

BAY04170

Family and community factors encouraging study resilience among Tasmanian Year 10 rural high school students: an exploration of social capital.

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Abstract

This research investigates family and community factors that encourage Tasmanian rural students to continue with education/training beyond the compulsory years of schooling. Rural post-compulsory education participation has attracted research interest for decades. The continuing under-representation of the rural population in higher education and the fact that the degree of rurality of a region still impacts on the post-compulsory educational aspirations of its residents, and consequently on participation, remain as challenges. Previous research indicates the importance of family and community factors. The research reported here utilises the concept of social capital developed by Bourdieu (1986) and used in educational research by Coleman (1988). Using qualitative methods and a grounded theory approach, several indicators of the level of social capital held by rural students, their families and local communities are examined to determine their usefulness in understanding variations in the nature, amount and quality of encouragement to pursue educational aspirations these students receive. Preliminary findings suggest the students sampled formed into four natural categories based on whether or not they had a clear goal for their future/career, extent of their consultation with others about their career options/choice, extent of encouragement received from others and whether or not their post-Year 10 path had been a smooth one.

1. Research problem

a) Background

An early indication of research concern about rural post-compulsory education participation came in the 1970s with the Karmel report “*Schools in Australia*” (Interim Committee for the Australian Schools Commission, 1973). An extensive body of literature has since developed and many improvements achieved as a result of this research. System- and school-based reforms have occurred and close attention has been paid to issues of student disadvantage. A brief review of some of the literature, however, indicates several reasons that justify continued research interest in rural post-compulsory education participation.

Firstly, rural people consist of a substantial minority, approximately 30%, of the population but the rural/isolated proportional share of the university student population is only 19% (James, Wyn, Baldwin, Hepworth, McInnis & Stephanou, 1999). This is a concern for all those with an interest in the future development of the intellectual assets of all Australians, regardless of where they live. Proportional rural participation in VET is less of a concern; NCVER (2003) data show that rural/remote students comprised about 34% of the total TAFE student population in September 2002, which is close to their share of the total Australian population.

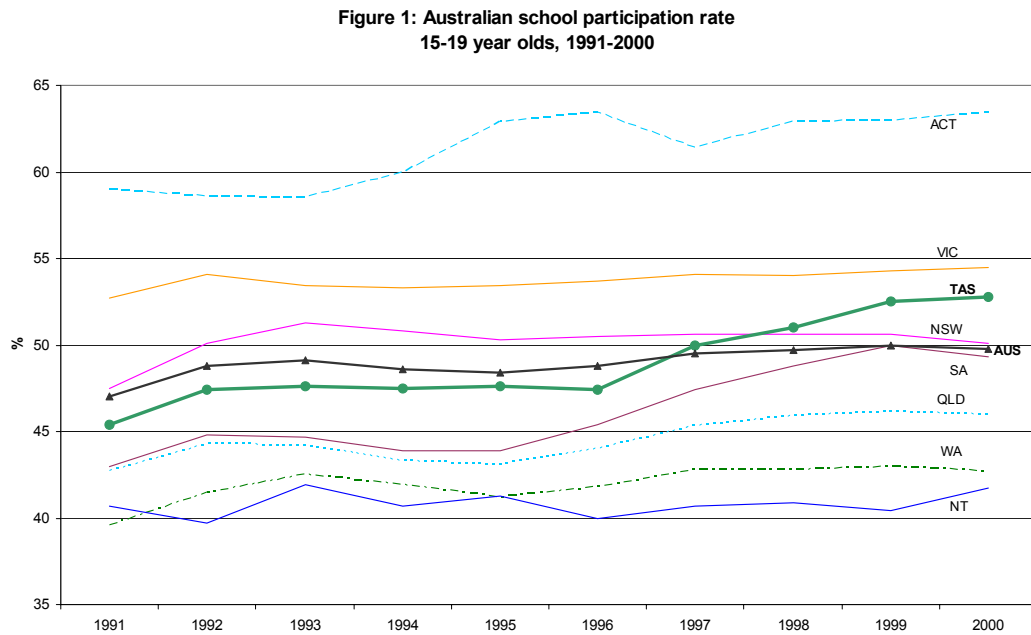
Secondly, the degree of rurality of a region is still impacting on students' post-compulsory educational aspirations and consequently on participation (e.g. Ainley, Malley & Lamb, 1997; Lamb, Long & Malley, 1998; Abbott-Chapman & Kilpatrick, 2001). This impact continues despite the development of a network of regional universities and the policy responses/interventions of several Commonwealth governments (James, et. al., 1999). There is a 10% difference between urban and rural rates of participation in Year 12 (Marks, Fleming, Long & McMillan, 2000), so there continues to be a need to understand why rural students are less likely to continue with education/training beyond the compulsory years.

