

GOING BUSH: PREPARING PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS TO TEACH IN REGIONAL WESTERN AUSTRALIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on outcomes of Phases One and Two of the ALTC Competitive Research and Development Project "Developing Strategies at the Pre-Service Level to Address Critical Teacher Attraction and Retention Issues in Australian Rural, Regional and Remote Schools". This project funded over two years aims to strengthen the capacity and credibility of universities to prepare rural, regional and remote educators, similar to the capacity and credibility that has been created in preparing Australia's rural, regional and remote health workers. There is a strong recognition of the fundamental importance of quality teaching experiences in rural, regional and remote schools and through this project over 200 pre-service teachers have participated in a curriculum module/object and completed a survey that encourages them to consider teaching in regional Western Australia. The project has mapped current Western Australian rural, regional and remote pre-service teacher education curriculum and field experience model. This mapping completed a comparison of national information with the identification of rural, regional and remote education curriculum and/or field experience models used nationally and internationally. In particular results from Phases One and Two will be presented reporting on the findings of the first year of the project. .

BACKGROUND

In 1998 Western Australia's Rural and Remote Education Advisory (RREAC) undertook an extensive consultation across the State's vast and diverse regional areas. The purpose of the consultation was to get a snapshot of what regional people were thinking about the provision of education to their locations. The consultation involved asking four questions: *What do you think is really good about rural and remote education in Western Australia? What do you think needs to be improved about rural and*

remote education in Western Australia? How can these things be improved? What do you see as the future for young people in rural and remote Western Australia? In terms of things that needed to be improved and how this should be achieved the findings noted that "...the single most important issue was that of staffing. It ranked by far as the single most mentioned, and most elaborately discussed issue. This was confirmed when people were asked to consider strategies to improve rural and remote education – again it ranked most mentions. Overall, taken across data on both school and TAFE, approximately 33.3% of the discussion involved staffing matters" (Butoroc, 1998). Butoroc's analysis of the survey results went on to show that issues around attraction and retention of quality teachers to regional locations rated high on the list of concerns. These concerns raised thirteen years ago in Western Australia have parallels in other parts of regional Australia (for example Vinson, 2002; Roberts, 2003; Green & Reid, 2004; Miles, Marshall, Rolfe & Noonan, 2004). Issues associated with attraction and retention of teachers to rural locations remains a challenge in Western Australia (Twomey, 2007; Daniels, 2007).

Within the first five years of their careers many teachers leave the profession (Abbott-Chapman, 2006) and this is particularly so in rural and regional practice where isolation in the way of geography and professional development takes its toll (Herrington & Herrington, 2001). In Western Australia Daniels (2007) found that 25% of new teacher graduates resign after two years service and that figures grows to 50% by their fifth year of teaching. As we move into a new decade retention is likely to intensify as the *baby boomers* begin leaving the workforce and the nation struggles to satisfy the demand for skilled labour brought about by the resource industry moving into another phase of expansion. The pressure of staffing country schools will continue to be an issue into the future.

Of all the issues surrounding the attraction and retention of the education workforce to regional, rural and remote Australia, the inadequacy of pre-service institutions to prepare teachers for working and living in the bush is significant. In Western Australia RREAC's 1998 consultation identified better teacher preparation as the third most significant way of improving regional, rural and remote education after increased government funding and greater availability of specialised study areas (Butoroc, 1998). The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC, 2000) reported in their landmark *National Inquiry into Rural and Remote Education* that pre-service teacher education courses did not adequately equip pre-service teachers well for working and living in rural, regional or remote Australia. Research by Sharplin (2002) confirmed HREOC's view as did national research by Lyons, Cooksey, Panizzon, Parnell, and Pegg (2006). Frid, Smith, Sparrow and Trinidad, (2008, 2009), the Twomey Taskforce (2007) and the Daniels Review (2007) found this to still be the case in Western Australia.

Often it would seem that the attraction of quality teachers to rural Australia is not a supply problem. It is not uncommon, in Western Australia at least, for there to be a number of graduates who are offered appointments in non-metropolitan locations but do not take them up preferring to wait until what they perceive as a more

desirable position in the city becomes available. One of the most significant factors impacting on the attraction of teachers to work in rural, regional and remote Australia is *fear of the unknown* (Sharplin, 2002). This apprehension could possibly be explained by the demographical phenomenon that Salt (2006) refers to as the “push from the bush”. In 1901, Salt points out, 52% of Australia’s population lived in rural location and only 15% resided in suburbia. The contemporary situation, just over one hundred years later, is very different and almost the reverse with only 17% of the nation’s population living in rural locations and 59% in suburbia. Picking up on this fact RREAC noted in their 2007 Annual Activity Report (pp. 46-47) that:

During a significant proportion of the last century rural life dominated in Australia. As a result of this domination even those who lived in suburbia or an inner city location had an understanding of the bush. In many cases those living in non-rural areas had links in some way, usually through family or work, with Australia’s rural life. With the restructuring of Australia’s rural economy in the latter part of the twentieth century, along with the associated decline in rural population and the growth of suburbia, the understanding of and empathy with Australia’s non-metropolitan life has been lost. For a significant number of people in this country, rural Australia is an alien place. Many of their beliefs are based on myths (Wallace and Boylan, 2007). For those who take up the challenge to work in rural Australia overcoming this alienation can be a difficult process with few support structures in place to assist in building an understanding of rural places and transition to what, in reality, is a different world.

