

PROMOTING RURAL EDUCATION: THE ROLE OF THE SOCIETY OF THE PROVISION OF EDUCATION IN RURAL AUSTRALIA (SPERA)

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ABSTRACT

The paper explores the role of the Society for the Provision of Education in Rural Australia (SPERA) and the challenges it has faced as the primary voice for Australian rural educators. The paper charts the origins of SPERA, and the contributions of key people involved in its foundation. The paper then examines the advocacy and impact of SPERA through its initiatives in establishing an internationally recognised national conference, the creation of Australia's only specifically rural education journal, Education in Rural Australia and the recognition of exceptional rural education institutions through its Australia Rural Education Award program.

INTRODUCTION

Australian rural education has a long tradition of providing access for all rural and remote students. This tradition has evolved despite policy and program decisions about what is best for a rural school having been developed in the highly urbanised capital cities of each Australian state and territory. This metro-centric and centralised mode of educational administration by state and territory departments has seen the development of a practice that can be summarised as a 'one size fits all' model of operation. As Sher 1983 suggests this mode of administration has created a perception that rural schools both in Australia and elsewhere are regarded as the 'ugly duckling' within educational bureaucracies. Wallace and Boylan (2007) suggested that Australian rural education needs to adopt the concept of a 'rural lens' that focuses on the specifics of place based educational programs and the creation and implementation of educational policies and programs that are sensitive to the local rural community needs and are effective in these rural and remote locations. (Canadian Secretariat, 2007).

Given this long standing view about rural education provision a group of like minded rural educators and rural community members came together, starting in 1983, to consider what could be done to enhance the status and awareness of rural education provision in Australia. As a direct outcome of this interest in rural

education provision, a new organisation, known as the Society for the Provision of Education in Rural Australia (SPERA) was formed.

WHO IS SPERA?

Commencing with a combined parent driven and tertiary education desire to provide a voice for rural education and training across the whole of Australia, the Society for the Provision of Education in Rural Australia has grown to be an organisation whose membership includes parents of children participating in schooling, community members who value the role and input a rural school has for their community, teachers in schools across rural Australia, teacher education staff who provide courses of study in rural teaching and provide rural practice teaching experiences within the pre-service course, pre-service teacher education students, TAFE teachers who provide the industry based courses in rural communities, and educational leaders at the state and federal levels who develop policies and programmes for educational delivery in rural places. Collectively the diversity of interests and expertise, and level of delivery in rural education and training ranging from pre-school to tertiary create a broadly based and informed voice from the 'periphery' to the 'centre' or centralised administrative and organisational units that manage education in rural Australia.

FOR WHAT DOES SPERA STAND?

The *Mission and Goals of SPERA* (SPERA Pamphlet, 1992) clearly establish its focus as an organisation that:

1. promotes a positive view of rural education and training;
2. encourages and supports innovation and initiative in the provision of rural education services;
3. promotes high quality provision of education and training;
4. supports efficient and effective delivery systems for education and training for people in rural areas;
5. encourages the collection and sharing of information on the provision of education in rural areas;
6. conducts an annual national conference to exchange ideas and information about best practices in education and training in rural education; and,
7. serves as a national advocate for expressing the voices of rural educators.

Using the Missions and Goals of SPERA as a foundation for policy development, a range of more specific policies addressing a variety of areas have been developed including social justice matters, funding for education and access to tertiary education and for school systems, developing effective rural teacher education programs, providing access to post-secondary training and adult education, and strategies for greater community development.

WHAT ACTIVITIES DOES SPERA ORGANISE?

SPERA engages in a range of proactive programs and activities that seek to support its mission and goals. These include:

