



'I felt like I was the only person in the world studying': place and affect in the constitution of online higher education study for rural Australian students

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Abstract

Higher education study has become more accessible to rural places through the development of stronger technologies, interfaces and pedagogy for online study. However, while these have made higher education more accessible, they also overlook the substantial impact that social circumstances and resources have on the means to meaningfully participate in higher education. Our study, conducted with 38 online higher education students, demonstrates how broader conditions in place shape study experience and possibilities. We consider how place makes certain practices and identities possible or realisable. In particular, we explore how place and affect shape the possibility of online study in rural areas. This includes how relationships in place also shape how higher education is perceived—both through what to study, how and where to study, or whether higher education is deemed to be valuable. Subsequently, the personal resources available to each student—be it social, cultural, educational or economic, have an exaggerated effect on the experiences and outcome of study. We suggest equitable higher education needs to take account of more than just the offering of online study narrowly conceived of a student identity only as a learner, recognising that personal, 'placial' and affective resources are critical in developing a meaningful sense of belonging in higher education.

Keywords Rural · Higher education · Equity · Place · Affect · Online study

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Introduction

Access and participation in Australian higher education for rural, regional and remote (RRR) people has seen substantial and increasing political and policy attention over recent decades. This began with the establishment of formal equity categories following the *Fair Chance for All* white paper (DEET, 1990), where the formal category of RRR was introduced, along with the stated aim of reskilling rural populations for a knowledge economy during early neoliberal economic reform (Dawkins & Kerin, 1989; Author). There has been a wave of reviews and reforms dedicated to identifying and resolving the problem of low RRR participation in higher education, such as Halsey (2017, 2018), and what is known as the ‘Naphthine Review’ (DESE, 2020), yet these reviews largely revealed nothing new. As Ledger and Downey (2018: 1) suggest in relation to Halsey, there are no ‘controversial findings apart from the ever-increasing divide between rural and metropolitan student outcomes’.

While the ambition of policy has remained focused on a ‘traditional’ ideal of higher education participation, the expansion of online delivery is receiving considerable attention as a means for providing access for rural populations that would otherwise be unattainable. This version of access is often argued to be an equitable and inclusive platform for people who either do not have the means or the time to participate via traditional routes. The increasing accessibility of high-speed internet and technology, coupled with flexible and asynchronous delivery of courses, is seen to remove many of the obstacles to access and participation. Subsequently, the rate of students at Australian universities engaging through online and blended approaches have continued to grow (Fan et al., 2024).

However, online learning has come with a host of problems of its own. Central to these are growing attrition and disengagement rates (Fan et al., 2024; Ragusa & Crampton, 2018). As studies have noted (i.e. Corbett et al., 2023), accessibility via online interfaces is often presumed to be the most critical dimension of participation. Problems identified within this literature include inconsistent quality of online pedagogy, and the perceived treatment of online students as lower priority. Higher education providers have hence continued to develop solutions for problems associated with online delivery, including adapting traditional learning and pedagogy with improved resources, teaching modes and interfaces.

While these approaches are important for improving the online learning experience, this paper engages with the broader ‘placial’ and affective conditions that shape rural online student participation. The paper draws on a phenomenological conception of ‘place’ (Casey, 1993, 1997; Massey, 1995) and affect as a way of refocusing the ‘problem’ of rural student experience towards the distinct contexts in which online study is enacted. Place and the ‘structures of feeling’ (Williams, 1977) of affect—conspire to create situated and durable relations that constitute and structure possible and enactable ways of being and identity that beyond individual psychology. A focus on place and affect allows for consideration of the broader social context for people engaged in online study in RRR places. We can therefore take account of how online delivery methods risk reducing student

identity to only that of being a 'learner' (Brooks & O'Shea, 2021), overlooking how place contributes to building a sense of belonging, value and identity in higher education. In focusing on online delivery, place becomes taken for granted in its role in holding 'in place' specific relations to different kinds of opportunities and resources.

While the deeper phenomenology of place is beyond this discussion, we will consider how online learning removes several of the 'thick' places of conventional experiences of study, such as the physical campus and classroom and other university facilities (such as cafes, bars, club spaces). Online learning environments tend to shrink the possibility of thick places connected to higher education study while providing a relative strength to the thicker places of an online student's everyday life beyond study. Or, in other words, a student's individual social position and resources exert more influence on the structuring of meaning and motivation. As we will show, this often means that the strategies available to online students require severe compromise, careful navigation of social expectation, and even idiosyncratic and novel ways of circumventing challenges associated with studying at home in a context of localised stigmas in relation to higher education and its various labours and pathways. The paper itself thus also takes a cursory detour into the issue of rurality and social class. In this context class is viewed as something constituted in and by place, where rurality becomes part of a 'dynamically constructed identity, not simply a geographical location' (Morris, 2011: 259). Class is conveyed through affect in rural place, often as an emotional confrontation with hierarchies of symbolic value (Pini et al., 2010) that are elicited through higher education aspiration and participation.

