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Teacher Education for Rural Communities: A Focus on ‘Incentives’

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Theme: Teacher Education Innovations, Research, Policy, Critique

Abstract
In Australia we face a national crisis in attracting and retaining teachers and other professionals with regard to rural areas. In response to this difficulty in ‘staffing the empty schoolhouse’ (Roberts 2004), the majority of state education departments have initiated some form of rural incentive scheme designed to attract teachers to rural schools. This paper argues that such schemes have little chance of success unless teachers taking up such incentives have actually been prepared for teaching in non-metropolitan schools. Although many universities claim to prioritise rural and regional education and community development as part of their vision statements, in reality relatively few education providers reflect this rhetoric in their practice and only a handful have made direct links to such state-based schemes in pre-service teacher education, or initiated their own rural incentives. A preliminary study into pre-service preparation and rural incentive schemes, as part of a three-year ARC Discovery Grant, indicates that, nationally, the majority of Faculties and Schools of Education have no easily accessible or advertised incentive programs to encourage students to undertake a rural practicum. Nor do many reflect rural education in their course-work.

This paper will introduce the ‘TERRAnova’ project, and then discuss findings of the preliminary work to date that has focussed on identifying incentives and their significance. Drawing on evidence collected from websites from Australian Universities representing all pre-service teacher education programs in the nation, we argue that few Faculties and Schools appear to see it necessary or desirable to provide students with links to information about particular state-based rural funding opportunities. We show how some, either directly or indirectly, imply the importance of a rural practicum, and that a few teacher education programs provide written advice to students who are considering taking up a rural practicum. It is unclear, however, whether follow-up advice is provided, so that the impact and effectiveness of such advice on students’ experiences and willingness to take rural education seriously can be questioned. Our analysis so far indicates that it is the regional universities which are more likely to address rural education needs, and on this basis we question the metro-centricity of teacher education practice more broadly and suggest ways of expanding the options of teachers in their initial teaching appointments.

Key words: Teacher Education, Rural Education, Professional experience, Incentives
The TERRAnova project

TERRAnova is the working name of a collective group of teacher education researchers from around Australia seeking to identify the nature of successful teacher education and recruitment strategies that make rural teaching an attractive and long-term career option for new teachers. The three year ARC-funded project involves a national study of pre-service preparation and rural incentive schemes offered by both University and State teacher recruitment programs, and a study of communities where teacher retention is high.

This project has arisen from our collective interest and research in rural education and more specifically the largely under-researched area of the link between teacher education and the project of sustaining a productive, vibrant, and resilient rural Australia, which we firmly believe is vital for our country’s overall social well being and economic growth. Strategically, it makes sense to improve the economic and social performance of non-metropolitan communities, so that the wealth and competitiveness of Australia as a whole will be maximised (ABS, 2005). Nationally, however, we face a crisis in attracting and retaining teachers and other professionals with regard especially to rural areas (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2000). Current teacher (and other professionals) supply and demand projections suggest an expected national shortfall for rural schools and communities, according to the Australian Council of Deans (1999). If we are to increase our nation’s chances of competing in a global market, then we must focus our attention on improving the educational experiences and opportunities of our rural communities, and this involves among other things making rural teaching an attractive and long term career option.

Currently, a number of disparate, state-based rural teaching financial incentive programs and university-based rural intervention approaches exist all aimed at improving rural recruitment. There is also anecdotal evidence of rural schools and communities that have good teacher retention rates (more than three years). Until now, however, there has been no systematic, national research on the actual success of these various incentives to attract rural teachers or any research into those school communities where teacher retention is high. Our research aims to collect data about what factors contribute to high retention rates and what constitutes successful recruitment strategies.

The TERRAnova study

The study draws on both qualitative and quantitative data across a broad range of stakeholder views, including student teachers, parents, teachers, community and school leaders, policy makers and teacher educators. A cross-comparison analysis of the various incentive schemes will allow us to compare the effectiveness of the different approaches in recruiting and retaining teachers to rural settings.

The major aim of the study will be achieved through the following three objectives:
1. Identification and documentation of key indicators for success in retaining rural primary and secondary teachers. At present we have little systematic evidence about the characteristics of beginning and early career teachers who remain for an extended period of time in rural and remote schools or information about the nature of communities in which such teachers are supported to successfully begin and sustain a teaching career. This research will identify rural schools that have a comparatively high teacher retention rate. Teachers and community members associated with these schools will then be invited to participate in the study to establish key factors related to leadership, school support and community practices that are successful in retaining staff in their communities.