1. *Annual National Conference*. This is a national and international venue where current theories, policies, programs and practices in rural education and training are disseminated. The 2011 Conference, *Summit 2011*, is the 27th annual conference which is jointly hosted with the Sidney Myer Chair, Rural Education and Communities and Flinders University. Through the use of video technology, international speakers are able to present at the annual conference along with key leaders in rural education from all states and territories across Australia.
2. *Education in Rural Australia journal*. Now in its 21st year of publication, the journal, *Education in Rural Australia*, provides a unique voice for researchers and practitioners in rural regions to disseminate their theories, programs and practices to a wider international community. The journal is abstracted by ERIC, EBSCOHOST, GALE and INFORMIT databases services. The journal has two issues per year.
3. *SPERA Newsletter*. Since 1985 SPERA has produced a Newsletter for its members. The role of the newsletter has been to: i) keep members informed of new and emerging issues in rural education and training; ii) to promote specific state or federal government initiatives that impact on rural Australia; iii) encourage members to become active spokespeople for rural education and training issues; iv) increase the membership base for SPERA; and, v) provide information on international events and conferences in rural education. The SPERA Newsletter is usually produced 4 times per year.
4. *Australia Rural Education Award*. The annual Australian Rural Education Award (AREA) was established by SPERA in 1994. It seeks to: i) acknowledge excellence in rural education; ii) recognise positive programs and practices that benefit the rural community; and iii) demonstrate approaches that meet the educational needs of rural people. (*Australian Rural Education Award Brochure, 2009*). The award is open to any institution, organisation or industry group. Over the years, the award has been presented to individual schools, industry based training groups, state-wide rural education providers, and rural tertiary education institutions. This annual award is presented at the annual national conference for that year.
5. *Life Members Rural Education Award*. Initiated in 2009, this award is linked closely to the Australian Rural Education Award and is specifically targeted to applicants from the host state in which the annual national conference is held.
6. *Pre-service Teachers Rural Education Forum*. Growing from an idea by past President of SPERA, Mrs Sheila King, the pre-service teacher education on-line forum seeks to bring together all pre-service teacher education students to provide a shared space where experiences about rural teaching and living

are disseminated between students from all Australian universities. It is free for students to join and become part of the forum.

7. *SPERA website*. From the early 2000's onwards, SPERA has developed its own web presence through its website. The www.spera.asn.au site is the public front door for all communities to engage with like-minded people about the provision of education in rural and remote places.

IN THE BEGINNING: THE CREATION OF SPERA

The impetus for the creation of a rural education organisation started with the work of Marie Dale, who was a protagonist for a strong rural voice and representation in the head offices of educational departments. Marie was a community member with children attending the local schools in Gunnedah NSW. Based on her experiences from an educational study tour of rural communities in the USA during 1982, Marie had returned to NSW with a vision to establish a strong vibrant voice for rural schools. During the early part of 1983 Marie Dale campaigned vigorously in the NSW Department of Education and the newly established Education Commission of New South Wales for a viable rural voice. Through connecting with key people both inside NSW as well as in other Australian states, Marie initiated planning for a National Conference on Rural Education in Australia. In 1984 with the support of Dr. Bob Meyenn, CSU Bathurst, Dr. Derrick Tomlinson Director, National Centre for Rural Education in Australia, Dr. Ian Barnard NSW Education Commission and M/s Daphne Clarke, Director NSW In-service Education, a national conference was planned. The first national conference was held in Armidale, NSW in 1985.

Significant outcomes from this first National Conference were: 1) the large number of attendees from all states and territories along with a number of senior educational policy makers from both Federal and state level education departments; 2) the creation of an organisation specifically focused on providing quality education for children and young adults in their rural place or location – this organisation adopted the name: The Society for the Provision of Education in Rural Australia (or SPERA); and, 3) the need for a national Rural Education Conference to be held annually. From this first conference Marie Dale was elected President of the newly founded organisation. As Marie wrote of that time:

“Looking back to 1983 when ten committed parents and teachers came together in Sydney to form SPERA a rural education organisation, there was considerable concern whether we would be able to reach people in other states who shared the same concern as we did over the provision of education services in rural areas” (President’s Message, SPERA Newsletter, September 1985, p.1).

The establishment of SPERA coincided with the major Federal government initiative to review rural education provision through its Commonwealth Schools Commission instrumentality that saw the release in 1987 of the *Schooling in Rural Australia* report (Commonwealth Schools Commission, 1987). Similarly in NSW, the

Education Commission had concluded its inquiry into rural education within NSW that led to the production of the *Listening and Responding* report (Rawlinson, 1983). While these policy and practice reports gave impetus to the need for a rural voice, the real challenge for SPERA lay ahead as it attempted to address the negative and disadvantaged stereotypes of rural schools that were the dominant view at the time. Marie wrote:

“Bob [Meyenn] and Marie [Dale] began lobbying state and federal governments with the aim of changing the perception of disadvantage in rural Australia. It was their view that the strengths of rural education should be built upon and recognized for its positive attributes.” (Dale, King and Boylan, 2009, p.4).