As a point of caution, we recognise the challenges in taking up the term 'rural' in this paper. As is noted elsewhere (Lumb et al., 2022; Robinson, 2012), rural or RRR tends to reduce entire regions to a homogenised set of relations. This is most notable in terms of how RRR tends to be taken up and defined. Rural, while often recognised as containing different formal equity categorisations (i.e. low socio-economic status) in higher proportions than the general population, overlooks how place itself is intersected by classed, raced and gendered social relations (along with other forms of stratification). It is important therefore to emphasise that rural places *maintain* a distribution of resources both between places (i.e. metropolitan and rural, large and small regions etc.) and within them (i.e. classed relations inside a region). Rural hence is a difficult term for thinking about social exclusion, notably when forms of technological advancement have provided greater means for access to different forms of tertiary educational provision, and so a deeper penetration of educational 'choices' and opportunities available to individuals. This paper is not meant as a critique of online delivery. Rather, it looks beyond the virtual interface, to consider how the peculiar circumstances of study enrich or erode the value and purpose of higher education participation.

Space, place and affect

Before defining the concept of space, it is necessary to take a detour through the far more prominent theory of space. This is because place has taken a backseat to space

and site within contemporary capitalist societies. While there is a much greater philosophical history that accounts for this change (see Casey, 1993, 1997), space and site have become dominant through their effectiveness as tools for governance. The concepts of space and site emphasise replaceability and mobility, allowing for the geographical categorisation of spaces as more homogenous, and hence, more governable. The values and importance assigned to any one site can be moved into any other site or space with minimal degradation. Examples of these logics include modern architecture and planning (for example, where ‘at times you cannot be sure which city you are in’ (Casey, 1997: xiii)) but also in the downplaying of the significance of place in large scale infrastructure projects (for an example of mining induced displacement and connections to place and environment, see Askland and Bunn, 2018). Place comes to be seen as ‘a mere “modification” of space’ (Casey, 1997: x).

Rural higher education policy readily accords with this tradition, as large and distinct geographies and communities become simplified into governable categories, concepts and logics (Lumb et al., 2022). This, as explored elsewhere comes from a form of ‘metonymic reason’ so that broader geographical areas can be made legible to a ‘small policy community’ (Woods, 2011: 240). Rural issues begin as spatialised problems, known through their juxtaposition to the metropole, a ‘metronormativity’ (Roberts & Green, 2013; Roberts et al., 2024). Educational policy has continued to understand rural problems and their solutions in connection to the outcomes desired by an ‘urban middle class’ (Corbett & Forsey, 2017: 429) ignoring the doxic formulation of higher education aspiration and its intersection with rural lives and identities (Gibson et al., 2021). This is evident in an overwhelming research preoccupation with agriculture and stereotypes of white male farmers, ignoring issues of class, race and gender (Pini et al., 2022). Subsequently, rural policy, and notably rural higher education policy, tends towards large scale initiatives insensitive to the specific conditions and intersecting inequalities of rural places.

We argue that the significance of place in the structuring of human experiences can be overlooked when applying ‘solutions’ such as online delivery. We are concerned that with a fixation on ‘solutions’—including online delivery—the *place* of higher education study might be too quickly reduced to the virtual interface.

This, as Casey outlines, contributes to the ‘thinning’ of place:

Only when appropriated (or more precisely, expropriated) do places become closed-in and closed-down sites—which, failing to be genuinely spaced-out, are spread thin in a technological landscape consisting merely of positions and distances, bare locations and barren relations. Such a wasted (and wasteful) site-scene lacks region and is destitute in depth. (Casey, 1997: 341)

Because of this eradication of depth, ‘thin places lack the “rigor and substance of thickly lived places”’. They offer nothing to hold the self in place, and no memorable or resonant command of placial experience’ (Casey, in Duff, 2010: 882).

The concept of place thus draws attention to the relationality between people, landscape material and environment. Place cannot be reduced to a series of particular physical locations or sites, or to physical objects and bodies. Rather, these are co-constitutive of place: specific and enduring relations occur *in place* and in

relation to other places (i.e. Massey, 1995). Place becomes internalised, and in turn, internal dispositions become part of the structuring of place. Place operates to maintain social expectations as to what identities are relevant or acceptable, and what is marked as deviant or stigmatised. Place also holds together our environments, relationships and subjective experiences. Casey (2001) captures this by invoking Bourdieu's *habitus*, as an intermediary between habit and habitation. Place becomes 'embedded in us' (Casey, 2001: 688). To feel that something is possible and meaningful, we must also inhabit places that correspond with embodied disposition.

