FACILITATING TRANSITION FROM RURAL SCHOOLS TO UNIVERSITY: A CASE STUDY

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This case study describes a career education program that has engaged rural high school students with the experience of university. The residential experience program included learning exercises for career exploration, attending university, and social experiences related to living in a city. Evaluation indicated that rural schools and students have engaged with the program and that there was tentative evidence indicative of a positive impact upon the participants' career aspirations and decision-making.

The Australian Education Council (1991) has highlighted the issue of rurality in its major report on young people's participation in post-compulsory education. Furthermore, research by the National Board of Employment Education and Training (NBEET) (1991) has found evidence that the provision of post-compulsory education to rural Australians was seriously lacking. Subsequent research has identified rurality as a significant factor regarding access and participation in higher education (e.g., James, Wyn, Baldwin, Hepworth, McInis & Stephanou, 1999; Martin, 1994; NBEET, 1994; Rhoden & Boin, 2002; Shaw & Larson, 2003; Williams, Long, Carpenter, & Hayden, 1993).

Much of this research indicated that there has been a differential in educational resources for rural and isolated students in contrast to their metropolitan counterparts. Furthermore, there has also been some exploration of the psychological aspects of rurality and their impact upon access. James et al. (1999) inspected crucial, but subtle

variables underpinning the global, and somewhat stereotypical notion of 'rurality' in the context of students' choices relating to higher education. Their research indicated that the decision to apply for a university place was embedded in a nexus of interpersonal and cultural themes. This research implied a need to address students' psychosocial status (viz, attitudes and expectations), as distinct from purely structural or material service initiatives aimed at mitigating the impediments of rurality.

Harvey-Beavis and Robinson's (2000) research revealed a theme within participants' images of university students and staff as being socially and intellectually remote and strange. The data also indicated errors in students' understanding of administrative processes and daily activities of university life. Overall, the research found that students' thinking was related to their understanding of the people at universities and the prospective outcomes of study regarding the world of work.

Rhoden and Boin (2002) have outlined an important program developed at the University of Melbourne, called *Uni for a Day*. Rural students were taken to the university for a day of exposure to the environment and activities of the campus. This program had lasting effects upon the participants' decisions to attend university. Direct contact with the university was highlighted as an important feature of the program. Their program has made considerable progress toward a model of mitigating psychosocial barriers to university.

In summary, the applied literature has indicated two important facets of impaired access to university because of rurality: resources and mindset. The program presented in this paper addressed some of the issues on a practical level through a three-day residential career education program for rural school students at the University of Southern Queensland.

PROGRAM PROCESS

In order to raise rural students' awareness of university life and the potential educational and career options available, the program addressed issues surrounding rurality and students' mindset in relation to university. The annual program has been in operation since 1999, with sponsorship from the Queensland Studies Authority (QSA) (previously Tertiary Entrance Procedures Authority).

Target Population & Student Selection

The catchment area for the program included the districts of northwest, central-west, southwest Queensland, and the Darling Downs. USQ and Toowoomba have significant educational, cultural and commercial links with these regions. The driving distance from the participating students' hometowns and Toowoomba has ranged from one hour to 20 hours. The QSA and local teacher selected students who were deemed to be at risk of not attending university, because of personal or community impediments were given priority for selection.

Staffing

The Careers and Welfare section of USQ's Student Services managed the majority of the program. Student Services staffing contribution included two counsellors, student mentors, and administrative staff. In most cases the mentors were previous students of the program. The QSA representative played an important role in the program's logistics and conducted an information session for the students. The program also included lecturers, faculty liaison staff, and university marketing staff.

Career Education Materials

An evolving range of career counselling and career education resources has been used. In the 2002 and 2003 programs, students used the internet to access the career information website, My Future (www.myfuture.edu.au) (Department of Education, Science & Training, 2003). The *Australian Interest Measure – Short Form* (Naylor & Care, 2001) was administered in 2003, and in previous years the *Self Directed Search* (Shears & Harvey-Beavis, 2001) was administered. A copy of *Parents Help With Careers* (Department of Education, Science & Training, 2002) was supplied to the participants' parents after the program was completed.

