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### **Australian Remote Education Tutors and Universities: Proposed Innovative Partnerships for Credentialling Adult Supervisors of School Students Enrolled in Distance Education**

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#### **Abstract**

Currently, an almost exclusively female workforce provides the government mandated adult supervision of Australian primary and secondary school students enrolled in distance education, including geographically isolated learners. These Remote Education Tutors (RETs) include unpaid family support providers and externally employed governesses and home tutors who are paid by the children's families. This crucial position has no prerequisite qualifications, which in turn generates occupational invisibility and an absence of recognised career pathways for the individuals fulfilling the responsibilities of this role. In response, we propose innovative partnerships for credentialling the experiences and effectiveness of Australian RETs, in order to recognise their professional status and to contribute to a sustainable rural education workforce. Such credentialling will entail dynamic and mutually responsive collaborations among the distance education stakeholders, including the tutors, the children's families and the universities charged with administering such credentialling.

Evidence to support this proposal is provided by selected data from a 2021 national survey completed by 575 current and former RETs in most Australian States and Territories. These data underwent descriptive analysis that elicited four themes that encapsulated key elements of the RETs' lives and contexts: career pathways, economic disadvantage, gender roles, and educational equity. This account—framed by Cardini's (2006) politicised conceptualisation of partnerships—highlights both the urgency and the complexity of envisaging and enacting situationally responsive rural community–university collaborations to support this vital yet invisible segment of the Australian educational workforce.

**Keywords:** *community–university partnerships, credentialling qualifications, externally provided support, family support providers, Remote Education Tutors, school-level distance education*

## Introduction

Educational partnerships abound, and they vary widely in terms of their intentions and effectiveness. For instance, recent scholarship about such partnerships has included accounts of educational partnerships vis-à-vis enhancing student voice (Mayes, 2021), mobilising university resources to initiate innovation in communities (Schlossberg et al., 2018), promoting social justice and community empowerment (Williams, 2019) and using research–practice links to foster educational improvement (Coburn et al., 2021).

Educational partnerships assume a particular character and significance in the case of rural education policy and provision. This is so, partly because of rural education, and rurality more broadly, being positioned as peripheral to metropolitan centres of decision-making and resource distribution, and as sites of disadvantage and marginalisation (Lembani et al., 2020; Reid, 2017), even while acknowledging the ongoing need to challenge negative rural education stereotypes (Guenther & Ledger, 2021). Similarly, distinctive features characterise rural teacher development and support initiatives (Li et al., 2020; Moffa & McHenry-Sorher, 2018), which are enacted in the context of rural schools sometimes finding it difficult to appoint and retain teachers (Downes & Roberts, 2018) because of these wider socioeconomic conditions.

Against the backdrop of the specific characteristics of these particular educational partnerships centred on rural schooling and rural teacher pathways, this paper focuses on a group of educators whose occupational contexts render them further differentiated from rural teachers. We have assigned to this group the overarching term *Remote Education Tutors* (RETs), to signify the adult supervisors of Australian primary and secondary school students who are enrolled in distance education of varying kinds, including learners in geographically isolated contexts. This distinctive educational workforce includes two specific subgroups: the individuals (almost always mothers) who constitute family support providers to the children; and the individuals (almost always women) who are paid by the children’s families to act as externally employed governesses or home tutors to the children.

Curiously, although RETs perform a crucial role of educational continuity and learning support for these distance education students, currently there are no formal qualifications required, and likewise there are no recognised pathways to afford them access to credentialled learning that would maximise their professional proficiency and enhance their employment status and security. This paper sounds a clarion call for the establishment of dynamic and productive educational partnerships that will bring together Australian RETs and universities in contextually responsive collaborations to credential the tutors’ often extensive professional experience. These partnerships will simultaneously help to strengthen the successful outcomes of the tutors and their students alike, to extend current conceptualisations of such partnerships, to respond dynamically to a particular demographic of rural places (Pini & Mills, 2015; see also Bennett et al., 2019) and to renew the distinctive understandings and practices of social justice in rural communities.

The evidence adduced to inform and underpin these proposed innovative partnerships is distilled from selected data taken from the first phase of our 2021 national survey that was completed by 575 current and former RETs in most Australian States and Territories. The detailed descriptive statistics related to this first phase of the survey yielded highly diverse patterns of demographics and experiences, as well as some striking commonalities of the respondents’ working lives. This comprehensive dataset elicited four distinct themes: career pathways, economic disadvantage, gender roles, and educational equity.

The paper is divided into the following four sections:

- A combined background, literature review and conceptual framework;
- research design, data collection and data analysis;
- selected findings; and
- discussion and implications.