To this we can add *cohabitation*. Casey raises the work of anthropologist Victor Turner to argue that: 'a *communitas* is not just a matter of banding together but of *bonding together* through rituals that actively communalise people—that require particular places in which to be enacted' (1997: xiv, italics in original). Identity and practice need recognition of their legitimacy both through the sharing of collective value and belief, and through actors that anticipate the legitimacy of certain kinds of actions. When these things are absent, forms of action can quickly become improbable or impossible. This is where collective experiences of affect '*actively constitute or produce place*' (Duff, 2010: 884). As Skeggs (2012: 260) explains: 'we never enter an encounter without history of affect: every time we meet somebody, we experience the encounter through different emotional responses such as disgust, horror, fear, anxiety, dignity, gravitas, pleasure, warmth, kindness'. The possibility of different ways of acting, then, are also composed by the places that we inhabit: we cannot enact practices and actions without the placial and affective conditions to make them sensible, recognisable or desirable.

Methodology

Our study consists of 37 in-depth interviews with 'emplaced' rural students—those who, whether through desire or necessity, are studying higher education online in a rural place. Our research was facilitated through the support of the Country Universities Centres (CUCs), an Australian initiative to provide physical space and personal support for online higher education students in RRR settings.¹ This meant that the basis of our study was both in exploring the experience of students studying online in rural place, but also in understanding the participant experiences of using the CUC's. The current paper only addresses broad experiences of online study without evaluating or exploring the success of the CUC's in their mediation of higher education study in rural places. Elsewhere (Bunn and Lumb, 2024) we have drawn attention to the significance of the CUCs as part of building stronger rural place-based opportunities for higher education.

The authors visited four of these centres located in New South Wales, Australia and conducted almost all interviews in person. Using the 'Australian geographical classification' (AIHW, 2023), two of these centres are classed as inner regional, one as outer regional and the other remote. Because rural Australian places have such

¹ More information about CUCs is available at <https://www.cuc.edu.au/>.

a small number of students studying higher education, our excerpts do not specify physical student location to provide greater anonymity.

CUC staff emailed students registered with the centres to invite their participation. We used a semi-structured interview schedule. The three broad themes covered in the interviews were: (1) Experiences of living in rural places; (2) The experience of studying online and; (3) participant experiences of the CUC's. Participants ages ranged from 18–65+. 27 (71%) of our participants were female, and 10 (29%) were male. This distribution is similar to the figures reported by the CUC, as '80% of CUC students identify as female' (Country Universities Centre, 2023: 8). The predominance of women using the CUC's warrants further analysis and investigation.

The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim. The transcribed interviews were analysed thematically using Nvivo. Almost all interviews were completed with active users of their local CUC. A small number of interviews were with recent graduates, infrequent users and/or people who are registered with a CUC but lived too far away to frequent that centre. Our analysis is guided by our critique of policy through metonymic reason, aiming to provide a greater diversity of understandings of the context of students in rural place.

The themes that emerged have been covered in greater detail elsewhere (see Bunn and Lumb, 2024). These themes broadly related to (1) participants reasons to remain, and experiences of remaining in rural places to pursue study; (2) the experience and challenges of participants studying at a distance and; (3) the role of the Country University Centres in supporting study in rural place.

In this paper, we focus on an analysis of themes that emerged related to participants experience's of studying at a distance. This theme was prominent in our analysis, suggesting that many participants experienced a stark sense of studying in rural place. Given the relative newness of most of the CUC's, almost all our participants had had experience of study before and after the establishment of their local CUC. This provided empirical insight into the formation of student identity before and after students' experiences with a CUC.

As a part of the methodological positioning of this paper, we assume that there is an *absence* that is not being articulated. We aim to draw attention not only to the presence within our current study of rural online student experiences, but also to acknowledge that, given the limitation of the recruitment process, there are likely students who have had more difficult experiences that are not accounted for. Our research is *haunted* by a lingering absence which is too easily overlooked through the presence of data. We see equity and social justice research requiring vigilance about the ways that people are excluded, muted, and made absent, including in this manuscript.

