

## LISTENING TO THE COMMUNITY ON STUDENT RETENTION

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### Abstract

This paper draws from a large longitudinal study into issues related to student retention beyond the compulsory years of schooling and gives voice to a commonly-overlooked set of stakeholders, namely those in the community. Although many studies report on students' and teachers' opinions of the influence of the community on student engagement and retention, very little is found based on data from the community members themselves. This paper provides an analysis of 11 in-depth interviews carried out with members of the community during the three-year mixed-methods research project on student retention in rural, regional, and disadvantaged areas of Tasmania. Of the themes that emerged, the most salient was that of the provision of educational pathways for students. Other themes included job opportunities, both as a positive and negative influence on student retention, the responsibilities of the community from the perspectives of community members themselves, and their views of the importance of parents and teachers in relation to retention.

### Introduction

This paper focusses on one component of a very large mix of influences and factors related to student retention beyond the compulsory years of schooling in rural and regional areas of disadvantage, namely that of the community voice. Contextualised in the state of Tasmania, the study highlights issues of retention that arise throughout Australia (see, e.g., Alloway & Dalley-Trim, 2009; Gemici, Bednarz, Karmel, & Lim, 2014; Jordan, Kostandini, & Myderezi, 2012; Khoo & Ainley, 2005) and internationally (see, e.g., Clifton, 2013; Haywood et al., 2009; Sheldon, 2007). Schools exist in communities and as such, there are opportunities for the community to have an influence – positive or negative (or to have no influence at all) – on the educational pathways chosen by students in local schools. As part of a large study of retention beyond the compulsory years in rural and regional Tasmania, students, teachers, principals, parents and community members were canvassed on factors relating to students staying on at school. Although all participants in the project could respond about the influence of the community, this paper examines specifically the input of community members themselves. Other studies have reported on views about the community from other interested parties such as students, teachers, and parents (e.g., Byun, Meece, Irvin, & Hutchins, 2012; Sanders, 2001, 2003; Sheldon, 2003, 2007; Sheldon & Epstein, 2005) but there appears to be little Australian research with data from the community itself. As part of a large general study of school-community involvement in South Australia, Gregoric (2013) included interviews with members of the wider community. Although not the focus of the research, some of the comments reflected initiatives supporting retention.

Kilpatrick and Abbott-Chapman (2002) surveyed rural Year 10 leavers in Tasmania in the context of social capital, finding that *knowledge resources* related to networks, and *identity resources* related to trust and shared values, were the foundation for building social capital. They concluded that social capital was “a community rather than individual characteristic that is central to the discussions

of social cohesion, citizenship and social development” (p. 46). Other studies have come to similar conclusions about the community’s social capital impact on students’ intentions and outcomes (e.g., Byun et al., 2012; Israel, Beaulieu, & Hartless, 2001; Kilpatrick, Field, & Falk, 2003; Semo, 2011; Sun, 1999), as well as on their increased attendance while at school (e.g., Sanders, 2003; Sheldon, 2003, 2007; Sheldon & Epstein, 2005). Semo (2011) sets the scene for interest in the community by claiming that “[s]ome evidence suggests that the influence of community networks can even help to offset some of the effects of socio-economic disadvantage” (p. 1). The themes related to community capital captured by the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) include: *informal networks* such as student teacher relations (Semo & Karmel, 2011), connectedness with the school (Khoo & Ainley, 2005), and local job-seeking networks (Seddon & Billett, 2004); *generalised networks* such as participation in community-based activities, volunteer work, and work experience; and *institutionalised networks* such as connectedness with the tertiary community (Hillman & Rothman, 2007; Hillman, 2005), with religious groups, with libraries, and with access to the media. What are missing in this area of research, however, are the views and reported activities of the members of the community themselves, outside of the population more directly related to the school. What do community leaders or contributors believe about the school environment in their community and their own influence on students’ priorities, aspirations and decisions to stay on at school beyond Year 10?

