID-19 impacts). Closures of schools put significant pressure on parents who were expected to support the online schooling of their children. At the same time, Year 12 students and their parents experienced significant disruption to final school certificate preparation and were feeling uncertain about what this would mean for transition to university and the future in general. Staff at the university and from other pathway providers, experienced an increase in contact from Year 12 parents seeking assistance on post-school pathway options as a result. Subsequently, the pilot program was altered to be a program for parents of Year 12 students, titled *FutureTalk*.

The impacts of COVID-19 and bushfires on the project's selected intervention and its roll out are detailed in Table 8. The Rural Community 3 site demonstrated great perseverance and flexibility in the way they adapted and responded to the unexpected challenges imposed by bushfires and then COVID-19.

**Table 8. Impacts of COVID-19 and the bushfires on the project**

| LIMITATION                   | IMPLICATION                                                                                                                                                                                                           | SOLUTION                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| School closures              | Parents of year 6 students were required to support the online schooling of their children. Participating in this pilot program was considered to be too much of a burden on parents of year 6 students at this time. | Program changed to target parents of year 12 students.<br><br>University to continue to develop content to deliver to year 6 students in the following year.                                                        |
| Physical distancing measures | Working party meetings could not be held-face to face<br><br>Parent workshop sessions could not be held face to face                                                                                                  | Working party meetings held via Zoom.<br><br>Parent workshop sessions held via Zoom supported by weekly emails.                                                                                                     |
| General COVID-19 disruption  | Fewer numbers of parents/supporters attended the pilot program than anticipated.<br><br>Fewer numbers of parents/supporters participated in the research.                                                             | Program is continuing, being repeated in 2021 and 2022 and extended to other campuses with increased participation.<br><br>Program evaluation supplemented by reflections and observations of implementation staff. |

### ***FutureTalk***

The pilot program implemented in Rural Community 3 aimed to support parents/supporters to engage with information that was relevant to their Year 12 child, and that would encourage career conversations about their child's post-school options. *FutureTalk* involved a series of informal, online interactive workshops and weekly emails. Parents/supporters of students involved in the university campus's university preparation program were invited to participate. Students involved in this program included those intent on going to university, as well as those not pursuing an ATAR score and students who intend to pursue vocational pathways. Due to the general disruption caused by the pandemic, six parents attended the online workshops, a lower number than would have been expected to participate under normal circumstances.

Five workshops were designed which considered the following career areas: Introduction to the program; World of work and education in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century; Post high-school options and pathways; Student-led education and career stories; and An introduction to local education and career opportunities. Workshops were delivered in the evening, to accommodate working parents, with each session lasting one-and-a-half hours. University staff were present at the sessions and delivered the workshops, alongside guest presenters, including local registered training organisations and employers, current and previous students, a parent of a 2019 Year 12 student and local school career advisers.

Each Friday parents were sent an email that highlighted some of the discussions their child was having in the University Preparation Program that week, offered conversation starters around careers and provided links to additional resources. Over 100 parents received these weekly emails.

### *Evaluation*

The *FutureTalk* pilot program was evaluated at its completion by online survey (n=1) and interviews (n=3) with parent participants as well as through reflections by university staff. Unfortunately, the number of research participants was low due to the low numbers participating in the pilot program and the disruption caused by the pandemic. Consequently, evaluation data has been supplemented by observations and reflections by two university staff members who implemented *FutureTalk*.

During the difficult year of 2020, *FutureTalk* participant parents were especially motivated to join the program to assist their Year 12 (and younger) children to navigate their post-school options. One parent stated: “I just needed to inform myself and arm myself with as much as I could”. Another parent felt an extra burden to help her daughter as a result of traumatic events which had impacted her daughter’s final year of school:

*I did this [program] because my daughter’s in Year 12 ... I thought I’d help her because we’d also lost our house at the beginning of the year in the fires ... She was really struggling so I just thought I’d try and help her any way I could.*

*FutureTalk* was a valuable way to learn about post-school options in Australia for parents educated overseas:

*The education system here [in Australia] is new to me which is why I was interested in finding out about, you know, so I can help [my son].*

This parent added that she wanted to understand the terminology and processes related to the final school certificate and transition to university in order to be able to join in conversations with her son and others, saying:

*I just wanted to be in a position where if he was throwing things at me, or people were having conversations around me, I had some idea of what people were talking about ... There’s been very little information expressed to me as a parent from the school regarding pathways to universities”.*

Instead, due to COVID-19, this parent noted that the responsibility for understanding post-school options had been allocated to her son:

*We couldn’t go around and speak to the teachers as parents so a lot of that’s been passed to my son, my 15-year-old son to make decisions.*

When asked about the usefulness in helping them learn about post-school options, parents agreed that *FutureTalk* was “extremely useful” (parent survey), “very useful” (interviewed parent participant), and “valuable” (interviewed parent participant) in helping them learn about post-school options. Specifically, parents learnt that “there are other pathways into

university” (parent survey) and about “the different avenues that you could go” (interviewed parent participant).

Central to parents’ understandings about pathways and options was how information was delivered to them, that is via the authentic stories of students and parents from their community. Within the program, parents/supporters were able to connect and engage with students who have been through a similar journey as their child. Parents interviewed explained:

*Listening to other students and the pathway that they’ve taken ... they’ve thought that they’re going to go in one direction and then they’ve done something totally different – just their experiences with attending university and doing different courses and applying, and all that sort of thing.*

*I think the interaction [with student presenters] was great... To hear real-life stories and real-life successes from ... you know, that was quite encouraging.*

Similarly, interaction with other parents and practitioners working in schools and post-school organisations (TAFE, university, school career advisers, and training services) was seen as highly valuable for participants. Within the program, participants were able to converse with a parent who had supported their child through Year 12 in the previous year. “Having the different people come from the different areas and the TAFE and all that sort of thing so that you could see all the different avenues you could go if need be” was valuable for one participant. Further, it was not just listening to other community members which was valuable, but having the opportunity to interact with them: “Just being able to talk... I mean, I know Zoom sort of helped for us all to sit there and talk and share different experiences and stuff like that – that was interesting”.

These responses echo the observations of university staff running *FutureTalk* who noted that “Parents/caregivers want to hear stories, engage and converse with students and parents who have been before them”. Additionally, the involvement of parents and students in the delivery of the *FutureTalk* program made the content more accessible to participants by reducing power differences. University staff observed that “the student panel fostered an even playing field.” The “experts” also were successful at making themselves “real” and accessible by sharing their own journeys. One parent observed and valued this aspect of the delivery of the program:

*I think the people that were delivering the program were great because they were real; they weren’t all of an academic, perfect background – you know, followed this, you know, “I did this and got this and got this”; some of them didn’t go straight to the positions that they’re in now.*

*FutureTalk* succeeded in making the program accessible and engaging to parents by highlighting authentic, real-life stories and using community members such as students and parents to deliver the content. As a result, parents felt reassured by the program, an important outcome in a year that saw Rural Community 3 students and parents unsettled by bushfires and COVID-19:

*I think it is more about reassurance of all the options out there ... my eldest son nearly lost all of his original offers to university as he was holding out for a particular offer that didn’t come through, this was a very stressful time for him (and me!). (Parent survey)*

Participants concur that they learnt and felt reassured that “there’s just so many different ways that you can do everything, and you’re not stuck in the one place, so to speak; if you have to do something you could do it remotely or whatever” (interviewed parent participant).

Even once a specific university course has been chosen, they valued hearing that options are still open further along in time:

*I think the assurance, or the reassurance I guess, is if you make the wrong choice of course you can change so you're not stuck with something for three, possibly four years; you can still make things work".* (Interviewed parent participant)

Clearly, the *FutureTalk* program came at an important time for parents of Year 12 students impacted by COVID-19 and the bushfires, when they were concerned for their children's futures. The program offered them an opportunity to be reassured that their child had options even within the disruptions and empowered them to help their child understand and navigate those options. Indeed, an outcome of the program was the empowerment of parents in supporting their children through these difficult times. One parent reported a change to her son's perception of her and her role during these times. Specifically, she went from being an outsider in the post-school decision making process, to a valued contributor.

*I think it's surprised me a bit how open he is to conversations with me ... We've gone from rolling the eyes, you know, it's like "Oh yes, mum. Yes, mum, I know mum", to actually, talking a bit more ... [my son] asks me questions now a little bit and my husband sometimes asks me questions, and because we've worked through a lot of these things together, I was able to demonstrate that I did know what I was talking about.* (Interviewed parent participant)

In other households, the program provided "a lot of different ways of bringing the subject up with [my daughter]" resulting in "more conversations" (interviewed parent participant).

However, other parents reported still feeling that they did not know enough. One survey respondent indicated that they felt fairly confident in speaking with their child about pathways "but I would like a little more information". Another parent responded in an interview that she also felt that she still did not have enough information, especially compared with her children who were "all over it". Feelings of still not knowing enough was observed in some participants by university staff who recommended to follow up with personal guidance interview and develop a collaborative action plan to further support those parents that need it.

In contrast to the working party's preference for face-to-face delivery, as reported above, parents participating in *FutureTalk* found that the online delivery suited their busy schedules and saved time as they did not have to travel away from the house. "You could still be doing whatever you had to be doing while you were talking and listening."

*I thought, look, the online delivery was fine. I think people are perhaps a bit nervous to begin with and ... the conversation could be slightly slower, there could be more gaps ... Look, on the whole I think it was a great way to run the program and I think, especially for me, because sometimes I work through till 6:00 o'clock, so if I had to then travel to a destination or travel to a place then I would have been late.* (Interviewed parent participant)

One parent said that the online delivery was "handy" as it fitted in with her workload ("one night I was doing the ironing") and enabled her daughter to sit in on a session as well. She suggested that a later time, e.g., 7pm would suit her schedule better. Clearly, however, finding a time that suits *all* participants is a difficult task.

Indeed, participants reflected on the challenge of attending *all* the sessions, prompting the observation that having access to recordings of each session available online afterwards would be beneficial. Alternatively, a different structure was suggested as potentially affording parents more opportunities to attend.

