Staying in touch: Young people maintaining relationships with rural and regional communities

A discussion paper by the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria and the Victorian Rural Youth Services initiative

March 2014
The Youth Affairs Council of Victoria

The Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (YACVic) is a vibrant, member based organisation that represents and advocates for young people and the organisations that work with them. YACVic has worked for and with young Victorians and the services that support them for over 50 years.

Our vision is for a Victorian community in which all young people are valued as active participants, have their rights recognised and are treated fairly and with respect.

The Victorian Rural Youth Services

The Victorian Rural Youth Services (VRYS) initiative sets out to advance research, training and policy development to support the rural youth sector. It aims to promote the strengths of young people in rural communities, and address the disadvantages these young people can face. The initiative is supported by the VRYS network, a network of services concerned with young people's wellbeing in rural Victoria, and it operates through the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria.

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## Contents

- Introduction ............................................................................................................................... 4
- Key findings: ............................................................................................................................... 4
- Recommendations .................................................................................................................. 9
- What’s happening to rural and regional populations? ................................................................. 11
- Is out-migration ‘bad’? Is it permanent? .................................................................................. 14
- Policy context: .......................................................................................................................... 16
  - Retaining young people in rural Victoria: 2006 ................................................................. 16
  - Regional Development Victoria ......................................................................................... 16
  - Department of Human Services initiatives ........................................................................... 17
- Literature review .................................................................................................................... 18
  - Overview ................................................................................................................................. 18
  - Plans and aspirations: ............................................................................................................. 19
  - Community and continuity .................................................................................................. 21
  - Gender differences ............................................................................................................... 23
- YACVic survey results ............................................................................................................ 24
- Who answered, where were they, and where had they been? ............................................... 24
- Family, friends and community ............................................................................................. 34
- A sense of place ....................................................................................................................... 35
- Plans for the future ............................................................................................................... 36
- Employment ........................................................................................................................... 38
- Contributing to the community ............................................................................................. 39
- Education ................................................................................................................................ 40
- Transport, housing and safety ............................................................................................... 41
- Reflections ................................................................................................................................. 42
- Plans and aspirations ............................................................................................................. 42
- Belonging to place .................................................................................................................. 44
- Bibliography ........................................................................................................................... 45
- References ............................................................................................................................... 49
Introduction

Communities benefit from the presence of young people. A thriving young population can enhance social and cultural life, boost the economy, and strengthen the community’s sustainability. Meanwhile, in order to support young people’s wellbeing, it is important that they have choices about where they live, and that they can take part in strong and nurturing communities.

The migration of young people from rural areas to cities has long been a topic of debate. Migration is driven by factors including higher education and employment, the economic effects of drought, changes to the agricultural industry, the withdrawal of local services, the lifestyle attractions of cities, and the belief that moving away is a rite of passage.¹

There has been considerable scholarship about young people’s decisions to leave rural communities. This paper contributes something different, by considering the experiences of young people who grew up in rural or regional communities, left, and have stayed in touch. We aim to find out more about:

- How they maintain relationships with their original communities;
- What benefits this contact has for them and / or the community;
- How any such benefits might be encouraged more widely; and
- What might influence them to live in a rural / regional area in the future?

This paper is based on a scoping of relevant data, literature and policy development, and an online survey of Victorian young people who had lived in at least two of the following: a rural town, a regional centre, and / or a capital city.

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'I know it’s important for rural communities to have more people but I just personally don’t like it.'

'I loved living in a rural community and I will definitely raise my kids in the same environment.'

YACVic survey, 2013 – young people’s responses
Community connections

- Many young people are already contributing actively and prolifically to rural and regional communities. They are not ‘future’ citizens, but current ones.

- Family, friends and community are critical in shaping how young people feel about an area, including after they have left it. When asked about the best aspects of rural or regional life, and the qualities that might draw them back in the future, the young people we surveyed rated personal relationships and a good sense of community very highly.

- Young people often stay in touch with communities where they’ve lived before. This communication has been transformed by social media (a significant change since the 2006 Inquiry into Retaining Young People in Rural Towns and Communities.) However, young people continue to value regular face-to-face contact, and feel regret and frustration when they can’t visit enough.

- A minority of young people who have left rural or regional communities go back there to play sport or volunteer.

- When young people who have lived in rural or regional communities are considering whether or not to return, the question of how they could contribute to the community, as professionals or volunteers, does occur to them.

- Our survey results suggest there may be a correlation between a history of volunteering and a wish to return to one’s original community, and that young people with less history of involvement in voluntary, civic or sporting groups may be less likely to wish to return.

- Alongside the many positive community attractions of rural and regional life, there are concerns about safety in some areas and a sense that safer communities would make rural / regional life more appealing.

- A minority of the young people we surveyed kept in touch with their old communities through local media, such as newspapers and radio shows.
Leaving, returning, or going elsewhere?

- Young people leave rural or regional areas for many reasons, most commonly to do with education, employment and the wish to experience life elsewhere. In deciding where to live, they struggle with a range of influences, including their communities’ anxiety about population loss, and the assumption that leaving a rural area is a sign of high achievement.
- Young people, as a population, are highly mobile. Discussions about retaining or attracting young people must acknowledge that this is often more complicated than a one-way or return journey.
- Leaving a rural or regional community often involves moving somewhere larger, but this is not always a capital city. The young people who took our survey were more likely to be living in a regional centre than in Melbourne.
- Many young people who have left a rural or regional community wish to live in one again in the future. However, ‘returning’ does not always mean going back to one’s old home. Respondents to our survey were more likely to state that they would like to live in a different rural or regional community one day.
- Young women are more likely than young men to leave a rural or regional community, for reasons including women’s higher rate of engagement in university education, and fewer options for women than men in rural areas.

A sense of place

- Natural and agricultural landscapes are very important to many young people who have grown up in rural or regional communities, and influence their wishes about where to live in the future.

Influences and encouragement

- Young people’s plans about where to live in the future are shaped most importantly by their families, but also by teachers, mentors, local government, employers and friends.
• A surprisingly large minority of the young people we surveyed reported that no one had encouraged them to live in a rural or regional community later in life.

• There is no clear, consistent relationship between the encouragement a young person receives about where to live in the future, and their own plans. However, our survey results suggest that never being encouraged to live in a rural or regional area makes a young person less certain about whether they would like to do this, and may be associated with a decision not to return.

• Our survey results suggest that young people who aspire to return to their old ‘home town’ may be especially influenced by personal connections, while those who aspire to live in a different rural / regional community are more affected by work or civic influences.

Employment

• Many young people who answered our survey had had part-time jobs in their rural or regional communities. However, this did not necessarily make them more optimistic about job prospects there in the future.

