



Australian and International Journal of Rural Education

Attracting teachers to rural and remote Queensland: A case study

Ann-Maree Paynter and Elizabeth Taylor, Attraction Team, Queensland Department of Education

Corresponding author: ann-maree.paynter@det.qld.gov.au

For many years the supply of graduate teachers, including specialist secondary teachers for Queensland state schools, has largely met demand. In recent years however, attracting and retaining specialist teachers in some Queensland locations and curriculum areas has become more challenging.

Reflective of wider Australian and international trends, balancing the supply of specialist teachers to meet current and future demands requires planning and early action. Taking a traditional approach to recruiting teachers (as vacancies arise) can result in shortfalls when unplanned absences, retirements and promotions occur unexpectedly. Subjects that are already hard to fill such as senior mathematics and science, English, languages, industrial technology and design (manual arts) are even more elusive in the middle of a school term. Many schools located in low socio-economic, regional, rural and remote communities are also experiencing challenges in recruiting teachers for the breadth of learning phases and curriculum areas.

Over the next five years, some of the key factors expected to increase and drive demand for suitably qualified and experienced teachers in Queensland state schools may include:

- strong student enrolment growth;
- establishment of new schools and a focus on teaching quality;
- significant educational reforms, including changes to the curriculum and senior secondary schooling;
- increasing government investment in schools and teachers, which in turn provides new opportunities for students, teachers and school leaders;
- an increasing number of teachers teaching in disciplines outside of the areas in which they trained;
- changes to initial teacher education programs, resulting in a declining supply of graduate teachers; and
- loss of experienced specialist teachers due to retirement and other factors.

In response to these current and emerging challenges, the Queensland Department of Education recognised the need to proactively engage with aspiring, preservice and

experienced teachers in new and innovative ways.

Career fairs

The annual Teach Rural and Teach Queensland Career Fairs are ways the department is proactively connecting with this audience.

Since September 2015, the career fairs have established and nurtured a connection between beginning, early career and experienced teachers, recruiters and school leaders, and those from rural, remote and regional communities around Queensland. Many school leaders and teachers have travelled from rural and remote communities to Brisbane to attend past events, including long distances from Thursday Island, Doomadgee, Lockhart River, Palm Island, Charters Towers, Kirwan, Tully and Moranbah.

Typically held late in Term One, or early in Term Two, the Teach Rural Career Fair focuses on current and future employment opportunities for teachers in rural, regional and remote state schools. Providing an opportunity for current teachers and school leaders to mingle and network with aspiring and preservice teachers in a casual setting, knowledge-sharing and conversations are commonplace and often revolve around personal and practical advice about living in rural and remote locations. Career fair attendees can also learn more about financial incentives, such as relocation assistance and locality allowances, and discuss personal and professional benefits from living and teaching in these communities.

The career fairs also provide preservice teachers with an opportunity to speak directly with HR, senior departmental representatives, principals and teachers, about their professional careers, rural and remote community placements and scholarship and grant opportunities, such as the *Beyond the Range Professional Experience Grant*.

Similar to the Teach Rural Career Fair, the Teach Queensland Career Fair, held in Term 3, has a greater focus on recruitment and promotes Queensland state school vacancies for the following school year.

In previous years, some attendees have received tentative offers of employment either on the day or shortly after the event.

The market stalls and exhibitor booths allow attendees to discuss local employment opportunities and directly ask staff, teachers and stakeholders regional-specific questions, in a one-to-one, personal manner.

Career Fair attendees may also elect to attend a seminar, run concurrently with the career fair and at regular intervals throughout the afternoon. Speakers and presenters include a variety of Queensland state school teachers, school leaders and industry panelists, who impart knowledge, share personal stories about their rural and remote teaching experiences, provide expertise and advice. A mix of panel discussions, presentations and videos ensure the seminars engage with, and appeal to, a wide audience.

Previous seminars have covered topics such as what it is like to live and teach in rural and remote communities; professional, personal and financial benefits and incentives; the teacher application process; what school leaders look for when recruiting teachers; tips for moving to and getting started in a new community; as well as professional development programs for those looking to progress their teaching career and step-up into leadership positions.

The Department of Education heavily promotes the career fairs across a variety of social media platforms ensuring a broad-reaching presence. The career fair is promoted on all Teach Queensland social media and online channels, including the monthly Teach Queensland News and Jobs newsletter and has previously attracted a reach of between 12,000 and 65,000 people across its event pages.

The events are also extensively promoted through higher education institutions (HEI), the HEI education societies and professional associations, to ensure that preservice and current teachers receive event information.

Key stakeholders such as the Society for the Provision of Education in Rural Australia, the Beginning and Establishing Teachers Association', Isolated Children's Parents' Association, Queensland College of Teachers and Queensland Teachers' Union are also invited to be an exhibitor at these events. They, in turn, share the events with their audiences and further promote and increase the reach of the events.

Challenges

Finding a career fair date and time that is suitable for exhibitors, seminar providers and attendees alike is a continuous challenge for the department. With preservice teacher professional experience (prac) placements, school holidays, weekends, teacher and school leader professional development and personal commitments, it is often difficult to find a date that suits everyone, and especially for those who travel long distances to attend the event.