A third reason is that government policy continues to be one of broadening participation. The Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-first Century states that schooling should be socially just so that "all students have access to the high quality education necessary to enable the completion of school education to Year 12 or its vocational equivalent, and that provides clear and recognised pathways to employment and further education and training" (MYCEETYA, 1999). Research is still needed to inform as to the best strategies to do this. In addition, some commentators more recently have noted that a national policy approach to the learning and work needs of Australian youth has slipped as a central focus in Canberra and that government spending will reduce by just over \$4 million in the next four years (Dusseldorp Skills Forum, 2003, p3). Students from rural areas will be among many from disadvantaged backgrounds facing financial disincentives to continue with post-compulsory education.

An additional reason that is particular to Tasmania is that the population is more dispersed than other States; a bigger proportion of the population lives outside the major cities. The majority of post-compulsory provision is in the major cities, although the situation is changing with some VET provision in regional centres. This situation impacts considerably on participation rates. Tasmanian rural post-compulsory education participation rates have been consistently lower than those in most other States (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1994-2001; Kilpatrick, Abbott-Chapman & Baynes, 2002) although there has been improvement in recent years.

Figure 1 shows Australian school participation rates for 15-19 year olds from 1991 to 2000. The fact that Tasmania's levels of school participation have been higher in recent years is being exploited in this study, as will later become apparent.

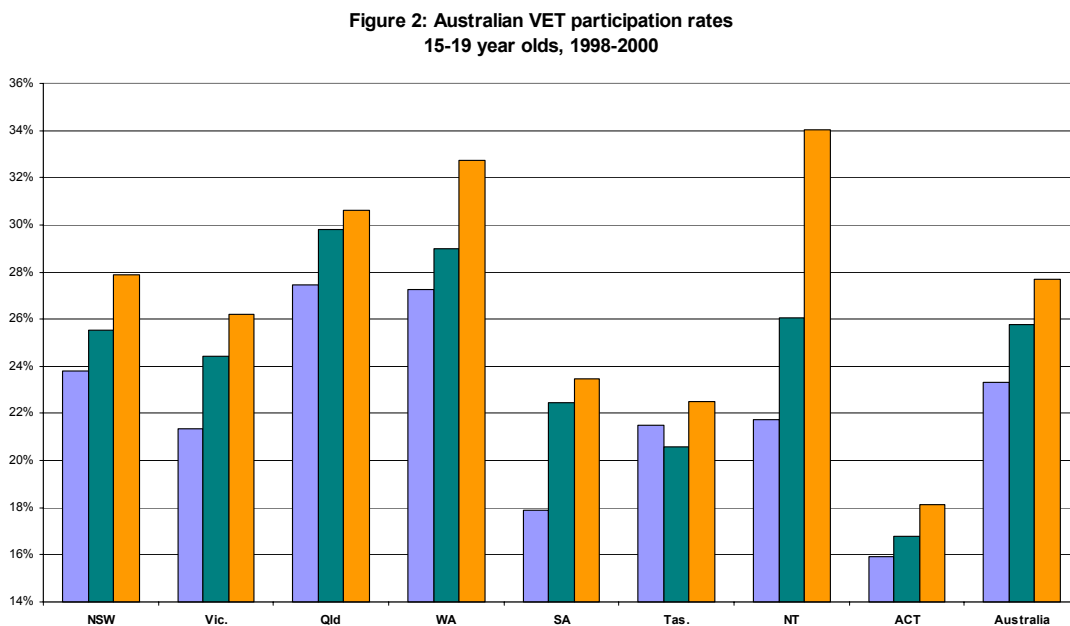
Figure 1: Australian school participation rates for 15-19 year olds, 1991 - 2000



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics Schools 4221.0 1992 –2000. Full time students only.

Figure 2 shows VET participation rates for the years 1998, 1999 and 2000. The Tasmanian VET participation rate is lowest of all States/Territories with the exception of the ACT. There has not been a progressive increase each year as in other States/Territories, and the level of gain has not been as marked as most other States/Territories.

