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Experiences of higher education for regional, rural, and remote youth in a metropolitan university

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In this research report we explore how youth from regional, rural and remote (RRR) areas experience higher education in a metropolitan institution. We are interested in their university experience, how it is shaped by the institution, as well as how students' rural subjectivity and identity fits, adapts or is challenged in this new environment. Rather than focusing on issues of learning and academic progression, which are more commonly found in the existing literature, we approach RRR students' university experience from the standpoints of welfare and their subjective experiences of feeling connected, or not, to their new environment. As they move to a metropolitan university, RRR young people are required to live away from their home and need to construct new spaces of sociality with other students and the university community. We examine the identity work that RRR young people, some of them also from a low socio-economic status background, have to do to negotiate new institutional values, norms and discourses, and social relationships.

The findings presented in this report come from a mixed methods research project with University of Melbourne undergraduate students from RRR backgrounds who, at the time of the research (in the second half of 2022), were living in Melbourne, away from their family home. Some participants were living on campus in the residential colleges, while others were in private rentals off campus. To learn about RRR students' experiences at university, we conducted a survey as well as semi-structured interviews with a sub-sample of survey respondents. Eighty-eight undergraduate students completed the survey and a sub-sample of 23 participants were interviewed. The survey and interview focused on the following broad themes:

- students' motivations to continue with post-secondary education
- students' experiences of relocating to Melbourne
- the impact of the pandemic on students' studies and life
- students' experiences and challenges with their housing arrangement
- students' relationship to other RRR students at university
- students' experiences of (un)belonging at university
- students' recommendations on how the university can support RRR students

Together, the survey and interview data provide a comprehensive picture of the experiences of RRR students at a high-status metropolitan institution, where they are a minority group. Their experiences are summarised below.

MAIN FINDINGS:

Decision to attend university

Students shared their motivations for choosing to go to university and why they chose the University of Melbourne in particular. The main reason students wanted to go to university was to get a good job and the main reason they chose the University of Melbourne was because of its strong reputation. The latter was supported by the variety of courses on offer and a prior exposure to the university through outreach programs in RRR schools led by the university or through personal networks, acquaintances, and encounters.

Regional, rural, and remote students' decision to attend university in Melbourne was also made in relation to key enablers and biographical desires. Students regularly cited their academic achievements, opportunities to leave their hometowns, and some expectation from their families and schools. Several students reported that they were expected and supported by both family and school teachers to go to university because of their good grades at school. For some, teacher initiative in informing and guiding them on the pathways to university was a necessary condition to their enrolment.

Experience of relocating

Where available and accessible, students strongly valued support from the university in the relocation process and its attendant issues (e.g. financial, logistical or time-related). These forms of support included: financial assistance, guidance with accessing welfare services (e.g. Centrelink applications), advice regarding access to public transport; and support in relocating from interstate.

Clear and easy to access online information about accommodation options was important to many RRR students. Since not every student could visit the university and colleges in person before enrolling, accessible information on the relevant websites was very much appreciated. The application process for student accommodation was generally found to be straightforward; however, timelines around applications were often a source of stress for students, as late decisions created uncertainty in an already challenging school-to-university transition process.

Cost was the primary concern for RRR students in terms of student accommodation in general, including college residence. With regards to residential colleges, many RRR students living there stated that they could only afford it due to being awarded a scholarship. For those living off campus in private rental accommodation, finding a place was often challenging, and the application process, generally done from outside Melbourne, was a consistent source of stress.

The impact of the pandemic

Whilst a few RRR students enjoyed or remained unaffected by the transition to online learning, most of them felt they were adversely affected by having to attend “Zoom classes”. Many of the participants commented on their sense of ‘missing out’ on the imagined and expected university experience due to the pandemic, especially in regard to making connections with their peers. Some students spoke about the isolation and loneliness brought on by being separated from their family, friends, and partners, which was detrimental to their mental health.

Those who lived in colleges, however, appreciated the sense of community and stability these institutions provided in a context of widespread uncertainty. The colleges, their staff and classmates, in some instances, were experienced as a surrogate family.

Experiences and challenges in students’ living arrangements

In our survey and interviews, we asked participants to reflect on the positive experiences of their living arrangements, but also on the challenges they face, or have faced, with regard to their housing and living situation.

Overwhelmingly, students felt positively about being close to services and resources. At least half of our survey respondents and interviewees were living in university colleges. Almost all these college students had a positive response to the resources (e.g. communal areas, tutors, clubs and events) provided by the colleges. Socialising, making new friends and finding “like-minded people”, was another advantage of the colleges and residences.

Students from RRR background draw on a range of financial sources to support themselves while studying at university, such as: their own savings, a scholarship, wages from work, direct support from family and government welfare assistance. Most survey respondents rely on multiple sources of support and income, with scholarships playing an important role for majority of RRR students. In the survey, among those who reported working, the majority of respondents indicate that their work impacts various aspects of their life, their commute (e.g. travel to campus), their study, and their ability to work on their assignments.

Other challenges were mentioned by some RRR students living on campus. Some students felt pressured to attend the many events organised by their colleges, even when these social expectations competed with study demands. For those on a scholarship, there was also pressure to sustain excellent grades. Other students felt a social class barrier in the colleges, between students from privileged backgrounds, often from urban private schools, and themselves, from RRR schools and less affluent socio-economic backgrounds.

A quarter of our survey respondents identify as first-in-family to attend university. These students were less likely to reside in college or live alone compared to their RRR peers. Our survey results also indicate that students’ family history of attending university is likely to stratify not only their academic experiences, but also their extra-educational experiences.

For students living in a rental accommodation off campus, knowledge of the rental market in Melbourne was a valued asset. Some students had access to this knowledge through family and friends, but other students had to navigate the rental market with little prior knowledge to make reasoned decisions. Navigating the abundance of information, contracts, and rights and responsibilities was experienced as a difficult task by many in these private rental accommodation situations.

RRR friendships, networks and sensibilities

Previous studies show that RRR students who relocate for study purposes tend to build friendship and social networks with students from the same locational background. These friendships and network are often built on shared identities, including a common understanding of place, upbringing, and shared experiences and “sensibilities”.

Our findings point to important contextual factors for the development of ‘RRR networks’ at urban universities. On one hand, approximately half of survey respondents and half of interviewees in our study affirmed that they made connections and friends with other RRR students. An important aspect of this construction of an ‘RRR network’ of support and friendship was the acknowledgement of a rural sensibility – an understanding of a shared past and common “struggles” when resettling in a new place like Melbourne. In some instances, friendships were built as a consequence of a shared sense of feeling “different”, in part due to social class and place distinctions when compared to the majority of other students.

On the other hand, a quarter of survey respondents and a third of interviewees stated that they did not make friends specifically with other RRR students. Three common responses or justifications were given for not connecting with other RRR students: 1) that there were none or almost no RRR students in their colleges; 2) that they “hang out” with many people and that these people’s places of origin does not factor into their relationships; and 3) that there were no RRR students in their university course and classes. This finding points to the diffuse presence of minority cohorts such as RRR students in metropolitan institutions, and to the fact that the presence of only small minority cohorts in large institutions can, in itself, present a challenge to the development of positive peer relationships.

Belonging

The idea and experience of belonging, and unbelonging, was recurrent in participants' responses. Around half of our interviewees felt that their new place of residence (e.g. private rental, college or university accommodation) felt like home. However, a third of interviewees expressed that their new place of residence did not feel like home; while a couple of participants felt that Melbourne and their current residence was a transient place and time in their lives.

Relationships were the most important aspect in the formation of a sense of belonging for participants. Those who felt they belonged in their new residence ascribed this to the development of positive relationships and to the friendships they formed in their household, college or university accommodation. Conversely, weaker personal networks and less developed relationships were associated with a lower sense of belonging to their new place and institution.

Related to this pivotal role of personal relationships was the importance of being respected and valued in interpersonal networks and relations. Being valued and recognised by others was an important factor in their sense of belonging. For some participants, this was the opposite of what they had experienced in their rural communities. For other students in college residences, the routine of sharing daily meals and open spaces for study and recreation helped construct a positive sense of belonging.

Students' advice to other students and the university

Participants were asked what advice they would give to other regional, rural, and remote young people planning to relocate to study at The University of Melbourne. Knowing what they know now, they offered three main pieces of advice: 1) have a support network in place or commit to developing it; 2) maintain a balance between study and social life despite the pressures that can arise in both areas of their lives; and 3) immerse oneself in university/city life to make the most of their university study experience.

When asked what the University could do to make rural and regional students' transitions to university easier, the majority of participants commented that information could be made more readily accessible, such as financial aid and university processes and practices.

Students also commented that there was a seeming lack of knowledge and awareness of rural and regional life at the university. Some reported feeling that students from these areas were often "overlooked" and that aspects of their lives were only "speculated" about. Many participants suggested that the University could create more spaces to facilitate connection between regional, rural, remote students themselves and others; events for RRR students to connect; as well as more openly showcasing and celebrating rurality and its contributions to society.



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1. INTRODUCTION

A growing body of research has focused on regional, rural and remote (hereafter, RRR) youth aspirations, and access and barriers to participation in higher education (e.g. Barnes et al., 2019; Cuervo, 2016; Gore et al., 2019). This is unsurprising as the percentage of RRR young people attending university has significantly increased over the last few decades in Australia (see ABS, 2021; Commonwealth of Australia, 2019). A number of these research studies have focused on young people's capacity to aspire to higher education studies, including the factors that enable or hinder this 'aspirational' disposition. Other studies have focused on challenges and barriers (e.g. financial, cultural, geographical) for young people outside the metropolis to access university studies.

Less attention has been paid to the higher education experiences of RRR youth during their studies. This gap is significant because, although access is an important issue to addressing educational inequalities faced by RRR young people, it would be a mistake to assume that access is the sole concern to achieve equity for this cohort.

In this research report we explore how youth from regional, rural and remote areas of Australia experience higher education in a metropolitan institution. We are interested in their university experience, as well as how their rural subjectivity and identity fits, adapts or is challenged in this new environment. Further, we examine the identity work that RRR young people, some of them also from a low socio-economic status background, have to do to negotiate new institutional values, norms and discourses; living away from their home; and constructing new spaces of sociality with other students and university authorities.

This research report draws on a mixed methods research project with University of Melbourne undergraduate students from RRR backgrounds who, at the time of the research (in the second half of 2022), were living in Melbourne away from their family

home (only one participant out of eighty-eight was living at home). Some participants were living on campus in residential colleges, while other were in private rental accommodation off campus. We conducted a voluntary survey with RRR students as well as semi-structured interviews with a sub-sample of survey respondents. Eighty-eight undergraduate students completed the survey and a subsample of 23 participants were interviewed. Postgraduate students are an important cohort at the University of Melbourne (hereafter, the university). However, we chose to focus on undergraduate students to support meaningful comparisons with international studies that focus on the experience of leaving a RRR community for the first time to undertake tertiary studies in a metropolitan centre. This is a common experience in systems of mass higher education participation in countries with large RRR populations, such as the United States.