The initial National Conference led to the formulation of a mission statement and a set of aims and goals and purposes for SPERA. The mission statement for SPERA indicates:

“SPERA links people with a diverse range of interests and training to promote the development of rural and remote education and training in rural and remote communities by:

- Promoting a positive view of education in rural areas;
- Encouraging innovation and initiative in the provision of rural education services;
- Supporting rural communities and educators to work towards the provision of quality education and training; and,
- Providing a framework for sharing of concerns, issues and experiences relating to education and training in rural areas.” (SPERA website and SPERA promotional brochure, 1992).

LEADERSHIP AND THE VOICE FROM THE PERIPHERY

Following on from Marie Dale who was elected as the first President of SPERA in 1985, Dr Bob Meyenn was elected President in 1987. Bob sought to keep the vision and the voice of SPERA in the foreground of federal and state education departments through engaging in policy formulating dialogues as well as providing more formal written submissions presenting a rural perspective on a number of educational provision issues in the late 1980's. In particular, as President of SPERA, he wrote:

“Marie Dale and I had a very productive meeting with the NSW Minister of Education, Rodney Cavalier. ... There was a discussion of two initiatives taken by the NSW department of education, i.e.

- The points system of rewarding teachers working in difficult-to-staff schools; and,
- The comparative assessment of principals for some schools.” (President’s Report, SPERA Newsletter, 1987, p.1).

And then in 1988, Bob writes:

“I have also seen a draft of the report commissioned by [the federal minister] John Kerin into post secondary education in rural Australia which should be released shortly and I advise people to get a copy of this as soon as they can.” (President’s Report, SPERA Newsletter, April/May 1988, p.1).

Together with these advocacy roles, the membership of SPERA was growing during the 1980’s to include members in all states and territories and at the 1988 SPERA National Conference, Susan Stevenson from Sheffield in Northern Tasmania was elected as the third President of SPERA. Susan brought to the leadership of SPERA a focused approach to enhance the organisational structure and operation of SPERA. In particular, she encouraged the development of a set of shared vision statements that form the basis of the current set of goals and purposes for SPERA that can be found on the SPERA website. The advocacy role of SPERA had been recognised nation-wide and many senior policy makers sought advice from Susan while she was President. She wrote:

“During the last four months I have had visitors from the Northern Territory, South Australia, and Western Australia. Discussions covered agricultural high schools, TAFE courses for isolated women, local employment initiatives and job creation schemes.” (President’s Message, SPERA Newsletter, December 1988, p.1).

At the 1990 National Conference Dr Don Reeves was elected as SPERA’s 4th President. Don recognised the need for SPERA to be a strong positive voice for rural schools as the economic downturn (“The recession we had to have’ quote made by the Hon Paul Keating, Australian Treasurer) in the early 1990’s impacted on rural communities in significant ways. Don wrote:

“With an uncertain economic future for the nation as a whole, and very pressing times for the rural sector in particular, our resolve to ensure that social justice means more than mere words will require us all – individuals and SPERA as an organisation – to do some hard work.” (President’s Message, SPERA Newsletter, August/September 1990, p.2).

REFLECTIONS OF PAST SPERA PRESIDENTS

For this presentation about SPERA and its history of SPERA, the author 1) examined all past newsletters of SPERA to identify key challenges, successes and contributions that each President described during their period as President, and 2) contacted the past Presidents of SPERA to invite them to submit a reflective analysis of their term as President. This reflection was guided by these three focus questions:

1. What have been the greatest **challenges** for SPERA while you have been President?
2. What have been the **successes** for SPERA while you have been President?
3. What **contributions** to State/Federal government policy/inquiry/programs happened while you have been President of SPERA?

Based on the generous responses provided by the past Presidents, a summary of their reflections follows.