Social recognition and value

As has been suggested in other studies (Corbett et al., 2023), many students appreciate the flexibility of online delivery of higher education. For people with challenging responsibilities and commitments, it may not be possible to even participate in higher education without flexible/asynchronous approaches. However,

as shown in previous work (Bunn et al., 2019), online and flexible study delivery produces a deeply individualised organisation of time. This temporal disorganisation of higher education study puts far greater responsibility for 'making time' on the individual. In these instances, the place that is offered through online study is thinned and puts more emphasis on an individual student's access to affective, social, cultural, material and economic resources. Online learning, while potentially reducing the effects of social stratification in some ways, can also exaggerate them in others.

For rural students in our study, online access often took place at an affective and placial distance from learning communities. While some participants felt comfortable with online learning, many expressed a sense of removal, isolation and loneliness. Our participant Yasmin has previously studied an undergraduate degree at a physical campus before working as a teacher. She moved from a major metropolitan area to an inner-regional area because 'there just weren't teaching opportunities' in the city. Having spent 20 years living in the same regional area, she has returned to study to change her teaching specialisation by completing a graduate-level degree. She expressed that 'I think for [online students] particularly, being online, like I talk about it with the coordinator of my course, that it can be quite a lonely experience'.

While the experience of loneliness and isolation are not exclusive to online learners (i.e. Vytniorgu et al., 2023), online learning provides few alternative forms of sociality beyond the virtual interface. For our participant Sylvia, it has been ten years since completing high school when she decides to begin higher education study. She had grown up in a remote area in NSW working in a number of different jobs in different industries. No one in her family has attended higher education and with limited means for seeking advice she struggled to choose an area of study. She notes how universities are 'just this whole different system that you don't really know how it works and it's really daunting'. This sense of alienation from higher education systems carried over into her studies, where trying to make a connection with lecturers and peers created a greater sense of isolation:

Sylvia: I don't know so, you know, I might write a few things [on online study discussion boards] a couple of times, and get no responses, and then that puts you off from doing it. So it did take a long-time for me to kind of... like I was really motivated to do it. So I got through it, but it was really hard, and it was very, very isolating. I felt like I was the only person in the world studying.

Sylvia suggests that the online space, despite having opportunities for peer interaction, did not necessarily foster a sense of a learning community. Her efforts to reach out for these connections emphasised placial disconnection. These sentiments are broadly reflected in studies examining online study (Corbett et al., 2023; Delahunty et al., 2014; Ragusa, 2017; Ragusa & Crampton, 2018; Rush, 2015; Thomas et al., 2014). In these instances, the *sense* of being a student largely emerges from a student's own sense of motivation and commitment. Students anticipate a *thick-feeling* experience of study (drawing from a dominant imaginary of successful studenthood in higher education) yet experience a relatively *thin-feeling* space. Online learning is experienced as isolating because it offers little of the 'stickiness' of the relations that a thick place holds. Subsequently, the formative conditions for student

identity are difficult to produce when they are located exclusively in an online study space.

The starkness of the online learning experience coincides with the affective absence of higher education in many rural communities. However, there is need for caution in this analysis of the absence of higher education in rural places, as it can present what could be considered a ‘deficit’ understanding of rural communities (see Robinson, 2012). Presenting rural communities as having a limited sense or care about higher education lends itself to the perpetuation of metropolitan narratives of backwardness. A more useful way of framing this discussion is in noting that rural places themselves have generally been excluded from higher education infrastructure and subsequent participation. Rural communities have historically had far less means to access higher education and participate at lower rates than their metropolitan counterparts. Moreover, higher education involvement has typically meant moving away to access high quality provision (Cook & Cuervo, 2020; Farrugia, 2016; Cook et al., 2021; Bunn and Lumb, 2024). Even in making this move rural students will still potentially be met with social, symbolic and economic barriers, including being subtly discriminated against (largely by urban peers) on the basis of rurality and social class (see Cuervo et al., 2023; Delahunty, 2022). Yet, this remains a legitimate trajectory for achieving success for middle class and academically capable rural students (see Holt, 2012).

Young people leaving to pursue higher education tends to produce ‘brain drain’ (Pedersen & Gram, 2018) in rural communities. This also removes from the community those with greater means to understand and legitimate higher education. Moreover, rural places suffer with a transient professional workforce who arrive from the city who take up short-term positions in rural areas as a way of gaining stable work in metropolitan areas in the future. Consequently, higher education participation remains in a stubbornly uneven relationship with rural places.

This is important to developing a sense of student identity, as affects are ‘not only indicative of the subjective mood of certain places; they also frame the array of activities and practices potentially enactable within that place’ (Duff, 2010: 884). The absence of higher education in rural places also makes higher education harder to enact with rural place. As our participant Yasmin explains: ‘being in a regional community, you’re not going to see people on the street that are doing [higher education study]. Very rarely, you might have a friend here or there that might be doing it’. The starkness or even absence of particular affects curtails the means to feel like particular practices or identities are meaningful. In the following excerpt, Rosa recounts a placial-affective sense of non-recognition in discussion with a friend who uses a CUC:

Rosa: Well, even this morning, [a study friend] and I were talking about like how outside of here [the Country Universities Centre], people don’t understand what we’re doing.