Participant Feedback

In earlier years the participants completed a feedback survey which was unstructured and used open-ended questions regarding satisfaction. In 2003, the students completed an evaluation survey of the program in the final session of the final day. This survey was used to procure feedback from students to determine their level of satisfaction with the program and to assess their opinions on a range of variables related to university. The survey used a Likert-scale of 1 to 5, for which 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree across the seven items.

PROGRAM CONTENT

Career Exploration Seminar & University Application Information

Students participated in a three-part career exploration seminar. The division of the seminar into three components allowed students to breakout for other activities and to undertake practical exploration work. The seminar was based upon a modified version of the Stevens' Model of Career Development (Stevens, 1993). Although the

Stevens' model is most apt for adults, we were able to modify it sufficiently to suit high school students by removing reference to common adult issues (e.g., children, employers).

The first part of the seminar focused on self-exploration issues (e.g., interests, values). The seminar also includes a section on the jargon of university. Students were informed of the terminology necessary to navigate their way through university handbooks and brochures. For instance, there was a description of the meaning of words like 'bachelor' and 'credit-point'. At the end of the first part of the seminar, students were given the psychometric inventory. The inventory was completed within the class setting and then returned to the counsellors for scoring.

The second part of the seminar involved a discussion of the results of the psychometric inventory and brainstorming how the results may open possible pathways for exploration in the assignment. The assignment required the students to access the website My Future and search for information about their interest areas, including possible educational options. The final part of the career exploration seminar was a group discussion of the results of their exploration.

The career exploration seminar was followed by a presentation made by a representative of the QSA. This involved an open discussion forum on how to apply for entry into university through the Queensland Tertiary Admissions Centre (QTAC). This presentation was a powerful vehicle for clarifying any concerns or questions about the admission process.

Faculty and Student Guild Presentations

The USQ Faculties provided a detailed understanding of the content of degrees, particularly degrees common to most universities (e.g., Bachelor of Arts). A lecturer

also presented a lecture in one of the main theatres. This provided the students with an understanding of how university lectures were different from school classrooms. Students were given a hands-on demonstration of the facilities within the main library of the university. This included use of the electronic catalogues and internet searching. The Student Guild described the role of student unions on campus and how they contribute to the community of a university.

Campus Living and City Tours

An inherent component of the program is its requirement for students to experience living in the city and university environment. Students were accommodated at one of the USQ colleges. Mentors conducted tours of the university campus and city. The campus tours were interspersed between program sessions. Public transport was used as a way of familiarising students with the concept and practice of intracity transit. They were taken into the city for activities such as ten-pin bowling, going to the cinema, and shopping.

PROGRAM OUTCOMES

Participant Feedback Survey

The descriptive statistics for students' feedback on the 2003 program have been presented in Table 1. The median rating for each of the items indicated a strong level of satisfaction with the program.

Insert Table 1 Here

The level of agreement with each item has been expressed as a percentage of the number of participants in Figures 1 to 7. These graphs indicate that the majority of participants strongly agreed with the items.

Insert Figures 1 - 7 Here

Sixteen participants wrote statements about the program on their survey sheet. General positive statements have not been reported here, however the following quotes have provided some additional feedback.

'I hope to come here next year'

'It was a was great experience which has been a wonderful help'

'This place makes me feel more comfortable than I am at school'

'A bit boring at times, but otherwise very beneficial'

'Would have been better with more practical activities'

'I would recommend this to anyone'

'The experience was one I will never forget'

DISCUSSION

This case study described the process and content of an experiential career education program that introduced the concept of university to rural school students. The program has been conducted for five years and the number of schools and participants has been progressively increasing. It has, therefore, been reasonable to conclude that rural schools have engaged with it as being a valuable adjunctive curricular experience for their students. This has been interpreted as a strong indicator of the program's value to the actual communities it is meant to serve.

