



NATIONAL CONFERENCE FOR REGIONAL, RURAL, REMOTE EDUCATION

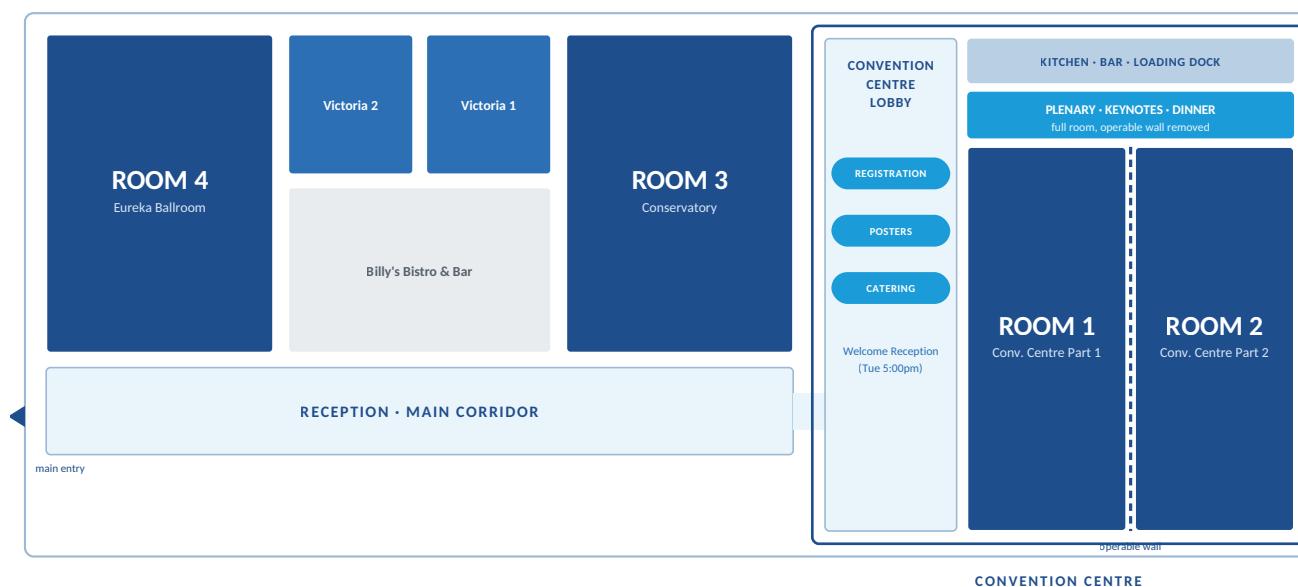
18 - 20 AUGUST 2026 | MERCURE BALLARAT

CONFERENCE HANDBOOK



WADAWURRUNG AND DJA DJA WURRUNG COUNTRY

Mercure Ballarat — Conference Spaces



Schematic — indicative layout, not to scale.

Room 1	Convention Centre Part 1
Room 2	Convention Centre Part 2
Room 3	Conservatory
Room 4	Eureka Ballroom
Plenaries, keynotes & Conference Dinner	Convention Centre (full room)
Study Hubs Network Symposium (Tue)	Eureka Ballroom
Principals Meeting (Tue)	Victoria 1
Regional Uni Campus Forum (Tue)	Victoria 2
Registration, catering & posters	Convention Centre Lobby
Welcome Reception (Tue)	Convention Centre Lobby



WELCOME

Sam Avitaia

President – SPERA

Welcome to the 3rd National Conference for Regional, Rural and Remote Education (NCRRE) hosted by the Society for the Provision of Education in Rural Australia (SPERA) in Ballarat, the traditional lands of the Wadawurrung and Dja Dja Wurrung peoples.

SPERA began in 1984 and has members in all Australian states and territories as well as internationally. SPERA aims to advance education opportunities in rural Australia by sharing best practice and serving as a national advocate for rural education. Our journal, AIJRE the Australian and International Journal of Rural Education now receives submissions from all across the world.

Previously hosting an annual conference, in 2022 the bi-annual NCRRE was established by SPERA to bring together people working in regional education from across multiple sectors to share practice, collaborate and celebrate. This year we welcome guests from the USA, UK and New Zealand as well as all across Australia.

Personally, I joined the SPERA Executive after one of their conferences in 2016 as I was inspired by all the positive stories in RRR Education and I felt I'd found "my people" - those who are passionate about regional communities and the positive role education plays within, between and beyond our borders.

We hope you feel the same!

Thank You to Our Sponsors

The 2026 conference is made possible by the generous support of our sponsors. Their involvement directly enriches the delegate experience across the three days — we thank them warmly.



LUNCHTIME SPONSOR • WEDNESDAY LUNCH

Sagecool is an Australian online education platform that enables schools to match students with teachers best suited to their individual learning needs, who then deliver live online classes regardless of location. By removing geographical barriers, Sagecool expands access to high quality education while giving teachers the flexibility to choose when, where and how they teach. Built in Australia but suitable for any country, Sagecool is helping shape the future of education.

sagecool.com



BRONZE SPONSOR • WEDNESDAY MORNING TEA

Bush to Boardroom is a leadership journey shaped by life on the land and tested in the boardroom. Drawing on a childhood spent in rural Australia, Tim Arnold shares the timeless lessons the bush teaches about trust, resilience, integrity, hard work and leading people through uncertainty. His stories connect the practical wisdom of the paddock with the challenges of modern leadership, showing that the principles that build strong farms are the same principles that build strong teams, organisations and communities.

As the founder of Bush to Boardroom and Director of Free Agency Education Recruitment, Tim delivers engaging, authentic presentations that blend powerful storytelling with practical leadership insights.

bushtoboardroom.com

**BRONZE SPONSOR • THURSDAY AFTERNOON TEA**

The Centre for Regional Education Research Development (CRERD) — part of the Institute of Education, Arts and Community — was established in 2025. The Centre's researchers work with a range of organisations to support the Victorian Government's 2025 education targets: learning for life; happy, healthy and resilient kids; breaking the link; and pride and confidence in our schools.

CRERD's goal is to establish applied, research-focused partnerships with education services, providers and organisations — including early years, school and community — to advance educational opportunities and quality in regional and rural communities, and to help address current and future education sector challenges, including workforce recruitment, retention and access to education and professional learning opportunities.

federation.edu.au/research/our-research/centre-for-regional-education-research-development

Tuesday 18 August 2026

8:30am – 5:00pm	Regional University Study Hubs Network Symposium Eureka Ballroom	
ROOM	VICTORIA 1	VICTORIA 2
1:00pm	Principals Meeting	Regional Uni Campus Forum
3:00pm	Conference Registration opens Convention Centre Lobby	
5:00pm – 7:00pm	Welcome Reception & AREA Award Presentation Convention Centre Lobby	

Wednesday 19 August 2026

from 8:00am	Registration and coffee on arrival Convention Centre Lobby
8:45am – 9:00am	Conference Opening Convention Centre
9:00am – 10:00am	Keynote — Robert Mitchell Bypassing the QWERTY of Education • Convention Centre
10:00am – 10:30am	MORNING TEA • Sponsored by Bush to Boardroom • Convention Centre Lobby

ROOM	CONVENTION CENTRE PART 1	CONVENTION CENTRE PART 2	CONSERVATORY	EUREKA BALLROOM
10:30am – 11:00am	1A • Engagement & Aspiration	1B • Pathways	1C • Connections	1D • Research
Parallel Session 01	“VECTOR” Virtual Education Connections to Overcome Remoteness Phil Brown Chelsea Routledge VECTOR	Analysing the relationship between reading and writing scores on national literacy assessments in remote schools in Australia’s Northern Territory Leonard Freeman <i>James Cook University</i> Bea Staley CDU	Partnering for Community Benefit Ellyse McNish <i>La Trobe University</i>	Ethical research practice in remote communities: A cautionary tale John Guenther Stephanie Dryden Robyn Ober Josh Jenner <i>Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education</i> Catherine Holmes ANU Rhonda Oliver <i>Curtin University</i>

10 minute change over

ROOM	CONVENTION CENTRE PART 1	CONVENTION CENTRE PART 2	CONSERVATORY	EUREKA BALLROOM
11:10am – 11:40am		2B • Pathways	2C • Connections	2D • Research
Parallel Session 02		What American Rural Schools are Doing Right Catherine Biddle <i>University of Maine</i> Ken Haptonstall <i>Colorado BOCES Association</i> Nikki Johnson <i>Campo School District</i>	Connecting Campus to Community Beth Boland Julia Day <i>University of New England</i>	What’s Rural About Rural Education Research? Melyssa Fuqua <i>University of Melbourne</i> John Guenther <i>Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education</i> Christopher Hudson <i>Westbourne Grammar School</i>

Wednesday 19 August 2026

ROOM	CONVENTION CENTRE PART 1	CONVENTION CENTRE PART 2	CONSERVATORY	EUREKA BALLROOM
11:50am – 12:20pm	3A • Engagement & Aspiration	3B • Pathways	3C • Connections	3D • Research
Parallel Session 03	Roots & Reach: How Student Employment is Transforming Regional Campus Life Nicky Suter Alistair McCosh Tamieka McLean <i>Deakin University</i>	Uni Step-Up Online - Impact of Dual Enrolment Program for RRR students Jamie Fenech Aidan Stephenson Emma Wakeling Paige Duffy Mikayla Seymour <i>Australian Catholic University</i>	Schools Plus: Supporting innovative practice in rural and remote communities John Guenther Robyn Ober Majon Williamson-Kefu <i>Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education</i> Kate Dixon Sherril Nixon <i>Schools Plus</i> Jillian Marsh <i>Charles Sturt University</i>	Evaluating the Wuyagiba Bush Uni utilising the culturally responsive 'Dilly Bag' methodology Andréa Jaggi Sam Ricketts Emilie Ens <i>Macquarie University</i> Godfrey Blitner Helen Rogers <i>Wuyagiba Bush Hub Aboriginal Corporation</i> Luke Preece <i>The Nature Conservancy</i>
12:20pm – 1:20pm	LUNCH • Sponsored by Sagecool • Convention Centre Lobby			
12:40pm – 1:10pm	Workshop (Convention Centre Part 1) — Tips and tricks: How to write a good practice article for the AIJRE John Guenther, Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education; Mel Fuqua, University of Melbourne; Ben Archer, Adelaide University			
12:40pm – 1:10pm	Learn more about Sagecool (Convention Centre Part 2) — matching students with the teachers who suit them best, in live online classes Sagecool			

Wednesday 19 August 2026

ROOM	CONVENTION CENTRE PART 1	CONVENTION CENTRE PART 2	CONSERVATORY	EUREKA BALLROOM
1:20pm – 1:50pm	4A • Engagement & Aspiration	4B • Pathways	4C • Connections	4D • Research
Parallel Session 04	First Bell to Farewell - How A Rural P-12 Became A Success Story _____ Danny Forrest Dean Lockhart Alexander Iser Emma Milne <i>Wedderburn P-12 College</i>	Reimagining Access: An Integrated Pathways Model for Regional and Rural Learners _____ Carolyn King Andrea Carr <i>University of Tasmania</i>	Innovation in rural school wellbeing staffing, leadership & programs _____ Lachlan Marchant Kimberley Tempest <i>Cobram Secondary College</i>	Professional Experience: Preservice Teachers' Strong Beginnings in Regional, Rural and Remote Education Settings _____ Anna Du Plessis <i>The University of New England</i>

10 minute change over

ROOM	CONVENTION CENTRE PART 1	CONVENTION CENTRE PART 2	CONSERVATORY	EUREKA BALLROOM
2:00pm – 2:30pm	5A • Engagement & Aspiration	5B • Pathways	5C • Connections	
Parallel Session 05	The role of place in the widening participation functions of Regional University Study Hubs _____ Joshua James <i>UTS</i> _____ Danielle Keenan <i>Study Hubs Australia</i>	Branch Out Mentoring, Peer to Peer transition program _____ Charlie Bracey <i>Youthrive Victoria</i>	Rooted in Rural: Lessons Learned from Connecting Industry, Schools, and Communities through the ACES Grant _____ Kriss Kemp-Graham Sharonda Pruitt <i>East Texas AM University (US)</i>	