Undertaking higher education study is seen as an isolating experience because it is not a shared affective dimension of place. Consequently, study takes place in isolated and isolating places, in virtual spaces that, for participants, have no anchor in the everyday places that they inhabit. The thinness of the online space contrasts

to broader corporeal realities: beyond the interface are the thick, complex affective atmospheres of place. As our participants' perspectives suggest throughout this paper, the affectivity of online study is lost when stepping away from the screen, where walking down the street provides a sense of the absence of the communal value of higher education. This is echoed by our participant Geoff, who has moved from a coastal regional area to an inland outer regional area for work and begun postgraduate studies. He suggests that having the CUC in town is important as it means that there are people who experience the 'ebbs and flows' of study—such as exams. But in contrast 'it can be very isolating to sit in a town like this and think "no one", you walk down the street and think "no one is studying"'. Isolation, then, is being constituted on both sides of the screen—through the thinness of the studentness of online spaces and through the affective absence of higher education study as meaningful practice in the broader community. As indicated by participants above, it is important to note that the CUC's are emerging as spaces that may counter the broader affect of rural place.

The absence of higher education and the subsequent affective isolation of students also intersects with experiences of social class. In this regard, the absence of higher education combines with localised narratives of suspicion and denigration of social mobility. Our participant Isabella remains in the regional town that she grew up in. She left home when she was 17, citing that many of her friends 'couldn't stay at home or didn't have a stable home' and that they had to be 'adults a lot younger than what they probably should be'. Her story suggested that precarity framed many of her peers' young lives, subsequently full-time work—regardless of the role—was crucial for creating stability. Despite, or possibly because of this, social mobility was felt to be derided:

Isabella: when you do tend to step outside of that mould [through higher education participation] you're almost like not ridiculed for it but it's like "Oh, what are you doing?", you know, because you're not doing the norm, and the norm for a town like this is quite lower level simple way of living, so if you see someone that says "No, I don't want to live that way and I want to kind of dream big" or even express themselves in a different way, it's almost like everyone's looking at you like "What are you doing?", whether it's good or bad or a mixture, because it's so uncommon.

Isabella's account demonstrates that 'dreaming big', or various forms of social mobility, are seen to be out of place and are experienced as policed, either directly or affectively. This reflects a common theme in studies of the intersection of the working class and higher education, where forms of 'dreaming big' draw attention to symbolic hierarchies (Mulcahy & Martinussen, 2023; Bunn et al., 2022). Yet, one of the challenges in what is referred to colloquially as 'tall poppy syndrome' is that these are also acts of protection of rural and working-class identities. Moreover, Isabella's peers may experience these things as an inaccessible privilege.

Our participant Rosa came from an inner regional town. Following from Isabella's experience, Rosa also reflects on how social mobility characterised her Dad's experience. Her Dad had stayed at high school until year 11, but as she notes, the general attitude was 'why are you doing that?'. Having moved to a remote town,

Rosa reflects on a sense that her own steps towards professional ascendancy produces a threat to the identities of those who do not boast these ‘aspirations’, begging the question ‘what’s wrong with who we are?’:

Rosa: And so like my old job, so like still am a [low level health worker]... We’re working with health professionals, but there’s kind of this feeling that, and like I’ve had a lot of pushback from my colleagues on my level of, well, ‘what are you doing [higher education study] for?’ Like, what’s the point of studying? Like you’ve already got a job... I hesitate to say there’s anti-intellectualism because I don’t think that’s what it is. I think it’s just... it’s like a cultural thing almost like it’s like, this doesn’t make sense to us. Why, that’s for other people, what’s wrong with who we are? And so then you can put all of this work in and you get a really good result and you can’t share it with most of your world because it doesn’t mean anything to them.

Higher education student identities can represent a challenge, or even a threat, to the sense of meaningful identity that other people in rural place maintain. Studies that have examined the ‘hidden injuries’ of class for higher education students (Threadgold et al., 2018; Lehmann, 2013) have provided a limited reading of how those who *remain* in working class positions might also share in the hidden injuries. Yet, as the excerpt above demonstrates, social mobility enacts symbolic violence through an implied questioning of legitimacy and value. Thus, the affective precarity of student identity for online students is not only being produced through their own *lack* of recognition, but also through the challenge that this recognition presents to other forms of identity, being and meaning in rural place, especially where higher education has little purchase. Studying online presents this experience as far more individualised, since there are less communal resources (for example, from other students) for resilience. Since the ‘norm’ is not to be involved in study, ‘thick’ places *push back* and exaggerate tensions of class in their intersection with higher education.