Feedback from the participants indicated that the program has satisfied some of their needs for information and experience related to university education. Moreover, the high level of agreement with the feedback statement 'being at university has made me feel confident that I could study for a degree' reinforced the argument that *in vivo* exposure to university had a positive impact upon the participants' aspirations toward higher education. Future evaluation should attempt to determine the impact of the program by comparing the rate of applications to higher education institutions against the application rates of the geographic regions from which the students are drawn.

In conclusion, this career education program has demonstrated one practical way in which universities could respond to the needs of rural high school students. It has provided tentative evidence that such a program impacts upon the psychosocial factors that affect students' decision to attend university. Finally, it has provided a working model that other agencies could implement and improve upon.

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THEORY AND PRACTICE

What are some factors that make 'rurality' a psychosocial impediment to university?

The usual costs of university study are compounded by the expense of relocating from a rural community. The distance from home can moderate a student's adjustment because the expense of returning home to catch up with family could be prohibitive. Significant others in a student's hometown may create a negative impression of university through lack of information and concern about 'brain drain' from the town, particularly given that employment after university would most likely be in a metropolitan centre. The difference in university language and city culture may present some concern for students already anxious about leaving home.

How could universities better enhance access for rural students?

Universities could engage in community education programs in which representatives visit rural towns to share information, diminish stereotypes, and seek information on how to better engage with regional Australia. Universities could develop loan schemes specific to equity groups, which redress some of the impediments.

How could rural schools assist with the transition into university?

Schools could include a visit to a university as part of the career education curriculum and make use of university events such as open days.

How could career counsellors involve family in the transition process?

Career counsellors could operate a 'family information seminar' during the main university orientation program. Career services could devote specific pages on their website to issues relevant to family and links to websites such as My Future.

What experiences would improve a career counsellor's ability to work with university students from a rural background?

Exposure to a rural school and community, including meetings with staff, students, and parents, would provide a counsellor with a rich source of contextual information. Conducting focus groups on-campus with rural students would assist a career counsellor to understand the issues faced by the students.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Feedback Survey of 2003(N = 41)

