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“What do you know about being a poor farmer, you’re one of those fancy university people”

A rambunctious Year 10 boy at a small high school in rural South Australia threw this statement at me while I was mingling with students in a quadrangle before the commencement of their annual end-of-year awards ceremony. The comment paralysed me and before I could respond, I was whisked into the school hall and onto the stage for the start of the formal proceedings – but the meaning of those words kept ruminating in my head.

It was harvest season; a time when every ounce of energy in this small community is focused on the land, yet the community had paused and gathered on a stifling hot summer evening in their school hall to acknowledge the achievements of their students. As the university regional equity and engagement officer, I was the only guest from outside the town invited to present an award on behalf of the university. It was a quintessential rural school; there were scones with jam and cream, pavlovas, and fruit for everyone to enjoy; while the farmers, covered head to toe in dust and sweat, were visibly impatient with the length of the evening. They had taken a brief reprise from the harvest but were busting to get back out to continue working into the cooling night. I sat on the stage processing this scene while sweating profusely in my neatly tailored suit, tightly sandwiched between the principal and the president of the parent’s association, both of whom were dressed far more casually and appropriately for the insufferable heat than I was. Gazing out into the room full of farmers and their kids, it was abundantly clear that I was the only one who didn’t belong in that school hall. While sitting on the stage trying to maintain composure in the searing heat, I had to time to reflect why the boy’s earlier comment had instantly disarmed me:

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I grew up in regional NSW with a single mother and three siblings, spending much of my childhood engaged with life on my family’s farm. In high school, I was an angry and frustrated student who was disengaged from learning and had a palpable attitude problem.

Sitting in the school hall in front of all those rural students, I realised that in high school I was exactly like that snarky year 10 boy; the country student who would loudly pronounce the lack of understanding that teachers and visitors to the school had about my identity and monologue about how nobody understood my situation. And now, as the representative of a university sitting on the stage wearing a suit, I was considered by the students seated in the sweltering school hall to be the antithesis of my own teenage identity – I was no longer the ‘poor’ regional student, I was now considered ‘one of those fancy university people’.

That evening in the school hall triggered the start of a deeply reflective personal journey about the connection between my regional identity growing up, and my current role in regional higher education equity.

I was fortunate to have a transformative university experience. I moved from my regional town to a residential college at a research-intensive university and was surrounded by high-achieving students from around the world, which placed me completely out of my depth. At the beginning of this transition,

I was *the* rural student (Ronan, 2020), from the language I used, the values I held, to the behaviour that I exhibited. Living in the residential college was initially confronting, but also redefined my identity.

I consistently felt that I did not belong at university, and it took the staff within the residential college to challenge my own identity and capability as a low-SES regional student. They opened my mind to new ideas in politics, philosophy, and business, empowering me to reframe my own identity and develop a passion for learning that challenged my self-prescribed identity. They instilled in me the importance of a growth mindset and that intelligence – however one defines that concept – can be learned and developed. Slowly, my language began to change, my values were challenged, and my behaviour was starting to shift to fit in with the expectations of what a university student living in a residential college should be. My identity was shifting, and I began to flourish as I increasingly adapted to the university environment. At that moment in time, I was happy to cast aside my regional identity and transition to an emerging perception of a new and improved version of myself.

However, upon reflection I have realised it is heartbreaking that in order to feel that I was succeeding in higher education, I needed to alter my rural identity and values, to move away from where I had come from and to assimilate into the dominant student culture of an elite university.

The need to leave rural areas to succeed is a deeply entrenched feature of the progress narrative of modernity (Corbett, 2008). Corbett acknowledges that this form of mobility is often uncritically positioned as a necessary precursor to economic prosperity and enhanced social status. More simply, the dominant consensus in regional Australia is that outward geographical mobility is needed for upward social mobility to occur. For me, this also became a psychological constraint as ‘success’ was defined by leaving the town that I grew up in and explains why I was so comfortable with my rapid identity shift that occurred when I initially arrived at university.

This psychological progress narrative takes hold of regional students at the end of their schooling with pressure imposed on them to leave their regional setting if they want to ‘make’ something of themselves. Not only does this perpetuate negativity in the capacity of rural Australia to develop, but it plants the seed in students that the regional components of their identity are considered less valuable when they transition to a metropolitan university environment.

Universities, governments, and even our regional communities inadvertently support this discursive framing of the mobility narrative, which develops a social pressure of the ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ pathway to take at the end of high school (Corbett, 2008; O’Shea et al., 2019). The result of this mobility paradigm is that at that at the end of their schooling, it appears advantageous for the student to push away from their regional identity to further support the notion of the successful transition to university study.

Reflecting on my own journey, I too fell prey to this progress narrative. I left my hometown and embraced university life in all its forms, casting aside much of my rurality in the process and was striving to recreate my identity as someone who belonged within a high-achieving collegiate environment and elite university. Because I was surrounded by the outwards/upwards mobility narrative, the transition away from my regional identity was socially affirmed by my new university surroundings and I was comfortable with embracing this identity shift – even blissfully unaware that it was occurring. As my identity was shifting, I was being subconsciously pulled into the hegemonic conception of what university student culture should be and this increased my sense of belonging at the institution. I was reshaping myself to fit, what I considered to be, the model identity of a university student.

