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Acronyms and Terms

DEECD	Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (Victoria)
DIICCSRTE	Department of Industry, Innovation, Climate Change, Science, Research and Tertiary Education (Australian Government)
FedUni	Federation University Australia (formerly University of Ballarat)
HEPPP	Higher Education Participation Partnership Program
HEESP	Higher Education Equity Support Program
LLENs	Local Learning and Employment Networks
LSAY	Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth
RMIT	Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology
SES	Socio-economic status
SULO	School University Liaison Officer
TAFE	Technical and Further Education
UB	University of Ballarat (Federation University Australia from 1 January 2014)
VET	Vocational Education and Training
VCAA	Victorian Curriculum Assessment Authority
VCAL	Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning
VCE	Victorian Certificate of Education
VCCF	Victorian Careers Curriculum Framework
VMPA	Victorian Multilateral Partnership Agreement
VTAC	Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre

Higher Education¹

Defining higher education in Australia today is complex with an increasing range and number of higher education providers (universities are only one type of higher education provider) and the range in qualifications (certificates, diplomas, degrees) that meet higher education qualifications as defined by the Australian Qualifications Framework 2011. The distinction between 'vocational qualifications' and 'higher education' is becoming blurred.

In addition a number of Tertiary and Further Education (TAFE) providers (formerly associated with vocational training) are adding degrees to their courses and a number of universities (formerly associated with higher education) are operating as 'dual sector' providers with substantial TAFE operations. Private institutions offering both higher and vocational education have increased. 'Tertiary education' historically understood as post school studies is becoming more widely used to cover both vocational and higher education courses.

To be consistent with RSOP information this report uses the term higher education to refer to university study.

¹ Sourced from Norton, A, 2012 *Mapping Australian higher education*, Grattan Institute, Melbourne

RSOP general schools

'General' schools refer to the 41 schools that RSOP works with targeting Year 10 and 11 and selected Year 12 students and parents.

RSOP partnership schools

In 2010 the RSOP adopted a dual-pronged approach with the identification of a sub-set of eight high priority, low SES communities for tailored, intensive engagement with the RSOP. 'Partnership' schools refer to the eight schools that have a deeper engagement with the RSOP involving students from Years 5/6 through to Year 12, parents, principals and teachers.

RSOP schools

RSOP schools throughout this report refers to the schools working with the RSOP in 2013.

Vocational Education and Training (VET)

VET in Schools (VETiS) provides students with broader curriculum options that contribute to completion of Year 12 or equivalent. VETiS subjects may be taken as part of the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) and are a compulsory part of senior and intermediate Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL).

Year 12 or equivalent

In Victoria, Year 12 or equivalent completion includes:

- VCE
- VCAL
- VET at the Australian Qualifications Framework Level II and above
- the International Baccalaureate.

In addition to undertaking a straight VCE or VCAL certificate, students can also study a combination of VCE and VCAL subjects as part of either certificate. VET, including apprenticeships and traineeships at Certificate Level II or above, is considered to be a Year 12 equivalent.

Executive Summary

Federation University Australia's (FedUni) Regional Schools Outreach Program (RSOP) operates with an equity focus, supporting students who are more susceptible to leaving school early and less likely to participate in higher education.

Despite higher education in Australia moving from *the periphery of Australian life to the centre* (Grattan Institute 2012), a number of groups remain significantly under-represented in higher education – students from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds, students from regional and remote areas, and Indigenous students.

The overlap and interrelationship between disadvantage and less favourable attitudes to school and lower aspirations for post-secondary studies are acknowledged in research² and highlighted in higher education statistics. A lower Year 12 participation rate and an under-representation in higher education for students in non-metropolitan Victoria continue to be reported. The recent Victorian Auditor General's report on student completion rates repeats these concerns.

Students in non-metropolitan schools and students from a low SES background have a lower Year 12 or equivalent completion rate than the Victorian average and the gap between metropolitan and non-metropolitan schools and low SES/high SES students is widening.³

The RSOP through Commonwealth Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) funding in collaboration with FedUni implements an innovative tailored program targeting students and schools from regional and remote areas of western Victoria that have less than 50% of students enrol in university.

The RSOP currently works with 49 schools across western Victoria delivering in-school workshops, activities and resources as well as on-campus experiences at FedUni. The RSOP aims to improve access to higher education from students from low SES, regional and remote backgrounds. In 2013 alone the RSOP worked with 5,067 students and 754 parents across 49 schools.

Since commencing in 2008 the RSOP has gathered extensive feedback on their programs. This data has been used to inform and develop program content and expansion. In 2012 an independent impact evaluation was commissioned to report on the impact of the program for participants. This evaluation faced the common challenges when evaluating program impacts in multifaceted environments. Difficulties of drawing consequential conclusions on the impact of the RSOP program on students, parents and schools includes the inability to disentangle a range of multiple influences that may impact on whether a student stays at school or aspires to higher education. To this end the evaluation explored the *contribution* that participation in the program made against RSOP aims, objectives and anticipated outcomes.

² For example: Parliamentary inquiry onto geographic differences in the rate in which Victoria students participate in higher education, Bradley Review of Higher Education, Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth

³ Students Completion Rates, Victorian Auditor-General's report November 2012
<http://www.audit.vic.gov.au/publications/20121128-Students/20121128-Students.pdf>

The evaluation was conducted with permission from the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) and consent from principals to conduct evaluation activities in their school. A total of 356 principals, teachers, students, parents from across 26 schools and all of the RSOP staff participated in the evaluation.

Evaluation data was collected through a mixed method approach – focus groups, surveys and interviews as well as an analysis of RSOP annual evaluation data and available quantitative data on school retention and higher education applications. A thematic analysis of all of this data provides consistent themes across student, teacher, parents, principal and RSOP staff surveys, focus groups and interviews.

RSOP programs, activities and resources are designed to respond to *the complex array of interrelated factors (geographical, socio-economic, cultural⁴)* facing students in rural areas. The RSOP approach and engagement with students, parents and schools is implemented with an understanding of:

- how to increasingly build a foundation for education
- how young people develop aspirations and gain knowledge at different year levels, and
- the socio-economic, cultural and rural environments of the students, the school and the community.

A distinctive feature of the RSOP includes the brokerage and maintenance of collaborations and partnerships with schools and ongoing engagement with students, parents and teachers. Deeper engagement occurs in eight partnership schools involving students, parents and teachers from Year 5 to Year 12. A larger proportion (62%) of the evaluation participants were from partnership schools.

Since 2008 the RSOP has increased the number of students engaged in the program together with program expansion in response to arising needs in school communities. The in-school program is reinforced with student classroom workbooks, teacher resources and parent information. Years 5-12 students and parents are provided with booklets, information sheets and a Year 12 electronic resource. RSOP resources reach further than the schools involved in the program and in 2013 an estimated 8,600 resources were distributed.

RSOP strategies aim to 'Excite, Explore, Empower and Collaborate' with students, parents and schools.

A summary of the evaluation of these strategies is discussed below.

⁴ Inquiry into geographical differences in the rate in which Victorian students participate in higher education Final report Education and Training Committee Parliament of Victoria July 2009



Excite

The RSOP aims to excite students by presenting potential options and building students' capacity and confidence to pursue their educational and career goals. Students provided numerous examples of how the RSOP did this. Involving tertiary student ambassadors from rural areas to talk to the secondary school students was highlighted as a very effective approach.

Using a four-point scale ranging from 'very much' to 'very little' the majority of students (n=200) indicated that the RSOP had 'very much' or 'somewhat' assisted them in deciding that they wanted to stay at school (78%), to complete the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) (74%) and want to apply for university in the future (67%).

Common themes emerging from the student focus group discussions (n=70) were that students found the RSOP interesting and stimulating and that the activities influenced and encouraged students to stay at school and to consider career options or goals.

Post-activity student feedback (collected by the RSOP) provides consistent responses about the impact of the session. The results show that students at different year levels, and after different RSOP activities, consistently report that their participation made a difference to their interest in pursuing higher education.

The extent that the RSOP contributed to school retention and higher education aspirations was discussed in focus groups and interviews with principals and teachers. Principals and teachers acknowledged that students' decisions about staying at school are influenced by a complex interplay of factors such as: peer choices, parents' views, information from teachers and careers' coordinators, and personal choices. However within this context, all principals and teachers agreed that the RSOP *contributed* to school retention. Principals and teachers unanimously rated the RSOP as 'significantly' or 'substantially' influencing students to aspire to higher education and that the program adds value to the schools' goals around student retention and career/study guidance.

Our retention rate now is high and partly because of students having their eyes opened through RSOP to finish Year 12 and to have options.
(School principal)

If this information (RSOP) wasn't here, we would be more reluctant to go to university and would stay in our local area, do a trade or get a job.
(Student focus group)

explore

Explore

Students, principals, teachers and parents overall reported that the RSOP contributes to improving students' understanding of the benefits, importance and relevance of secondary and higher education. Eighty-one per cent of students reported the RSOP helped them to understand the benefits of staying at school 'very much' or 'somewhat'. Four per cent of students reported that the RSOP did not help in this area.

All principals and teachers interviewed reported that the RSOP's approach with students and the program's content had a positive impact on students' understanding of school and corresponding benefits of completing Year 12, reinforcing the messages provided to students by the school. In particular the program had the capacity to provide accessible and relevant information on the links between school, education and careers.

Post-activity student feedback collected by the RSOP shows that students leave the RSOP activities with a greater understanding about the benefits of completing Year 12 and pursuing higher education. Almost all parents (98%) reported that the parent session greatly/somewhat provided practical information to support their child's education. Parents in evaluation focus groups and interviews commented on the benefits and value of having another 'voice' (in addition to parents and schools) informing students of the importance of school.

Having 'real' experiences through the University Experience Days and Camps was reported as invaluable by teachers. For many students this may be the first time they have seen a university and it gives them a taster. From participating in university learning activities and exploring the residences, students can picture themselves at university.

*The RSOP helps you understand what your options are. It influences you to do VCE.
(Student focus group)*



Empower

Evaluation participants – principals, teachers, students and parents– articulated a range of barriers for students from rural areas in accessing higher education, well documented in the research literature.

Difficulties rural students face in pursuing higher education were raised in most interviews and focus group discussions. Students raised issues such as not having any family members or friends who had gone to university, concerns about financial issues, concerns about moving away from home and concerns about the impact their absence may have on the continuation of the family farm or family business. Parents had similar concerns, particularly concerns about the financial impost of supporting students at university, worries about children needing to move out of home, either to student accommodation or housing, the need for rural students living away from home to own a car for return visits to home and concerns about students feeling homesick when living away from home. Higher education was unfamiliar, and not perceived as a realistic option for many students and their families.

Students, principals, teachers and parents consistently reported on the positive contribution of the RSOP towards empowering students to understand, think, aspire, decide and plan their schooling and career pathway.

Students survey results report that for a majority of students the RSOP had 'very much' or 'somewhat' helped them to feel confident about making the right decisions about their future (78%), about understanding pathways into university (79%) and about learning how to overcome practical barriers of going to university (72%).

*The RSOP has taken away the 'fear factor' for students from small communities.
(School principal)*

All principals and teachers interviews indicated that the RSOP effectively empowered students to think about their future. In particular the RSOP presents information that is accessible, stimulating and relevant to rural students and their situations. As a program with a long-term approach, students' self-efficacy can be built over time. This was reported as central to the approach in partnership schools where students can be involved from Year 5. The approach in general schools includes school workshops in consecutive years for students in Year 10 and 11.

Collaborate

Collaborate

Working collaboratively with schools and developing partnerships are core aims and strategies of the RSOP. The RSOP collaborates with schools on a number of levels and principals, teachers and parents consistently reported that the RSOP effectively collaborated with them to support students' knowledge and understanding about the benefits and relevance of secondary school and higher education.

Through interviews, principals and teachers overwhelmingly reported the significant gains for schools and the wider community derived through their participation in the RSOP. The partnership approach, the provision of extra career resources and advice beyond the capacity of the school's resources and that the program provided encouragement and support for teachers work were commonly reported benefits.

A range of benefits for teachers was related across many of the interviews, including exposing teachers to new career teaching material and methods and provision of teacher classroom resources.

Some principals and teachers reported increased participation and engagement of parents with the schools as a result of the RSOP school-based activities and resources.

Parents involved in evaluation interviews, surveys and focus groups from the partnership schools commonly related that the RSOP school visits have developed into a whole-of-school participation and response, providing opportunities for the whole school to come together.

All principals and teachers involved with the RSOP commented on the successful collaborative approach with schools and attributed this to the high level of professionalism, efficient organisational practices and procedures, approachability of staff and the ongoing work on building relationships between the RSOP and schools.