*Whether like a one-off on a Saturday ... it could go for a couple of hours and just get a whole lot of it done. I think parents would be more open to doing that, or one night, or a couple of evenings or something one week rather than every week for whatever it was, six weeks.* (Interviewed parent participant)

It appears that online delivery *does* suit some parents. However, working party members highlighted that “there are so many areas of our community that won’t engage with digital” and therefore a purely online program is unlikely to be accessible by *all* parents.

A university staff member reflected that: “not all parents have the capacity to engage with multiple longer style workshops, but they want to understand and know what is happening in this space”. Therefore, future program implementations might consider the delivery of the program in multiple ways, for example, as a series of sessions; as a single longer session; as a series of email resources and prompts.

Participants all strongly advocated that future programs should be advertised more widely, in order to capture more parents who might want to participate. One commented “I’m still quite shocked that more parents weren’t in attendance.” Others suggested that the program team should advertise it through the school:

*Just to advertise it more and get it out there more. ... the online school newsletter, which is great, it’s [just] very easy just to skim over things and miss them ... So if there was a direct way of getting to more parents just to let them know that this course is available ...* (Interviewed parent participant)

Participants’ desire to see the program more widely advertised and attended by other parents in the community is testament to its need in the community. Final evidence for this comes from the comments of participants including “I hope it continues to run because I think it’s a valuable program” and “keep doing what you’re doing”.

Indeed, the working party also hoped that the program would continue to run in their community long-term and be expanded to incorporate programs targeted at parents of younger students, too. “Whilst we address the immediate need with the older students, there’s still a lot more that could be done” (working party member). Another member concurred, “if we stick with that transition space being in that Year 10, 11, 12 space, we’re doing it way too late. So, engagement in the younger years is going to be critical”. So important is this program and efforts to improve the information and support given to key influencers of low SES and RRR students, that a third working party member claimed: “it has to be on the agenda forever because the space changes all the time”.

In summary, the *FutureTalk* program, although implemented on a small scale, showed evidence of being extremely useful in learning about post-school options and highly valued by participants as it increased their confidence and ability to have conversations with their children and enabled them to support their children. Parent participants found the knowledge and support reassuring in the difficult circumstances that 2020 had brought them. Within this, they valued the authentic accounts and opportunities to interact with student and parent members of their community who had gone before them as well as accessible experts from their region. Interestingly, the online mode of delivery brought about by COVID-19 was considered to be a convenient way of participating in the program for time-poor parents. Parent participants advocated for wider advertising of the program to increase the reach of the program, one considered valuable for all parents in Rural Community 3.

### **Overall Rural Community 3 findings**

#### *Whole of community approach*

Working party members indicated that they thought that the working party was comprised of people from a variety of fields and interests who brought with them considerable experience

and varied skills and perspectives, although some members suggested the working party would have benefited from having people connected with parents, particularly through schools, and people working in the transition from school pathway area. This site was the only one to have people from outside the community on the working party. It was felt that the group dynamics were positive and led well by university staff, resulting in a genuinely consultative process. Through their participation, working party members learned about what is happening in the pathways space in their region and valued the contact and understandings they acquired.

Working party members particularly appreciated opportunities to network and find out what was 'happening on the ground'. Members observed that in their experience in working in career and pathway education and support, they have seen much work in their region being undertaken in a siloed, disparate, manner which resulted in duplication and lack of real outcomes. For example, "I have seen, in the past anyway, a lot of individual agendas driving ... involvement [in post-school options support]". Another member had seen "duplicity of intent" which is "astounding".

In addition to the individual agendas and duplication of programs, some felt there was also a lack of ownership for education and career pathway support in Rural Community 3. One member had seen "no responsibility being taken in a lot of regards to different things that are supposed to happen around the place". As a consequence of such a lack of ownership of pathway education, he felt that the programs for young people in this area are missing the mark, not necessarily being what was needed in particular circumstances.

Two members with school system backgrounds advocated for a coordinated approach to pathway education and support in Rural Community 3. The model developed through this project was seen as having potential to provide the coordination framework the community needs.

A successful working party requires that everyone in it understands its purpose and goals as well as their own responsibilities and commitment to it. According to one member, a successful working party requires committed and proactive people, and a leader or someone to drive it. As this member has observed, community working parties, even if they are a joint endeavour with shared leadership between education provider and community, have to be driven by somebody if they are to achieve concrete outcomes. This member indicated they would have liked to see better engagement with sub-groups in the community, including Aboriginal communities, disengaged students and young people in juvenile justice/corrections.

The *FutureTalk* program was designed by the Rural Community 3 working party to be a small-scale pilot of a whole of community, place-based, and coordinated education and career pathway program. The findings presented above highlighted the benefits of the program for its participants as well as making suggestions as to adjustments which could be made in future implementations.

Whole of community approaches to equipping key influencers of low SES and RRR students' education and career pathway choices require a highly coordinated approach. The working party was made up of people with diverse skills, experience and community networks who provided valuable input into the project. The university acted as a trusted, credible, institution in leading the project, acting as pathway broker, and giving credibility to the work being done in the project.

While the key influencers project has provided a model for coordinated action in Rural Community 3 that has been successful as a pilot, continuing the momentum will require active leadership. The university has indicated it will continue with a parent education and career pathway information program. There are lessons from this pilot for future action,

including wide ranging representation on a pathway working party, development and clear communication of expectations.

## **Implications**

Strong leadership from the university as a trusted local institution which took ownership of the project was crucial to its success in Rural Community 3, particularly in the context of the extreme pressures on the community at the time.

A coordinated approach with a working party at the centre involves the drawing together of people representative of various groups and with a wide range of interest, skill and experience in order to fully understand the complexity of the area. Committed external membership on a working party increases access to external resources. Clear two-way communication with all education and training providers and sub-groups in the community is essential.

## **Cross-case summary and comparison**

This section looks across the three case studies. Key points are synthesised and compared, with overarching issues explored in more detail in the following Discussion chapter.

### **Community demographics and characteristics**

The rural community sites varied in population size from 6,000 to 38,000. While the original intention was smaller sites, findings suggest that for education and careers pathway information or advice programs, rural regions centred on rural service centres with services including schools, health services, banks and a range of retail businesses are an appropriate scale.

The rural communities are typical of lifestyle communities which attract population growth (Ryan, 2019), particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic. They are either coastal, or in attractive rural settings, not too far from major population centres. Their populations are older than the Australian average. Major industries are also typical of rural lifestyle communities: health and social assistance; agriculture, forestry and fishing, tourism and retail were prominent. Rural Community 2, located closest to its state capital has higher educational attainment rates relative to the state average than the other two sites, although Year 12 completion is highest in Rural Community 3 which has the best access to Year 11 and 12 schooling. Notable in each community is the significant importance of youth unemployment to the overall rate of unemployment.

All communities have an Aboriginal population above the national average. None of the sites were particularly successful in engaging their Aboriginal populations in interventions, suggesting a future focus on education and careers pathway information programs for key influencers of Aboriginal student choice, with significant input from Aboriginal communities themselves.

### **Working parties**

All communities established working parties that captured a broad diversity of key influencers in their community. Each working party had representatives from education, employers and industry, community organisations/services, family/carers, and council, and collectively had networks reaching across the community. Rural Community 3 had representation from the Aboriginal community, whereas the other two sites did not. Overall, working parties attracted members who were well placed to be key influencers of education and career pathway decisions. While each working party was supported by a pathway broker, the role of pathway broker was implemented differently in each site.

Overall, working party members in each community reported that they had started with a 'good' to 'expert' understanding of careers education and pathway knowledge and were mostly confident in sharing this knowledge with young people and others who needed it. Their motivations for joining the working parties were similar across the three sites.

As individuals, working party members wanted to improve/further their own understandings, primarily because they also acknowledged their own limits in knowledge and the changing nature of the knowledge. They wanted to support their community and particularly, to improve outcomes for the young people, especially disadvantaged young people, in their communities.

## **Interventions**

Each working party identified their community's needs in terms of education and career pathways advice, and the key influencer groups best placed to address these. They selected interventions to improve the knowledge and confidence of the key influencers. All three communities identified parents as the group most in need of upskilling and initially chose variations of the *Parents Matter* intervention. The challenges of bushfires and COVID-19 saw Rural Community 3 modify their parent intervention to *FutureTalk*, targeting Year 12 parents. Rural Community 1 also chose *Warm Connections*, targeting staff and volunteers in community centres and libraries, to better address an overall high unemployment rate in an area with a large number of local job vacancies. Rural Community 2 also selected the Beacon Foundation's *GrIPP* to better equip teachers, staff in community centres and employment agencies, and support services to act as key influencers by exposing the many and varied jobs in local industries.

## **Flexibility**

COVID-19 and bushfires tested the responsiveness of the whole of community approach and found it was sufficiently flexible to handle the unimagined impacts. All three communities moved to more online activity, with Rural Community 3 changing the target group for their intervention to meet community need. While many project participants would have preferred face-to-face meetings and events, online sessions and training, live-stream events and recorded online presentations were reported to have worked for their target audience. They were easily accessible, convenient, available for use at alternate and more convenient times. The online format was also suggested to be more readily accessible for those with lower literacy levels.

## **Reaching the target audience**

The intention was that education and career pathway information and support programs coordinated or implemented by a working party should consider principles of program design in order to maximise the success of interventions. Two principles, Accessibility and Authenticity, emerged as being central to success of future programs in the sites.

Undoubtedly, programs should be accessible to targeted participants by being delivered at locations, times and in modes that are suitable to them. In Rural Communities 2 and 3, where those organising the interventions possessed high level communication and project management skills, there was less tension in the groups planning and delivering interventions than in Rural Community 1. Rural Community 3 targeted a small group of parents and was successful in engaging them at an extremely difficult time, with positive feedback from parent participants. Rural Community 2 reached large numbers through their online events and resources. It should be noted that many viewers may have also come from outside Rural Community 2.

Trust and authentic connections were essential to encourage participation, in addition to events and resources being accessible. The local council in Rural Community 2 and university campus in Rural Community 3 provided credibility to the project, and employed the

pathway brokers, increasing trust and community willingness to engage with the project and its interventions. The project's impact in Rural Community 1 was constrained by the limited engagement of schools in the community.