### **Background, Literature Review and Conceptual Framework**

Workforces constitute an accurate litmus test of the success and sustainability of the occupational fields in which they are located. From this perspective, some recent changes in specific subfields notwithstanding, occupations such as engineering (Wipulanusat, 2019), the law (Williams et al., 2019), medicine (Zavlin et al., 2017) and the public service (Holt, 2018) tend to have large and stable workforces, often with highly competitive entry points and sometimes having successive generations of family members working in those occupations. By contrast, service occupations like nursing (Pregaman et al., 2017), social work (Geisler et al., 2019) and teaching (Worth & Van Den Brande, 2019), while employing large numbers of employees, are characterised by challenges in recruiting and retaining those employees, particularly in certain fields such as regional, rural, and remote locations (Brownell et al., 2018). They are also characterised by the politicisation of particular aspects of their work (Birger et al., 2020), such as in the case of asserted or identified systemic failure to fulfil their clients' needs. For occupational fields with intermittent success and sustainability in terms of their workforce development, it is crucial to create opportunities for planning and delivering innovative partnerships that can harness productive relationships and change the existing assumptions and parameters in order to generate new possibilities for service provision.

In relation to this occupational litmus test, the issues attending teaching exhibit both complexity and competing pressures. On the one hand, many individuals continue to be attracted to teaching as a generally stable and well-recognised profession. For instance, the 2018 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS), completed by teachers and school leaders about working conditions and learning environments in contemporary schools, reported that school educators were attracted to the profession by a combination of “*a strong commitment to public service and the social impact of teaching*” (OECD, 2019, p. 114), career prospects, job security and a perceived flexibility in work schedules. On the other hand, there is a recognition of teaching as a challenging occupation with potentially high stress and burnout levels (McCarthy, 2019), and sometimes with teachers as victims of bullying and violence (Curran et al., 2019), prompting consequent attrition from the profession (Kelly et al., 2016). Moreover, certain teaching subjects, including mathematics, science and technology, and particular student cohorts, such as students with special educational needs, are persistently difficult to staff (Goldhaber et al., 2020). Furthermore, there are continuing critiques of a perceived lack of diversity of the teaching workforce (Carter Andrews et al., 2019; Goldhaber et al., 2019).

Against the backdrop of the complexity and competing pressures attending teaching, there is increasing policy and research interest in the preparation and credentialling of teachers, including the expansion of alternative routes into teaching (Redding, 2021), as well as the distinctive opportunities for preparing and credentialling teachers to work in regional, rural and remote locations. For instance, White et al. (2011) emphasised the value of partnerships between rural schools and universities that included giving pre-service teachers direct experience of teaching in such schools. Schulte and Justeson (2019) evaluated the effectiveness of a rural teacher residency program, as part of a partnership between California State University (Chico Campus) and four school districts in rural northern California, in terms of enhancing the teachers' efficacy. Goodson-Espy and Salinas (2018) analysed what they identified as synergistic relationships

among science and mathematics teacher pathways for rural settings, ranging from graduate certificates to scholarships to “*licensure-only and lateral entry programs*” (p. 345) to both face-to-face and online teacher pathways. Albright and Williams (2021) reported a disparity in the numbers of teachers qualified to teach students with autism working in urban and rural schools. All of this highlights teaching as a distinctive workforce with hugely diverse contexts of learners and teachers, and with some of those contexts being far more visible and better understood than others. Moreover, there are significant examples of this divergent visibility and understanding in rural education settings. Furthermore, these divergences are linked directly with, and have crucial implications for, the diversity of pathways to and models of teacher preparation and credentialing.

In Australia, these pathways and models need to be understood in relation to the distinctive affordances and barriers characterising rural education and rural society more broadly. In that context, the *Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education* (Halsey, 2018), commissioned by the Commonwealth Department of Education and Training, has proven to be a landmark report in this policy and research field, based on the 340 submissions that it received and the multiple consultations that it conducted. Overall, Halsey argued that “*the key challenge for regional, rural and remote education is ensuring, regardless of location or circumstances, that every young person has access to high quality schooling and opportunities*” (p. 1). That this remains a complex and continuing challenge was reflected in Halsey’s bald but powerful statements: “*The national statistics show there is a persistent relationship between location and educational outcomes when data for the various measures [are] aggregated*” (p. 4); and also “*much remains to be done to bridge the gap between the achievements and opportunities of RRR [regional, rural and remote] students and those most commonly associated with their urban counterparts*” (p. 4). Specifically with regard to teacher education for rural schools, Halsey’s recommendations included the following: “*Ensure RRR contexts, challenges and opportunities are explicitly included in the selection and pre-service education of teachers, initial appointment processes and their on-going professional support*” (p. 5). This recommendation was elaborated in one of the four priorities that Halsey identified as underpinning his set of recommendations: “*The second priority is focussing on four critically important resources for successful learning and building young people’s futures—leadership, teaching, curriculum and assessment*” (p. 6). It is worthwhile reproducing in full Halsey’s articulation of this priority, which constituted a powerful encapsulation of the distinctive features of learning and teaching in regional, rural and remote contexts:

