Working As Rural Academics

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Abstract

The work of academics in rural/regional campuses is distinguished in various ways from that of their metropolitan colleagues. From this difference can come insights of benefit to their institution, their discipline and academia in general. The networks formed by such academics can also play a part in regional development initiatives. While academics have often studied various rural and regional occupational groups, they have much less frequently focused upon themselves as rural workers in academia. A study conducted by a team of academics from regional campuses of two metropolitan-based universities, located in two different states, aims to contribute to building knowledge about working as a rural academic. Based on interviews and a survey of academics, the study explores the ways in which rural/regional academics perceive their working life, and compares these perceptions with metropolitan academics' perceptions of the academic work of their distant colleagues. In a climate in which concerns about professionals leaving regional areas are common, this paper focuses on views of 'rural academia' as a potential long-term career.

Introduction

Far from working in an 'ivory tower' rarefied atmosphere, academics at regional university campuses play a vital role in providing higher education for rural Australians, not only in the immediate environs of the campus, but also further afield through flexibly delivered programs. They also contribute to their communities, institutions and disciplines in a multiplicity of ways. Here we explore the distinctive roles, joys and challenges of academic staff working in the regional campuses of two metropolitan-based universities, one in South Australia and the other in Victoria, and their assessment of their work as a possible lifelong career.

Is the work of academics at rural/regional university campuses different from that of their metropolitan colleagues? Are there particular contributions that they make or challenges that they face that are distinct from the achievements and experiences of those in large cities? Benchmarking discussions held in the late 1990s among academics at regional campuses of metropolitan-based universities led some of those involved to believe that there were such distinctions. This provided the impetus for a collaborative research project conducted by researchers from a South Australian and a Victorian university regional campus.

Academics have often studied various rural and regional occupational groups (e.g. Sawyer & Munn 1996 & 1998 on accountants; Stephenson & Petkov 1999a & 1999b on teachers; Dollard, Winefield & Winefield 1999 and Lonne & Cheers 2000 on social workers; Huntley 1991 on health professionals). Higher education students in and from rural contexts have also been the subject of study (Hicks, Johnston & Hipp 1998; James 2000). Researchers have also studied academics in general (recent studies including: Sheehan & Welch 1996; Coaldrake & Stedman 1999; NTEU 2000, focusing on workloads and stress; McInnis 2000, whose findings included a noticeable decline in job satisfaction; Anderson, Johnson & Saha 2002, an online survey relating to the changing nature of academic work and age profile; and Bryson, Barnes & Kirk 2000, a United Kingdom online survey on working in higher education), or particular aspects of their lives (e.g. Applebee, Bruce, Clayton, Pascoe & Sharpe 1998 on academics' use of the Internet). However, they have more rarely focused upon academics as rural workers in academia. Our study aimed to build a knowledge base in this area of study.

After giving a brief overview of the project and papers arising so far from the study, this paper focuses on the qualitative data from the interviews and survey that sum up perceptions of working in rural academia. It also shares some of the reactions to the type and scope of the survey.

Overview of the research project

The aim was to identify and explore: rural academics' perceptions of their working lives; the implications of being a rural academic for lifestyle and career; the knowledge, attitudes and skills involved; the contributions made to institutions, disciplines and communities; and also a comparison of these perceptions with metropolitan academics' perceptions of rural academics. 'Rural' here has been used to encompass regional university campuses, even if located in a provincial city.

The initial stage of the project consisted of in-depth interviews of twelve academics (selected using maximum variation sampling) in each of the two states. A third of these had worked as academics only at a regional campus, a third had worked only in a metropolitan campus, and the remainder had worked in both situations. The resulting data were reported in earlier papers (1999 and 2000), and also provided a contribution to an international conference (Ellis, Boxall, Dollard & Sawyer 1999 & 2000; Boxall, Ellis, Dollard & Sawyer 2000).