Before addressing these questions, it is important to clarify what is meant in this paper by the term “community,” which, it is acknowledged, is a contested and problematic concept in the sociological literature. Corbett (2014), for example, points out that “the issue of who and what counts as community [remains] a question that is often contested, sometimes violently” (p. 604), and Fendler (2006) cautions that “terms like community tend to be used so loosely that their meanings become vague and muddy” (p. 303). In the study reported on in this paper, sample participants represented a particular network or sub-community of those who work in various community organisations that promote education in rural communities in various ways. It is acknowledged that this group is one of a number of diverse community groups with a range of disparate perspectives. Corbett (2014) is one of many commentators who take up this issue of diversity of community in relation to opinions on rural education. The community voice includes those who wish to improve the community through a positive, futures-oriented stance on education and others who wish to retain the community as it has “always been” (and a range of opinions between these two stances). In the context of this study, the members of the community interviewed see themselves as part of the group or sub-community that supports educational and economic improvement for the community through student retention in education. Although positive by nature in their own aspirations for their community, some of their comments are seen to reflect negatively on the community group that would wish to retain the status quo.

## The Current Study

This paper focuses on data collected from community members as a part of a large Australian Research Council Linkage project with the Department of Education Tasmania. Other data were collected from students (Watson et al., 2013, 2015a), teachers, school leaders and parents (Hay et al., 2015). A survey answered by 86 community members that included both Likert scale questions and open-ended questions has been reported elsewhere (Watson et al., 2015b). As well as surveys, interviews were conducted with various community members on the issue of student retention beyond Year 10 and extracts from 11 of these are the focus of this analysis.

The research reported in this paper addresses two key questions:

1. What are the issues raised by the interviewed members of the community in relation to retention of students in education beyond the compulsory years?
2. How do the opinions of these members from within the community compare with the views of other interest groups on issues of school retention?

## Methodology

### Sampling

The source of data for this paper was extracts from some of the 29 targeted interviews with 35 people that were held as part of the overall project. These began with key members of the Department of Education Tasmania (the Linkage partner in the project) and used a snowball technique to choose other people considered to have views or experiences on student retention relevant to the aims of the project. Extracts from 11 interviews, 10 with individuals and one with a group (consisting of five members) who were specifically employed in positions within the community rather than with the Department of Education, were chosen for analysis. Four of these people were local councillors or employed by councils. Three were consultants. One of the consultants was also on a local board or authority, as were two others. One was a federal government regional education and employment officer and a group of five people represented a non-profit support organisation.

### Instrument

A protocol consisting of a list of questions was supplied to the participants before the interview; this protocol is found in the Appendix. At the interview, however, participants were given considerable freedom throughout the exchange, which was led by one of the project's chief investigators with notes taken by a research assistant. The questions were not followed in strict order or detail and at times the interviewees strayed from the protocol. They were however always within the ambit of the project. Interviews took between 35 minutes and 1.5 hours (average 57 minutes). All interviews were audio-taped with participant consent and subsequently transcribed for detailed analysis. Participants were provided with a copy of the transcript and given the opportunity to amend it.

### Analysis

The 11 interview transcripts were analysed consecutively by two research assistants with comments classified according to 20 themes. Although analysed separately from the survey data, many themes related to those identified through the surveys (see Watson et al., 2015b). Salient quotes are presented from participants with respect to their views in relation to the interview questions, providing insight into the community's position on student retention and associated issues. This approach of considering interview extracts was designed to help identify perspectives and provide some benchmarks for future research into the opinions and beliefs of the actual members of the community rather than the opinions and beliefs about the community from those on the "inside" of the education system.

## Results

Table 1 lists the 20 themes that were identified from all of the interviews conducted as part of the larger project (29 in total) and indicates how many of the 11 interviews included in this paper addressed these themes.