Item	Median	M	SD
1. I have enjoyed being at university for these three days	5	4.64	.49
2. I have learned what it would be like to be a student at university	5	4.64	.54
3. The career planning seminar helped me think about my options for study in the future	5	4.64	.54
4. Being at university has made me feel confident that I could study for a degree	5	4.46	.60
5. The Faculty presentations helped me to understand the different degrees at university	4	4.28	.76
6. I would like to go to university	5	4.72	.51
7. The mentors helped me learn about university	5	4.56	.55
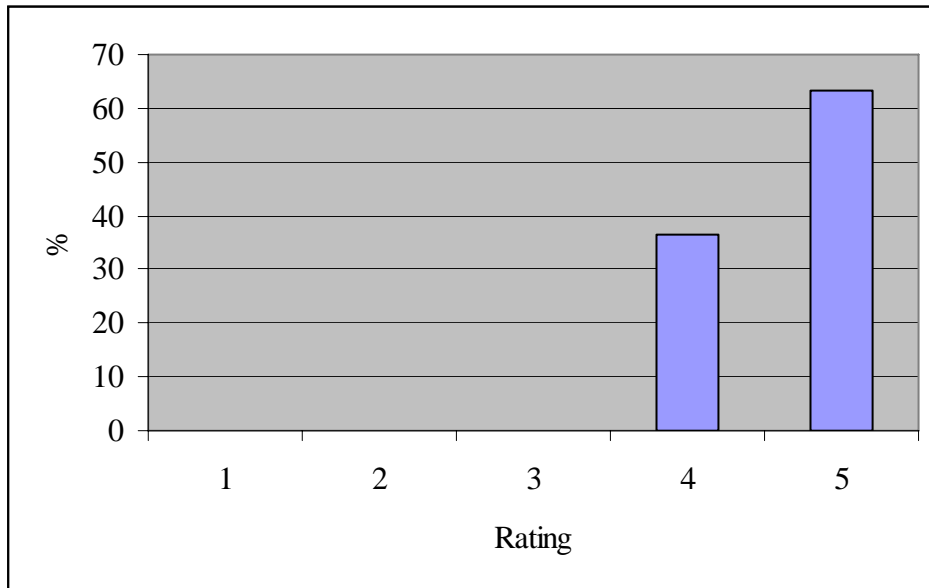
Figure 1. Percentage of participants as a function of agreement rating for Item 1 of the Feedback Survey.
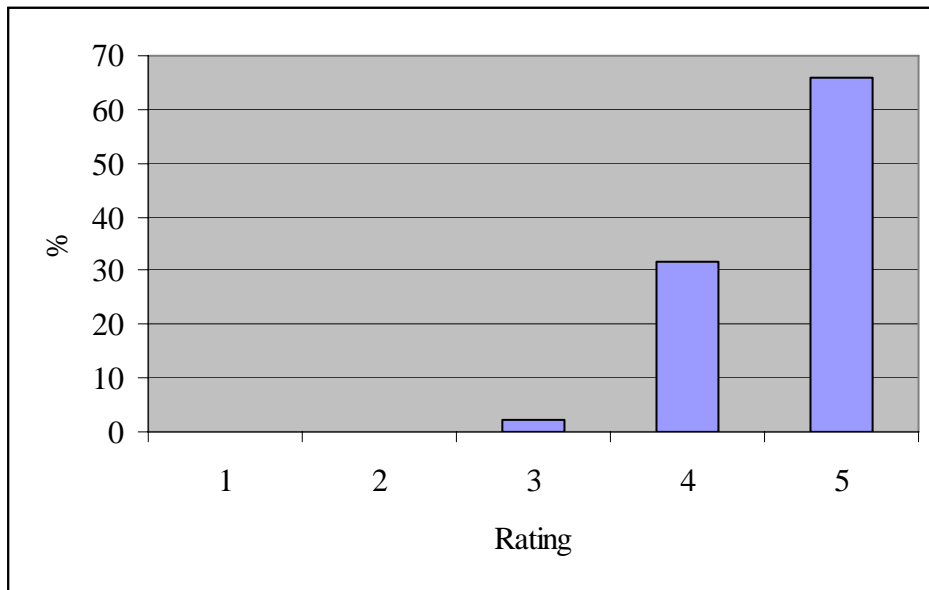
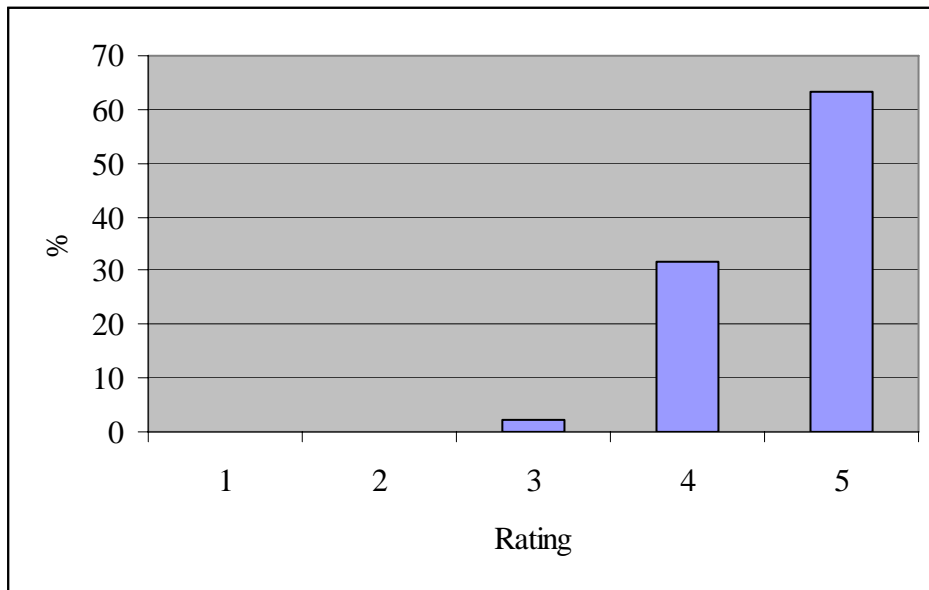*Figure 2.* Percentage of participants as a function of agreement rating for Item 2 of the Feedback Survey.

