

Background paper

How to bridge the gap between individual rights and community interest when it comes to youth?

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Introduction

This paper addresses the question: “How to bridge the gap between individual rights and community interest when it comes to youth?” This question is part of a greater premise posed by Doha International Family Institute to this Expert Group Meeting: what is the role of families in supporting youth transitions? These premises are circumscribed within the goal of discussing “what policies might help countries improve youth outcomes, moving towards the youth-related UN Sustainable Development Goals targets (Target 4.4, 8.5 and 8.6)?” Finally, within this broad framework, another issue helps guiding the direction of this background paper: “the importance of a healthy transition from youth to adulthood in the achievement of SDGs”.

To address the question of *“how to bridge the gap between individual rights and community interest when it comes to youth”* I will focus on rural youth in Australia. Within this research space, I argue that rural youth are caught in a tension between aspirations and belonging. That is, it has become normative for Australian youth to continue with further and higher education well into their twenties; which demands for rural youth to migrate to metropolitan centres, and thus leave behind their local social networks and rural sense of belonging. This tension that envelopes rural youth also has an impact on the community needs. As rural youth migrate to continue with further education and work, the sustainability of their home-community is eroded. Thus, this tension between individual rights and community interests opens up a series of questions: what are the post-secondary school options for rural students with no local further education and work opportunities? What happens to rural communities when their youth leaves them? What opportunities are for rural youth to have positive and healthy transitions? How can this tension between youth rights and community needs be solved?

This background paper continues with a brief contextualization of the changes in youth transitions in the last half a century. These changes affect in particular rural youth as opportunities for work and higher education are more prevalent in urban spaces. The next

section tackles youth and education policies that set the norm to aspire to continue with post-secondary education. These policy mandates are also explained in relation to the nexus of education and work, and in particular to the growing casualization of the youth labour market and the phenomenon of underemployment. I then proceed to reflect on the tension aspirations and belonging, and the impact on community sustainability. I conclude with some possible avenues of action that contribute to sustain both youth and community interests and rights.

Before continuing, it is important to re-state that this background paper addresses the problematic of rural youth and rural communities in Australia. As a highly urbanized country, where at least three quarters of its population lives in major urban centres, it is an important contribution to the tension between individual rights and community needs. I am aware, however, of the dangers of placing one's experiences into a different context. Research in less-developed economically societies has revealed that children and young people in rural places enjoy different opportunities, and in many instances the boundaries of childhood-youth-adulthood are blurred; where children and youth are already combining education and work at an early age (see Colonna 2019; Iwilade 2019; Morrow 2014; Rabe, Swart & de Beer 2019).

Context of youth transitions

Over the last half a century, patterns of transition have changed dramatically in Australia. There are, however, two significant moments in Australian youth transitions from 1950s to 1990s. Firstly, the implementation of free mass secondary education (up to 15 years of age) which aimed for young people to gain the necessary skills to enter the labour market dominated by the manufacturing sector (Dwyer & Wyn 2001; Cuervo & Wyn 2011). Secondly, with the economic shift from primary sector (e.g. agriculture) and the manufacturing sector to a service economy; mostly based on industries located in metropolitan centres, it increasingly became indispensable for young people to continue with post-secondary school education to learn new skills and secure a place in a growing

competitive and precarious labour market. Thus, by the 1990s many of the youth jobs in primary and secondary industries were closed shifting to employment that demanded higher credentials from young people (Bessant & Cook 1998). This collapse of the youth labour market, coupled with Australia's latest financial recession in the early 1990s, the need to study late into their twenties, and an increasingly casualised job market, made young people to become more dependent on their families; including postponing the achievement of some of the traditional markers of adulthood such as leaving their parental home and forming a family of their own (Cuervo & Wyn 2011). As I have stated elsewhere:

One of the effects of this [educational and economic] change was that young people became more dependent on their families for longer. Instead of being able to establish their independence, they were increasingly dependent on living in the family home while they spent their late teens and early twenties completing their education. Even with income from part-time jobs, a majority of young people did not have the resources to live independently (Cuervo & Wyn 2011: 3).

For rural young people that aim to continue with further and higher education, living with their parents was not a clear possibility (Cuervo & Wyn 2012; Kenway et al. 2006). The lack of post-secondary school institutions meant they need to leave their family home behind.