Pre-service education institutions need to expose their students to the significant, broad and complex issues relevant to rural, regional and remote education. These issues exist not only within the context of rural, regional and remote schools but also their wider communities. The role that universities play in supporting teachers develop their professional identity is important and “best not left of chance” (Cattley, 2007, p. 339). As Cattley points out, the practicum experiences is integral to the development of professional identity. Supporting pre-service teachers do this in what is for many the very unfamiliar context of rural communities is a role that universities need to address in a more vigorous way than they do currently. This is particularly so when viewed in contrast to the important role universities play in the pre-service preparation of rural health professionals – the other keystone of regional, rural and remote community well being.

In terms of better preparing pre-service teachers for working and living in non-metropolitan locations universities need to develop appropriate curriculum and ensure that pre-service teachers are involved in quality placement programs in rural, regional and remote Australia to learn the necessary attributes needed to be successful in these positions. These attributes include such things as; classroom and school strategies relevant to non-metropolitan teaching and learning, building

knowledge and skills associated with living and working in isolated places and building skills around community awareness and involvement in, what is, for many pre-service teachers, very unfamiliar ground. According to Boylan (2005) pre-service rural education curriculum need six essential program inclusions, namely: teaching and learning focus; administration focus, community focus; personal focus; field experience focus and professional learning focus.

THE PROJECT

Through a strong collaborative partnership of the four public universities in Western Australia, a group of researchers came together to work on the task of better preparing pre-service teachers with the necessary attributes and expectations for rural, regional and remote teaching, which may result in attracting and retaining more teachers to these regions. This project was undertaken through a nationally funded Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) Competitive Research and Development Project titled "Developing Strategies at the Pre-Service Level to Address Critical Teacher Attraction and Retention Issues in Australian Rural, Regional and Remote Schools". This project funded from May 2010 to May 2012 has set about to strengthen the capacity and credibility of universities to prepare rural, regional and remote educators, similar to the capacity and credibility that has been created in preparing Australia's rural, regional and remote health workers. The project is being completed in five phases, allowing the production of exemplar curriculum modules/objects, the development of rural, regional and remote field experiences, and the documentation of outcomes through the production of case studies.

This paper provides a summary of the first year of the project with emphasis on some preliminary research finds associated with expected improved knowledge and skill development by First Year pre-service teachers, across a number of teaching and learning fields as a result of engagement with a curriculum object /module with a regional, rural and remote content.

Outcomes from the First Year of the Project

The project has successfully completed Phases One and Two of the project with Phase 3 underway.


The outcomes, process and focus for evaluation of Phase One have included the mapping of current Western Australian rural, regional and remote pre-service teacher education curriculum and field experience models and comparison with national information. Collaborative mapping between partner universities has resulted in a thorough understanding of rural, regional and remote education curriculum and pre-service experience within the Western Australian context. Secondly, the identification of rural, regional and remote education curriculum and/or field experience models used nationally and internationally. A thorough Internet and literature search has been supported by follow up interviews with

specific institutions to elicit in-depth detail about rural education curriculum and field experience. Universities in all Australian States and Territories have been included along with selected universities in Canada and the United States. The third outcome has been the identification of structures and processes from the Combined Universities Centre for Rural Health (CUCRH) which could be replicated in the field of education and identification of common goals and issues which could serve as a foundation for integrating or emulating education with/within the CUCRH structure. Internet and literature search, along with follow up interviews with CUCRH personnel has been used to develop an understanding of existing structures and processes. Support mechanisms to attract and retain health workers have been identified at both the national and state level. The team is continuing to investigate synergies that could be developed and/or replication models for implementation of a similar model.

Phase Two has produced two outcomes. Firstly, the identification of key fields of knowledge, central concepts, objects and course outcomes of each universities teacher education curriculum, and secondly, the sequencing of the field experiences of the four universities involved. This has paved the way for investigating additional opportunities for the development of collaborative field experience models across the four universities with high level engagement by school systems and sectors. Consultation with potential partners is continuing through the Rural and Remote Education Advisory Council (WA) and Aboriginal Education and Training Council (WA). One key element of the project is the extensive consultation with key stakeholders through the Department of Education especially the Remote Teaching Program (RTP), the Catholic Education Office, the Association of Independent Schools of Western Australia, the Western Australian District High Schools Administrators Association and the Regional Development Commissions to develop suitable experiences for pre-service teachers to meet the needs of the system and rural schools and their communities. The Society for the Provision of Education has been a founding partner of the project.