In addition, comments by interview participants provided many of the items for a larger survey. This was web-based. Early questions provided a respondent profile. Most of the survey items consisted of statements that were rated by the respondent on a seven-point scale according to extent of agreement (from 'disagree strongly' to 'agree strongly'). The survey also included Goldberg's General Health Questionnaire (twelve items), a question on job satisfaction (with seven alternative responses from 'extremely dissatisfied' to 'extremely satisfied') and an open-ended question inviting further comments. Invitations to participate were sent to all regional academics of the two universities and to a random sample of 200 metropolitan academics in each of the same universities. (For the introduction to the survey, see http://www.unisanet.unisa.edu.au/ruralsurveys/forms/index.htm). Despite a disappointing response rate (about 10 per cent of the random metropolitan sample), the survey served to confirm many of the insights gained from the interviews. The following indicates the profile of the survey respondents:

Gender	42 males	43 females
State	37 SA	48 Victoria
Rurality	41 metro	44 rural
Age	60 under 51	25 older than 50

(There were more age categories in the survey, but here age 50 has been used as a divider between those in early or mid-career and those closer to retirement.)

The 1999 paper addressed the 'swings and roundabouts' nature of the rural academic working life: the compensations for the perceived disadvantages. The 2000 paper emphasised the interdependence of regional campuses (including their staff) and their communities, and the contributions made by regional academics to their community, their discipline and the institution. (This interdependence and universities' contributions to regional communities are explored by Garlick in 1998 and 2000 Evaluations and Investigations Programme publications.) A further planned journal article will draw comparisons between rural and metropolitan academic perceptions of various aspects of their work.

This paper draws on the earlier work, but focuses particularly on the motivations, lifestyle choices and other circumstances that have led rural academics to work in that context, as well as on some of the characteristics of their working lives, with associated positives and negatives. Much of this has come from comments contributed as responses to the open-ended question in the web-based survey: 'Would you like to elaborate on any other factors not covered by this survey that you feel have had an impact on you and your perceptions of the work of rural academics?' This question allowed respondents to convey more of their personal feelings about their work situation and its prospects and to expand upon their earlier responses. About half the completed surveys (40 out of 85) included these additional comments. In some cases the opportunity to contribute these appeared to allow some cathartic 'blowing off steam', indicative of less than ideal work situations. The extent to which survey respondents agreed or disagreed with the statement: 'Being a "rural academic" is a potential lifelong career' is also reported. Responses to a similar question in the original interviews are also revisited.

Survey reactions

Some of the additional comments related to the actual completing of the survey, such as time taken (which varied greatly) and computer skills inadequacies, or to some difficulties with the questions themselves. Some of the latter are reported below.

Some comments referred to definitions of rurality:

Is the ANU a rural campus?

I don't know what "rural" means. Is Christchurch NZ "rural"? Is Bundoora "rural"? (Melbourne people would say so)

Whether there was a rural/metropolitan dichotomy was also questioned:

Both contribute to the advancement of knowledge.

One commented on a perceived weakness of the survey:

I think you need to distinguish more clearly between rural people who became academics, and academics who moved into rural areas, as I don't think we're the same animals!

It was pointed out that distance education and flexible delivery mean that metropolitan academics may be teaching students from both settings:

My discipline involves a large amount of distance education and we service the needs of many rural students; therefore we, too, have to be aware of rural issues. This also leads to a totally different conception of just what an academic does!

In similar fashion, some rural academics provide distance education for metropolitan students who wish to study a particular subject not offered nearby, or at times that do not suit. The experience of metropolitan academics who coordinate subjects run at rural campuses was something not covered specifically by the survey, as one participant stressed. Another's situation brought other complexities:

I work at a metro campus, but live in a rural district (very rural but obviously not isolated). So I find my multiple identities quite fragmented and competing against each other as I try to answer these questions. Furthermore, for each question I silently said 'Yes (or no) but'. For example, ... rural academics can provide links [for the community with the wider world], but do they? The same can be said for metro academics. They too can provide ... but do they? And so on.