A second principle that emerged as powerful through Rural Community 1's videos and Careers Expo, Rural Community 2's *Parents Matter* online Q&A and *GrIPP* panel sessions, and Rural Community 3's *FutureTalk* program, was the importance of authenticity of the content and delivery. Participants valued the opportunities to interact with other members of the community and key stakeholders in post-school options in their region. Involving a wide cross-section of people in the delivery of the program reduced power differences between the perceived "university experts" and parents from low SES backgrounds in Rural Community 3. The use of community members and local practitioners ensured that a credible and trusted messenger was delivering the information, thereby supporting the successful uptake of the knowledge.

### **Community orientation and maturity in working together**

The three communities varied in the ease with which they worked together internally, and for Rural Communities 1 and 2, with external parties including university researchers and the Beacon Foundation. The differences appear to be related to the commitment of a trusted local institution, a past history of working together, and skills and expertise of community members who are willing to volunteer to work for the benefit of their community. While Rural Community 3 benefited from a local university campus and Rural Communities 1 and 2 from support from local councils, including a pathway broker employed by a local institution appeared to assist in initiating community engagement with the project. Each community faced unique challenges and opportunities. Social and political divides in Rural Community 1 hindered the operation of the project. The planning and delivery of interventions in Rural Community 3 benefited from the skills and networks of the externally orientated working party, while Rural Community 2's intervention benefited from its lead parent group, which included parents who had moved into the community, bringing professional skills and a desire to make a difference in their new home.

A final indication of the success of the project in the three case study communities is that there are plans in all three to build on learnings from the project and move forward with some kind of education and career pathway information program for key influencers of pathway decisions in their community.

In conclusion, the words of a Rural Community 3 working party member convey the deep need and potential of a whole of community approach to education and career pathway advice:

*May the idea, networks, and new information continue to grow in ways which will strengthen support for our youth as well as for their families. It's a whole new world and now is a great time to take a deeper look at the ways regional youth can connect with a world of opportunities.*

## Chapter 5 Discussion

This chapter considers the findings presented in Chapter 4 in relation to the literature. It first discusses various factors that contribute to the effectiveness of a whole of RRR community approach to equipping key influencers to support education and career pathway decisions, then discusses how a CBPR approach can be used to inform policy and practice in relation to whole of community-based education and career information for key influencers of student decisions.

A point of difference in this research is that we deliberately chose to focus not on students themselves, but rather on those who can *influence* the decisions of students in RRR communities. Research has shown that communities can play a strong role in influencing career and education pathways (Kilpatrick et al., 2019; Machimana et al., 2020; Turner, 2020). This includes key people within communities who because of their roles, knowledge or lived experience are best placed to reach and influence low SES students in RRR areas. They include families and caregivers, teachers, employers and others in the community who may have conversations with young people and adults considering education and career choices. This project generates new knowledge of how key influencers can work within communities to shape their own localised context and impact the pathways of RRR students.

The findings indicate that the three case study communities were very different in how they operated, their resources, and how they approached the project partnerships. However, across sites there were overarching themes and practices that provide important insights into the how, what and where to implement a whole of community approach, and so what is effective for equipping key influencers to support education and career pathway choices. The themes, discussed below, were community ownership, engagement and inclusion; flexibility, accessibility and authenticity; community orientation and maturity; and CBPR as a vehicle for promoting whole of community education and career pathways.

### What makes for an effective whole of community approach?

#### Community ownership, engagement and inclusion

The inclusion of, and engagement with, community members who have credibility and visibility, and who are well-integrated in their community is a critical part of community based participatory research (Israel, Schulz, & Parker, 2012; Labonte, 1994). Partnerships need to build on identified strengths and assets (Blumenthal, DiClemente, Braithwaite & Smith, 2013). In this project, drawing on a diversity of community members' knowledge (Israel et al., 1998) led to improved understanding of local context and experience, fostered local ownership of activities and outputs, and assisted in validation of the project findings (Dockery, 2020). There were some key mechanisms which assisted in driving community ownership, engagement and inclusion in the project. These included local pathway working parties and pathway brokers who acted as community-based incubators, activators and boundary crossers. The impact of these mechanisms is discussed below.

#### Community pathway working parties

CBPR design emphasises the involvement of community members in projects. The nature and extent of their influence on the governance, design and implementation of research can differ and lead to different forms of ownership (Blumenthal et al., 2013). This project used a community pathway working party in each site to provide local contextual input and play a key role in decisions made throughout project implementation phases. All working parties captured a broad diversity of key influencers of education and career pathway decisions in their community and had networks reaching across the community. Members were motivated by a shared desire to improve outcomes for their communities. Young people

were not included in the working parties because of the focus of this project on key influencers to fill the gap in the research.

The pathway working parties made significant contributions to a whole of community approach. They acted as *incubators*, creating a supportive environment for the development of new ideas and promoting connections with other efforts within the community (Spitzer-Shohat et al., 2020). The working parties assisted in testing ideas, explained secondary data, shared observations of their lived experience, provided insight and input into findings and progress and, most importantly, identified local contextual factors that might enhance or hinder understanding of education and career pathways in their community and how ideas could be translated into programs and participation (Harwood et al., 2017, 2017; Kilpatrick et al., 2019). For example, in two communities, statistical data indicated that there was limited experience of post-school education. Local knowledge gained from the working parties assisted the researchers in understanding that this was largely attributable to community culture (Kilpatrick et al., 2019; Southgate & Bennett, 2016). The working parties helped to navigate factors such as program delivery format preferences, the social/political divides in Rural Community 1, the invisibility of many jobs in local industries in Rural Community 2, and the siloed approach to career education in Rural Community 3.

Working parties also acted as internal activators within their community through developing a charter of action for enabling a whole of community approach. Further, they developed expected outcomes for the project and assisted in the development, implementation and evaluation of interventions and in confirming the relevance of findings to the local context. The breadth of experience and local contextual understanding in the working parties assisted with the identification of enhancers and hindrances to the effectiveness of programs for key influencers. Overall, the combination of three factors resulted in the selection of interventions that fitted local community contexts and were owned by the community. They (1) identified their community's needs in terms of education and career pathways advice, (2) identified the key influencer groups best placed to address these needs, and (3) selected interventions (*Parents Matter*, *Warm Connections*, *GRIPP*, *FutureTalk*) to improve the knowledge and confidence of key influencers. Working parties were therefore a key mechanism for engaging key influencers, and for the development and implementation of locally relevant activities that worked for that community (Israel et al., 1998).

Pathway working parties across all three sites engaged people with a range of the roles suggested in the national career education strategy: government, parents and carers, school leaders and teachers, and employers (Department of Education and Training, 2019). All went further to include community providers of VET and/or adult education: TTCs, TAFE, public libraries and/or neighbourhood houses. Rural Communities 1 and 2 also included people with roles in community sporting and other groups. Rural Community 3 had representation from the local Aboriginal community, whereas the other two communities did not. Employers were explicitly included in all communities as representatives of key local industries, rather than employers more generally, consistent with literature about programs that are effective in informing parents, as well as students about careers and employment (Herlina et al., 2019; Machimana et al., 2020; Santarossa & Woodruff, 2020; Woodroffe et al., 2017; Zimmerman, 2019).

### **Local pathway brokers as boundary crossers: bringing the community together**

The employment of a locally based pathway broker in each community played a critical role in connecting the institutions and subgroups within their community with each other, and connecting the researchers with the communities; they were key to the partnership as well as a whole of community approach. Pathway brokers acted as *boundary crossers* (Kilpatrick et al., 2008, 2002; Miller, 2008). A key local link between community, researchers and working party, they acted as community liaison, organised interventions, meetings and distributed evaluation tools. They joined up groups and key influencers, and drew on their

lived experience and knowledge of the community to increase project engagement and community ownership. The pathway brokers provided regular reflections and reporting on actions and progress, including input into data collection approaches. Pathway brokers were integral in creating co-learning processes that facilitated reciprocal transfer of knowledge, skills, capacity, and experience (Collins et al., 2018; Israel et al., 2012). The pathway broker as a knowledgeable, respected local resource, facilitated action for mutual benefit of all community and researchers (Israel et al., 1998).

Community trust of pathway brokers was important to an effective CBPR approach (Blumenthal et al., 2013). In Rural Community 1, local tensions affected trust – while not a widely shared view, it nonetheless negatively affected the engagement of some community members. In Rural Community 2, where the pathway broker was employed by local government, the combination of personal knowledge and community trust resulted in high community buy-in and engagement with the interventions. It was evident that having a well-integrated pathway broker is essential to the success of initiatives in a community, and that the broker must be trusted and seen as credible by their community to successfully play a boundary crosser role (Kilpatrick et al., 2008; Miller, 2008).

While the pathway brokers were key activators and boundary crossers, they were not the only boundary crossers active in the project. Local government played the role of boundary crosser in Rural Community 2 by employing the pathway broker in other work which was synergistic with the project and by developing a shared understanding with the researchers about desired project outcomes. The university was a boundary crossing institution in Rural Community 3, being credible both within the community and a part of the researchers, and so able to speak the language of both, and manage expectations of both partners in relation to what the project could achieve.

Pathway working parties and brokers played critical roles in all three communities, and what they did and how they did it appeared to influence the effectiveness of the project in their community. For example, the project's impact in Rural Community 1 was constrained by the limited engagement of schools in the working party and the project more generally. Project findings indicate that having a diversity of people who have credibility and visibility, and who are well-integrated in their community is critical to the success of community based participatory research. This assists in communication with the whole community (Blumenthal et al., 2013), and impacts on the willingness of people from all sections of the community to engage.

In line with the CBPR approach, involvement of community members is an essential part of any project. There is no one recipe for how to do this. This project indicates that searching for the right people may take some time and demands some commitment; 'don't just target the usual suspects'.

### **Flexibility, accessibility, sustainability and authenticity**

This project took place during a global pandemic, where all project sites faced considerable whole of community challenges including limits on social mobility; a move to learning at home for all students; the closure of university campuses; and a significant reduction in industry and community activity. The longer term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in areas such as post-school education and training pathways as well as youth employment foregrounded the importance of the project to the local community setting. It also highlighted the significance of identifying key influencers and supporting communities to best equip themselves for education and career pathways. Finding ways in which this project could continue and adapt to changed external contexts and also be responsive to the local contexts while remaining authentic and relevant, was essential. Three principles, flexibility, accessibility and authenticity, emerged as central to success of the project. They also should be applied in any future programs.