*The essence of the recommendations and actions for leadership and teaching is that more has to be done to recognise the diversity of contexts, challenges and opportunities of leading and teaching in RRR schools and communities, particularly how people are prepared and supported for such appointments. Continuing to develop and refine ways and means of attracting and retaining experienced leaders and teachers to the most demanding schools and locations needs to be ‘front and centre’ of the planning and work to enhance RRR achievements and opportunities. (p. 6)*

Significantly for the issues canvassed in this paper, previous research by Downes and her colleagues (see e.g., Downes, 2013; Downes & Roberts, 2015) explored the distinctive contributions made by parent supervisors to their children’s primary schooling in remote locations in Australia. Downes’ semi-structured interviews with parent supervisors in remote areas of New South Wales highlighted that, “*while most parent supervisors do not have formal qualifications in education, they undertake many tasks akin to those of a teacher and experience similar challenges to new teachers*” (p. 31). Moreover, Downes and Roberts (2015) located this crucial but generally overlooked work in a broader debate about the development of distinctive “*rural meanings*” (p. 80), and also contended that such meanings “*matter and need to be considered within the knowledge that is valued in schooling, the subtle meanings schooling conveys, and the methods of schooling*” (p. 88).

Taking forwards this identification of parent supervisors of Australian remote distance education for primary school children, Halsey (2018) commented specifically on the vital but uncredentialed work of “distance education home tutors” (p. 75), whom we have called RETs here, as a distinctive feature of Australian rural schooling. Again, we have found it helpful to cite these comments at length, given the crucial importance of the issues that they raised:

*Related to DE [distance education] students needing to have ready access to a ‘hands on’ guide, the contributions of distance education home tutors who are usually parents of the children enrolled with DE schools have been especially valuable over many years. After discussions with a number of these parents as part of the Review and on previous occasions as well as through reading submissions, it is time to formally recognise their expertise. A way to do this is by using the established protocols of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) as detailed in the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF)[.] Regulatory and accreditation bodies would need to work with states and territories to ensure the necessary compliance and quality teaching requirements are met.*

*The RPL process should not be onerous but provide sufficient evidence to enable a confident determination of the level of an award, for example, a portfolio of the learning and skills a person has developed through being a distance education home tutor and an opportunity to speak about their experiences. The DE School they are associated with, or were, could be invited to assist with verification as well as determining the award. The criteria for AQF level 3 or 4 appear to be a good fit. (p. 75)*

What we propose here is a variation on Halsey’s (2018) suggested approach that nevertheless aligns his recommendation above about preparing teachers to work in rural schools with his advocacy for recognising the work of “distance education home tutors” (p. 75). That is, the particular proposed innovative partnerships articulated here for credentialling adult supervisors of Australian distance education students are centred on a close and mutually beneficial alliance that brings together the shared and separate interests of four distinct partners: (1) RETs; (2) the distance education children whom the RETs supervise; (3) the parents who employ RETs; and (4) universities that use their microcredentialed qualifications to recognise the RETs’ occupational contributions. We elaborate this distinctive partnership proposal in the final section of this paper.

With regard to the partners’ shared and separate interests highlighted in the previous paragraph, conceptually this paper is informed by Cardini’s (2006) analysis of educational partnerships in the United Kingdom (see also Brown & Danaher, 2008). Cardini’s central argument accentuated the political and politicised character of partnerships when she contended that “the notion of partnership constructs a vision of public policy that stresses efficiency, devolution and participation and in which everyone seems to benefit. However, when the actual practice of partnerships is explored, a different picture emerges” (p. 393). Cardini illustrated this contention as follows: “Rather than inclusive, symmetrical and democratic social practices, current partnerships are revealed to be facilitating and legitimating central policy decision-making as well as the private sector involvement in the delivery of public policies” (p. 393).

Cardini (2006) elaborated this central argument in a way that resonated with the recognition by Halsey (2018) and other rural education scholars of the inequities of educational access experienced by many regional, rural and remote communities, in Australia and internationally: “to challenge current social organization by promoting more progressive relationships, the theoretical definition of partnership has to recognize the issue of power and establish working relationships in which struggle and dissent are discussible and transformable issues” (p. 412).