The capacity of the RSOP to maintain partnerships with 49 schools in the FedUni catchment area was considered by some stakeholders to be beneficial for the university, given the program is closely associated with FedUni by participants and all of the resources include the university's logo.

Evaluation findings presented under the strategies Excite, Explore and Empower provide evidence of the RSOP contributing to student decision-making to stay at school and aspire to higher education. A key challenge for the evaluation however is that the RSOP does not work in isolation. Multiple factors may influence student aspirations including local employment opportunities, training opportunities, the labour market, exposure to and impact of career teachers and career expos to name a few.

The RSOP has moved away from a formal careers program and it has a better impact than the normal schools' classroom career program.

(Careers teacher)

Previously parents were disengaged from the school. The RSOP helped getting parents on board.

(School principal)

Increasing student retention and higher education applications

The evaluation explored a range of quantitative data on student retention and applications to higher education from students in RSOP schools. In addition to the multiple factors mentioned that can influence students aspirations, changes to the school leaving age (in 2010), subject choices and changes in eligibility for Youth Allowance support since the start of the RSOP could influence student retention and higher education applications.

The evaluation compiled data on the number of students from RSOP schools who completed senior secondary school/ Year 12 since the beginning of the RSOP program in 2008 to attempt to establish any clear patterns for student retention in these schools. The data shows some small fluctuations occur in student numbers over the past five years and in 2013 there was an additional 247 students completing senior secondary school/Year 12. In addition to the challenges presented above, student /age group population size influences the number of students at schools and precludes the evaluation from establishing a quantifiable link between RSOP and school retention from this data.

DEECD data on government schools sourced in the evaluation also reports rises and falls in apparent retention rates (Year 10-12) across DEECD regions since 2003.

The number of applications to higher education (Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre (VTAC) data from RSOP schools is currently the closest statistic that potentially provides a statistical measure into the contribution that the RSOP has on student aspirations for higher education. A number of limitations and challenges occur when utilising this data to quantify this contribution. In addition to challenges cited above three further considerations need to be taken into account when discussing this data.

These include:

- the number of students who have participated or are participating in the RSOP activities that are eligible to apply for higher education at the time of the evaluation represents only a small proportion of the number of students involved in the RSOP. For example, the 2,474 students involved in Year 10 in-school RSOP activities in 2013 are not be eligible to apply for higher education until 2015.
- VTAC data does not include direct applications to tertiary institutions
- not all students have been exposed to the same level or quantity of RSOP activities.

In 2013, VTAC data reported that 1,562 first preference applications to Victorian universities and TAFE institutions were from students in RSOP schools. This was an increase of 414 applications compared to 2010 (the year that the first students involved in the RSOP were eligible to apply for higher education).

Of these first preference applications in 2013, 348 or 22% were to FedUni. A further 123 direct applications were recorded for FedUni from students in RSOP schools.

Establishing the quantifiable link between RSOP and an increase in higher education applications through available quantitative data sets is limited by the current data and the timing of the evaluation. The data to date provides a baseline for future analysis of change in students applying for higher education over time.

Conclusion

Taking into consideration the many challenges and limitations of the data and context for the evaluation, the evaluation identified that the views of students, parents, principals and teachers were strongly consistent. This data is also consistent with RSOP annual student and parent feedback data, reported since 2008.

The consistency of information about the RSOP from students, principals, teachers, parents and RSOP staff suggests the program makes a significant *contribution* in educational achievements and aspirations for students from low SES backgrounds from regional and remote areas of western Victoria.

*The RSOP is a significant player in the area of educating children in country areas.
(School principal)*

The ongoing need to assist and support these students to reach their educational capacity was reiterated in the evaluation interviews and discussions.

SECTION 1: RSOP CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

'Equity' and higher education

Over the last 40 years, higher education has moved from the periphery of Australian life to the centre. In population terms, one in 267 Australian residents were enrolled in university in 1950, compared to one in 18 in 2010. (In later years, however much of this enrolment growth has come from international students). If current policies are successful, by 2025 40% of young Australian adults will hold a bachelor degree or above.⁵

Who are the students participating in this growth in higher education? Are all young Australian adults provided with the opportunity to undertake higher education if they have the capacity?

The *Bradley Review of Australian Higher Education* (2008) reported on three groups that remain significantly under-represented in higher education – students from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds, students from regional and remote areas, and Indigenous students. At the time of the review a person from a high SES background was about three times more likely to attend university than someone from a low SES background. Access rates for regional students had been steadily decreasing to around 19%, compared with 25.4% for the general population. For remote students the access rate was 1.3%.⁶

There is considerable research literature examining the lower participation rates of people from regional, rural and remote areas (Godden, 2007; James, 2000; James et.al., 1999; Khoo & Ainley, 2005; Long et. al., 2000; Marks et. al. 2000; Stevenson et. al. 2001). Most of the research in this area acknowledges the complex variety of factors that lead to differing participation rates across regions. These include distance from a university campus; the socio-economic status of people living in regional and remote areas; differences in aspirations and attitudes of regional students; Year 12 retention and completion, and the cost of university study. Many of these factors are also interrelated.⁷

Research using Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) data indicates young people from low SES backgrounds have lower achievement, less favourable attitudes towards school and lower aspirations for post-secondary study and careers. Rural young people also have lower rates of participation than metropolitan young people.⁸

The situation in Victoria reflects the Australian scenario.

Unfortunately, while overall higher education participation in Victoria is high, there are substantial and long-standing differences in the rate of participation across different areas and social groups. These differences arise from a complex mix of interrelated geographical, socioeconomic and cultural factors, which begin to affect students well before the transition from school to university.⁹

⁵ Norton, A, 2012, *Mapping Australian higher education*, Grattan Institute, Melbourne

⁶ The Review of Australian Higher Education Report 2008 (Bradley review)

⁷ Regional Participation: The Role of Socioeconomic Status and Access

Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations 2012

⁸ Peer-mentoring of students in rural and low socioeconomic status schools: increasing aspirations for higher education David D Curtis, Aaron Drummond, John Halsey, Michael J Lawson, School of Education, Flinders University NCVET publication 2012

⁹ Inquiry into geographical differences in the rate in which Victorian students participate in higher education Final report Education and Training Committee Parliament of Victoria July 2009
www.parliament.vic.gov.au

According to 2013 Victorian *On Track* data, 43.9% of 2012 Year 12 completers from the lowest SES cohort were enrolled in a bachelor degree by April 2013 compared to an average of 51.1% for all SES categories. The proportion for non-metropolitan Victoria is 38.3% compared with 58.4% for metropolitan Victoria.¹⁰

Key Commonwealth and Victorian government 'equity' initiatives and strategies include:

- the requirement for universities to increase their undergraduate enrolments of Australians from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, including Indigenous peoples and those from regional and remote areas. Universities receive additional funding (4% of total teaching and learning funding in 2012) for the enrolment of students from low SES backgrounds.
- the Commonwealth government target of increasing the number of students from low SES backgrounds to 20% of domestic undergraduates by 2020
- the Commonwealth funded Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) aimed at ensuring Australians from low SES backgrounds who have the ability to study at university get the opportunity to do so
- the Victorian government target of 92.6% of 20-24 year olds attaining Year 12 or equivalent by 2015 (Under the National Partnerships on Youth Attainment and Transitions)
- the Victorian government (nine) School University Liaison Officers (SULO) located across the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development 's (DEECD) four regions support partnerships between Victorian schools and universities to increase the number of students from low SES backgrounds enrolling in higher education
- the DEECD's commitment through the Victorian Multilateral Partnership Agreement (VMPA) to support successful Victorian school-university partnership activities funded through the HEPPP.

The Auditor General's report on student completion rates for Victoria in 2012 recommends that the DEECD should develop specific strategies to increase retention and completion rates for non-metropolitan students from low socio-economic status backgrounds.¹¹

'There is no doubting the importance of geographical differences in higher education participation, or the profound differences in higher education participation across Victorian communities. In every regional location visited by the Committee, as well as many more that the Committee could not reach during this inquiry, access to higher education is a significant concern.'

'The Committee also found that the causes of geographic differences in higher education participation rates go beyond the obvious barriers of distance and costs. They also stem from differences in the ambitions and aspirations of students and their families, school completion rates and academic achievement levels.'

Inquiry into geographical differences in the rate in which Victorian students participate in higher education, Parliament of Victoria July 2009

¹⁰ The *On Track* Survey 2013 The Destinations of School Leavers in Victoria Statewide Report DEECD Victoria

¹¹ Students Completion Rates, Victorian Auditor-General's report November 2012
<http://www.audit.vic.gov.au/publications/20121128-Students/20121128-Students.pdf>

HEPPP program and funding

The HEPPP is aimed at ensuring Australians from low SES backgrounds who have the ability to study at university get the opportunity to do so.

Federation University Australia's (FedUni) RSOP is one of 11 HEPPP programs in Australia funded through the first round of the HEPPP Partnership (component B) competitive bid process. The HEPPP Partnership competitive bid funding is for three years until the end of 2014.

Key points of difference between the HEPPP partnership activities and other university recruitment or marketing programs include that HEPPP partnership activities:

- are informed by access and equity principles
- target populations with low levels of participation in higher education
- aim to develop partnerships with schools and other stakeholders
- have the broad aim of fostering school educational aspirations and achievement and a range of pathways including higher education
- promote higher education and not any particular higher education institution.

Following the Bradley Review of Higher Education and government policy, the previous federal 'equity' funding to universities under the Higher Education Equity Support Fund (HEESP) was replaced by HEPPP funds in 2010, to enable universities to focus on raising the access of people from low SES background. The HEPPP funding includes two components:

- Participation (component A) focusing on access and retention of students from low SES backgrounds
- Partnerships (component B) focusing on outreach activities and partnerships. The funding through this component is allocated through two streams – through direct allocations to each university and through competitive bids.

The aim of the Partnerships component (component B) is to develop and undertake activities in partnership with primary and secondary schools, vocational education and training (VET) providers, other universities, State and Territory governments, community groups, and other stakeholders to raise the aspirations and build the capacity of people from low SES backgrounds to participate in higher education. These initiatives are intended to ensure a coordinated approach to concentrating resources to most effectively target low SES communities where articulation to universities has historically been low.¹²

All HEPPP projects have undertaken annual evaluation or reviews of their specific programs and activities. An overall evaluation of the HEPPP however has not been implemented.

The status of HEPPP funded projects beyond their initial funding period (until December 2014) is unknown at the time of writing the evaluation report.

¹² HEPPP information Department of Industry, Innovation, Climate Change, research and Tertiary Education www.innovation.gov.au/HigherEducation/Equity/HigherEducationParticipationAndPartnershipsProgram/Documents/AIPPartnerships.pdf

FedUni's RSOP

Aims, objectives & strategies

Initially developed in 2008 in response to the then University of Ballarat's (UB) review of UB outreach services, the RSOP aims to increase access to higher education among students from regional/remote and low SES backgrounds in western Victoria. The RSOP strategies are to **Excite, Explore, Empower and Collaborate** with schools, students, parents and the wider school community.

Aim <i>What RSOP wants to achieve</i>	To improve access to higher education among students (participating in the RSOP) from low SES, regional and remote backgrounds.			
Objectives <i>What RSOP wants to do to achieve RSOP's aims</i>	Build aspirations for Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) and higher education (HE). Improve school retention.	Improve understanding of the benefits, knowledge, importance and relevance of secondary and higher education.	Build self-efficacy and confidence in career planning and decision-making.	Strengthen the family, school, support structures for students to access higher education.
Strategies <i>How RSOP do it</i>	Excite	Explore	Empower	Collaborate
Program implementation	RSOP's core goal, 'to improve access to higher education among students (participating in the RSOP) from low SES, regional and remote backgrounds' is implemented through targeted activities including; In-school Workshops, Parent Information Sessions, Teacher Engagement, Classroom Resources, Student and Parent Information Resources, Student Mentoring and University Experience Days and Camps.			

RSOP schools

The RSOP targets government schools in western Victoria with fewer than 50% of students who enrol in university. Currently the RSOP works with 49 schools as indicated on the map below. Whilst the core focus of RSOP is under-representation in higher education, there is considerable overlap with disadvantage related to low SES background.



FIGURE 1: LOCATION OF THE 49 RSOP SCHOOLS IN 2013

Expansion

Since its inception, the RSOP has continued to expand in response to identified need and RSOP goals and priorities. This expansion includes the building of program initiatives and content and a growth in student numbers across year levels. In addition since 2011, the RSOP has deepened its work in eight partnership schools identified as educationally and socially disadvantaged. Work with partnership schools involves students, families and teachers from Year 5 through to Year 12.