## *Flexibility*

The project demonstrated a flexible approach to planning and implementing intervention programs. By taking into account community context, researcher-community partnerships built on identified strengths and assets (Blumenthal et al., 2013). This was exemplified in our case study communities where it was evident that the flexible, strengths-based approach led to positive outcomes from the interventions. COVID-19 and bushfires tested the responsiveness of the whole of community approach. It was found sufficiently flexible to handle the unimagined crisis impacts in Rural Community 3. The re-targeted and re-designed intervention, *FutureTalk* was successful in meeting needs, as exemplified by one parent who reported a change in her son's perception of her role in his post-school decision making process, from that of outsider to valued contributor.

While many project participants would have preferred face to face meetings and events, all three communities moved to some online activity. The findings show that COVID-19 provided an opportunity for the sites to think differently and more innovatively about their interventions and to adapt them to what was happening in their community, in relation to both communication about interventions and their delivery format.

## *Accessibility and sustainability*

The online format made interventions more easily accessible for many participants, and the option for recording for later online viewing by those who could not make live sessions was appreciated. Online activity also led to more sustainable outcomes, with websites, social media pages and videos that can still be accessed and added to by the community over time.

In enabling a whole of community approach, programs and resources needed to be accessible to targeted participants by being delivered at locations, times and in modes that were suitable to them. Rural Community 3 targeted a small group of parents and was successful in engaging with them at an extremely difficult time, with positive feedback being received from parent participants, including in relation to delivery mode and timing. Rural Community 2 reached large numbers through their online events and resources. The timing of online *Parents Matter* training was negotiated to suit the lead parents in Rural Communities 1 and 2. The Rural Community 1 Careers Expo was not as well attended as expected due to clashes with other community events – which was unavoidable as the timing was dictated by the duration of project funding and COVID-19. COVID-19 also pushed the timing of other community events out toward the end of the year.

Considering local contextual factors to ensure accessibility to target groups is consistent with the literature which argues that there should be due consideration of proper design as well as the challenges of undertaking project work before a partnership can become effective (Israel et al., 1998).

## *Authentic place-based learning*

The project's findings confirm that education and career pathway information and support programs developed in partnership with RRR communities should consider principles of program design as well as local context to maximise their success. Delivery time and place are but one aspect of program design. In addition to events and resources being easily accessible, trust and authentic connections are essential in encouraging community participation. The local council in Rural Community 2 and university campus in Rural Community 3 provided 'credibility' to the project and its interventions. These bodies employed the pathway brokers, increasing trust and community willingness to engage with the project and its interventions.

The National Career Education Strategy notes that programs should be authentic for the context in which they are delivered (Department of Education and Training, 2019). The importance of authenticity of programs in engaging RRR key influencers and equipping them with information and confidence to support pathway decisions of others was a significant finding in this project. Rural Community 1's videos and Careers Expo, Rural Community 2's *Parents Matter* online Q&A and *GrIPP* panel sessions, and Rural Community 3's *FutureTalk* program evidenced the import of engaging people from the local community as experts on careers in local industries and in navigating education pathways. Working party members with relevant local knowledge assisted in ensuring authenticity of interventions. Industry representation on working parties assisted in engaging local industry in interventions, particularly in Rural Communities 1 and 2. Participants valued opportunities to interact with other members of the community and key stakeholders about post-school options in their region. Using community members and local practitioners ensured that a credible and trusted messenger was delivering the information, thereby supporting the successful uptake of the knowledge. While the researchers' external links brought resources to the communities, local people, particularly working party members, also had external links that were drawn upon.

These findings reinforce themes within the literature relating the importance of community connectedness to research (Blumenthal et al., 2013; Israel et al., 1998), the engagement of industry (Herlina et al., 2019; Machimana et al., 2020; Santarossa & Woodruff, 2020; Woodroffe et al., 2017; Zimmerman, 2019), and the importance of a bottom up approach to the selection of intervention programs. Local ownership of activities and outputs was fostered through the CBPR approach, and assisted in validation of the project findings (Dockery, 2020). CBPR also provided a model for the ways in which communities can work together using a local and regional lens, that can be adapted to context and need, and can be used to inform education and career pathways (Shergold et al., 2020).

The findings also link to literature around place-based learning. As described earlier, place-based learning is an approach that takes advantage of geography to create authentic, meaningful and engaging personalised learning for students (Gruenewald, 2003; Gruenewald & Smith, 2008). Some Australian states use place-based education plans to inform student learning and improve student outcomes. Education plans use a partnership approach by creating tailored and targeted programs which harness community knowledge, passion and expertise (Bryant et al., 1999; Victorian Department of Education, 2020). Place-based learning partnerships can involve local government, schools, TAFEs, universities, other government agencies, local businesses and industry, and community and cultural organisations.

In summary, findings support the principles of community based partnership approaches, as well as supporting the importance of career education which recognises and draws on local context. Relevant findings are that:

- many local stakeholders bring expert knowledge
- partnerships should build on strengths and assets
- communities are more likely to engage with initiatives which consider local context because they are seen to be relevant (Blumenthal et al., 2013; Israel et al., 1998; Shergold et al., 2020).

### **Community orientation and maturity**

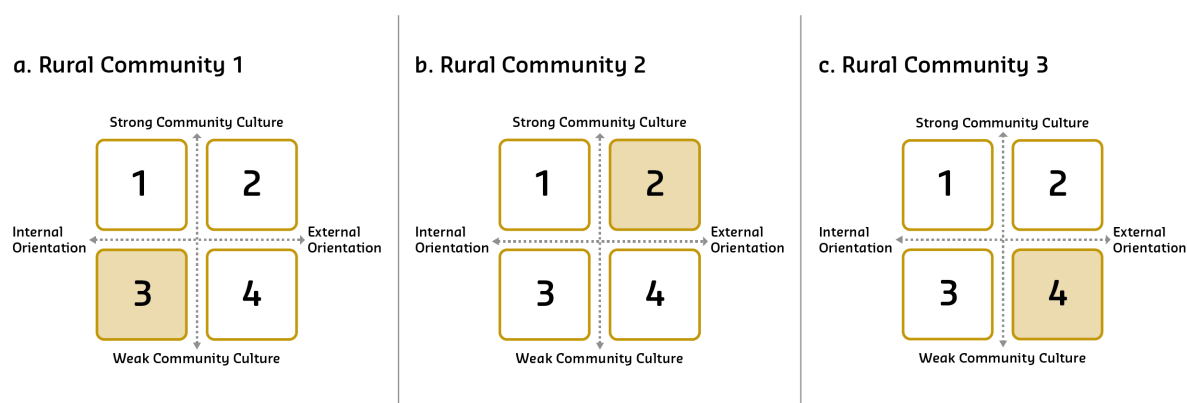
The project findings suggest that there are a number of external and internal factors that influence effective whole of community approach/efforts in this space, as well as the ways in which key influencers can be best equipped. Community orientation and community maturity worked hand in hand, influencing the effectiveness of the project's implementation in each community. To explore these aspects of the project, Sporn's (1996) model of university

culture was used in combination with Kilpatrick et al.'s (2008) concept of community maturity, and Kilpatrick et al.'s (2002) and Miller's (2008) boundary crosser attributes. These conceptualisations build a picture of how orientation and community maturity (labelled as “culture” in the refined model in Figure 6 below) intersect and in turn, how community culture can be influenced by the qualities and actions of those acting as boundary crossers.

The case studies were examined in view of these identified characteristics, to determine the effectiveness of the project within each community. Characteristics clustered around four key features: each community having access to one or more *boundary crossers*; a community's ability and/or willingness to act as a *mature community*; a community's ability and/or willingness to *work together*; and a community's willingness and/or ability to be *outward looking*. Communities can be placed in one of four quadrants according to externality of community orientation and strength of community culture (Figure 6). Given the basic assumptions and definitions, each quadrant indicates certain characteristics about a community at a particular point in time.

Because the project was intended to enact change this meant that it was more likely to be effective in a community with a strong community culture and external orientation. In the context of this project, a community in Quadrant 2 is able to draw on a strong community culture/maturity to work together. It also indicates that the community has a strong external orientation. A community with these characteristics is best positioned to effectively partner with an external agent, such as the researchers, to inform key influencers about education and career pathways using a CBPR approach. Such a community is also best placed to take ownership and continue to drive education and career pathway education in the future (sustainability).

It should also be noted that the programs offered across every site were very effective in some ways for some people, regardless of their community's quadrant allocation. Belonging to a particular quadrant should not be considered ‘eligibility’ criteria for engagement in the process/model. The outcomes across case study sites were not as black and white as these binaries indicate, and terms like ‘weak culture’ and ‘community maturity’ as descriptors of, for example, a community responding to severe crisis such as Rural Community 3, are not indicative of the minutiae of each community's circumstances. However, each community could be identified as broadly aligning to a quadrant as suggested in Figure 6. Community position will move over time as communities continue to be influenced by the nature of the external forces they face at any time. Figure 6 gives an indication of where the three case study communities were positioned at the point in time when the research was conducted.



**Figure 6. Community orientation and culture for each case study site**

Based on Sporn (1996) with definitions refined with Kilpatrick, Auckland, Johns, and Whelan (2008) and Miller (2008)

Quadrant 1 placement indicates a community that can function well in a stable environment. However, if the environment is not stable (for example, population growth or shifts in the economy), adaptation will be difficult. Communities in this quadrant would benefit from strong boundary crossers and a greater external focus. None of the cases fitted this quadrant.

Quadrant 2 placement indicates a community well-placed to respond flexibly to changes. These communities are capable of establishing and reaching shared goals through coordinated activities (despite internal differences) and have the people and resources to support this. Rural Community 2 fitted into this quadrant.

Quadrant 3 placement indicates there are challenges to be overcome if the community is to adapt to a changing internal and external environment. These can manifest in terms of tensions among internal groups or between internal and external agents, and demonstrate a need for a widespread understanding the community's situation within the larger context. A two-pronged approach with a focus on building relationships and encouraging an outward perspective would strengthen a community in this situation. Rural Community 1 fitted most closely within this quadrant.