Following this Introduction, the report is structured into five chapters. Chapter 2 offers an overview of the existing literature on the topic of RRR students in higher education. This literature offers useful insights, yet reveals important gaps, in the understanding of the study and living experience of RRR students at metropolitan high-status universities in Australia. Chapter 3 draws on the content of the literature review to outline the development of the data collection instruments for the present study. We discuss the data collection and analysis processes, as well as limitations of the research design. Chapter 4 presents the main findings from the survey, focussing on students' experiences of study and residence. Chapter 5 presents the main interview findings to provide more detailed insights into the key issues discussed with participants. Finally, Chapter 6 provides a concluding discussion to consider the significance of the report's findings and opportunities for future research.



2. BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE

In the last few decades there has been an increase in the participation of young people (18-24 years) in higher education. This increase has reached the 40 per cent participation target put forward by the Bradley Review of Higher Education fifteen years ago (ABS, 2021; Bradley et al., 2008). While more young people from regional, rural and remote (RRR) areas of Australia are undertaking higher education studies, they continue to lag behind their urban counterparts in relation to participation in, and completion of, higher education studies (Commonwealth of Australia, 2019; Halsey, 2018). This gap continues in the present where the proportion of individuals living in metropolitan centres attaining a higher education qualification is twice as high as it is for those from RRR areas (see ABS, 2021). Davis and Taylor (2019, p. 80) report that in 2018, 23 per cent of individuals aged 25-34 years in regional or remote Australia had obtained a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 45 per cent in metropolitan centres. Further, within the category of place, the more remote young people's place of residence is, the lower the percentage of youth completing higher education studies is (see ABS, 2021; Commonwealth of Australia, 2019; Halsey, 2018).

There are other differences between urban and RRR participants in terms of higher education. For example, the latter are more likely to be mature-age students, first-in-family students, identifying as Indigenous, and/or from a low socio-economic status (SES) background (Delahunty, 2022). Other studies reveal that students from low SES and RRR backgrounds are much less likely to attend a high-status university (i.e. those belonging to the Group of Eight (Go8)) (Cakitaki et al., 2022). Further, there is a link between institutional hierarchy and students' outcomes. Researchers have found that young people attending Go8 institutions have better graduate outcomes (e.g. initial and long-term income benefits, better fit between qualifications and their job) than those from other universities (see Carroll et al., 2019; Li & Miller, 2013).

This stratification into participation in and outcomes through higher education underpins the present research about the experiences of university for RRR students. It is important to note that the majority of existing research, including the studies quoted in this section, tend to be quantitative and typically draw on administrative data. These studies provide broad statistical trends about the opportunities of RRR students. Less common are qualitative studies into RRR youth experiences in higher education. This strand of research helps tease out the nuances, joys and struggles of everyday life during the university years for RRR youth (see Cook et al., 2021; Delahunty, 2022 for recent exceptions). Accordingly, our research project contributes to filling this research gap.

THE 'ASPIRATIONS' FRAME IN NON-URBAN TRANSITIONS TO HIGHER EDUCATION

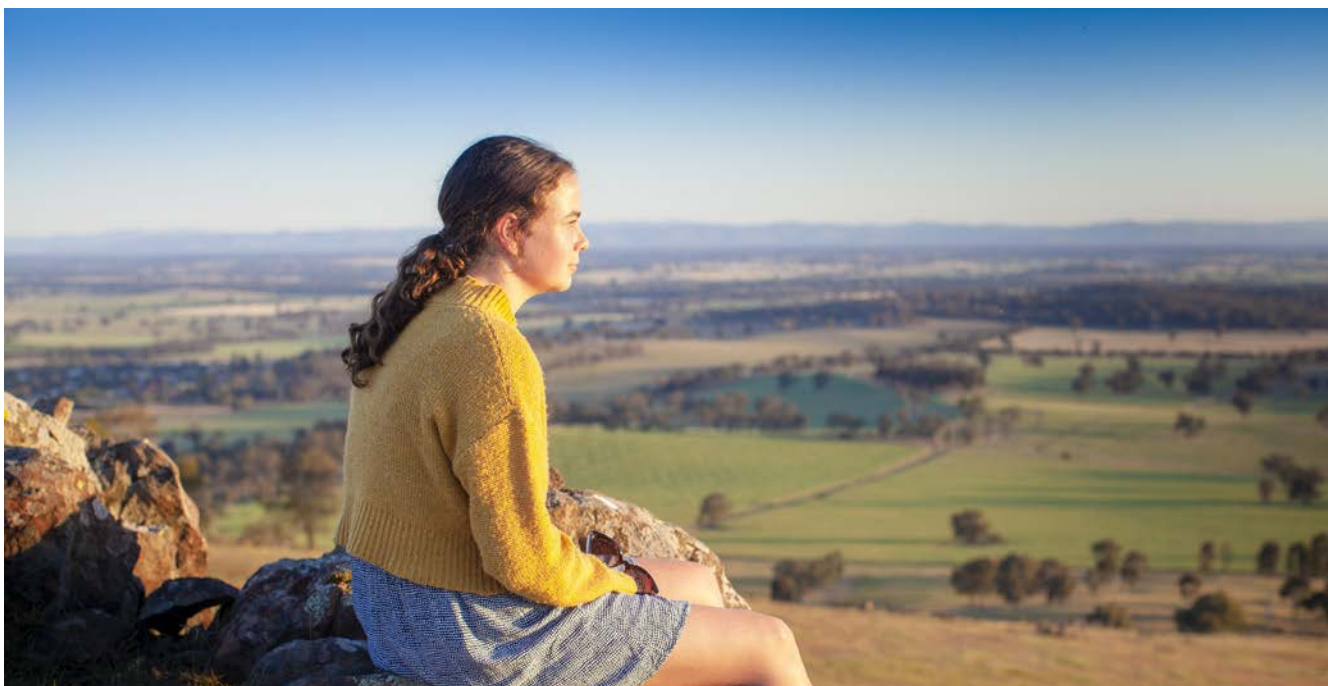
Against a backdrop of youth unemployment and financial recession, the 1990s and 2000s witnessed the emergence of educational policies in Australia shaped by a view of the need to create a new 'productive workforce' and to restructure the economy to compete in a tougher international market (Haynes 2002, Cuervo & Wyn, 2011). A key element in policy directions and discourses was to support the participation of young people (18-24 years) in tertiary education to adapt and thrive in the "knowledge economy". In terms of higher education, the Bradley Review (2008) has been the leading policy designed to guide the "upskilling" of the population in the last 15 years. Two equity groups were identified by the Bradley Review: students from low socio-economic status, for whom a target of 20 per cent participation by 2020 was set, and youth from rural and remote areas.

At the core of the Bradley Review was the idea of aspirations, which was put forward in terms of equity in higher education policy. As Cuervo, Corbett and White (2019, pp. 88-89) state:

Aspiration is often viewed as synonymous with social mobility: to be "aspirational" is to be "ambitious" which is conflated with a willingness to leave current circumstances and to look for a better life.

In contrast to this framing of inequality that associates unequal outcomes for RRR students with a deficit of aspirations, research also indicates that a consistent problem for many young people from RRR areas has been the lack of access to local higher education institutions, as a pre-condition to develop aspirations for this increasingly normative post-school pathway (Halsey, 2018).

Given the concentration of higher education institutions is in metropolitan areas, a second problem for RRR youth is the tension between staying and belonging to their local community or moving to another regional or urban centre to continue with further studies. Having to leave their community has an impact on the realisation of students' post-school aspirations. Relationships with family, friends and community members weigh heavily on the decision to migrate to continue with higher education studies for young people from RRR areas (see Cardak et al., 2017; Cuervo, 2014; Cuervo, Barakat & Turnbull, 2015; Delahunty, 2022). In this situation, distance, which has been historically presented as a barrier to attend university (see James, 2002), has been conceptualised by RRR youth attending university as an affective or emotional term. This results in some young people who had to leave their community to study or to 'spread themselves across multiple responsibilities' (e.g. work, caring, studies) to feel guilty, exhausted, or emotionally drained (Delahunty's, 2022, p. 34).



Notwithstanding these two important problems, the discourse of aspirations has also been criticised for ascribing an apparent lack of it to individual psychological deficits (Bok, 2010) and to an inability for equity group members (e.g. working class, Indigenous and RRR youth) to act on their own self-capitalisation (Sellar, 2013), rather than focusing on structural barriers that preclude youth from these groups to these normative aspirations. Cuervo et al. (2019) also argue that policy debates around higher education aspirations have ignored spatial inequities, by understanding space as a neutral category rather than a sustained process shaped by social structures and relationships (see also Cuervo, 2016; Green & Letts, 2007). Too often, deficit views are imposed from outside onto RRR youth, schools and communities, including a lack of aspirations. This research study contributes to challenging this deficit view and negative stereotypes about RRR youth aspirations and desires for their future.

OPPORTUNITIES AND BARRIES TO ACCESSING HIGHER EDUCATION FOR RRR YOUTH

Different studies focusing on RRR youth have challenged the above view of a lack of aspirations to report that school students from low socioeconomic status and non-metropolitan areas have high aspirations for their futures (see Cuervo, 2014; Gore et al., 2019). According to Delahunty (2022) the problem is not low or high aspirations, as if some young people lack the appropriate psychological motivational traits; rather what matters is the possession of implicit knowledges and practices that open the capacity to aspire. Similarly, other researchers view the possession of different forms of capital (e.g. social, cultural and financial) as defining the possibility and diversity of aspirations that young people outside the metropolis can have (Cuervo et al., 2019). Barnes and colleagues (2019) studied rural influences on youth higher education participation and found that family, friends, relatives and other community members (e.g. employers, local business and media) all play a key role in the development of post-secondary school aspirations (see also Cakitaki et al., 2022; James et al., 2010; Kilpatrick et al., 2019). That is, in many instances the community socio-cultural environment plays a role in terms of promoting different type of discourses.

Materialising the aspiration to attend university also depends on different type of resources. For example, some RRR youth are able to engage in higher education thanks to living near a regional university campus and centre (Delahunty, 2022). Bringing education opportunities closer to non-metropolitan youth is hence a matter of social justice. Other RRR students might choose their degree or university because they have a family or relative living in the metropolitan area or near the university they attend (Cuervo, 2016). Family members might provide not just financial and housing support but also emotional support in the relocation process. Recent research on RRR youth housing accommodation in metropolitan centres has identified this as a significant issue in terms of participation and completion of higher education studies (see Cook et al. 2022). Attending a metropolitan university campus incurs extra financial costs for RRR youth, including for housing (Cook et al. 2021; Cuervo, 2016); thus, many RRR students rely on parental financial support and institutional bursary and scholarship support to materialise their aspirations (Cuervo, 2016; Polesel, 2009).

More generally, it is important to state that attending a university is not, and should not be, the only pathway for young people. Futures outside higher education pathways and in local RRR communities should be promoted by those close to young people.

Notwithstanding, there is no doubt that nationally and internationally, there has been a greater focus on the process of access and enrolment in higher education for RRR youth, including discussions around their type and level of post-school aspirations, than on the social and cultural experiences of higher education for students from RRR backgrounds (Delahunty, 2022; see McNamee 2022 for a similar argument in the United States). As McNamee asserts, by examining the social and cultural experiences of RRR students in higher education, we can learn how these institutions can support this social group to thrive and succeed at university.