Figure 2: Australian VET participation rates for 15-19 year olds, 1998-2000



Source: NCVET participation by age as at 30 June. ABS Estimated Resident Population by Age & Sex 3201.01-3201.09

Several studies of patterns of, and influences upon post-compulsory education participation have been conducted in Tasmania (e.g. Abbott-Chapman, Hughes & Wyld, 1986, 1987, 1989, 1991, 1992; Department of Education, Tasmania, 1999; Williamson & Marsh, 1999) and some studies have particularly focused upon rural areas (e.g. Behrens, O'Grady, Hodgson, Houlst & Hughes, 1978; Cunningham, Choate, Abbott-Chapman & Hughes, 1992; Choate, Cunningham, Abbott-Chapman & Hughes, 1992; Kilpatrick, Williamson & Thrush, 1999; Abbott-Chapman & Kilpatrick, 2001; Kilpatrick & Abbott-Chapman, 2002).

b) Rural participation: the current situation.

Across the nation improvements to rural post-compulsory education participation rates have been achieved through research attention to the difficulties faced by rural young people trying to continue their education and training past the compulsory years (e.g. Darnell & Simpson, 1981; Parker, Cooney, Bornholt, Harman, Ball & Scott, 1993; Department of Employment, Education & Training/A.N.O.P., 1994; Western, McMillan & Durrington, 1998; James et. al., 1999). Improvements have also been achieved through research focus on factors that assist rural young people in overcoming disadvantage especially in the education system (e.g. Abbott-Chapman, et. al., 1986, 1987, 1989, 1990, 1991, 1992; Withers & Batten, 1988, Batten, Withers, Thomas & McCurry, 1991; Patterson & Abbott-Chapman, 1992). Reforms to curricula, assessment and teaching have been linked with the most rapid rise in school retention (Ainley et. al., 1997). Urban/rural differences in participation, however, have remained relatively unchanged since the early 1990s (Fullerton, Walker, Ainley & Hillman, 2003). It is possible that system- and school-based reforms have had their effect and therefore other avenues may usefully be pursued. Levels of family (and maybe community) encouragement could be one of the ways remaining to influence participation rates and possibly is one that has not be fully utilised. Research has found that rural students were likely to experience lower levels of encouraging factors and were more likely to perceive 'discouraging inhibitors and barriers' than urban students (James et. al., 1999, p xvi). Finding out more about what does encourage rural students would therefore be an important addition to our knowledge. Higher levels of Tasmanian school participation in recent years (see Figure 1) suggest it would be timely to investigate factors that encourage rural students to continue as a range of rural students' views of what is encouraging them should be readily available.

Calls have been made for further research to develop the most appropriate long term strategies to ensure equal representation of the geographically isolated, socio-economically disadvantaged and rural groups in higher education (Postle, Clarke, Skuja, Bull, Batorowicz & McCann, 1997, p163). Views have also been expressed that boosting the encouraging factors is likely to be more critical in achieving long term gains in participation (James et. al., 1999, p93). This study will add to our knowledge about these factors and thus increase the likelihood of achieving long term gains in participation.

Research that has investigated family influence on educational participation has shown there is a close link between a student's plan to complete Year 12 and actual participation in Year 12 and that parental aspirations for the student were a strong influence (Marks et. al., 2000). Rates of early school leaving have been shown to be strongly related to family educational and cultural resources; where one parent has a

professional occupation or where parents are university-educated, the family tend to have greater knowledge of the school system and have higher aspirations for their children (Ainley et. al., 1997). The impact of family in influencing student's post-compulsory plans and participation has been highlighted in some Tasmanian-based research. Abbott-Chapman, Easthope & O'Connor (1997) showed that family socio-economic status and related educational aspirations were the best predictors of post-school destinations in terms of study, work or unemployment, one year after leaving school. Abbott-Chapman and Baynes (2002) in a study of rural school leavers and their families showed that educational and employment experiences of older siblings may lead parents to encourage or discourage their younger children from further study. Kilpatrick and Abbott-Chapman (2002) suggested that although rural economic downturn and associated factors were important in explaining participation differences, family and community values surrounding education and their social capital are also involved.

c) The social capital approach

The term social capital has been used by social science researchers for over 80 years and has featured in several fields of the social science literature (Woolcock, 1998a). A definition of social capital that summarises the positions of the major contributors of the theory, including Bourdieu (1986) and Coleman (1988) is "the information, trust and norms of reciprocity inhering in one's networks (Woolcock, 1998b, p153). Social capital is very much about the relationships which people have with others and the use they can make of those relationships and networks.