In policy terms, the shift from secondary school degrees to tertiary education credentials is also related to an increasing view of education as a personal investment – as a property right (Rizvi & Lingard 2010) that an individual ought to acquire to navigate in the labour market. Researchers working in the space of youth studies and education research noted at the time that education was positioned as ‘an individual good’ by government policies; including families and youth carrying the cost of tertiary education-fees (Bessant & Cook 1998; Dwyer & Wyn 2001).

Youth and education normative assumptions: Are they spatially blind?

In a similar way to youth policy, rural education policy in Australia has also undergone two distinctive periods in the last decades. In the 1970s and 1980s education policies sought to redress the low rates of school completion in rural communities (e.g. Commonwealth Schools Commission 1988; Karmel 1973). In the next decades, in the 1990s and 2000s, the emphasis was placed on the issue of rural students making a transition to further and higher education at the same rate as their urban peers (e.g. Bradley 2008, Gonski 2011). This shift responded, firstly, to an improvement in rural secondary school completion rates and, secondly, as mentioned above, to an imperative to increase national productivity and skill-up the workforce, particularly the youth, to engage in competitive regional and global markets (see Cuervo 2016; Rizvi & Lingard 2010; Wyn 2015).

Embedded in this discourse of youth needing to ‘skill-up’ is the notion of ‘aspirations’ which is supported by the policy direction recommended by the Bradley Review on Higher Education, that states that by the year 2020, 40 per cent of those aged 25 to 34 years should have at least a bachelor-level qualification (Bradley 2008). While as mentioned above this recommendation focused on increasing Australia’s national economic productivity; it is also underpinned by equity notions. A central focus was closing the gap in post-secondary school participation and completion between students from low and high socio-economic background (Bradley 2008, p. xiv). In this sense, Australian education and youth policy, particularly the Bradley Review (2008) aligns with the SDG Target 4.4: “Substantially increase the number of youth (and adults) who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship”. This is critical given the re-shift of the Australian economic production base from primary service industries (e.g., agricultural) and manufacturing sector towards the service industry with its high-skills job mostly located in metropolitan areas.

As their urban counterparts, rural youth are immersed in a context of global transitions regimes, in which educational, work and welfare institutional practices and discourses

portray mobility and studying well into their twenties as part of a normative youth transition (Cuervo & Wyn 2011). Thus, young people in rural communities are subject to the same normative policy pressures of aspiring to continue with further and higher education (see Bradley 2008) but unfortunately have fewer opportunities than their metropolitan counterparts. Further, as Corbett's (2007, 2017) work in rural Canada and Australia reminds us, while becoming mobile is a 'powerful compulsion for rural youth' with post-school educational and employment aspirations, leaving one's community is no easier than it has ever been. Thus, researchers have argued that while the discourse of 'aspirations' is an important equity device, policies establishing that all young people must follow a post-secondary school pathway, also assume that those not doing it, such as low socio-economic students or rural students, lack the right aspirations (see Bok 2010; Cuervo, Corbett & White 2019; Sellar 2013). A better approach is to look at the challenges and opportunities that rural youth face to materialize these aspirations.

Contemporary rural youth post-secondary school scenario

In 2017 the Federal government commissioned an Independent Review of Regional, Rural and Remote Education (Halsey 2018). The Independent Review established some important differences between urban and rural post-secondary education:

In terms of successful completion of year 12 or equivalent qualification (at the level of Certificate III or higher) by the age of 19, there is the same pattern of outcomes as those already reported in this section; namely, a marked decline from 78 per cent for Major Cities to 43 per cent for Very Remote, with the difference between Inner Regional and Major Cities being 14 per cent (Mitchell Institute, 2015). In relation to transition to university and the proportion of persons aged 25–34 years with a bachelor degree or above, there is also a decreasing trend with increasing remoteness. In 2014, the proportion of residents holding a degree was: Major City 42.2 per cent, Inner Regional 21.8 per cent, Outer Regional 19.5 per cent, and Remote and Very Remote 17.8 per cent (Universities Australia, 2015, p. 8). For vocational education and training (VET) non-metropolitan participation rates are

comparable with urban rates and completion rates for Certificate 3 exceed urban (38 per cent compared to 35 per cent), but at the diploma level the situation is reversed (10 per cent compared to 16 per cent) (Macintyre, 2017).

While historically important policy reports have documented the disadvantages endured by rural education (see Karmel 1973, Commonwealth School Commission 1988, HREOC 2000), a significant problem is the cost of continuing with further and higher education for rural youth. That is, different studies have showed that for rural young people to continue with university or vocational studies, they must leave their rural community (Cuervo 2016; Godden 2007; Halsey 2018). The problem, however, is that the cost of relocation to continue with further and higher education is approximately between \$25,000 to \$30,000 Australian dollars more for rural young people (see Godden 2007; Halsey 2018; Pearce & Handley 2015).