*Table 1.* Themes discussed by the selected interviewees from the community

Theme	Number of interviews in which issue was raised
<b>Pathways:</b> systemic issues, perceptions, and importance of planning	11
<b>Employment Opportunities:</b> retention to improve chances, lure of jobs, options and choices	10
<b>Community:</b> co-responsibility for education, attitudes, and regional factors	9

<b>National Broadband Network:</b> pros, cons, and general issues	9
<b>Family:</b> interviewees' involvement with parents and moving away from home	8
<b>Teachers/principals:</b> pedagogy and training, systemic barriers, and influence on students	7
<b>Transitions:</b> Grade 10 to 11, Grade 6 and beyond, and as a general barrier	7
<b>Retention versus Attainment</b>	7
<b>Relationships:</b> peers, teacher/student, and other agencies	6
<b>Transport:</b> systemic factors, overcoming barriers, and regional isolation	6
<b>General School Support:</b> for individuals and overall environment	6
<b>Alternative Programs:</b> examples, issues, and funding	6
<b>Generational factors:</b> unemployment, family history and early school leaving	5
<b>Literacy/Numeracy:</b> systemic issues and facilitators	4
<b>Early Disengagement</b>	3
<b>Absenteeism</b>	2
<b>Lack of Co-ordination of Initiatives:</b> funding problems and issues between sectors	2
<b>Accommodation</b>	1
<b>Timetables in schools</b>	1
<b>Counselling/Mental Health</b>	1

The comments made by community participants reflected their opinions, their suggestions and their knowledge of some initiatives that were taking place. Extracts are provided for the themes in Table 1 that were raised in four or more of the interviews. Direct quotes are annotated by the position held by the interviewee or by reference to the group.

## Pathways and Transitions

With respect to *pathways*, some interviewees commented specifically on the Department of Education's program involving Pathway Planning Officers<sup>1</sup> working in secondary schools, mostly with students in Year 10, although others spoke more generally. A number of comments were based on local experience, as typified by the following:

I think we [in our region] have a very definite school-to-work culture and I think that really is behind a lot of the decision-making of young people around that Year 10 time. We have a really strong trade base here and I think that that's a familiar and a comfortable place for the majority of young people here. So I think stepping away from that pathway is actually quite difficult for some. [Consultant A]

[T]he critical issue is the Pathway and the Guidance Officers and making sure that they're really switched on to what's happening and providing the sort of support that young people are looking for. I certainly get the feel at the moment from some of the kids that it's probably not as valuable as they think it could be. [City Councillor A]

Divergent views were expressed in relation to the university sector, as illustrated by the following extracts.

[In relation to pathways] ...there's that snobbery associated with academia ... [it] is the heritage of [the] English public school ... in our education system, [it is] deeply ingrained. University's for the elite. [Advisory Board Member]

[W]e have to have a really close connection with the university ... that's going to be critical to this ... I think we will design pathways that lead to university that have different experiences than the traditional formal academic ones ... I think that we will also create more cross connections say between university, polytechnic, training organisations, all sorts of things. ... kids in this particular

<sup>1</sup> Pathway Planning Officers support students to gain an understanding of the education and career pathways available to them through the provision of information, advice and the development of an individual Pathway Plan (Department of Education, 2014a).

area, and I think across all education, need individual learning packages. [City Councillor C]

Related to *pathways* is the theme of *transitions*. The “finality” of Year 10 was noted, as was the necessity to make subject choices too early.

It’s about people having the belief that there’s some sort of finality. ... I think Year 10 is just such a strange blockade. [Non-profit Organisation Group]

I’ve certainly noticed with Year 11 and 12s ... they have a lot of support in Year 10, for the pathways, and then they go off to college and the support in terms of pathways and [subject choice, job requirements] drops off quite a bit, because they’re one of a thousand students rather than one of a hundred. [Council Youth Development Officer]

## Employment Opportunities and Attainment

With respect to the theme of *employment opportunities*, two perspectives were presented: (1) the potential of retention to improve employment opportunities, and (2) the lure of employment away from staying on at school. In relation to the first of these, views expressed included Australia having the potential to move from a manufacturing economy to an information-based or service-industry-based country and the need for Years 11 and 12 to provide the foundation for such positions.