Finally in terms of this paper’s conceptual framework, we note also Cardini’s (2006) still timely apposite reminder of the need for continuing attentiveness to the sometimes unconscious but still potent exercise of differential levels of power in partnerships: “partnerships are spaces where cooperation is very hard to achieve; that ..., in practice partnerships tend to show asymmetrical and



*unbalanced relationships between different members; and ... that ... in practice partnerships seem to be the instrument to implement top down central policies” (p. 398).*

We do not see this characterisation of partnerships as automatically invalidating the empowering and transforming potential of the innovative educational partnerships proposed here.

Nevertheless, we value Cardini’s (2006) analysis as a timely reminder of the even greater need to recognise the political landscape in which these partnerships are being advocated, given the traditionally and continuing politicised contexts in which rural education specifically, and rural society more broadly, are enacted and experienced. Accordingly, this conceptual framework is aligned with our location of this research in the interpretivist research paradigm (Carr & Kemmis, 1986), given our focus on understanding the participants’ meaning-making through their self-reported experiences, augmented by an attentiveness to the social justice dimensions of education research of this kind (Atkins & Duckworth, 2019).

## **Research Design, Data Collection and Data Analysis**

### **Context and participants**

The aim of the research reported in this paper was to map the experiences and perceptions of Australian RETs through a survey to gather data that informed us about the current status of this unique work and to provide direction for future phases of the research. This research drew on data collected in a national survey that we conducted across Australia in 2021.

More specifically, of the participants in this study (n=575), the currently practising RETs (n=339) were divided into two groups: immediate family RETs (n=207), who were referred to as family support providers; and externally employed RETs (n=132). The study was designed to reveal the RETs’ demographics, including their diversity and widespread geographical locations. Hence, the perceptions of the RETs elicited in this study were drawn from a wide range of locations and varied experiences in the role. Individualised demographic details such as participant age group, gender breakdown and educational background were included, as the focus was on representing the perspectives of RETs from within the broad context of Australian rural education. The survey sought to recruit RETs with past experience or those currently acting in this role.

All the ethical considerations from our university (Ethics number: H20REA214) were adhered to, with informed consent being obtained from all participants via LimeSurvey, an online statistical survey tool. After they had read the participation information form and upon their agreement, the participants were asked to click the survey link that confirmed their consent. The survey was estimated to take 20 minutes to complete. Participation in this study was entirely voluntary and anonymous. The study’s acknowledged limitations included that the analysis would have been strengthened by a larger data set, although the subsequent phases of the research have been designed to record the RETs’ voices in other, equally authentic ways.

### **The data set**

With this data collection intended to be the preliminary phase in a broader study, the research design was developed as a survey to include three sequential measures that examined:

- Part A Australian remote education workforce;
- Part B Remote Education Tutors’ personal and professional perspectives;
- Part C Remote Education Tutors’ Basic Needs Satisfaction in the Work Domain, a published, standardised test (adapted from Chen et al., 2015; Schultz et al., 2015).

This paper concentrates on the data collected through the predominantly closed responses provided to Part A of the survey.

## **Data analysis**

The analysis of data from the online survey formed Part A of the study to identify who represents the *RET* workforce in Australia. The four themes from the Part A data emerged inductively, whereby the *RET* participants demonstrated evidence of strong contention, contention, neutrality, agreement and strong agreement in response to each question. These themes surfaced as we hypothesised through the analysis of the data tables and graphic representations. The research team agreed on the themes and constructed rich descriptions as elaborations to make meanings of these themes.

The data presented in the findings locate a unique Australian education workforce, which in turn provides evidence of the necessity for developing partnerships. Mapping the demographics to determine who is represented and where they are situated is critical in enabling the sustainability and growth of *RETs*.

## **Selected Findings**

In an endeavour to map the experiences and perceptions of Australian *RETs*, this section of the paper presents the responses to the *RET* survey questions. The next section discusses the four elected themes as the study's selected findings for the purpose of this paper and their implications.