Figure 3. Percentage of participants as a function of agreement rating for Item 3 of the Feedback Survey.
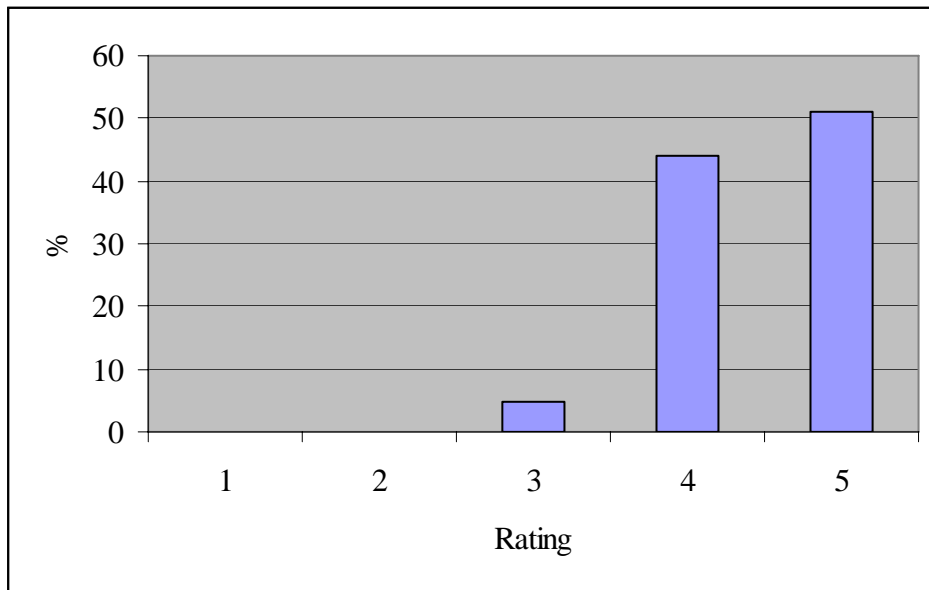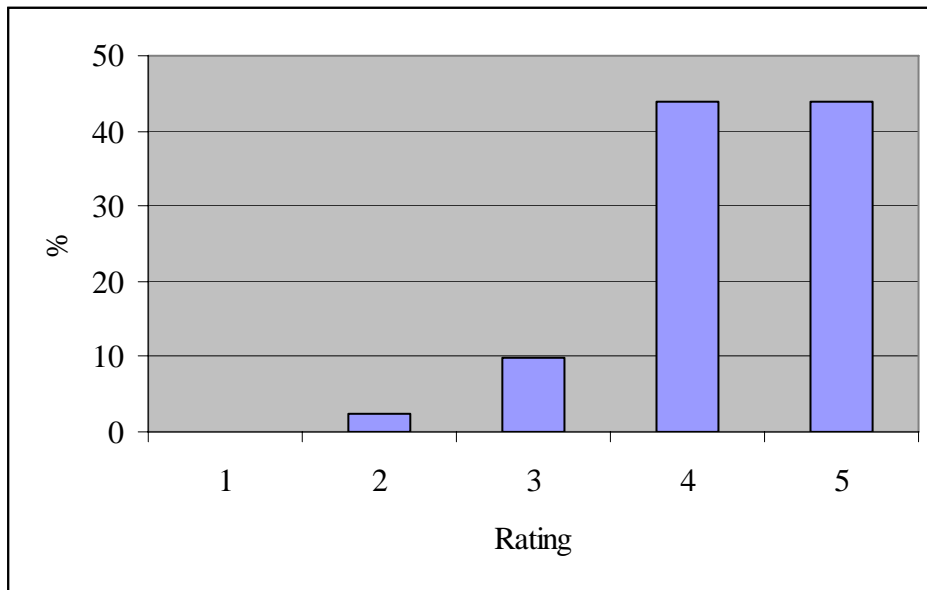
Figure 4. Percentage of participants as a function of agreement rating for Item 4 of the Feedback Survey.