1. Mrs Marie Dale, Foundation President, 1985-1987

The seed for SPERA

"SPERA emerged as a result of three things I experienced. 1. I had been running local regional and state in-service courses for parents and teachers but always experienced an emptiness after each event as participants did not seem to believe in the positive attributes of being educated in a rural school. 2. After visiting the US on an in-service scholarship and seeing the best of rural education in isolated areas of the US I came home realising how much more rural Americans believe in making their local school great and how they embrace the value of their rural school. and 3. When I returned from the US I returned to an economy with high unemployment and a careers advisor at [local] High School encouraging students to consider "creative unemployment" I was livid by this. I saw rural kids as resourceful, independent, creative and employable. I wanted to acknowledge the teachers who admired rural students for the above characteristics and able acknowledge their strengths. I wanted to accentuate the advantages of growing up and being educated at a local rural school and to see federal programs shift their emphasis from the negative to the positive." (M. Dale. Written Communication, September 2010).

The successes of SPERA

"When SPERA formed, I wanted our conferences to highlight not the research into disadvantage but the best examples of rural school curriculum that built on rural knowledge. An example being the high school teacher in Gunnedah who taught science by showing his students the art of tanning by utilising the rabbit skins of the rabbits they had shot over the weekend. There was a tannery in the town and the students had the assistance from the tannery. This unit of study validated the lives of rural students and encouraged their interest in science." (M. Dale. Written Communication, September 2010).

The ever present challenges

"When I came across Pat Thomson book "Schooling the rustbelt kids" in 2002 I could not help thinking that to call children in the disadvantaged program rustbelt kids labeled them as unsalvageable. In my view language has a powerful impact on enabling or disabling communities." (M. Dale. Written Communication, September 2010).

2. Professor Bob Meyenn, President, 1987-1988

The issues facing SPERA

"The key issue that confronted the organisation from its inception was recognition, influence and profile. We tried whatever we could to make the organisation relevant in the eyes of the State Education Departments, State and Federal Governments and rural communities generally." (R. Meyenn, Written communication, August 2010).

It is important to note and remember that the most important word in the organisation's title is SPE *IN* RA. The new organisation was up against some pretty formidable opposition and resistance particularly from the Isolated Childrens' Parents Association (ICPA) who had the strong backing from the Farmer's Federation and the National Party." (R. Meyenn, Written communication, August 2010).

The Successes for SPERA

"I would highlight two achievements while I was President.

1. School funding formulas.

SPERA argued strongly that than inputs model for school funding did not achieve equity and fairness and that funding should take outputs much more seriously. SPERA certainly did cause Governments and Education Departments to rethink and refine funding of rural schools.

2. Rural Education as a research area.

SPERA has played a key role in establishing Rural Education as a legitimate area for research and publication. This has enabled the debates on Rural Education to be much more based on fact and rigorous research than emotion and anecdote." (R. Meyenn, Written communication, August 2010).

3. Mrs Susan Stevenson, President 1988-1990

(Susan Stevenson was a community member living in North West Tasmania)

Success for SPERA

1. 'the very diversity of our membership (parents, community members, teachers administrators and academics) can be our greatest strength providing we harness it by creating a genuine network of people listening, sharing, challenging, responding and working always for those we represent' (Newsletter August 1988)
2. Incorporating the sharing of success stories from around Australia via the SPERA Newsletter.
3. Representing SPERA in meetings with senior educators from Tasmania, South Australia, Western Australia and at the Australian Education Council.
4. The incorporation of SPERA as a public organisation. (Newsletter September 1989)

Challenges for SPERA

1. We must increase our membership – more members will make more contributions to our future. (Newsletter September 1989)
2. We must put more into the Newsletter – this is how we can share ideas of good practice. (Newsletter September 1989).

One of the saddest moments during Susan's presidency was the death of her husband, Barry Stevenson early in 1990.

4. Dr Donald Reeves, President 1990-1991

(Don Reeves was an educational administrator living in rural North East Victoria when he was elected President)

Successes for SPERA

1. The 6th annual conference held at Lake Hume, Albury was very successful.
2. The endorsement by the Annual Conference and the SPERA executive for an informative journal, *Education in Rural Australia*, to commence in 1991. (Newsletter December 1990).
3. Initiation of face to face meeting of SPERA Executive once a year first meeting held 8th December held in Sydney. (Newsletter December 1990)
4. Initiated closer links to the Isolated Children's Parents Association (ICPA) (Newsletter December 1990)

Contributions to Policy and Practice

1. SPERA invited to respond to the Review of Assistance for Isolated Children Scheme managed by the Commonwealth Government. (Newsletter December 1990)

Challenges for SPERA

1. 'We must tap all available energy and expertise from the membership to bring home the message to decision makers the many essential qualities of education in rural areas' (Newsletter December 1990).
2. Promote SPERA's voice with government departments at federal and state level.