In order to afford this further and higher education cost, some studies have found that rural youth choose universities in urban centres were they have a social network (e.g. family, relatives, friends) that will financially support them to make this transition (Cuervo 2014, 2016; Cuervo & Wyn 2012; Holt 2012). These social networks are also vital to support the emotional labour that involves moving out of your home community to continue your studies or work in a new place (Cuervo 2016). Other research has found that rural youth share houses or apartments in their new urban settings with rural-like minded youth; which subsequently function as surrogate families in an alien landscape (Cuervo & Wyn 2012).

In terms of employment, technological advances in agricultural production mean that parents now labour in the farm for a longer period of time; thus, postponing their children's aspirations to take over the family-farm (see Barr 2009; Carr & Kefalas 2009; Cuervo & Wyn 2012). In other instances, research has showed that family farms cannot compete with big firms that have entered the agricultural business and must "exit" the industry, which has great implications for the transitions of young people, as traditional labour trajectories closed down (see Barr 2009). In these instances, research has also found that some of the males offspring decided to study courses associated with farming to re-enter the agricultural industry by working for the big firms that now have become main farming players in

Australia and around the world. In the case of females, the research showed that some choose tertiary education courses, such as teaching or nursing, that will enable them to return or remain rural (Cuervo & Wyn 2012).

Finally, it is important to mention that not all rural communities are struggling. As Holmes (2006) has explained, rural Australia is heterogeneous and composed of areas such as mining towns, coastal towns and amenity spaces (historic touristic towns) that are thriving. Nevertheless, it is also important to state that the Australian youth labour market is underpinned by a fast growth of part-time work. Part-time work grew from 12% in 1987 to 44% in 2017 for young people aged 20-24 years (ABS 2017). While for young adults aged 25-34 years, part-time employment grew from 17% in 1987 to 24% in 2017 (ABS 2017). Furthermore, since the last official 'recession' in 1993, Australia has experienced 25 years of continuous growth; nonetheless, unemployment and underemployment rates, particularly of young people aged 15-24 years, remain high (ABS 2017). While the general unemployment has been kept low at 5-6%, the youth unemployment has escalated in some hotspots to 12% to 20%, particularly in some rural and regional areas (Brotherhood of St Laurence 2018). Further, coupled with the problem of youth unemployment is the growing rate of underemployment for young people. The underemployment rate for those aged 15-24 years increased from 7% in 1987 to 21% in 2017 (ABS 2017). These labour patterns hit harder young people in rural places where employment is scarce or casual, and often reliant of harvest season and tourist activity.

The tension between youth rights and community needs

The need to migrate from rural communities to pursue post-secondary school education and employment is not unique to Australian youth. At least in other Western developed countries, rural education and youth researchers have documented similar trends (see for example Carr & Kefalas 2009; Corbett 2007; Nairn et al. 2006; Tieken 2016; Shucksmith 2012). As in Australia, the phenomenon of rural youth out-migration is driven by factors including higher education and employment, the economic effects of climate change (e.g. 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.

Important policy developments that construct studying further and higher education as the norm, imply for rural youth the notion that their future lies somewhere else than in their communities. This presupposes an erosion of youth sense of belonging, or at the best, the need to start anew. Policy reports in Australia have stated that youth 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 (YACVic 2014). Further, young people also reported that no one had encouraged them to live in a rural or regional community later in life (YACVic 2014). Research has showed that parents are conscious of the hard choices of “should I stay or should I go?” that their youth face but in an increasingly urbanized-world that accumulates economic and cultural capital, it seems that what hope remains for rural youth is to embrace the aspiration imperative (Cuervo 2016, 2018).

In addition to this erosion of the sense of rural belonging, the individual right of young people to continue with post-school studies also has implications for the sustainability of the community. In previous research in rural Australia I have found that teachers and schools work very hard to provide all students with the opportunities to have, as the UN Sustainable Development Goals targets state, the appropriate skills and education to pursue the future the wish to (see Cuervo 2014; 2016). Thus, schools enforce a politics of distribution of the appropriate capital that will ensure students a successful pathway to further and higher education and employment out of the community. It would be hard to blame teachers, as well as parents and students, for looking for a future away from home when it only offers precarious pathways for youth. However, this strong hopefulness for becoming mobile is constructed around a weak pedagogy of place and a normalization of youth aspirations that replicate urban sensibilities (Cuervo 2018). Missing in education policy is a place-based strategy that connects students to their local environment. Needless to say, to counteract this placeless hope and build a sustainable future for rural communities cannot be done solely within the contexts of schools but through a broader structural societal approach. Like rural students, their communities need not just proper allocation of resources but respect and recognition of their interests and the possibility to participate in decisions that affect their lives.