Figure 5. Percentage of participants as a function of agreement rating for Item 5 of the Feedback Survey.
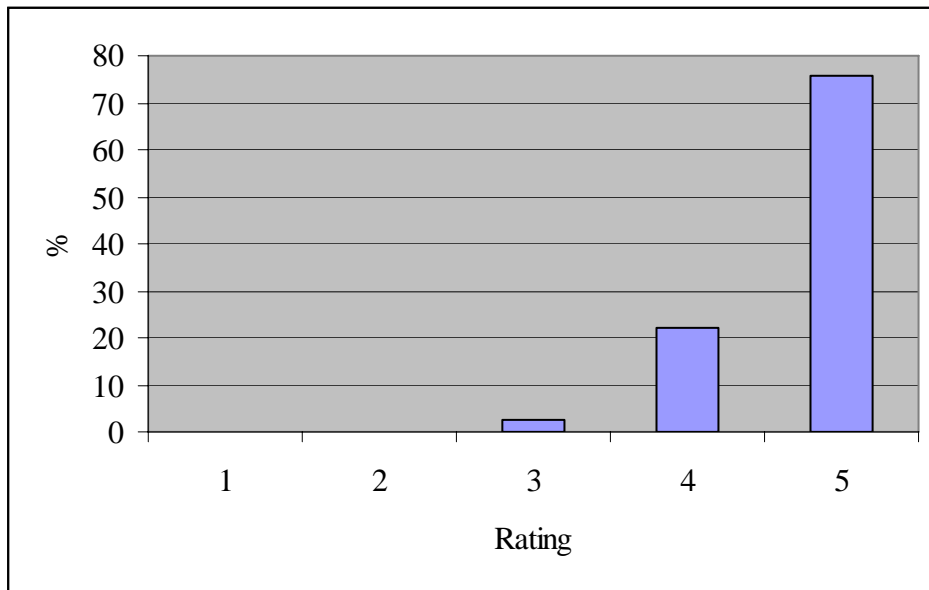
Figure 6. Percentage of participants as a function of agreement rating for Item 6 of the Feedback Survey.
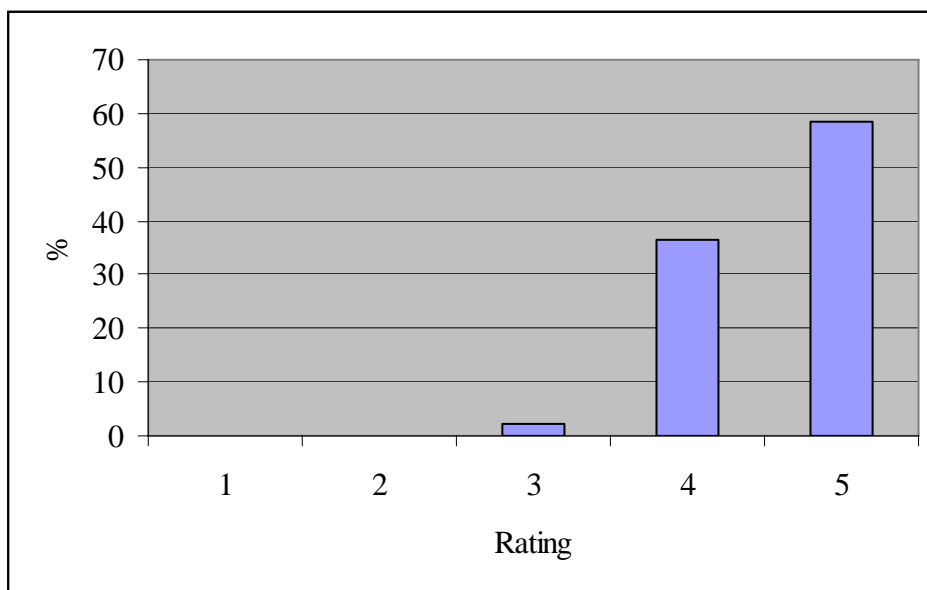
Figure 7. Percentage of participants as a function of agreement rating for Item 7 of the Feedback Survey.