• Many factors make young people keen to return to rural or regional Victoria later in life. However, the young people who answered our survey rarely listed optimism about job prospects as a key factor enticing them back. When asked what could make them more likely to live in rural or regional Victoria in the future, improved job prospects was a common reply.

Access – education, transport, housing

• In our survey findings, the shortage of tertiary education options in rural and regional areas was a key concern raised by those young people who were unsure about where to live in the future, and those who didn’t want to live in a rural or regional area in the future.

• When asked what would make rural and regional communities more attractive to them, survey respondents rated increased availability of university study especially highly.
• Respondents to our survey were very aware of the limited public transport in rural / regional areas, and rated improved public transport highly as a factor that might attract them back.

• Many young people who have lived in rural or regional areas are conscious that the cost of housing, and the general cost of living, can be lower there than in capital cities. At a time of crisis for prospective first-home buyers, it is worth looking further at how young people who wish to return to a rural or regional community might be supported to access affordable, appropriate housing there.

‘The city is great, but unless you're involved in a sporting club or community group, it is very isolating with no friends or family around.’

‘I would've stayed in Heywood if there were more opportunities … I wish there was more opportunities for post secondary education out that way’.

‘Staying in touch with rural communities is a two way street.’

- YACVic survey, 2013 – young people’s responses
Recommendations

1. We recommend the Minister for Youth Affairs endorse the below points as valuable areas for further work. We would urge that any such interventions also pay attention to young people’s aspirations around family and community life, belonging to place, and making a contribution, in order to address their life plans more realistically and holistically and allow space for discussion about where they may live in the future.

Whole of Victorian Government

2. Continues to support a wide range of schemes to attract professional young people and graduates to live and work in rural and regional communities.

Regional and Rural Development

3. The regional Victoria Living expo strengthens its engagement with young adults who have left a rural or regional community but may wish to return;
   - a greater involvement of young people in the planning of the Expo
   - a stronger emphasis on young adult speakers
   - promotion of the Expo to secondary students still based in rural or regional areas
   - promotion to university students and recent graduates based in Melbourne.

Community Services

4. Online material aimed at supporting young people in career planning- such as the ‘Finding a Job in Rural or Regional Victoria’ section of the Youth central website – include information about schemes to encourage graduates and professionals to rural and regional Victoria.

5. Advocate and liaise with the Commonwealth Government to support;
   - an increase to Youth Allowance for young people living independently of their parents, to reflect the real minimum cost of living.
   - amendment of the of the ‘independence’ criteria for Youth Allowance, to ensure that all regional young people are immediately eligible for the full rate of independent Youth Allowance if they must move away from home for tertiary education.

Higher Education and Skills

6. Identify where the Regional Partnerships Facilitation fund has been found to be successful in increasing young people’s access to higher education in rural and regional communities, and advocate for any lessons to be taken up by other providers. Where appropriate consider extending the grants program beyond 2013.
Transport and Education

7. Continue to strengthen the Victorian Government’s commitment to improving public transport access in rural and regional areas, so that young people can access wider opportunities for post-school education and maintain their community connections. Additional options include:

- Supporting rural/regional communities to make empty seats on school buses available for free to young people who are undertaking study or training outside of secondary schools
- Utilising rural school buses outside of peak school transport hours to transport other community members (during ‘down time’)
- Extending bus services between rural towns and regional hubs on weekends and
- Supporting programs developed through Transport Connections to continue on sustainable basis, where they have shown strong results in increasing young people’s access to education, work and community.

Regional and Rural Development, Local Government, Planning, and Regional Cities

8. Importance of engaging young people in the planning of regional cities, incorporating sporting, cultural and volunteering infrastructure and green spaces into the design of new regional suburbs and rural communities.

Environment

9. Review the extent of rural and regional young people’s engagement in environmental sustainability initiatives such as Sustainability Victoria’s Sustainability Fund and the Communities for Nature grants to determine whether their rate of involvement accurately reflects their presence in the community, and whether it could be enhanced, in line with DEPI’s Environmental Partnerships (2012) which encourages more youth led partnerships and projects.
What’s happening to rural and regional populations?

Young people in their teens make up a significant part of the population of rural and regional Victoria. On average, they comprise a larger percentage of the population there than they do in Melbourne. However, it is common for young people over the age of 18 to leave rural or regional communities to study, travel or work. People aged 20-24, 25-29 and 30-34 make up a notably lower proportion of the rural / regional population than they do in Melbourne.²

In Victoria in 2011, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 46 out of 48 rural / regional LGAs showed a decline in their populations between the 15-19 and 30-34 year old age groups. In the vast majority of LGAs, this population drop was most noticeable between the 15-19 year old and 20-24 year old groups, pointing to the departure of school-leavers.³ (Migration also flows in the opposite direction, as older retirees leave Melbourne to settle in rural and coastal communities.)

Rural out-migration is a complex process, more pronounced in some communities than others. In a recent national study, Neil Argent and Jim Walmsley found that out-migration was most common amongst young people coming from the driest, most remote, and most agriculturally-based parts of Australia. They also found that young

YACVic Young people maintaining relationships with rural communities, 2014
women were more likely to leave than young men – a finding echoed in the 2010 report from the Department of Planning and Community Development (DPCD), *Regional Victoria: Trends and Prospects*.4
In Victoria, the loss of young adults has the most impact in smaller communities – see the graph above. In contrast, in some regional centres – Bendigo, Ballarat, Wodonga, Warrnambool and Latrobe – the population drops at a later age, between the 20-24 and 25-29 year old groups. Higher numbers of young adults are attracted to stay in these centres during their early 20s, or move there, for study or work.

‘Gaining employment [in a rural community] and working your way up in the chosen career can be quite difficult, as there are limited opportunities. There is a lack of social events in the community aimed towards this age group as well. The feeling of safety in the community especially for women is also a big problem.’

- YACVic survey, 2013 – young people’s responses

The loss of younger people, combined with a growing proportion of older people, leads some communities to experience an overall ‘ageing’ of their population. This can have significant impacts, as people aged over 55 have lower workforce participation than younger cohorts, and have particular needs in terms of health, housing, and financial and personal support. In their 2005 report *Economic Implications of an Ageing Australia*, the Australian Productivity Commission concluded that Australia faced a pronounced ageing of its population over the next 40 years. By 2050, they estimated, around one in four Victorians will be aged over 65. Impacts will be felt most strongly in ‘coastal non-urban’ and ‘inland rural’ communities. The Commission’s projected figures suggested that the proportion of over 65s in rural / regional areas would rise from 12.5% of the population in 2001 to 30.2% in 2045.