2. Identification and documentation of successful teacher education ‘interventions’ aimed at promoting rural teaching. A survey will be used to identify those practices currently existing in Australian universities that are specifically aimed at promoting rural teaching. Student teachers who participate in such programs will be invited to evaluate their effectiveness in terms of providing information about rural teaching, and their success in convincing them to apply for a rural appointment as an early-career teacher. Those beginning a rural career will be tracked over this time to establish if, and how long, they stay in a rural position and what factors have impacted on their decision to either remain or move on after two years.

3. Identification and documentation of successful state-based financial ‘incentive’ programmes aimed at promoting rural teaching. A survey will target student teachers who take up state- and system-based financial incentives offered to support student teachers willing to undertake a rural placement as part of their initial teacher education.. This smaller group will be surveyed separately, to investigate the nature and impact of this ‘situated’ teaching experience. They will also be invited to participate in a two-year tracking process that will allow us to determine the success of the programs in terms of the numbers who go on to begin teaching in a rural school, and who intend to remain in the position after two years. As these interventions are a considerable expenditure item in each jurisdiction, it is important to understand the nature of their success in the attraction and longer-term retention of new teachers.

While TERRAnova broadly focuses on the three areas identified above, this paper specifically explores preliminary data gathered in preparation for the national survey investigating university-based and State based rural incentives. A first sweep of university-based and State based rural incentives was conducted by the TERRAnova research assistant who examined each University’s teacher education website for easily accessible information about rural education incentives and opportunities. State based information was also gathered from the various Department of Education websites.

State based incentives
The initial sweep of State based incentives identified a variety of different schemes. In NSW a program, entitled Beyond the Line, is designed to promote country teaching outside of the usual scholarship incentives for student teachers to take up a rural practicum. The program (https://www.det.nsw.edu.au/employment/teachnsw/btl.htm) gives students a taste of teaching and living in rural NSW, by introducing them to schools and communities in the Bourke, Broken Hill, Deniliquin, Dubbo, Griffith and...
Moree areas, and selected schools in the Armidale, Orange and Tamworth areas. The program aims to provide a snapshot of a rural teacher’s life, first-hand experience of country hospitality and the chance to discover more about country areas that hold the greatest number of employment opportunities.

The NSW Department of Education also offers a Teacher Education Scholarship Program designed to recruit quality teachers to, hard to staff rural and metropolitan schools. Each year up to 230 scholarships are offered to support secondary student teachers in mathematics, science, technological and applied studies or English. Scholarships can be for up to 5 years and cover the cost of HECS fees and an allowance of up to $1,500 for each year. Scholarship holders are guaranteed permanent employment in a NSW public school in Sydney's western or south-western suburbs or in a non-coastal rural area of the state.

The Northern Territory Education Department takes a different approach through its website (http://www.teaching.nt.gov.au/index.cfm?attributes.fuseaction=stories) that offers NT stories from teachers discussing their experiences. This is an innovative resource for student teachers to obtain insights into teaching in rural and remote locations. While many of the State Education Department websites advertised the benefits for teachers to take up rural careers, specific incentives for student teachers to find out about rural education were mainly financial and related to completion of a rural practicum.

In 2007/2008 Victoria offered a Student Teacher Practicum Scheme (http://www.teaching.vic.gov.au/news/practicums/default.htm), which is advertised as an initiative that provides financial incentives to eligible student teachers to undertake practicum placements in Victorian government rural and outer metropolitan schools. The scheme provides schools with an opportunity to participate in the training of student teachers and, in turn, enables student teachers to experience a rural or outer metropolitan placement. This scheme also provides the school with the opportunity to see student teachers at work and assess their skills should a suitable vacancy arise in the future. Under the Scheme students who meet the eligibility criteria can claim a one off ‘Living Away from Home' allowance or a 'Travel' allowance for placements of three weeks or longer.

South Australia offered a targeted financial incentive entitled Country Teaching Scholarships (http://www.decs.sa.gov.au/employmentopps/pages/shr2/) designed to attract quality pre-service teacher education students to the Department of Education and Children’s Services (DECS). Students who are accepted into the program receive financial support up to the value of $10,000 while studying a teacher education program full time and permanent employment with DECS upon completing their course. Scholarship holders are expected to successfully complete their teacher education program in the minimum time and commence teaching in a DECS country school the year following their graduation.