Quadrant 4 placement indicates community action toward shared goals is hampered by divergent values or priorities, but the community is focused outwardly and considering its future. While the activities of the different subcultures are not coordinated with this orientation, the community can still adapt in a changing environment. To become even more effective, the community would benefit from focusing on developing a stronger, more mature culture, while continuing to maintain their external orientation. In the context of the crisis caused by a combination of bushfires and COVID-19, Rural Community 3 fitted into this quadrant.

Quadrant placement has implications for future action; what will work for a community in one quadrant may not be suitable for a community in a different quadrant. Rural Community 1 is a community in transition, currently undergoing rapid growth. As such, it may be headed towards Quadrant 4 as the economy shifts to a greater focus on tourism and people continue to relocate there. This will likely alter the orientation to be more external. The disasters experienced by Rural Community 3 are likely to have affected how the community was functioning at the time of study, and the nature of suggested future actions will change as it recovers.

### *Orientation*

In contrast to Rural Community 1, Rural Community 2 demonstrated an external orientation through its enthusiasm to work with the external university researchers, and continued responsiveness and engagement with the researchers. Rural Community 3 was also externally orientated, as demonstrated by having some external people on the pathway working party, and through the dual internal-external orientation of the university campus staff who took on the pathway broker role. These two communities were concerned for the 'big picture' ideas that their community were working towards, rather than focussing inwardly on their own more personal and fractured community needs.

Incomers connected more easily into the more externally orientated communities. In Rural Community 2 this allowed the community to access incomers' skills and use them toward community goals in organising the interventions. This was beneficial to both the community and the incomers personally, as they wanted to connect and contribute to their new community (Kilpatrick et al., 2011). Despite some involvement of incomers as lead parents, a more internal orientation existed in Rural Community 1, observed as tensions and a greater focus on personal needs. This hindered the project's effectiveness. As shown in the Rural Community 1 case study, this inward looking orientation was recognised by the council and working party as an endemic issue. Employment of the pathway broker by the external

university rather than through an internal community organisation may also have contributed to this internally orientated community's detachment from the project implementation.

As the findings demonstrate, all the communities were *responsive, flexible and adaptive* in what they offered. This was particularly evident in Rural Community 3 where a program, planned for roll out with Year 6 parents, was quickly replaced by a program for Year 12 parents in response to the impact of the bushfires and COVID-19. Such a flexible response was possible because of the external focus on community needs and extensive community external links. Rural Community 3 drew on a *local lens* to harness local and external resources to deliver *authentic, relevant and realistic activities and actions* that were effective.

The external orientation of Rural Communities 2 and 3 also enabled them to demonstrate shared community ownership of the project and promote sustainability in terms of continuing local education and career pathway programs after the project's end. Rural Community 1 showed a willingness to move forward with the project, with several individuals, one internal and one external organisation committing to progress sharing of education and career pathway information, including local industries' skill needs.

### *Community maturity*

The ability of a community to respond to make the most of the opportunity presented by the project appeared to be linked to community maturity or culture, as well as orientation. A strong community culture that could: react flexibly to change; work with subcultures within the community to reach common goals; and was ready to respond, was evident in Rural Community 2 to a greater extent than Rural Community 1, where community tensions impeded the project. Rural Community 2 pulled together a working party and a lead parent group with complementary skills sets with networks that reached across the community.

Community maturity as well as external orientation also assisted with community ownership and sustainability in Rural Community 2, where goals around education and career pathways were widely shared throughout the community. As a result, it was an obvious and simple step for the council to take the lead and apply for funding to continue work in this area.

### **Boundary crossers**

Boundary crossers are able to assist communities to share attitudes, values and beliefs, which are associated with readiness to respond, community maturity and strong community cultures which encompass subcultures. Boundary crossers were present in each community but operated differently. In Rural Community 1 though the pathway broker employed was from the community, the role was supported and paid for by the university, taking some of the ownership of the project away from the community. This was reflected in evaluation responses from community participants that spoke of their involvement becoming a burden. People were concerned that work was being delegated to community volunteers when the pathway broker who had a paid role should be doing it. Some participants also noted that schools, which many community members regarded as externally controlled institutions, were not doing enough work in the project. This also demonstrated the internal focus on individuals and the tensions within the community which meant the boundary crosser role was not as effective as it was in other sites.

Rural Community 2 embraced the pathway broker after the local council took ownership of the role. The pathway broker was held in high esteem by the community and had relevant communication, project management and technical skills. The broker was able to draw together a diverse team that reached into all parts of the community. The result was a highly effective outreach into the community that was creatively adapted around a COVID-safe response. The broker's boundary crossing between council, industry, and subgroups of

parents and community groups, coordinated an outward looking working party that was highly focused on the subgroups and needs of their community.

The university took on the role of pathway broker in Rural Community 3 which could have moved ownership of the project away from the community. However, the university staff/researchers were also members of the community, and so brought a dual perspective, making them ideally placed to act as boundary crossers. While *FutureTalk* was driven by pathway broker leadership (who also delivered the program), these university staff were also supported by the working party who had wide reach across the community. The planned future and expanded offering of education and career programs for key influencers in this community demonstrates that the model has sustainability.

While local government supported the project in both Rural Communities 1 and 2, it appears that having the pathway broker employed by a local institution as in Rural Communities 2 and 3 legitimised the project (Kilpatrick et al., 2002) and assisted in gaining community engagement.

## Summary

The three communities varied in the ease with which they worked together internally, and with external parties: university researchers, the *Parents Matter* trainer and the Beacon Foundation. The differences appear to be related to the externality of community orientation, and the strength of community culture or community maturity. These differences were visible in communities': ability and willingness to partner with the university researchers; commitment of trusted local institutions; quality and credibility of boundary crossers; past history of working together; and skills and expertise of community members who are willing to volunteer to work for the benefit of their community.

## Equipping key influencers of education and career pathway choice

The findings suggest that while there are a number of factors that influence how a whole of community approach can best equip key influencers to support pathway choices of both young people and adults, the overarching factor is understanding community context and matching program design to context. Off the shelf generic programs will not be as effective as a program that understands and takes account of community need, capability and context. The Recommendations listed in Chapter 6 set out a model that will effectively equip key influencers in RRR communities to support education and career pathway choices.

## CBPR and promoting whole of community education and career pathways

The identification of such a broad range of stakeholders; and of the notions of 'partnerships', 'communities', 'shared responsibility', 'flexibility'; and articulating 'pathways' between elements of education and careers, makes a clear statement that research in this space must be collaboratively driven. In employing CBPR, the project was underpinned by a collaborative, partnership approach which integrated community involvement in all project stages. The CBPR design highlighted the importance of multiple local expert perspectives to develop and deliver programs (Rhodes, Malow, & Jolly, 2010), to build the capacity of key influencers within communities. Local input was the key factor in ensuring that the programs were accessible to, and regarded as authentic by, those in the community who were well placed to act as key influencers of others' pathway decisions.

CBPR proved to be an effective method for partnering with the three case study communities. CBPR is a strength-based approach that draws on community strengths while recognising limitations (Collins et al., 2018). Project experiences demonstrate that

researchers must identify the relevant resources available within rural communities for the purpose, in this case, of engaging key influencers and improving their understanding of career and education pathways. Resources include community institutions, business and industries, groups, and formal and informal leaders. Equally important is an understanding of community political and social dynamics (Israel et al., 1998). Such understandings of community are essential for drawing on multiple perspectives to address local issues through a partnership approach (Rhodes et al., 2010).

The three case study communities were very different in how they operated, their resources, and how they approached the project partnerships. Schools were members of all three working parties, but their commitment varied from highly involved to providing minimal engagement. In one site, it became evident that despite a strong commitment and acknowledgment of the need for collaboration and partnership in career education, long running divisions and community social dynamics needed to be overcome to achieve project goals. In another site, community dynamics served to consolidate and expand what had been achieved through the project partnership, even with the challenges of COVID-19. In the third site, previous career education efforts had been siloed. The impetus of a coordinated partnership approach allowed synergies to be realised, and the community to take ownership. While external partners cannot change these dynamics, they must take them into account in project processes.

Building upon prior positive working relationships is a significant enabler for conducting community based research (Johns, Kilpatrick & Whelan, 2007). The project team was able to use pre-existing relationships or contacts within its case study communities to develop research partnerships. A history of working collaboratively with communities is quite critical in rural communities, and that despite being 'outsiders', familiar, known researchers can often be more effective than external consultants in developing trust and in establishing productive relationships (Kilpatrick, Katersky Barnes, Woodroffe, & Arnott, 2021).

It became apparent that involvement of community members in all parts and stages of research (Blumenthal et al., 2013) is not necessarily what every community might want or be ready to take on. The findings indicate that the key areas where communities wanted input and ownership were:

- high-level project implementation
- deciding on individual programs and resources, including involvement of local experts and stakeholders
- the timing, location and delivery of programs
- promotion of programs
- the confirmation (or not) of project findings
- developing future actions.

Where researchers best provide input was in:

- project design
- evaluation
- ethics
- member checking
- collating findings
- collaborating on recommendations which have relevance and meaning to the local context.

The three communities were comfortable with different levels of leadership and involvement in the areas where they wanted input. This indicates that in a partnership with external actors

such as the researchers, there should be discussion about options for leadership and involvement in different project stages so that communities themselves can make an informed decision about what parts of the project they would like to lead, what areas they want to be involved in, and what parts the researchers might lead.

All three communities had some sort of action plan for future education and careers pathway programs for key influencers at the end of the project. The CBPR approach allowed ownership and leadership of the area to move from a partnership with the researchers toward community ownership. This was most evident in Rural Community 2 but occurred to some extent in the other two communities. This suggests that CBPR can lead to sustainability through building community capacity to act in the education and career pathway area.

## Conclusion

The project findings indicate that whole of RRR community approaches must be cognisant of local context and draw on local expertise and ownership to be successful. Partnerships must take account of the pragmatic elements of program or resource delivery (timing, location, delivery mode, place-based learning) which will affect engagement and impact. These elements should be driven by the community, not researchers, and should involve elements of good practice in program design. Likewise, the authenticity and relevance of interventions, as decided by the community, will also add to success of interventions and the engagement of key influencers.