The danger of generalising was mentioned:

The interaction between the context and the individual academic is complex. Academics differ in their motivation and expertise. Rural campuses differ and the context for each academic on these diverse campuses also differs. For example, some academics may have good relations with colleagues on metropolitan campuses and feel extremely supported; others may not. There are many variables that interact in complex ways.

There are dud rural academics just as there are great metropolitan ones.

Respondents also queried whether those who had had no rural academic experience could comment on the situation of rural academics. A number of puzzled e-mail messages arrived of the type, 'I think this has come to me by mistake – I'm not a rural academic' and needed reassurance that they *were* included and that it was perceptions as well as reality that were being investigated.

Feelings and perceptions

How rural academics perceived their working life varied immensely according to their situation, campus changes and other factors. One liked 'the greater autonomy of rural life and work'. Other lifestyle advantages included:

I love going home for lunch – I could not do this in the city.

Others commented on the complexity:

It is relative to the individual circumstance. How much they can control and set their own job parameters and how they do their job. Rural academics must be flexible and interact with the community outside the university. If they don't they pay the price and lose credibility.

As well as flexibility, 'more breadth (of perspective and skills)' is needed.

The variations in the nature of collegial relations in different settings were underlined:

The smaller the campus, the more likely that your intellectual stimulation will be cross-disciplinary. I think people only have time for a certain amount of interaction – in a metropolitan campus, that is more likely to be in the same discipline, and maybe you contribute more to that specific discipline.

The intertwined nature of work and other activities, which has both positive and negative aspects, was highlighted:

One aspect of life in a rural town is that you cannot separate work and non-work. I have taught people I know from other activities, children my child went to school with, etc. etc. My students serve me in the supermarket and know where I go to church. Likewise, disasters that affect students, affect you as you know about them. So we go to funerals, send sympathy cards and try to encourage them to keep studying. Life is very public and we have very little support.

The same person found it difficult to isolate which community contributions were made as part of her university role, as she had been doing many of the same things before becoming an academic.

Some felt a sense of being 'othered' by their institution:

Uncertainties in communication and cooperation with metro colleagues can be a source of worry and feeling forgotten. It really seems that we need to be constantly reminding the big smoke of our existence and the need for reliable, timely information relating to our area of work.

I do not believe the wider university really considers us as part of them.

In other cases, a lack of awareness by metropolitan management was the issue:

Problems in perception seem to come more from administrations and top-of-the-heap decision-makers than from 'front-line troops'. The element these decision-makers misunderstand most is the intensity of the identification that rural communities have with their place, their resources, their facilities, including their university.

Rural academics require the resources of a large organisation based in a City, but could do without the management structures applied by City management to rural areas based on their belief and not reality.

Disadvantages of the rural academic situation included a perceived feeling of isolation, being broken down to some extent by modern technology:

With improved access to the Internet I imagine that rural academics would feel less isolated than they may have done in the past.

This impression is confirmed by Applebee et al. (1998, p. 52). However, distance caused other professional development barriers:

Opportunity for undertaking PhDs severely limited or student/staff member need to be able to cope with long distance supervision, which does not suit everyone.

It is difficult to get to do professional development in the country; nothing is really offered. In the end, you tend to turn off to professional development opportunities that you would normally attend in the city, just because it is too hard to get there.

Other disadvantages were no doubt shared more widely:

As regards to high teaching loads and hassles with a 'distant' central administration, it can't be much worse than being in a metropolitan campus, surely?!

Not feeling valued by both superiors and peers was a cause for concern:

There is room for advancement and opportunity in rural academic practice, but often the work of rural academics is not valued sufficiently by the university through promotion and incentives. You can be a big fish in a small pond and that attracts local resentment from other academics who have either not created their own opportunities or who are held back by poor managers.

Relationships with peers and supervisors were seen to be a crucial factor in job satisfaction. Perceived difficulties in regard to research opportunities were partially attributed to the background of those who had come from former colleges of advanced education:

> They are not used to the demands of research and of advancing knowledge in their chosen field. Given the right spirit of enquiry, the problems of lack of equipment and access to library facilities can be overcome. However, more effort is certainly needed than in metro universities.

