

Student Vignettes: resources for professional development

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The vignettes in this resource were created from the perspectives of students who came from regional, rural and remote areas. The vignettes are short stories which represent a 'slice of life' (Thomson, 2017). They are interpretations of particular issues or situations that students from regional, rural and remote areas talked about in surveys and interviews. To foreground the voices of these participants, the vignettes are written in the first person (using pseudonyms) and include some additional demographic information.

As an educational tool, the purpose of the vignette is to "stimulate discussion" and is defined by Carolyn Jeffries and Dale Maeder (2011) as:

"a specific type of short, descriptive story that describes a problem ... vignettes are effective because they are brief and relatively easy to construct and administer, provide a useful focus and stimulus for discussion, are valuable in addressing difficult-to-explore and sensitive topics, can be used with individuals and groups ... and reflect real-life contexts and problems" (p. 162)



These vignettes attempt to represent some of the diversity across regional, rural and remote student populations and can be used for professional development or other educational purposes. There are eleven vignettes to choose from: nine representing different university student perspectives and two from final year secondary school students.

The main aim is to provoke thought and discussion on various aspects of higher education participation in light of the regional, rural and remote student experience. This approach may help challenge and/or question current policy and practices that may not take into account some of the complexities presented, or alluded to, in the vignettes. There is unlikely to be one 'right' answer and your responses and approaches to supporting people from these areas should be reflective of the diverse contexts in which you provide that support.

Posing questions helps provoke thought and discussion in relation to the messages within the vignettes. These should be flexible enough that individuals from different groups or different roles "can identify with the story and bring their perspective forward in discussions of solutions" (Campbell n.d. cited in Jeffries & Maeder, 2004, p. 18). Therefore, the broad questions below are a guide only and should be adjusted to suit your specific context(s):

- ✔ What are some of the potential issues/barriers for this person?
- ✔ What are some of their strengths or qualities, and how could these be drawn upon?
- ✔ What issues of equity does the vignette highlight, and how could these be addressed or approached?
- ✔ What kind(s) of support might this person benefit from?
- ✔ How well do your current resources of support this kind of case? And what could be improved?
- ✔ What is not known about this person/situation that would be helpful to know in terms of providing/developing support?

You may also want to look at some of the [Stories](#), which are longer narratives created from a number of students who participated in the [study](#).



References

- Jeffries, C., & Maeder, D. W. (2011). Comparing vignette instruction and assessment tasks to classroom observations and reflections. *Teacher Educator*, 46(2), 161–175. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08878730.2011.552667>
- Jeffries, C., & Maeder, D. W. (2005). Using vignettes to build and assess teacher understanding of instructional strategies. *The Professional Educator*, XXVII (1&2), 17–28.
- Thomson, P. (2017, May 4). [use a vignette – #wakeupreader](#) [patter weblog post]. Retrieved from <https://patthomson.net/2017/05/04/use-a-vignette-wakeupreader/>



VIGNETTES - University students

Linda

My name is Linda, I'm in my thirties with a family and I've almost finished my Education degree. I grew up and lived in regional and remote areas most of my life, which meant that I faced challenges in accessing tertiary education. This is because the support services and facilities were inadequate and often non-existent. That delayed my ability to start university until I was in a position to financially support both myself and my family. When I was considering university, I wasn't even sure how to get in because it had been so many years since I'd finished school. Now as a mum and with my community commitments across several organisations, I had to think about the sacrifices I'd have to make with my family and my community work. I also had to be sure that I could access the support I'd need such as from tutors or the library. It has been hard sometimes, especially completing my professional placements, as my small community has no formal childcare available. Oh ... and internet access and having the resources needed to study, like additional internet, laptop, desk and study space etc, can also be challenging. Last year my travel costs alone exceeded \$10,000!

More about Linda

Linda is 31-40 from an outer regional area, in 3rd year Education, studying fulltime in blended mode. She is from a low-SES background, is carer for her children as well as having community commitments.

Paula

I'm Paula and I'm studying Behavioural Science. I'm in my 30s with a young family and I work part-time. There's lots for me to juggle on a day-to-day basis, I am primary carer for my children with disabilities and I can get overwhelmed, especially as due dates loom. But studying is also rewarding because I'm passionate about what I'm doing and enjoy the pursuit of learning. Before I started, I had to consider travel and time commitments, our tight finances, juggling family commitments, and my lack of self-confidence as well as how my disability would impact my learning, and if I would have enough of a support network around me. Travel is hard and time-consuming and being away from family is hard. It's really important to find yourself an amazing support network. I have been getting good grades despite all the chaos I juggle in my life. So I'd describe it as: overwhelming, stressful, tiring but also extremely rewarding. What keeps me going? My children, my husband, my two closest friends, my sister and my passion. Also, a good cry seems to help.