Academic labour and legitimacy

The limited recognition that was described by our participants as a broader affective sense of rural place also manifested through familial connections and understandings of what constituted meaningful or legitimate labour. In rural places, higher education sits on a sliding scale of practicality for participants and their social networks. While discourses of ‘employability’ have grown in their influence and power throughout the higher education sector (see Lumb and Bunn, 2021), participation was often viewed by participants’ networks, family and friends as being more legitimate when it related to clearly ‘practical’ or tangible employment outcomes. As is shown in other studies (Atkin, 2000), rural communities globally tend to place emphasis on ‘practicality and applied knowledge’ (Pini et al., 2010: 18). Our participant Yasmin reflects on this sentiment as it is expressed by her Mum and whether higher education study related to a clearly defined employment pathway:

Yasmin: There's quite a few people in my life, particularly here, that haven't been to university, but the number one question I get and a few people have said this here too, "What are you doing that for? What job are you going to get out of it? Will that help you get a different job? What job are you going to have from that?" My mum was very much like that. My mum didn't understand back when I did my undergraduate why I went to university. She just didn't get it. "You're doing a Bachelor of Arts?" She didn't get the concept of why someone would go to university unless it was to get a job. She wouldn't have cared what kind of job I did, as long as it was a job. That was her end goal because that was the way that she was brought up.

As we have seen, the broader affects of place play an important role in the identity and sense of value of higher education study. In the case of Yasmin, this sentiment is carried through the legitimacy of different study pathways and their connection to legitimate, or readily recognisable employment opportunities. In another case, our participant Rob, had moved around, having spent much time living in regional and remote areas. He now lives with his partner (who is from a farming family) on a farm in an outer regional area. Rob suggests that study is hard because being on a farm 'there is always something to do'. He feels that this has put pressure on his studies, and that it made more sense to adapt his area of study to better suit the expectations within his community and family. Having almost completed a degree majoring in linguistics, he shifted degrees to nursing, for, as he explains, linguistics had a perceived lack of practicality:

Rob: I have an active interest in languages and linguistics and whatnot, and I've used that a lot, I don't really have much ability to apply that in my current context. So while it annoys me to an extent that I've got two and a half years, or two years down of it and I've practically finished my requirements for my major, it annoys me that I'm not doing it now, or I've taken up a deferral on that and started something else, because if I'm to explain to people out here that I'm studying languages and linguistics, it doesn't ... people go, "Oh, okay, all right, what are you doing that for?" whereas if you explain that you're studying nursing, people are like, "Oh, well that's a great career," and it is, but it makes those conversations easier and I'm interested in a career as nursing.

Rob explains that he finds interest and value in his current area of studying, but still experiences an ambivalence about his reasons to shift degrees. One of his major reasons for this change is affective: that it is 'easier' as it relates to what could be called *recognised labour*:

Rob: You could be doing something better. You should have a good reason why you're not doing farming stuff, and that's what I often feel like: I should have a good reason for why I'm not out there on the tractor or something. Studying languages and linguistics is not one of those reasons. They're like, "Okay, that's interesting and bizarre or eccentric hobby," whereas if you study nursing or something, people can say, "That time that you may spend

studying is important because I can see what a nurse does. Those are things that I can relate to." Something a bit more abstract, people are just, "Oh, okay." I can't say that that was a big focus of why I chose to study it... I've always had an interest in community services and health. It definitely makes it easier. If I'm navigating a conversation with my boss to say, "I need time off to go do a simulation block," or whatever, it makes it easier because it's something that they can see and say, "Yeah, well we need that," or, "I understand that," or, "Wow, that must be hard".

The granted legitimacy of different forms of study are converted to a perceived practicality. Nursing is constructed as having a clear and immediate social value, in contrast to the more indistinct or 'eccentric' value that studies in languages present. However, Rob demonstrates that student identity constructed around disciplines that do not have this convertibility have a far more tentative, if not denigrated, position in rural place. With his studies granted legitimacy, an ease of communication and subsequent recognition of his labour is constituted.