THE EXPERIENCES OF REGIONAL, RURAL AND REMOTE STUDENTS AT UNIVERSITY

The experiences of student life and accommodation on university campuses have not received the same attention as other aspects of higher education. Cook and colleagues (2021) provide some reasons for the lack of research on student housing and RRR youth experiences at university. Drawing on Christie and colleagues (2002), they posit that student life can be seen as unproblematic, with a consideration that the majority of students in university are from privileged and middle-class backgrounds, exempt of the financial struggles that affect working class students. Additionally, the prominence of urban youth in universities renders less visible the experiences of those from RRR backgrounds. Further, Cook and colleagues (2021) also found in the literature views that position student life as a transient and temporary experience in the passage of youth to adulthood (see Thomsen & Eikmo, 2010).

Scholars argue that the under-researching of RRR youth experience in higher education can often be a result of the classification of this cohort as having similar attributes as their urban peers as regards integration – i.e. language, cultural signposts, and values (Bimonte et al., 2019; Cook et al., 2021). Their migration process is viewed as soft, when compared to those of international student migrants and refugees that migrate for political reasons. Studies on RRR youth pathways to metropolitan university studies challenge this conceptualisation of soft migration by revealing that these young people face significant cultural, economic and geographic challenges, as well as having to navigate a new institutional culture and processes without the same level of support than in their communities of origin (Burke et al., 2017; Cuervo & Wyn, 2012; see McNamee 2022, for an international view).

Within research studies focusing on RRR youth experience at university, a prevalent emphasis has been on factors enhancing completion or attrition. Different studies on attrition and completion by students from equity groups (e.g. rural, low socioeconomic status, Indigenous) point to the challenges faced by these students in their trajectories through university. Some of the most common challenges are caring for family members, commitments to relationships and community, the need to work for a living, and even commuting to the university campus for those remaining in their local communities (Delahunty, 2022; Devlin & McKay, 2019). Further, the number of hours worked while studying, has been found to also have an impact. It has been affirmed that students from first-in-family backgrounds face the challenge of navigating the cultural norms and values of an institution (university) which is mostly unknown to them and their closed ones (see Bunn et al., 2020; O’Shea et al., 2017; Patfield et al., 2021). This is particularly so for students in their first year at university – where it has been affirmed that establishing attitudes, approaches and values to higher education learning are critical for educational success. Further, the initial year and experience at a higher education institution has been identified as a critical moment in determining the academic failure or success of a student (ACER, 2008).

A recent study of undergraduate students in a regional university reported that whether or not students work is not the critical aspect impacting studies and completion of degree. Rather, working more than 11 hours a week was identified as having a detrimental effect on students’ educational outcome (Cook et al., 2021). Working more hours was also found to be a consequence of more limited access to support from family, which can be an important barrier to completion. More generally, financial and housing issues are significant stressors in students’ lives (Cook et al., 2021; Lewis et al., 2007). Stress over financial concerns to afford appropriate housing and cost of living pressures have a negative impact on RRR students’ ability to successfully complete their higher education degree. Residing on campus has been found to contribute to better access to institutional resources, greater involvement in university activities and, ultimately, success in university studies, for those students who can afford it (Read et al. 2020).

However, understandings and conceptualisations of success mean different things to different social groups and stakeholders (O’Shea & Delahunty, 2018). Relevant to this study, students at university have equated “success” with ‘being able to positively negotiate feelings of otherness and difference’ (O’Shea & Delahunty, 2018, p. 1068). For equity group students (e.g. from low SES background, Indigenous, RRR students), this means, for example, recognition from others (e.g. classmates, lecturer, tutor, senior management at university) to validate their “belonging” to an institution with which they often lack a family connection or relevant cultural knowledge. Finally, O’Shea and Delahunty also found that success also means being resilient and ‘defying the odds’ against a lack of family history of higher education, or being able to successfully negotiate the complexity of life, such as juggling study with work and caring duties.

In terms of study progression and university degree completion, Delahunty (2022) found that the significant hardship experienced by some RRR students during their upbringing (e.g. a decade-long drought or work expectations placed on them since childhood) helped them cope with the many trials university life presents. Others found that building a sense of community, a notion of ‘belonging’, or having access to their peer group from their local community were important to cope with these new challenges. Importantly, some young people in Delahunty’s research ‘valued the belongingness experienced at regional campuses and regional university centres in particular, and those interactions in which they were not made to ‘feel like a number’ (p. 53). Other studies have found that young people rely on existing social networks to decide on where to migrate to continue with higher education, but also tap into their rural subjectivity to build new connections on campus with other students with a similar rural background and identity (Cuervo & Wyn, 2012; Holt, 2012).



INTERNATIONAL STUDIES: EXPERIENCES OF RURAL YOUTH IN AMERICAN COLLEGES

The lack of Australian literature on the higher education experiences of RRR youth during their degree years has parallels internationally. An exception is the developing research literature on this issue in the United States. For example, Heinisch (2018), McNamee (2022) and Spanella (2017) have focused on the cultural experiences of rural youth in universities. McNamee, focusing on youth from rural and working-class and in a situation of poverty, found that these students struggle to navigate an institution that has different values and norms. McNamee calls for higher education institutions to be more attentive to these students' needs, interests and values. He also found that rural students remained connected to their communities of origin while struggling to achieve appropriate recognition by their university peers and the institution. Spanella focused on cultural capital and on what rural youth, and their families, lack in terms of adapting to university norms, practices and values. For the present research, an important finding from Heinisch's study is the importance of sociality and belonging for rural students' success in university. Rural youth connection to others and to university programs was vital to their belonging and inclusion, which ultimately resulted in better educational outcomes.

In the broad literature on rural youth and higher education in the United States, it is important to mention that studies regularly show strong connections with the Australian literature. For example, some studies focus on youth aspirations to higher education and on the social actors (e.g. parents, peers, teachers) that influence this disposition (see Ganss 2016; Tiekens, 2016). There is also a

focus on quantitative approaches to the comparative educational performance of rural students at university (Byun et al., 2012). Other research focuses on rural students' reliance on values learned in their farming upbringing, such as self-reliance, a demanding work ethic and pride, to navigate a new unfamiliar territory (see Schultz, 2004). Another study found that while some rural youth maintain ties with their community of origin and others sever them, the majority of these students draw on some level of social capital deriving from family, school, community and/or campus sources to make it work at university (Nelson, 2019).

Finally, and important to our research, is McHenry-Sorber and Swisher's (2020) study of Appalachian (rural) women constructing gender and place identity in their first year at university. Here the researchers noticed the complexities and heterogeneous experiences at the time of forming and sustaining place identities: some youth rejected their Appalachian identity and embraced the "non-Appalachian norms", while others defended their home cultures and sustained their identity linked to their place of origin. In other words, while some hid their Appalachian identity, others experienced a sense of loss of their home identity, and others fought back stereotypes of Appalachia-as-place. Ultimately, McHenry-Sorber and Swisher's study shows the active identity labour that rural youth have to do when they leave home for university study.

3. METHODS

This research project is a mixed methods study focusing on the higher education experiences of RRR youth at a metropolitan university in Australia. Domestic students from a regional, rural or remote background enrolled in an undergraduate degree were invited to complete a survey and participate in an interview to discuss the following themes:

- their motivations to continue with post-secondary education
- their experiences of relocating to Melbourne
- the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their studies and life
- their experiences and challenges with their housing arrangements
- their relationships to other RRR students at university
- their experiences of belonging and unbelonging at university
- their recommendations on how the university can help RRR students

The development of the survey, its distribution and administration, as well as the interviews, was supported by funds from the Melbourne Graduate School of Education Seed Funding Scheme (Round 2, 2022). The survey questionnaire and interview guides were developed by the project team and, as the above list suggests, their content was informed by the review of existing research literature. The questionnaire included 37 questions grouped into 9 sections: background and demographic information (8 questions); place of origin (2 questions); current residence (4 questions); residential history (2 questions); spatial experiences (4 questions); social experiences (7 questions); COVID-19 (3 questions); finances (3 questions); and work (4 questions).

The distribution of the survey to the relevant student groups was the main challenge in collecting the data. Without direct access (i.e. through administrative services) to a contact list of all students from RRR backgrounds enrolled at the University of Melbourne, the project researchers invited participation to the study through the University's online notice board for students. The survey was made available online through the Qualtrics platform. The distribution of the survey was also supported by the Student & Scholarly Services unit and the Student Accommodation unit at the university. We thank these two units for their support. Survey responses were collected between September and November, 2022.

This approach resulted in the collection of 88 usable survey responses. Given that the total population of undergraduate RRR students at the University of Melbourne was 1,653 in 2021 (according to the Australian Department of Education's Higher

Education Statistics), the study's sample size was approximately 5.3 per cent of the population (assuming that the population changed little between 2021 and 2022). The cleaned survey data was analysed through descriptive statistics about RRR students' views of their residential, social and financial circumstances as University of Melbourne students living in Melbourne.

Participants completing the survey were given the opportunity to leave their contact details if they wished to participate in a 40-60 minute semi-structured interview. The majority of survey respondents (58 per cent) expressed interest in participating in an interview. Of these 51 respondents, 36 participants were selected and approached to undertake an interview, with 23 agreeing and completing their interview. Of the interview participants, six identified as male, sixteen as female and one as non-binary. Around 65 per cent of interviewees grew up in rural towns; 25 per cent in regional centres; and 10 per cent in a remote location in Australia. Overall, 80 per cent of interviewees had previously lived, or were living, in a university residence or college at the time of the interview.

The interview questionnaire followed a chronological structure. The interview guide began asking participants about their lives in their hometowns, followed by the factors and reasons underpinning their decision to leave their family and communities to attend a metropolitan university. This was followed by questions around relocation, initial experiences at university, living arrangements, and experiences of socialisation and belonging at university. In this sense, the interview took a life history approach; that is, a retrospective view of the past of participants moving until the present (Thomson & MacLeod, 2009).

Interviews were carried out in Semester Two of 2022 and were conducted over approximately eight weeks. They were recorded, with participants' consent, and transcribed professionally. Data was entered into the software package NVivo and coded, initially through a priori themes that followed from the questions in the interviews, and a posteriori code through thematic concepts that emerged against our readings of the research literature. For example, the idea of a "rural sensibility" or subjectivity is a theme that emerged from our reading of the literature paired to participants' comments that social networks were formed due to a shared identity with other RRR students. In the next section we present some descriptive analysis from the survey, followed by a more in-depth analysis of the findings emerging from the interview data

4. SURVEY FINDINGS

This chapter reports on the main findings from the survey. After providing an overview of the profile of respondents, the chapter explores their residential history and trajectory, social experiences, financial circumstances and work commitments. This overview of the extra-educational circumstances of RRR students at the University of Melbourne provides the basis of the analysis of their interview responses in the next chapter.