2:30pm – 3:00pm	AFTERNOON TEA + POSTER VIEWING SESSION • Convention Centre Lobby			
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POSTERS	POSTER 1	POSTER 2
	Learning through local stories: Exploring Rural Teachers' Perceptions and Approaches to Social and Emotional Learning _____ Subekshya Ghimire <i>Ohio University</i>	Scoping the Field: A Visual Framework for Understanding the Community Impact of University Study Hubs _____ Ben Archer, Sharron King, Sarah McDonald, Sarah Hattam <i>Adelaide University</i> Cathy Stone <i>University of Newcastle</i> Kerry Russo <i>James Cook University</i>

Wednesday 19 August 2026

ROOM	CONVENTION CENTRE PART 1	CONVENTION CENTRE PART 2	CONSERVATORY	EUREKA BALLROOM
3:00pm – 3:30pm	6A • Engagement & Aspiration	6B • Pathways	6C • Connections	6D • Research
Parallel Session 06	Rural Social Space as Method: Exploring Aspiration with Rural Primary School Students Han Worsley <i>University of Canberra</i>	Community-Led or System-Controlled? The Future of Regional University Study Hubs Chris Ronan <i>Study Hubs Australia</i>	Curtin University and the Western Australian RUSH Network: Co-creating higher education options with RRR communities Luke Webster Kelly Nowak Humira Mirza <i>Curtin University</i>	Understanding the career pathways of leaders in small rural communities Pauline Thompson Hernan Cuervo <i>The University of Melbourne</i>
10 minute change over				
ROOM	CONVENTION CENTRE PART 1	CONVENTION CENTRE PART 2	CONSERVATORY	EUREKA BALLROOM
3:40pm – 4:10pm		7B • Pathways	7C • Connections	7D • Research
Parallel Session 07		Breaking Barriers in Remote Australia: Place-Based English Language Education and Workforce Pathways for Migrants in the Pilbara Susan Grylls Shan Su Relma Bule-Turner <i>Pilbara Kimberley University Centres</i>	It takes a community to invest in your success Angelina Ambrosetti <i>Central Queensland University</i>	Strengthening regional education through professional learning Tyron Paspa Marcia Devlin <i>Victorian Academy of Teaching and Leadership</i>
7:00pm	Conference Dinner Convention Centre			

Thursday 20 August 2026

ROOM	CONVENTION CENTRE PART 1	CONVENTION CENTRE PART 2	CONSERVATORY	EUREKA BALLROOM
9:00am – 9:30am	8A • Engagement & Aspiration	8B • Pathways	8C • Connections	8D • Research
Parallel Session 08	STEM in Sport Programme: A Place-Based Model Transforming STEM Pathways in Regional Western Australia Shan Su Susan Grylls <i>Pilbara Kimberley University Centres</i>	Credential Divides and Unseen Sides: Labour Market Segmentation and Regional Education Pathways Ben Archer Ros Cameron <i>Torrens University Australia</i>	Teaching and Student Perspectives of Delivering a Bachelor of Nursing Education Program in a Rural Health Setting: A qualitative study Louise Allen Karen Missen Naomi Cruz Elissa Dabkowski Chelsea Webb Jane Anderson <i>Federation University</i> Sarah Bourke <i>Country Universities Centre, Bass Coast</i>	Transforming Research into Action: Regional, Rural and Remote Research Pitch Dean White Megan Walsh Dr Brianna McCourt Martin Dickens <i>NSW Department of Education</i>

10 minute change over

ROOM	CONVENTION CENTRE PART 1	CONVENTION CENTRE PART 2	CONSERVATORY	EUREKA BALLROOM
9:40am – 10:10am	9A • Engagement & Aspiration	9B • Pathways	9C • Connections	9D • Research
Parallel Session 09	Pilbara Kimberley University Centres Supporting Aspiration and Higher Education Pathways for Secondary Students across Northern Western Australia Jacinta Homann <i>Pilbara Kimberley University Centres</i> Luke Webster <i>Curtin University</i>	Bridging Education, Industry, and Communities: The Professional Certificate in Education (Rural & Regional) Dean White Martin Dickens Megan Walsh <i>NSW Department of Education</i> Matthew Brown Amy Smith <i>University of Canberra</i>	Building Capability Across Australia's University Study Hub Workforce: Standards, Identity, and Sustainability. Danielle Keenan <i>Study Hubs Australia</i> Joshua James <i>UTS</i>	From Place to Possibility: Building Career Capability and Community for Regional, Rural and Remote Women Jane Coffey Julia Richardson Hannah Wilkinson <i>Curtin University</i> Kendall Galbreith <i>RRR Network of WA</i>

10:10am – 10:40am

MORNING TEA • Convention Centre Lobby

Thursday 20 August 2026

ROOM	CONVENTION CENTRE PART 1	CONVENTION CENTRE PART 2	CONSERVATORY	EUREKA BALLROOM
10:40am – 11:10am	10A • Engagement & Aspiration	10B • Pathways	10C • Connections	10D • Research
Parallel Session 10	The Road to Active Learning Alexander Iser <i>Wedderburn College</i>	'Growing our Own' Early Childhood Educators in Regional SA Shanon Pillion <i>Uni Hub Spencer Gulf</i>	Surveying the Field: A Bourdieusian Framework for Understanding the Community Impact of University Study Hubs Ben Archer <i>Adelaide University</i>	Travelling at the Speed of Trust: Co designing Regional Outreach in the Ovens Murray Sarah Lambert <i>RMIT University</i> Mark van Bergen <i>Country Universities Centre – Ovens Murray</i>

10 minute change over

ROOM	CONVENTION CENTRE PART 1	CONVENTION CENTRE PART 2	CONSERVATORY	EUREKA BALLROOM
11:10am – 11:40am	11A • Engagement & Aspiration	11B • Pathways	11C • Connections	11D • Research
Parallel Session 11	Negotiating Uncertain Futures: Young People, Schooling and Aspirations in Rural NSW Leanne Fray Sally Patfield Jenny Gore <i>University of Newcastle</i>	'Growing our Own' - Uni Hub's place-based cadetship program Richard Horgan <i>Uni Hub Spencer Gulf</i>	Pilbara Kimberley University Centres (PKUC) Building Local Leadership through the Certificate IV in Leadership and Mentoring Program Jacinta Homann <i>Pilbara Kimberley University Centres</i> Peta Sanderson <i>University of Notre Dame Australia</i>	Reimagining Rural Futures: Creativity, Economic Gardening, and University-Community Ecosystems for Regional Innovation Philip Dennett <i>London South Bank University UAE</i>

Thursday 20 August 2026

ROOM	CONVENTION CENTRE PART 1	CONVENTION CENTRE PART 2	CONSERVATORY	EUREKA BALLROOM
11:50am – 12:20pm	12A • Engagement & Aspiration	12B • Pathways	12C • Research	12D • Research
Parallel Session 12	The Four Cs - Beyond the Postcode _____ Danny Forrest <i>Wedderburn P-12 College</i> _____ Robert Boucher <i>Swifts Creek P-12 School</i>	Local Solutions for a Rural Healthcare Workforce _____ Samantha Avitaia <i>UOW Regional Campuses</i>	Leading a successful and flourishing rural primary school in Australia _____ Christopher Hudson <i>Department of Education Victoria</i> _____ David Gurr <i>The University of Melbourne</i>	Why Choose Rural? The Case for Teaching in these Schools _____ Andrew King <i>New Zealand Rural Schools Leadership Association</i>
12:20pm – 1:20pm	LUNCH • Convention Centre Lobby			
1:20pm – 2:20pm	Closing Keynote — Conor Ashleigh Everybody has a story worth hearing • Convention Centre			
2:20pm – 2:30pm	Conference Close Convention Centre			
2:30pm – 3:00pm	AFTERNOON TEA • Sponsored by CRERD • Convention Centre Lobby			



OPENING KEYNOTE

Robert Mitchell

Associate Chair & Associate Professor, University of Colorado Colorado Springs

Wednesday 19 August • 9:00am – 10:00am • Convention Centre

Bypassing the QWERTY of Education

Contrary to many reports, today's schools are better than they have ever been. Students of all ages are learning more information and discovering more ways to acquire knowledge more rapidly than ever before. Yet, in many ways, education continues to be stuck in the industrial age in regard to school operations and teaching. There is not only a need, but an obligation, for us to examine what we do in school and why we do them. This session requires us to examine all aspects of our teaching, student interactions, and school design to ensure that schools continue to evolve and transform to serve students into the mid-21st century. Only through examination of our current practices can we forge the future of school.

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Robert Mitchell is an Associate Professor and Associate Chair in the Department of Leadership, Research, and Foundations at the University of Colorado Colorado Springs. During the last 20 years, he has been a classroom teacher at the elementary, middle, and high school levels, and has served as a governmental director overseeing educator preparation programs and new teacher development. At present, he teaches and researches topics related to global rural education, and helps develop rural school policy and coordinate efforts related to teacher recruitment and retention in remote locations.

When not on campus, Robert also serves as a humanities teacher in various rural districts that continue to face challenges related to widespread teacher shortages. Over the years, he has been fortunate to have collaborated with students and scholars in Australia, Canada, Morocco, Iran, Egypt, Brunei, Zambia, the Seychelles, Malawi, and Bahrain, and continues to focus on challenges related to rural education across the globe. His recent work has been published in *The Rural Educator*, the *Journal of Education Human Resources*, the *American School Board Journal*, and the *International Academic Forum Journal of Education* and he is the co-author of the reference text *A Practical Guide to Theoretical Frameworks for Social Science Research*.



CLOSING KEYNOTE

Conor Ashleigh

Documentary filmmaker, photographer and storyteller

Thursday 20 August • 1:20pm – 2:20pm • Convention Centre

Everybody has a story worth hearing

Everybody has a story worth hearing, and often the most powerful ones exist in the most unassuming places. I believe people have an instinct for recognising meaningful stories—but often lack the confidence to capture and share them. In this keynote, I explore how storytelling can be a practical, accessible tool for educators to amplify voices within their communities, build connection, create impact and most importantly have some fun!

It's about shifting from thinking of storytelling as a specialised skill to seeing it as something we can all engage with—thoughtfully, ethically, and with confidence.

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Conor Ashleigh is a documentary filmmaker, photographer and storyteller who works with individuals, communities and organisations to shape stories that educate, empower and drive change. Over the past decade, he has worked across more than 65 countries, collaborating with organisations including the Red Cross, World Vision, UNICEF, the World Bank and the World Health Organization.

With a background in community development and communications, Conor combines photography and filmmaking with a strengths-based, participatory approach that places people at the centre of their own narratives. His work explores the diversity of human experience and people's relationship to place, with stories published in The New York Times, The Guardian, Le Monde and Al Jazeera, and exhibited internationally.

Conor is a member of Oculi and holds a Master's in Communication for Development from Malmö University.

WORKSHOPWednesday 19 August
12:40pm – 1:10pm · Convention Centre Part 1

Tips and tricks: How to write a good practice article for the AIJRE

John Guenther*Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education***Mel Fuqua***University of Melbourne***Ben Archer***Adelaide University*

SESSION SUMMARY

Writing a journal articles might not be something many education practitioners feel they can or want to do. You might be thinking: 'I'm not an academic', 'It's too hard', 'I'm too busy', 'Who will read it anyway?' 'Why should I?'

But it isn't that hard, and you don't have to be an academic! The Australian and International Journal of Rural Education is a great space for education practitioners and researchers to share their knowledge. And lots of people read the articles we publish—about 12000 articles are downloaded from the journal website every month. People are keen to learn about what's happening in schools and universities, how teachers experience rural education, what works to improve learning, how to engage learners, and so much more!