These issues were also flagged by DPCD’s *Regional Victoria* report (2010). The report notes that while the population of regional Victoria is projected to grow at an annual rate of 1% to 1,860,391 by 2036, this will be accompanied by an ageing of the population, whereby deaths will have overtaken births by 2033. All regional populations are projected to age during this period, but the impacts will vary. The Barwon and Loddon areas are predicted to experience a relatively large increase in the numbers of children and young people aged 0-18. There will be a smaller growth
in this age group in the Central Highlands, Goulburn, Gippsland and East Gippsland, and a decrease in this age group in the Western District, Wimmera and Mallee regions.¹¹

Is out-migration ‘bad’? Is it permanent?

Out-migration from rural communities, and the associated concerns, are not new, as this quote from a survey conducted in 1944 demonstrates:

‘In spite of the fact that the majority of people we interviewed pointed out the superiority of country town life, there was a general complaint that too many young people leave country towns for the city. Two reasons given for this: ‘They have to go to Melbourne to get jobs.’ ‘They think the country is too slow for them. They want “a good time” in the city.’¹²

Moreover, the question of retaining young people in rural communities is complicated by the fact that out-migration, however controversial, is often associated with progress. For example, when the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) analysed the On Track data, they found that between 2008-11 there was a rise in the proportion of young Victorians who had completed Year 12 going on to a bachelor degree. This trend was growing in rural communities faster than in Melbourne. In some ways, this is positive – but it will presumably mean more young people leaving rural areas.¹³ Similar issues arose when Victoria’s Regional Policy Advisory Committee undertook research in 2013 about increasing rural young people’s educational aspirations.¹⁴ Some of the effective approaches outlined in the report would serve to retain young people in education settings in their home towns, but many others would have the effect of encouraging them to move away. As Hernan Cuervo remarks ‘there is a fundamental paradox: the desire for better opportunities for young people creates a rural youth brain drain … Schools themselves effectively become “talent export industries”.’¹⁵

Some young people who leave rural / regional communities return later. In their 1997-2004 findings from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Youth, Kylie Hillman
and Sheldon Rothman noted that while 26% of the 5112 rural young people they surveyed were living in a major city by the end of the study, and while there had been an overall loss to rural communities, yet out-migration was not always permanent. By the end of the study, 30% of the young people who had left for the city had already experienced a move back to a rural or regional area. Similarly, the 2011 ABS data showed 20 rural / regional Victorian LGAs where the female population began to rise again by the 30-34 age group (having dropped away during the 20s), and 13 LGAs where the male population began to rise again by the ages 30-34. This trend is apparent in diverse communities, including Indigo, Corangamite, Moyne, Mansfield, Bass Coast and Murrindindi. Some of these adults may be newcomers, but anecdotally it seems that some are former residents returning.

‘Living in a rural community and then moving to a urban area (or vice versa) gives you a well rounded view of living, and both have different benefits. Though I miss being in the country, living in the city has shown my opportunities and a way of living I would never have known.’

‘If I had the opportunity to study my course at home I most certainly would.’

‘...it is very hard to find enough help for sick and/or mental ill people.’

‘The benefits of living in rural communities are endless, close knit communities, family, friends, the general environment. However growing up and leaving school it was evident of the support around further education and rural kids is severely lacking. Opportunities are very limited and people are forced to move further away from their communities, identity and family & friends. Little support is offered by the government for these people who are often moving away for the very first time. Although I love my community, I found myself having to move 3-4 hours away to further my education. This was extremely hard for myself and many others in my position. I moved back as soon as I could because it just wasn’t easy… Supports and opportunities are in ample supply for our metropolitan and city cousins however the further you are from these areas the less these are offered to you.’

- YACVic survey, 2013 – young people’s responses
Policy context:

Retaining young people in rural Victoria: 2006

In 2006, the Victorian Government undertook a major inquiry into retaining young people in rural communities. Key findings included:

- The most common reasons for leaving were to access education, training or employment, or to experience urban or overseas life;
- The decision to leave often began early in life, although leaving itself usually occurred after finishing secondary school;
- Migration could be influenced by young people’s negative perceptions about rural communities, including social attitudes and job prospects; and –
- Leaving had many positive outcomes for young people but negative outcomes for rural communities, exacerbating population ageing and decline.18

The inquiry also mentioned the importance of maintaining connections with young people who left rural areas, to support them and attract them to return later on if they wished.19 The issue of attracting young people to rural communities was also raised, and here the committee found that the most significant reasons for in-bound migration were positive community, lifestyle and environmental attractions, employment, and / or to settle in a long-term relationship.20

Regional Development Victoria

Regional Development Victoria (RDV) is the lead regional and rural agency for the Victorian Government. Through its Regional Growth Fund, RDV is providing $1 billion over eight years to improve infrastructure and facilities, stimulate jobs, businesses and tourism, attract skilled professionals to rural and regional Victoria, support programs to improve Year 12 completion rates, and increase people’s engagement in decision-making and governance in their communities.
RDV also offers the Young Professionals Provincial Cadetship Program. This is aimed at students from regional Victoria who have moved away to undertake university or vocational study. It provides them with a paid work-based cadetship in a field related to their study in regional Victoria during semester break, aiming to build their skills and encourage them to work in a regional community later on.

More broadly, RDV has supported a Youth Action Strategy, to increase the number of young people in regional and rural Victoria who feel connected to their local community and engaged in deciding its future. Through this strategy, RDV supported the ‘Reaching out to Rural Young People’ research grants in Geelong, Swan Hill and Bendigo, to develop proposals for improving service access to young people living in rural communities outside of regional centres. The strategy also funded rural youth inclusion grants (managed by the Department of Human Services) to embed youth engagement in local governments, and training for service providers and young people in youth participation and advocacy (delivered through the VRYS initiative at YACVic).

**Department of Human Services initiatives**

Positive experiences of community engagement can help shape a young person’s perception of the area where they live and their plans for the future. The Victorian Government Department of Human Services oversees several programs to strengthen young people’s involvement in their rural / regional communities. These include:

- **Change It Up** – a youth leadership program facilitated by the Foundation for Young Australians, where young people learn to pitch their ideas for change to government, business and community leaders.
- **Be Heard!** – a grants program for engaging young people in rural / regional community radio, particularly production and broadcasting, showcasing their talents, building their skills, and promoting local opportunities.
- **Local Government Youth Inclusion Grants** – a program to strengthen rural and regional young people’s involvement in local government.  The program
provides support for youth advisory committees, youth councils, youth summits, youth consultations and other advisory mechanisms.

- Shape It! – a grants program providing seed funding for rural / regional youth groups to start new projects in their communities. Funding has been announced for projects including cyber-safety campaigns, music and film festivals, and environmental clean-up groups.

Would any of these things make you MORE likely to live in a rural or regional community in the future?

‘More diverse cultural things: arts festivals, exhibitions, gigs, promotion of different cultures and different things, teaching kids that there isn't a “normal”.’