Tasmania offers the Professional Experience in Isolated and Rural Schools (PEIRS) program (http://www.education.tas.gov.au/dept/employment/teachers/peirs). This scheme is designed to encourage pre-service teachers to undertake school experience in participating rural and isolated schools by providing support for accommodation and travel.
In Western Australia a number of different financial incentives are available. A Rural Teaching Practice (http://www.det.wa.gov.au/teachingwa/ccm/navigation/student-teachers/rural-teaching-practice/) offers student teachers the opportunity to undertake their final year practicum in a public school in a rural area and receive financial support to cover the cost of travel and living expenses. Financial support includes assistance with travel costs to and from the school and a stipend towards living costs for the period of the practicum. The stipend amount differs between locations: for example in the Goldfields, Kimberley and Pilbara districts it is $140 a week, in the Mid West district: $120 a week and in Albany, Bunbury, Esperance, Midlands, Narrogin and Warren-Blackwood districts: $100 a week. Employment offers in rural schools are made first to those people who have participated in the program.

Also available is specific information about rural school placements (http://www.det.wa.edu.au/teachingwa/ccm/navigation/aspiring-teachers/teaching-options/where-to-teach/?page=3#toc1) with information that includes “Working in rural schools offers opportunities for promotion and leadership roles before they may be available in the metropolitan area. And all our schools have access to the internet and a range of communications technologies so you are not isolated from family and friends”. WA also advertises information for student teachers to consider remote locations (http://www.det.wa.edu.au/teachingwa/ccm/navigation/student-teachers/support-for-new-teachers/), naming 41 schools which are classified as remote schools and are part of what is called the Remote Teaching Service, and including comments from teachers indicating how much they enjoyed the experience.

Teaching in WA Department of Education and Training remote schools also includes a number of incentives including:

- An additional salary allowance from $10,000 to $15,000 a year
- A locality allowance of between $2,085 and $4,798 a year depending on the location of the school
- 10 weeks paid leave after three years continuous service in the same location or 22 weeks paid leave after four years continuous service in the same location
- Immediate permanency subject to two years continuous service in remote schools
- Free housing and storage of furniture and effects while in the location.

The information available to student teachers browsing the internet in search of available scholarship or support for their studies does appear to highlight and strongly support the employers’ needs to staff schools in rural and remote locations. While not all states offer similar incentives, it is clear that any student who begins teacher education with an interest in teaching in a rural or remote school, or who develops such an interest along the way will be able to find financial and informational support to encourage and sustain that interest.

**University based rural incentives: What do student teachers see?**

The intent of this survey was to identify those incentives made most available and obvious to pre-service teachers entering the websites of Australian universities from the outside. While there is, of course, far more information than we have been able to access available to student teachers inside their home universities, the relative inaccessibility of information about rural teacher practicums and incentives from the
public portals of most of Australia’s universities indicates that if we are to make a significant impact in shifting students teachers’ awareness of rural incentive programs, then we need to more actively engage with the ways in which they collect information.

We have categorised the incentives into six different levels of active and explicit involvement by the university with rural education. These levels ranged from ‘no obvious or easily accessible information about rural incentives at all’ for student teachers to ‘university-based initiated and designed rural electives or units.’ A brief description of the various levels is provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Levels of University based rural incentives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category of University based incentive</th>
<th>Brief Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No explicit link or mention of rural practicum incentives evident on website</td>
<td>Majority (12) of these universities are all metropolitan based universities, only 1 regional based.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Link provided to a State-based rural practicum financial incentive (usually through the Professional Experience Link)</td>
<td>These sites (5) make some mention of or provide the link for students themselves to seek further information about State Based incentives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Link and further description of the benefits of the State based rural practicum financial incentive</td>
<td>These sites (4) tend to make some value judgement encouraging student teachers to participate in a rural practicum. For example “[We] actively encourages all students to complete one or more of their field experiences in a school away from the south east corner of Queensland”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University funded scholarship to participate in rural practicum advertised on website</td>
<td>These sites (7) advertise a university based financial incentive, (scholarship) to be used to support a student teacher whilst on a rural practicum. There is usually a stipulation of criteria. For example, sometimes the scholarship is only to students from rural communities. Sometimes only for students going to an indigenous placement. The financial incentive varies from a lump payment to weekly payments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University initiated rural practicum advertised on website</td>
<td>1 University offered the Bachelor of Education (Primary to Middle Years) course which requires students to spend substantial period of time observing and teaching in schools/centre/community programs as part of co-ordinated program of practice teaching. Their workplace learning includes one or more placements in rural, regional and remote areas.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Some universities (4) offered a ‘rural practicum’ as part of a larger suite of global experiences. Some were broadly rural, others more specifically indigenous.

| University initiated unit/course focus on rural education advertised on website | No such units were clearly advertised, although ongoing investigations have uncovered university based units at the time of the first sweep. |