[O]bviously we need higher education, higher skill levels to not just have lower unemployment, but to actually ... have better economic outcomes for Australia, and obviously that relates to better living. [Federal Government Regional Officer]

[W]here you had families which [*sic*] had a two or three generation unemployed, education is the only way to end that cycle. [Consultant B]

But I think what we’re saying around the table is it’s about real jobs in the future and they need to go on to [Year] 11 and 12 and whatever they’re going to have in the future at TasTAFE and Uni, Trade Training Centres, so that they can have the skills for working in Tasmania and elsewhere. [Non-profit Organisation Group]

The second perspective, that of employment luring students away from school, is illustrated by comments about seeing many 15- or 16-year-olds on employment agency books or about them being asked by employers to work during school hours.

A job in the hand is worth the low gratification down the track. So that’s still really strong particularly in these regional areas where economic well-being is tough generally. [Consultant and Advisory Board Member]

[Schools are] facing pretty big challenges really, because we’ve got some of the big employers in [CITY] ... wanting young people to go to work and get paid during school hours. So, of course, those young people are going to think this is awesome: “I don’t need school. I’m getting paid to go to work. Why not just leave and go to work?” [Council Youth Development Officer]

The issue of the alternative of employment to schooling is also related to that of actual *attainment* for those who stay in school.

It’s all very well for you to say to me, we had 200 kids in this school at the end of Year 12. I say, yeah but what did they achieve? What are those children going to take away that’s going to be meaningful? This is one of my real concerns at the moment. [City Councillor C]

[W]hat we can focus on is the disengaged ... and to recognise that a school doesn’t suit every person, and

we need to look at those people, because if you don't look at those people then we're limiting their progress, but also Australia's progress as well. ... [Disengagement is] everybody's business, rather than it's just a school issue or it's just an employment issue, or it's just a social issue – but it's everybody working together. [Federal Government Regional Officer]

## National Broadband Network

Comments on using the *National Broadband Network* (NBN), which was being installed across the state in Tasmania at the time, reflected differing experiences and expertise. Typical positive views were the following.

Your location no longer limits your access to learning. So the technology solution I think is far more sensible than replicating infrastructure and trying to staff that infrastructure in isolated communities. ... There are huge potentials there for teacher professional learning internationally through the National Broadband ... I think [they] are really powerful as well. [Consultant and Advisory Board Member]

[O]n the west coast ... they had the e-learning pathway, but obviously e-learning, when you're not really talking one-on-one with a teacher is difficult. Had they had the opportunity to see that teacher through a screen and work one-on-one with them in real time, which I'm assuming is something like the Broadband Network can provide, then I think that would have been a pretty awesome opportunity for them, because they just didn't have the class sizes [otherwise, to offer certain courses]. [Council Youth Development Officer]

More circumspect opinions were expressed by others, including the need for quality relationships within the physical classroom.

This is about relationships that exist inside classrooms. It's about the quality of teachers and the quality of teaching and the quality of learning. ... it's just a nonsense to think that another form of technology can actually do what's required there because ... what often happens with technological advance in education is it becomes a substitute for the hardest part and all it does is shift the poor learning that's going on in the classroom, to poor learning going on in front of a computer screen ... [Advisory Board Member]

[P]articularly if you're talking about other skills that employers are looking for, like the social, emotional intelligence and ... you're not going to get that through an online system. [City Councillor A]

## Family and Generational Factors

In relation to observations of and engagement with *families*, the participants expressed a range of views that often overlapped with those in the *generational factors* theme. There were mentions of the heavy impact of moving away from home, of bringing an income into the household, and of lacking an appreciation of the value of education.

What we're aware of is that for a lot of young people, and their families, the threshold there at Year 10, that post-compulsory decision, does include a big consideration about the ability to bring an income into a household. [Authority Chair]

[P]eople coming from a lower socio-economic background don't necessarily value ... a job that's \$70,000 a year or whatever. They can have different values, and their values are often around family and relationships, rather than [financial] success in a job ... Success is very much a middle class value. [Federal Government Regional Officer]

Several participants made specific comments about *generational factors*, for example,

We also know we've got intergenerational poverty and long term unemployment, so not just mum and dad, grandparents ... it's over several generations. [City Councillor C]

*Family-focused* interventions with potential positive influence were also discussed.