A DIVERSITY OF PROFILES

Despite fitting under the overall category of ‘RRR students’ at the University of Melbourne, it is first important to note that the survey respondents had diverse profiles. The majority of respondents (61.4 per cent) identified as female and three in four were 21 years of age or younger. Although the majority of respondents identified as Anglo, Australian, Caucasian or white, over 10 per cent identified as either Asian (including Indian), Hispanic or Latin American. The survey focus on undergraduate students explains that very few respondents were mature-age students. However, over 10 per cent of respondents also belonged to another equity group based on their self-reported disability. In terms of level of study, first-year students accounted for just over one in four respondents, with the other respondents distributed evenly between second year students and those in their third or more year of study.

A diversity of profiles was also evident when examining the geographical and school origins of respondents. Overall, 60 per cent completed school in Victoria and 40 per cent interstate. The majority completed school in a regional or rural place, but a sizeable minority (20 per cent) had already relocated to an urban school to complete their schooling (a school which was more or less distant from their home). The majority of survey respondents finished Year 12 in a private school (21 per cent in a Catholic school and 46 per cent in an independent school), with around one in three completing secondary education in a government school. The sector of schools where respondents completed secondary education was associated with significant differences in the level of socioeconomic disadvantage among students, as measured using the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA), a synthetic index of school socioeconomic profile computed for all Australian schools by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority. Although the mean school ICSEA of RRR survey respondents was 1063 (i.e. more socioeconomically advantaged than the national mean of 1000), the mean ICSEA value was 998 for those from government schools, 1031 for those from Catholic schools and 1122 for those from independent schools. This indicates that RRR students at the University of Melbourne are likely to have had significantly different schooling experiences.

Finally, the socio-economic profile of respondents also displayed significant variation when using measures of geographical social background. Using the Australian Bureau of Statistics’ Index of

Relative Socio-Economic Advantage and Disadvantage (IRSAD) to characterise the socio-economic status of respondents’ place of origin, the IRSAD scores of respondents’ postcode of origin ranged from 802 to 1152, i.e. covering a broad spectrum of communities from highly disadvantaged to highly advantaged ones. The IRSAD sample mean was 981 (i.e. inferior to the national mean of 1000), suggesting that as a whole, RRR students at the University of Melbourne tend to come from relatively disadvantaged localities. The socioeconomic gradient of localities is also associated with the kind of schools different RRR students attended: the mean IRSAD score of the postcode for those who went to an independent school was significantly higher than the corresponding score for those who attended a Catholic or government school (1002 against 969 and 957, respectively).

Overall, the above-average socioeconomic profile of schools attended by respondents suggests that RRR students enrolled at the University of Melbourne may have had a distinguished educational trajectory through school, when compared to their peers not enrolled at university or enrolled in lower-status universities. In turn, this is likely to be related to specific family backgrounds, including family histories of university attendance: among survey respondents, close to three in four (73.6 per cent) did not identify as first-in-family. This link between family background and educational trajectory is confirmed when comparing the school attended by students based on their first-in-family status: the proportion who completed Year 12 in a government school was twice as high among those identifying as first-in-family as among those with a parental history of attending university (56 per cent versus 27 per cent, respectively).

RESIDENTIAL EXPERIENCES

The majority of survey respondents (72.7 per cent) reported living in college, with a higher proportion of women than men in this residential circumstance (74 per cent versus 69 per cent). Additionally, over half of respondents (55.7 per cent) reported having only lived in college since relocating for the study. Given this predominant college enrolment situation, even though every second respondent (51.1 per cent) reported living alone, this does not mean that most respondents lived in isolation. In fact, college allowed most respondents to live independently within the context of a broader community of students.

Over 70 per cent of respondents lived in their accommodation only during study periods, with another 24 per cent living there year-round. The patterns were broadly comparable for women and men. However, differences in residential experiences can be observed when comparing first-in-family to other students. First-in-family students were less likely to reside in college compared to their RRR peers (61 per cent versus 77 per cent). Relatedly, they were also less likely to live alone, i.e. more likely to share their accommodation with other people (65 per cent for first-in-family against 44 per cent for non-first-in-family students). First-in-family students were also the only students to stay at their Melbourne accommodation for only part of each week during university semesters, with this circumstance concerning one in five first-in-family students. These results indicate that students' family history of attending university is likely to stratify not only their academic experiences, but also their extra-educational experiences.

Figure 1 reports the proportion of respondents who selected among a list of 13 reasons provided for choosing their current accommodation (respondents could select all that apply). By far the most commonly given reason for choosing their current accommodation was proximity to university (81.8 per cent of all respondents). Over 90 per cent of college residents selected this reason, but it was also the reason selected most often by non-college residents, alongside proximity to transport. As such, convenience appears to be central to RRR students' residential choices. The other important reason chosen by respondents was the amenities available in the property (45.5 per cent of all respondents). Non-college students were more likely to select that their chosen accommodation was the best option available at the time, that it was affordable and that the timing of availability was right; whereas college residents were more likely to select the safety of the area and proximity to family/friends as relevant reasons.

Figure 1. Percentage of respondents who selected each of the 13 reasons listed for choosing their current accommodation, by accommodation type (%)

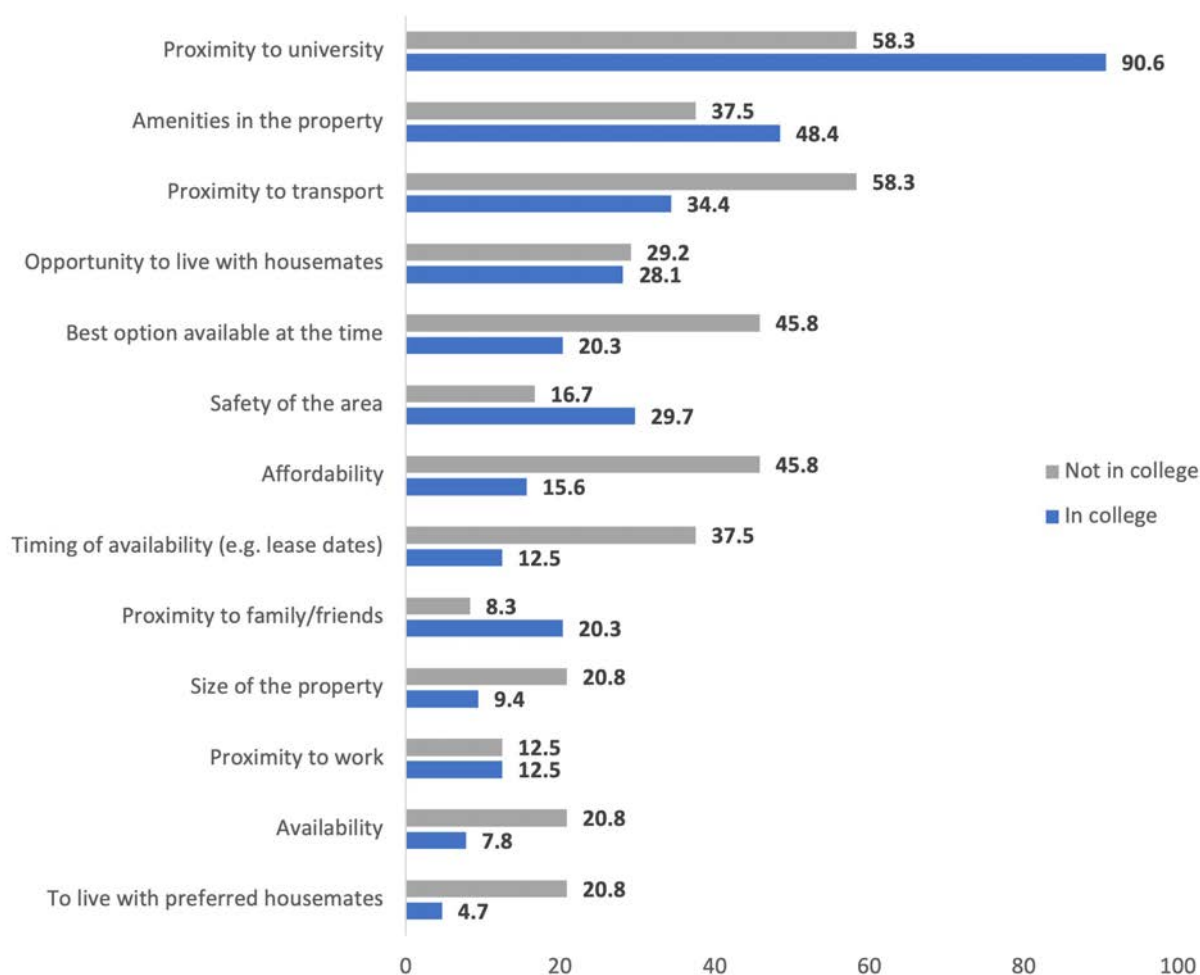


Figure 2. Percentage of respondents declaring being (very) satisfied with four aspects of their current accommodation, by accommodation type (%)