TABLE 1: RSOP PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT AND EXPANSION FROM 2008

	School visits by Year level						Parent sessions by student Year level			Uni Experience Days or Camps by Year level			Supplementary Activities		
	5/6	8	9	10	11	12	5/6	8	9	10-12	8	9	10	12	Teacher Briefings
2014											*				
2013						P					*				
2012	P						P				*			P	
2011			P					P			* P	P		P	
2010		P						P							
2009															
2008															
School Year	5/6	8	9	10	11	12	5/6	8	9	10-12	8	9	10	12	All

P – Pilot * Camps

RSOP resources

The RSOP continually develops resources to support their work with students, teachers, and parents. Currently the RSOP has over 14 individual year level resources specifically to engage rural young people and their families. The classroom resources for students and teachers align with Victorian Careers Curriculum Framework (see Attachment 1 for a full listing of RSOP resources).

RSOP management/staff

The RSOP is located within FedUni's Equity and Equal Opportunity Unit. The Manager of Equity and Equal Opportunity is responsible for overseeing the program. FedUni also provide in-kind support for the RSOP through office and operational infrastructure including finance administration, car pool, office building and facilities and IT services.

The RSOP is delivered by fixed-term staff (at 5.6 EFT) and nine casual Senior Student Ambassadors. Program activities are also supported through the recruitment of Student Ambassador volunteers. In 2013, 47 Student Ambassadors from FedUni were trained and volunteered in a range of RSOP sessions (see Attachment 2 for RSOP staffing structure).

Funding

Since 2008 the RSOP has operated with federal government university equity funds. In 2011 the program was successful in obtaining three-year funding (2012-2014) through the Commonwealth HEPPP Partnership (competitive bid) funding stream. A total of \$1,776,076 HEPPP funds have been allocated to the RSOP over three years, until December 2014.

SECTION 2: RSOP EVALUATION

RSOP evaluation

This evaluation was commissioned by FedUni's RSOP to report on the impact of the program for participants – students, their families and the school community. The RSOP collects extensive program feedback from participants to inform program development and planning, and produces annual program evaluation reports. An independent external evaluation focusing on the impact of the program on participants however had not been undertaken.

Effective Change was commissioned in December 2012 to undertake the evaluation.

The following tables outline the relationship between the RSOP aims, strategies and objectives and the impact evaluation.

RSOP Aim	To improve access to higher education among students (participating in the RSOP) from low SES, regional and remote backgrounds.			
RSOP Strategies	Excite	Explore	Empower	Collaborate
RSOP Objectives	Build aspirations for VCE and higher education. Improve school retention.	Improve understanding of the benefits, knowledge, importance and relevance of secondary and higher education.	Build self-efficacy and confidence in career planning and decision-making.	Strengthen the family, school, support structures for students to access higher education.
Evaluation aims	The RSOP evaluation aims to identify the contribution of the RSOP to motivate students from low SES backgrounds in regional and remote areas to stay at school and aspire to higher education.			
Evaluation objectives	Key objectives of the RSOP evaluation are to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • apply rigorous and independent data analysis to provide an insight into and report on the achievements and outcomes of the RSOP • provide an independent summative evaluation of the RSOP's effectiveness against its stated aims and objectives and ascertain where possible the RSOP long term outcome • report on the perceived benefits and impact of the program with students, parents, school principals and teachers involved in the RSOP • communicate the results of the evaluation to key stakeholders (by end of February 2014) • provide analysis / reporting of data that can help create a business case for the continuation of RSOP under FedUni or other funding. 			

Evaluation key areas of enquiry

Key areas of enquiry include:

- Has participating in RSOP activities been beneficial to students and in what ways?
 - Does the RSOP contribute to students' (from low SES, regional/remote backgrounds) aspirations for higher education?
 - Does the RSOP contribute to students' attitude, understanding and confidence in making decisions about their future career and/or educational pathways?
 - Does the RSOP contribute to parents' understanding of and support for their children's future career and/or educational pathways?
 - Has there been an increase in school retention rates, in particular retention/completion rates into VCE over time for schools participating in RSOP?
 - Do more students want to/aspire to apply for higher education?
 - Has there been an increase in higher education application rates from RSOP schools?
 - What impact has the RSOP had for principals and teachers in participating schools?
 - How effective are the partnerships and collaborations between RSOP and participating schools in making a difference for student aspirations to stay at school and/or higher education?
 - How can RSOP collaborations and partnerships be strengthened?
 - Do more students reached by the RSOP apply to FedUni than other universities?
 - What have been the unintended outcomes of the RSOP?
-

Evaluation framework

A RSOP evaluation framework was developed to ensure the RSOP aims, objectives and anticipated outcomes were systematically captured, analysed and reported. The framework detailed evaluation data collection processes, data collection tools including all interview schedules, focus group questions and surveys, sampling techniques, key areas of enquiry and communication with schools, students and parents. (See Attachment 3, Evaluation framework).

The evaluation framework was developed in consultation with the RSOP and received approval from the DEECD to conduct research in schools. The evaluation process required written permission from each school principal prior to undertaking any of the evaluation activities in a school.

The evaluation aimed to include the broad range of schools, students, parents, teachers, principals and stakeholders who had participated in the RSOP. All schools involved in the program were invited to participate in the evaluation, with a deeper evaluation engagement in partnership schools.

The evaluation applied a mixed-methods approach and used a range of data collection instruments – an online student survey, an online and hard copy parent survey, face-to-face interviews with principals and teachers, focus groups with students and parents from partnership schools, face-to-face interviews with RSOP staff and management.

TABLE 2: OVERVIEW – EVALUATION SAMPLE AND METHODOLOGY

Students Parents Principals Teachers	8 partnership schools	Evaluation activities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Year 9/10 student focus groups - Year 11/12 student focus groups - Student (Years 8-12) online survey - Principal/teacher interviews - Parent focus group/ interviews - Parent online survey
	41 general schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Student (Year 10-12) online survey - Year 10 career teacher interviews (sample of 10)
Past RSOP Students	Students on the RSOP volunteer database were invited to participate in a phone interview	
RSOP staff	All RSOP staff were invited to participate in an interview	
Teachers	Teachers attending RSOP Year 10 University Experience Day were invited to participate in an interview	

Quantitative data

Available quantitative data (*My school* database, *On Track* data, Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre (VTAC) data, FedUni direct applications data) was to be explored to ascertain school retention and applications to higher education from students in RSOP schools.

Evaluation timeframe

The evaluation commenced in December 2012 and was completed in February 2014.

Evaluation participants

All 49 schools involved in the RSOP in 2013 were invited to participate in the evaluation. Twenty-six schools agreed to be involved and all RSOP staff resulting in a total of 363 people participating over an eight-month data collection period.

School participation

The evaluation was successful in obtaining permission from 26 principals to conduct evaluation activities in their school. Four principals did not give permission and the remaining 19 principals did not return a permission form.

Obtaining written permission was challenging and usually involved repeated contacts with schools following the initial letter to principals. The 19 schools where there had been no response were contacted four times in an effort to get a response. Without the principal's permission, the evaluation was not able to pursue any evaluation communication or activities with these schools.

Participating schools covered both partnership schools (7) and general schools (19) located in main regional centres (Ballarat, Ararat, Swan Hill and Mildura) as well as throughout the DEECD North-Western and South-Western Victoria regions (see map page 17). Five of the participating schools are identified as 'small schools' by the DEECD.

All but one of the schools participating in the evaluation have been involved with the RSOP since the program commenced in 2008. With the exception of three schools, all of the schools received consistent service each year from the RSOP since 2008.

Schools participating in the evaluation, in particular partnership schools, were very keen to participate and provided their support to implement the school based evaluation activities with teachers, students and parents.

TABLE 3: NUMBER OF EVALUATION PARTICIPANTS BY SCHOOL AND DATA COLLECTION METHOD

Evaluation data collection tools	Partnership schools (7)	General schools (19)	Total participants
Student focus groups Years 9-12	70	-	70
Student on-line survey Years 8-12	122	118	240
Parent interviews/focus group	8	-	8
Parent survey	9	-	9
Principal/teacher interviews	19	10	29
RSOP staff and management	-	-	7
Total sample	228	128	363

The evaluation sample did not include interviews with past students who had participated in RSOP school activities as initially planned as methods applied to contact past students did not result in sufficient numbers. Data from a snapshot survey in 2013 (24 past RSOP students in first year at FedUni) conducted by the RSOP has been included in this report to provide a past students perspective.

Data analysis methodology

Qualitative data

Evaluation data collected through the evaluation focus groups and interviews has been analysed using a thematic analysis approach.

Information from the RSOP annual evaluation reports 2008-2013 has been included where relevant as an addition to the impact evaluation data.

Snapshot data from the RSOP welcome lunch in 2013 of first year FedUni students who had participated in RSOP while at secondary school has been included where relevant.

Quantitative data analysis

Key quantitative data analysed in the evaluation include:

- VTAC first preference university and Technical and Further Education (TAFE) applications and offers by individual RSOP schools for the previous five years was obtained to track any change in volume of applications over this period
- FedUni direct applications data for the previous five years
- available data by individual schools on student retention, students completing senior school certificate and VCE enrolments from *My school* data base, *On Track* data and *Compulsory Completion Achievement Information* from the Victorian Curriculum Assessment Authority (VCAA).

Methodological challenges and limitations

The evaluation was commissioned to report on the impact of the RSOP against the program intent and outcomes. This evaluation faced the common challenges experienced when evaluating program impacts in multifaceted environments. Difficulties of drawing consequential conclusions about the impact of the RSOP program on students, parents and schools includes the inability to control a range of possible factors that may influence a person's actions and/or experience of the program and/or outcomes from the program. To this end the evaluation does not draw a correlation between participating in the program and outcomes, but explores the perceived contribution that participation in the program made against RSOP aims, objectives and anticipated outcomes.

A further challenge for the evaluation is the time lag between involvement in the RSOP and the year students are eligible to apply for higher education. Consequently the number of students eligible to apply for higher education at the time of this evaluation represents a relatively small proportion of students involved in the program. For example, the Year 10 students who participated in the RSOP's first program of activities in 2008 were only first eligible to apply to higher education in 2011. Year 10 students participating in RSOP in 2013 will not be eligible to apply for higher education until 2015 and Year 5/6 students in 2019/2020.

There is also a variety in the length of time that a student may have been involved in the program as well as the level of involvement in one or more of the RSOP activities. The RSOP has continued to develop and expand to offer an increasing range of activities since its inception, thereby presenting challenges for measuring the impact of the program over time on student outcomes.

Key quantitative data challenges

Analysis of university application data to report on the higher education applications from students attending schools involved in the RSOP is limited by the data collection as well as the potential range of higher educational institutions (Victorian, interstate, international) that a student may apply to.

The incompatibility between many of the data sets including incompatibility of timelines, definitions and type of data collected and reported through *My school* data, *On Track* data, *Compulsory Completion Achievement Information* and VTAC data presents a major challenge for data comparisons and analysis. In addition there is not one single data set that captures all of the avenues and processes that a student may apply for higher education through (for example VTAC, direct applications, post-school enrolment).

Analysis considerations and cautions

Any analysis of the impact of the RSOP on student retention and applications to higher education needs to be understood within the context of the limitations of the available quantitative data, the multifactorial influences impacting on a student's decision to stay at school or apply for higher education and the evolutionary changes within the RSOP program since its inception.

Key potential influences on school retention and applications for higher education noted since the start of the RSOP program include:

- changes to the school leaving age – *The Education and Training Reform Amendment (School Age) Bill* 2009, increases the minimum school leaving age to 17. This took effect from 1 January 2010.
- changes to Youth Allowance eligibility and criteria for 'dependent' and 'independent' youth in 2010 had financial implications for students and families
- an increase in subject options and pathways offered to students through the Vocational Educational and Training (VET) subjects and Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) program
- fluctuations in student population numbers
- fluctuations in employment opportunities, the labour market, training opportunities and migration
- environmental conditions (for example effects on a population from drought or fire) and demographic change in rural and regional areas.

The development of the RSOP program since its inception poses considerations when interpreting the evaluation findings and applications data. For example:

- not all students received the same level of RSOP activities or information
- not all students participated in the same activities
- the RSOP program has developed and expanded considerably since commencement
- some students may have only been exposed to RSOP for one year, others for multiple years
- the program in the partnership schools is significantly broader and deeper than general schools
- some of the schools have very small numbers of students.

A further consideration is that a large proportion of the evaluation sample is from partnership schools where the RSOP involved deeper engagement with schools.

In addition to the above considerations, identifying the contribution that the RSOP has towards increasing applications for higher education through the existing data is limited by the timeframe since the RSOP started. Consequently the available applications data is only relevant for a relatively small proportion of the students who have been/or are involved in the RSOP.

The above challenges have been taken into account by the evaluation consultants in drawing conclusions about the impact of the RSOP.

SECTION 3: EVALUATION FINDINGS

The evaluation findings are presented in the following section under RSOP strategies and objectives.