The good news for practitioners is that the Journal has a special place for practice stories from rural communities. We call this space 'Rural Connections'. In this presentation members of the AIJRE's editorial team will share some tips and tricks that will show how easy it can be to share your stories in this section of the journal. We'll provide some examples, give you a structure you can choose to follow, and offer some tips that will make the task less daunting. People love to read education stories from rural communities. These stories inspire others, they learn from them, and they get a glimpse of what someone else from a different rural community experiences.

If you'd like to share your story through the AIJRE and haven't yet been game, this presentation is for you!

1AWednesday 19 August 2026
10:30am – 11:00am · Convention Centre Part 1

Student Engagement, Aspiration & Motivation

Case Study

“VECTOR” Virtual Education Connections to Overcome Remoteness

Phil Brown, Chelsea Routledge

VECTOR

SESSION SUMMARY

During 2022, young people from throughout the Mid West of Western Australia participated in the national Rural Youth Ambassador program; a first for WA. They sought to address the isolation faced by many senior secondary students, devising a collaborative and partnership based model: “VECTOR” – Virtual Education Connections to Overcome Remoteness. The VECTOR concept was further developed by a larger group of 60 staff and students from 15 schools from 2023 to 2025. This case study explores the partnership structure and implementation processes developed for a local delivery approach of ATAR subjects, including a common curriculum and online platform, with support through a study buddies program and aspiration workshops. It will discuss lessons learned as well as emerging findings resulting from the first Year 10 to Year 11 VECTOR ATAR Forum hosted at the Geraldton Universities Centre (GUC) in December 2025. 90 participants from six schools undertook a range of workshops and discussion groups. Students sharing a common career pathway were linked under “Journey Mates”. Two Study Buddy programs were established to support Year 12 students in 2026 while two Year 11 ATAR subjects were progressed for local delivery under VECTOR for the first time. With a full Rural Youth Ambassador Program underway in 2026, VECTOR is drawing on lessons learned to expand opportunities for Year 11 students across all 15 schools. Inclusion of more remote Year 12 students in GUCs supported model of Curtin University’s UniReady in Schools is being progressed for a first intake in 2027.

1BWednesday 19 August 2026
10:30am – 11:00am • Convention Centre Part 2

Pathways for Education

Academic Presentation

Analysing the relationship between reading and writing scores on national literacy assessments in remote schools in Australia's Northern Territory

Leonard Freeman*James Cook University***Bea Staley***CDU*

SESSION SUMMARY

Background: In remote Northern Territory (NT) school communities, access to national literacy assessments is shaped by students' linguistic backgrounds, cultural knowledge, and familiarity with assessment formats. Drawing on evidence that reading and writing share underlying cognitive and linguistic processes, the NT context raises important questions about how literacy achievement is measured in linguistically diverse school communities. **Methods:** This study analysed school-level Year 3 NAPLaN reading and writing scores from 80 remote NT schools where Aboriginal students comprised at least 80% of enrolments (2008-2022). Descriptive statistics, Pearson correlations, and multivariate regression models were used to examine the strength and stability of reading-writing relationships across schools and over time, including variation associated with remoteness. **Findings:** Mean writing scores were frequently comparable to, or higher than, reading scores, even in schools with lower reading performance. This pattern suggests that standardised reading measures may underrepresent aspects of students' literacy capability in linguistically and culturally diverse contexts. The reading-writing relationship strengthened once schools reached a minimum reading performance threshold, although substantial variation remained across schools and years. **Implications:** Findings raise important questions about the validity of standardised reading assessments in remote Aboriginal contexts. Results support the use of complementary literacy measures, culturally responsive assessment practices, and professional learning approaches that better reflect multilingual development and integrated reading-writing instruction. Findings provide practical guidance for remote educators by highlighting the value of integrating reading and writing instruction, recognising students' multilingual capabilities, and using multiple forms of literacy assessment to complement standardised testing data.

1CWednesday 19 August 2026
10:30am – 11:00am · Conservatory

Connections: Industry, Education & Community

Case Study

Partnering for Community Benefit

Ellyse McNish*La Trobe University*

SESSION SUMMARY

This session presents a case study of La Trobe University's regional Aspire partnership with Bendigo Health, showcasing a powerful model of collaboration between industry, education and community to support regional workforce development.

At the centre of this partnership is Bendigo Health's School Holiday Volunteer Program, which provides secondary students with structured, hands-on exposure to both clinical and non-clinical healthcare settings, including wards, emergency, administration and community services. These experiences broaden students' understanding of health careers while contributing meaningful volunteer hours that directly support their Aspire applications.

The initiative aligns with La Trobe's Aspire Community Impact stream, which recognises student volunteering and community contribution with early conditional university offers. As an Aspire partner, Bendigo Health creates a clear, supported pathway from local volunteering to higher education and ultimately employment, reinforcing regional talent pipelines. Evidence from Bendigo Health shows many of its graduate workforce studied at La Trobe, highlighting the value of strengthening local education pathways.

Importantly, this model raises awareness of health careers and tertiary opportunities without placing additional burden on health services, embedding student engagement within existing volunteer structures. It delivers shared benefits: workforce pipeline development for Bendigo Health, increased regional participation for La Trobe, and accessible, aspirational pathways for local students.

The presentation will also outline plans to scale this model across additional regional and rural hospitals, particularly to support students in more remote communities.

This case study demonstrates a scalable, sustainable partnership that enhances community impact while strengthening regional workforce futures.

1DWednesday 19 August 2026
10:30am – 11:00am • Eureka Ballroom

Strengthening Rural Education Research

Academic Presentation

Ethical research practice in remote communities: A cautionary tale

John Guenther, Stephanie Dryden, Robyn Ober, Josh Jenner*Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education***Catherine Holmes***ANU***Rhonda Oliver***Curtin University*

SESSION SUMMARY

The ethical landscape of research in educational settings is rapidly changing in Australia and internationally. There are numerous standards, guidelines and codes that have been developed--all of which are designed to ensure that research is beneficial, respectful, just, fair and which meets high standards of integrity. However, in remote communities the guidelines often do not reflect the realities of cultural, environmental and social demands. Based on an ARC project that explores remote school retention and transitions beyond school, this presentation aims to reflect the researchers' own experiences of navigating ethics in remote community contexts. The presentation will contrast practical research experience with the literature and guidelines. The presenters will offer suggestions that may better reflect the realities of remote community research.

2A

Wednesday 19 August 2026
11:10am – 11:40am • Convention Centre Part 1

This session has been withdrawn.

2BWednesday 19 August 2026
11:10am – 11:40am • Convention Centre Part 2

Pathways for Education

Academic Presentation

What American Rural Schools are Doing Right

Catherine Biddle*University of Maine***Ken Haptonstall***Colorado BOCES Association***Nikki Johnson***Campo School District*

SESSION SUMMARY

Australia has been a global leader in rural education and ensuring that students in remote and rural regions have access to outstanding learning opportunities. While operating under a very different model, schools in the United States have also started examining new ways to best serve rural students. This session brings together three American rural education experts to discuss innovations and new directions found within rural schools throughout the United States. This panel examines the strengths and recent positive developments emerging in American rural schools and provides new ideas about how to operate highly effective schools in rural and remote environments.

2C

Wednesday 19 August 2026
11:10am – 11:40am • Conservatory

Connections: Industry, Education & Community

Case Study

Connecting Campus to Community

Beth Boland, Julia Day
University of New England

SESSION SUMMARY

This case study, presented from the perspective of academics, will include reflections about their participation within a small cross-disciplinary team, at UNE in Tamworth, which is achieving collective efficacy, impacting both students and the wider Tamworth community. The Tamworth Regional Council area has a unique and diverse population, with the amount of people educated at Bachelor or above being 15%, well below the national average of 26%, and below the regional NSW average of 18% (ABS, 2021).

Reflections from the evolution of the team over the last 5 years will be offered; with examples of engagement activities the academics have been involved, as well as explanation about how a collaborative team has been fostered through intentional organisational structures. This presentation will also explore how productive and innovative cross-disciplinary teamwork has broken down siloing issues, systemic to higher educational institutions.

The team the academics work within comprises of both professional and academic staff, who have been activated to mobilise community collaborations, prompting educational innovation and enhancing teaching and research. Through this approach, academic research findings can have an immediate and direct benefit on the Tamworth community, as well as inform contextually relevant practises for UNE professionals and academics working with community.

Through sharing this approach, we seek to encourage other academics in their practice, providing examples of ways the team has been able to overcome challenges and inspire innovation within this regional community.

2DWednesday 19 August 2026
11:10am – 11:40am • Eureka Ballroom

Strengthening Rural Education Research

Academic Presentation

What's Rural About Rural Education Research?

Melyssa Fuqua*University of Melbourne***John Guenther***Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education***Christopher Hudson***Westbourne Grammar School*

SESSION SUMMARY

This presentation unpacks the question: 'what's rural about rural education research?'. There are differences between research set in a rural context and that which engages with rurality. The 'rural' in rural education research is about place-based knowledge, relationships, values, and being rural. We argue that rurality is generative: it actively produces knowledge, connections and pedagogies rather than serving as a passive backdrop (Guenther et al., 2026). Recognising this in our work combats producing research that is place-unconscious or treats rural contexts as incidental or deficit-laden. To advance rural education research, we continue to call for the following: (1) make place a central, described element of research design; (2) reject deficit narratives in favour of frameworks that foreground rural strengths; (3) reflect on what the adjective 'rural' does in your work (Green, 2013); (4) consider how participants' right to be rural (Cuervo et al., 2026) is honoured.

3AWednesday 19 August 2026
11:50am – 12:20pm • Convention Centre Part 1

Student Engagement, Aspiration & Motivation

Case Study

Roots & Reach: How Student Employment is Transforming Regional Campus Life

Nicky Suter, Alistair McCosh, Tamioka McLean*Deakin University*

SESSION SUMMARY

The Deakin Engagement & Access Program (DEAP) is a Year 9-12 equity outreach initiative engaging 14,000 students annually across 55 schools throughout Victoria. Powered by the MoD Squad, Deakin students employed as mentors, the program provides authentic work opportunities, allowing students to apply professional skills in real-world settings alongside their degrees.

In 2025, over 30 MoDs were employed at the Warrnambool campus, including students returning from metropolitan campuses to work in their home region. Regional campus students are more likely to come from equity backgrounds, be first in family, and have fewer organic social touchpoints. The MoD Squad addresses these gaps through, co-presenting, cross-cohort mentoring and shared travel to schools creating consistent opportunities for connection and belonging.

Survey data from 2025 reveals compelling outcomes: 100% of current MoDs report a sense of belonging, 91% made friends outside their usual peer groups, and 87% received emotional support from fellow MoDs. Notably, 85% of Warrnambool MoDs attended a DEAP partner school themselves, closing a powerful loop between aspiration-raising and university success.

This program is a tangible expression of the Warrnambool campus strategic plan, Ideas to Impact 2030, shaping the future workforce with passion and purpose by empowering students to make a lasting impact in their communities. Rather than viewing student employment as a financial mechanism alone, DEAP demonstrates how universities can generate the social and academic capital equity students need to persist, succeed, and thrive, while simultaneously inspiring the next generation of regional students to see higher education as a place for them.

3BWednesday 19 August 2026
11:50am – 12:20pm · Convention Centre Part 2

Pathways for Education

Case Study

Uni Step-Up Online - Impact of Dual Enrolment Program for RRR students

Jamie Fenech, Aidan Stephenson, Emma Wakeling, Paige Duffy, Mikayla Seymour
Australian Catholic University

SESSION SUMMARY

This session will explore the impact of ACU's Uni Step-Up Online program, a dual-enrolment equity initiative that gives regional, rural and remote (RRR) secondary school students the opportunity to experience university study while still at school. The presentation will examine how early exposure to higher education can influence students' aspirations, confidence and readiness for university.