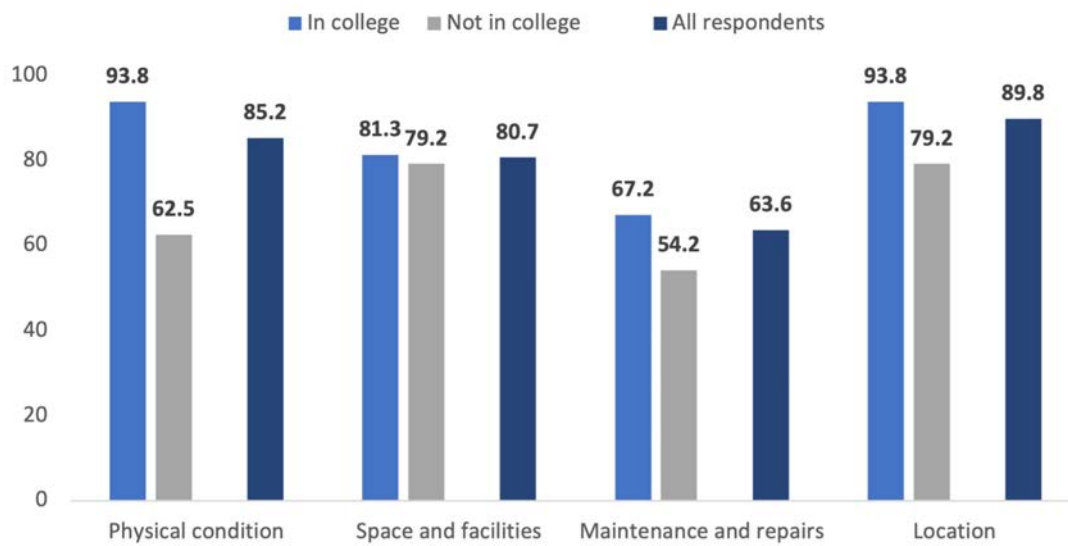


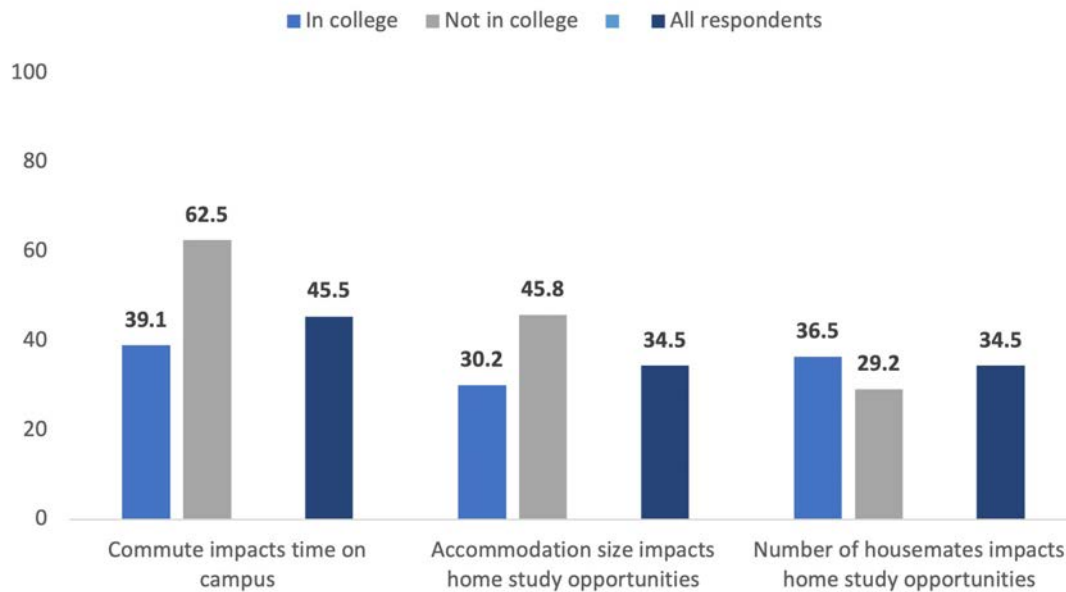
Figure 2 displays the reported level of satisfaction with four aspects of their residential circumstances among college and other RRR students: physical condition, space and facilities, and maintenance and repairs. Overall, the majority of RRR students are satisfied with these aspects of their accommodation, with the highest degree of satisfaction observed for location (89.8 per cent satisfied or very satisfied), followed by physical condition (85 per cent (very) satisfied), space and facilities (81 per cent (very) satisfied), and maintenance and repairs (63 per cent (very) satisfied). For all four dimensions, college students more often reported feeling satisfied, with the largest gap observed as regards physical condition (93.8 per cent satisfaction among college residents compared to 62.5 per cent satisfaction among those in private rentals or other residential circumstances).

Although the survey did not focus directly on RRR students' study experiences, a series of questions highlight the way students' residential experiences are directly connected to their study opportunities and experiences. Figure 3 shows that, overall, non-college students are more likely to be negatively affected by their residential circumstances than are college-residing students. The gap is particularly marked with respect to the disruptive role of students' commute, but it is also significant with respect to the size of respondents' accommodation. By contrast, the number of residents and, by extension, the broader social environment

of college residence, means that RRR students in college are somewhat more likely to report having their studies disrupted by this aspect of their residential circumstances. As will be shown in Chapter 5, this theme of needing to balance study and social life for college residents also emerged in the interviews.

Finally, informed by the literature highlighting the importance of students' sense of belonging to their university experience, especially for students with less familiarity with the norms and expectations of university life or those less familiar with urban universities, we asked survey participants if they felt like they belong where they live. A majority of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with this statement (62.1 per cent), suggesting that RRR students' residential circumstances are not lived as an alienating experience by most students. However, important differences exist between different groups of students: those living in college are significantly more likely to (strongly) agree than others (68.3 per cent versus 45.8 per cent), and men are significantly more likely to (strongly) agree than women (75.0 per cent versus 56.6 per cent). This suggests that places of urban residence may be unequally hospitable to different categories of RRR students based on their gender identity or the kind of residential arrangements they have.

Figure 3. Percentage of respondents who agree or strongly agree that their studies are impacted by their residential circumstances, by accommodation type (%)



SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

The social relationships formed and sustained by RRR students are integral to their experience of studying at a metropolitan university. These relationships include new friendships developed since relocating to Melbourne, but also the pre-existing social circles and friends RRR students had at home, away from Melbourne. Our survey asked a range of questions covering both aspects of RRR students’ social relationships.

Relocating to Melbourne is lived differently whether RRR students are already familiar with people in the city. On this front, pre-existing social networks in Melbourne are a relevant indicator. Overall, just over one in four survey respondents (28.7 per cent) indicated that they already knew someone before relocating to their current area of residence. However, this result is different for young women and young men, with the latter significantly more likely to have pre-existing acquaintances in Melbourne (46.9 per cent versus 18.9 per cent).

The existing literature shows that affinities and a sense of shared experiences or identity can form the basis of friendships between RRR students in urban environments. In the survey, we asked participants whether they spend time with other RRR students in Melbourne. Overall, over 70 per cent of respondents said ‘yes’. However, residential situations divide the RRR student cohort: 84.1 per cent of those living in college answered ‘yes’, against 41.7

per cent of those living outside college. In other words, residential arrangements that feature a strong social community may be an important enabler of these elective RRR friendships.

Alongside these RRR friendships, we asked survey participants about their social connections since relocating to Melbourne more broadly, from their sense of being able to meet people and make friends to the role the university plays in fostering these new social relationships. Here, too, the results highlight the value of on campus residence to the social experience of being a university student for RRR youth. College residents are more likely than those in private accommodation to agree or strongly agree that they: can meet people and make friends (73.0 per cent versus 58.3 per cent); that they have met like-minded people at university (71.4 per cent versus 66.7 per cent); that they go to or are on campus for relationships and social reasons (54.0 per cent versus 45.8 per cent); that they feel comfortable with other university students (76.2 per cent versus 70.8 per cent); and that they feel comfortable with university staff (76.2 per cent versus 62.5 per cent). While these results are likely to indicate the specific role played by college residence, they may also point to the fact that RRR students electing to live on campus hold different social outlooks, dispositions and resources than their RRR peers living off campus, which may translate into different social experiences at and outside university.

FINANCES AND WORK

Alongside students' residential experiences and social life, their financial circumstances and work situation are central aspects of their extra-educational life while studying at a metropolitan university.

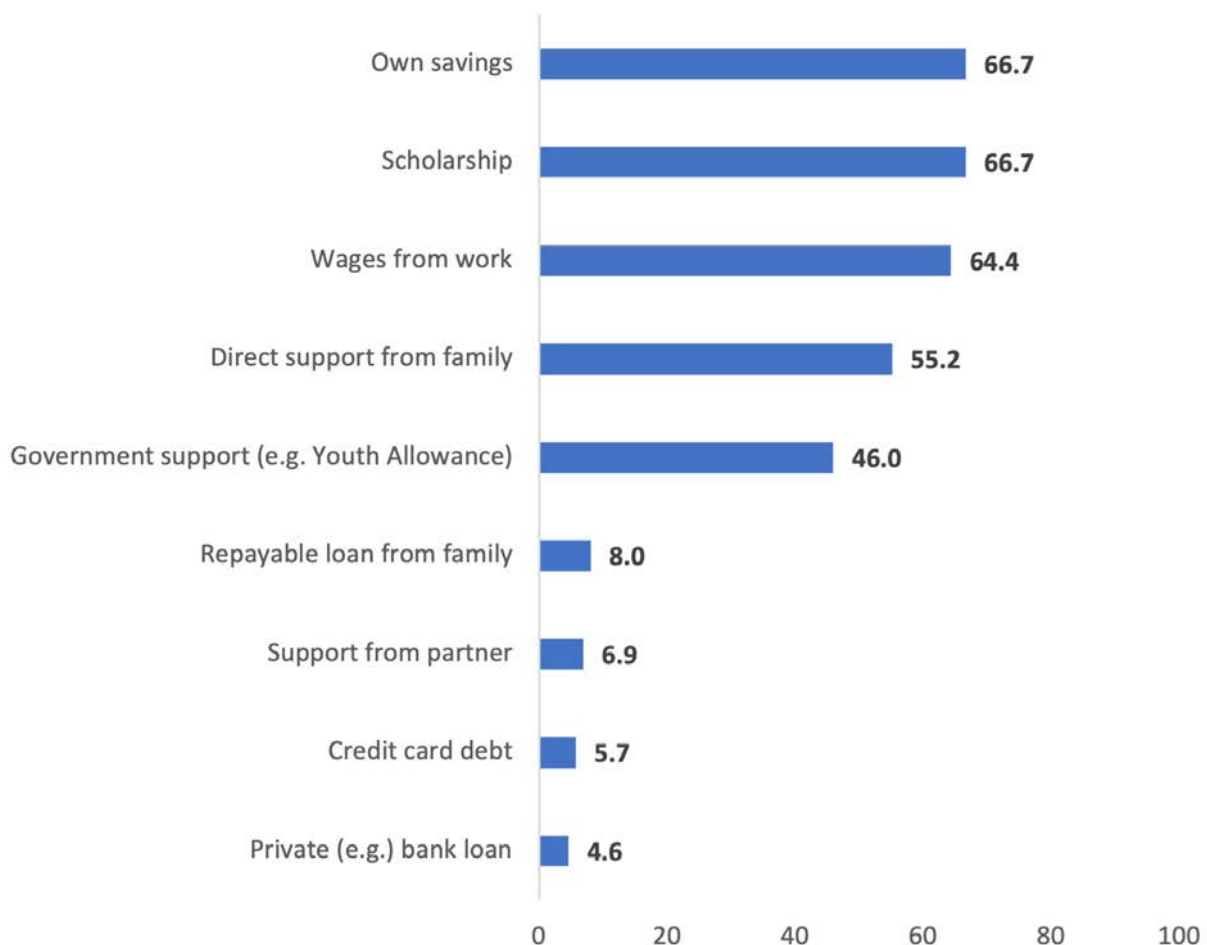
The first finding is that RRR students draw on a range of financial sources to support themselves while studying at university (Figure 4). Four categories of resources concern the majority of RRR students: their own savings (66.7 per cent of respondents); a scholarship (66.7 per cent of respondents); wages from work (64.4 per cent of respondents); and direct support from family (55.2 per cent of respondents). Just under half of respondents also access government support (e.g. Youth Allowance). In other words, most survey respondents rely on multiple sources of income and support during their studies. Scholarships in particular appear to play an important role for a majority of RRR students at the University of Melbourne. They are a source of support not only for college residents (68.8 per cent of them) but also for other RRR students (58.3 per cent of them). By contrast, few rely on a repayable loan from family, credit card debt or support from a partner to support themselves.

Access to diverse sources of financial support appears to be less an indicator of financial ease than a marker of needing these various sources to get by. Indeed, when asking respondents whether they

spend 30 per cent or more of their income on accommodation costs in a typical week, i.e. a standard indicator of housing unaffordability, 65.5 per cent of respondents said yes. Reported rates of housing unaffordability were lower for college residents than those in private rentals (57.1 per cent versus 87.5 per cent), in part because a higher proportion of college residents had access to scholarships (68.8 per cent of college residents versus 58.3 per cent of those living off campus). The majority of RRR students in the survey reported working to support themselves, not only outside of, but also during, the semester, and this was true for both college residents and off campus residents.