To offset this challenge, the career fair is held in the afternoon and evening, opening after lunch and closing at 7 pm. This ensures preservice and current teachers, who reside in the south-east, can attend after school.

For those who live outside the south-east, or who have commitments that mean they are unable to attend the career fairs in person, the department offers a series of webinars.

The webinars, also known as the Teach Queensland Live Chat Series, cover a variety of relevant teacher-topics and sometimes mirror those presented at the career fair seminar program. A different panelist and speaker line-up to those at the career fair, provides a fresh and different perspective, ensuring career fair audiences, including preservice and current teachers, can still participate and engage online and even draw some further inspiration, or receive additional advice.

Earlier in 2018, the department's Teach Queensland team hired four Education Career

Ambassadors. Taking a 12-month teaching break, the in-service state school teachers actively promote teaching as a profession and talk to prospective applicants about teaching in Queensland state schools. Sharing their first-hand experiences of teaching in rural, remote and regional Queensland state schools, the ambassadors provide another avenue for preservice and current teachers to connect and engage with the department, which is especially valuable if they are unable to attend the biannual career fairs. Education Careers Ambassadors are active on social media, conduct presentations at HEIs, and converse informally, online and in-person at regional career fairs and Education society events.

Opportunities

The continued success of the department's events since 2015, has enabled the:

- provision of accurate and timely information about the variety of teaching opportunities across Queensland;
- promotion of benefits and incentives for teaching in rural and remote locations;
- breakdown of common misconceptions about working in rural or remote communities;
- processes to becoming a Queensland teacher to be accurately provided to prospective applicants;
- fostering of positive experiences and interactions with prospective employees;
- strong collaboration between the department and key stakeholders;
- continued strengthening and building of an engaging employer brand;
- leverage of existing and emerging technologies, including social media and an event app, and
- continued support of high quality candidates and their employment success.

Outcomes

The department's career fairs continue to evolve and expand, reaching new and broader audiences and increasing engagement with preservice and current teachers.

The September 2017 Teach Queensland Career Fair attracted 733 visitors, almost 60% more than the 460 visitors who attended the first career fair in September 2015.

The department's career fairs have seen both preservice and current teachers travel to Brisbane from across Queensland, interstate and overseas to find out about career opportunities in Queensland state schools. One of these attendees stating, "I'm so glad I made the trip. A 9-hour drive all up, but I learnt so much and I hope my teaching career begins in QLD soon!"

Internal and external stakeholders have also found the events to be incredibly beneficial and a great use of their time, with many exhibitors showing continued support and

expressing their interest to participate in future events.

“This is an incredible opportunity to meet with potential candidates and share our opportunities in a comfortable, casual environment. Just by turning up these people are letting us know they are somewhat interested. That’s better than any database!” said one exhibitor.

The success of the career fair has also resulted in growing interest from sponsors. The 2017 Teach Queensland Career Fair was the first time the department received sponsorship for the event, with more prospective sponsors expressing their interest in sponsoring future events in 2018 and beyond.

The work that the Department of Education is doing was recognised last year when the Teach Rural Career Fair received the Australian Rural Education Award.

Most importantly, the Teach Queensland career fairs have demonstrated their success as an important engagement tool to positively network and interact with prospective applicants, with many attendees securing a job with the department.

A career fair attendee, Jennifer Piotrowski graduated in 2014 with a Bachelor of Education (Primary). Finding it difficult to secure a teaching job in her home state of Western Australia, Jennifer looked further afield.

“Since graduating, I had scarce relief teaching jobs. In WA, I had to register with various schools to be put on their relief teacher list and then play the waiting game. It was a very competitive world,” Jennifer said.

When she heard about the Teach Queensland career fair from a fellow university graduate who lived in Queensland, she discussed moving to Queensland with her husband and booked flights to attend the 2016 Teach Queensland Career Fair. Keen to explore her career options, Jennifer travelled from Perth to Brisbane and back again in one day.

When Jennifer got to the career fair she was impressed by the opportunities and information available.

“I was made very welcome by the staff. I was blown away by the numerous opportunities for graduates and experienced teachers to obtain work in various regions,” she said.

“I was able to attend seminars and had the opportunity to meet and greet various Human Resource (HR) consultants from each region and principals too.

Following the career fair, Jennifer sent in applications to the various regions and was soon contacted by the HR representative from Far North Queensland, whom Jennifer met at the fair. Jennifer was informed by the department representative that the Cairns School of Distance Education (CSDE) was interested in hiring her.

“After a long conversation with the Deputy Principal, I took the teaching job at CSDE and

then started organising the huge move.”

Jennifer and her family arrived in Cairns in April 2017 and have been enjoying the change of scenery for the past year and a half.

Future directions

The continued success of the Queensland Department of Education’s career fairs and events is proof that in this digital age, people still value face-to-face interactions and conversations. The department’s Teach Queensland team will continue to look for innovative ways to interact and engage with candidates about working in Queensland state schools, both online and face-to-face.

To learn more, visit www.teach.qld.gov.au, follow Teach Queensland on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter or follow Queensland Department of Education on LinkedIn.