We will highlight success stories from regional communities across Victoria, showcasing the experiences of students who have participated in the program and gone on to higher education. It will also explore the importance of local role models and how seeing students from the same communities succeed can inspire others to view university as a realistic and achievable pathway.

Drawing on program evaluation data, student feedback and participation outcomes, the presentation will explore emerging trends and the impact of involvement in Uni Step-Up Online. This will include insights into students' confidence, preparedness for university study, and engagement with higher education pathways.

Students who have completed Uni Step-Up Online and successfully transitioned to higher education will also share their personal experiences. Through their stories, participants will gain an understanding of the benefits of studying university units while still at school, the transition into higher education, and the opportunities and challenges that can come with relocating to regional or metropolitan centers to continue their studies.

Finally, the session will discuss future directions for evaluating the program, including plans to strengthen the long-term tracking of student outcomes, transitions into higher education, and the ongoing impact of Uni Step-Up Online on increasing access to and participation in higher education for students from regional, rural and remote communities.

3CWednesday 19 August 2026
11:50am – 12:20pm · Conservatory

Connections: Industry, Education & Community

Schools Plus: Supporting innovative practice in rural and remote communities

John Guenther, Robyn Ober, Majon Williamson-Kefu*Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education***Kate Dixon, Sherril Nixon***Schools Plus***Jillian Marsh***Charles Sturt University*

SESSION SUMMARY

Many rural and remote schools face challenges finding resources to meet the needs of students and communities. Apart from perennial staffing challenges (Guenther et al., 2023), the ability to provide special needs support, being able to offer a full range of curriculum options, and having the funds to engage with community or develop place-based curriculum resources are often on the yet-to-be-fulfilled wish list for schools. Within this context philanthropy can play a role, enabling what would otherwise be difficult to achieve (Roberts et al., 2021). Schools Plus is one philanthropic organisation that works with schools to turn these wish lists into reality. The Schools Plus Schools Partnership Program has been supporting more than 50 rural and remote schools around Australia with resources for place based projects. Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education is partnering with Charles Sturt University to undertake an evaluation of these projects.

This presentation reports on findings from the evaluation, but also showcases case studies from two school sites that demonstrate what is possible when schools are resourced to provide innovative programs and support services, which would otherwise not be possible for a rural or remote school. Evaluation team members, Schools Plus and representatives of participating schools will share their learnings.

3DWednesday 19 August 2026
11:50am – 12:20pm • Eureka Ballroom

Strengthening Rural Education Research

Academic Presentation

Evaluating the Wuyagiba Bush Uni utilising the culturally responsive ‘Dilly Bag’ methodology

Andréa Jaggi, Sam Ricketts, Emilie Ens*Macquarie University***Godfrey Blitner, Helen Rogers***Wuyagiba Bush Hub Aboriginal Corporation***Luke Preece***The Nature Conservancy*

SESSION SUMMARY

Evaluations involving Aboriginal people have historically been undertaken by non-Aboriginal outsiders with limited understandings of local cultural contexts. Culturally responsive evaluations require more than the adaptation of existing methods. They demand a shift in power to position Aboriginal knowledge holders as the researchers instead of the researched. Drawing on the evaluation of the Wuyagiba Bush Uni, an on-Country two-way higher education initiative developed by local elders in south east Arnhem Land, we here foreground the ‘Dilly Bag’ method as an approach that supports Aboriginal people to move beyond subjects to active researchers and agents of change in remote communities. Developed by Sithole and Aboriginal co-researchers through the Aboriginal Research Practitioners Network, the ‘Dilly Bag’ method reflects an approach to evaluation that centres Aboriginal ways of being, knowing and doing. It conceptualises evaluation as a participatory process of collectively gathering and making meaning from what communities value through a strength-based, relational approach. We demonstrate how the ‘Dilly Bag’ method was utilised to centre local voices and ‘dig to the bottom of the yam’. Rather than imposing externally derived indicators, local Aboriginal participants and co-researchers defined and interpreted successes and challenges through their own cultural lens. Analysis of these findings led to the development of several core values underpinning the program, and the development of an ongoing monitoring and evaluation framework that reflected local priorities and supports continuous community-led reflection. More broadly, we argue that culturally responsive evaluation methods can shift the dynamic in power-marginalised communities from a largely colonial-driven process towards approaches that privilege local practices and position Aboriginal community members as drivers of change.

4AWednesday 19 August 2026
1:20pm – 1:50pm • Convention Centre Part 1

Student Engagement, Aspiration & Motivation

Case Study

First Bell to Farewell - How A Rural P-12 Became A Success Story

Danny Forrest, Dean Lockhart, Alexander Iser, Emma Milne*Wedderburn P-12 College*

SESSION SUMMARY

This session will outline the eight-year transformation journey of Wedderburn P-12 College from a context of student disengagement to a highly respected and engaged rural community school. A key focus will be the strategic implementation of School-Wide Positive Behaviour Support (SWPBS), alongside a strong emphasis on inclusive engagement and active learning practices as core drivers of improvement.

Participants will explore how the consistent application of clear expectations, aligned to the College's values of Respect, Responsibility and Resilience, will establish a shared language across the school community. SWPBS will be highlighted as a framework that connects behaviour, wellbeing and learning, creating a safe, predictable and supportive environment for all students.

The session will also examine the importance of amplifying student voice, agency and leadership. Through the adoption of an active learning framework, classrooms will shift from passive settings to dynamic environments where students are actively engaged, challenged and connected to meaningful, real-world learning experiences.

Despite operating within a low socio-economic context, the College will demonstrate how these strategies strengthen relationships, improve attendance, and increase engagement and achievement. Ongoing professional learning will continue to build staff capability and support a consistent, high-expectation teaching culture.

The session will conclude by recognising Wedderburn College's achievement of Platinum-level SWPBS status—among the first in Victoria—which has repositioned the College as a place of pride, connection and opportunity. With 160 years of education and new \$25 million facilities, there has never been a better time to begin your learning journey at Wedderburn P-12 College.

4BWednesday 19 August 2026
1:20pm – 1:50pm • Convention Centre Part 2

Pathways for Education

Case Study

Reimagining Access: An Integrated Pathways Model for Regional and Rural Learners

Carolyn King, Andrea Carr*University of Tasmania*

SESSION SUMMARY

Improving access to higher education for regional, rural and remote learners requires approaches that are flexible, place-responsive and grounded in the realities of diverse learner journeys. This case study presents an integrated pathways model developed within an Australian regional university context in response to persistent participation barriers experienced by regional Tasmanian learners, particularly those seeking alternative entry, upskilling and reskilling opportunities.

The model comprises a suite of online Diplomas with nested Undergraduate Certificates in Agribusiness, Applied Technologies, and Applied Health and Community Support — areas aligned with regional workforce needs and community sustainability priorities. Designed to support learners who may not meet traditional admission requirements, the model embeds Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), flexible entry and exit points, and scaffolded transition opportunities that enable learners to engage with higher education in ways that reflect their aspirations, experience and circumstances.

Underpinning the model is the VINE framework (Validation, Integration, Negotiation and Elevation). This strengths-based approach positions learners as experienced contributors rather than passive recipients of knowledge. Successful diploma completion provides articulated entry into the second year of aligned bachelor programs, with cumulative credit pathways demonstrated through Applied Health and Community Support. Complementary initiatives, including intensive workshops and a developing senior secondary University Connections program, further strengthen participation and transition.

This case study highlights the pedagogical and structural design principles underpinning the model, early implementation insights, and considerations for transferability across regional contexts. It offers a practical example of how institutions can create flexible, strength-based pathways that support access, belonging and progression for regional, rural and remote learners.

4CWednesday 19 August 2026
1:20pm – 1:50pm · Conservatory

Connections: Industry, Education & Community

Case Study

Innovation in rural school wellbeing staffing, leadership & programs

Lachlan Marchant, Kimberley Tempest*Cobram Secondary College*

SESSION SUMMARY

Regional secondary schools are being asked to strengthen student wellbeing while managing workforce shortages, limited budgets and reduced access to specialist services. Cobram Secondary College has responded by developing a structured Wellbeing Placement Program embedded within its Junior, Middle and Senior subschool model, aligned to multi-tiered systems of support and the Australian Student Wellbeing Framework.

Across two school years, the College has hosted 12 wellbeing placement students through partnerships with six universities. Placements are intentionally designed around Tier 1 and Tier 2 wellbeing work, including engagement and attendance supports, classroom observations, structured check-ins, group work, restorative supports, student voice activities and whole-school wellbeing initiatives. A hybrid placement plus paid casual Education Support day has also been trialled to improve continuity, placement affordability and graduate employability. One former placement student has now transitioned into ongoing wellbeing team employment, strengthening the workforce pipeline.

Evaluation uses mixed evidence sources: staff impact surveys, psychosocial review feedback, Compass wellbeing records, AToSS, attendance and behaviour data, capacity measures such as sessions delivered, students seen, observations completed and staff supported, plus ongoing reflection with internal stakeholders and university partners.

The presentation will be underpinned by current research and policy, including AERO guidance on multi-tiered systems of support, the Australian Student Wellbeing Framework, Victorian tiered school mental health and wellbeing guidance, and national placement workforce policy. It will share implementation requirements, costs, resources and critical success factors for schools seeking scalable, evidence-informed wellbeing workforce solutions.

4DWednesday 19 August 2026
1:20pm – 1:50pm • Eureka Ballroom

Strengthening Rural Education Research

Academic Presentation

Professional Experience: Preservice Teachers' Strong Beginnings in Regional, Rural and Remote Education Settings

Anna Du Plessis*The University of New England*

SESSION SUMMARY

Concerns about the quality of education and support for the teaching profession in regional, rural and remote settings call for an in-depth understanding of preservice teachers' challenges during professional experience placements. This qualitative study examined the perceptions of 179 preservice teachers regarding specific challenges linked to professional experience placements. The online survey data were thematically analysed, and the findings highlight lived experiences during two phases: prior to, and during placements. Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory was adapted to provide a framework for understanding the participants' perceptions of ecological systems and their impact on their preparation for the teaching profession, as well as the available resources to support preservice teachers before starting and during their placements. The theoretical framing of the investigation emphasises a context-conscious understanding of responses to challenges, including targeted support, collaborations between higher education providers and industry partners and related multifaceted requirements among higher education providers. The identified key concerns include cultural sensitivity, community needs, applied curricula in specific contexts, differentiated teaching strategies and professional relationships. The paper concludes with recommendations to support preservice teachers during placements in regional, rural and remote education settings.

Keywords: context-conscious applied curriculum, professional experience, ecological systems in education, regional teaching, quality preparation for rural and remote teaching

5AWednesday 19 August 2026
2:00pm – 2:30pm • Convention Centre Part 1

Student Engagement, Aspiration & Motivation

Academic Presentation

The role of place in the widening participation functions of Regional University Study Hubs

Joshua James*UTS***Danielle Keenan***Study Hubs Australia*

SESSION SUMMARY

Regional University Study Hubs (Regional Hubs) are government-funded, community-led, place-based facilities that enable students in regional, rural, and remote (RRR) Australia to participate in higher education without relocating. This paper discusses how three interconnected place-based mechanisms underpin student engagement with RUSHs: access to a dedicated study space free from domestic distractions; appropriate study infrastructure, including high-speed internet, technology, and basic amenities such as heating, kitchens, and personal care products; and extended access hours that enable students to study around work and family commitments.

This presentation draws on findings from a mixed-method Equity Fellowship study (2024–2025) to examine the role of place in shaping student engagement, aspiration, and motivation at Regional Hubs. Data were collected through fifty-seven semi-structured interviews with students, staff, and community stakeholders across nine Regional Hubs in all six Australian states and the Northern Territory, alongside ethnographic observations during site visits.

Drawing on Oldenburg's (1999) theory of third places — informal, accessible, community-oriented spaces that are neither home nor work — this presentation posits that Regional Hubs function as third places for RRR students. This conceptualisation helps explain how Regional Hubs do more than provide physical access to education; they foster a sense of belonging, build community aspirations toward higher education, and sustain student motivation over time.