**Rural education: Whose responsibility?**

As displayed in the chart above, few Australian universities highlight, or draw attention to a program of attracting pre-service teachers to rural teaching. We argue that the wide range of evident interest in and commitment to this task highlights a lack of attention to the rural in the education of student teachers at the present time. The majority of universities whose websites indicated no explicit link or mentions of rural teaching were metropolitan universities. This raises the question of whether the responsibility for rural teacher education ought to be left to rest with rural universities alone? It is clear that the lack of any explicit or obvious information about rural schools renders them invisible to metropolitan-based student teachers coming to understand the boundaries of their course and new profession, and highlights why Halsey’s (2005) report indicated that, for all practicum placements in Australian universities, only 22.7% were be in a non-metropolitan school; with the majority of these placements taken up by student teachers who already attend a regional campus or live in a rural area.

Our survey of universities in the second category indicated that some metropolitan-based universities acknowledged that there were state-based incentives and provided a clear link for student teachers to find out this information. The fact that some universities had done this, but provided no indication of any university based incentives or further information about rural education once again illustrates the point that responsibility for ensuring the provision of quality education in rural schools appears to rest mainly with rural universities. These universities, while providing demonstrable support for the state employing authority in its need to staff rural schools, still appear to regard rural teaching as something separate from their own concerns, and as an external, state-based responsibility. As we interview students from programs around the nation we will be seeking to determine whether this strategy is sufficient, and whether enough students would take the initiative on this opportunity without further information and advocacy.

The data highlighted that over the range of universities there were indeed a number of different incentives including scholarships, rural-based practicum experiences, and units designed to build student teacher understanding and awareness of rural schooling. In the small number of cases where there was evidence of university-based rural incentives, it appeared that the responsibility for this often falls to a ‘lone academic’ or a small team, rather than a Faculty or School-wide focus.
The key question for our ongoing work is how understandings and awareness of rural schooling created when students do take up incentives and opportunities to practice teaching in a rural setting is brought back into the teacher education programs and built into the ongoing teacher education curriculum? For example, with regard to a student who takes up a state-based incentive, is it incumbent on them to provide feedback to either the provider or their university of what they learnt from the experience? Further questions require some investigating:

- What record is kept of the students doing this practicum?
- Are there any links into coursework?
- Are these students’ experiences utilised in any way collectively or is it only for the individual student’s portfolio?
- Are lecturers encouraged to liaise with these students, schools, teachers etc?
- Do these students take up a rural career?
- What happens to these students whilst on the scholarship?
- Of what value to the student is the monetary support?

While this research project does not explicitly examine the level of federal funding that universities receive, particularly in relation to professional experience, the researchers do recognise it as an issue to be addressed. Recent research related to the financial plight of university students suggests that almost 40 per cent of full-time students and 54 per cent of part-time students said work commitments impacted negatively on their studies (AVCC, 2007). One-third of all students said they were forced to regularly skip class because of work responsibilities. It would appear obvious that loss of income from paid work while undertaking professional experience in distant rural communities would be a strong disincentive for students to participate in a rural practicum.

**Conclusion**
Consistent with Halsey’s (2005) findings that to make a real difference to the way teachers are prepared as pre-service professionals, new and better ways of preparing for country teaching are needed. Two key policy recommendations from his study, directed at teacher education programs were:

- that universities with teacher education programs be strongly encouraged to develop policies to increase significantly the number of pre-service country teaching placements;
- that metropolitan universities and key stakeholders be strongly encouraged and provided with incentives to progressively and significantly increase the proportion of their teacher education cohort that participates in a country pre-service placement, and that beginning teachers’ perceptions on teaching in rural or remote schools are studied.

Our brief introductory analysis of how Australian universities promote and demonstrate commitment to advocating rural teaching as a career move for their students raises overall questions about those few universities, who have initiated rural teaching experiences for their students.

- In what ways were they supported to do so?
- Why has the university decided to do this?
- What changes have they needed to make in mandating this opportunity?
• Where this opportunity is mandatory, is there a significant difference in the number of students who take up a rural career in comparison to those universities that do not offer such experiences?

The work of TERRAnova over the next three years will be to examine and investigate the work done by teacher education programs in universities around Australia to promote and educate pre-service teachers about teaching in rural schools. From this preliminary report into the public commitment of Australian Universities to this issue, we have been able to make several interim claims here that we hope may well encourage Faculties and Schools of Education to conduct a thorough overview of the information provided to their student teachers about rural incentives, to ensure all students have up-to-date, relevant and accessible information. At the very least we would suggest that all Schools and Faculties of Education should look to provide clear accessible information linked to any state-based incentives for student teachers.

References