

**Additional material in response to a question taken on notice:
Hobart hearing 19 September 2014 on the Extent of Income Inequality in Australia**

My PhD research *Young People's Career Choices in Rural Australia* aims to add to the understanding of the relatively low Year 12 rural completion rates by examining how young people subjectively make their career choices in rural Australia. Data collection involved ten week's participant observation at a mixed gender, non-streamed public high school in rural Tasmania, and in-depth interviews with students, teachers and policy makers. This approach offered an emic account of how the participants constructed their post-compulsory educational choices, as well as insider accounts of critical events underpinning their choices.

The study found a strong link between the young people's subjective understandings of their lives in the small rural town and choices to leave school before completion of Year 12 or continue on to some form of post-compulsory education. For many of the young participants early school leaving was not so much linked to physical distance but to a mixture of deep attachment to and identification with their local area and its social networks and a fear of the world outside their local town. It was particularly young people with their social and cultural capital closely tied to the local town who were most likely to leave school early because they did not feel that they had the social and cultural connections to make the move to a larger regional town possible.

For many of the young people the decision to leave school early co-existed with a desire to continue their education, and a sense that they were setting themselves up for failure by making the choice to leave. Statements such as 'it's too late to change anything now' and 'I will just have to make the best of the situation' highlight that choices to leave school prematurely were not experienced as unproblematic. These statements reflect the young people's beliefs that they did not have the confidence, skills and knowledge and connections to move away from their local area to continue their education.

The findings from this study suggest that the proposed changes to Newstart might be counter-productive unless they are accompanied by supportive strategies that encourage young people to travel outside of their region for work. The assumption of these policies that young people will simply relocate in order to obtain paid employment does not reflect reality for the young people in this study whose social and cultural networks meant that they felt they could not make the choice to relocate to continue their education in a larger regional town.

Supportive strategies addressing issues of low school retention rates and high levels of youth unemployment would benefit from a focus on the nature of young people's social and cultural networks rather than narrowly concentrating on withdrawing income support. For example, this study provides evidence that the absence of a broad variety of leisure activities in the small rural town was associated with a high rate of 'hanging around' and significant social isolation expressed in terms of withdrawal from the community, disengagement from school and decisions to leave school early. Increased attention to the importance of leisure in the

lives of young rural people may help reduce experiences of ‘hanging around’ and in turn improve the young people’s attachment to schooling and build their confidence to continue their education away from home.

Familiarisation with life in larger population centres is another key strategy which has the potential to increase the young people’s mobility by accustoming them to the different lifestyles of larger towns. Such a strategy might be facilitated by the Education Department through familiarisation with larger population centres and especially exposure to the nearest regional College. Although such approaches have been trialled, it is paramount that the process of familiarisation is ongoing through the senior secondary years to successfully build relationships between the young people and College staff and students. More informal arrangements such as ‘Adoption’ based programs where rural young people liaise with urban families to become more familiar with the towns they will move to for further education or employment would also increase young rural people’s awareness of life outside their local communities.

The Education Department occupies a powerful role as an agent of socialisation, and its role in reversing the continuing rural-urban gap in retention and completion rates could be expanded if more funding was directed towards recognising and addressing this issue. The isolated location of many rural schools means that the costs for these schools to access resources are very high. For example, a common concern of the teachers in this study was the difficulty of hiring busses to take the kids to the theatre, cinema or museums in larger regional towns because it was too costly.

Despite the unique role of the Education Department in facilitating change, it cannot be expected to initiate change on its own, and a collaborative approach to the issue between health, education, youth services and local government is desirable.

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