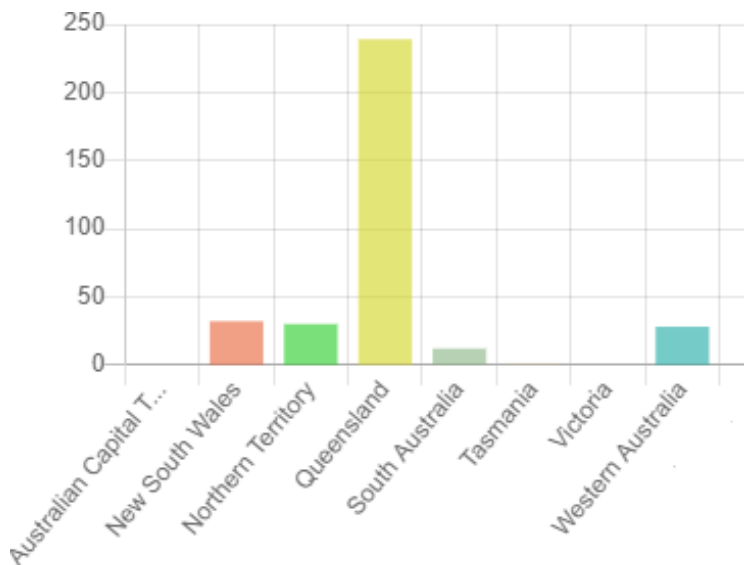
The findings from the survey responses have been organised into distinctive categories to represent the positions and locations of the people who self-report as *RETs*. Further categories include the relationships and partnerships shared in the workplace and the disclosed roles conveyed by the *RETs*.

### ***The position and Location of the Remote Education Tutors***

*RETs* in Australia described themselves as being in the position of *Parent Tutor*, *Governess/Govie*, *Home Tutor*, *Distance Education Tutor*, *Family Tutor*, *Nanny* or *Home Teacher*. The predominant self-description of the occupation was *Parent Tutor* (37.91%) and *Governess* (37.74%). Of the total respondents, 59.48% were currently practising as *RETs*, and 87.72% of the practising *RETs* fitted into the educational context of geographical isolation. These currently practising *RETs* had a total of 808 students under their care. The highest demand for *RETs* was in the primary school sector (81.68%), where the position is mandated by education authorities. It follows that the requirement of an adult is paramount, as primary school students have less developed capabilities and maturation to take responsibility for their learning.

Respondents were from all Australian States and Territories except Tasmania, Victoria and the Australian Capital Territory, which have among the smallest land size areas in Australia, and hence are less likely to have families needing *RETs*. Queensland had the largest representation across Australia of currently practising *RETs* with 69.88% of respondents. Within Queensland, the Capricornia School of Distance Education contributed the most responses (27.20%). Figure 1 represents the distribution of survey responses across Australia.

**Figure 1: The Distribution of RETs' Responses Across Australia**

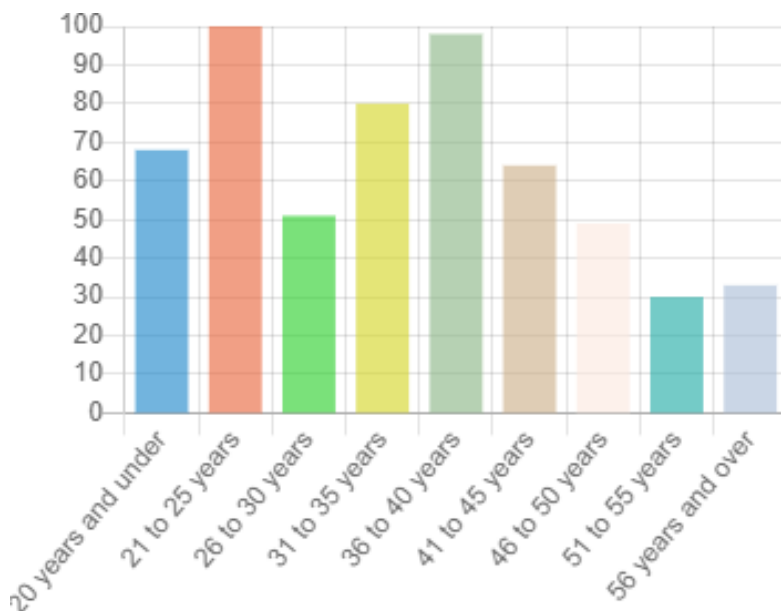


### **The Qualifications and Experiences of the Remote Education Tutors**

The RET respondents' ages ranged from the beginning of an adult working life through to retirement. This showed that this occupation draws on people from all age groups.

Of the currently practising RETs, those who identified as family support providers were labelled as immediate family for this statistical analysis. This cohort was aged predominantly between 31 and 50 years. By contrast, the cohort of the currently practising RETs who identified as externally employed were aged predominantly between 20 and 30 years. The overwhelming gender for this occupation was female at 99.13%. Figure 2 represents the range of ages of the RETs who responded to the survey.

**Figure 2: The Range of Ages of the RETs who Responded to the Survey**



The minimum education qualification for the RETs who responded to the survey was a School Senior Certificate. Similar numbers of immediate family and externally employed RETs had a Technical and Further Education (TAFE) Certificate as their highest education qualification. Of



note was the fact that the currently practising RETs who identified as immediate family were the predominant cohort who had completed education qualifications higher than a TAFE Certificate.