The project shines light on the many contextual characteristics that must be taken into account in the design of a sustainable whole of RRR community approach to education and career pathway education. It demonstrates that CBPR is an effective methodology to underpin research and develop community partnerships. While some RRR communities have an orientation and community culture that makes CBPR easier to apply than other communities, CBPR can help build the capacity of RRR communities to engage in productive partnerships such as those in this project. CBPR values and prioritises local input into the design and evaluation of programs and resources, while also providing external expert knowledge that can be applied and adapted for local context. The result is more flexible, accessible and authentic programs that are likely to engage RRR key influencers.

## Chapter 6 Conclusion and recommendations

This project strongly suggests that a strengths-based whole of community approach is effective in engaging rural key influencers of student education and career pathway choices in learning about career options and education pathways. A partnership approach between communities and external actors such as universities, employing CBPR methodology can be effective. It is essential that external actors develop a clear understanding of the community, its resources and political and social dynamics. Engaging trusted local institutions such as schools and local government, having a dedicated local-external liaison person; and involving a diversity of community members who have credibility and visibility, all assist in achieving mutually beneficial outcomes for community and external actors.

The project findings also align with recommendations from a number of recent reports and policy documents relevant to careers advice and education pathways including The Education Council's *Looking to the Future - Report of the review of senior secondary pathways into work, further education and training* (Shergold et al., 2020) as well as *Future Ready: A student focused national career education strategy* (Department of Education and Training, 2019). Using a CBPR approach provided an understanding of the ways in which communities can work together using a local and regional lens that can be adapted to context and need to inform post-school education and career pathways as recommended in recent policy documents in Australia (Shergold et al., 2020).

Recently, in 2021 the Tasmanian Government announced a suite of reforms to support recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, including statewide *Jobs Tasmania Local Networks* to help match Tasmanians of all ages with available jobs through education and training and careers advice (Premier's Economic and Social Recovery Advisory Council, 2021). Such efforts include an understanding of the ways in which communities can work together using a local and regional lens that can be adapted to context and need to inform post-school education and career pathways.

The value of communities partnering with others using their own resources, skills, expertise, knowledge and places to promote awareness of education and career pathways for low SES and RRR students, is boundless with the right framework of support and partnerships.

### Recommendations

The first set of recommendations (Recommendations 1-14) are a model for communities wanting to work internally and partner with external agents to equip key influencers to support education and career pathway choice of community members. The second set of recommendations (15-18) apply more generally to education and career pathway research and career education in RRR communities.

#### **A model for communities wanting to work internally and partner with external agents to equip key influencers to support education and career pathway choice of community members**

1. Involve key local stakeholders early. Include schools and other locally based education providers, e.g. neighbourhood houses, trade training centres (TTCs). Consider including regional education systems, e.g. universities, tertiary and further education (TAFE) providers, and state departments of education.
2. Set up a working party or similar oversight arrangement with the key internal and external stakeholders as members. Draw in and include diverse members from local industry/employers, local government, families, equity groups, sports clubs, non-government organisations and community groups with an interest in young people, education and/or skill development. Ensure the working party has wide-reaching

networks into all sectors, subgroups and layers of the community. The working party should be engaged at key stages of any program: (1) identify the community's needs in terms of education and career pathways knowledge, (2) identify the key influencer groups best placed to address these needs, (3) select interventions most appropriate to improve the knowledge and confidence of key influencers.

3. Think about shared ownership of the program. Do you need to gradually move ownership from external to internal parties?
4. Appoint a dedicated local human resource to drive the program (a pathway broker in this project). Have that resource employed by a trusted and credible local institution. The broker and/or institution should act as a driver and activator in the program and make sure that external and internal interventions and programs are coordinated.
5. Consider community needs based on statistical data, local knowledge about changes to the internal and external environment and, crucially, local understanding of contextual factors that act as constraints and enhancers to local people's education and career pathway choices (see Appendix, Template B).
6. Does your community have a shared understanding regarding education and career pathways? If not, think about how your pathway broker and others in the community can act as boundary crossers to help develop shared understandings of community needs and goals in the education and career pathways area.
7. Consider who are key influencers in the community; which key influencers should be targeted to meet your goal, and the types of interventions that may work for your community (see Appendix, Template A).
8. Draw on skills, resources and networks of external and internal working party members and other relevant people/organisations inside and outside the community in selecting, designing, or adapting programs from elsewhere. Consider the skills of people who may have recently moved in as well as longer established residents. Ensure programs are translated to the local context (see Appendix, Template C).
9. Interventions should be accessible to community members – time, place, delivery format. They should be approachable, welcoming and translated to happen organically in the local context. Ensure opportunities for community members to ask questions, engage in feedback mechanisms as part of interventions. Online resources that are accessible beyond the intervention leave a legacy for community use and should be part of any community's diverse suite of interventions.
10. Interventions must be authentic and ideally place-based; delivered by people who are part of the community, have come from the community, or understand the community, e.g. are closely aligned with the community or similar communities.
11. Any program must be flexible and responsive to internal or external change.
12. How interventions and programs are promoted matters. Word of mouth is particularly effective. Use the networks of the working party – make sure all sections of the community are covered through the diversity of formal and informal communication channels.
13. Monitor and evaluate the interventions and your overall progress. Involve the working party. Make changes according to evaluation results.
14. A sustainable model has community ownership, is a partnership between community and relevant external parties, is driven from within the community, resourced on an ongoing basis, and monitored to anticipate future needs and external changes.

### **Recommendations for education and career pathway research and careers education programs in RRR communities.**

15. When designing RRR education and careers pathway information or advice programs, rural regions centred on rural service centres appear to be an appropriate

scale, rather than small communities or large regions with several major service centres.

16. There should be a focus on education and careers pathway information programs for key influencers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student pathway choice which are culturally appropriately designed for RRR settings in partnership with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.
17. Community based Participatory Research should be a methodology of choice to engage RRR communities in education and career pathway research.
18. Universities should partner with RRR communities to deliver interventions which focus on education and career pathways and use placed based learning principles.

## **Future research opportunities**

- The model set out in Recommendations 1-14 should be modified and tested in other communities, both RRR and urban. This will build and consolidate the evidence for such an approach to be used effectively.
- Research which adapts or modifies the model for Aboriginal communities, other groups such as migrant communities and other equity groups would be useful.

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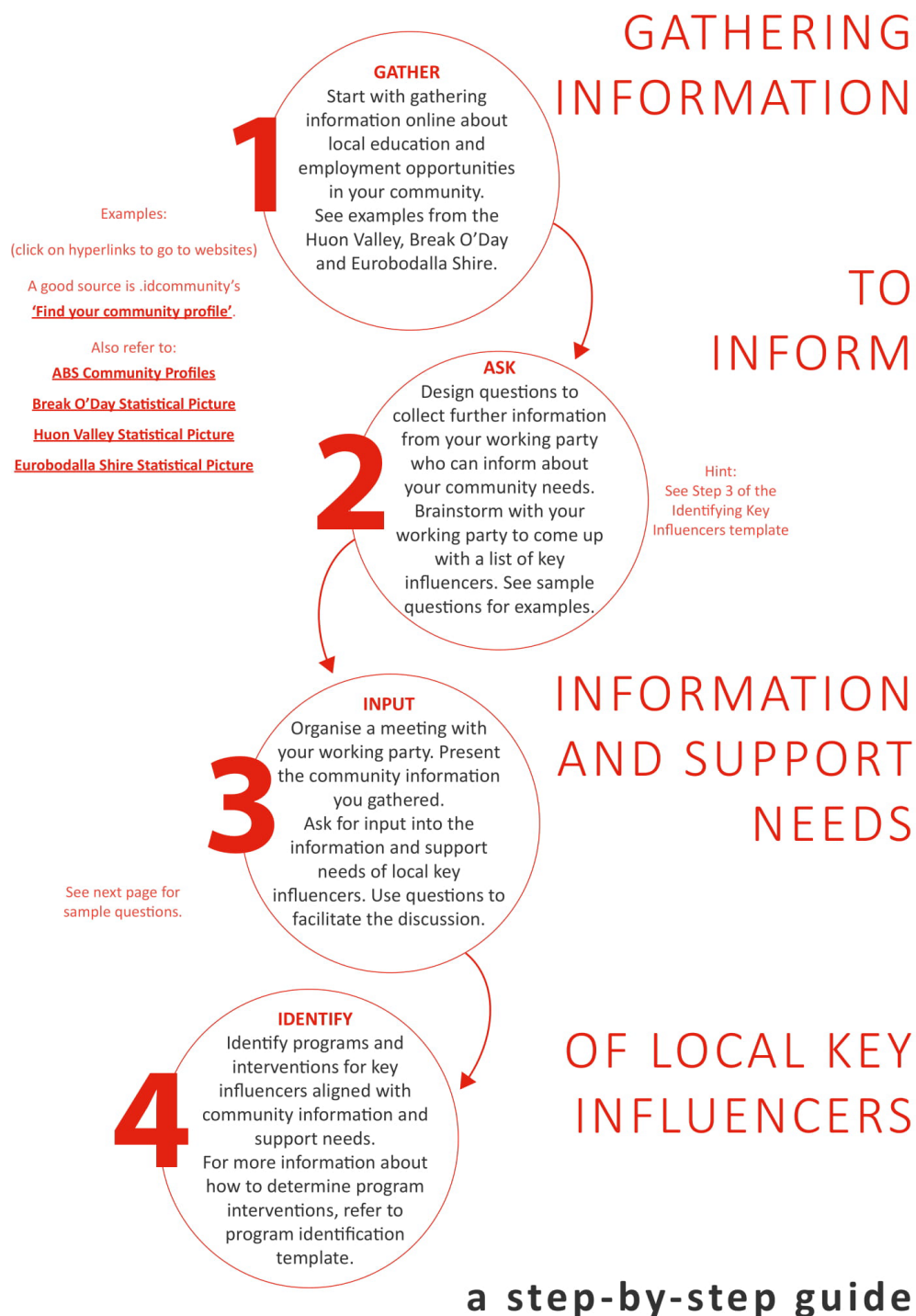
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# Appendices