Our study participants also recounted how specific forms of labour required in higher education—such as understanding lectures, participating in classwork, or completing assessments—could be misunderstood or downplayed. Our participant Belle comes from an outer regional town and is the first person to participate in higher education from her family. She notes how her academic interest made her the 'outcast' of her family, where her views were often dismissed. Initially, Belle left home and enrolled in study in a major city but found problems around cost of living and housing so overwhelming that her mental health deteriorated. Belle subsequently moved home, but found that her family was not supportive of the challenge of higher education study:

Belle: I think too, you're at a university so you're at a place where other people are studying ... like my family doesn't get what study is like, my partner doesn't. I talk about doing a 5,000 word essay or whatever and he's like it's not big deal because he's never done it and referencing and that. I've got four assessments due and they're just like, okay? And I'm like, no that's a big deal. So I guess it's just being in a space where you have likeminded people here who have gone through uni and have done the process, know the stresses and value quiet time. You know what I mean?

Belle begins with a reflection on the importance of place. As recounted earlier, rituals of community are enacted in places. Unique placial dynamics operate to legitimise and recognise some practices and identities, and not others. Physical university campuses are seen to offer more moments of identity affirmation through it being a place of study. This comprises bodily practices (sitting in front of a computer, carrying books, waiting outside a lecture theatre five minutes before the hour etc.) that also produce an implicit recognition of student identity. In contrast, Belle suggests that in her immediate network the value and significance of the labour of higher education study can be subverted, disregarded and downplayed. These findings are consistent with a study by Corbett et al. (2023: 121) with students participating in online study; that knowledge and

the subsequent value and recognition of different forms of labour are classed, but also place-specific. The value of higher education is only enactable in places that recognise these forms of knowledge, capability and aptitude as valuable.

Our participant Rosalind now lives in the regional place she grew up in. She left to go to boarding school in a major city before going on to another major metropolitan city to complete her undergraduate degree. Her parents has both completed post-graduate studies. Rosalind had experienced an environment where study is seen as a legitimate form of labour, creating a much greater sense of recognition of higher education student identity:

Rosalind: I think I'm very privileged and lucky; both my parents have gone on to higher education so I'm probably different to some people in country areas. Dad's got a PhD and mum's got a grad dip so research is respected. There is still that thing where everyone else in your family, say, is working around you and you can be seen to be just studying if you're studying full time for a while. So when you - when I - I find when I say to my family, "I'm going in to study at the university centre for a day" that's seen as work. They get that, you know.

Rosalind has a strong awareness of the perception of higher education in 'country areas' and positions her own experience as 'privileged' in this setting. She demonstrates a sense of empowerment through her parent's recognition of study as a legitimate labour ('research is respected'), and so provides a greater conduit toward an affective circulation of the importance and value of higher education study.

Study space and place

For online students whose home is also likely their classroom, the house becomes a space for multiple, and often conflicting, identities. Study participants shared how this dynamic meant for them that various other identities and responsibilities could *enter* the study space in interruptive ways. Our participant Heather had moved from overseas to work in various jobs around regional and remote Australia. She met her now husband and moved to the remote town where he had grown up and started a family. Though being a part of a strong local community, few of her friends and family had studied in HE. This created frustration for Heather, as despite a face-value recognition of study, this did not translate into a respect of the little time she had available to study:

Heather: I've got study to do. "Oh, we'll come over". "No, don't come over. I don't want to see you, go away. This friendship is close to ending. If you keep coming over". It's like, you know? "Yeah. Do it [higher education study]. That's so good for you. That's so good for you, but I'm going to interrupt you as much as I possibly can throughout the whole time". Great, thanks... Oh, looks hard. It's not for me at all. "Did you see that thing on Netflix the other night?"

Heather's experience highlights the difficulties associated with home as a place of study. Rural places can produce a sense of isolation around student identity,

but this is exacerbated when homes are the *exclusive* place for the expression of student identity. Study practices, habits and space are heavily influenced by the individual resources different students have available to them, then, within their homes.

Our participant Edith is a mature student that has moved to a regional town from a major city. She holds an undergraduate degree that she completed while raising children. She has mature children who have left home. Her husband runs a small business, and she works in a professional role that allows her to work from home. In her home, she has a dedicated office:

Edith: I'm really fortunate that I have an office separate to the house. I mean, it's attached to the house but it's not my couch, it's not my kitchen table, it's not my bedroom. I have an actual office space. So in that respect, I think I'm really lucky because then at least I could separate work and home.

Edith reflects on the *separation* that a dedicated study space provides. However, many participants had less than ideal circumstances in the home. These included the intersection of domestic, familial and work responsibilities and commitments, and a lack of an appropriate space. When the home becomes the exclusive place of study, the resources that individuals have at their disposal dramatically impacts their experience of study. In the following excerpt, Louise is a student who has also spent time in face-to-face higher education. She discusses the contrast between this, and the distraction from study at home:

Louise: I loved being on campus. Because you meet some really nice people at uni. I met some really nice people and you just stick with that friend group and they help you out doing all of your class work.

