

GUEST EDITORIAL COMMENTS

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Welcome to this special issue of *Education in Rural Australia*. In this special issue, an international set of perspectives on challenges facing rural education are explored. Collectively, the contributing authors were asked to address current issues in their country surrounding educational provision in rural and remote places. The contributing authors are drawn from Scotland and Wales in the United Kingdom, Alaska and Nebraska in the United States of America, Newfoundland and Ontario in Canada, New Zealand and Australia.

John Bryden examines how a new rural university in Scotland is faced with meeting the challenge of regional engagement while being held accountable by centralist government funding policies relating to the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). John explores how the ‘metrics’ of research productivity devalue regional engagement over publication outputs and research income before arguing that such economic rationalist approaches to education ignore what Greenwood (2002) contends is one of the fundamental forms of knowledge: *phronesis*. Bryden carefully examines how the charter of the rural university for regional engagement, place based education, and the national Research Assessment Exercise marginalise rural education and create tensions both within the university and its broader regional community as they attempt to include and value *phronesis* knowledge within the university curriculum. Bryden’s article is timely as it identifies many similar challenges facing rural Australian universities.

Dennis Mulcahy provides a detailed picture of educational provision in rural Newfoundland, Canada. Against a back drop of declining school enrolments, school amalgamations and closures, and political expediency, Dennis argues passionately for the continuation of small rural schools, especially in the isolated fishing villages. As part of his demographic analyses of rural communities, his three questions: *Who is leaving? Who is staying? and Who is returning?* present a powerful community analysis tool for rural educators. Dennis asks the reader to reconsider many of the ‘accepted’ and ‘conventional’ claims about quality education provision as he explores how the use of web-based distance education systems has turned these accepted claims upside.

Clark Gardener and Art Borgemenke provide the reader with a fascinating insight into how the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) American federal government legislation is impacting on small rural schools in the state of Nebraska. The focus on measuring student progress and linking school funding to results has seen the rise of ‘teacher proof’ curriculum materials in literacy and numeracy. Clark and Art argue that solutions to school improvement in literacy and numeracy education are more likely to be successful when collegial, locally contextualised solutions are implemented that draw upon the knowledge and skills of the teachers working in the small rural schools. They conclude that sustained school improvement cannot be solved by the ‘quick fix’ approach but needs an approach that focuses on the whole child and empowers teachers to develop place based school improvement programs.

In 'Local solutions to local problems' Russell Yates discusses how the University of Waikato in New Zealand has addressed the challenge of providing pre-service teacher education locally. Through the Mixed Media Programme, Russell identifies the successes of the program in recruiting and training teachers from rural areas where staffing shortages in rural primary schools were evident. The benefits of training local residents as teachers have become a well accepted strategy to solve hard-to-staff schools. Additionally, the unanticipated benefits for the teachers in the schools where the Mixed Media students were located found their involvement to be professionally enriching and prompted a number of the teachers to commence further studies themselves. Yates' article represents an innovative solution to the on-going challenge of recruiting and retaining teachers in rural hard-to-staff schools. The solution is one that has wide implications for many other nations that face the same challenges.

Aniko Varpalotai and Malcolm Thomas provide the reader with some comparative findings from their research in Ontario and Wales. Their research focuses on access and provision of health care services in rural places in both countries for rural youth. They note that the difficulties experienced by rural youth in accessing appropriate health care to meet their needs are linked to cut backs in program funding in many rural places. They discuss the creative link between better health care access and educational provision as a strategy to create a 'web of supports' for rural youth. The development of cooperative programs between health care professionals, youth workers and educators is identified as a model of best practice which promotes improved school retention rates, and access to health and personal care services locally for rural youth.

In the final article in this special, Ted Munsch and Colin Boylan report on the innovative program in rural Alaska that engages pre-service primary teachers with Native Alaskan village life. One of the challenges in rural Alaska is recruiting teachers to work and live in some very remote locations. Many rural village schools also experience high turnover of staff annually. Set against this on-going staffing challenge, Ted and Colin discuss a program developed by Alaska Pacific University that places their final year teacher education students into a remote Alaskan Native village. In their paper, they report on the impact of this immersion experience on these teacher education students. They reported that through living and teaching in a Yup'ik village for a week the students' knowledge and appreciation of rural Alaskan village conditions was changed in ways that developed a deeper appreciation and understanding of cultural and pedagogy issues.

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In conclusion, I would encourage the reader to reflect on each article and commence dialogue with colleagues about the ideas, activities and programs contained in this special issue of Education in Rural Australia.

REFERENCE

Greenwood, D.J. (2002). *Who are the real 'problem owners'? On the social embeddedness of universities*. Paper presented at the Conference: Universities: The knowledge economy and regional engagement. University of Innsbruck, December 13-14.

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