The implications for practitioners and policymakers are significant: intentionally designing Regional Hubs with place-based principles and third place characteristics in mind could enhance their effectiveness in widening participation and building cultures of learning in RRR communities.

5BWednesday 19 August 2026
2:00pm – 2:30pm • Convention Centre Part 2

Pathways for Education

Case Study

Branch Out Mentoring, Peer to Peer transition program

Charlie Bracey*Youthrive Victoria*

SESSION SUMMARY

Branch Out Mentoring (BOM) is a peer-led initiative addressing a persistent gap in regional, rural and remote education: how well young people are prepared for life beyond school. While academic pathways are well supported, rural students consistently report feeling underprepared for the practical and social realities of transition. In 2025 61 Victorian Rural and Regional schools participated in the program, plans for even more participation in 2026.

Co-designed with Youthrive Victoria alumni, the program responds directly to lived experience. It delivers workshops on topics identified by rural young people as critical yet under-addressed, including financial literacy, housing, digital wellbeing, scholarships, and post-school pathways.

A defining feature of Branch Out Mentoring is its delivery model. Workshops are facilitated by Rural Engagement Coordinators (RECs), young people from rural communities who return to local schools to share their own transition journeys. This peer-led approach builds trust, increases engagement, and creates space for honest, relevant conversations that traditional models often struggle to achieve.

The program is intentionally flexible. Following a whole-cohort introduction, students opt into workshops aligned to their needs, typically delivered during lunch breaks to maximise accessibility. Partnerships with local organisations have supported expansion across rural Victoria and strengthened community connection.

To further understand impact and emerging challenges, Youthrive Victoria has commenced a research partnership with Federation University. This project aims to evaluate program effectiveness and deepen insight into the transition experiences of rural Year 12 students.

This case study will share key learnings on peer-led delivery and research-informed practice, offering practical insights for those working to improve post-school outcomes in regional, rural and remote communities.

5CWednesday 19 August 2026
2:00pm – 2:30pm · Conservatory

Connections: Industry, Education & Community

Case Study

Rooted in Rural: Lessons Learned from Connecting Industry, Schools, and Communities through the ACES Grant

Kriss Kemp-Graham, Sharonda Pruitt*East Texas A&M University (US)*

SESSION SUMMARY

Rural communities are rich in knowledge, relationships, and local assets — yet students in underresourced rural schools and communities have historically faced significant barriers to postsecondary education and meaningful career pathways. The Attaining College Entry and Success (ACES) Grant, funded through the U.S. Department of Education's Rural Postsecondary and Economic Development program and administered by East Texas A&M University, was designed to address this challenge by building intentional bridges between industry, schools, and community.

Supported by a \$1.23 million federal investment spanning five years, ACES created a multi-year pathway that connected students in underresourced rural communities to work-based learning experiences, local industry exploration, college advising, and a summer immersion camp — culminating in a supported transition to university with internship opportunities at the sophomore year. Central to the model was the belief that sustainable change requires genuine partnership, not programs imposed from the outside.

This case study shares the practical lessons learned across five years of implementation, guided by Improvement Science principles. These include the power of community trust and leadership investment, the critical role of a dedicated campus advisor mentor, the importance of student voice in shaping program design, and the challenge of sustaining partnerships when grant funding ends. The ACES experience also navigated significant policy shifts that ultimately expanded program eligibility to all rural students across Texas.

Attendees will leave with concrete strategies for building industry-school-community partnerships that honor local strengths and create lasting opportunity for rural learners.

6AWednesday 19 August 2026
3:00pm – 3:30pm • Convention Centre Part 1

Student Engagement, Aspiration & Motivation

Academic Presentation

Rural Social Space as Method: Exploring Aspiration with Rural Primary School Students

Han Worsley*University of Canberra*

SESSION SUMMARY

While rural student aspiration remains a dominant concern within rural education discourse, much of this work has focused on secondary students and has often relied on deficit logics that overlook the diversity and strengths of rural communities. Far less attention has been given to how primary aged children imagine their futures and how these futures are shaped through everyday engagement with rural space.

This presentation presents emerging doctoral research exploring how rural primary school students in the Snowy Monaro region of New South Wales engage with their local environments through their future aspirations. The project aims to develop Green & Reid's (2010) Rural Social Space (RSS) model into a methodological approach that can be used to centre rural lives in studies of aspiration. Using child centred and arts-based methods, students create future-oriented artworks while they participate in a semi structured interview. The approach privileges children's own representations and interpretations of aspiration, foregrounding rural students as active meaning makers whose aspirations are deeply embedded within place.

The presentation will explore the possibilities and tensions of applying RSS theory as method for both researchers and practitioners, as well as discussing the importance of engaging with aspiration as a spatial concept from a young age. It provides an opportunity to go beyond methods that may abstract rural students from their lived contexts, reinforcing metropolitan norms and narrow understandings of educational success. This research contributes to evidence informed, place responsive approaches to student aspiration, engagement, and pathways within regional, rural, and remote education.

6BWednesday 19 August 2026
3:00pm – 3:30pm • Convention Centre Part 2

Pathways for Education

Case Study

Community-Led or System-Controlled? The Future of Regional University Study Hubs

Chris Ronan*Study Hubs Australia*

SESSION SUMMARY

Regional University Study Hubs have succeeded because they are locally owned, governed and operated. Their strength lies in the ability of communities to shape access to higher education around local needs, aspirations and cultural context.

However, the policy environment surrounding study hubs and tertiary education is changing. Through the Universities Accord, the establishment of the Australian Tertiary Education Commission and a renewed emphasis on system stewardship, Australian tertiary education is moving towards greater coordination, centralised planning and integration.

This case study of the Australian Government's Regional University Study Hubs Program explores the features that have underpinned the programs' success since 2018, as demonstrated through practice, program data and research. It then considers whether these features can be maintained within an increasingly centralised tertiary education system.

Drawing on this case study, the presentation will examine the choices facing policymakers, communities and study hubs as the program enters its next phase. It will be of particular interest to those seeking to understand the program's success factors and how they can be protected as the policy environment evolves.

6CWednesday 19 August 2026
3:00pm – 3:30pm · Conservatory

Connections: Industry, Education & Community

Case Study

Curtin University and the Western Australian RUSH Network: Co-creating higher education options with RRR communities

Luke Webster, Kelly Nowak, Humira Mirza*Curtin University*

SESSION SUMMARY

Access to higher education in regional, rural and remote (RRR) Western Australia remains shaped by significant geographic and structural barriers. Curtin University's collaboration with the WA Regional University Study Hub (RUSH) network responds to these challenges through listening-led, co-created solutions.

RRR Western Australia is characterised by vast distances, dispersed populations, limited local university provision, constrained infrastructure, and narrow secondary subject choice -significantly shaping how, and whether, students can participate in higher education and contribute to local workforce needs.

In response, Curtin has prioritised sustained consultation with WA RUSHs, schools, and community partners to understand local education gaps and workforce priorities. Through Regional Exchange events and ongoing engagement, regional stakeholders have shaped new initiatives and been active contributors to institutional change.

Engagement has highlighted strong demand for flexible pathways beyond traditional ATAR entry, particularly where local options are limited. In response, Curtin delivers enabling programs within high schools in partnership with RUSHs and secondary schools, enabling students to access higher education while remaining in school.

Complementing this, a new regionally focused enabling program has been developed outside the school setting, supporting entry into disciplines such as engineering and allied health, areas often out of reach for regional students. Together, these initiatives broaden access and align participation with workforce need.

Simultaneously, Curtin is expanding its undergraduate Secondary Education offering through additional online subjects, including a new fully online Human Biology major. This initiative increases subject choice and responds to workforce needs in regional schooling, supported by local study hubs that provide on-the-ground academic and student support. It also enables these units to be taken across other science-based courses, expanding their reach and impact.

These initiatives reflect a shift towards becoming more 'regional student friendly' and align with the Universities Accord focus on widening participation.

6DWednesday 19 August 2026
3:00pm – 3:30pm • Eureka Ballroom

Strengthening Rural Education Research

Academic Presentation

Understanding the career pathways of leaders in small rural communities

Pauline Thompson, Hernan Cuervo*The University of Melbourne*

SESSION SUMMARY

Attracting and retaining teachers and leaders in rural schools is an enduring challenge in Australia. While policy initiatives and incentives have encouraged teachers to take up rural posts, comparable incentives for leadership roles are largely absent, contributing to persistent difficulties filling school leadership vacancies in many rural locations.

This study investigates the career pathways of six leaders currently working in small rural schools. We address the following research questions:

What are the career pathways for leaders in small rural schools?

What motivates teachers to take up leadership roles and remain in rural school settings?

Using Recognition Theory (Honneth, 1995, 2003) as a theoretical lens, we examine the factors that motivate these leaders to assume rural leadership roles and how those roles fit within their broader career goals.

Findings highlight both the challenges and affordances of leadership in small rural settings. Participants demonstrate strong commitment to their communities and deploy adaptive strategies to manage the professional and contextual constraints of rural schooling. Implications for policy and practice include the need for targeted incentives and support structures to attract and retain school leaders in rural communities.

7BWednesday 19 August 2026
3:40pm – 4:10pm • Convention Centre Part 2

Pathways for Education

Case Study

Breaking Barriers in Remote Australia: Place-Based English Language Education and Workforce Pathways for Migrants in the Pilbara

Susan Grylls, Shan Su, Relma Bule-Turner*Pilbara Kimberley University Centres*

SESSION SUMMARY

Approximately 35% of Pilbara residents were born overseas, yet migrants and their families have historically faced significant barriers to education and workforce participation in one of Australia's most economically vital regions. Limited access to English language training, the absence of formal testing facilities, and restrictive visa conditions have compounded the isolation experienced by many who relocate to support the region's critical industries.

Pilbara Kimberley University Centres (PKUC) – a not-for-profit Regional University Study Hub with six locations across the Pilbara and Kimberley – responded to this gap by developing its Community English Program in 2021. Delivered face-to-face at the Karratha and Port Hedland hubs, the Program provides tailored English language education aligned to the Australian Core Skills Framework (ACSF) and the Australian Migrant English Program (AMEP). Participants develop speaking, reading, and writing skills to support social inclusion, community participation, and preparation for formal English proficiency testing.

In 2023, PKUC established the first International English Language Testing System (IELTS) testing centre in the Pilbara, directly responding to demand from migrant workers needing qualification recognition for roles in nursing, engineering, childcare, and trades – occupations central to the Pilbara Designated Area Migration Agreement (DAMA). Over 100 Pilbara residents have now sat IELTS locally, removing the costly and impractical requirement to travel to Perth. To date, 81 participants have completed the Community English Program, with outcomes including career progression, professional qualification recognition, social connection, and individual empowerment.

This case study explores how PKUC's place-based model connects industry workforce needs, education pathways, and community wellbeing in a remote regional context. It highlights the role of Regional University Study Hubs in bridging structural policy gaps – particularly the disconnect between migration frameworks that bring skilled workers to the region and education settings that can support their long-term integration and advancement. It also presents an opportunity for RUSHs to be formally recognised under student visa frameworks, enabling migrants already settled in regional communities to study without relocating.

The Pilbara experience demonstrates that addressing workforce challenges in remote Australia requires not one silver bullet, but a suite of integrated, community-led solutions – of which accessible, place-based English language education is a vital and often overlooked component.

7CWednesday 19 August 2026
3:40pm – 4:10pm · Conservatory

Connections: Industry, Education & Community

Academic Presentation

It takes a community to invest in your success

Angelina Ambrosetti*Central Queensland University*

SESSION SUMMARY

Regional University Study Hubs (RUSHs) afford the opportunity for regional and rural Australians to access tertiary education. They are able to 'live local, study local and work local', thus removing some of the financial and personal pressures many experience when having to move away from their local area to attend university.