In their view, the often-challenging financial circumstances of RRR students have consequences for their studies. This is particularly evident when asked about the consequences of juggling study and work. Among those who report working, the majority of respondents indicate that their work impacts various aspects of their life, their commute (e.g. travel to campus) (53.7 per cent), their study (57.4 per cent) and their ability to work on their assignments (51.5 per cent). Here, too, the results confirm the importance of exploring students' lives beyond study and academic progress to make sense of their experiences as students. For RRR students at the University of Melbourne, this is relevant with respect to their work and financial circumstances as much as for their residential situation.

Figure 4. Percentage of respondents accessing different sources of financial support (%)



5. INTERVIEW FINDINGS

In this chapter we report data from 23 semi-structured interviews with participants that completed the survey. In the interviews we asked participants about their aspirations, their decision to relocate to Melbourne, their experiences and challenges at the university and in a metropolitan setting, how they navigate the pandemic, perceptions and practices of belonging, and asked about their advice to other RRR students and university authorities.

TRAJECTORIES TO UNIVERSITY

Students shared their motivations for choosing to go to university and why they chose the University of Melbourne in particular. The main reason students wanted to go to university was to get a good job and the main reason they chose the University of Melbourne was because of its reputation. In other words, normative understandings of contemporary youth transitions were present in these students' approaches (see Cuervo, 2014; Fu, 2023).

Besides wanting to position themselves for better employment opportunities, students also cited their academic achievements, opportunities to leave their hometowns, and some expectation from their families and schools. Several students reported there was an expectation to go to university because they received good grades at school. Maddie, who was from Bendigo, stated that because she was a “high achiever academically... it seemed like the thing that I was supposed to do.”

A few considered university as a way out of their hometown for a variety of reasons. For example, Zara wanted to leave her home in a small town in central Victoria because she found it “dull” and “boring” and William, who grew up in the Philippines but went to secondary school in Tasmania, said he “wouldn't know what to do anyway” if he did not attend university. Daniella grew up in northwest New South Wales (NSW) near a river in one of “Australia's sportiest town[s]”. She enjoyed life on the farm and then had to travel seven hours each way to attend boarding school, from Year 7 through Year 12. When describing her motivations to attend university she said, “that's why I tried so hard during high school because I wanted to make the most of that opportunity of going away to be able to go to university.”

There were three main reasons students chose the University of Melbourne: 1) its strong reputation, 2) the variety of courses and subjects, and 3) prior exposure to the university. The case of Noah offers an example of how students viewed the university. Noah is from a small community just outside a regional town in Victoria. He focused exclusively on his studies in Year 12 and then spent six months working at an investment firm in town, doing administrative tasks to earn more money and to see if he enjoyed the industry. When he started applying for university, he decided on The University of Melbourne because it “definitely has the

reputation and the name, so I thought why not aim for what seems to be the highest.”

Many students also cited the variety of courses and subjects, especially because of the flexibility to change and try different areas, which they saw as a major draw. William highlighted variety as a reason to look beyond his local, regional university. The number of subject offerings was particularly important when students were not sure what they wanted to study or in the event their interests changed. Finally, students identified various instances of prior engagement/exposure to the University of Melbourne, through representatives visiting schools, career expos, and school trips to the university.

EXPERIENCE OF RELOCATING

When asked about their experiences of relocating, students provided insights into their decision-making processes when selecting housing and revealed a number of uncertainties around the practical and social elements that shaped these decisions.

Colleges had some consistent strengths and draws for RRR students, but there were several areas which were problematic. The main appeal of colleges was the potential for community. While some students, like Zara, expressed early worries about how “uptight” the rules were and like Lucas, about the “stereotypes” of students who attended colleges, most valued the small sizes of the colleges and the support offered by them. Students particularly noted their appreciation for the support during moving day, the assistance provided with other finances such as through Centrelink applications, obtaining student Mykis (i.e. public transport), and the support transiting from interstate.

A few students expressed challenges with the communities in their college: feeling it was a “formative” experience in general, just not for them. Some felt out of place as a student who had not previously attended a metropolitan private school or had a lower ATAR than others. Other students struggled in the first semester and first year to adapt to the pressures of studying at university.

The college websites served as an important entry point – students found them very informative and easy to use, especially since they did not necessarily have the chance to visit in person. Several found the application process straightforward: as Emily from northern NSW highlighted there was “a very easy form and it was all very quick”. However, the timelines around applications, results being released, and O-Week occasionally caused a great deal of stress. Late notifications of Year 12 results and/or offers from the University, restricted the option of a college, which was the case for Evelyn from rural NSW who “got my acceptance [to the University]... the first of February and I was going to Melbourne orientation on the 21st so there was not time to organise residential college.”

The primary concern about colleges was the cost. For most, if the college fees could not be covered by scholarships or bursaries, then living at a college was not viable. Some needed multiple scholarships, like Mia from southwest Victoria, while Anna from a regional Victorian town shared that they had used “some money from my granddad, which was technically meant to be a trust for me when I’m like 21. It’s gone; it’s all gone” on the fees before securing a scholarship.

Olivia, for example, is from a small, remote town in Victoria and is studying Arts. They were rejected for a scholarship to their chosen college in mid-December. Olivia commented:

I wasn't able to get a scholarship, so that was restrictive in my first year. This relocation more generally is expensive, and I didn't have much money saved up because there wasn't many employment options for me. And my parents didn't have that much of a capacity to support me, at least not full time, so they would've paid completely for my accommodation. So, it's a bit adding deep waters there.

For students not living in colleges, they detailed challenges with the housing market, housemates, and complex commutes. The main challenge with the housing market was the application process – one student applied for “probably 40” places before securing one. Zoe’s case was similar. She is from regional Victoria. They were familiar with Melbourne from visits with family and teammates growing up. After living in a college for their first year, they decided to move into a share house:

Over the summer so we basically came to Melbourne every weekend for looking at stuff. And then finally got one after 10 tries, actually two days before uni started. So that was kind of scary moving in on the first day of second year.

For some students, challenges with housemates meant their experience of transitioning to stable housing took years or has been delayed because they still live at home for cultural reasons. A few other students, like Alex and Maddie – both from central Victoria, - tried commuting from home but found the time and hassle of public transport to be too much and moved to the city.

EXPERIENCES OF COVID-19

Undoubtedly, this cohort of students have had to navigate a significant challenge during their studies: the COVID-19 pandemic. We asked the participants how the COVID-19 pandemic affected their lives, in terms of their learning and participation in university life, living arrangements, work and finances, mental and physical health, and their relationships (with their family, friends, and peers).

Whilst a few participants actively enjoyed or remained unaffected by the transition to online learning, most participants felt they were adversely affected by having to attend “Zoom classes”. One participant, James, who grew up in a rural city in northeastern Victoria with his parents and two older siblings, commented:

I really struggled with online lectures. I can do things online, but if I go in person, I'm seeing it and I just absorb it so much better. And then when I'm doing it online, for some reason, it just takes me twice as long. And it doesn't feel right.

Speaking of his experience of the pandemic, William stated online classes were “unmotivating” and explained how students undertaking courses with a strong practical element were impacted: “Doing the course Construction Management, one of the biggest things we actually have to do is inspect sites, so actually physically coming to sites . . . seeing it in person, is very important. Year One didn’t really offer that.” Many others echoed this sentiment and also shed light on the ways in which those with different learning needs were disadvantaged: “I’m also a visual learner and have to see things in order to learn it rather than just by theory.”

Many of the participants commented on the fact of missing out on the university experience and making connections with their peers. Zoe, for example, affirmed that “I just like being on campus”. She later added:

I think I enjoyed that lifestyle, so I kind of forced myself to participate and feel like a uni student. . . I don't think I've made those connections through [online] classes or. . . close relationships with other students.



Another participant, Maddie, commented on how going into lockdown in the second half of 2021 was harder: “we had already done some uni in person... I had actually made friends at uni and I’d actually formed relationships and had that taste of going on field trips”.

Many participants spoke about how the isolation and loneliness brought on by being separated from their family, friends, and partners were detrimental to their mental health. Isabella, who grew up in a small regional town southwest of Sydney, maintained a relationship with her boyfriend in NSW whilst completing her degree during the pandemic. She said: “You can’t hold each other... you’re really not emotionally available to look after the other.”

Harper, born and raised in a small town in Victoria, spoke of how difficult it was having to travel back and forth to be with her mother who had been diagnosed with cancer. Meanwhile, Sarah, who grew up on a dairy farm and is the eldest of five children, spoke of how hard it was to miss seeing her younger siblings grow and change:

I’m just that big sister who comes in every now and then and leaves again, and that was quite upsetting... they’ve made these huge milestone leaps all of a sudden, they’re so much taller and so much smarter...

Those who lived in colleges, however, appreciated the sense of community and stability they provided. “That was the benefit of being in college,” said Grace, “we could still see the other people... we could still hang out... we could eat meals together and things like that.” Indeed, for many students living in colleges, that space provided a refuge against the isolation imposed by the pandemic.

SATISFACTION WITH LIVING ARRANGEMENTS

In our interviews, we asked participants about their positive experiences and challenges of their living situations. Overwhelmingly, there was a positive response to being close to services and resources. For those participants that live off campus in rental properties, access to shops, bars, restaurants, and other amenities was an important part of choosing to rent in that suburb. Maddie, for instance, commented: “I definitely enjoyed the independence of living away from home.” Maddie moved out to a private rental accommodation and is enjoying the amenities of her “Melbourne suburb, there’s a lot going on, and being able to go out on the weekends and not have to drive anywhere and just go out and have fun, that was a big plus side.”

A significant proportion of the participants in this study lived in university colleges. At least half of our interviewees lived in residential colleges. Almost all these participants had a positive response to the resources and opportunities provided by the colleges and university accommodation. Participants liked the “communal areas”, the “24-hour access to a library”, study areas and access to tutors, being able to be part of academic and social clubs, living within “a culture of success”, and support from career counsellors. Participants living in colleges also placed a positive emphasis on the opportunities of making friends and socialising. Mia grew up in a working-class household, in a regional town an hour and a half away from Melbourne. Mia commented:

I love being with all of my friends, especially after having made a really strong group of friends there. It’s really convenient to have them just in such a close proximity and be able to have dinner together and lunch together and study together in the facilities that they have there, the library, which is open, we’re able to access 24/7, which is really good for me considering I study later in the night. Yeah, it’s just close proximity to the university and then to the city. So yeah, it’s just been really beneficial in terms of socializing and also being around people that are more academically-minded... which I don’t think I would’ve been able to study to the extent and succeed to the extent that I have if I hadn’t had been granted the scholarship.

While opportunities and resources were important aspects of living in the college, socialising, making new friends and finding “like-minded people” was another advantage of the colleges and residences. This was particularly for students that went through COVID-19 at the colleges and through online learning, but also for those like Isabella who “really struggle to make connections with my peers at the Conservatorium simply because our schedules are so intense”. Additionally, the different class schedules and places of rehearsal made it hard for Isabella to make a group of friends with her music peers. For her, the college, particularly during COVID provided “that opportunity to build relationships”.