Strategy 1 – Excite

Strategy 2 – Explore

Strategy 3 – Empower

Strategy 4 – Collaborate

RSOP program reach and development

Increasing school retention

Increasing higher education applications

Each of the strategy themes presents the key findings, issues, how the RSOP achieves their objectives, key evidence and discussion.

Strategy 1 – Excite

RSOP Strategies	Excite
RSOP Objectives	Build aspirations for VCE and higher education. Improve school retention.
Evaluation objective	Report on RSOP effectiveness against stated aims. Report on perceived benefits and impact on participants.

Key findings

Students, principals, teachers and parents consistently report that the RSOP contributes significantly to building student aspirations for VCE and higher education. In addition it was found that the program had some influence on school retention, particularly for students who were undecided about staying at school.

RSOP program factors, multifactorial influences on students and data limitations preclude the evaluation from drawing firm quantitative conclusions and correlations between student aspirations and applications for higher education from students attending RSOP schools.

What are the issues?

- Young people in rural areas can experience a complex mix of interrelated geographical, socio-economic and cultural factors which begin to affect students well before the transition from school to university.¹³
- Year 12 or equivalent completion rates in non-metropolitan Victoria has deteriorated since 2006 and the gap between metropolitan and non-metropolitan schools is growing.¹⁴
- Students in rural communities can have limited exposure and understanding of the range of careers and educational options available to them.

¹³ Inquiry into geographical differences in the rate in which Victorian students participate in higher education Final report Education and Training Committee Parliament of Victoria July 2009 www.parliament.vic.gov.au

¹⁴ Student Completion Rates, Victorian Auditor Generals report November 2012

How the RSOP achieves their objectives

The RSOP in-school workshops, resources, University Experience Days, University Experience Camps and student mentoring are key activities where information is delivered to students aimed at increasing their aspirations for school and further education. Program strategies implemented to achieve this aim include:

- presenting a range of in-school and on-campus activities and experiences for students, targeting different stages of student development and year levels
- exposing students to potential opportunities that they would otherwise not have from living in small often isolated and low SES communities
- providing ongoing information and avenues of support for students and teachers (for example practical resources, repeated visits to schools)
- having student ambassadors in program delivery to provide role models and ensure engagement with students
- utilising feedback to inform program development and content
- targeting the program content to be of relevance to students in regional and remote areas.

Key evidence

- Students in Years 8-12 reported that their participation in RSOP activities influenced their aspirations to stay at school and pursue further education. Using a four-point scale ranging from 'very much' to 'very little', the majority of students indicated that the RSOP had 'very much' or 'somewhat' assisted them in deciding that they want to:
 - stay at school
 - complete VCE
 - apply for university in the future.

TABLE 4: YEARS 8-12 STUDENTS RATING OF RSOP HELP TOWARDS DECISION-MAKING ON EDUCATIONAL PATHWAYS

Thinking about your participation in any of the RSOP activities, have they helped you to:	Very much	Somewhat	Total (Column 1 & 2)
• <i>want to stay at school?</i>	49%	29%	78%
• <i>want to complete VCE?</i>	43%	31%	74%
• <i>want to apply for university in the future?</i>	37%	30%	67%
• <i>want to apply for TAFE in the future?</i>	11%	28%	39%
• <i>want to complete VCAL?</i>	12%	23%	35%

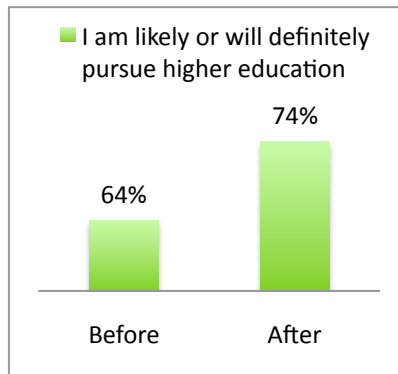
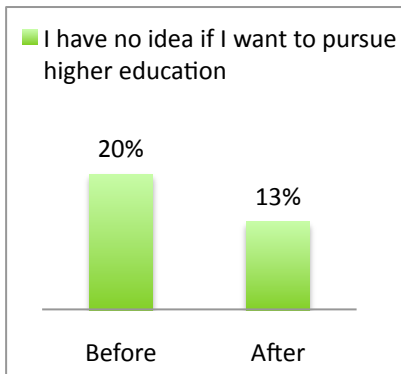
Source: RSOP evaluation student survey (n=200)

- More than three quarters of students reported that participating in the RSOP activities helped them decide that they wanted to stay at school.
- Fewer students aspired to apply for TAFE (39%) or complete VCAL (35%) than those wanting to complete VCE or apply for university.

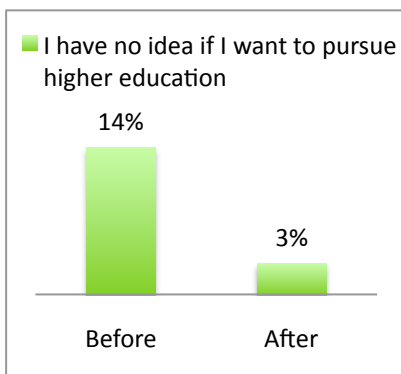
- The Year 9 to 12 student focus group discussions were analysed thematically. Common themes which emerged were:
 - that students found the RSOP information interesting and stimulating
 - that the RSOP information and activities influences and encourages students to remain at school and to consider their career or educational goals.
- The RSOP has had varying influence on students, such as:
 - being the catalyst to stay at school
 - influencing their aspirations to higher education
 - reinforcing their decisions about their future study or career goals.
- Post-activity student feedback (collected by the RSOP) provides consistent responses about the impact of the sessions. Examples from feedback in 2013 are presented in the graphs below. The results show that students at different year levels, and after different RSOP activities, consistently report that their participation made a difference to their interest in pursuing higher education.

FIGURES 2, 3 & 4: IMPACT ON STUDENT DECISION-MAKING FOR HIGHER EDUCATION, POST RSOP ACTIVITY STUDENT FEEDBACK

Year 10 Uni Experience Day 2013 n=126 Year 11 school visit 2013 n=457



Year 12 advisory service 2013 n=115



Source: RSOP 2013 Evaluation Report

- Principals and teachers unanimously rated the RSOP as 'significantly' or 'substantially' influencing students to aspire to higher education.
- In interviews, principals and teachers commonly reported that:
 - the program information interested and excited students
 - students looked forward to participating in RSOP activities
 - the program engages students
 - the program adds value to the schools' goals around student retention and career / study guidance.
- Parents participating in evaluation interviews, focus groups and parent surveys reported the RSOP information helps stimulate students' thinking about their options from an early age.
- Quantitative data on school retention and applications to higher education are discussed separately under increasing school retention findings.

Discussion

The evaluation explored the contribution that the RSOP has made in terms of encouraging students to stay at school and to aspire to higher education. A key challenge for the evaluation is that the RSOP does not work in isolation. Multiple factors may influence student aspirations. These include local employment opportunities, training opportunities, the labour market, exposure to and impact of career teachers and career expos, to name a few. Research (as cited in Section 1 of this report) indicates that for rural students the educational level and expectations of parents is a major formative influence on students' interest in further education and thinking about their future careers.

The RSOP aims to excite students by presenting potential options and building students' capacity and confidence to pursue their educational and career goals. Students provided numerous examples of how the RSOP did this.

Students felt that involving tertiary student ambassadors from rural areas to talk to the rural secondary school students was really effective. Students could relate to the ambassadors, and ambassadors were able to discuss real challenges that rural secondary students face, or worry about, in making the transition to university, and provide some of their real-world examples of dealing with the challenges. Students commented, for example, that (the students ambassadors) *have their own stories and are from country areas. If they can do it (going to university) it's something that I can do as well and having students present is a really good part of the program. You get more real information from student ambassadors as they are not trying to push any particular points.*

If this information (RSOP) wasn't here, we would be more reluctant to go to university and would stay in our local area, do a trade or get a job.

Student focus group

I want to be a nurse, the RSOP helped me to decide this and showed me that I could do it.

Student focus group

After the RSOP visit we got onto the website and did tests of what career suits you best.

Student focus group

Promoting the importance of staying at school, attaining VCE or VCAL and promoting the wide range of further educational opportunities, from TAFE to university, rather than promoting a particular educational pathway or single institution was seen as important by some of the students. A selection of qualitative feedback from students provides some examples and insights into the impact of the program on students.

Principals and teachers consistently commented on the high standard of the RSOP program. They expressed surprise at the enthusiastic responses from students to the program.

This is a very isolated area, there are no tertiary institutions nearby. The RSOP has had a substantial impact. We estimate that 10-15% of students from here going to university/further education is a direct result of the RSOP.

School principal

Principals and teachers observed how effectively the program engaged students, and attributed this to the combination of high-quality and appropriately pitched content, and exciting delivery methods.

The extent that the RSOP contributed to school retention was discussed in focus groups and interviews with principals and teachers. Principals and teachers acknowledge that students' decisions about staying at school are influenced by a complex interplay of factors such as: peer choices, parents' views, information from school teachers and careers' coordinators, and personal choices. However, within this context, all principals and teachers agreed that the RSOP *contributed* to school retention, in particular for students who were initially undecided about whether to stay at school.

Suggestions for improving student retention and aspirations for higher education from some of the career teacher interviews in general schools included targeting of Year 9 students in the RSOP in-school visits and University Experience Days and Camps. These teachers felt that this was an opportune year level as many schools/students have pathways set in Year 10.

The RSOP has influenced some students to stay at school. Most influence is on students who were indecisive about whether or not they would stay at school.

School principal

There are more students staying past Year 10. There are lots of influences on that including the RSOP. The whole school culture has changed.

School principal

Our retention rate now is high and partly because of students having their eyes opened through RSOP to finish Year 12 and to have options.

School principal

A relatively small number of parents participated in the evaluation, however common comments from parents reflect the benefits of the RSOP program related elsewhere in the evaluation.

A snapshot survey in 2013 of first year FedUni students (n=24) who had participated in RSOP activities while at secondary school reflected that the RSOP had influenced them 'greatly' or 'somewhat' to go to university (75%) and that participating in the RSOP had 'greatly' or 'somewhat' made them more likely to go to FedUni (87%).

The RSOP has given students the spark to ignite thinking.

Parent

The RSOP backs up the messages from school.

Parent

One of my children is currently at university. Without RSOP he would never have a) applied, or b) gone to university.

Parent

The RSOP made my younger one (Year 5/6) think more consciously about the future and what she wants to do.

Parent

Strategy 2 – Explore

RSOP Strategies	Explore
RSOP Objectives	Improve understanding of the benefits, importance and relevance of secondary and higher education.
Evaluation objective	Report on RSOP effectiveness against stated aims. Report on perceived benefits and impact on participants.

Key findings

Students, principals, teachers and parents overall reported that the RSOP contributes to improving students' understanding of the benefits, importance and relevance of secondary and higher education.

The RSOP was reported to have a positive impact on student-parent-school relationships.

What are the issues?

- Compared to students in metropolitan areas, students from rural areas leave school earlier and are less likely to apply for higher education.
- Participating in higher education usually requires that rural students move away from home. This can be viewed as a deficit for the family and the local rural community.
- Rural communities have limited exposure to the diverse spectrum of education and career options and opportunities.

How the RSOP achieves their objectives

The RSOP in-school workshops, resources, University Experience Days, University Experience Camps and student mentoring are designed to target specific year levels and demonstrate an understanding of the relevance and value of school and how these impact on a student's future options. Program strategies implemented to achieve this aim include:

- demonstrating the link between school and career options in all of the RSOP workshops with hands-on activities and resources
- providing a practical understanding of education levels, corresponding careers and lifetime outcomes, such as salary differences between graduates and non-graduates
- building and reinforcing the benefits of schooling and higher education throughout the RSOP activities and workshops
- tailoring RSOP workshop and resources content to specifically engage students from rural areas
- building a foundation for education from an early stage (Year 5 students in partnership schools).

Key evidence

- Students in Years 8-12 reported that the RSOP helped them to understand the benefits of staying at school. Using a four-point scale ranging from 'very much' to 'very little', 81% of students indicated that the RSOP had helped them understand the benefits of staying at school, with 40% reporting that the program helped 'very much' in developing this understanding.