Many students seek information, advice and the opinions of others when considering their options after completing Year 10. These people may include family, peers, those from the school and college attended or people from the local community and beyond. These people may be sources of information about educational opportunities available outside the locality, and where these opportunities are available. They may be sources of general or specific career information. They may be useful sources of information and advice about transition to studying at a college away from home, essentially through their own experience of having done this or through one of their family having done this. They may also be sources of information, advice or opinion about work experience in occupations not available locally, or not known about locally. Finally, these contacts may not be actual sources themselves, but may know other people who are (i.e. may be information channels).

As a generalisation it would be fair to assume that the broader a students' knowledge was about the range of education, training and career options available, the greater chance they would have of making an informed decision about their plans. Similarly, the wider their sources of information, advice and opinion were, the greater the chance would be of their making a realistic and appropriate decision. In most instances and under most circumstances, informed, realistic and appropriate decisions are more likely to result in successful completion of the chosen course. The relationships and networks that students and their families have, the level of trust of the people in those relationships and networks and the use students make of them can be an important influence on this decision making process and on the amount of encouragement a particular student receives.

The concept of social capital has the potential to increase understanding of this process. It may assist in explaining variations in the amount of encouragement to continue with education/training past Year 10 which rural students receive from their families and local communities. In this study social capital is taken to mean the resources students themselves have access to, and can draw upon for information, advice, opinions etc., through their own networks and relationships with other people in their families, with their peers, with people in their school/college, with others in the local community and outside that local community.

Students' use of their networks is also of great interest in order to establish whether a student's level of trust of the people in their family or community is related to whether or not they use the networks they have. For instance, a student may know many people in the local community but may not have sought their advice or opinion because they thought the person didn't know them well enough or because they thought the person didn't have the particular information/knowledge they were seeking. Conversely, a student may prefer to use the advice/opinion of a person in the local community over that of a family member, because they perceive that person as impartial or more informed/knowledgeable about a particular course or occupation than a family member. Related to student's level of trust is the issue of confidentiality. It will also be of interest to determine whether questions of confidentiality affect students' willingness to use local networks.

The kind of relationships students and their families have is another area focussed upon. Three key dimensions of social capital discussed in the literature are useful in understanding these kinds of relationships and these are referred to as bonding, bridging and linking social capital (Woolcock, 2000, p19). Bonding social capital is the relationships that a person has with other people like themselves, i.e. family, friends, close work colleagues, neighbours. Bridging social capital makes links to unlike people, e.g. from a different socio-economic status, from a different age group, etc. Linking social capital refers to relationships with people in positions of power.

It is likely that the study sample of rural students and their families will have rich stocks of bonding social capital as they live in smallish communities, places where everyone knows everyone else and where many families have lived for generations. It may be the case that some of these students and their families do not know many people who live in other places, meaning their stocks of bridging and linking social capital may be limited.

The extent and quality of rural students' relationships and networks with people in their families, their local communities and beyond may be an important resource to draw upon as they make their career/future decisions. Examination of these relationships and networks may help to understand why there is a residue of rural students who are unwilling or reluctant to participate in post-compulsory education or training or who are unsuccessful in their participation at this level. Allied to this is the use that could be made of a fuller understanding of why the majority of rural students do participate.

2. Research design

This study is designed to seek answers to these questions and will be of an exploratory nature, gradually building up a picture of what is encouraging the rural students to continue with post-compulsory education/training. The abstractions are

built as the particulars that have been gathered are grouped together (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). The grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was considered as a most appropriate way to derive a general theory of the process rural students use to make decisions about their careers and futures; a theory that would be grounded in the views of the study participants.

The study is small scale and qualitative, contrasting with the many earlier large quantitative studies. It deals with the issue of regional variations in levels of retention in an in-depth and detailed way. This level of detail can be hidden behind the crude participation rates of larger scale studies (Dwyer, 1994), but it is important and highly specific information that will pinpoint and inform the kind of strategies that may herald an improvement in post-compulsory education/training participation. Findings from this study will be able to be considered alongside results from larger scale, quantitative studies. Two important features of the design are theoretical sampling of different groups to maximise the similarities and the differences of information and constant comparison of data with emerging categories (Creswell, 2003).