Other participants in this study, like Mia, also mentioned the significant support that scholarships provided in terms of finance and affordability of housing and living costs. For many RRR students without scholarships and bursaries, attending university and/or living in colleges would be very difficult to afford. As Sarah put it, “the scholarship made it almost cheaper to live at college than it was to move out”.

CHALLENGES WITH LIVING ARRANGEMENTS

There were many positive comments around the living arrangements for these RRR students, both on campus and off campus accommodation. The return to face-to-face lectures and tutorials and a growing campus life also contributed to the positive experiences. There were, however, negative experiences faced by RRR students in their accommodation situations and university life. Some found living away from home hard, including for those that sustained a long-distance relationship with a partner. Others found it hard to connect with their peers or to learning online during the lockdown period of the COVID-19 pandemic.

For some of those in private rental properties, sharing a house or apartment with housemates was a complex situation. Some young people found themselves “taking on more responsibility than my housemates in terms of house administration and organising things and chores”. Others, like Maddie, commented that “my housemates operated on drastically different daily schedules – I would be asleep at night and then my housemate at 3:00 AM would be suddenly deciding to have a shower with her speaker on”. Often, participants resolved these situations by moving out of their accommodation.

Some students found they were paying a high rent for their accommodation. Evelyn, who came from a small rural town, was one of them. She felt as though she was “being really scammed for the amount that I was paying”. She decided to move into student accommodation close to the university. Knowledge of the rental market in Melbourne was considered a valuable asset by students coming from non-metropolitan areas. Navigating the abundance of information, contracts, and rights and responsibilities was felt as a difficult task by many.

For those living in colleges, there were also negative aspects beyond the many positive sides to this type of accommodation. Some participants felt pressure to attend the many events organised by their colleges. Part of the pressure rested on the need to socialise or “bond”, when students wanted to study or have quiet time, while other pressures were related to the cost of these events. Amelia was in this situation. She came from a rural town from interstate. She summarises this “pressure” she felt to participate in social activities where drinking alcohol was involved:

I feel like being at college, there was a pressure to go to every social event and do that. Even sometimes when I'm like, I don't really want to, but I probably should. And even the events cost a lot of money and it was just that side. So, I feel like that the pressure wasn't good. Also, I would say again, the point of everyone being from similar, having a similar background which kind of leaves you out of the mix a bit, which wasn't as good.

A significant problem that some RRR students had in colleges are illustrated by Amelia's final point: the existence of a social class barrier between students from privileged backgrounds, often from private schools, and the non-metropolitan students, many of whom come from working class or from less affluent backgrounds. Class differences were sometimes highlighted by participants through references to words and descriptors such as “privilege”, “wealth”, and “being from a private school”. Some participants, however, pointed directly to social class differences and, like Harper, to experiences of discrimination and “microaggression”: “I have had people treat me differently because I come from a low socioeconomic background. I have had people make fun of me because I'm poor.” For some students, this social class divide intersected with place, in so far as being from a rural area was, in some instances, associated with being of lower social status by more privileged students.

Maintaining excellent grades was another reported stressor. Some participants in this study felt pressure to sustain excellent grades to retain their scholarships. Others found that their college placed too high an emphasis on excellence in academic results, which left no room for recognition of students doing very well academically but that were not at the top of their class.

A significant complaint by some students was a culture of alcohol and partying happening in some colleges. Anna's example illustrates this issue. Anna came from a regional town, where she attended a private school. She moved into a college when relocating to study at university. At first, she found it “terrible” to live in the college with a “culture around drinking, partying, obnoxious extroverts, and also borderline sexual harassment”. She also felt, however, that:

It needs a massive overhaul, which the college is currently working on a lot and I'm really happy to be a part of that, like offering non-drinking events that people should get excited about. But the culture when I came in was really difficult for me to adjust to and made me want to leave.

Some of Anna's experience was similar for other participants coming from regional or rural areas – particularly for those that did not have a pre-existing social network (which was typically formed through their private school networks) – and who had to navigate constructing a new life in a completely different environment.

REGIONAL, RURAL AND REMOTE SOCIAL RELATIONS AND SENSIBILITY

Elsewhere, we have found that RRR students tend to build friendship and social networks with students from the same locational background (see Cuervo & Wyn, 2012). These friendships and networks are often built on a common understanding of place, upbringing, and of shared experiences and “sensibility” – as some participants in this study have pointed out. Thus, we asked participants in the survey and interviews with whom they socialise, how they do this, and if they have made friendships and built social networks with other young people from RRR places.

A quarter of survey respondents and a third of interviewees stated that they did not make friends with RRR students. Three common responses or justifications were given for not connecting with other RRR students: 1) that there were none or almost no RRR students in their colleges; 2) that they were very “extrovert[ed]” and “social person” and “hang out” with many people, and that they “don't select people [to hang out with based on] from where they are from”; and 3) that in their university degree and classes there were no RRR students.

Interestingly, some participants mentioned that they would welcome the university organising an “event”, or a specific gathering or a club that would bring RRR students together. For example, Maritza who came from a small rural locality in Tasmania, stated: “it was a very big change from living rural to city life with the sheer amount of people would ‘consume’ you”. She could not connect with other RRR students and affirmed that “maybe if there was a specific event then maybe I would have”. Further, while some participants mentioned that in their colleges – some of the larger ones – there were very few or almost no RRR students; others mentioned that there were many in their college, which facilitated connections between them.

Approximately half of survey respondents and half of interviewees in this study affirmed that they made connections and friends with other RRR students. Some participants made their RRR network in the “corridors” of the college, or by sharing daily meals or communal spaces (e.g. library, games room). An important aspect of this construction of RRR support networks and friendships was the acknowledgement of a rural sensibility – an understanding of a shared past and a common “struggle” in their resettling in an “alienating” place like the big metropolis of Melbourne. Elisa came from a small town of 360 people two hours north of Melbourne. During the “university year” she lives in a college residence. At the time of the survey, she was in the third year of her studies. She commented: “It's easier to draw familiarity with people who understand the difficult move and coming from an educational background that didn't offer as many opportunities as the city kids”.

Thomas was in the first year of his studies. He came from a big rural Victorian town close to the NSW border. He also mentioned a rural sensibility to explain his RRR university connections: “I just feel that we have the same sense of humour and relatable experiences.” Theresa, a student from a small rural town and in her third year of university, mentioned:

I think it is easier to relate to students who are also from rural towns. In my experience, the culture in country towns is starkly different to metropolitan areas, and a lot of metro students don't really understand our experiences. Even coming to college was a massive culture shock - some students here have never been camping, have never seen a tractor or a dairy farm, and don't know what a swag is. Small things like that make it hard to relate to students, especially if they also went to private schools.

Maria, like several others, also talked about “relatability”, shared past experiences and present struggles. Like Theresa and a few of her RRR university peers, she also placed the emphasis on social class divisions between urban and RRR students. She came from a low socioeconomic background, living in a residential college through a scholarship. She spoke not only about common experiences but fewer cultural differences: “Rural kids are more relatable. They are generally also low income so there isn't massive cultural differences.” Finally, some students started a friendship because they shared the experience of attending university and living in a college through a scholarship. While this was seen as positive and helpful, it was also a way to differentiate themselves but be seen, as one participant described, as “different” by other wealthier students. Ultimately, place and social class serve to bring students together, as well as separate them from the larger cohort of the college or university residence.

FORMATIONS OF BELONGING

The idea and experience of belonging, and unbelonging, was recurrent in participants' responses in the survey and interviews. This is perhaps unsurprising given that for RRR young people, attending a university often means uprooting their lives and relationships to construct a new home away from their local community (see Cuervo, 2014; Delahunty, 2022; Harris et al., 2022). New constructions of belonging have to be built in different places and spaces, and with new relationships.

There were a variety of responses to whether RRR youth felt ‘at home’ in their living arrangements. Half of our interviewees felt that their new place of residence (e.g. private rental, college) felt like home – at least for the period of (study) time they spent in Melbourne, as many RRR youth return to their local community during the academic holidays. A third of interviewees expressed that their new place of residence did not feel like home; while a couple of participants felt that Melbourne and their current residence was a transient place and time in their lives.

Relationships were the most important factor or aspect in the formation of a sense of belonging and unbelonging for participants. Those who felt they belonged in their new home, ascribed this to the development of positive relationships and friendships they formed in their household, college or university accommodation.

For example, Harper, who came from a small town and a single parent home, and was able to attend university thanks to a scholarship, commented on her experience at university and sense of belonging:

Yeah, definitely... I feel very supported here by the students and by the staff. I'm really good friends with all the staff, with the receptionists, the cleaners, the kitchen staff, the dean. But also, the students are amazing, most of them. Everyone here kind of just appreciates me for who I am. I guess, back home, it kind of feels like I was always boxed into the academically good box and the little town prodigy box. But here, I'm kind of just appreciated for being a well-rounded human who's capable of many things and that's a very different feeling. And I feel very appreciated and very loved here.

Being valued and recognised by others was an important factor in their sense of belonging. For some participants, this was the opposite of what they experienced in their rural communities. For other students in colleges, the routine of sharing daily meals and open spaces for study and recreation helped construct a sense of belonging. Underpinning these routines and the sharing of spaces, places and activities, were relationships. Emily, for example, commented,

The eating meals together and having such close connections to the management who run it but also the other students... and especially being part of different committees. So, there's quite a close relationship there. Yeah, I do commonly refer to it as home... it's the place I return to at the end of each day, and yeah, it does feel very homey because it is on the smaller side and it is very family-like.

Participants talked about “feeling wanted”, “recognised”, “appreciated”, and “supported” as key practices that enhanced their sense of belonging. Some in the colleges mentioned feeling “safe in this space”, having “some agency over my experience here”, and “the power to influence what the culture of this place is.”

For those participants who did not feel they belonged, their unbelonging was also rooted in the dynamics of relationships. In many instances, their sense of belonging was attached to their parents and family. As Amelia put it: “home is being on the phone to Dad”. Other participants expressed they did not make as “endearing friends” as the ones from their town or felt it “was not in the fulfilling sense of a home. It's a place to live and a place to eat and study, but once removed, I didn't really find myself missing them like I would home.”

It is important to reiterate that while some participants felt they belonged in their new Melbourne life and their residential places, some put an extra effort “to fit” or “blend” with other students at university or colleges – including adapting their identity and “accent to different situations and people”. Finally, there was a sense of spatial and relational liminality for several participants; in so far neither Melbourne nor their RRR hometown felt “one hundred per cent my home”. As new friendships are forged and others left behind, participants spoke of “feeling like you are a visitor” when they return back to their rural town.