TABLE 5: STUDENTS YEARS 8-12 RATING OF RSOP HELP TOWARDS UNDERSTANDING THE BENEFITS OF SCHOOL

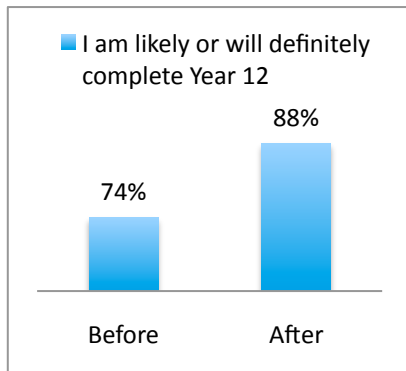
Thinking about your participation in any of the RSOP activities, have they helped you to:	Very much	Somewhat	Total (Column 1 & 2)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> understand the benefits of staying at school 	40%	41%	81%

Source: RSOP evaluation student survey (n=200)

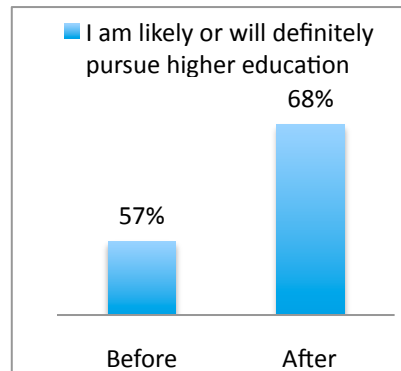
- Four per cent of students reported that the RSOP did not help in this area and a further five per cent stated that they did not know. (RSOP evaluation student survey (n=200))
- In focus groups, students consistently reported that through participating in RSOP activities they gained a better understanding of:
 - the benefits of staying at school
 - how staying at school impacts on future career and education options.
- Post-activity student feedback (collected by the RSOP) shows that students leave the RSOP activities with a greater understanding about the benefits of completing Year 12 and pursuing higher education. Examples of before and after feedback across different year levels and activities are provided below.

FIGURES 5, 6 & 7: IMPACT ON STUDENT DECISION-MAKING TO COMPLETE YEAR 12, KNOWLEDGE OF UNIVERSITY AND PURSUING HIGHER EDUCATION, POST RSOP ACTIVITY STUDENT FEEDBACK

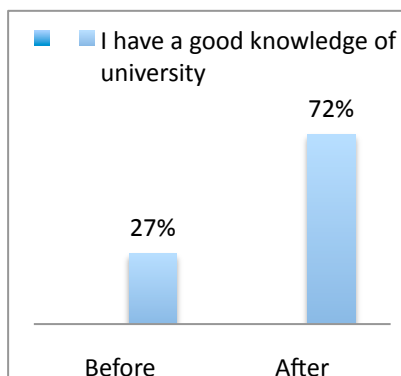
Year 8 school visit 2013, n=116



Year 10 school visit 2013 n= 624



Year 10 school visit 2013 n= 624



Source: RSOP 2013 Evaluation Report

- All principals and teachers interviewed reported that the RSOP’s approach with students and the program’s content had a positive impact on students’ understanding of school and corresponding benefits of completing Year 12, reinforcing the messages provided to students by the school. In particular the program had the capacity to provide accessible and relevant information on the links between school, education and careers.
- Parents participating in the evaluation interviews, focus groups and parent surveys reported the benefits and value of having another ‘voice’ (in addition to parents and schools) informing students of the importance of school.
- Parent feedback to the RSOP following a RSOP parent session overwhelmingly demonstrates the perceived value of these sessions. For example, the 2012 RSOP evaluation reports that:
 - 98% of Year 8 parents reported that the parent session greatly/somewhat provided practical information to support their child’s education (n=250)
 - 91% of Year 10-12 parents reported that the parent session greatly/somewhat provided practical information to support their child’s education (n=170).

Discussion

The evaluation explored the contribution made by the RSOP towards improving students' understanding of the benefits of school and the importance and relevance of secondary and higher education. It is important to acknowledge that there are multiple 'voices' encouraging students to complete Year 12 and consider higher education, including those of schools, parents and young people themselves. The data triangulated from a range of sources shows that the RSOP adds another important voice encouraging students to understand the benefits of completing their secondary education and the importance of higher education to later outcomes in life.

I knew nothing before the RSOP told me. I didn't see the point of finishing Year 12 or university. But RSOP showed me some options.

Year 11 student

The RSOP helps us think about what to do. Especially starting from Year 8. Plants ideas in young peoples heads, time to plan and think.

Year 9 student

A majority of students surveyed (81%) reported that the RSOP 'very much' or 'somewhat' helped them understand the benefits of staying at school. Qualitative feedback from the focus groups illustrates some of the ways this occurred.

The RSOP helps you understand what your options are. It influences you to do VCE.

Student focus group

The RSOP helped me realise that it was good to finish school.

Student focus group

Students participating in the focus groups who were intending to complete Year 12 reported that the RSOP information reinforced their decision. Other students who were unsure about completing secondary school reported that the RSOP influenced their thinking about completing their secondary school education.

Some students, principals and teachers provided examples of how the RSOP was the catalyst for students to further understand and explore their future options.

Having 'real' experiences of university through the University Experience Days and Camps was reported as invaluable by participating teachers. For many students this may be the first time they have seen a university and it gives them a taster. From participating in different university learning activities and exploring the residences, students can picture themselves at university.

A career teacher reported that the university experiences were timely for many students as it supported and linked with work experience, subject selection and pathways discussions. A number of career teachers highlighted the importance of Year 10 students hearing the need to have a range of study areas (science, arts, sport, technology) as part of their uni experience. Suggestions to include some TAFE experiences and to target Year 9 students were also made by career teachers.

Because of RSOP we sit with our career teacher and look at the prerequisites needed for a uni course.

Student focus group

Students access more tertiary information and resources since RSOP. Students walk past the information in the corridor and pick up leaflets about university and TAFE.

School principal

If you don't have proactive parents who are able to take students to open days then all of this information is unknown.

Parent

We discuss career options but the RSOP provides another voice and its good for the children to hear this from someone else.

Parent

Would be good to include more of a focus on VCAL and TAFE so as not to leave out students who are not academically inclined.

Parent

Parent feedback collected through the surveys, interviews and focus groups commonly reported that the RSOP supported parents in discussing the value of school completion and future options with their children. Some parents reported the need to ensure the RSOP information and activities catered for the diversity of students, in particular students who are not interested in higher education.

Strategy 3 – Empower

RSOP Strategies	Empower
RSOP Objectives	Build self-efficacy and confidence in career planning and decision-making.
Evaluation objective	Report on RSOP effectiveness against stated aims. Report on perceived benefits and impact on participants.

Key findings

Students, principals, teachers and parents consistently reported that the RSOP contributes to empowering students to understand, think, aspire, decide and plan for their schooling and career pathway.

What are the issues?

- Students in rural areas can have little exposure and understanding of careers, career pathways and/or educational options outside their communities.
- Students from low SES backgrounds and rural areas face specific barriers to accessing higher education and careers outside their communities. These include financial issues, the need for students to move away from home to pursue further education, distance, and moving from a small community to a bigger town/city.
- Students may not know of any other person or family member who has undertaken higher education.

How the RSOP achieves their objectives

The RSOP in-school workshops, resources, University Experience Days, University Experience Camps and student mentoring are designed to target specific year levels and student decision-making stages. Program strategies implemented to achieve this aim include:

- providing a range of educational and career options and ways for students to explore the relevance of these options for themselves
- having program activities that include stories and examples relevant to students from rural areas with a particular focus of addressing barriers to higher education for rural students
- designing in-school workshops and university experiences to include student ambassadors from rural areas as role models
- providing ongoing reinforcement of information through workshop resources
- consistency of program delivery and messaging over consecutive years.

Key evidence

- Students in Years 8-12 reported that their participation in RSOP activities helped build their confidence and decision-making abilities. Using a four point scale from 'very much' to 'not at all' helpful, the majority of students indicated that the RSOP had 'very much' or 'somewhat' helped them in:
 - understanding more about the pathways into university (79%)
 - understanding more about university life (79%)
 - learning about overcoming practical barriers of going to university (72%)
 - building their confidence in their decision-making abilities (78%).

TABLE 6: STUDENTS YEARS 8-12 RATING OF RSOP HELP TOWARDS UNDERSTANDING UNIVERSITY AND FEELING CONFIDENT IN DECISION-MAKING

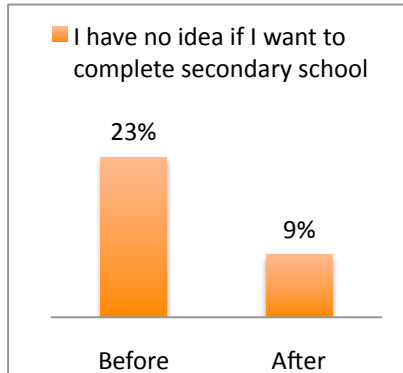
Thinking about your participation in any of the RSOP activities, have they helped you to:	Very much	Somewhat	Total (Column 1 & 2)
• understand about the pathways into university?	36%	43%	79%
• improve your knowledge and understand what university life is like?	36%	43%	79%
• feel confident that you will make the right decisions about your future?	39%	39%	78%
• learn about how to overcome practical barriers of going to university (accommodation, financial support, scholarships, youth allowance etc?)	29%	43%	72%

Source: RSOP evaluation student survey (n=200)

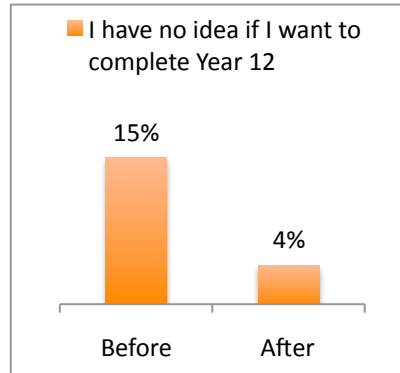
- Only two per cent of students reported that the RSOP had not helped them understand pathways into higher education and a further five per cent did not know. (RSOP evaluation student survey n=200)
- The thematic analysis of the student focus groups showed that self-efficacy development was a common theme to emerge from the discussions.
- Post-activity feedback (collected by the RSOP) provides consistent responses regarding the impact of participating in an RSOP session. Examples of before and after feedback across different year levels and activities are provided below.

FIGURES 8, 9 & 10: EMPOWERING STUDENT DECISION-MAKING TO COMPLETE SCHOOL AND PURSUE HIGHER EDUCATION, POST RSOP ACTIVITY STUDENT FEEDBACK

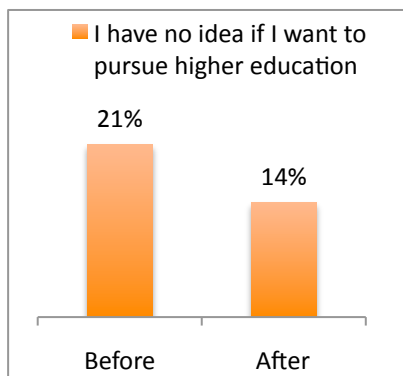
Year 5/6 school visit 2013, n=120



Year 8 school visit 2013, n=148



Year 11 school visit 2013, n=457



Source: RSOP 2013 Evaluation Report

- All principals and teachers interviewed indicated that the RSOP effectively empowered students to think about their future.
- Parents participating in evaluation interviews, focus groups and parent surveys reported that the RSOP gave students a greater capacity to make informed decisions.
- Parent post-session feedback (collected by the RSOP) overwhelmingly indicates the perceived value of the parent sessions. For example, the 2012 RSOP evaluation reports that:
 - 97% of Year 8 families reported that the parent session greatly/somewhat helped parents feel more confident to discuss their child's education with them (n=250)
 - 95% of Year 10-12 families reported that the parent session greatly/somewhat helped parents feel more confident to discuss their child's education with them (n=170).

Discussion

The evaluation explored the contribution made by the RSOP in building students' self-efficacy and confidence in career planning and decision-making. The evaluation found that the views of parents, teachers, principals and students were strongly consistent.

Around four out of every five students responding to the student survey reported understanding more about university, feeling more confident about making the right decisions and understanding more about overcoming practical barriers.

The RSOP shows us how to apply, what to expect, how to compare universities and helps you develop your ideas of where you want to go.

Student focus group

Being so isolated the RSOP has given us a better opportunity and shows us what the opportunities are outside our small community.

Student focus group

The RSOP made us think about university as an option.

Student focus group

We see more kids going to open days, we see that as a direct result of the RSOP.

Careers teacher

Students in focus groups were able to clearly discuss the RSOP, what activities they had participated in, and what they believed were the impacts. All stakeholder groups (students, teachers, principals and parents) reported that the RSOP helps students to understand more fully the various pathways into higher education and how to find the information they require to pursue a particular pathway.

This qualitative feedback is reinforced by the student and parent survey results, and the results from data collected by the RSOP. In combination, all of the evaluation data shows that a better understanding of higher education pathways developed as a result of the RSOP activities.

Developing knowledge about further education pathways and the ability to navigate the various information sources empowers students to continue searching independently for accurate information, as

they move into senior years, or their interests or strengths change. Students emphasised the importance of understanding higher education pathways from the middle years of high school, and understanding the importance of their subject choices as they moved through to their senior years.