The research presented here investigated the delivery of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) through two Regional University Study Hubs (RUSHs). The research explores the lived experiences of those studying to become a teacher whilst being supported by their local RUSH. Each of the RUSHs involved in the study have their own unique delivery model: one being a face to face model and the other a supported distance model.

Data was gathered through interviews with pre-service teachers, graduate teachers and school principals. The preliminary results identified three themes: 1) enablement, 2) environment and 3) expertise. The theme of enablement includes such aspects as access to and preparedness for study, personalised and personable support, flexibility and an invested interest in one's success. The environment as a theme encompassed the study hub facilities but was more focussed on an overall community atmosphere that was family friendly, familiar, and interconnected. The theme of expertise focussed on the staff, access to industry, and instructional quality.

The preliminary result from this study demonstrates that the RUSH model create communities and invests in the success of its students.

7DWednesday 19 August 2026
3:40pm – 4:10pm • Eureka Ballroom

Strengthening Rural Education Research

Academic Presentation

Strengthening regional education through professional learning

Tyron Paspas, Marcia Devlin*Victorian Academy of Teaching and Leadership*

SESSION SUMMARY

This presentation examines early-stage impacts of the establishment of seven dedicated regional professional learning centres across Victoria, Australia, as a case study in strengthening regional education systems through place-based investment, cross-sector partnerships and locally responsive professional learning.

Opened progressively across 2023 as part of the Victorian Academy of Teaching and Leadership, the centres are designed to improve equity of access to professional learning and leadership development for educators across government, Catholic and independent school sectors.

Aligned to conference theme of strengthening rural education research, the presentation draws on findings from a statewide research project using a Most Significant Change methodology which is suited to rural contexts. Interviews with 137 educators explored what had changed for them as a result of participating in professional learning at an Academy regional centre.

The findings identified evidence that the centres were contributing to improved outcomes for rural and regional students; increasing equity of access to impactful professional learning; strengthening leadership capability; generating pathways for educators to contribute to school and system improvement; and raising public awareness and respect for the teaching profession within regional communities.

Since opening, the centres have contributed to an 86 per cent increase in professional learning registrations from regional teachers and school leaders. The presentation will also reflect on implementation lessons, including the importance of local partnerships, sustained regional investment, and approaches that recognise the distinct contexts and aspirations of rural and regional communities, including First Nations perspectives and local ways of knowing and learning.

8AThursday 20 August 2026
9:00am – 9:30am • Convention Centre Part 1

Student Engagement, Aspiration & Motivation

Case Study

STEM in Sport Programme: A Place-Based Model Transforming STEM Pathways in Regional Western Australia

Shan Su, Susan Grylls*Pilbara Kimberley University Centres*

SESSION SUMMARY

The STEM in Sport Programme, delivered by Pilbara Kimberley University Centres (PKUC) in partnership with Santos, addresses persistent inequities in regional, rural and remote (RRR) education, including declining STEM participation and limited access to pathways. With STEM employment projected to grow by 14.2% over the next five years, these gaps present a critical challenge, particularly for regional and First Nations students who remain underrepresented in STEM.

Geographic isolation remains a significant barrier. For many students, accessing metropolitan programs requires travelling to Perth for several days at a cost of \$2,000–\$3,000 per student, with experiences often limited in depth. STEM in Sport removes this barrier by delivering high-quality, place-based learning locally across two school terms, enabling deeper engagement and equitable access for all students.

The programme positions sport as a culturally relevant and engaging entry point into STEM. Targeting Year 9-12 students, it immerses participants in authentic, applied research. Students investigate real-world challenges across biomechanics, data analytics, nutrition and performance analytics, while developing critical thinking, communication and digital capabilities. The programme also supports exploration of career pathways and promotes mental health and wellbeing.

Strong industry and community integration is a defining strength, with guest speakers, mentorship and workshops enhancing relevance, aspiration and real-world connection. Culturally responsive practice is embedded through partnerships with First Nations organisations, including the Polly Farmer Foundation, STARS Foundation and Follow the Dream.

Outcomes demonstrate increased confidence, engagement and clearer intent toward STEM pathways, positioning the programme as a scalable, high-impact model for advancing regional education equity.

8BThursday 20 August 2026
9:00am – 9:30am • Convention Centre Part 2

Pathways for Education

Academic Presentation

Credential Divides and Unseen Sides: Labour Market Segmentation and Regional Education Pathways

Ben Archer, Ros Cameron*Torrens University Australia*

SESSION SUMMARY

Regional communities in Australia face a persistent educational paradox. Young people who leave for tertiary study rarely return, and the credential requirements of professional employment make regional labour markets structurally dependent on out-migration pathways they cannot reliably sustain. This research examines that paradox through a mixed-methods case study of regional local government in South Australia, applying labour market segmentation theory to investigate how educational barriers shape workforce access and what place-based interventions can realistically address them.

Quantitative analysis of a commissioned career mapping tool, documented 100 pathways across 98 roles, reveals that 66% of positions require tertiary qualifications as minimum entry criteria, with only 1% of pathways bridging vocational and professional segments. Two career areas exhibit complete educational segmentation, with zero vocational entry points regardless of transferable competency. A salary premium of \$28,080 separates the two qualification cohorts, demonstrating that credential hierarchies produce economic stratification as well as access barriers.

Regional University Study Hubs emerge in the qualitative findings as a direct structural response to this divide. By enabling degree-level study without requiring out-migration, they address the credential access problem at its geographic root. Stakeholder interviews identify employer-validated qualification models, already operating in engineering, planning, and business, as a mechanism for aligning place-based educational provision with documented regional workforce need. The findings also identify aspirational narrowing at the school stage and gendered channelling through the VET pathway as compounding barriers that place-based access alone cannot resolve. Second-stage interventions, including Recognition of Prior Learning systems and occupational redesign, are necessary to convert pathway visibility into genuine workforce integration.

8CThursday 20 August 2026
9:00am – 9:30am · Conservatory

Connections: Industry, Education & Community

Academic Presentation

Teaching and Student Perspectives of Delivering a Bachelor of Nursing Education Program in a Rural Health Setting: A qualitative study

Louise Allen, Karen Missen, Naomi Cruz, Elissa Dabkowski, Chelsea Webb, Jane Anderson
Federation University

Sarah Bourke
Country Universities Centre, Bass Coast

SESSION SUMMARY

Students from rural and regional Australia face significant barriers to accessing higher education, particularly in nursing programs requiring clinical placements. Geographic isolation, relocation, transport difficulties, and the costs associated with travel, accommodation, and unpaid placements can limit participation and completion (Fray et al., 2020; Winchester, 2025). At the same time, rural health services face persistent nurse workforce shortages (MacKay et al., 2021). To address these challenges, Federation University partnered with a rural health facility to establish a Bachelor of Nursing satellite program. This study explored the implementation and impact of the program from learner and teacher perspectives. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2022) approach. Findings demonstrated improved access to higher education, successful program completion, and increased graduate nurse recruitment within the health service and local community, highlighting a sustainable strategy for developing a regional nursing workforce and addressing local healthcare needs.

8DThursday 20 August 2026
9:00am – 9:30am • Eureka Ballroom

Strengthening Rural Education Research

Case Study

Transforming Research into Action: Regional, Rural and Remote Research Pitch

Dean White, Megan Walsh, Dr Brianna McCourt, Martin Dickens*NSW Department of Education*

SESSION SUMMARY

Regional, rural and remote (RRR) education communities face unique challenges that require practical, evidence-informed responses aligned with system priorities. The NSW Department of Education's Regional, Rural and Remote Research Pitch (the Pitch) addresses these challenges by bringing together university researchers, practitioners and policymakers to co-develop research that delivers tangible benefits for RRR schools. The Pitch is a collaboration between university researchers and the NSW Department of Education's Regional, Rural, Remote and Unique Settings Directorate (RRRUSD) and Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE).

The initiative strengthens connections between industry, education and communities, while addressing key evidence gaps identified in the department's 2025 report, *Education in Regional, Rural and Remote NSW – A resource for researchers*. Designed as a structured, collaborative process, the Pitch supports research grounded in local contexts and informed by practice, lived experience and policy expertise. It also promotes partnerships aligned with the department's equity priorities outlined in *Our Plan for NSW Public Education*.

The inaugural Pitch, held as a hybrid event at Charles Sturt University in Bathurst in August 2025, invited researchers to present proposals, with selected projects progressing to collaborative development with the department and key stakeholders. This ensures research is relevant, feasible and responsive to on-the-ground needs.

This presentation will outline the Pitch's design, outcomes and early insights, demonstrating how targeted partnerships can strengthen rural education research, support meaningful engagement and translate research into real-world impact for RRR schools and communities.

9AThursday 20 August 2026
9:40am – 10:10am · Convention Centre Part 1

Student Engagement, Aspiration & Motivation

Case Study

Pilbara Kimberley University Centres Supporting Aspiration and Higher Education Pathways for Secondary Students across Northern Western Australia

Jacinta Homann*Pilbara Kimberley University Centres***Luke Webster***Curtin University*

SESSION SUMMARY

Pilbara Kimberley University Centres' (PKUC) delivery of the AHEAD program across northern Western Australia, in partnership with Curtin University, demonstrates how tailored, collaborative outreach can unlock new opportunities for student engagement, build aspiration, and widen participation in higher education.

AHEAD is a university-agnostic aspiration-raising program developed by Curtin University, with a proven track record of strengthening students' aspirations towards higher education. Prior to the PKUC-Curtin partnership, AHEAD had been successfully delivered across most regions of Western Australia but had not reached the Pilbara and Kimberley due to the geography of the region and the substantial costs associated with university-led delivery. In a region where some communities are 16–24 hours by road from the nearest university campus, and where many students must relocate to Perth to pursue university study, access to informed pathways advice is particularly important.

By leveraging PKUC's local presence, trusted community relationships, and established regional infrastructure, the partnership has created a sustainable model for delivering higher education aspiration and pathway support directly to students across northern Western Australia.

In 2025, PKUC delivered 22 AHEAD sessions across five school communities, engaging 499 secondary students. Across 304 survey responses, 93% of students reported that the program covered topics or ideas beyond their regular school classes. Students particularly valued practical study skills, clearer information about pathways, reassurance that ATAR is not the only route to university, and guidance on scholarships, university costs, and support. Demand for the program has subsequently grown across schools in the wider region.

The partnership has also generated valuable insights for the Perth-based AHEAD team. Feedback from PKUC, local schools, and students has helped make the program more contextual and relevant to northern Western Australian cultures, workforce opportunities, and educational pathways. These insights have informed changes to AHEAD content and delivery, strengthening the program not only in the Pilbara and Kimberley, but also across other regions of Western Australia.

9BThursday 20 August 2026
9:40am – 10:10am • Convention Centre Part 2

Pathways for Education

Case Study

Bridging Education, Industry, and Communities: The Professional Certificate in Education (Rural & Regional)

Dean White, Martin Dickens, Megan Walsh*NSW Department of Education***Matthew Brown, Amy Smith***University of Canberra*

SESSION SUMMARY

This session showcases an innovative collaboration between the University of Canberra and NSW Department of Education. The Professional Certificate in Education (Rural and Regional) is the first postgraduate microcredential designed to support teachers in regional, rural, and remote (RRR) schools delivered through the Commonwealth Microcredentials Pilot in Higher Education.

Across two cohorts in 2025 and 2026, nearly 100 NSW public school teachers have enrolled in this fully subsidised 12-month program, funded by the Commonwealth and the NSW Department of Education. The course offers two flexible units:

1. Understanding Rurality and Education
2. Rural Pedagogies.

Each unit emphasises learner-centred professional development that responds to teacher workload and promotes engagement with community contexts.

Mid-course evaluation of 2025 participants found 83% were satisfied or very satisfied, and 93% agreed or strongly agreed the learning was relevant to their professional context. Reflection on forum engagement and assignments indicates the course effectively prompts participants to consider how context shapes their practice, including the complexities of rurality, challenging deficit narratives and metrocentric perspectives, and recognising how community strengths influence belonging for RRR teachers.