Facilitator: And so you would prefer to be face to face?

Louise: Yeah, I find it easier to learn because I'm actually in class and focused on one thing. But when I'm at home doing an online class, then I can go clean the kitchen or something at the same time and I get distracted.

These stories are a frequent component of student interviews participating in online classes (or even online elements of face-to-face study) (See Burke et. al 2017; Bunn et al. 2019) where students report struggling with different distractions when studying in a household setting. Yet one of the difficulties faced by remote students is that in rural towns there is little in the way of fit for purpose study space. As our participant Jen explains, 'there's nowhere else to go':

Jen: But there's nowhere else to go... I used to try the library, but that was noisy. You couldn't always get a computer guaranteed or desk space you needed. There was one of the librarians who was studying [in higher education] ... [she] would walk past me every so often when she saw me procrastinating and tap me on the shoulder and go, "Study." That was good, but it wasn't a great environment to study in.

Jen again draws attention to a key dimension of how place creates the conditions for what kinds of practices are enactable: not only do many rural places

lack forms of infrastructural recognition, but also a sense of starkness: that just one person can form a crucial support. In these accounts, thick places hold few markers for the recognition of higher education student identity. Their starkness becomes clear in their absence. This is well recounted in Rob's experience. As we noted above, Rob received little recognition for his studies in his local social network. Because he had few spaces at home conducive to study, he tried to escape by taking his van down to the bank of a nearby river:

Rob: I've set up a ... I have a chair and a table and an ashtray next to it but then I feel like, people, if they see me, they would be like, "What the fuck is that man doing there?"

Rob did not experience studying in a van with a sense of recognition. His experience was almost a sense of deviance, as his anticipation of passers-by judging this as strange behaviour. Rob continually returns to an affective experience of higher education study as something that takes him *out of place*.

Conclusion

In this paper we have demonstrated how student identity is wrapped up in 'thick places' outside of the thin place of online study. Despite the considerable dedication and resources behind the development of online learning pedagogies, we argue that these alone cannot compensate for the broader placial and affective conditions of an online student's life. Isolation from peers and the affective absence of higher education in broader place, community and within familial and social connections play important roles in the constitution of study experiences and identities. Yet these are not the only placial/affective experiences possible. Our study has shown that rural place contains different connections to the meaning and importance of higher education.

Important steps are being made to recognise the importance of place in higher education participation. The expansion of the rural university studies hubs (RUSH) network is a good example, and work around this (Bunn and Lumb, 2024; Baker et al., 2025) shows how study hubs can create important and meaningful connections for rural higher education students studying online. However, this cannot be the only answer, as these will not be able to cover the breadth of Australia's very large RRR areas. This paper has provided an argument for why more attention needs to be paid to these matters in the development of online higher education in Australia. There is a need for further research exploring how, or even if, online curriculum and pedagogy can provide greater recognition of how place matters in the constitution of student identity.

Here we agree with Duff (2011: 154) who suggests that 'no one place is likely to generate the same bundle of affective resources for all who experience it yet all places generate affective encounters and so all places have the potential to augment or diminish one's capacities'. Yet while place might not be a determinant, our paper has shown how rural place can exacerbate tensions relating to higher educational participation when understandings of the importance of thick places are ignored.

Normative or flat models of delivery without recognition of social disparities in access to resources will continue to perpetuate an unequal distribution of higher education access and participation along class, gender, race and ableist lines. Careful consideration of how online learning can *invisibilise* differences needs to be central when imagining and implementing initiatives that intend to provide greater RRR access to higher education.

Finally, the paper demonstrates how people with fewer social, cultural and economic resources to leverage online study are much more likely to experience greater challenges in their studies, as other placial forms of value and recognition *compete* in the everyday formation and enacting of identities. Similar to Webb et al (2021), we note that social class and other forms of inequality exaggerate the effects of place and distance, isolation, academic legitimacy and social value. Yet, while we discuss the problem of social class, we do so primarily with a focus on the constitution of, and confrontation with, social-symbolic hierarchies as an affect contained within place. Our analysis does not extend deeply into this issue, and much more attention is required to carefully understand the intersection of rurality and class. Further research and analysis is required that can engage more deeply in how the intersection of rurality and social class conspire in the accessibility, meaning and value of higher education. These require a generative and robust account of the social, cultural and economic conditions that continue to shape rurality and class position in relationship to the broader societal context. An analysis of rurality and class in these circumstances can generate a better understanding of how place carries broader affective regimes while creating nuanced and idiosyncratic renditions and tensions.

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Declarations

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