ADVICE TO THE UNIVERSITY

Participants were asked what advice they would give to other regional, rural, and remote young people planning to relocate to study at the University of Melbourne. Knowing what they know now, they offered three main pieces of advice:

1. Have a support network in place or commit to developing it
2. Maintain a balance between study and social life despite the pressures that can arise in both areas of their lives
3. Immerse oneself in university/city life to make the most of their university study experience

Whether it be moving into a college or a share house, many participants advised establishing a support system, both social and financial, before moving to the city. Several participants advised prospective students to apply for Centrelink payments, as well as all possible scholarships and other financial aid. Zara suggested applying for these early, “because it obviously takes a lot of financial pressure away.” Another participant, William, commented: “have that finance security to start off with... There’s a lot of relocation scholarships that are offered. Australian government offers relocation scholarships, so definitely take advantage of those.”

In addition to this, having and/or building a social support system was highly recommended by many. Anna advised:

You need a social network... even if you have a social network, make sure that social network is actually really strong because if it's just people you were friends with in high school... it probably won't last because you're going to change a lot as a person and then those friendships might break down.

Additionally, Anna suggested it should be a network made up of “people you can go and talk to”. Sarah, who lives in a college, recommended

finding a college that's values align with yours but also making sure you're not stuck in that college bubble... the move is always hard. It's a bit of an adjustment no matter where you live, but I think being able to do it with other people is really good.

Participants offered advice on study/life balance as well. Alex warned, “it’s very tempting to go and do super social things every night, go on a pub crawl every night, just make sure you study a bit because your grades will drop quickly.” James concurred, saying, “it’s a legitimate use of your time to go out and socialise because you want connection... and it’s very legitimate to stay in and study... try and do both a healthy amount.”

Making the most of university and city life was many participants' advice, as well as making connections. "Be open to new experiences," said Amelia, and Noah added: "Join some clubs and societies to meet new people... talk to people in your tutorials." Mia advised prospective students to "be confident and know that you do belong" and even provided a strategy to make new connections: "I would sit next to someone and speak to them, and then once the class was done, I would ask if they wanted to go for a coffee... 9 times out of 10, that usually worked, and I'm still in contact with... two or three of the people."

ADVICE TO SUPPORT RRR STUDENTS

When asked what the university could do to make rural and regional students' transitions to university easier, the majority of participants commented that information, specifically on financial aid and university processes and practices, could be made more readily accessible. Esther said she had to "go searching for it." "There's so much red tape and bureaucratic tape that is just another language to someone that's grown up in a smaller community or town," said Isabella, and commented on how daunting and exhausting it is "having to ask for something and then being told that you have to go through three different avenues just to get to talk to someone that knows what they're talking about and actually knows what to do for you."

William also suggested preparing students for how much independent learning there is at university. Zara concurred, claiming,

I quite frankly actually didn't even know I had readings the first week... Because I was too busy trying to do other things, like logistical things to set yourself up... even if you have to send a reminder email, that's pretty much the same email, that's kind of fine."

Alex said,

I'm sure they could run some sort of algorithms that tell students, 'hey, if you put in that application you would qualify for this payment or something,' instead of just making it you have to go look for them and stuff and apply.

One of the most significant things observed by participants, however, was the seeming lack of knowledge and representation of the rural and regional at the university. This is reflected in Grace and Sarah's claims that there were a lot of assumptions about regional/rural and out-of-state students, for instance that they know where certain places are or how to use the public transport system.

Olivia reported feeling like students from these areas were often "overlooked" and speculated whether this could be due to the "the lack of rural and regional participation in leadership teams within the university". Daniella surmised:

educating people from urban areas about rural areas I think would be really helpful... because I feel like there's a lot of days of university that celebrate culture and history, but... not really rural people or things of Australia, even agriculture, that kind of thing that might bring people together.

Harper, too, spoke of the time she walked through the weekend market at the university:

It was so lovely. I walked through, there was a pop-up deli meat market and I saw all of the little towns in my shire there. I saw Strathbogies wines and Gruyere cheeses and all of these places that I visit on the weekend were here selling their goods in the middle of the uni. I thought that was really cool... something to showcase rural areas and just what they provide.

Many participants suggested the university create more spaces that facilitate connection between regional, rural, remote students themselves. Evelyn suggested:

If they had... an orientation or something, group activities... Maybe they should have a session, a meetup or something with regional people and rural areas. So, then I guess going back to the lines that people don't feel like they belong here from rural areas, they can have people with similar interests.

Anna agreed and recommended "trying to actively cultivate student hubs where people talk to each other that aren't just clubs. Like hubs where people can go to study and talk to people." Amelia spoke about how important it is for young people to "find people who are similar to them in some sort of way" and Harper proposed "providing a bit more connection". Emily suggested that "clubs could be beneficial for helping [students] get a sense of belonging and connection."

Ultimately, students' comments point to some forms of misrecognition from the university to what it means and entails to be from a RRR area commencing a new life in a metropolitan place. While overall there is a satisfaction with university and college services and support, their rural identity seems to be misrecognised by the institution, their authorities and other fellow students.

6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The voices and experiences of RRR students presented in this report show that choices and decisions to leave their communities to attend university at a metropolitan place are multifaceted. In a similar vein, their experiences at university are also varied, although they contain commonalities that are shaped by geography and other social structures, such as class.

Resonating with other studies (Cuervo 2014; Delahunty, 2022; James et al., 2010), decisions to leave their communities were cemented in the aspirational support of families, peers, and teachers. For some students, doing well at school opened up the opportunity to access a scholarship to attend university. On the other hand, student accommodation was found by many participants to be very costly and unaffordable without a scholarship. Many of our participants were recipients of study and accommodation scholarships, which they indicated enable them to continue with higher education studies. This finding is consistent with the literature showing that, for many RRR students, financial circumstances are a constant barrier to attend higher education, particularly to relocate to urban centres (Bradley et al., 2008; Cuervo, 2016; James, 2002).

Some students, however, pointed to their own desire to relocate to separate themselves from their rural milieu (see Cook et al., 2021). Not all young people from outside the metropolis find their local communities as a desirable place to continue with their transition to adulthood. Nevertheless, this decision to move to the city and start anew is a complex time for RRR young people (Cuervo, 2014; Cuervo et al., 2015; Holt, 2012). During this difficult transition, participants showed appreciation for university support, both in material and financial terms, but also regarding knowledge around accessing services, resources, and opportunities. These forms of support enabled them to better negotiate this transition, particularly for those that stayed in university colleges.

Overall, RRR students in our study suggested that the university made information about studies, degrees, scholarships, and other resources clear and “straightforward”. With respect to RRR youth transitions to post-school life, however, they argued for more flexible timelines between finishing their high school studies, applying, and starting university. This period and process is always stressful for students and their families (Delahunty 2022), and particularly so for RRR youth who, many times, have to negotiate a new place to live without even having visited it.

Studies about the journey, including the aspirations and barriers, to attend university are common in the research literature (Cook et al., 2022; Gore et al., 2019). Less common are studies looking into the experiences of RRR youth once at university. The few that approach it from this perspective tend to look at the reasons for attrition or completion of higher education degrees (Davis & Taylor, 2019). In this study we were interested in RRR youth university experience in a broader sense, with a stronger focus on social lives

and residential experiences. In doing so, we were able to shed new light on their university study experience, including how it is shaped by the institution, as well as how students’ rural subjectivity and identity fits, adapts or is challenged in this new environment. That is, we were able to explore the identity work that RRR young people, some of them also from a low socio-economic status background, have to do to negotiate new institutional values, norms and discourses; living away from their home; and constructing a sense of belonging and new spaces of sociality with other students and university institutions and people.

Overall, participants in this study were positive about their experiences of studying at university. Those attending colleges were very satisfied with the resources and material opportunities they found in them. The possibility of having resources and assistance for their studies (e.g. libraries, tutors, counsellors, extra classes) was appreciated by many. Most importantly, they also appreciated the possibility of getting to know other students and share with them their experiences at university. Thus, sharing lunches and dinners, and joining clubs and communities, were regarded as valuable opportunities to build new networks of friendship and support, and a sense of belonging. This was particularly so during the pandemic. For many students, the pandemic signified studying online and being deprived of seeing their loved ones. But for those in colleges, having other students around them during this time meant that they could socialise and find groups and spaces of support during a difficult time.

For those participants in this study renting a private property (e.g. apartment, house) there were many challenges: from the difficulties of finding a suitable place to knowing their rights and responsibilities. Participants commented on the difficulty of negotiating this from afar at first (i.e. living outside the city or without much knowledge of its private residential market). Participants also mentioned the challenges of sharing a new home with other individuals, and how when co-habitation did not work, they left that property to find a new place better suited to their lifestyle. Importantly, there was an understanding that making a place of residence into one’s home takes time.

Those living on campus, in colleges and residences, also found challenges. Some experienced pressure from expectations to sustain excellent grades to maintain their scholarship. Others felt pressured to socialise and attend the many events offered by the colleges. Most importantly, some students talked about struggles of fitting in amid a geographical and class divide between them, as RRR and “scholarship” students, and other residents that came from urban and more affluent backgrounds. This resonates with studies of first-in-family students, in which this struggle to navigate the cultural norms and values of an institution that is alien to their family history is often challenging (Bunn et al., 2020; Patfield et al., 2021). In a similar vein, participants in this study found themselves being labelled or having a sense of being different, or



sometimes not fitting into the cultural behaviours and dispositions of the mainstream student body in the college. While this was not everyone's experience, it was a common experience of many RRR youth.

Building a new life is never easy and, in some ways, this is what many RRR youth have to do when they complete secondary school (Cuervo, 2016, Holt, 2012). This experience of struggle and hardship in the transition from RRR to metropolitan areas and university provided some participants with a "sensibility" and experiences common with those of other RRR youth. This translated into an understanding and a subjectivity that brought them closer to one another. But geography was not the only glue in cementing friendships: for some participants, experiences of financial struggle and being on a scholarship also meant a shared understanding that served as the foundation of developing or sustaining friendships.

At least half of participants interviewed in this study felt that they belong in Melbourne, in their place of residence and in their college. Relationships were described as the bedrock of this feeling of belonging. Feeling recognised and valued was critical for participants to make them feel that they belong. As other studies have shown, success for RRR students is not only about grades or educational outcomes, but in many instances is about being able to negotiate a new life, environment, and relationships (O'Shea & Delahunty, 2018). Other participants, while not dissatisfied with their "Melbourne life", felt that home was still their rural family and local community. Others felt that the connection to old friends and local community was eroding, as more time was spent in the city and new relationships forming, putting them in a place of liminality – neither from here nor from there.

In sum, we found participants in this study were overall satisfied with their university experience. For most, studying at the University of Melbourne has meant transitioning to a 'new life', and differences, new emotions and experiences, and material and personal challenges have to be navigated in this new life. There were calls for the university to provide more information to support the transition from a RRR environment to university halls, and suggestions for institutions, including colleges, to be more appreciative of rural experiences, including by providing spaces (e.g. clubs and events) where RRR students could meet one another.

Ultimately, findings in this study also call for further research into the experiences at university by RRR youth. While we know much about the challenges, barriers, and aspirations to attend university, we know little about the enablers and obstacles for RRR students to thrive while at university in Australia. The life and time of RRR youth at university does not receive the same research and institutional attention as the pathway to access higher education. This research report represents a step in the direction of identifying the experiences, needs, challenges, and satisfaction of young people from regional, rural and remote background in metropolitan universities.

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