More about Paula

Paula is 31-40 from an inner regional area. She is in 4th year Behavioural Science, part-time on campus. She didn't move but she does have to commute to attend classes. She is a student with disability, from low-SES situation and is also carer for her children with disability

Macey

Hi, I'm Macey, I'm 20 and am doing what I love - Nursing. I had to move a long way from my family to study Nursing, but at the moment I'm staying with my aunt near the city campus. I grew up in remote Australia, and my sister and I went to the bush school in the community. It was hard to learn because the teachers didn't really know how to teach kids from different cultural backgrounds, plus, I have dyslexia although we didn't know that for a long time. At one stage my mum tried to home-school us, and she was obviously doing the best she could with what she had, but I continued to fall behind. That's when I got diagnosed with dyslexia. I wasn't necessarily born with it but it kind of developed, and it wasn't like how some people get diagnosed when they're five or six. I was older, and I still find it hard to spell and do maths. I had to re-do Year 6 twice - I got held back because I was two years behind in my education in literacy and mathematics, and I was 19 when I graduated from Year 12.

More about Macey

Macey is 18-20 from a very remote region. She is in 2nd year Nursing, doing this on campus. She is a student with disability, from working class background and is first in family at uni. She is 15 hours' drive from her family.

Wendy

I'm Wendy and I was in my 50s when I started a Psychology degree. I had done a Nursing degree 30-odd years ago and worked in mental health so I have that kind of background and then I took time off to have my kids and then followed my husband's career. Because we moved to isolated small towns, there were no hospitals or anywhere for me to work so I focused on raising the kids. Then as they got older, I started to think about doing something. I'd been talking about it for years, and then my son said to me, "just enrol in something, Mum". Psychology has always fascinated me, so I looked at what was available online because we don't have a university here and I didn't want to travel. But even when I did find a course online, I still ummed and ahh-ed. The biggest thing holding me back from saying "Yep, I'm going to do this" came down to confidence. I had spent so long looking after kids as my main role (although it's no small task) and it was kind of like "can I really get back to doing this kind of thing?". And then there was the age thing, "well, I'm 50. By the time I finish, maybe I'll be 56 or older - do I really want to spend all my time doing all of this stuff and knowing that it's going to be really hard and it's going to be difficult?"

More about Wendy

Wendy is 53 from an inner regional area. She is in 2nd year of Social Sciences Psychology, studying part-time, online. She is from a low-SES and working class background. Her children are independent adults but has caring responsibilities for her elderly mother.

Billy

My name is Billy and I'm 20. To do a Commerce degree I had to move away from home because there's no public transport to uni and I don't have a car. While living in small town can be good because you know people and there's a little bit less fear of walking down the streets at night, there's very few opportunities inside the town and the work is very seasonal so during winter it's really hard to find a job. After school I took two gap years, I travelled and worked before I started uni. I decided to go to university because I got tired of the job I was doing, which was loading boats and working long hours. I decided that I didn't want to continue doing jobs like that; I wanted to upskill. Actually, I got interested in finance and accounting when I was at school working at a pizza place; I noticed that my superannuation started to grow and I was wondering how it was doing that. Then I discovered what investing was. I'd like to head in the direction of becoming a financial advisor because I just like the idea of helping people and sharing the knowledge I learned when I was younger.

More about Billy

Billy is 20 from an outer regional area and moved to attend university. He is in 1st year Commerce fulltime on campus. He is first in his family at university and works a casual job.

Caitlyn

I am Caitlyn, 21 years old and doing an Arts degree by distance. Unfortunately moving away wasn't an option and I actually had been knocked back from a couple of jobs because of my disability, so I wasn't financially stable enough to move to the city with everyone else. My biggest struggle was when I first enrolled and I had absolutely no idea where I was going to study because home just isn't an option – there's too many distractions, too many opportunities for procrastination. So, I was actually having a look at my local town library which is open between 9:30 and 5:00 but that didn't really allow me to be flexible with time. University has always been "Yep, I have to do this" and it was just finding the right majors. At the very least, I want written qualifications into the jobs that I'd like to pursue, because what's the point of getting stuck in a job that you're not going to enjoy. But honestly, I'm not quite sure about my direction at the moment because it seems like everything in my life is, you know, one week it's one thing, another week it's another and it's really just trying to take one day at a time. I suppose at the end of it all, the years will be worth it, the knowledge will definitely be worth it. It's just trying to hang in there.

More about Caitlyn

Caitlyn is 21 from an outer regional area, in 3rd year Arts, fulltime online. She is a student with disability, from a low-SES and working class background, and is involved in volunteer work in her community.

