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## **Influencing the influencers in rural and regional education**

There are two things that are critical for student participation in post school education, and individuals securing employment: aspiration, and an understanding that it is achievable.

In rural, regional and remote communities, the key influencers of these critical factors are found both inside and outside the school environment.

Teachers and other school staff, university outreach programs and visits to university campuses are all influencers. But parents, friends and employers in the community are just as important.

New research led by the University of Tasmania and funded by the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education will look at how to best support these key influencers.

It is hoped the work will help foster increased pathways for school students and adults towards university, or future employment opportunities and careers.

“Increasing participation in education and employment cannot be achieved by schools alone, or universities, or governments – it takes whole communities,” project lead Professor Sue Kilpatrick said. “To succeed, it is clear that we need to influence the influencers.”

The project will design, trial and evaluate whole community, place-based, coordinated career and education pathway information and support.

It will set up pathway working parties of employers, local government, parents and teachers in case study communities in New South Wales, and Tasmania’s Huon Valley and Break O’Day areas.

The communities will be assisted to select, modify if needed, and then run programs and interventions aligned with community needs.

“This work builds on previous research that identified key influencers and suggested a whole of community approach would be the most successful in lifting education participation in rural, remote and regional areas,” Professor Kilpatrick said.

“Higher education and career pathway aspirations are typically formed in primary and early secondary years when parents, families and teachers are key influencers.

“This has to be coupled with an understanding of the attainability of higher education if aspiration is to be converted to participation, for mid to late secondary students and adults.

“Employers, members of the community, friends, the media and industry all play a role in this process.”

Examples of programs which may be run:

- *Feast of Knowledge* takes teachers and parents on tours of industries and discusses education pathways;
- *Place-based Curriculum Materials* engages teachers with local industry to develop materials aligned with the Australian Curriculum;
- *Parents Matter* trains parents to organise events to familiarise other parents and families with career pathways and associated education pathways, with assistance from industry;
- *Warm Connections* training and information resources for rural library and Neighbourhood House staff and volunteers, to assist adults access further education;
- *University student ambassadors* trains university students to work with schools in their home or similar communities;
- *External programs* which engage industry with schools such as, Agrifutures’ rural entrepreneurship program StartupAUS;
- *Partnerships with local industry* promoting and endorsing education and training (e.g. University College Associate Degrees), which will benefit current and future employees.

The project involves researchers from the University of Tasmania and the University of Wollongong with the first working group meetings beginning in Huonville last week.

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