## Appendix A: Template for identifying key influencers in rural communities



## Appendix B: Template for gathering information to inform information and support needs of local key influencers



sample

questions

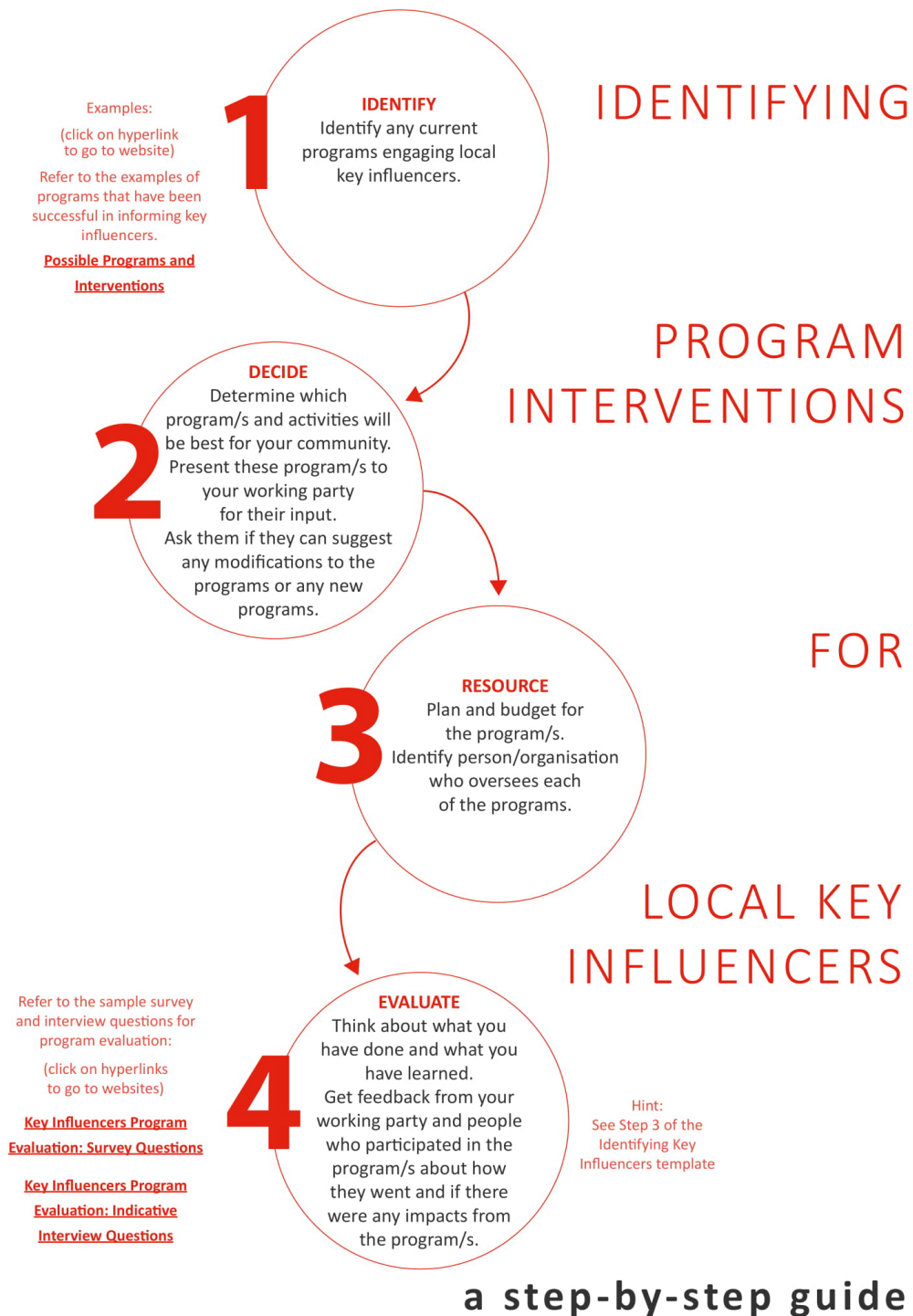
for

working  
party  
members

Thinking about your local community:

- \* How are you involved locally with regard to further education or career pathways (e.g. educator, guardian, mentor, employer)?
- \* How would you describe how your community thinks about continuing education post school? Would you change this narrative if you could? How?
- \* Who/what are the biggest local influencers about education and local career pathways? (Who do people talk to about continuing their education or career opportunities?)
- \* What other sources of information could be helpful?
- \* What other programs or support would make the biggest difference/could be most helpful in supporting locals (e.g. young people, parents, employers) to know more about what opportunities exist post school?
- \* Are you aware of any career education programs that run locally or elsewhere? If so, who is involved/how do they run?

## Appendix C: Template for identifying program interventions for local key influencers



## Appendix D: Selected programs and interventions for key influencers

| PROGRAMS /INTERVENTIONS                                       | DESCRIPTION                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Warm Connections                                              | <p>Warm Connections provide general introduction to VET and higher education pathways for rural adults not currently in education or training, through locally provided information. Activities include:</p> <p>One to two days of workshop for local library, neighbourhood house and other community organisations staff and volunteers, to assist adults to access tertiary education. The staff and volunteers will be trained to become front line, first point of contact for locals interested in VET and higher education.</p> <p>Promotional stands set up in the library, neighbourhood house and other community organisations. The stands display course information guides and brochures, university banners, and digital imagery on television monitors.</p> <p>See: Douglas, J., Kilpatrick, S., Katersky Barnes, R., Alderson, R. &amp; Flittner, N. (2020). Embedding tertiary education in rural communities: Building 'Warm Connections'. <i>Studies in Continuing Education</i>, 42(1), 61-74.</p>                                     |
| Beacon Foundation Growth Industry Preparation Program (GriPP) | <p>One-day program to raise teacher, parent and other staff awareness of skills shortages and career opportunities within the rural community and around Tasmania.</p> <p>Site tour: Held on site, industries showcase the workforce and future career opportunities to parents/families, teachers, and other community members.</p> <p>Work Readiness Education: Following the site tour, participants attend a workshop that builds confidence and an understanding of workplace expectations. Industry mentors support in enriching participant connection with each workplace, workforce and growth area.</p> <p>See Beacon Foundation Growth Industry Preparation <a href="https://ebeacon.net.au/gripp/#:~:text=Beacon%20Foundation's%20Growth%20Industry%20Preparation,and%20career%20opportunities%20within%20Tasmania.">https://ebeacon.net.au/gripp/#:~:text=Beacon%20Foundation's%20Growth%20Industry%20Preparation,and%20career%20opportunities%20within%20Tasmania.</a></p>                                                                   |
| Parents Matter                                                | <p>Aim: Train parents to organise events/activities to familiarise other parents and families with career pathways and associated education pathways.</p> <p>Phase 1: Volunteer parents/carers/grandparents recruited to lead and facilitate a community based learning group in the community.</p> <p>Phase 2: Lead parents commence accredited place-based training program: VET units of competence.</p> <p>Phase 3: Community based learning group meets 2-3 times in community settings to increase parental understanding of post-year 10 educational and career options.</p> <p>Outcome: Community learning group continues in the community: supported, resourced, networks developed, stronger connections with education providers.</p> <p>See: Kilpatrick, S., Burns, G., Katersky Barnes, R., Kerrison, M. and Fischer, S. (2020) "Parents Matter: Empowering Parents to Inform Other Parents of Post-Year 10 Pathway Options in Disadvantaged Communities", <i>Australian and International Journal of Rural Education</i>, 30(3), 21-35.</p> |
| Feast of Knowledge                                            | <p>Take teachers and parents on tours of industries and discusses education pathways.</p> <p>See: University of Tasmania A 'Feast of Knowledge:' aquaponics and careers in the food industry <a href="https://www.media.utas.edu.au/general-news/all-news/a-feast-of-knowledge-aquaponics-and-careers-in-the-food-industry">https://www.media.utas.edu.au/general-news/all-news/a-feast-of-knowledge-aquaponics-and-careers-in-the-food-industry</a></p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| Place-based Curriculum Materials                              | <p>Engage teachers with local industry and assists them to develop associated materials that align with the Australian Curriculum.</p> <p>See: Woodroffe, J., Kilpatrick, S., Williams, B. &amp; Jago, M. (2017). Preparing rural and regional students for the future world of work: Developing authentic career focussed curriculum through a collaborative partnership model. <i>Australian and International Journal of Rural Education</i>, 27(3), 158–173.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| Speed Careering                                               | <p>Interactive and informal way to broaden parents' knowledge of specific job requirements for their children, whilst engaging with a range of different positions found within a particular industry, sector and professions.</p> <p>See: Kilpatrick, S., Burns, G., Katersky Barnes, R., Kerrison, M. and Fischer, S. (2020) Parents Matter: Empowering Parents to Inform Other Parents of Post-Year 10</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |

| PROGRAMS<br>/INTERVENTIONS   | DESCRIPTION                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                              | Pathway Options in Disadvantaged Communities, <i>Australian and International Journal of Rural Education</i> , 30(3), 21-35.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| Industry-education<br>forums | Informs industry partners of education pathways and introduces them to educators from school, VET and higher education.<br>See: Woodroffe, J., Kilpatrick, S., Williams, B. & Jago, M. (2017). Preparing rural and regional students for the future world of work: Developing authentic career focussed curriculum through a collaborative partnership model. <i>Australian and International Journal of Rural Education</i> , 27(3), 158–173. |

## Appendix E: Project website

[utas.edu.au/arts-law-education/research/informing-key-influencers-of-regional-and-rural-students](https://utas.edu.au/arts-law-education/research/informing-key-influencers-of-regional-and-rural-students)

Study with us

Who we are

Research

News

Events

People

Contact us

Student Resources

Staff Resources (Secure)

# Informing key influencers of regional and rural students education and career pathway choices

In partnership with the University of Wollongong, the University of Tasmania is undertaking two nationally funded projects to improve access to information about higher education study options, pathways and careers for low socioeconomic status students and those who influence them.

**Key influencers project** (project completion date: 1 April 2021)

**Careers advice project** (project completion date: 31 October 2020)

The projects are funded by the [National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education](#) and are being conducted under the Australian Government Department of Education, Skills and Employment National Priorities Pool program.

## Key influencers project

This project aims to design, trial and evaluate whole community, place-based, coordinated career and education pathway information and support.