Parents reported finding information about pathways into higher education and university quite overwhelming. They appreciated developing their own knowledge about pathways to higher education, so that they were better informed when having conversations with their children, particularly at critical decision points, including post-VCE results. Principals and teachers found that the ability of the RSOP to provide up-to-date and relevant information and strategies for students to think about and discuss what might best suit them to be invaluable.

Isolation is our biggest difficulty as a school community. The RSOP gives students opportunity to think outside the box and see options outside their everyday – different options, courses and pathways, helps them to see beyond our town.

Parent focus group

Student self-efficacy, developed through acquiring knowledge and understanding of the higher education system and the support provided through the RSOP, was discussed as a core contribution of the program in the focus groups and interviews. Having an external program delivered to students in their school environment was considered advantageous by principals and teachers. In particular the RSOP presents information that is accessible, stimulating and relevant to rural students and their situations. As a program with a long-term approach, students' self-efficacy can be built over time. This was reported as central to the approach in partnership schools where students can be involved from Year 5. The approach in general schools includes school workshops in consecutive years for students in Year 10 and 11.

The RSOP activities stimulate some peer discussion – 'you could do this' 'I could see you doing this' etc. it's a boost for their self-esteem.

Parent interview

It's informative and you have fun doing it at the same time!

Student survey

The RSOP activities make the students focus on their personality, their strengths and what might suit them. There are no negatives, it is really empowering.

Parent focus group

Students commonly reported that the RSOP provided a sense of the big picture about what university is like, providing 'real' information about financial and scholarship support, and providing links to further information sources.

Difficulties rural students face in pursuing higher education were raised in most interviews and focus group discussions. Students raised issues such as not having any family members or friends who had gone to university, concerns about financial issues, concerns about moving away from home and concerns about the impact their absence may have on the continuation of the family farm or family business. Parents had similar concerns, particularly concerns about the financial impost of supporting students at university, worries about children needing to move out of home, the need for rural students to own a car for return visits to home and concerns about students feeling homesick when living away from home. Higher education was unfamiliar, and not perceived as a realistic option for many students and their families.

The RSOP parent sessions have been an eye-opener. Parents were amazed to hear about scholarships and other support that students can get. It has taken away the fear of sending their child to university and a big city.

School principal

The RSOP makes parents aware of the options at an early stage and gets us thinking, planning and sorting ourselves out financially.

Parent focus group

The impact of the RSOP in addressing the barriers experienced by rural and low SES background students and their families in accessing higher education was reported as significant and raised in all of the focus groups and interview discussions. Providing students with hands-on experiences of university was commonly mentioned as highly influential for students as well as providing students and families with practical resources and information as highly effective in removing the 'unknown' factor of what university is really like.

Engaging parents as well as students, and providing practical resources and information for both students and parents was reported as a great assistance provided by the program to families.

A key theme in the student and parent feedback was that the RSOP provides information that breaks down the barriers that rural students confront when thinking about university. Using student ambassadors previously from rural areas in the program delivery was highly valued by students and parents. The importance of the positive role models provided by the student ambassadors was consistently raised in the evaluation focus groups and interviews.

Students, parents and teachers agreed the program builds student confidence to explore and consider higher education, through the combined approach of providing information, skilling students and parents with the capacity to navigate information, providing practical and accurate information and authentic experiences of university.

I think the program is great in helping students to understand their future.

Student survey

There are very few jobs or professions in this town. The RSOP gives students the confidence to have the conversation with their parents.

School principal

The RSOP opens up the possibilities for kids to explore what they might like to do – not a tunnel vision, not just farming.

Teacher interview

When the RSOP came to school it helped me decide what I want to get into, what jobs and what options I had.

Student focus group

The RSOP demystifies university for kids and shows that it is not unattainable, not that far away.

Parent focus group

One of our students from a disadvantaged family had not considered going to university because of the cost. The RSOP informed them of financial support options and through having conversations this student was inspired and encouraged to apply for university. The student is now studying at university.

School principal

The RSOP has taken away the 'fear factor' for students from small communities.

School principal

The only improvement suggested by parents was for the RSOP to ensure it also builds the skills and confidence of students who do not plan to go to higher education – with equal focus on non-higher education information, such as moving directly into employment after school, pursuing apprenticeships or other practical options.

Strategy 4 – Collaborate

RSOP Strategies	Collaborate
RSOP Objectives	Strengthen the family, school and university support structures for students.
Evaluation objectives	Report on RSOP effectiveness against stated aims. Report on perceived benefits and impact on participants.

Key findings

Principals, teachers and parents consistently reported that the RSOP contributed to strengthening the relationships between schools and families.

Principals, teachers and parents consistently reported that the RSOP effectively collaborated with schools and parents.

What are the issues?

- Many schools do not have opportunity to participate in student /career development programs due to geographical distances and resource limitations.
- All schools provide career advice however many small schools are challenged to provide a comprehensive career development program within current resources.
- Many families/communities may have little experience and/or knowledge of university life, pathways into higher education or available support structures for rural students to access higher education.
- Students from rural areas can experience a number of barriers to accessing higher education.

How RSOP achieve their objectives

The RSOP aims to build collaborative relationships between the FedUni, RSOP, schools, teachers, students and families to improve regional and remote students' access to and aspirations for higher education.

Working collaboratively with schools and developing partnerships are core aims and strategies of the RSOP. The RSOP collaborates with schools and the wider school community on a number of levels including:

- annual in-school visits to all schools involved in the RSOP
- providing financial support for students and schools to participate in RSOP activities (most program and activity costs are covered by the RSOP to ensure inclusion of all students)
- ongoing communication and contact throughout the school year between schools and the RSOP (resources, website, teacher briefings, expert advice, consultation on higher education options and pathways)
- provision of teacher resources to accompany each of the classroom workshops. These resources correspond and link with the Victorian Careers Curriculum Framework (VCCF).
- provision of student and parent resources specifically addressing barriers experienced by rural students and their families in accessing higher education
- conducting parent workshops as part of the program in partnership schools
- clear feedback mechanisms between schools and the RSOP
- piloting new initiatives with schools prior to roll out. Schools have the opportunity to contribute to the program development.

Work with the eight partnership schools involves a deeper program of engagement to include students from Years 5- 12, parents and ongoing partnerships that extend to the whole-of-school community.

Key evidence

- Through interviews, principals and teachers consistently reported a number of significant gains for schools and the wider community derived through their school's participation in the RSOP. The partnership approach, the provision of extra career resources and advice beyond the capacity of the schools' resources and that the program provided encouragement and support for teachers work were all commonly reported benefits.
- The successful collaborations and positive working relationships between the RSOP and the schools was unanimously raised in all of the principal and teacher interviews.
- Some principals and teachers reported increased participation and engagement of parents with the school as a result of the RSOP school-based activities and resources.
- Parents involved in evaluation interviews, surveys and focus groups commonly related that the RSOP school visits have developed into a whole-of-school participation and response, providing opportunities for the whole school community to come together.

Discussion

The evaluation provided the opportunity for principals and teachers to comment on all aspects of the RSOP through confidential in-depth interviews. Overwhelmingly and consistently the interviews reported significant gains for schools and the wider community derived from their participation in the RSOP.

A key theme drawn from the principal and teacher interviews includes the way that the RSOP complements schools' work in educating young people for their futures. In particular the RSOP collaboration with schools was reported as adding extra career resources and advice beyond the capacity of the schools.

The RSOP takes a partnership approach and directly supports our work with students. It presents what schools are striving for.

School principal

This is a low SES area, school tries to provide opportunities to encourage children to try out experiences. School provides some of this but the RSOP experience adds another layer of opportunity and inspiration.

School principal

Teachers have busy lives and do not have the opportunity (financial, resources, knowledge) to delve into the intricacies of what it means to go to university. Having an external organisation deliver an up-to-date program satisfies our needs – it outsources that role to experts and the students get a greater benefit.

Careers teacher

The RSOP has moved away from a formal careers program and it has a better impact than the normal schools' classroom career program. Children are more engaged.

Careers teacher

I had no idea what some of the children wanted (for their future). The RSOP session gave me a more personal understanding of each child.

Teacher interview

The RSOP provides inspiration around how to have conversations with students about careers and informal discussions.

Teacher interview

A range of benefits for teachers was related across many of the interviews, including exposing teachers to career teaching material and methods and provision of teacher classroom resources.

Principals and teachers discussed the tyranny of distance and the dearth of programs that are delivered in their school. Schools are isolated and have very limited resources and capacity to reach beyond their immediate communities. The RSOP is one of the few programs – for some schools the only external program – that is based at the school. This was repeatedly reported as invaluable.

A further common theme raised by principals and teachers was that the RSOP encouraged school, student and community relationships. Parent participation in the RSOP parent sessions exceeded expectations for many schools. For some schools these sessions were the first time that school had been able to engage with a family. In 2013, 754 parents had participated in RSOP parent sessions and 800 parent resources were distributed.

The financial support enables all students to attend RSOP activities especially the FedUni camps and experience days.

Careers teacher

Benefits for the wider community were also reported in some of the interviews with principals and teachers. Some stakeholders commented that the RSOP contributes to increasing the visibility of university in the community.

All principals and teachers involved with the RSOP commented on the successful collaborative and partnership approach with schools and attributed this to the high level of professionalism, efficient organisational practices and procedures, approachability of staff and the ongoing building on the working relationship between the RSOP and schools.

The RSOP is good publicity for the school. It provides an interesting and engaging program. Wouldn't get that engagement from parents for classroom careers activities.

Teacher interview

Previously parents were disengaged from the school. The RSOP helped getting parents on board.

School principal

Once university was a rare thing to talk about in our community– now it is common.

Parent

The RSOP familiarises the community with the (former) UB.

Teacher interview

By coming to the school the RSOP is known in the community, they stay locally, bring some economy into the community and make further connections with the community.

School principal

The RSOP is a significant player in the area of educating children in country areas.

School principal

The capacity of the RSOP to build and maintain partnerships with 49 schools in the FedUni catchment area was considered to be beneficial for the university, given the program is closely associated with FedUni by participants and all of the resources include the university logo.

RSOP program reach and development

Extent of the RSOP reach

Since commencing in 2008, the RSOP has increased the number of students engaged in the program together with program expansion in response to needs arising in school communities. On an annual basis, the RSOP engagement extends to almost 5,000 students across 49 schools. This reach has been maintained by the RSOP alongside introducing intensive and deeper program delivery in eight partnership schools since 2011.

The RSOP has experienced continued demand from current general schools for additional programs as well as demand for the program from schools not currently involved with the RSOP. Current resource levels however, restrict the RSOP in meeting further demand.

In 2013 4,051 students from Years 10-12 participated in RSOP in-school workshops and a further 275 attended a RSOP University Experience Day at FedUni. One-on-one advice was provided to 120 students involved in the Year 12 Advisory service. Years 10-12 are regarded as a pivotal point for many young people's decision-making for future study and career pathways.

TABLE 7: VOLUME OF RSOP ENGAGEMENT WITH SCHOOLS, STUDENTS AND PARENTS SINCE 2008

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Number of schools participating	43	47	54	54	49	49
Students participating (approx.)	2,100	4,127	4,708	5,947	4,802	4,667
Parents participating (approx.)	-	80	327	595	790	754
University Experience Days participants	-	206	245	363	244	275
University Experience Camps participants	-	-	-	59	115	125

Source: RSOP annual evaluation reports 2008-2013

Partnership schools

In 2011 (after a pilot program in 2010) the RSOP initiated a deeper engagement with eight partnership schools identified as high priority, low SES communities. This deeper engagement involves the targeting of the RSOP at three levels – Primary (Grade 5 & 6), Middle Years (Years 8 & 9) and Later years (Years 10- 12). This three level targeting is designed to layer the information and build interest, understanding and aspirations commencing in primary school through to Year 12.

The deeper engagement with partnership schools also involves parent activities to foster information sharing and discussion. The 2013 parent program presented below shows activities by year level and parent participation numbers.

TABLE 8: RSOP PARENT PARTICIPANTS BY YEAR LEVEL ACTIVITIES

RSOP target audience	RSOP parent activities 2013	Total schools	No. of parents
Primary years parents	Grade 5/6 parent session	8	370
	Year 8 parent session	8	223
Middle years parents	Year 9 parent sessions	8	161

Resource development

Since commencing the RSOP has continually built targeted resources for students, teachers and parents to assist them in knowledge acquisition and working through decisions. (Attachment 1 provides a list of RSOP resources). Providing access to RSOP resources (hard copy and website) extends the reach of the program beyond the annual school visit. In 2013 for example, in addition to each of the 4,667 students receiving resources through in-school visits, a further 130 teacher resources, 800 parent resources, and 3,000 student resources were distributed.