A high number of respondents (84.70%) were not currently studying towards an education qualification. This most likely reflected the fact that there is no current requirement for RETs to have such a qualification. Only a low number of respondents (14.96%) indicated that they were currently studying towards a qualification. Of those who were studying, 91.86% of the currently practising RETs were studying towards a TAFE Certificate, Diploma or Bachelor Degree in education.

Predominantly, the RETs who responded to the survey exceeded one year's experience (84.70%), with immediate family having the highest representation of the practising RETs beyond three years of experience. By contrast, the externally employed had the highest representation of the practising RETs at one to two years of experience. This suggested that the externally employed RETs were more likely to be a transient workforce.

### ***The Relationships and Partnerships of the Remote Education Tutors***

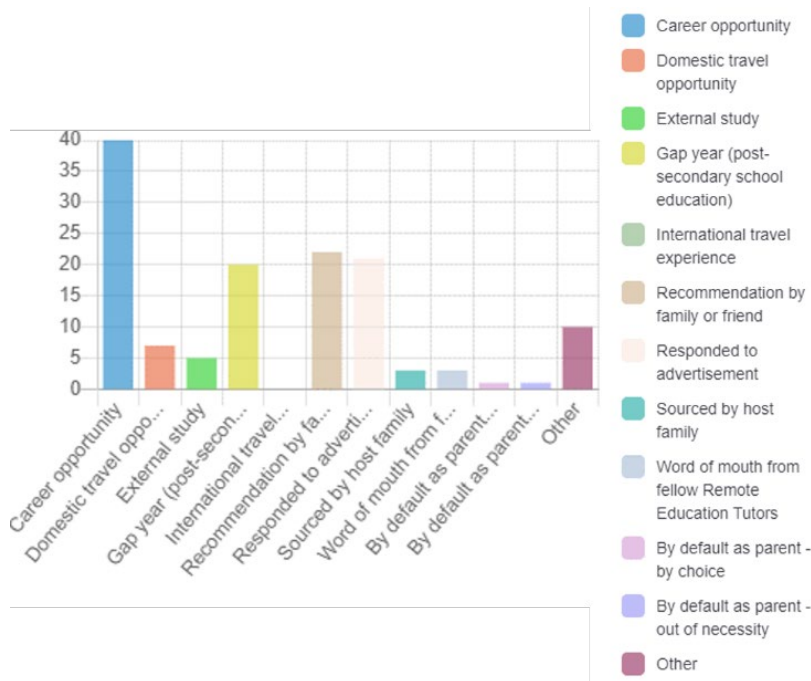
From the currently practising RET respondents (n=342), 60.53% identified as immediate family and, of those, 72.94% described themselves as a parent tutor. By contrast, of the 38.6% who identified as an externally employed RET, 87.12% described themselves as a governess.

Unequivocally, all the immediate family RETs were the mothers of the students they supervised. Significantly, 70.05% of the mothers reported that their voluntary role prevented them from pursuing other paid employment or from filling a role in their business. These RETs who identified as immediate family predominantly experienced this role for a duration beyond three years, which indicated that they followed their family through the primary schooling years.

Of the currently practising externally employed RET respondents, 60.90% reported that they had worked in this occupation for the longest duration of one to two years with one family. Similarly, less than 1% of these respondents reported that they had worked beyond six years with one family. As such, it seemed clear that the current position as an RET did not lend itself as an occupation with a sustainable career pathway for those who were externally employed. Significantly, 85.71% of the externally employed RET respondents reported that their tutoring role prevented them from pursuing any other paid employment. Nonetheless, only 30.08% of the externally employed currently practising RETs indicated that they had entered the work as a career opportunity.

Other significant motives for becoming an RET included that they had taken the opportunity for employment as a gap year or had responded to an advertisement, or that they had been recommended for the position by a family member or a friend. Figure 3 represents the externally employed RETs' motives for choosing this career.

**Figure 3: The Externally Employed RETs’ Motives for Their Career Choice**



### **The Roles of the Remote Education Tutors**

The substantiated role of the RET can be evidenced by the 31+ hours on average per week self-reported by the currently externally employed RETs (86.29%) as commitment to their role. In the survey, a list of expectations of RETs was provided that were sourced from within the distance education schooling sector. The list consisted of 15 role descriptors, and the RETs were asked to identify the tasks that they assimilated with their roles. The findings were classified subsequently according to the following set of skills: organise, communicate, teach and manage. (Intriguingly, in her study referred to earlier in this paper, Downes (2013) elicited seven categories canvassing the work of parent supervisors of primary school distance education in New South Wales: *“organising and structuring their children’s school learning, creating a learning environment, planning and preparing, assessing children’s learning, motivating and engaging students, conducting lessons and engaging in relationships to enable them to teach their children effectively”* (p. 35).) All currently practising RETs (82.00%) identified with each of the 15 role descriptors, thereby confirming their relevance. Table 1 presents the role descriptors and highlights the level of agreement of their practical relevance from the RET respondents.