5. Mrs Sheila King, President, 1991-2000

Challenges for SPERA

1. Strengthening the connections and links with the grass roots membership to involve more rural communities, rural parents, schools and teachers in SPERA.
2. Promote SPERA in Western Australia as an organization focused on rural education. The first conference ever held in WA was in Fremantle in 1994 coordinated by Murray Lake. The 1999 Kalgoorlie conference which was coordinated by Rosa Lincoln-Napolitano, saw many Remote Area teachers from North East Western Australia attend the conference as part of their professional development activities. This was the start of a long and successful association with the 'west'. (King, 2011)

Successes for SPERA

1. Establishment of the Australia Rural Education Award (AREA) with its inaugural presentation in 1994. The creation of the Australian rural education award was an important strategy to link with the grass roots, schools teachers and communities in rural places. (King, 2011)
2. Presentation of Life Membership to Foundation President Marie Dale in 1994 at the Annual Conference in Fremantle, Western Australia.
3. Establishment of *Education in Rural Australia* journal in 1991 under the editorship of Colin Boylan.
4. The creation of a committees structure within the Executive of SPERA to undertake specific functions and roles, e.g. newsletter, membership, sponsorship, journal, conference.
5. SPERA provided the support for distance educators to attend the 1993 annual conference which had a specific focus on Distance Education. "This was the first conference to look at Distance Education from a national perspective. From this conference, the Australian Society for Distance Education was formed which now represents all distance education providers in every state and territory of Australia." (King, 2011)

Contributions to Policy and Practice

1. One of the major contributions during this period of time was the development of submissions to the National Inquiry into Rural and Remote Education in Australia that was conducted by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC). As President, Sheila King played a central role in coordinating and presenting SPERA's views to the Inquiry (HREOC, 2000: submission number 185)

2. SPERA was asked to provide advice and submission to the NSW TAFE organisation on work preparation and the range of options and choices for rural people. (King, 2011)
3. Through the SPERA annual Conference in Alice Springs, SPERA was able to support the development of a research agenda for rural and remote education in the Northern Territory. (King, 2011)

6 Mr Ian McKay, President, 2000-2004

Challenges facing SPERA

The key two challenges during Ian McKay's presidency were:

1. "For most of us who have been involved with SPERA, rural education is a lifelong passionate commitment making our involvement with SPERA a natural fit. Whilst membership of SPERA has remained relatively low over the years it is the incredible dedication of members to rural education that has allowed SPERA to have influence in the national arena and in turn make a difference." (I. McKay, Written communication, August 2010).
2. "For almost 30 years SPERA has been successful in promoting a positive view of education and training in rural areas and encouraging innovation and initiative in the provision of rural services which remains the organisation's key goal. Despite this success the challenges in my term as President were consistent with many of the challenges that SPERA experienced before my Presidency and have continued since. The most significant challenge remains, is to engage a wider group of people involved in rural education to encourage them to become members of SPERA." (I. McKay, Written communication, August 2010).

Successes for SPERA

Four successful endeavours were listed by Ian McKay. These were:

1. "When I reflect on my term as SPERA President the memory that stands out the most is the passion that the SPERA Executive shared for rural education and for celebrating the successes that were occurring in rural education."
2. "the strong growth in the development of the Australian Rural Education Award (AREA) during my term as President with the quality of the projects and the award winners getting better with each successive year. Anne Napolitano, my successor as President, played a leading role in promoting AREA during this period of time."
3. "the significant development of the SPERA web site was also a success during this period at a time where a web presence became increasingly critical to communicate with, and engage with, members and others interested in rural education. Kate Haddow from the Northern Territory led much of this development." and
4. "SPERA has always "punched above its weight" and had a significant influence on rural education in the national agenda and through showcasing and

celebrating the many achievements and successes of rural education through awards such as AREA. How much more could be achieved with a larger membership base? A challenge for us all who share a passion for rural education." (I. McKay, Written Communication, August 2010).