RSOP good practice

The impact evaluation did not focus on the operations of the RSOP or the content of the programs delivered. The RSOP collect pre and post feedback on the activities they deliver from students and parents to inform program practice, development and content.

The quality and professionalism of the RSOP was acknowledged in all of the evaluation interviews with principals and teachers. Reported best practice features included:

- activities are informed by an understanding of the nature of young people's aspirations and how young people gain knowledge
- the information, activities and workshops are tailored to different year levels and the socio-economic, cultural and rural environments of the students, the school and the community
- the activities increasingly build a foundation for education from Year 5 through to Year 12
- the program provides a range of accessible resources for students, teachers, parents and schools
- the program applies consistent feedback systems and evaluation to inform development
- the high standard and quality of RSOP resources and information
- the professional approach applied by all of the RSOP staff.

The RSOP improves each year. I admire their capacity to continuously improve. They pick up on needs and the program has flexibility to grow.

School principal

The RSOP deliver on everything they say they will deliver. It is not a just once visit, they follow-up and return the next year. We are very proud and happy to be associated with the RSOP.

School principal

Parents are very impressed that the RSOP information was related back to the local community.

School principal

Key differences between the RSOP and other programs around school retention and educational aspirations were identified as:

- the partnership approach and relationship building applied with schools
- the RSOP is ongoing and not a one-off program
- the effectiveness and relevance of the content of the RSOP material for rural areas
- the RSOP's capacity and skills to engage with students, parents and teachers
- the RSOP capacity to financially resource student participation in activities.

Increasing school retention

RSOP goals	More students stay at school and complete VCE.
Evaluation area of enquiry	Has there been an increase in school retention rates, in particular retention/completion rates into VCE over time for schools participating in RSOP?

Key findings

Establishing a quantifiable link between RSOP and school retention through available quantitative data sets however is not possible in this evaluation due to data limitations and multifactorial influences on school retention.

Discussion

Student retention is most commonly measured as the number of students who remain in school at a given point in time as a percentage of the number in that cohort who started.

School retention data reports on 'apparent' retention rates to take into account that school retention is influenced by factors not taken into account by this measure such as, students repeating year levels, interstate and overseas migration, transfer of students between education sectors or schools, students who have left school previously returning to continue their school education.¹⁵

Apparent retention rates data sourced in the evaluation indicate fluctuations in these rates across all DEECD regions since 2003¹⁶. Apparent retention rates (Year 10-12) in government schools across some of the (former) DEECD regions indicate:

- lower retention rates for young people in non-metropolitan areas
- considerable fluctuations in rates each year
- the Grampians region increased its apparent retention rate by 0.4% between 2003 and 2012
- Loddon Mallee and Barwon South Western regions decreased their apparent retention rate between 2003 and 2012.

TABLE 9: GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS YEARS 10-12 APPARENT RETENTION RATES (PER CENT) BY SELECTED REGIONS 2003-2012

Selected Regions	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
Barwon South Western	76.4	78.5	75.9	74.5	72.8	72.2	68.5	71.4	72.6	69.9
Grampians	73.4	71.8	74.3	72.9	71.6	71.2	73.9	73.9	73.9	73.8
Loddon Mallee	82	80.5	79.4	77.1	74.9	78	78	77.6	75.7	78.1
Metro Regions	86.3	86.4	86.2	85.1	85.3	83.3	85.4	86.6	87	85.5
Non Metro regions	75.9	76	75.6	73.1	73.4	72.2	72.4	73.9	74	72.4

Source: Summary Statistics Victorian Schools February 2012 DEECD.

No conclusions from this data can be made for RSOP schools, which make up only a proportion of government schools in the (former) DEECD Barwon South Western, Grampians and Loddon regions. The non-metropolitan rates however during this period remain significantly below rates for metropolitan regions.

¹⁵ Summary Statistics Victorian Schools February 2012 DEECD

¹⁶ In 2013 the DEECD amalgamated their nine regions into four. This combines former metropolitan and non-metropolitan regions together, limiting future comparisons between metropolitan and non-metropolitan regions over time.

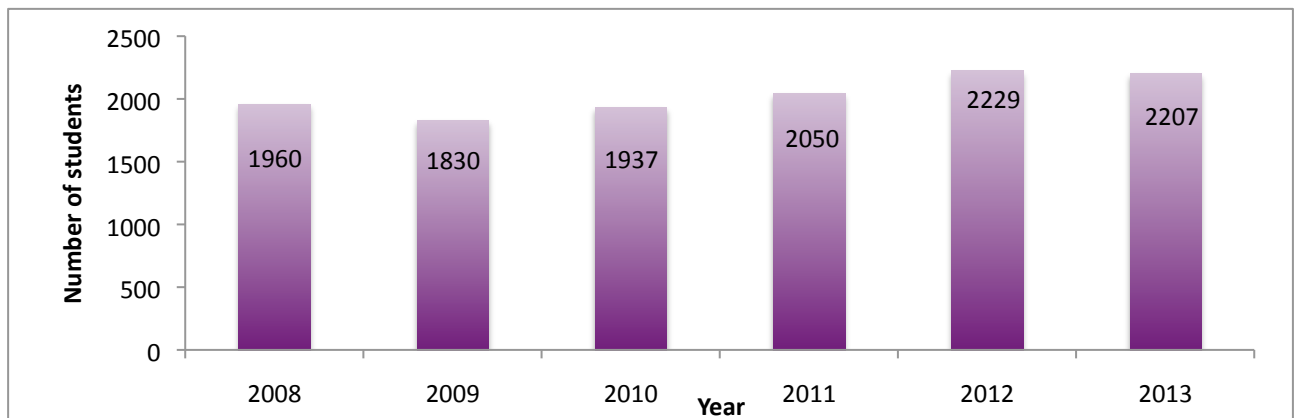
Increase in school completion rates¹⁷

The Auditor General's report¹⁸ on student completion rates for Victoria in 2012 concludes that:

- the proportion of 19-year-olds completing Year 12 or equivalent in Victoria plateaued at around 80 % in 2008 and has not improved since
- students in non-metropolitan schools and students from a low SES background have a lower Year 12 or equivalent completion rate than the Victorian average and the gap between metropolitan and non-metropolitan schools and low SES/high SES students is widening
- DEECD has failed to significantly improve student completion rates in the past 10 years.

The evaluation compiled data on the number of students from RSOP schools who completed senior secondary school/ Year 12 since the beginning of the RSOP program in 2008 to attempt to establish any clear patterns for student retention in these schools. The data shows some small fluctuations occur in student numbers over the past five years and in 2013 there was an additional 247 students completing senior secondary school/Year 12.

FIGURE 11: NUMBER OF STUDENTS WHO COMPLETED SENIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL/ YEAR 12, FROM RSOP SCHOOLS 2008-2013



Source: *My school* data for 2008-2011. Summary Statistics Victorian Schools for 2012 and 2013

Difficulty in drawing any conclusions from this data include the fact that the number of students completing senior secondary schools can be influenced by multiple factors including any change in student /age group population size, labour force factors, training opportunities, subject choices and change in school leaving age.

¹⁷ In Victoria, Year 12 or equivalent completion includes: the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE), the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL), Vocational Education and Training (VET) at the Australian Qualifications Framework level II and above and the International Baccalaureate. In addition to undertaking a straight VCE or VCAL certificate, students can also study a combination of VCE and VCAL subjects as part of either certificate. VET, including apprenticeships and traineeships at Certificate Level II or above, is considered to be Year 12 equivalent.

¹⁸ Students Completion Rates, Victorian Auditor-General's report November 2012
<http://www.audit.vic.gov.au/publications/20121128-Students/20121128-Students.pdf>

Increasing higher education applications

RSOP goals	More students want to/aspire to higher education.
Evaluation area of enquiry	Has there been an increase in students applying for tertiary courses over time for schools participating in the RSOP?

Key findings

In 2013, 1,562 first preference applications to higher education (university and TAFE) were from students from RSOP schools. Of these applications, 348 or 22% were to FedUni. A further 123 direct applications¹⁹ to FedUni were from students from RSOP schools.

It is not possible to establish a quantifiable link between the RSOP and an increase in higher education applications due to data limitations and constraints of time to show affect. The data to date provides a baseline for future analysis of change in students applying for higher education over time.

Discussion

The number of applications for higher education from RSOP schools is currently the closest statistic that could provide a statistical measure demonstrating the contribution made by the RSOP on student aspirations for higher education. However, the evaluators' capacity to draw conclusions from this data is limited by the following factors:

- multiple factors influencing a students aspirations and applications for higher education
- applications to higher education through 'direct applications' to tertiary institutions are not included in the VTAC data collection
- only a small proportion of the number of students involved with the RSOP to date have been eligible to apply for higher education (See Table 1)
- not all schools/ students have been exposed to the same level or quantity of RSOP activities
- some of the RSOP schools have very small numbers (in particular at VCE level) therefore requiring caution when comparing data across schools.

Increase in percentage of students applying for university

Post Compulsory Completion and Achievement Information, Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority data was compiled in the evaluation for RSOP schools from 2008 – 2012. This data provides an indication of the proportion of VCE students applying for higher education by individual RSOP schools.

Conclusions drawn from analysing this data include:

- the proportion of VCE students applying for a tertiary place randomly fluctuates annually for each school between 2008 and 2012. No pattern to this fluctuation can be detected.
- approximately two thirds of RSOP schools increased their proportion of students applying for higher education places between 2008 and 2012; approximately one third decreased this proportion of applications
- the change in proportion of students applying for higher education from RSOP schools (an increase or decrease) does not follow a linear trend between 2008 and 2012
- in 2012 the percentage of students applying for higher education ranged from 38% (one school) to 100% (3 schools). The majority of RSOP schools (20 schools) recorded between 70% and 90% of VCE students applying for higher education followed by 15 schools recording between 50% and 69%. The number of students enrolled in VCE however varies significantly between RSOP schools²⁰ skewing any interpretation of these figures.

¹⁹ Direct application data reliability is dependent on consistency of practice in recording applicant details.

²⁰ In 2012, the number of students per RSOP school enrolled in at least one VCE unit ranged from 4 to 546

An increase in the proportion of VCE students applying for higher education between 2008 and 2012 cannot be identified for RSOP schools utilising the above data but the limitations of this data have been discussed throughout this report.

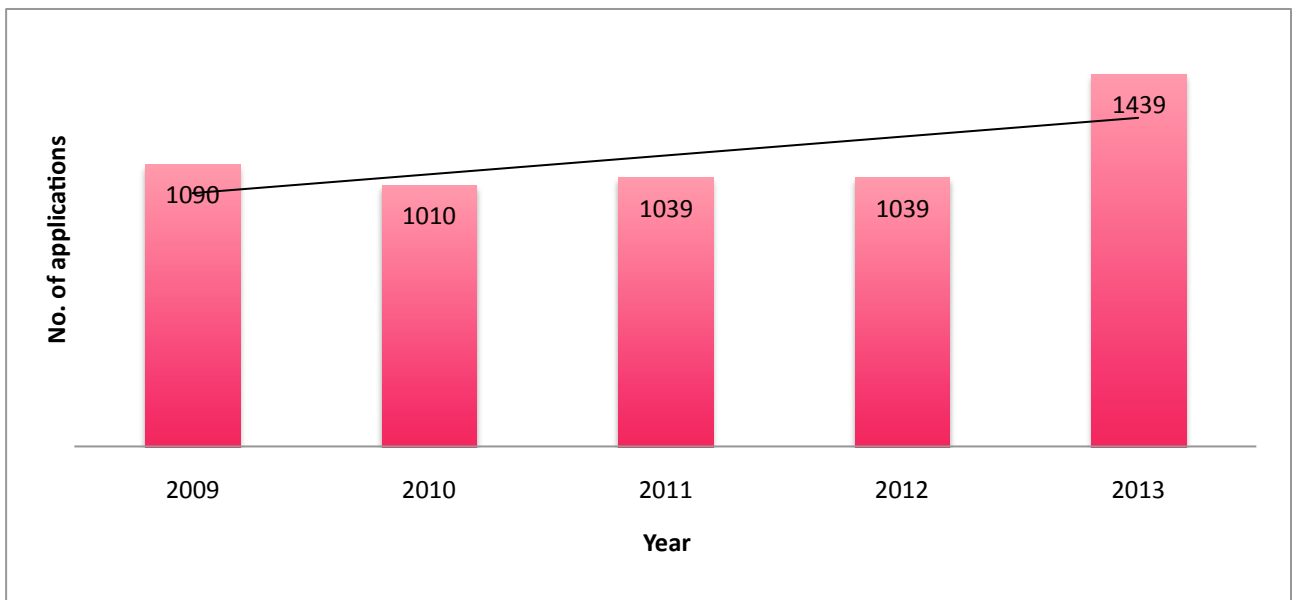
Increase in applications to university and TAFE

The primary source for reporting on tertiary applications is the Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre (VTAC) data. For the purposes of the RSOP evaluation VTAC data was requested on applications from students from RSOP schools for the previous five years.