The study focuses on the processes used by rural students when forming their post-school aspirations and in realising these aspirations. There is emphasis on the part played by the rural students' families, schools and local communities in this process, and in particular the role of students' relationships and networks within their families, schools and local communities in encouraging them to persist with post-compulsory education/training, often under trying circumstances.

Choice of sample

In order to address the research questions it was necessary to obtain a wide coverage of the views of an anonymous and representative sample of ex-Tasmanian rural high school students as to what had encouraged them to persist with their education or training since they completed Year 10. The definition of rural has been taken as "places outside the major centres in Tasmania". This is very similar to the definitions based on metropolitan or non-metropolitan status of a place used in some previous studies. Three of the schools in the sample were situated in towns where the population ranged from 700 to 1904 with the fourth town having a somewhat larger population of 4129. Many students themselves lived in much smaller settlements, e.g. with less than 250 people (5), 250-500 people (3), 500-700 (6).

The sample consisted of 24 students who completed Year 10 in 2001 in a district or rural high school where students were doing well and felt successful, that had a good record of retention to Year 11 courses in urban centres, and that had good links with the local community. It was most likely that a good response, in terms of encouraging factors, would be obtained from schools thus selected. The particular schools to be used for sampling were selected in consultation with the Department of Education and Principals of the rural schools.

Interviews – Phase 1

Initial contact with students was through the college attended in Year 12 via an information/explanation letter inviting participation. A meeting was held in each senior secondary/TAFE college offering further explanation. Face-to-face interviews were used to provide the more detailed, rich data required for in-depth insight into the topic. This was considered to be especially appropriate because the information being

sought was based on emotions, experiences and feelings as well as factual matters. Also to some extent the topic was personal and sensitive, and likely to require careful handling to obtain open and honest responses. Information sought was not likely to be obtained from anywhere else, only from the student respondents and those that have encouraged them.

Interviews – Phase 2

The second sample of people interviewed emerged through a process of reference from the original student respondents. This snowball sampling technique (Denscombe, 1998, p16) enabled the inclusion of others, who had encouraged the students to continue with education/training, and is intended to add valuable additional data which will help in understanding factors within the family and the community that shape post-compulsory education and training participation. In addition, the name of the nominating student was able to be used (with their permission) thus enhancing the researcher's bona fides and credibility (Denscombe, 1998, p16).

Both Phase 1 and 2 interviews were semi-structured with a clear list of issues to be addressed. Answers were open-ended with opportunity provided for the respondents to develop ideas and elaborate on points of interest. This was essential to discover the nature of the encouraging factors and to explore the respondents' personal accounts of their experiences and feelings.

Interviews - Phase 3

As the students proceed a further year with their education and training they will be interviewed again to ascertain whether the encouraging factors change in any way, or if further factors emerge that encourage them. These interviews will be conducted in 2004 whilst the students are in the first year of a university or VET course or other activity. For those students who have not continued on track, the interview will deal with the particular factors that have intervened and focus on any factors that might encourage these students to return to their education/training.

Data analysis

Qualitative methods were chosen as the most productive for data analysis. This was because the data gathered consisted of detailed and intricate descriptions of events and people or 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) and also because the concern was with meanings and the way people understand things. Such methods enabled the complexity of the situation of rural students and their families and communities to be described and analysed, as well as enabling the focus to rest on the encouraging factors in context and to see how they are related to other factors (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Analysis of interview transcripts will be conducted to identify key themes.

3. Preliminary findings

Students' social capital, or the resources they have access to and can draw upon for information, advice, opinions etc. through their own networks and relationships with other people was found initially to be useful in terms of understanding the processes used by rural students to form and realise their post-school aspirations. Preliminary inspection of the data showed differences between students as follows: presence/absence of a clear career goal; the extent that students had sought information, advice or opinion from others; the amount of encouragement students

had received from others; and the ease with which they had moved from Year 10 studies through Year 11 and 12 and on to further education or training. Students in the sample formed into four natural categories on the basis of these four factors.