Contributions to Policy and Practice

1. The leading role SPERA played in disseminating many of the relevant findings from the Inquiry into Rural and Remote Education report (2000) throughout the rural education sector in Australia. We were thrilled to be able to have the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commissioner travel to Cairns and speak at the 2000 SPERA Conference (convened jointly with AADES)."
2. "without doubt, the major success for SPERA during 2000 to 2004 was our significant role in the formation and development of the Rural Education Forum Australia (REFA). REFA as a collective of organizations that have an involvement in education in rural Australia was an important step forward for ensuring the rural education remains on the national agenda. SPERA can be proud of being a foundation member of REFA and playing a significant role in its formation." (I. McKay, Written Communication, August 2010).

Personal benefit and value

1. "conferences are always an annual highlight for SPERA members and the four held during my term as President were all exceptional; Cairns (2000), Wagga Wagga (2001), Adelaide (2002) and Canberra (2003). I thoroughly enjoyed being Convenor for both the 2000 and 2003 Conferences."
2. "For most of us who have been involved with SPERA, rural education is a lifelong passionate commitment making our involvement with SPERA a natural fit. Whilst membership of SPERA has remained relatively low over the years it is the incredible dedication of members to rural education that has allowed SPERA to have influence in the national arena and in turn make a difference." (I. McKay, Written Communication, August 2010).

7. Mrs Anne Napolitano. President, 2004-2007

Challenges facing SPERA

1. "When I first took over for a range of personal, family and health reasons a number of long term executive members were unable to stand - this meant that we were a very tiny band of executive members. Most of the executive left on board were very new to their role so we struggled with workload."
2. "Overall an ongoing challenge was endeavouring to ensure that communication lines were open and that networking structures were established between executive members and the membership base."
3. "By the conclusion of my third term in office the executive membership had also increased with sound communication structures operating between the executive." (A. Napolitano, Written Communication, September 2010).

Successes for SPERA

Specific examples of success for SPERA both internally as an organisation and in the National arena were identified by Anne. These included:

1. "The use of the face to face meetings enabled networking links to be established and for the role and responsibilities to be clearly articulated and better understood. It was also the opportunity to revisit the ethos and goals of the organisation and in place a number of changes in relation to operational matters."
2. "SPERA as an organisation played a strong role during the formation of REFA - this was a national body which was formed to incorporate a wide range of rural and remote bodies which had been for the most part been working in isolation. The intention was to enable a strong and cohesive voice to air rural and remote issues at Federal Government level." (A. Napolitano, Written Communication, September 2010).

Contributions to Policy and Practice

1. "When REFA was established in the role of SPERA President I held a position on the REFA executive. My role involved developing the initial constitution, meeting and presenting cases to Federal Government Ministers and delegates, engaging in networking --usually through teleconferences (rarely face to face because of the distances with key rural and remote bodies."
2. "There were a number of Rural and Remote Roundtables held in Canberra in which I presented SPERA's position in relation to a number of key issues relating to the delivery of educational and training services i.e. curriculum, access and delivery of education and training to Indigenous students, the rollout (or issues relating to the limited access of information technology services to rural and remote students, critical short staffing issues relating to teachers and administrators especially in the areas of specialist staff, pre service teacher training, provision of vocational and educational training." (A. Napolitano, Written Communication, September 2010).

8. Mrs Emmy Terry, President, 2007-2011

Challenges facing SPERA

Two significant challenges were identified for SPERA by Emmy. These were:

1. "The major issues facing SPERA have focused on government (both state and Federal) and state jurisdictions acknowledging the unique issues and challenges facing rural and remote communities" (E. Terry, Written Communication, August 2010).
2. "People in regional and remote parts of Australia remain significantly under-represented in higher education with participation rates declining over recent years. However, the Government's Review of higher Education "Transforming Australia's Higher Education System is attempting to address issues of participation and access by regional and remote students." (E. Terry, Written Communication, August 2010).