It is important to acknowledge that not all rural students leave their communities when they complete secondary school. Some rural students do not complete school (at least a third of rural students – see Halsey 2018) and/or engage early in paid labour. Nonetheless, the irony of the struggle for achieving the individual rights of youth is that those students that rural schools construct as successful are the ones that leave the town depleting their community of valuable capital (Cuervo 2016). Those students that rural schools struggle to engage and raise their self-determination and capacities, remain in the community as the best hope for its future.

Concluding remarks

To effectively produce and implement strategies that ensure the individual rights of rural youth to the appropriate capital demanded in the scenario of twenty-first century labour and not erode the sustainability of rural communities, the public and private sector, government agencies, non-profit organizations, business and individuals and young people have to cooperate and draw on knowledge resources that ‘link old and new, past and future, one social group with another, and endogenous with exogenous structures’ (Dargan & Shucksmith 2008: 279).

One pathway to take is focusing on young people aged 13 to 17 years, where it is critical that education, labour and community programs effectively engage this demographic so they remain involved in their community and/or developed a sense of belonging that might contribute to their returning after gaining qualifications somewhere else. Programs should aim to create inter-generational dialogue, improve self-esteem and build a transition from risk to empowerment and from marginalisation to inclusion (Kimberley 2008).

For youth aged 18 to 25 years, there is a general research and policy consensus that many of this demographic will not remain in their local communities if there is not vastly improved access to services; meaningful and accessible higher and further education, and employment opportunities. It is unrealistic to ask young people to stay where there are no opportunities available to them.

A strategy to ensure rural youth have access to the rights skills demanded in the current a future employment landscape and that they enjoy a healthy transition, is for them to have the possibility to study locally or at least in near proximity to their home-community. While this might not be the ambition of all youth, at least they should enjoy the same rights as their urban counterparts and have a local or nearby further and higher education institution. Australia currently has 6 regional universities with 17 campuses (see Regional University Networks - <http://www.run.edu.au/>). Some metropolitan universities, like University of Melbourne, Monash University, La Trobe University, also have regional campuses. However, regional universities and campuses in many instances do not offer the same array of courses that are available in the metropolitan institutions. Thus, regional universities and campuses can be seen by rural youth as residual alternatives or second-class options.

Studies in teacher education have found that those rural youth that have studied in regional campuses or universities are more likely to return to rural communities, including with the appropriate skills demanded by the labour market (Lyons et al. 2006). Recently, the federal government in Australia committed to 'comprehensive range of measures and significant funding of \$134.8 million, including for new scholarships, growth of regional university campuses, and new regional study hubs, to boost higher education in regional Australia' (RUN 2018). As the recent announcement states: 'As anchor institutions for their regions, regional universities have a pivotal role to play in addressing some of the big issues facing Australia. Encouraging young people to stay, study and work in the regions helps address national cohesion and assists in alleviating congestion in major cities. Seventy percent of the graduates from RUN universities work in regional Australia. In addition, regional universities are commonly the most international institutions in their communities, and facilitate international links and regional development through students, staff and alumni' (RUN 2018).

Finally, a strong emphasis should be placed on increasing the youth population in rural areas by targeting former regional and rural residents that have migrated as well as newcomers. There is an opportunity to attract young people aged 25 to 30 years that are looking for a change of quality of life, and/or to start a family. Nevertheless, this cohort will also require the provision of affordable and good quality of services (e.g. housing, health, education and transport services). This cohort acquires a significant importance since they represent the

social, economic and cultural revitalisation of regional communities; thus, responding to community interests.

In sum, respecting and ensuring that all youth enjoy healthy and positive transitions should not mean the erosion of community interests, such as its sustainability. It is important that rural young people, just like their urban counterparts, have the access to the best quality of education possible to confront the many challenges of the future of work. While some youth might wish to continue their trajectories in urban places, some might want to do so closer to home. This right, the possibility of continuing being rural, is in many instances not provided to rural youth; thus having to seek a new life. Policy directions such as revitalising regional universities can function as positive strategies to ensure the individuals rights of rural youth to a healthy transition and the respect of rural community interests to sustainability.

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