A changing academic environment also contributed:

> ... academic life has become much harder and more stressful over recent years. In general, rural academics seem to have less support, fewer facilities, and a harder time conducting good research.

Unfortunately, for a minority, their situation was a mountain of negatives:

> I work in an under-resourced, unsupported, unrecognised position, teaching huge contact hours with no recognition and reward. I have lost promotion because of excessive teaching loads that have virtually precluded meaningful research over the past five years. I am totally disenchanted with the concept of rural teaching ... I am only here because I cannot afford to get out.

> Recent changes to the administration of the campus have sealed the fate of this campus as marginal, insignificant and a political dot. It is for this reason a sense of doom has prevailed with hope lost for the future.

Honest and open communication from campus leadership was seen by another as a real need.

In responding to one of the survey statements relating to career perceptions, 'There are pluses and minuses in each situation', no rural or metropolitan academic expressed disagreement. The following table compares the responses:

	Rural	Metropolitan
Neutral	17.0%	7.1%
Tend to agree	21.3%	26.2%
Agree	31.9%	33.3%
Strongly agree	29.8%	33.3%
Total	100.0%	100.0%

This sums up the general recognition that there are trade-offs involved in working in either a metropolitan or a rural campus.

Temporary or forever?

Additional comments by survey respondents that related specifically to rural academic career possibilities ranged from the very negative 'I am only still here because my varied employment history means I cannot afford to quit' to an expression of a possible intention to leave academia 'to obtain broader experience of work outside Uni, in the next 2-3 years' to the almost positive 'I have lived in a rural area and would be happy to do so again, although family considerations would make it very difficult.' However, this last response was accompanied by negative thoughts about academic work in general:

> ... the life of an academic (rising work loads, both professional and administrative, poorish pay and extremely hostile treatment by corporate-style anti-academic management make the life of an academic so unattractive that doing this work anywhere seems pretty unappealing. Much as I like teaching and research, and successful as I have been in a small way, I am considering my options.

The motivation of one respondent to become an academic was interesting:

> Previously I worked as a consultant. My decision to become an academic reflects my desire to getaway from the poor work conditions of consulting: short time-lines, sometimes low pay, and virtually no opportunity to attend to research issues in detail

When all the responses to the survey question on extent of agreement with the statement, 'Being a rural academic is a potential lifelong career' are considered, the picture is more positive. Four respondents did not answer this question, but the responses of the remainder were as follows: none expressed strong disagreement, 3 (3.7%) disagreed, 6 (7.4%) tended to disagree, 14 (17.3%) were neutral, 20 (24.7%) tended to agree, 29 (35.8%) agreed and 9 (11.1%) agreed strongly. While the question can be interpreted in general terms ('Yes, but not necessarily for me personally'), all the strong agreement responses came from people in a rural setting.

Another question relevant to this 'lifelong career potential' aspect of rural academia included requests for agreement or disagreement with the statement, 'I want to stay here forever'. The following is a comparison of the responses from rural and metropolitan academics:

	Rural	Metropolitan
Strongly disagree	10.6%	16.3%
Disagree	14.9%	7.0%
Tend to disagree	8.5%	11.6%
Neutral	36.2%	48.8%
Tend to agree	10.6%	7.0%
Agree	12.8%	9.3%
Strongly agree	6.4%	-
Total	100.0%	100.0%

While a large proportion of both groups were undecided, and the proportions expressing varying degrees of disagreement were similar for both groups (34.0% compared with 34.9%), there was more strong disagreement from metropolitan academics. It is interesting that the only people to strongly agree with that statement were rural academics.