Successes for SPERA

A range of successes for SPERA were identified during the presidency of Emmy Terry. These included:

1. "Hosting the annual national SPERA Conferences continue to pull together academics, teachers, students and communities with a view to addressing the inequities that exist. Coupled with this the quality of the conference Proceedings sets a standard that other associations aspire."
2. "Improving communication through the establishment of an interactive website ensuring the membership base is kept informed"
3. "Increasing the SPERA newsletter to six issues per year and showcasing rural schools and their communities has also ensured that our membership is kept well informed."
4. Forging partnerships with universities – Flinders; University of the Sunshine Coast; University of New England. (E. Terry, Written Communication, August 2010).

Contributions to Policy and Practice

At the national policy level SPERA has been able to contribute to the following inquiries:

1. Presenting submissions to senate and national inquiries seeking feedback –on the i) National Professional Standards for Teachers; and ii) Youth Allowance.
2. Acknowledgement at a national level by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership by being invited to participate at a national forum. (E. Terry, Written Communication, August 2010).

At the membership level for organisational practices, two key developments have occurred. These are:

1. Improving communication through the establishment of an interactive website ensuring the membership base is kept informed.
2. Increasing the SPERA newsletter to six issues per year and showcasing rural schools and their communities has also ensured that our membership is kept well informed. (E. Terry, Written Communication, August 2010).

SPERA PARTNERSHIPS

The SPERA executive has firmly believed in forming partnerships with other organisations that share a rural focus. Over the recent years the number of partnerships has included:

1. *International partnerships.* SPERA has established a partnership with the American National Rural Education Association (NREA) to share information (Newsletter October 2009). Additionally, SPERA has developed a partnership with the International Symposium for Innovation in Rural Education (ISFIRE) which originated from a partnership between the University of New England, and its SiMMER project. The Third ISFIRE conference will be held in February 2013 at the

University of Western Australia in partnership with SPERA, in Perth Western Australia (Newsletter April 2011).

2. *National level partnerships.* SPERA executive and members have involved in number of national projects of significance. These have included: a) the Rural Education Forum of Australia (REFA) and SPERA have worked closely on coordinating the SPERA National Conferences (Newsletter April 2011); b) SPERA, REFA and the Victorian Country Education Project (CEP) are working collaboratively on an Australian Learning and Teaching Council funded research project in rural WA on a rural leadership and networking project known as the Pilot Murchison Strategy; c) SPERA provided a detailed submission to the Federal Senate Inquiry into Rural and Regional Access to Secondary and Tertiary Education Opportunities (Newsletter January 2011); and, d) SPERA has been actively involved in two recent projects. These are a) the ALTC funded project: Renewing Rural and Regional Teacher Education Curriculum (RRRTEC) and which is coordinated by SPERA member Professor Simone White at Monash University and formerly at Deakin University; and b) the Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) funded project: Developing Strategies at the Pre-Service Level to address critical Teacher Attraction and Retention Issues in Australian Rural and Remote Schools. SPERA members involved in this project include: Dr Sue Trinidad (Curtin), Dr Graeme Lock (ECU), Dr Elaine Sharplin (UWA), Sue Ledger (Murdoch), Tania Broadley (Curtin), Don Boyd and Emmy Terry (Newsletter April 2011).
3. *State level partnerships.* SPERA along with the Western Australian universities established a WA Rural Network to focus on state specific rural education provision, delivery and training matters (Newsletter October 2009).

CONCLUSION

Since 1985 SPERA has created a voice for rural and remote education and training. SPERA is the voice from the periphery that speaks for and on behalf of students, teachers, communities in rural and remote places across Australia. Like other small periphery organisations, it has been a long and slow process towards recognition and acceptance by state and federal level organisations and governments that the rural (peripheral) voice has a right to be heard and a valid place in the discourse of educational provision.

Through its active process of forming partnerships, in both short and long term projects, SPERA continues to meet its Mission and Goals statements. It has established international, national and state level networks that have enhanced the place of rural education and fully established SPERA as a key voice for rural and remote education, training and rural communities.

SPERA has become that voice for rural Australia and through its various activities has raised the level of awareness of the quality and excellence in educational provision and services in rural and remote place. The national and international recognition of its annual conferences as the venue where best practices from around

the world are shared, where new and innovative policy decisions and programs are discussed and reported and where outstanding rural educational programs are recognized and rewarded have made a significant contribution to the status of Australia rural education.

SPERA has carried the messages from the people at the periphery to the policy makers, politicians and administrative systems located in the centre in each and every state and territory in Australia.

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