‘More help towards mentally ill persons.’

‘Better opportunities to meet new people and become engaged with members of the community, eg. social sporting activities’.

- YACVic survey, 2013 – young people’s responses

Literature review

Overview

Hillman and Roth

In a national, longitudinal study of Australian young people (1997-2004), Kylie Hillman and Sheldon Rothman observed that more young people were moving from rural / regional areas to metropolitan areas than the other way around. Following a cohort of rural young people, they observed that by 2004, 24% of the young women they followed and 27% of the young men were living in capital cities, most commonly undertaking post-secondary study. Furthermore, 33% of the males and 40% of the females they followed had spent time living in a metropolitan area. This demonstrates that moving to a metro area is common, but not always permanent. For young people who’d decided to stay in the city, the biggest influences were finding full-time work there and, for young women, having a tertiary qualification.
When Hillman and Roth compared the ‘leaver’, ‘stayer’ and ‘returner’ groups, they found few major differences in their rates of marriage or their career satisfaction levels. The ‘leaver’ group were less likely than the ‘stayer’ or ‘returner’ groups to have become parents, though, and rates of home ownership were higher for those who ended up living in rural communities. 

“When Hillman and Roth compared the ‘leaver’, ‘stayer’ and ‘returner’ groups, they found few major differences in their rates of marriage or their career satisfaction levels. The ‘leaver’ group were less likely than the ‘stayer’ or ‘returner’ groups to have become parents, though, and rates of home ownership were higher for those who ended up living in rural communities.”

*‘Rural/regional living is the best way of becoming a part of a strong community. Especially in a very small town it is hard not to get involved’.*

- YACVic survey, 2013 – young people’s responses

### Plans and aspirations:

**Geldens, Davies, Easthope & Gabriel, and Operation Next Gen**

In a detailed, qualitative study published in 2007, Paula Geldens surveyed 138 Victorian secondary students from family farms, Geldens observed that many of these young people expressed complex feelings towards home, struggling with the assumption that the ‘best and brightest’ would leave and that staying was a sign of failure. Most expressed positive views about farming life but did not want to make it their career. The most attractive aspects of farm life included space, entertainment, freedoms, and the natural environment. The worst aspects involved distance and isolation. Young women were more likely than young men to plan to leave.

In interviews with young people who had left, Geldens found that many missed home, visited frequently, or felt frustrated by barriers which prevented them from visiting. Case studies included one young woman who returned every weekend to play on the netball team, another who returned regularly in secret, fearing local gossip that she had failed to succeed in the city, and a young man who returned as expected to take over the family farm and found it an easy transition.

Geldens argued that while discussions about young people’s decisions to stay or leave often focus on the ‘objective’ availability of education and work, these are not the only...
influences. Social values and ideas about success, failure and ambition are powerful too.  

‘I love rural life but I would like to see the stigma [concerning young people] removed. I've had situations where my opinions have been disregarded and overlooked for the opinion of an older person because mine was seen as inferior.’

- YACVic survey, 2013 – young people’s responses

Additional insights were offered by a 2012 survey of 735 secondary students in the Victorian shires of Buloke, Loddon and Gannawarra, by the Center for Rural Entrepreneurship (US), in partnership with Community Leadership Loddon Murray and Operation Next Gen, with support from the Victorian Government’s ‘Putting Locals First’ program. The study found that 73% of students rated their community as an ‘above average’ to ‘excellent’ place to live, and 51% said they could see themselves living there in the future. This was complicated, however, by the 53% of respondents who planned to attend university (which usually means a move away).

When asked about incentives to live in their home town, 62% said it was a good place to raise a family; 58% highlighted ties to friends and 48% to relatives. The most common reasons given for not living in their home town in the future related to career opportunities elsewhere (65%) and making more money elsewhere (49%).

Similar points emerged in Hazel Easthope and Michelle Gabriel’s study of rural Tasmania. They found that the most privileged or high achieving young people were especially likely to think that they should leave, but that all young people were affected by the assumption that the ‘best and brightest’ would go. Interviews with young people who had left Tasmania and then moved back found that while some enjoyed being home again, others were frustrated, seeing Tasmania as backward and limited, or worrying that returning was akin to failure.

In a 2008 study of youth in-migration to rural Western Australia, Amanda Davies showed how young people’s choices about where to live are influenced by popular perceptions. Davies surveyed young people who were studying in Perth, and found
that young people had more positive views of rural life and were much more likely to consider living in a rural area if they’d lived in one before. Indeed, the majority of students surveyed who recorded a rural family address said they would like to move back to a rural area one day. However, as Davies notes, the statistics indicate that only a minority of them will actually do so.\textsuperscript{28}

**Community and continuity**

*Cuervo and Wyn, and Budge*

In their 2012 publication *Young People Making it Work: Continuity and Change in Rural Places*, Hernan Cuervo and Johanna Wyn discussed the longitudinal Life Patterns survey of rural young people who left school in the 1990s. The researchers followed this up by interviewing young people who had stayed in or returned to a rural community.

The people interviewed (now in their 30s) spoke of how their lives had been transformed by changes to the agricultural sector, the decline of full-time employment and small-scale farming, and the common assumption that they would undertake post-school study.\textsuperscript{29} They also articulated their ongoing connections to family and place. Many challenged the ‘deficit model’ of rural areas, expressing positive views about where they lived and a strong sense of community enduring across the generations. Even their experience of ‘leaving’ was linked to their rural identity. Some explained that they had left town in order to study, so that they could eventually return and have a successful, rural career; others spoke of city life as reinforcing their sense of themselves as rural people, for example when they lived in colleges and made friends with other students from rural backgrounds. Many described relying on their parents emotionally and financially throughout their 20s, while at the same time they were also more likely than their city peers to show characteristics of ‘adulthood’ at a younger age, such as marriage, parenthood, divorce and home ownership.\textsuperscript{30} The authors said of these rural young people:
‘In making sense of their pathways and trajectories, it becomes very evident that relationships – to family, friends and to place – are always at the centre of their decision-making. Study and work are important but, in making their lives work, they are at the service of relationships.’

‘I don’t think you can generalise what communities need when each are so individual and unique. My main motivation is the type of district (dairy farming) and my families long history within the area. I am a country girl and always will be!!!!’

‘I grew up in the country and moved to the city to study and gained an excellent job that I loved in the city. I started seeing my partner who is on a farm in a rural town and moved back for him. I am working in a job under my qualifications and investigating if there is the population to start up my own business in my field of choice. It would be fantastic if there were more education opportunities in rural communities’.