Cathy

My name is Cathy and I am 26-30. I'm in my second year of Healthy Ageing. I decided to study online because as a farmer's daughter I have work on the farm so I needed to slot uni into my life. I've worked in aged care before and so I am doing my Healthy Ageing degree because I want to make a difference. And then after this degree I'm planning to do Psychology because rural mental health is so important and we are lacking resources in our smaller communities. Regional communities have so much love and acceptance. In a way, it's like one big family but you're not related, but I have to admit that committing to something, even something that I can see is worthwhile in the long term, was the hardest part. And also knowing all the sacrifices I would have to make.

More about Cathy

Cathy is 26-30 from an outer regional area, in her 2nd year of Healthy Ageing, fulltime in block mode, which is mostly online and there are no placements. She is first in family and from a working class background. She also works fulltime and is involved in extra-curricular activities.

David

My name is David, I'm 46 and I grew in a small town overseas. I came to Australia over ten years ago. I moved to a remote area for work, and compared to the city where I lived for about eight years, people out here are friendlier, but also a bit closed to "newcomers", like me. I decided to go to university to widen my horizons, increase literacy and up-skill myself. I also want to increase public health outcomes for the region through my research. I want to be a good dad for my two kids and give something back. I enjoy carrying out research and want to be engaged in lifelong learning, which can only be positive for my later life; this makes me feel excited. But sometimes the internet connection out here is not stable, which can be frustrating. Actually I'd say the most important thing is to have reliable internet connection. The rest will be sorted as you go along.

More about David

David is 46 from a remote area in 1st year Science, studying part-time in blended mode. He is first in family, mature age and from a non-English speaking background. He two children and works fulltime.

Lucy

Hi, I'm Lucy, I'm 49 and I'm doing an on-campus Arts degree in Sociology but I want to transfer to Social Work, which has always been my passion. Having to move online because of COVID has been massive for me; I had lots of barriers – I'm not very computer literate and I would get very overwhelmed with what I had to do. I would look at all the instructions on our Moodle site and I just didn't seem to be able to navigate it very well. For a lot of us mature-age students, there's huge gaps in terms of technology, I think we can get quite lost. For instance, some of the social media stuff in one class was compulsory but I had no idea how to navigate it because I'd never used it, whereas everyone else in my class knew exactly what they were talking about and how to do it. On a personal level, I have both mental health and a chronic disease, but with mental health I think that's one of the ones where quite often people who are suffering from it can't or aren't capable of participating or of answering questions because they might be having an episode or something is happening in their life at the time. So, quite often, we fall through the cracks.

More about Lucy

Lucy is 41-50 from inner regional NSW, in 1st year of Sociology. She is a mature-age student with disability and comes from a low-SES and working class background. She has two children and is carer for her elderly parents.



VIGNETTES - School students

Amelia, Year 12 regional student

My name is Amelia; I go to a regional high school and I'm in my final year. What I like about living here is that it's quiet, like there's never much traffic around but it's quick to get into town and go to the library or to get to school. I like that we have a small community, so I know lots of people which is good, as opposed to living in a bigger city where you don't know as many people around you. I plan to move away to go to university and study Psychology, then do a Masters and then hopefully do the five-plus-one, so I'll have a year of internship to have more experience in Psychology. I would also like to travel and do volunteer work either in Australia or overseas to complete my Duke of Edinburgh award. One of the challenges was whether I should go straight to university or take a gap year because before COVID I was planning to au pair overseas and then do volunteer work. But with all the border closures, I've decided I'll just do my university degree and travel another time, but before that I was like "Oh yeah, I'll take a gap year because that's what friends and family have done". COVID kind of changed that for me.

More about Amelia

Amelia is 18 and is in her final year at a regional high school. She is a student with disability and from working class background. She has a casual weekend job and she said that going to university is fairly important for reaching her goals.

Sam, Year 12 regional student

I'm Sam and I'm 17 going on 18. I'm currently in Year 12 in a regional high school. We're out in the bush so there's plenty of room to move around and everything. We're off-grid and have no mains water so we're always concerned about that. We've got a big generator and a battery bank and right now, the batteries are all dying so the power's constantly going out and we have to keep running the generator. Yeah, that's a bit annoying. As well as that, we don't really get very good internet because we're running off satellite. I'm planning to move interstate for uni because of the Engineering degree I want to do. What I would like most is a really cool high tech workshop where I could build all of my nut-bag, really dangerous ideas. I would like to think that I would have a little bit of money to be able to get stuff. That's probably a bit selfish but you know, high-tech labs with a whole bunch of stuff for building crazy, nut-bag projects aren't cheap. What I don't really want is to work at Macca's for the rest of my life; that wouldn't be very fun.

More about Sam

Sam is 17 and he is in his final year at an outer regional high school. He lives in an isolated area, off-grid and is one and a half hours drive from school. Sam said that going to university is extremely important for his long-term goals.