...with this ... project that we're doing with Year 5s, [we are] not only getting the Year 5s out to different businesses, but also getting the parents to go with them to be able to see what their son or daughter is learning about and where they might want to go and where the opportunities are. [Council Youth Development Officer]

[About the state-wide Launching into Learning (LiL)<sup>2</sup> Pre School Program] ... you're actually educating the parents as well as the child, and you're actually finding where there are problems ... so it's changing that attitude and that culture at that very early age. [City Councillor B]

## Teachers, Principals, Relationships, and School Support

There were divergent views about the influence of *teachers* and *principals* on retention, but a unanimous expectation of excellence.

We need to be categorical [*sic*] about the requirement for good teachers, that we've let mediocrity slip through, and so we need the best teachers and the best principals. I think we've shot ourselves in the foot numerous times in the last decade by having so many leadership changes. I mean, it's impacting highly and the flow on effect to the schools has just been catastrophic. [Non-profit Organisation Group]

...great principals make great schools. ... The way they talk and encourage their staff and work with their staff is critical to the whole thing. [City Councillor C]

These views were related to those on *relationships* and those on *school support*. Concerns included: the impact of peer pressure and lost relationships due to transfers, and the need for teachers to report more frequently to parents, and to recognise and encourage abilities and skills in their students, as well setting high standards and having high expectations.

[T]he young people who are inspired to move on and want to make things happen, it's really a hard effort for them when they're in a particular school environment, like [CITY], to step up and say I want to do this, I want to make a success of myself, because of that peer pressure. [Non-profit Organisation Group]

[W]e also need ... to allow [teachers and principals] to stay for a period of time ... Because a lot of it's relationship building with the families and you can't build it if you're only there for a term. ... there's a lot of language about partnership but that parent/teacher partnership is very poor and teachers can do so much more to encourage parents. [Advisory Board Member]

## Literacy and Numeracy

Several participants commented on *literacy and numeracy* skills, mainly in relation to the need for these skills for employment and the perceived lack of such skills in some school students. A couple of interventions were noted in this area.

[K]ids are coming through and they haven't literacy and numeracy skills. ... [there are] expectations of employers that basically don't want to be ... spending the next 12 months to 2 years ... helping young people with literacy, numeracy or whatever to get them to a level where they're employable. [Non-profit Organisation Group]

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<sup>2</sup> Launching into Learning (LiL) "provides resources to schools to develop and lead initiative with families and their community to support children's early learning prior to Kindergarten" (Department of Education, 2014b).

[T]hose building blocks [of literacy and numeracy] need to be there if we're going to retain more kids in education because you're not going to play a game that you can't succeed at, are you?  
[Consultant and Advisory Board Member]

## Alternative Programs

The topic of *alternative programs* also attracted comment, including the one noted earlier in relation to *pathways*. There was recognition of the need for finding ways to keep students interested. Other alternatives to traditional school classrooms were also mentioned.

I think it's whether or not, for that individual student, whether retention in school is the best thing for them ... I think for a lot of boys as well, a lot of the time, the learning environment ... doesn't match their needs. So, if we were to overcome that, then I would say, I would like to see all students finish Year 12 ... [Council Youth Development Officer]

Trade Training Centres are very much in the regional areas, and amazing facilities, but not only for the courses that are actually being run there, which tend to be VET courses, but for other RTOs [Registered Training Organisations] to go in and actually use those facilities in those regional areas where in the past it has been no facility there. [Federal Government Regional Officer]

[We need to be] really trying to provide an education that engages kids, motivates kids. ... So I think that's a barrier ... that we could have really capable kids in our classrooms who are just bored by the educational provision that they're getting and do drop out. [Consultant and Advisory Board Member]

## Transport

The only physical barrier receiving attention from some participants was *transport*. In relation to this theme, many of the statements noted the lack of public transport to schools, the cost of transport, and the length of time involved. These included reference to a student undertaking work experience with one of those interviewed.