VTAC data on university applications for students from RSOP schools in 2013 reports that:

- 1,439 first preference applications to Victorian universities were from students from RSOP schools. Of these first preference applications, 324 or 22% were to FedUni.
- there was an increase of 429 first preference applications in 2013 compared to 2010 (the first year some of the RSOP students were eligible to apply for university).

FIGURE 12: FIRST PREFERENCE APPLICATIONS TO VICTORIAN UNIVERSITIES FROM STUDENTS FROM RSOP SCHOOLS 2009-2013



Source: First preference applications and offer data by secondary school and other attributes from VTAC in July of each year. Provided by FedUni

VTAC data on TAFE applications for students from RSOP schools in 2013 reports that:

- 123 first preference applications to all TAFEs in 2013 were from students in RSOP schools. Of these 24 or 19% of applications were for FedUni TAFE.
- there was a decrease of 15 first preference TAFE applications in 2013 compared to 2010 (the first year some of the RSOP students were eligible to apply for tertiary equivalent courses at TAFE).

There are a number of considerations to take into account when interpreting this first preference application data including:

- the number of students in RSOP schools enrolled in at least one VCE unit 3/4 in between 2008 and 2012 was relatively stable²¹
- the number of students in RSOP schools enrolled in VET has steadily increased since 2008 and increased significantly in 2012 (3,167 students enrolled in a VET in 2012)
- the marked increase in first preference applications to universities in 2013 is also evident in a sample of 28 (non RSOP) government school located in the FedUni catchment region
- VTAC data does not report on direct applications to universities.

Direct applications

Direct applications to universities or TAFEs are not included in VTAC data. Direct applications data obtained from FedUni for students from RSOP schools reports:

- 123 direct university applications to FedUni were from students in RSOP schools in 2013.

Direct application data reliability is dependent on consistency of practice in recording applicant details. This data was not available for FedUni TAFE applications. Due to unreliability of data the direct applications data obtained in the evaluation for the previous 5 years was considered as not reliable.

Higher education application statistics summary

TABLE 10: TOTAL APPLICATIONS TO VICTORIAN UNIVERSITIES AND TAFE'S, FEDUNI AND FEDUNI TAFE, FROM STUDENTS IN RSOP SCHOOLS 2009-2013

RSOP schools student applications	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
First preference to Victorian universities	1,090	1,010	1,039	1,039	1,439
First preference to Victorian TAFE institutes	156	138	138	136	123
Total first preference applications	1,246	1,148	1,177	1,175	1,562
First preference applications to FedUni	301	288	279	253	324
First preference applications to FedUni TAFE	32	40	35	36	24
Total first preference applications to FedUni	333	328	314	289	348
Direct applications to FedUni	133	N/A	N/A	150	123

Source: Applications and offer data by secondary school and other attributes from VTAC in July of each year. Provided by the FedUni

²¹ The number of students enrolled in at least one VCE unit 3/4 does not necessarily correspond with number of students taking Year 12.

SECTION 4: SUMMARY CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Summary conclusions

The RSOP evaluation has provided an independent assessment of the impact of the program for participating students, parents and schools as well as the contribution of the RSOP towards student aspirations for school and higher education.

Data collected through evaluation focus groups, interviews and surveys provides a strong and consistent view of the positive contribution that the RSOP makes towards exciting students to stay at school, assisting students and families to explore and understand the possibilities of undertaking higher education, and empowering students and their families decisions on education and career pathways. Principals and teachers unanimously rated the RSOP as 'significantly' or 'substantially' influencing students to aspire to higher education.

The RSOP successfully achieved collaborative working relationships and partnerships with principals, teachers, students and parents and was reported as adding value to the schools' goals around student retention and career/study guidance. In particular the RSOP responds to the specific needs of students in rural areas and helps break down barriers that these students and their families often experience when contemplating education options.

A key challenge for the evaluation was that the RSOP does not work in isolation and there can be multiple factors that influence student aspirations and decision-making. Establishing the quantifiable link between the RSOP and an increase in higher education applications through quantifiable data sets is limited by the current data and the timing of the evaluation. The data to date provides a baseline for future analysis of change in students applying for higher education over time.

Taking into consideration the many challenges and limitations of the data and the context for the evaluation, the evaluation identified that the views of students, parents, principals and teachers were strongly consistent. This data is also consistent with RSOP annual student and parent feedback data, reported since 2008.

The consistency of information about the RSOP from students, principals, teachers, parents and RSOP staff suggests the program makes a significant *contribution* in educational achievements and aspirations for students from low SES backgrounds from regional and remote areas of western Victoria. The ongoing need to assist and support these students to reach their educational capacity was reiterated in the evaluation interviews and discussions.

Future direction considerations

FedUni's RSOP is currently funded through the Commonwealth HEPPP until December 2014.

The RSOP evaluation identified the significant contribution that the program makes in educational achievements and aspirations for students from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds from regional and remote areas of western Victoria.

The evaluation findings provide an independent data analysis to report on the achievements and outcomes of the RSOP. This information can be used to support the development of a business case for the continuation of the RSOP beyond the current funding period.

The following considerations are recommended by the evaluators to strengthen the development of a business case for the continuation of the RSOP.

- The RSOP explore a range of funding sources to ensure continuation of the RSOP with schools from low socio-economic status backgrounds in rural areas of western Victoria. Potential funding partners include Commonwealth and State education sector, FedUni and other educational institutions.
- The RSOP investigate ways of broadening and strengthening collaborations and partnerships with local communities including local government and Local Learning and Employment Networks.
- The RSOP explore opportunities for expansion of the program beyond the current government schools to generate income from their in-school activities, University Experience Days and Camps and classroom, teacher and parent resources.
- The RSOP explore opportunities for expansion and application of their outreach model into other rural areas identified as having low university participation rates.
- The RSOP continue to build evidence to contribute to an understanding the impact of RSOP on applications to higher education through annual tracking of first preference applications for university and TAFE from students attending RSOP schools.

ATTACHMENTS

Attachment 1: RSOP resources 2014

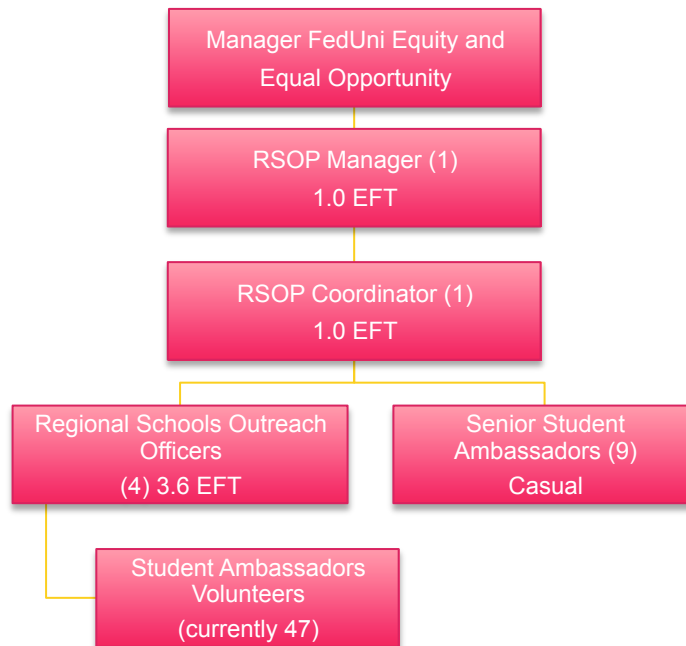
Attachment 2: RSOP staffing structure 2014

Attachment 3: Evaluation Framework

Attachment 1: RSOP resources 2014

Resource	Target
Stepping Up – Creating a pathway to your future Workbook with activities aimed at getting students to start thinking about their future	Year 5/6 students
Stepping Up – Creating a pathway to your future Teachers Guide Workbook resource for teachers for the Grade5/6 program and links to the Victorian Careers Curriculum Framework (VCCF)	Year 5/6 teachers
Stepping Up – Reach for the Stars Workbook with activities and information designed to forge links between school and the future	Year 5/6 students
Stepping Up – Reach for the Stars Teachers Guide Workbook resource for teachers for the Grade5/6 program and links to the Victorian Careers Curriculum Framework (VCCF)	Year 5/6 teachers
The future is now Workbook with activities and information for students to explore self development, careers exploration and informed decision making	Year 8 students
The future is now Teachers Guide Workbook resource for teachers for the Year 8 program and links to the Victorian Careers Curriculum Framework (VCCF)	Year 8 teachers
Focus on your future – A Parent Guide Booklet with information about helping students with their career and future pathways	Year 8-12 parents
Focus on your future Workbook with activities and information to start thinking about the future, choices and what career options are available	Year 9 students
Focus on your future Teachers Guide Workbook resource for teachers with links to the Victorian Careers Curriculum Framework (VCCF)	Year 9 teachers
University – Put yourself in the picture Booklet with information aimed at addressing concerns and unknown questions about university life	Year 10 students
VCE & VCAL – a snapshot Information sheets about VCE & VCAL including subjects and pathways	Year 10-12
University – How to Make it Happen! Booklet with information aimed at addressing concerns and unknown questions about pathways, scholarships, accommodation, transport, living and study costs	Year 11-12 students Parents
Going Places One-on-one advisory service. Includes information sheets on VTAC, change of preference, bridging courses and pathways programs – 'I don't know what to do', 'Support Services Available', 'Making the Transition'	Year 12 students
Ask me...About Uni! On line question and answer service about the barriers, benefits and transition to university life and study	Grade 5/6 – Year 12 students and parents

Attachment 2: RSOP staffing structure 2014



Attachment 3: Evaluation Framework

Key RSOP Outcomes – What RSOP expect/hope to see

- More students aspiring to stay at school
- More students stay at school till VCE
- More students complete VCE
- More students aspire to higher education
- More students apply for tertiary courses
- Increase in positive attitude to higher education
- Increase in level of understanding about the benefits of secondary and higher education
- Increase in self-efficacy and confidence in career planning and decision-making
- Stronger, collaborative relationships between the RSOP, schools, teachers, students and families with regard to improving access and aspiration for higher education
- Improved visibility of 'university' in school communities

Key evaluation questions to report on RSOP outcomes include:

- Has participating in RSOP activities been beneficial to students and in what ways?
- Does the RSOP contribute to students' (from low socio economic, rural/remote backgrounds) aspirations for higher education?
- Does the RSOP contribute to students' (from low socio economic, rural/remote backgrounds) attitude, understanding and confidence in making decisions about their future career and/or educational pathways?
- Does the RSOP contribute to parents' understanding of and support for their children's future career and/or educational pathways?
- Has there been an increase in school retention rates, in particular retention/completion rates into VCE over time for schools participating in RSOP?
- Do more students want to/aspire to apply for higher education?
- Has there been an increase in higher education application rates from RSOP schools?
- What impact has the RSOP had for Principals and teachers in participating schools?
- How effective are the partnerships and collaborations between RSOP and participating schools in making a difference for student aspirations to stay at school and/or higher education?
- How can RSOP collaborations and partnerships be strengthened to support young people (from low socio economic, rural/remote backgrounds) who aspire to higher education to access higher education?
- Do more students reached by the RSOP apply to the UB than other universities?
- What have been the unintended outcomes of the RSOP?

Evaluation sample and methodology		
Students Parents Principals Teachers	8 partnership schools	Evaluation activities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Year 9/10 student focus groups - Year 11/12 student focus groups - Student (Years 8-12) online student survey - Principal/teacher interviews - Parent focus group/ interviews - Parent online survey
	41 general schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Student (Year 10-12) online student survey - Year 10 career teacher interviews (sample of 10)
Past RSOP Students	Students on the RSOP volunteer database were invited to participate in a phone interview	
RSOP staff	All RSOP staff were invited to participate in an interview	
Teachers	Teachers attending RSOP Year 10 University Experience Day were invited to participate in an interview	

Sample	Evaluation approach	Tool A Principal/ teacher interviews	Tool B Parent focus group	Tool C Parent online survey	Tool D Middle years focus group	Tool E Later years focus group	Tool F Student online survey
Partnership schools (8)	On site school visits (4)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Remote school visits (4)	✓ (telephone)	✓ (telephone)	✓	✓ (Skype)	✓ (Skype)	✓
General schools	Sample of 10 schools	✓ (telephone)					✓
	Remaining 36 schools						✓
Camps/ activities	Uni day 6/9	✓					
	Uni day 13/9	✓					
	Uni camp 25-27 Nov	✓					✓