However, there is a temporal complexity to identity development in my higher education journey. As a student, I subconsciously shifted my identity and was comfortable because this was allowing me to continually ‘fit in’ better at university. But now, almost a decade later, I am re-examining this transition and the effects that this process had on my personal identity development from a long-term perspective. The positive perception of my university experience has led me towards a career working with students to enable them to have the

same transformative experience that I did in both residential colleges and universities more broadly. But I am beginning to question the impact that my professional work is having on regional students. Am I simply preparing students to undergo the same identity shift that I did? Is that a good thing?

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This single statement undermined the whole understanding of my self-prescribed professional identity as an equity practitioner. It made me question that rather than empowering students to overcome barriers or fears in pursuing higher education – which much widening participation rhetoric aims to achieve – perhaps I am instead perpetuating the deficit framing of regional identity and reinforcing the outwards and upwards mobility discourse? I had the positive perception that my outreach into regional schools assists these students to transition to higher education, but I never considered the potential impact this has on their long-term identity development. However, I am now questioning if my efforts are actually empowering students to transition with their rural identity intact, or if they are simply preparing students for the same subconscious identity shift that I underwent, by helping them understand how to navigate the transition of their rural identity to the dominant university student culture to ensure they are successful. If the latter is the case, then instead of reducing inequality through higher education, I am fearful that perhaps my actions are perpetuating the metro/rural divide.

Since that rural school awards night, I have increasingly challenged myself to better understand the impacts that my equity work may have on these students after their university journey. I have also begun noticing the divide in how my local rural community perceives me. I still feel distinctly regional, but many people in my own community see me as part of the ‘middle-class educated university’ or being distinctly different from them. When I am visiting a rural school, I worry that, just like that sweaty summer awards night, students don’t see my regional identity, they see me as an ‘intellectual’ and this is not a positive connotation. Instead, this labels me as something different to them – the other.

It has made me realise that equity and outreach activities need to be conscious of the temporal nature of identities, the impact that the framing of equity groups has on long term identity development, and the ability of students to reconnect with their past identities post-graduation. Our outreach activities examine students’ needs at a fixed point in time. We aspire to assist them in their transition into university from high school and measure our success on the number of students who make that transition. But these actions can impact the coexistence of student identities long after their initial transition to university, and manifests in a deeply subconscious manner that potentially shapes these individual’s imagination of their rurality throughout their lives.

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Both the awards night and the student’s comment helped me to think about the temporal shift in my identity and the struggles of navigating both the ‘rural’ and ‘educated’ identities simultaneously. I acknowledge that my lived-experience is not going to be the same as other rural or regional students; nor will every regional student attend the same style of university and residential college that I did, or want to maintain elements of their regional identity as I do; but I believe it is our responsibility as equity practitioners to ensure higher education outreach empowers students with a positive framing of their rurality.

Since the Halsey Review (2018), rural and regional higher education policy has become intensely focused on rural student equity. As a result, funding for regional campuses and rural study hubs are expanding to create community-based alternatives for students who would otherwise have to relocate to metropolitan institutions (Halsey, 2018).

However, many of these regional alternatives have limited degree options (Halsey, 2018). Rural students who aspire to be economists, creative designers, musicians, engineers, doctors, writers or pure mathematicians, still face the challenges of assimilating into metropolitan universities.

Despite the creation of these place-based study options, equity practitioners will continue to promote the transition from rural communities to metropolitan university, and regional students will continue attempting to navigate the tension between their existing rurality and sculpting their new identity as a metropolitan university student.

Often university outreach is the first touchpoint many of these regional students have with a university. With that privilege comes an immense responsibility to ensure that rurality is celebrated, and we are not using our power to perpetuate the deficit narrative of regional Australia or create an environment where regional students are 'learning to leave' (O'Shea et al., 2019; Corbett, 2008). My lived-experience highlights that for regional students, the ineffable pull to conform to what universities expect of their students can surreptitiously reduce the importance of their rural identities. We need to continually reflect on how equity practitioners are assisting regional students to transition to metropolitan universities; how their regional identity fits in this transition to university; and how will these students may maintain or reconnect with their rurality after their metropolitan higher education experience.

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From sitting in that sweaty school hall, to writing this piece, I have been on a deeply reflective journey through my personal identity and the values that I hold working in the higher education sector. As an equity practitioner, we can often get caught up in the energetic message of our institutions and operate in an echo chamber of the positive impacts that widening participation can have on students' lives. I am not discounting this positive impact, rather I am learning that addressing inequality in higher education is a deeply sophisticated activity that has ramifications far beyond the short time that we are engaged with students. Widening participation of regional students in higher education deeply affects the identity of these individuals long after their university journey and has serious impact for the development narrative in regional Australian society more broadly. I am not advocating that we stop espousing the positive developments that higher education can have on rural and regional development. Rather, I want to illuminate the need to reconceptualise how we examine the widening participation agenda and make the time and space to reflect what those unintended consequences for future regional student identities may be.

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To cite this paper: Ronan, C. (2021). Shifting rural identities: The long-term impact of widening participation on rural student identity. In Burke, P.J., Bunn, M., Lumb, M. (Eds). *An invitation to reconceptualise Widening Participation through praxis*. Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education Resource. Available at: <https://www.newcastle.edu.au/ceehe/>.