The program's success relies on a collaborative partnership of education leaders, university academics, and regional communities. A working group oversees course design, assessment, participant selection and support, and evaluation. The initiative aims to build teacher confidence and skills while strengthening community connections by grounding education within local cultural and geographic contexts.

This session explores how such partnerships ensure quality, relevant professional learning that advances educational equity and meaningful development for RRR teachers.

9C

Thursday 20 August 2026
9:40am – 10:10am · Conservatory

Connections: Industry, Education & Community

Academic Presentation

Building Capability Across Australia's University Study Hub Workforce: Standards, Identity, and Sustainability.

Danielle Keenan*Study Hubs Australia***Joshua James***UTS*

SESSION SUMMARY

As Australia's university study hub program expands to 71 regional and suburban communities, questions of workforce quality, consistency, accountability, and sustainability have become increasingly pressing. This presentation builds on a recommendation from an Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success Equity Fellowship examining how Regional University Study Hubs contribute to widening participation in higher education. Drawing on mixed-methods research, including stakeholder interviews, practitioner surveys, and ethnographic observation, the presentation argues that the long-term credibility and sustainability of the study hub sector depends on the development of shared standards of practice and deliberate workforce professionalisation.

Despite significant growth and demonstrable impact, study hubs continue to operate without a common professional framework. Staff are required to navigate complex student, institutional, community, wellbeing, operational, and compliance contexts, yet their work remains inconsistently defined and under-recognised within the broader tertiary education system. This absence creates variability in service quality, exposes government and institutional stakeholders to regulatory and reputational risk, and limits the development of a collective professional identity for study hub practitioners.

The presentation contends that the sector has reached a critical juncture. Professionalisation is a necessary response to the increasing scale, visibility, and policy significance of university study hubs. Establishing shared standards will strengthen accountability, support workforce development, and affirm study hub staff as a distinct professional group with specialised expertise — offering a pathway to sustaining the integrity and legitimacy of the study hub program.

9DThursday 20 August 2026
9:40am – 10:10am • Eureka Ballroom

Strengthening Rural Education Research

Case Study

From Place to Possibility: Building Career Capability and Community for Regional, Rural and Remote Women

Jane Coffey, Julia Richardson, Hannah Wilkinson*Curtin University***Kendall Galbreith***RRR Network of WA*

SESSION SUMMARY

This case study discusses the design, implementation and impacts of a large-scale career development initiative for women delivered across Western Australia. The program was developed, as a collaboration between Curtin University and the RRR Network of WA, in response to persistent structural, geographic and gendered barriers that limit equitable access to career education and progression opportunities in RRR contexts.

The program aims were to enhance women's career self-efficacy, agency and capability, strengthen pathways to further education, and foster place-based communities of practice that support sustainable workforce participation. Grounded in contemporary career development research, the program has delivered eight individual face-to-face workshops across seven regional locations. A total of 160 women participated, representing diverse life stages, cultural backgrounds and industry sectors including community services, agriculture, STEM and resources. In addition, each participant enrolled in an innovative Curtin University micro-credential, providing credits for entrance to a range of university courses.

Participant feedback demonstrates positive outcomes across educational and practice domains, including improved career clarity, confidence, understanding of the future of work, expanded professional networks, and increased engagement with further learning pathways. The establishment of ongoing regional communities of practice extended learning beyond the workshops and supported long-term impact. The program has now been rebranded (EnrichHER) and is financially self-sustaining with corporate sponsorship.

The program outcomes provide empirical and practice-based insights into how contextualised, strengths-based career education can enhance participation, agency and educational access for RRR women, offering scalable implications for regional education policy, program design and workforce development practice.

10AThursday 20 August 2026
10:40am – 11:10am · Convention Centre Part 1

Student Engagement, Aspiration & Motivation

Case Study

The Road to Active Learning

Alexander Iser*Wedderburn College*

SESSION SUMMARY

Rural P-12 schools face distinct challenges, including enabling high-quality teaching and learning, grappling with staffing and collaboration limitations, and the ongoing challenges of student engagement and motivation (Halsey 2018). This case study presents Wedderburn College's ongoing journey from often fragmented and individual approaches to teaching and learning toward a cohesive, whole-school pedagogical structures and beyond, to an ongoing commitment to 'active learning'.

A 2022 school review identified a need for common structures, language, and frameworks for classroom practice. With leadership and staff in partnership, the school developed and implemented a common instructional model that gave teachers a shared vocabulary, consistent lesson structures, and clear expectations for quality practice. The consistent and predictable routines enabled by this model have contributed to calmer learning environments and support for our high-proportion of trauma-affected students. Critically, implementation of this initiative was not a top-down mandate but an evolving, staff-owned process.

The next phase of our journey centred on active learning: moving students from passive recipients to engaged, self-directing learners. Using the work of Amy Berry (2020) as a base, Wedderburn College has begun a medium-term plan to explicitly teach the behaviours of active learning, treating dispositions such as persistence, collaboration and metacognitive awareness as skills to be modelled, practised and reinforced, rather than assumed. Our current focus on the explicit and consistent teaching of command terms (years 3-12), to provide a tool for student goal setting and reflection, has been particularly impactful; our year 12 cohort have been keen and vocal supporters of this work.

This session will share our journey, the research base of our active learning work, reflections on evidence of impact, and key learnings transferable to other rural schools navigating inconsistency with learning models or compliant-yet-passive students.

10BThursday 20 August 2026
10:40am – 11:10am • Convention Centre Part 2

Pathways for Education

Case Study

'Growing our Own' Early Childhood Educators in Regional SA

Shanon Pillion*Uni Hub Spencer Gulf*

SESSION SUMMARY

Uni Hub Spencer Gulf is a community-owned, not-for-profit organisation dedicated to expanding access to tertiary education and addressing regional workforce needs across the north and west of South Australia. Uni Hub enables students to study locally with face to face support that significantly increases student retention and completion compared to online study alone.

This presentation outlines a collaborative, place-based project designed to address critical workforce shortages in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in Port Augusta. Building on the success of the Roxby Downs Early Childhood Project, UHSG is partnering with Port Augusta City Council, Port Augusta Children's Centre and Central Queensland University to deliver accessible training pathways across Certificate III, Diploma and Bachelor-level qualifications. The 18-month initiative aims to grow the local workforce by 20 qualified educators, aligned with children's centre licensing, capacity and staffing requirements.

The project responds to persistent workforce challenges in regional ECEC settings, including high staff turnover, low qualification levels and increasing demand for services. By embedding training within the local community and providing coordinated academic mentoring, career guidance and wellbeing support, the initiative removes common barriers to participation and supports diverse cohorts, including school leavers, job seekers and career changers.

Uni Hub plays a central brokerage role, managing recruitment, enrolments, stakeholder coordination and ongoing participant support. The model integrates study with practical experience, fostering strong connections between education providers, employers and the community.

This presentation will share key insights, early outcomes and lessons learned, demonstrating how a collaborative, locally embedded approach can strengthen workforce pipelines, increase tertiary participation, and build sustainable early childhood education capacity in regional South Australia.

10CThursday 20 August 2026
10:40am – 11:10am · Conservatory

Connections: Industry, Education & Community

Academic Presentation

Surveying the Field: A Bourdieusian Framework for Understanding the Community Impact of University Study Hubs

Ben Archer*Adelaide University*

SESSION SUMMARY

10DThursday 20 August 2026
10:40am – 11:10am • Eureka Ballroom

Strengthening Rural Education Research

Case Study

Travelling at the Speed of Trust: Co designing Regional Outreach in the Ovens Murray

Sarah Lambert*RMIT University***Mark van Bergen***Country Universities Centre – Ovens Murray*

SESSION SUMMARY

This case study shares key learnings about educational partnerships and the value of co design arising from the design, delivery and evaluation of the Peak Pathways Outreach program. Developed between 2022 and 2025 through a partnership between Country Universities Centre – Ovens Murray, RMIT University and La Trobe University, Peak Pathways co designed, delivered and evaluated 48 workshops with 1,020 students across seven schools in three regional sites.

Underpinned by the principle of “travelling at the speed of trust”, the project prioritised relationship building, shared decision making and place based curriculum. This approach enabled high quality, repeat engagements with both large and small schools, and supported staff to embed robust, theory based impact evaluation into their practice. The strength of these partnerships has been recognised through funding to extend the program to 2027 and through the integration of new, jointly designed outreach activities into business as usual work in 2026. The 2026-7 cycle of co design conversations and outreach initiatives will explore shared responses to improved curriculum integration and gender bias in regional career aspirations.

We introduce an emerging theory of change for regional school based outreach which has been developed from our collaborative Peak Pathways research. Our results suggest that shifts in school–university/CUC relationships and power dynamics are treated as the first objects of change. This relational groundwork then supports co development of age appropriate, locally relevant curriculum and more sustainable, impactful outreach. We will share how ethnographic evaluation methods and accessible storytelling are being used to make research findings meaningful for non academic audiences, including school leaders, teachers and community stakeholders.

11AThursday 20 August 2026
11:10am – 11:40am • Convention Centre Part 1

Student Engagement, Aspiration & Motivation

Academic Presentation

Negotiating Uncertain Futures: Young People, Schooling and Aspirations in Rural NSW

Leanne Fray, Sally Patfield, Jenny Gore*University of Newcastle*

SESSION SUMMARY

In an era of increasing socio-economic and environmental uncertainty, young people's post-school futures in rural and regional Australia are being reshaped. Persistent underinvestment in public education, coupled with a concentration of resources in metropolitan and independent school sectors, has shifted enrolment, staffing, and subject offerings in many rural government schools. These dynamics are intensified by geographic isolation, limited access to local services, and constrained post-school pathways, with students from equity groups navigating complex educational conditions. This paper draws on interviews and focus groups with 23 students and 4 teachers from two New South Wales rural public schools to examine how local conditions and broader systemic factors shape students' aspirations in the current climate. Participants described how place-based factors such as limited subject offerings, transport barriers, workforce precarity, and community expectations intersect with broader policy agendas to influence both everyday schooling and imagined futures. Drawing on Lingard's notion of a pedagogy of possibility, the analysis foregrounds how aspirations are not simply constrained by these conditions but are actively negotiated within them. Students reported balancing schooling with work, family, and community responsibilities, often articulating aspirations that were simultaneously pragmatic, relational, and locally grounded. The data also highlight how students and educators actively work within uncertainty, enacting resilience, creativity, and possibility. We argue that rural schools are dynamic spaces where futures are imagined, recalibrated, and negotiated. Even amid enduring structural inequities, these schools remain critical sites in which young people make sense of uncertain futures and develop the capacities to navigate them.

11BThursday 20 August 2026
11:10am – 11:40am • Convention Centre Part 2

Pathways for Education

Case Study

'Growing our Own' - Uni Hub's place-based cadetship program

Richard Horgan*Uni Hub Spencer Gulf*

SESSION SUMMARY

Uni Hub Spencer Gulf's Cadetship Program demonstrates a scalable, place-based approach to addressing regional workforce shortages while increasing tertiary participation and graduate retention.

As a not-for-profit focused on expanding access to higher education, Uni Hub partners with universities, employers and community stakeholders to "grow our own" skilled workforce by embedding students in paid, discipline-aligned employment throughout their studies.

This presentation explores Uni Hub's Cadetship Program as an effective model for integrating university study with meaningful employment, particularly in regions facing economic transition and significant skills shortages. It highlights how locally embedded, employer-supported cadetships can build regional workforce capacity, strengthen economic resilience, and deliver sustained benefits for communities.

Cadetships provide structured, flexible employment that enables students to gain real-world experience, build professional networks, and remain connected to their communities, while completing their qualifications locally. For employers, the model offers a proactive pipeline for future workforce development, enabling them to invest in and shape emerging talent aligned to industry needs.