- YACVic survey, 2013 – young people’s responses

In a 2002 study of the Victorian community of Murtoa, Trevor Budge surveyed 159 young adults to scope their most common reasons for staying (employment and family) and leaving (employment and education). Budge noted that those who had settled into ‘adult’ lives in the community (full-time work, marriage etc) mostly described themselves as likely to very likely to stay on. He also noted how the community ran regular events such as the Murtoa Races, the Agricultural Show, and sporting matches, to encourage young people who had left town to keep returning.

‘I recently became involved in a very exciting election campaign and have since moved back to my home region, along with several other highly motivated and enthusiastic young people. This has made the area a lot more enjoyable for me. During the campaign I also made friends of many different ages which was a fantastic experience. Working on something so positive and community focused really made me/us want to come back here for a while. It has been fantastic but I also don’t see a lot of long-term prospects for my career here.’

- YACVic survey, 2013 – young people’s responses
Gender differences

Alston, Muenstermann, and Cuervo and Wyn

Scholars have observed a broad national pattern of larger numbers of young women than young men leaving rural areas and not returning. In a 2011 study of women living on farms, Ingrid Muenstermann linked this trend to a tradition of women being expected to work hard on farms without wielding much formal authority, the shortages of full-time employment for women in small rural communities, and a sense amongst young women that city life was more attractive. Rural young women tend to stay in education longer than young men, Muenstermann noted, and take up the opportunities this presents to leave town.

Ten years earlier, Margaret Altson discussed similar issues concerning the loss of young women from towns in rural NSW. The young women she interviewed reported feeling less valued in their communities than young men, and having fewer ‘safety nets’ of local career paths or sporting opportunities.

Gender difference is also a key theme in Cuervo and Wyn's 2012 work. They discuss the diminishing of the agricultural sector (which once offered a secure route to adulthood for rural young men); the growth of new professional identities for young male farmers; the fact that rural young women, while initially as ambitious as their male peers, were less likely to achieve high professional success; and the fact that child-rearing and domestic labour remained predominantly female work.

‘Moved to rural [area] for reasons of needing less stress, subsided rent prices and long term friends at the time lived local’.

‘Increases in Public transport, meaningful employment and access to education (university tafe or apprenticeships) would see rural living for young people become an increasingly attractive option.’

‘Myself, I’ve no desire to live in metropolitan areas’.

- YACVic survey, 2013 – young people’s responses
YACVic survey results

In October 2013, we conducted an online survey, aimed at young people who had lived in two or more of the following: a rural community, a regional centre, or a capital city. Here, we wanted to capture some of the diversity and mobility of young people’s experiences, and acknowledge that not all young people who leave their home towns go to Melbourne.

The survey asked young people what the best things were about living in a rural or regional community, which extra-curricular activities they had been involved in there, and what their main reasons were for leaving. It asked whether they stayed in touch with people from their old communities, how and why, and whether they were satisfied with the amount of contact they had. It went on to ask whether anyone had encouraged them to live in a rural or regional community in the future, and whether they would like to do so. Those who nominated that they would like to live in a rural or regional area in the future were asked what attracted them; those who did not want to live there were asked why not; and those who were unsure were asked what appealed to them and what might put them off. All respondents were asked what would make them more likely to live in a rural or regional community in the future. Most of the questions allowed respondents to choose multiple answers, and / or to write their own comments. This was intended to capture some of the complexities of young people’s communities and choices.

Who answered, where were they, and where had they been?

The survey had 83 responses. The respondents’ ages ranged from 12 to 25, but the most populous cohorts were between 18 and 21, and the median age was 20. This aligns with the large numbers of school-leavers who depart rural / regional areas.

Only 43 respondents specified their cultural background. 29 wrote some variation on ‘Australian’, ‘Anglo Australian’ and ‘white Australian’, 5 identified themselves as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, and other responses (most of which got one response each) included Scottish, New Zealander, Croatian, Latino, and Welsh.
When asked ‘Which of these best describes your life at present?’ there were 79 responses. The most common were ‘I’m at university’ (44%); followed by ‘I’m in secondary school’ (24%), then ‘I’m working full time’ (15%). When asked ‘If you moved away from a rural or regional area, what were the main reasons you moved?’, there were 67 responses, and the most common were: ‘To go to university’ (66%), ‘To experience life somewhere else’ (39%), and ‘To get a job’ (31%). This seems largely in keeping with existing research about young people’s reasons for leaving rural / regional areas.

The responses showed a striking gender imbalance. 62 respondents identified themselves as female, 20 as male, and 1 as genderqueer. As the survey was distributed through multiple networks (none with an obvious female bias), this result is curious. In the future, more innovative efforts may be needed to engage male respondents. At the same time, the largely female response is not wholly inappropriate, given the larger numbers of women who leave rural communities.

The largest proportion of respondents (45) had ‘up-sized’ their communities, moving from a rural or regional area to a capital city, or a rural town to a regional city. A minority (12) had ‘down-sized’, moving from a regional city to a rural town, or a capital city to a rural or regional area. Another minority (9) described having lived in such a mix of cities, towns and centres that it was difficult to characterise them as moving ‘up’ or ‘down’ in scale. The remaining 17 gave what appeared to be incomplete responses, listing only one community that they had lived in, but often writing as if they had indeed experienced life in other places. Some of these respondents may have misunderstood the survey, but it seems likely that some had

Talking point:
- The survey was more successful in capturing the views of young women than young men, and of young people who were engaged in education and / or employment than those who were not. On the other hand, this is suggestive of the cohorts of young people most likely to leave a rural or regional community.
studied or worked away from home while considering their rural or regional address to be their ‘real’ one. There was a great diversity of communities named, with around a third of respondents indicating that they had lived in three or more communities.

When asked where they were currently living, the most common answer (from 38 respondents) was a Victorian regional city, such as Mildura, Ballarat or Bendigo. Next was Melbourne (with 29 respondents), followed by a Victorian rural town (16 respondents). Two respondents were living in other Australian capital cities; one was living in a regional city in NSW, and one divided her time between a regional city and Melbourne. The predominance of regional cities here was unexpected. It may reflect the enthusiastic promotion of the survey by YACVic’s rural / regional contacts. However, it also serves as a valuable reminder that many young people who leave their original communities are not necessarily headed for a capital city. Studying or working in a regional centre may be more convenient and appealing, and may allow them to stay closer to their old communities.