**Table 1: The Role Descriptors and the RET Responses**

Classification	% RETs	Role descriptor identified with:
Organise	97.04%	setting up and maintaining a well-organised and resourced classroom.
	96.35%	ensuring that students linked in via the internet or telephone for their formal instruction.
	96.35%	receiving and returning school resources.
	95.30%	receiving and returning completed work from and to the distance education school.
	94.61%	planning and timetabling.
	91.48%	organising extra-curricular activities.
	82.96%	marking schoolwork before it was returned.
Communicate	98.09%	communicating with parents, teachers and schools in relation to student learning.
Teach	85.91%	planning interventions for learning difficulties.
	96.35%	supervising the support work to complement On-Air Lessons.
	95.48%	providing specific numeracy instructional support.
	94.26%	delivering and providing support for other curriculum learning areas.
	93.04%	providing explicit reading and writing instruction.
Manage	95.30%	managing disciplinary issues.
	90.78%	keeping students engaged in the curriculum during On-Air Lessons.

When respondents were asked about which roles constituted most of their time, supervising the support work for students to complement the On-Air Lessons was the most popular response. In addition, setting up and maintaining a well-organised and resourced classroom was acknowledged as time-consuming.

### Discussion and Implications

As was noted above, four themes emerged inductively from the data analysis: career pathways, economic disadvantage, gender roles, and educational equity.

#### **Theme 1: Career Pathways**

The role of the RET is currently overlooked as an occupation with a career pathway, and it is without a recognised knowledge base and skillset. This is evidenced by the fact that no prerequisite education qualifications are required to fulfil the role. Further, despite this role being mandated (adult supervision is required for school students in distance education contexts [Isolated Children’s Parents’ Association of Australia (ICPA), 2015]), no remuneration is offered by the government educational providers in Australia. Yet RETs have a clear responsibility to act as the conduit between the distance education teacher and the student. Moreover, as the responses to the question regarding the role descriptors on the survey made strikingly clear, more than 80% of the respondent RETs indicated that they identified with all 15 of the provided role descriptors, which were classified as the set of skills to organise, communicate, teach and manage, thereby demonstrating both the complexity and the diversity of their roles, and highlighting also how much of those roles paralleled the activities of fully qualified teachers. As such, we assert that they are entitled to opportunities for a professional pathway that leads to a

sustained and sustainable career trajectory. In reality, evidence of the current lack of a sustainable career pathway is the high turnover of externally employed employees who predominantly do not stay longer than two years with a family.

### **Theme 2: Economic Disadvantage**

RETs who identify as immediate family have highlighted an economic burden that impacts on their financial status. When fulfilling the RET role, there is limited opportunity to draw an income because there is restricted available time for external employment beyond that role. For those who choose to hire an externally employed employee in the mandated position of RET, there is a significant financial burden that they endure as a result.

### **Theme 3: Gender Roles**

In some cases, parents make an informed decision to be the RET. However, some families that prefer to outsource the RET role cannot access or afford an externally employed employee for this role. In turn, the evidence is overwhelming that the obligation to support the children's education falls to the mother. This reinforces a traditional expectation around a female parent's identity and domestic role that is incongruent with gender identity and equity in contemporary society.

### **Theme 4: Educational Equity**

The highest demand for RETs is in the primary schooling sector, where the position is mandated and the requirement for an adult is paramount, as students have less developed capabilities and maturation to take responsibility for their learning. Distance education students require the RET to be proficient across a complex set of skills that include communicating, organising, managing and teaching for them to receive an equitable education, irrespective of location.

It is in concert with these four themes that we elaborate here our proposal for innovative partnerships directed at credentialling adult supervisors of school students enrolled in Australian distance education. This proposal is designed to identify and build sustainable career pathways for RETs who seek to gain formal qualifications with the potential to facilitate their transition from RET to qualified teachers. Such pathways are intended to help address the economic disadvantage highlighted in the survey data by making possible well-paid teacher positions for externally employed RETs, and also potentially for mothers who are family support providers to their children and who might wish to consider teaching as an occupational goal. This proposal is focused on engaging both with the survey respondents' overwhelmingly female gender roles, and with the educational equity issues gleaned from the survey responses, by creating feasible occupational pathways that can render valued and visible Australian education workforce members who are currently devalued and invisible.