In response to a question relating to the desirability of a transfer to the opposite situation, most rural academics disagreed, including 32.7% strongly, or were neutral (28.6%), whereas only 4.1% tended to agree. On the other hand, metropolitan academics seemed less satisfied with their current situation. Rural academics responded to the statement, 'I can't wait to get a transfer to the city', whereas for metropolitan academics it was: 'I can't wait to get a transfer out of the city.' A summary of the responses follows:

	Rural	Metropolitan
Strongly disagree	32.7%	16.3%
Disagree	20.4%	32.6%
Tend to disagree	14.3%	9.3%
Neutral	28.6%	32.6%
Tend to agree	4.1%	2.3%
Agree	-	4.7%
Strongly agree	-	2.3%
Total	100.0%	100.0%

Further statistical analysis is to be done on the whole survey. This should cast further light on distinctions between rural and metropolitan responses in this area of attitudes, as with the other sections.

If we go back to the earlier interview responses to the question, 'Do you consider "rural academic" to be a potential lifelong career, or a temporary step?' we see that many things influence the choices that people make: lifestyle, job opportunities, family responsibilities, enjoyment of work, research interests.

While metropolitan interviewees in general did not want to move to a rural campus, one who had previously been a farmer had a real wish to move back and continue with research interests from there. Others thought there could be career opportunities, particularly if an appropriate research centre was based at a rural campus. Alternatively, it was perceived as a possible good move prior to country retirement living. However, for most of those who had

experienced life in rural academia it was seen as a potentially permanent option. Some worked in a rural area because it was where they wanted to be, or because moving would be difficult owing to family or other commitments. Some had originally gone to the country on a temporary basis, but then decided to stay longer. Two rural interviewees were fairly negative, in one case also about academia in general. Job security, and how people were treated, were seen as issues. For others it depended on changes in personal or professional circumstances, such as family needs and whether they continued to enjoy the work and had continuing opportunities for research. Here are some of the responses:

> ... it doesn't really fit lifelong career or temporary step.. 'It suits me at the moment', is the best way to put it. It suits my family life, it suits what I want to do, but I'd prefer to be a social worker rather than a teacher.

> It can be a career, depending on the institution's attitude. Or it can be a catastrophic slip. ... as far as a lifelong career, you're most likely stuck from the moment you get here!

> ... it is my work-life – I don't envisage ... transfer to a metropolitan campus. I think this view varies quite markedly – for some people it is a stepping-stone to academic preferment or advancement and it may be a quite short-lived area for them. For others they have got substantial ties in the area, they are wedded to a rural lifestyle, and that is what they envisage in the longer term. If they were to change they would probably change to another rural campus ... but would not be looking particularly to move to a metropolitan area for an assortment of reasons.

> I thought it was quite possibly a lifelong career. I would have been happy to stay in a lot of ways. ... I think the quality of life is better in the country. ... So no, I didn't see it as a temporary step when I took it. I guess it's more that my circumstances changed.

Conclusion

Rural issues and urban issues may share some common factors, but this cannot be taken for granted. The reality is often very different. Change has been impacting often negatively on regional cities and smaller communities, with closing of bank branches, withdrawal of various health services and so on being frequently and depressingly in the news. Academics, along with other rural professionals, are part of the situation on which these issues impinge, as well as being part of an ever-changing higher education scene, responding to the implications of different emphases as each 'discourse of the month' becomes the focus: equity, inclusivity, student-centred learning, quality, flexible delivery, internationalisation, graduate qualities and so on. Academics can also be part of regional solutions, recognising the interdependence of rural community sectors and collaborating with other members of the community in business, local government and other educational institutions to find new directions. They can provide ways to approach answers through their research and their links with others in the global academic community and through their professional area. They teach new professionals who will be able to bring knowledge and skills to bear on rural issues. Because of these significant roles that rural academics can and should play, it is crucial that institutions find ways to maximise the perceived strengths and opportunities of rural academia by valuing their staff, and showing clearly that they and their roles and expertise are valued. Those working in rural university campuses also need to work together, as do other members of the wider rural community, to build a strong future.

> ... rural academics need to pull together ... focus limited resources on a shared vision. The collegial environment would be significantly enhanced if the university community could follow some of the guidelines for building and re-creating rural communities. (Survey participant)

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