The section below reproduces graphs showing the young people’s responses, followed by interpretation and commentary. It is recognised that the sample size is not large enough to draw definite conclusions, but many of the responses serve to either complement and strengthen existing knowledge, or pose dilemmas for us to consider further.
What were the best things about living in a rural or regional community? (81 responses)

- Being near my family: 55 hits
- Friends: 54 hits
- The landscape - beaches, green spaces, farms: 53 hits
- A strong sense of community: 42 hits
- Going to school there: 31 hits
- Sporting teams: 26 hits
- Fresh food: 21 hits
- Volunteering: 16 hits
- Cultural stuff like music gigs, plays, or art competitions: 15 hits
- Things to do - shops, movies, skate park, bushwalking: 12 hits
- Local services such as health services, headspace, public housing or disability support: 9 hits
- Good jobs: 8 hits
- Nothing was good - I didn't like it there: 5 hits

YACVic Young people maintaining relationships with rural communities, 2014
Whom do you stay in touch with, from your old rural or regional community? (62 responses)

- Friends: 56
- Family: 54
- Teachers: 23
- Employers: 17
- Sporting team: 16
- Local services such as doctors, headspace or youth workers: 14
- Girlfriend / boyfriend / partner: 9
- Local government: 3

How do you stay in touch? (63 responses)

- Facebook / social media: 57
- I visit friends or family, or they visit me: 52
- Phone: 49
- I go back for special events like festivals: 27
- Local newspapers or local radio shows: 25
- Email: 23
- I go back for parties: 23
- Skype: 14
- I go back to play on a local sporting team: 10
- I have a part-time job there: 7
- I go back to volunteer: 6
- I’m studying there: 3
What are the best things about staying in touch with your old community? (62 responses)

- It makes me feel close to the people I care about: 46 responses
- I love the place itself - eg the natural environment, the climate, being on the farm: 39 responses
- It makes me happy: 38 responses
- It reminds me I could go back if I wanted to: 30 responses
- They give me good advice: 17 responses
- It helps me keep up with my interests, like sport, art or volunteering: 17 responses
- It's good to know I'm helping them out: 13 responses
- They help me out with money or practical things like a car: 10 responses
Has anyone ever encouraged you to live in a rural or regional community in the future? (73 responses)

Number of hits

- Family: 37
- No, no one did: 32
- Teachers: 17
- Friends: 14
- Mentors: 8
- Local government or politicians: 8
- Employers: 7
- University lecturer or vocational trainer: 7
- Youth workers or other support workers: 4

When you lived in a rural or regional community, did you ever take part in any of these? (77 responses)

Number of hits

- Part-time work: 56
- Volunteering: 54
- Sporting teams: 53
- Student Representative Council: 30
- Music or theatre: 29
- Full-time work: 17
- Scouts: 15
- Mentoring program: 15
- Youth council: 13
- FReeZA committee: 13
- Activist groups: 5
- Heywire (ABC) competition: 3
- Running for local council: 1

YACVic Young people maintaining relationships with rural communities, 2014
What attracts you about living in a rural or regional community?

Combines responses from those who wanted to live in a rural or regional community in the future, and those who were unsure.
(70 responses.)

- There are lots of green spaces or beaches, a good natural environment: 50
- It's a good place to raise kids: 47
- It's a good, friendly community: 45
- I'd be near my friends or family: 43
- The housing is affordable: 37
- The cost of living is cheaper there: 36
- I want to contribute to the community - eg as a teacher or a doctor: 31
- Good opportunities to get involved in volunteering, mentoring, church, or clubs: 23
- I'll be sick of the city by then: 22
- There are good jobs there: 17
- My partner wants to live there: 11
- I could study or train there: 10
- I'll take over the family farm or business: 6
- I want to run for local council: 4

What attracts you about living in a rural or regional community?
What puts you off living in a rural or regional community?
Combines responses from those who did not want to live in a rural or regional community in the future, and those who were unsure.
(24 responses.)

- There are not enough options for study or training: 19 hits
- There are not enough fun things to do: 16 hits
- There are not enough jobs: 15 hits
- Transport is a problem there: 14 hits
- I love my job / studies in the city: 12 hits
- I prefer living in the city or overseas: 10 hits
- There are not enough services like doctors or childcare: 10 hits
- Most of my friends live in the city: 9 hits
- I don't feel comfortable there: 5 hits
- It's too expensive to live there: 4 hits
- I don't think I would get a say in how the community is run: 2 hits

There are not enough options for study or training

YACVic Young people maintaining relationships with rural communities, 2014
Would any of these things make you MORE likely to live in a rural or regional community in the future? (73 responses)

- More job opportunities: 44
- More things to do - eg movies, cafes, shopping, sport: 37
- Better opportunities for university study: 33
- Better public transport: 31
- A safer community: 29
- I would move back to help out my family or friends, if they needed me: 28
- A better image for rural communities, more community pride: 27
- More affordable housing: 22
- Better services like doctors, childcare, job agencies or schools: 21
- A more diverse community: 20
- More opportunities to volunteer: 15
- Support in starting up my own business: 13
- More opportunities to have a say in how the community is run: 11
- Better opportunities for TAFE or apprenticeships: 10
- NOTHING - I would never move back!!: 4

(YACVic Young people maintaining relationships with rural communities, 2014)
Family, friends and community

One of the clearest messages was the importance these young people attached to family and friend, listing them most commonly as the best things about living in a rural / regional community, and as the groups that young people were most likely to stay in touch with. Family were the group most likely to have encouraged these young people to live in a rural or regional community in the future.

Of the 52 young people who agreed they would like to live in a rural or regional area later in life, the second, third and fourth most population reasons given concerned wanting to raise their own children there, wanting to be near friends or family, and finding it a good, friendly community. Of the 19 young people who were unsure about whether or not they would like to live in a rural / regional community in the future, the most common attractions they selected were ‘It’s a good, friendly community’, then ‘It’s a good place to raise kids’. When asked ‘Would any of these things make you MORE likely to live in a rural or regional community in the future?’ 38% of the respondents checked ‘I would move back to help out my family or friends, if they needed me’.

When those who stayed in touch were asked ‘If you visit in person, how often do you go?’ 61 responded, and the most common response was ‘Once a month or more’ (33 hits), followed by ‘Every couple of months’ (23), then ‘Once a year or less’ (5). When asked if they were happy with the amount of contact they had with their old communities, the majority who selected ‘yes’ were people who visited once a month or more. Those who ticked ‘No, I’d like to see more of them’ were more likely to be people who visited every couple of months (followed by people who visited once a month or more). This suggests the regular, committed connections many young people have with communities where they’ve lived before, but also the practical obstacles some face in maintaining these connections. Financial barriers may be significant here. For instance, in the 2013 update *Deferring a University Offer in Victoria*, Klatt and Polesel found that 51% of the students they surveyed from rural backgrounds were on Youth Allowance, compared to 18% of the metro ones.37
On a different note, we were interested to note the prominence of local media, with a large minority of respondents (40%) staying in touch with their old communities via newspapers and radio shows.

Of the 8 young people who noted that they did not stay in touch with their old rural or regional communities, the most common reason selected was ‘I don’t want to’ (63%).