I've got one young girl who's doing a diploma with me at the moment, like work experience, and she'd be on a bus 2 hours a day and she's realising she's spending up to \$30 or \$40 a week on bus fares. For someone that's ... not able to work because of other challenges and also trying to complete her studies, and spending 2 hours a day on a bus and paying that sort of money, I applaud her for even getting to us. [Council Youth Development Officer]

## Community

Finally there were many comments about the *community* by the community participants, especially with respect to co-responsibility for education. Several acknowledged the need for collaboration between school and business, the view of the local community as an extension of the family and school, the appreciation of students as the future workforce, the need for innovative approaches to solutions, and the view that education happens everywhere. Among the specific suggestions were the following.

[E]ducation of itself can't deliver everything and they need to work with the business community and community organisations and local governments. But schools shouldn't exist in ... isolation.  
[Non-profit Organisation Group]

I like to think that the local community is an extension of the family and the school environment. That ... the mayor and the football coach and the man from the post office, and the Lions Club are there to congratulate kids when they graduate and value achievement in something other than football and birthdays. [Authority Chair]



The interviewees also commented on attitudes to education and the need for change.

You've also got this other cohort which is a demographic in your community who've had really poor experiences of school and don't see it as a supportive environment. It's something that's against them. [City Councillor A]

While it might have been okay in one generation to achieve maybe Year 9, maybe Year 10 and be able to step into a job, nowadays people need a much higher education to any sort of step into a job. [Federal Government Regional Officer]

[I]t's like a double whammy. When you start joining rurality and socio-economic status together I think ... it has a double impact on opportunities. [Consultant A]

## Discussion

The two research questions addressed in this paper are based on the interviews with community members that were used to explore community views on school retention. The first question asked for the issues and these are delineated in the results section. The second question asked for a comparison of these issues with those raised by others. The discussion hence summarises the issues in comparison with the available literature from other sources than the community itself. Many of the issues considered were addressed through different voices and the aim is to consolidate these issues to provide a benchmark for further research.

## Pathways/Transitions

In relation to pathways and transitions, the participants were concerned whether the Department of Education's Pathway Planning Officers were aware of the necessary breadth of students' knowledge of alternative pathways and that this knowledge came early enough, particularly in terms of subject choice. Concern was also expressed about the level of continuing support provided to students who did manage to make the transition from small rural schools to much larger, sometimes distant, colleges. These concerns reflected several written comments from the survey participants (Watson et al., 2015b). The views corroborate the findings of Gale et al. (2013) in their study of students' aspirations for higher education in Central Queensland, an area of similar rurality to the current study. They found "that students' capacities to navigate pathways to higher education in the [state] education system, are 'patchy' and/or limited" (p. 6). They further recommended that programs "need to focus more explicitly on developing students' navigational capacities to realise their higher education ambitions" (p. 6). There are indications that this is being reflected in Tasmania with the Australian Maritime College carrying out visits to schools and emphasising the importance of studying mathematics (I. Penesis, personal communication, April 28, 2014) and the University of Tasmania receiving funding from the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program to work in low SES regions of the state to increase participation in higher education by providing pathways and smooth transitions (University of Tasmania, 2013). As well, the University has entered into a partnership with the State Government and Government House to establish the Peter Underwood Centre for Educational Attainment. One of the programs of the Centre will focus on "Building educational aspiration amongst children, parents, schools and community organisations" (University of Tasmania, 2015).

The comments and suggestions on pathways and transitions are also related to community members' impressions of attitudes observed from parents within the community. The attitudes that students absorb from their parents and contacts within the community were seen by the participants to influence their reactions to the pathways offered to them by the education system. Of interest was the specific reference to values held by the parents, including lack of understanding of the value of education, of the economic benefits of a well-paying job, or of actually being employed rather than being on unemployment benefits. The value of staying within the family and local scene often outweighs the other values that are more middle class in nature. These views have been well

documented by other researchers (e.g., Abbott-Chapman, 2011).

