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Regional Partnerships: Building a Future Regional Workforce in Western Australia

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Abstract

Following the success of a pre-service teacher hub in the Pilbara region of Western Australia, a decision was made to establish a second hub within the same region in another town. The second hub will be a collaboration between the Pilbara Universities Centre (PUC) and the Western Australian Department of Education. Although the PUC does not currently train teachers, it does, however, provide administrative, academic and pastoral support to a range of local education students studying at both bachelor and post-graduate levels in the field of education. The PUC also has students from many other disciplines who can add to the depth of the pre-service teacher hub. The PUC has the potential to grow, and it makes sense for the Department of Education's pre-service teacher hub to work in collaboration with the PUC to develop regional employees. The hub provides a way to connect and upskill not just pre-service teachers, but also students from other disciplines.

Keywords: *building regional communities, community education, cross-sector collaboration, pre-service teacher, regional professional experience, regional student, regional university, regional workforce*

Introduction

This article is about a partnership between the Department of Education and the Pilbara Universities Centre (PUC), with the purpose of building a work-ready regional workforce for a growing Pilbara town in the Northwest of Western Australia. The partnership builds upon an existing Department of Education pre-service teacher hub in the same region. The new student hub reaches beyond pre-service teachers and the future teaching workforce. The new student hub is inclusive of all students who are potential future employees for a regional community.

Pre-Service Teacher Hubs

The Western Australian Department of Education established 12 pre-service teacher hubs in 2020. The purpose of these hubs was to build work readiness in graduates in areas of workforce

demand. Regional schools are areas of workforce demand, so eight hubs were established in regional locations. Each hub has a coordinator who is responsible for coordinating professional learning and networking opportunities for pre-service teachers undertaking a regional professional experience in that location. The Department of Education provides funding to support eligible pre-service teachers to undertake a regional professional experience. The Department also provides funding to run each hub. Networking and professional learning events occur during the professional experience and bring pre-service teachers from different schools together, so that they can form a community, support each other, and gain a deeper understanding of working and living in a regional location.

Eligible pre-service teachers who are undertaking a regional professional experience can access support through the pre-service development program. This support is financial, professional and holistic. Prior to the start of each school term, pre-service teachers are invited to attend a full day induction. The induction provides an opportunity for pre-service teachers from different universities to network and it provides professional learning to assist with their professional experience.

The themes of the professional learning are around the Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership's (AITSL) *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers*:

- 1.1: Physical, social and intellectual development and characteristics of learners;
- 1.3: Students with diverse linguistic, cultural, religious and socioeconomic backgrounds;
- 1.4: Strategies for teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students;
- 1.5: Differentiate teaching to meet the specific learning needs of students across the full range of abilities;
- 1.6: Strategies to support full participation of students with disability;
- 2.4: Understand and respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to promote reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians;
- 4.3: Manage challenging behaviour. (AITSL, 2022)

These standards focus on cultural responsiveness, trauma-informed practice, English as a second language or dialect, classroom management, catering for diversity and inclusivity.

Pilbara Pre-Service Teacher Hub

The largest towns in the Pilbara are Karratha and Port Hedland. Port Hedland was chosen for the Pilbara pre-service teacher hub in 2020 because there was available and affordable accommodation and many schools were willing to mentor pre-service teachers. These factors meant that more pre-service teachers went to Port Hedland than to any other regional town in Western Australia.

Karratha Student Hub

Karratha is one of Western Australia's most remote regional towns and is located some 1535 kilometres north of Perth. The City of Karratha is home to four industrial ports and contributes approximately \$8.76 billion to the national economy each year, predominantly from mineral exports generated from the vast mining, oil and gas industries located in the Pilbara. Characterised by the juxtaposition of this modern industry and an ancient natural landscape steeped in culture, the City of Karratha has national economic significance, and the rich history of Australia's Ngarluma and Yindjibarndi people is of global heritage value.

The City of Karratha consists of five towns: Karratha, Dampier, Wickham, Roebourne and Point Sampson, and is home to over 10 primary and secondary school. The growth in student numbers in many of these schools has resulted in an ever-increasing demand for teachers.

Due to limited accommodation available in Karratha, few pre-service teachers were able to undertake a professional experience there. To address the accommodation issue that affected Karratha and many other regional towns, the Department of Education established an accommodation register, which allowed teachers in Government housing to host a pre-service teacher in their house whilst on a professional experience.

In 2023, an additional hub was established in Karratha in partnership with the PUC. The PUC, established in 2020 with some three students, has grown rapidly over the past three years to now, providing academic, pastoral and administrative support to over 300 students (from a range of disciplines) based in the Pilbara (including over 200 based in the City of Karratha). The expansion of the pre-service teacher hub into the City of Karratha has occurred because Karratha is starting to attract more pre-service teachers than any other town, and key stakeholders were engaged and keen to broaden the reach of the pre-service teacher hub to a student hub including students of other disciplines.

Baynton West Primary School, along with the other Karratha Network schools, worked closely to promote a program of shared accommodation, providing school staff in Government Regional Officer Housing with an allowance of \$125 per week to provide accommodation to a pre-service teacher or school psychologist participating in the Department of Education's pre-service teacher program. This suddenly opened up previously untapped options of accommodation in the City of Karratha, where accommodation is expensive and availability is limited. Previously, pre-service teacher placement demands could not be met, due to a lack of accommodation.

Since this option has become available, Baynton West Primary School alone has hosted more than 20 pre-service teachers in their third or final year of initial teacher education. Some of the third-year student teachers returned to complete a final placement the following year. All of these teachers have commenced employment in the regions, alleviating pressures caused by the national teacher shortage. This had previously impacted the Pilbara negatively, with positions remaining unfilled for extended periods of time.

Pre-service teachers report the camaraderie and acceptance of their host schools. Along with the cohesiveness of the staff, this has made them enthusiastic about a career in regional areas. The professional learning opportunities provided through the hub, including working with students from other disciplines, has enabled the pre-service teachers to be workforce ready, as they are able to engage in targeted professional learning in literacy, numeracy, cultural responsiveness, English as an additional language or dialect, and trauma-informed practice. Lisa Ledger, Principal of Baynton West Primary School, states that it is a *“win/win situation, the schools now employ graduate teachers who are well prepared for the complexities of the regions and are equipped to begin their teaching careers with high degrees of pedagogical knowledge and resilience.”*

Evidence-Based Practice

Evidence will be collected to ensure that the program is meeting the goals of preparing work-ready graduates for regional schools. The program also needs to meet the current and future directions of the Department of Education. The Department of Education's (2022) *Focus 2023* document prioritises the strengthening of partnerships with local Technical and Further Education Colleges, registered training organisations, and industry, to maximise student pathways. A partnership with the PUC is an example of a partnership which will maximise student outcomes.

Data from pre-service teachers will be collected pre- and post- professional experience to determine self-perceived knowledge in cultural responsiveness, trauma-informed practice and English as an additional language or dialect. These themes have been chosen as key measures of regional work readiness.

Regional principals will be surveyed to determine if pre-service teachers who have undertaken a supported regional professional experience are more prepared and more likely to be retained longer than graduates who have not been part of the pre-service development program.

Currently, 86% of final year pre-service teachers who undertake a regional professional experience as part of the pre-service development program convert to employees upon graduation. The vast majority take employment in regional settings. This figure becomes a benchmark. The impact of the partnership between the Department of Education and the PUC in Karratha for building a regional workforce will be measured to determine the value of the partnership.

References

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