**Talking points:**

- Do policies and debates about ‘leaving’, and about rural aspiration, take into account the influences of young people’s families and friends?
- Do policies and debates about rural aspiration consider young people’s aspirations for family and community life, not just study and work? Study and work are critical – they were the biggest reasons these young people had moved away – but human relationships had proven lasting and influential.
- Was this survey inadvertently skewed towards young people who held positive views of rural / regional life and maintained relationships with people back home? While we tried to keep the language and promotion of the survey quite neutral, perhaps the subject itself would not appeal to young people who had left rural or regional communities and adamantly did not wish to stay in touch. As this paper was prompted by interest in the connections that young people do maintain, the imbalance may not be a significant problem here. However, it points to the need for alternative research methods in the future.

**A sense of place**

One striking finding from the survey was the value young people attached to landscape – beaches, green spaces, and / or farms. The landscape was the third most popular response from young people who talked about the good aspects of rural life (after family and friends). It was the second most popular response to the question of what was good about staying in touch with one’s old community, and the
most popular attraction cited by those young people who said that they would live in a rural or regional community in the future. Amongst the young people who were unsure where they would like to live in the future, the landscape was also ticked as an attraction by 50% of this group.

**Talking points:**

- How can we widen conversations about ‘aspiration’ to consider the many things that young people aspire to, including belonging to a particular place?
- When planning the layout and environmental management of rural and regional communities, young people should be actively engaged.

**Plans for the future**

When asked ‘In the future, would you like to live in a rural or regional community?’ 76 young people answered. The most common response (39%) was ‘Yes, I’d like to live in a different rural or regional area, where I haven’t lived before’, followed by ‘Yes, I’d like to move back to my old home town’ (30%), then ‘I’m not sure’ (25%). Only 7% ticked ‘No, I’d never live there again’.

As noted, families were identified as the group most likely to encourage a young person to live in a rural or regional community in the future. This influence was not necessarily decisive, however; nor did it necessarily mean a young person planned to move back to their old home town. The influence of family was cited by 52% of young people who said they’d like to return to their old community, but also by 55% of those who said they’d like to live in a different rural or regional community, and 42% of those who were unsure where they would like to live.

Perhaps surprisingly, of the 73 people who answered the question ‘Has anyone encouraged you to live in a rural or regional community in the future?’, the second most common response was ‘No, no one did’. This response was most common...
amongst young people who said they were unsure where they would like to live in the future. 53% of this group said no one had encouraged them to live in a rural or regional area, compared to 39% of those who said they wished to return to their old home town, and 34% of those who wished to live in a different rural or regional community.

For those young people who planned to return to their old home communities, the other common sources of encouragement were friends (39% of this cohort), followed by teachers (17%) and mentors (17%). For those who planned to live in a different rural or regional area, the other common sources of encouragement were teachers (24%), local government / politicians (17%), employers (14%) and friends (14%). Given the small sample size, it would be unwise to make too much of this, but it might suggest the importance of personal connections for those who planned to go ‘home’, and the more formal influence of education, employment and civic life on those thinking about settling in a different regional area. Amongst those who weren’t sure where they wanted to live in the future, the biggest source of encouragement to live in a rural or regional community (after family) was teachers (32%). The number of young people who identified that they definitely did not want to live in a rural or regional community in the future was too small to draw many deductions from. However, most of them indicated that few people, or no one, had encouraged them to return.

Talking point:

- Given how often community leaders and policy makers discuss the issue of retaining young people in rural communities, it seems curious that so many young respondents stated that no one had encouraged them to live in a rural / regional community later in life. This may be a quirk of this particular survey. However, it is also suggestive of a common assumption that the ‘high achieving’ young people (which would include many of those surveyed here) will leave. In addition, it might suggest a communication gap or barrier between high-level planning discussions about the future of rural / regional communities, and the young people who live there.
Employment

Jobs emerged as a key concern. When asked ‘What were the best things about living in a rural or regional community?’, very few ‘Good jobs’, despite the fact that around three quarters of the respondents had done part-time work in a rural or regional community, and about a fifth had done full-time work. Of the 67 respondents who answered the question about why they had left a rural / regional community, 31% ticked ‘To get a job’. Interestingly, though, a minority of respondents did note that they stayed in touch with employers from their old communities, and that employers had encouraged them to live in a rural or regional community in the future.

Of those young people who indicated that they wanted to live in a rural or regional community in the future, jobs were not listed as a strong attraction. Of this cohort of 50 respondents, only 32% selected ‘There are good jobs there’, placing employment behind attractions such as family and community life, cheaper housing, lower living costs, and a wish to contribute to the community.

Those who were unsure about where they wanted to live in the future were unlikely to nominate employment as a big attraction. Only 1 out of 20 of these respondents ticked ‘There are good jobs there’. When this same cohort were asked if anything put them off living in a rural or regional area, the second most common answer (68% of this group) was ‘There are not enough jobs’. Of the five young people who answered that they did not wish to live in a rural or regional community in the future, two ticked ‘There are not enough jobs’.

When all the respondents were asked ‘Would any of these things make you MORE likely to live in a rural or regional community in the future?’ there were 73 responses. The most popular answer selected (by 60% of these respondents) was ‘More job opportunities’. Jobs were especially identified as an incentive by those who had indicated that they did want to return to their home community in the future, and by those who wanted to live in a different rural or regional area. (Those who were unsure where they wanted to live were more likely to select ‘More things to do – eg movies, cafes, shopping, sport’ and ‘Better opportunities for university study’.)
Contributing to the community

The young respondents to this survey had been involved in their communities to a very considerable extent, and in a wide range of ways, most commonly ‘Part-time work’ (73%), ‘Volunteering’ (70%), and ‘Sporting teams’ (69%). In addition to the other options listed, some respondents added activities of their own, including the Zarque Ballarat sexual diversity group, the Rural Youth Ambassador Program, the Lions Club, and the Victorian Police Youth Corps.

When asked ‘What were the best things about living in a rural or regional community?’, ‘Sporting teams’, ‘Volunteering’, and ‘Cultural stuff like music gigs, plays or art competitions’ were selected by a large minority. While these were not the most popular responses, they came noticeably ahead of ‘Good jobs’ or ‘Local services’.

A minority of respondents also checked that they continued to go back to their old communities to play on a local sporting team, work in a part-time job there or volunteer there.

Those young people who confirmed that they wanted to live in a rural or regional community in the future were asked what attracted them about it. Of the 50 who replied, 52% selected ‘I want to contribute to the community – eg as a teacher or doctor’, and 40% selected ‘There are good opportunities to get involved in volunteering, mentoring, church, or clubs’. These responses were less evident amongst the smaller cohort of people who were unsure about whether they’d like to live in a rural or regional community in the future. Of this group, 25% selected ‘I want to contribute to the community’, and 15% selected ‘There are good opportunities to get involved’.