Participants' comments in relation to unemployment and leaving school for whatever employment opportunities were available were balanced, including the view that in fact some students do not belong in school. The idea of co-responsibility was reflected by several in terms of both influence and providing opportunity. To some degree these observations were born out in the larger sample of Gregoric (2013), for example in offering programs that rewarded students for attendance at school. The comments also need to be juxtaposed with the findings of Kilpatrick and Abbott-Chapman (2002) who reported the "observed tendency for resilient, strongly bonded families of low SES to 'look after each other' and share information and resources" (p. 56) and the importance of "word of mouth."

## National Broadband Network

The comments of the community in relation to the NBN were positive with regard to its availability but mixed based on the current e-learning on-line experiences of which they were aware. The advantages for small classes in rural schools to have access to college teachers with expertise for subjects in Years 11 and 12 were acknowledged. The importance of contact with teachers was stressed over the availability of stand-alone text or video on-line. This balance of views reflects the earlier research of Stack, Watson, and Abbott-Chapman (2013) in a case study of the implications for Education of the introduction of the NBN in Tasmania. The comments are important in the light of the subsequent change of government in Tasmania with a policy of eventually extending all secondary schools in the state to Years 11 and 12, but to do so for 21 rural schools within four years (Liberal Party of Australia (Tasmanian Division), 2014). This will involve hiring 105 new teachers as well as other infrastructure expenses. The policy statement includes the role of technology, with students "encouraged to use flexible learning methods such as on-line learning to access specialist courses if they are not offered at their high school" (p. 5). The policy may alleviate some of the students' and parents' concerns about leaving the local communities before the end of Year 12, but they will remain at the later time of transition to university or other further education.

## Family

Many perspectives were presented by the interviewees on the part that family, and particularly parents, play in the aspirations of their children and their decisions about continuing their education beyond Year 10, including the time spent in travel away from home. There were both positive and negative aspects, with financial issues important for some but not others, ranging from the need for extra family income to different family values that did not include education or the financial benefits it could bring. In the study of Byun et al. (2012) in the United States, considering aspects of family and school social capital, parents' expectations for further education (in this case tertiary) and how to pay for it, were significantly positively related to students' aspirations. The interviewees went on to describe some of the positive interventions with parents in their communities, emphasising the importance of beginning when the children are quite young. The positive impressions complement the findings of Abbott-Chapman, Johnston, and Jetson (2014) in a study of parents in isolated Tasmanian communities. The importance of the relationships of parents and teachers was also noted by some interviewees, for example with respect to feedback from teachers to parents.

## Teachers/Principals

In commenting on principals and teachers, participants expressed support for the leadership provided and its positive influence on students' aspirations. Byun et al. (2012) found a similar influence of teachers' educational expectations in their large survey study of the aspirations of rural secondary school students in the United States. The participants in the current study, however, were realistic in their comments on the need for good teachers and leaders who would stay in schools for some years in order to have an impact. This led to several community members recognising the very important relationships that can develop between teachers and students and their families, resulting in

high expectations for the students, which they are then seen to meet. This phenomenon was also reported in the review of Abbott-Chapman (2011). There was also some specific concern expressed by some of the participants about changes in school leadership in local schools and about teachers failing to adequately help students to engage in learning. Participants were also concerned about teachers being disconnected from the challenges faced by students in rural and disadvantaged communities.

## Literacy and Numeracy

The community representatives expressed concern about the literacy and numeracy requirements of both further education and employment. Some appeared to speak from personal experience. Making younger students aware of the need to keep up interest in the core subjects was mentioned by several who were associated with organisations working in schools. The interviewees' general concerns about low literacy and numeracy levels are widely reflected in the literature (e.g., Khoo & Ainsley, 2005; Lamb & McKenzie, 2001; and Mark, McMillan, & Hillman, 2001).