For the Spencer Gulf region, where degree attainment and workforce participation remain significantly below national averages, the program strengthens pathways into high-demand professional roles in sectors including health, engineering, education, business and planning. Uni Hub plays a central brokerage role—promoting opportunities, matching students with employers, and sustaining relationships that extend beyond initial placement through mentoring, industry engagement and ongoing support.

The presentation will highlight key outcomes and lessons learned, demonstrating how cadetships enhance employability, improve student retention, and foster stronger industry-education linkages.

11CThursday 20 August 2026
11:10am – 11:40am · Conservatory

Connections: Industry, Education & Community

Case Study

Pilbara Kimberley University Centres (PKUC) Building Local Leadership through the Certificate IV in Leadership and Mentoring Program

Jacinta Homann*Pilbara Kimberley University Centres***Peta Sanderson***University of Notre Dame Australia*

SESSION SUMMARY

Pilbara Kimberley University Centres (PKUC) Certificate IV in Leadership and Mentoring program shows how locally delivered, contextualised training can support leadership development that might otherwise be out of reach in regional and remote communities.

In early 2022, PKUC partnered with Rio Tinto and Trainwest to develop a place-based model of the 52880WA Certificate IV in Leadership and Mentoring for Indigenous employees and broader community members in the Pilbara. Previously, the qualification was only available to those who could travel to Perth for blocks of study, creating practical, workplace and family barriers to participation. Delivering the course face-to-face in Karratha, with support workshops and ongoing support from PKUC and Trainwest, created a more accessible opportunity to build leadership capability in the region.

Across three cohorts, 49 students participated in the program, with 13 completing the qualification to date and others continuing their studies. For many, Certificate IV level study was new and challenging, reinforcing the importance of a culturally safe learning environment, explicit support from workplace managers, strong professional and personal support networks, and delivery contextualised for the Pilbara, for participants' workplaces, and for their roles.

Feedback highlighted the value of a classroom environment where students felt heard and respected, and where the benefits of learning extended beyond the qualification itself. For some, participation also meant becoming the first in their family to undertake tertiary study, underlining the significance of creating education opportunities close to home. These outcomes reinforce the importance of strong collaboration between industry, education providers and local stakeholders in providing professional development opportunities that are accessible, contextualised and locally delivered.

11DThursday 20 August 2026
11:10am – 11:40am • Eureka Ballroom

Strengthening Rural Education Research

Academic Presentation

Reimagining Rural Futures: Creativity, Economic Gardening, and University-Community Ecosystems for Regional Innovation

Philip Dennett*London South Bank University UAE*

SESSION SUMMARY

This session explores how regional, rural, and remote communities can move beyond deficit-based models of economic development toward creative, locally embedded innovation ecosystems. Drawing upon Richard Florida's concept of the creative class, the Economic Gardening model pioneered in Littleton, Colorado, and contemporary research into place-based entrepreneurship, the presentation argues that rural futures depend not simply on attracting external investment, but on activating existing local capability, creativity, and community networks.

Particular attention is given to the role universities can play in this process. The session proposes that many rural students are currently educated to leave their communities rather than to reimagine and build within them. In response, the presentation introduces a conceptual framework that positions students as creators, connectors, and entrepreneurial participants within rural ecosystems. Through examples of maker cultures, collaborative innovation spaces, local enterprise networks, and digitally enabled micro-businesses, the session demonstrates how creativity and entrepreneurship can become forms of educational and community infrastructure.

Using a Socratic and systems-oriented approach, the presentation challenges participants to reconsider assumptions about rural decline, innovation, and opportunity. Rather than seeing rural communities as peripheral or lacking, the session reframes them as places of identity, experimentation, resilience, and human-centred innovation. The presentation concludes by proposing practical strategies through which universities, councils, educators, and communities can collaboratively cultivate sustainable rural creative ecosystems for future generations.

12AThursday 20 August 2026
11:50am – 12:20pm • Convention Centre Part 1

Student Engagement, Aspiration & Motivation

Case Study

The Four Cs - Beyond the Postcode

Danny Forrest*Wedderburn P-12 College***Robert Boucher***Swifts Creek P-12 School*

SESSION SUMMARY

This upbeat, high-energy session showcases the power of the 4Cs—Curiosity, Collaboration, Connection and Community—to transform education and strengthen rural communities. Presented by two P-12 Principals from opposite ends of Victoria, the session demonstrates that opportunity is not defined by postcode, but by the strength of the relationships, partnerships and collective leadership we build. Participants will explore how intentional collaboration expands pathways, broadens thinking and creates meaningful outcomes for students, staff and school leaders.

At the heart of this work is a commitment to building thriving communities founded on trust, shared purpose, open communication, high expectations and a genuine desire to see others succeed. Recognising that strong communities are shaped by many interconnected factors—including leadership, culture, collective efficacy and meaningful partnerships—this session explores how stepping beyond the school gate and breaking down traditional silos builds educator capacity, influence and impact. When we lead with curiosity and collaborate with purpose, we move beyond improving practice—we transform it.

A key feature of the session is the practical use of sociograms to map relationships, identify influence and strengthen collaboration across teams. This work is framed through the TDF (Thinking, Doing, Feeling) Framework, exploring how collaboration shapes beliefs and mindsets, how strong connections influence teaching, leadership and decision-making, and how trust, belonging and optimism fuel engagement, wellbeing and performance.

Grounded in a strengths-based narrative and the dispositions of hope and optimism, this session reinforces the belief that relationships are the foundation of sustainable improvement. Participants will leave inspired, connected and equipped with practical strategies to build cultures where every educator, every student and every community can thrive—because great outcomes are created through connection, not constrained by postcode.

12BThursday 20 August 2026
11:50am – 12:20pm • Convention Centre Part 2

Pathways for Education

Case Study

Local Solutions for a Rural Healthcare Workforce

Samantha Avitaia*UOW Regional Campuses*

SESSION SUMMARY

“Small rural towns are seeing far fewer healthcare professionals per capita compared to metropolitan areas and even remote communities,” (Cortie et al, ARJH April 2024).

In a pilot program to address critical workforce shortages, the University of Wollongong (UOW) and UOW College have secured funding through a Department of Health, Disability and Ageing initiative. The pilot will deliver a multi-sector healthcare traineeship program in the regional NSW areas of Bega Valley, Eurobodalla and Snowy Monaro.

Building on partnerships with Healthcare providers in regional Australia, UOW and UOW College are expanding training beyond Aged Care to include Disability and Indigenous Healthcare with an industry taster component.

Training has and will be delivered from both regional university campuses in Batemans Bay and Bega plus the Country University Centre in Cooma.

“This program is designed to bring new people into the sector – from school leavers to migrants to career changers – and support them to train and work locally, strengthening care for regional communities,” Manager UOW Regional Campuses, Samantha Avitaia.

The program offers flexibility, so participants might complete a short course to gain foundational skills, continue into paid work placements to explore different settings, and/or progress into a longer traineeship. Each stage includes an earn-and-learn component, which is especially valuable for regional students.

This case study will share the elements and stages of this pilot including design and implementation and partnership development. Learnings across the program will be explored in addition to recommendations on potential application in other regions and sectors.

12CThursday 20 August 2026
11:50am – 12:20pm · Conservatory

Strengthening Rural Education Research

Academic Presentation

Leading a successful and flourishing rural primary school in Australia

Christopher Hudson*Department of Education Victoria***David Gurr***The University of Melbourne*

SESSION SUMMARY

This presentation is focused on an analysis of data from a 2024 multiple-perspective mixed-method case study whereby a systems model of successful rural school leadership was forged. Data were collected through interviews with the principal on three separate occasions, school leaders ($n = 3$), teachers ($n = 4$), students ($n = 12$), parents ($n = 9$), the school council president and a system leader. The case study was part of the International Successful School Principalship Project (ISSPP). Interview data were supported by school observations, document analysis and a whole-staff teacher survey. Findings suggested a symbiosis between the research of the ISSPP and the ecosystems for learning and flourishing approach, specifically through the weaving circle for systemic impact model as described by Diaz Gibson and colleagues (2024). Connecting the models builds an awareness of how both can complement each other to prompt thinking about rural schools as complex and adaptive systems that achieve broader rural school and student outcomes alongside students' academic results. This suggests that future ISSPP research protocols could be modified to consider the weaving circle model and also provides a way for thinking about how the weaving circle model could be extended to better capture the complex world of leading rural schools successfully.

12DThursday 20 August 2026
11:50am – 12:20pm • Eureka Ballroom

Strengthening Rural Education Research

Case Study

Why Choose Rural? The Case for Teaching in these Schools

Andrew King*New Zealand Rural Schools Leadership Association*

SESSION SUMMARY

Drawing on the New Zealand context, Andrew will outline current initiatives and emerging strategies aimed at attracting teachers and school leaders to rural, isolated, and remote schools. Central to this work is raising awareness among the public, school boards, initial teacher education providers, academics, and the wider profession about the unique opportunities these settings offer.

Too often, careers in large urban schools are perceived as more advantageous, yet teaching in rural and small schools provides rich professional and personal learning that is frequently overlooked.

Participants will gain practical insights and hear real examples of how the New Zealand Rural Schools Leadership Association is working alongside government agencies, ITE providers, and the profession to elevate and promote the value of rural teaching. The presentation will also highlight approaches being used to better inform and engage the public in understanding the importance and rewards of teaching in these communities.

POSTER 1Wednesday 19 August
2:30pm – 3:00pm · Convention Centre Lobby

Poster Presentation

Learning through local stories: Exploring Rural Teachers' Perceptions and Approaches to Social and Emotional Learning**Subekshya Ghimire***Ohio University***SESSION SUMMARY**

Social-emotional learning (SEL) is a key to helping individuals build important life skills such as self-awareness, social awareness, empathy, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. These abilities are crucial in influencing individual's perceptions, emotions, and attitudes, helping them to succeed in educational settings and throughout life (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), 2020). Research has shown that rural educators can empower their students by using place-based knowledge even in adverse situations. Guided by two theories, Place-Based Education and CASEL Framework, this case study explores how rural high school how teachers draw upon local stories, cultural narratives, and community histories to foster SEL competencies such as self-awareness, empathy, social awareness, and relationship-building. It will also investigate opportunities and challenges associated with integrating place-based storytelling for social-emotional learning into classroom learning. This research will also shed light on how teachers perceive students' engagement and its impact on those stories on students' social and emotional learning. Data will be collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews, multiple class observations, document analysis, and field notes, and will be thematically analyzed. This research study is significant for educators and school leaders who seek to integrate creative, local, culturally responsive, and engaging strategies to support students' well-being in rural schools. By illuminating how rural teachers leverage community knowledge and storytelling practices to support social and emotional development, this research highlights the strengths of rural contexts while addressing persistent challenges such as limited professional development and mental health supports. It will inform how the SEL can be purposefully integrated into everyday lessons according to the school environments and local contexts.

POSTER 2Wednesday 19 August
2:30pm – 3:00pm · Convention Centre Lobby

Poster Presentation

Scoping the Field: A Visual Framework for Understanding the Community Impact of University Study Hubs**Ben Archer, Sharron King, Sarah McDonald, Sarah Hattam***Adelaide University***Cathy Stone***University of Newcastle***Kerry Russo***James Cook University*

SESSION SUMMARY

University Study Hubs are evaluated most often on enrolment and completion metrics. This approach captures what is easy to measure but misses much of what Hubs actually contribute to their communities.

This poster presents a visual framework, grounded in Pierre Bourdieu's theory of field and capital, for mapping the broader impact of University Study Hubs. Drawing on a scoping review of analogous initiatives in Australia and internationally, the framework illustrates how Hubs generate social, cultural, symbolic and economic capital within their communities. Together, these dimensions position Hubs not simply as study facilities but as active agents in regional community development.

Hub coordinators and community partners are invited to consider whether this framework reflects their experience.



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