Could any relationship be observed between the respondents’ histories of community involvement and their plans for the future? We looked at the top 5 most popular activities that young people had been involved in, while living in a rural or regional community. Amongst the main three cohorts – those young people who wanted to return to their original home town in the future, those who wished to live in
a different rural or regional community in the future, and those who were unsure – the top 5 popular activities were the same: sporting teams, volunteering, Student Representative Councils, music / theatre, and part-time work. The popularity of these activities varied slightly between the three cohorts. The survey size was too small to read very much into this, but those who wanted to return to their original homes did seem more likely than the others to have engaged in volunteering in the past. Meanwhile, those who were not sure where they wanted to live were less likely than the other groups to have engaged in sport, volunteering or part-time work.

The number of respondents who did not want to live in a rural or regional area in the future was so low that we must be cautious about reading much into their responses. However, in this study, these young people were more likely than the others to have done part-time work in a rural or regional community, and less likely to have been engaged in sporting teams, volunteering, or SRCs.

**Education**

Education emerged as an important and vexed issue for young people who had lived in rural or regional communities. When asked about the best things about living in a rural or regional community?, ‘Going to school there’ was the fifth most popular response. A minority of respondents also indicated that they stayed in touch with teachers from their old communities, and that teachers or (less commonly) university lecturers or vocational trainers had encouraged them to live in a rural or regional community in the future.

At the same time, going to university was the most popular reason why these young respondents had left a rural or regional area, and many did not seem optimistic about prospects for further education in smaller communities. Those who wanted to live in a rural or regional community in the future were relatively unlikely to tick as one of the attractions ‘I could study or train there’ (20% of respondents). Of those who were unsure where they wanted to live in the future, none selected this option. When this cohort were asked ‘Does anything put you off?’ the most common response (75%) was ‘There are not enough options for study or training’. This
When respondents were asked whether anything would make them more likely to live in a rural or regional community in the future, the third most popular response was ‘Better opportunities for university study’. A much smaller group selected ‘Better opportunities for TAFE or apprenticeships’ – this may reflect the characteristics of the young people who answered the survey, or of young people who are most likely to leave rural or regional communities. It may also reflect the fact that, traditionally, vocational options were relatively easy to access in rural areas.

**Transport, housing and safety**

Not surprisingly, the limited access to public transport in rural and regional communities was flagged as a concern. When the young people who did not want to live in a rural / regional area in the future, and those who were unsure where they wanted to live, were asked what put them off, the fourth most common response was ‘Transport is a problem there’. ‘Better public transport’ was the fourth most popular response to the question ‘Would any of these things make you MORE likely to live in a rural or regional community in the future?’.

Conversely, the more positive qualities of rural and regional communities can include more affordable housing and lower costs of living – the fifth and sixth most popular responses when young people were asked what appealed to them about living in a rural or regional community. Relatively few of these young people flagged affordability as a concern about living rurally (although of course it is a concern to some local residents living on low incomes).

Interestingly, another popular response to the question ‘Would any of these things make you MORE likely to live in a rural or regional community in the future?’ was ‘A safer community’ (40% of respondents). This was especially nominated by the groups who wanted to return to their home towns, and who were unsure about where to live. This concern about safety is especially interesting in light of how many young
people also flagged the attractions of friends, family, beautiful landscapes and positive communities, and reminds us again of the complexities of rural / regional life.

Reflections

Plans and aspirations

YACVic noted with interest the release of the report *Research into Education Aspiration for Regional Victoria* (2013), which was commissioned by Regional Development Victoria at the request of the Regional Policy Advisory Committee. This work stemmed from recognition of the importance of education and skills to the growth of vibrant, sustainable regional communities, and from concern at the educational ‘gap’ between regional and metropolitan Victoria. We were especially interested to note the report’s emphasis on the role of families and communities in raising young people’s aspirations. This aligns with the significance of family, friends and community in this paper. However, the report did not have scope to focus on the fact that attaining a post-school qualification often means leaving a rural community, or to address young people’s aspirations about other aspects of their lives. The report’s recommendations involve:

- Refocusing interventions around education aspiration to target Year 7/8 and primary school students, in recognition that aspirations form early in life;
- Incorporating strategies to improve parental and community engagement around students’ education aspirations;
- Ensuring that any multifaceted approach to improve aspiration includes a strategy to overcome financial barriers to further education; and –
- Re-thinking the interventions aimed at early school leavers, recognising that they often have complex needs which necessitate multi-faceted interventions.  

The annual **Regional Victoria Living Expo** is funded by the Victorian Government to promote living and working in regional Victoria to people currently based in Melbourne. For the many young adults who have left a rural or regional community but wish to live in one in the future, events like the Expo have potential to be especially useful, particularly for these young people who wish to live in a different rural / regional area to their old home town. However, while the Expo has featured
In light of the fact that young people begin to form their job aspirations early in life, and in light of our survey’s suggestion that not all young people in rural or regional communities feel encouraged to live there in the future, it might be valuable to increase young people’s awareness of these schemes. Where these programs have been found to be effective in enabling people to return to rural or regional communities, there might be potential to extend them or share their findings with other sectors.

**Access and connections** issues raised in this paper included rural / regional young people’s struggles to access tertiary education, their wish to maintain in-person relationships with their old communities, and the obstacles some face in achieving this.

**Financial barriers** are relevant here. The current rate of Youth Allowance for a full-time student aged over 18 living away from their parental home is $407.50 a fortnight, or $29 a day – an alarmingly low figure which does not reflect the real costs of living. Furthermore, at present, young people are not considered independent of their parents in relation to Youth Allowance until the age of 22, unless they have worked full-time for at least 18 months during the previous two years (for rural and regional students, part-time work of at least 15 hours a week is acceptable). This arrangement does not reflect the realities for young people from rural / regional backgrounds trying to access higher education. Living on a very low income also makes it harder to maintain connections with their old communities.

This paper also raised the issue of young people’s ability to access university education close to their original communities. In light of recognised inequalities in
rural Victorians’ access to university study, the Victorian Government funded the Regional Partnerships Facilitation Fund (RPFF), a $20M grant fund to support increased alliances between higher education institutions like universities and VET providers. Grants were intended to support tertiary education providers to position themselves to better deliver a range of higher education options in regional Victoria, giving students more options for studying closer to home. The RPFF comprised two funding rounds, with the second awarded in June 2013. This report also reminds us of the importance of public transport in enabling young people to access education and stay in touch with their communities.

**Belonging to place**

In light of the importance of place identified in this review, and in light of the rapid growth occurring in some regional centres, young people’s role in developing, sustaining and nurturing their natural and built environments should be further supported.
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