## Limitations

The sampling for community members interviewed by the researchers was not random but used a snowball technique to follow leads of particular interest in relation to educational retention. In some sense these people could be considered "experts" and were sharing their knowledge and experience with the project. Hence the definition of community used here was narrower, for example, than that of Gregoric (2013). As noted in the description of the analysis, the interviewees were allowed to divert from the questions they had been given prior to the interview. Some opinions hence are expressed in the results section that may not have been actively canvassed with all interviewees. With little evidence of this type of input from the community in earlier research, the input from these people can lay the foundation for comparisons with others more widely dispersed in Australia or interviewed in later years.

## Conclusion

The overall impression from this group of interviewees was one of encouragement for students to stay in school and engagement with schools to attain that goal. The larger group of community members interviewed by Gregoric (2013) in South Australia had more diverse views and varied experiences with schools, suggesting more research is needed within a wider definition of community but focussing on the specific issue of retention addressed as in this current study.

The questions that arise implicitly from listening to the community on student retention not only relate to potential avenues to help students achieve the level of retention that will meet the political policy goal of "creating a job ready generation," but also relate to the issue of the time frame within which it is reasonable to achieve such a goal, if it is a reasonable goal. The provision of Year 11 and 12 education in 21 secondary schools within four years may be a physical possibility, but how long will it take to change the hearts and minds of parents in the marginalised communities that send their children to these schools? The Federal Government Regional Officer, praising the "Launching into Learning" program, looked for good outcomes in 10 to 12 years. Another interviewee made reference to reforms in Finland (Sahlberg, 2011) and suggested that governments will have to invest over two or three decades to shift community attitudes. Furthermore, comments on intergenerational poverty over several generations cannot lead to the expectation of a solution over a few years. Although other research referred to in this paper acknowledges deficit scenarios that cannot expect to be turned around in a few years, estimates of how long it will take to turn the outcomes around are lacking. The impression gained from the community members participating in this study is that the community is behind the efforts to improve retention but is realistic about how long it might take. Given Semo's (2011) assertion that the influence of community networks can offset some of the effects of socio-economic disadvantage, the overwhelmingly positive response of the community

members in this study offers further hope for the rural and regional students within the local community.

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## Appendix

### Interview protocol

1. I would like to ask for your views about retention of students beyond the compulsory years (i.e. beyond Year 10).
  - a. What level of importance do you place on retention of students beyond year 10? And for whom?
  - b. How satisfied are you with current levels of retention?
  - c. Can you think of any advantages of improving retention levels?
  - d. Can you think of any disadvantages of improving retention levels?
  - e. In your opinion what is the main goal of retaining students at school beyond Year 10?
    - i. Can you please comment on the different retention pathways, such as academic pathways to senior secondary school and higher education institutions, such as university, and other pathways such as trade qualifications or apprenticeships?
    - ii. Is retention necessary for “all” students?
2. I would now like to ask for your views on barriers to higher retention levels.
  - a. Are there any barriers in terms of student capabilities?
  - b. Are there any barriers in terms of parent attitudes?
  - c. Are there any barriers in terms of school culture, school leadership and/or teacher attitudes?
  - d. Are there any barriers in terms of community attitudes?
  - e. Finally, are there any barriers in terms of structural issues, such as school timetabling, transport, location (e.g., living in a rural location), and availability of different pathways?
3. I would now like to ask for your view on possible ways to facilitate improved retention levels.
  - a. In terms of students themselves, how can retention be facilitated?
  - b. From your experience, what can parents do to facilitate retention?
  - c. From your experience, what can teachers do to facilitate retention?
  - d. From your experience, what can members of the local community do to facilitate retention?
  - e. How can retention be facilitated in terms of structural issues, such as schools, transport, location (e.g., living in a rural location), and availability of different pathways?
  - f. Finally, do you think there is potential to facilitate retention with the National Broadband Network initiative? Why/ Why not? If so, how? Can you provide any examples you know of?
4. Are you aware of any specific initiatives relating to student retention? These might be school-based, departmental or community-based.
5. Can you suggest anyone whom you think we should contact for their views on retention beyond Year 10?

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