Other factors that were important to consider were student personality and attitudes. Clearly many facets of a student's personality would have an impact upon their decision to continue with their education and/or training beyond Year 10 but these are not the focus of this research. However, a student's level of self-reliance, self-confidence and self-motivation does assume particular relevance, as this may affect the extent to which a student would want to consult with others when making career decisions. A student who is very self-reliant, self-confident and self-motivated may be more likely to develop a career plan and goal without reference to anyone else and be less likely to seek the advice and opinion of others about their career choice because they do not feel the need. Similarly they may be more likely to rely on their own research and gather information from print materials, internet sites and career information events.

Category 1 consisted of eight students who were clear about their goal; six knew exactly which course they wanted to enrol in for 2004 and the other two had narrowed it down to two or three options. They had all proceeded straight through from Year 10 to Year 12 and were expecting to continue on to university in 2004. All had been encouraged by people from their family, school, college and/or local community and had valued that encouragement. They had consulted widely with a network of people from these groups and in some cases with people from outside their local community.

Category 2 consisted of seven students who were particularly self-motivated, some by a particular childhood idea/ambition or early interest in a specific career, others by a more recently-developed idea. Unlike the Category 1 students, they had not consulted very widely with other people, preferring to do their own research into career options, mainly through perusing print/electronic materials and/or attendance at Careers Expos, University Open Days, etc. Although they had been supported by others they appeared less interested in or reliant upon this encouragement in order to continue with their education or training. This is in sharp contrast with Category 1 students. All were clear about their goal (knew which course they wanted to enrol in). Four of the students had experienced a smooth path since Year 10. One student had some failures in Year 11 so was completing Year 13 at college in 2003 and two planned to do Year 13 in 2004 before proceeding to university in 2005. These last three students had taken the need to do this extra year in their stride. Year 13 refers to an additional year at senior secondary level, or a repeat of Year 12, usually immediately afterwards. Students are required to make special application for this year and entry criteria apply.

Category 3 contained six students who had been encouraged by others and had consulted with some others. They were negotiating their pathway but had found some bumps along the way. Two of the students were in Year 13 in 2003 and two are planning to do Year 13 in 2004. It is likely that not having a clear goal when coming to college and/or changing their plans/aspirations may account for the decisions of these four students to complete an extra year. Failure in some Year 11 subjects may also have played a part for one of the students. The other two students were experiencing bumps not related to their academic success but rather to other interests conflicting or competing with their education/training goals.

The final category of students contains three students who had experienced some degree of struggle in their attempt to achieve their aspirations so far. One student had experienced two separate interruptions to her studies, another had dropped out of Year 12 studies and the final student had experienced illness and absences in Year 12 and was unsure of what she would be doing in 2004. The question arises of whether some of the students in Category 4, and perhaps Category 3, will turn out to be non-completers?

These four categories divide the sample of students according to a number of factors that may affect the following:

- the way their post-Year 10 aspirations are formed,
- whether or not they limit their aspirations
- their rate of progress towards their chosen career
- whether they achieve their goal (at least in the near future).

These categories show some similarity to groupings of students in a previous study (Pascoe, 1996). In using focus groups to determine where and how young people acquired knowledge and developed their attitudes about careers and post-compulsory education/training, the researcher found the students grouped into “career-confident”, “career-determined”, “career-confused” and “career-condemned”. Labels for the four categories in this study are emergent at this stage, but the following are tentative suggestions - Category 1: clear and confident, Category 2: self-motivated and self-reliant, Category 3: negotiating their path, Category 4: struggling and vulnerable.

4. Conclusion

The rural population continues to be under-represented in higher education. Similarly, the degree of rurality of a region is still impacting on students’ post-compulsory education/training aspirations and consequently on participation. This warrants further research attention in order to understand why rural students are less likely than other students to continue after the compulsory years. Improvements to rural post-compulsory education participation and the way these have been achieved are well documented. However, a small percentage of rural students are not sufficiently persuaded of the need for and benefits of post-compulsory education/training participation. In Tasmania the particular characteristics of both population distribution and sites of post-compulsory education provision/delivery accentuate the situation.

Some research has indicated that a focus on the family may be productive as school and system factors have been thoroughly raked over. The social capital approach taken in this study may increase our understanding of the nature of the relationships that rural students have with other people and the use they make of them when making career decisions. This small scale, qualitative study also represents a shift from the statistics-based approach taken in much previous research into levels of participation. This research deals with the issue of regional variations in levels of retention in an in-depth and detailed way. Nevertheless, it will be possible to use findings from this study to complement results from larger scale, quantitative studies.

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