The proposal presented here engages with the growing policy and research interest in microcredentials (Muirhead & Birks, 2019; Pizarro Milian, 2021; Ruddy & Ponte, 2019), while also noting critiques of such qualifications (Boud & Jorre de St Jorre, 2021; Ralston, 2021). The empowering and transforming potential of microcredentials was distilled powerfully by Cohen (2020), albeit in a different discipline and profession from teaching:

*These questions [about building effective capabilities for future professional work] might (or should) receive different answers if graduates could access a comprehensive, nationally-based continuing professional development (CPD) system that spans the geosciences – designed, delivered and with the option for micro-credentialling by a partnership involving industry, government, the professional societies and universities. The building blocks of such a CPD system are in place, courtesy of the short courses and other educational activities provided by professional societies in Australia and overseas. CPD is not only a means of converting capable scientists in other fields into geoscientists (bringing with them much-*

*needed expertise in other fields) and deepening the skills of those already in the geosciences at all stages of their career, but also providing pathways for those wishing mid-career changes. (p. 29)*

The keywords in this synthesis of the potential power of microcredentialling are ‘partnership’, ‘universities’, ‘building blocks’ and ‘pathways’, which are crucial elements of the occupational trajectories that we are advocating here. With regard to the potential application of such an approach to teacher education, Perry, Findon and Cordingley (2021) presented a brief but astute encapsulation of both possibilities and problems for consideration:

*Assessment—Looking at the literature, great claims are made about the potential for personalized learning via technology in teacher education and education more generally. A widely advocated variant of this idea is that a combination of learning analytics (from simple scores to analysis through artificial intelligence and machine learning) and ‘microcredentials’ or units can make even the most structured and content-heavy programs highly accessible and differentiated for individual needs. ... There are several points within this general description: first, that micro-structures and credentials may allow more bespoke teacher education activity, perhaps at a cost of collaboration and guided support. Second, that multimedia technology can be used to connect and make accessible evidence relating to the learning to foster discussion and/or as a summative assessment. Third, micro-structures may indulge the concept of gamification. This is not something we discuss at any length here, but note that points, badges, levels and leader-boards are becoming ubiquitous features of many online spaces and are widely held to be beneficial features of learning design to encourage engagement and performance (Subhash & Cudney, 2018). (pp. 24–25)*

Taking heed of this combined endorsement of and cautionary note about the potential utility of microcredentialling in teacher education, we contend that deployment of this increasingly popular provision option in Australian higher education is likely to be of interest to and value for RETs and the families with whom they work because of the relative agility and flexibility of such a qualification. The capacity to complete “bite-sized” learning components in situ, and to engineer them to constitute broader qualifications that lead directly via well-recognised pathways to teacher education registration for those RETs who aspire to such registration, is in our view a viable approach to recognising this currently invisible element of the teaching workforce and is well worth developing further.

At the same time, and mindful of Cardini’s (2006) evocation of the contested and politicised character of partnerships from a theoretical perspective, we concede the power disparity between RETs and universities, the proposed providers of such occupational pathways. In an era of (hopefully post-) COVID-19, with universities, like all institutions, needing to consider the budgetary implications of this kind of proposal, there is the potential for those universities to evaluate this proposal initially through an economic rationalist lens that would privilege economic questions over social justice issues. On the other hand, microcredentials afford the opportunity, for all members of the proposed partnerships, to experiment with the proposal on a small scale at first. Certainly, these partnerships will thrive only if the shared and separate interests and needs of all partners are fulfilled genuinely and sustainably.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, we have proposed a particular approach to developing and enacting innovative partnerships concerned with credentialling adult supervisors of school students enrolled in Australian distance education. In doing so, we have sought to develop a counternarrative to the dominant discourses that perpetuate the occupational invisibility of Australian RETs, and that contribute more widely to the continued deficit views and inequitable access attached to Australian rural education.



In proposing this approach, we have drawn on the occupational experiences gleaned from the RETs' responses to the survey reported here, which have highlighted the contextual specificity and the diversity of the RETs' role, as well as their indispensable contributions to the learning outcomes of the students whom they supervise. More broadly, our proposal helps to emphasise both the urgency and the complexity of envisaging and enacting situationally responsive rural community–university collaborations to support this vital yet invisible segment of the Australian educational workforce. This distinctive element of that workforce creates both challenges and opportunities for ensuring that rural teacher pathways are as comprehensive and inclusive as possible, and it also constitutes an important litmus test for schools and universities striving to create a teacher workforce that is authentically responsive to the needs of regional, rural and remote schools and their respective communities.

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