The project will establish career and education pathway working parties in three case study communities in two States, each resourced with a pathway broker. Working parties and communities will be made aware of a suite of programs and interventions found to be successful in informing and influencing key influencers of student pathway choice. Working parties and communities will be assisted through a process led by the researchers to select and/or modify programs and interventions aligned with community needs. These will be trialled and evaluated.

### Interventions

**Parents Matter:** Train parents to organise events to familiarise other parents and families with career pathways and associated education pathways. For more details, refer to the [Parents Matter](#) website.

pathways and associated education pathways. For more details, refer to the [Parents Matter](#) website.

**Warm Connections:** Training and information resources for local library, Neighbourhood House and other community organisations staff and volunteers, to assist rural adults to make informed decisions about undertaking further and higher education and training.

**Growth Industry Preparation Program (GrIPP):** Program run by Beacon Foundation to raise teacher, parent and other staff awareness of skills shortages and career opportunities within the local community and around Tasmania.

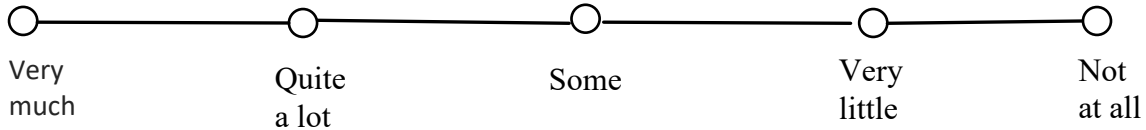
### Project resources

- Template for identifying local key influencers in your community
- Template for gathering information to inform information and support needs of local key influencers
- Template for identifying program interventions for local key influencers in your community
- Huon Valley Parents Matter
- Online GrIPP - Influencing the influencers
- Parents Matter videos
- Summer on the farm - next steps - Regional Development of Australia : Education pathways to jobs in agriculture

### Team

|                          |                                                                                                                            |
|--------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| University of Tasmania   | Professor Sue Kilpatrick<br>Dr. Nicoli Barnes<br>Dr. Jessica Woodroffe<br>Dr. Robin Katersky Barnes<br>Dr. Subhash Koirala |
| University of Wollongong | Ms Kylie Austin<br>Professor Sarah O'Shea<br>Professor Julia Coyle                                                         |

## Appendix F: Working party survey – Project commencement

1. What are your roles in this community? Please tick (✓) in the box that most applies:
  - ☐ Parent/carer, grandparent
  - ☐ School leader, teacher, trainer or other education related
  - ☐ Council elected member or staff
  - ☐ Community organisation (eg service club, sports club)
  - ☐ Employer
  - ☐ Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_
2. Who do you talk to in your community about education and career pathways? Please tick (✓) in the box that most applies:
  - ☐ My children/grandchildren/other young relatives
  - ☐ My students
  - ☐ My employees
  - ☐ My friends
  - ☐ Unemployed people or people looking to change careers
  - ☐ Other young people
  - ☐ Other adults
3. How would you rate your knowledge of education and career pathways? Please tick (✓) in the correct circle:  


Very much                      Quite a lot                      Some                      Very little                      Not at all
4. What do you expect from this project for yourself and for the community?

## Appendix G: Working party interview questions – Project commencement

1. Tell me about yourself and your roles in this community.  
[prompt] - participating, volunteering, paid work
2. How did you find out about the project?
3. Why did you agree to become one of the community pathway working member?
4. What do you expect from the project?  
[prompts] for yourself, for the community, your commitment/involvement, from the project team, from the working party
5. This project is about equipping people such as yourself with more information and resources about post school education and career pathways. What groups of people in the community do you interact with who might be thinking about their education and career choices? What kinds of things do you talk about in relation to education and careers?  
[prompts] young people, people who are working now, people thinking about entering or re-entering the workforce, people studying for interest
6. How much do you think you know about education and career pathways?
7. What, if anything would you like to know more about?
8. Which groups of people in your community are influential in student choices about education and career pathways?
9. How could those people be best informed and supported to assist students to make choices about education and career pathways?  
[prompts] what do you think they need to know? More about jobs of the future? What employers are looking for? University? TAFE/VET? How would they prefer to get information?
10. Any other comments?

## Appendix H: Working party survey – Project end

1. After your participation in the project, how would you rate your knowledge of education and career pathways? Please tick (✓) in the correct circle:

○ ————— ○ ————— ○ ————— ○ ————— ○

Very much                      Quite a lot                      Some                      Very little                      Not at all

2. How would you describe the project in helping you to learn about education and career options?

- ☐ Extremely useful
- ☐ Very useful
- ☐ Somewhat useful
- ☐ A little bit useful
- ☐ No use to me at all

3. After your participation in the project, how confident do you feel about speaking to your children/employees/students/(other) about what is available after grade 10 now?

- ☐ Very confident and fully informed about options post year 10
- ☐ Fairly confident but I would like a little more information
- ☐ Somewhat confident, but there is still more I need to know
- ☐ I feel I can talk to my children/employees/students/(other), but there is a lot more I need to know
- ☐ Not at all confident

## Appendix I: Working party interview questions – Project end

1. How did you think the pathway working party meetings went? How the groups worked together?  
[prompts] What worked well? What could have been improved? Were there the right community people on the working party?
2. How did you think the intervention selection process went?  
[prompts] Did the project team provide the right information and support to help you select interventions?
3. Tell us about how the interventions went? What do you think were their strengths and limitations?  
[prompts] Were they the right interventions? Did enough people participate in the interventions? What worked well? What could have been done better? Are you aware of any outcomes from the interventions?
4. Has your involvement in the project changed your understanding of post-school education and career options for young people and adults in this community?
5. Do you think the project helped change community understanding of and support for post-school education and career options for young people and adults in this community? How?
6. What do you think is the likelihood that the community will continue the interventions and pathway working party?
7. What do you think is the likelihood that the community will continue some other form of coordination of information about education and career pathways?
8. Is there anything else that you as a working party member have learned from participating in this project?
9. Is there anything else that you think the community has learned from this project?
10. How well did the overall project meet your expectations? Any other comments about your experience or the project more broadly?

## Appendix J – Pilot program participant survey questions

1. How would you describe yourself with regards to participating in this program? Please tick (✓) all that apply:

- ☐ Parent/carer, grandparent
- ☐ School leader, teacher, trainer or other education related
- ☐ Community organisation (eg service club, sports club)
- ☐ Employer
- ☐ Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

2. How did you hear about this program? Please tick (✓) all that apply:

- ☐ Facebook
- ☐ School newsletter
- ☐ From a friend
- ☐ From a community member
- ☐ Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

3. Before doing this program, how would you rate your knowledge of career options after school? Please tick (✓) the option that most applies:

- ☐ Very much
- ☐ Quite a lot
- ☐ Some
- ☐ Very little
- ☐ Not at all

4. Before doing this program, how would you rate your knowledge of education pathways after grade 10? Please tick (✓) the option that most applies:

- ☐ Very much
- ☐ Quite a lot
- ☐ Some
- ☐ Very little
- ☐ Not at all

5. How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? Please tick (✓) the option that most applies in each given row:

|                                                                                           | Strongly disagree     | Disagree              | Undecided             | Agree                 | Strongly agree        |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Today's program provided me with improved knowledge about the world of work.              | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Today's program provided me with improved knowledge of career options after school.       | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Today's program provided me with improved knowledge of education pathways after grade 10. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

|                                                                                                                                            | Strongly disagree     | Disagree              | Undecided             | Agree                 | Strongly agree        |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Today's program gave me more confidence about speaking to my children/employees/students /(other) about career options after school.       | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Today's program gave me more confidence about speaking to my children/employees/students /(other) about education pathways after grade 10. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

6. Do you think this program would be best delivered online or face-to-face ? Why or why not?

---

7. Which part of the program has been the most helpful? Why?

---

8. Is there anything you would like to learn more about with regards to education and career options after grade 10?

---

9. Do you have any other ideas or comments for us?

---

## Appendix K – Pilot program participant interview questions

1. How did you find out about [name of program]?
2. Why did you decide to attend [name of program]?
3. What did you find most useful? Why?  
[prompts] Industry, business and education speakers, tours, take home resources, online resources.
4. Which parts not so useful; and why?  
[prompts] Industry, business and education speakers, tours, take home resources, online resources.
5. Before you participated in [name of program], have your children/employees/students/(other) people spoken with you about what they would like to do in terms of [post school] education or careers? What did they talk to you about?
6. During/after you participated in [name of program], have you spoken with your children /employees/students/(other) people about what they would like to do in terms of [post school] education or careers?
7. Were these conversations different than those you may have had before you participated in [name of program]? How did [name of program] help you with these conversations?
8. Have you spoken with other community members about [name of program]? Can you tell me a bit about those conversations?
9. Impact of COVID-19 - good and bad on project (e.g.- online meetings, creation of digital resources etc.)? As a parent or community member, how effectively do you think we could use online tools for community education activities?
10. How do you feel that work in this area needs to be done, priorities for the future in the community?
11. What do you feel is the best model for a community wide approach to career and future pathways?
12. Any other comments?

## Appendix L: Project sites, evaluation methods employed, and participants

|                                                                               | RURAL<br>COMMUNITY<br>1 | RURAL<br>COMMUNITY<br>2 | RURAL<br>COMMUNITY<br>3           |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Evaluation Surveys                                                            |                         |                         |                                   |
| Working Party members - project commencement                                  | 8                       | 8                       | 8                                 |
| Working Party members – post interventions, at third meeting                  | 4                       | 3                       | 11                                |
| Intervention participants - post intervention                                 | 27                      | 16                      | 1                                 |
| Semi-structured individual and group interviews (face-to-face, Zoom or phone) |                         |                         |                                   |
| Working party members – project commencement                                  | 11                      | 10                      | 13                                |
| Working party members – post interventions, at third meeting                  | 5                       | 4                       | 11                                |
| Intervention facilitators/leaders – post interventions                        | 3                       | 8                       | (pathway broker reflection notes) |
| Intervention participants                                                     | 1                       | 0                       | 3                                 |
| Observations, reflections and field notes                                     |                         |                         |                                   |
| Local pathway brokers                                                         | 1                       | 1                       | 2                                 |
| Research staff                                                                | 4                       | 4                       | 1                                 |
| Community forums                                                              |                         |                         |                                   |
| Community stakeholders                                                        | 21                      | 23                      | 4                                 |