Currently Phase Three which is the Implementation of Student Learning is underway. In this Phase the team also interrogated the National Professional Standards for Teachers and identified, at the graduate level, draft *key rural, regional and remote content*. The intention is to also compile a list of applicable resources related to pre-service and graduate teachers working and living in rural, regional and remote locations. An example of the project's work in this area is provided in Figure 1. The Project Team is establishing a strong working relationship with the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) who are tasked with the preparation and validation of the National Professional Standards for Teachers.

Figure 1: Draft Key Concepts and Possible Resources for Graduate Teachers working in RRR (Source: Project Newsletter, *Achievements: "Developing Strategies at the Pre-Service Level to Address Critical Teacher Attraction and Retention Issues in Australian Rural, Regional and Remote Schools"* Edition One, June 2011)



National Professional Standards: Graduate Teachers – Draft Key Concepts and Possible Resources

The fact that the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) release of the Standards for Graduate Teachers coincides with the TERRR Project, has given the team the opportunity to begin developing *key concepts* and *student resource links* for the standards. The TERRR Project Team believe this work will help pre-service teacher education providers with ideas about the regional and remote focus needed in their curriculum to ensure that graduate teachers can meet the standards in non-metropolitan teaching and learning environments.

More information about this work will be posted on the TERRR *Groupsite Website* <http://terr.groupsite.com> as the *framework* takes shape.

An example of the work in progress is listed below. The TERRR Team acknowledges the support of the Reference Group and Network Partners, especially the Remote Teaching Program Team, in helping to develop this framework.

Focus	Graduate	Key Concepts	Resources
STANDARD 1 KNOW STUDENTS AND HOW THEY LEARN			
Physical, social and intellectual development and characteristics of students	Demonstrate knowledge and understanding of physical, social and intellectual development and characteristics of students and how these may affect learning.	RRR – funds of knowledge; asset based; understanding of RRR health (otitis media, ENT, youth suicide; vision, foetal alcohol syndrome; substance abuse); mobility; participation / engagement - transience;	Do You Hear What I Hear; DoE KIT SEDRA Program Commonwealth
Students with diverse linguistic, cultural, religious and socioeconomic backgrounds	Demonstrate knowledge of teaching strategies that are responsive to the learning strengths and needs of students from diverse linguistic, cultural, religious and socioeconomic backgrounds.	Special programs – two way learning; ESL; cultural competencies; Intercultural & multicultural competencies; catering for diverse learning styles; authentic learning; multiple identities; disadvantaged students – low SES backgrounds; access;	DoE Poverty Cycle Ways of Being, Ways of Talk; DoE KIT ESL Resource Centre, Mt Claremont
STANDARD 2 KNOW THE CONTENT AND HOW TO TEACH IT			
Understanding of and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to benefit reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians	Demonstrate broad knowledge of, understanding of and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and languages.	Use of appropriate language; awareness & sensitivity to language; cultural competency (Australian Aboriginal); Aboriginal History; Place based learning;	Protocols for Welcome to Country and Acknowledgement of Traditional Ownership, DET Brochure Solid English, DET Publication Deadly Ways to Learn Deadly Ideas, DoE Kit
Literacy and numeracy strategies	Know and understand literacy and numeracy teaching strategies and their application in teaching areas.	ALS; multi-age grouping; local literacy (WA) programs (Pilbara; Kimberley; Murchison); ESL Local numeracy programs	ABRACADABRA (Northern Territory); Literacy – WA; QuickSmart (SIMERR); Quicker & Smarter; Literacy and Numeracy Partnership Schools Starter Pack, DOE WA 2009

Data Collection from the First Year Students

Initial qualitative and quantitative data has been gathered from First Year pre-service teachers through an online survey (n=200). Of these 64 respondents 18 students provided a positive response regarding follow up telephone interviews to further clarify the reasons for answering the online question in the way that they did. This follow-up interviewing is still in progress. The online data were gathered through the implementation of student learning commenced with a trial of a curriculum object at Curtin University that focused on rural, regional and remote education linked to technology. First Year students in the teacher education program for Early Childhood and Primary participated in the trial. This module/object has been adapted and refined for institution specific implementation for the other universities involved in this ALTC Project. As part of the engagement with the curriculum module/object participants had the opportunity to consider participating in a regional, rural or remote practicum/field experience and were then invited to complete the online survey asking them to indicate the *extent* to

which they expected to improve their knowledge and skills across 23 fields associated with the work of teachers if they participated in a regional, rural or remote practicum/field experience. A seven point Likert-type scale was used based on its effectiveness in terms of validity, reliability and preference by respondents (Preston & Colman, 2000).

FINDINGS

There were 64 First Year students who responded to the follow-up online survey with a 32% response rate. Of those respondents there were 24 training to be Early Childhood Education teachers and 40 were training to be Primary teachers of which 60 were females and four were males. The majority of respondents (81%) were either under 20 years of age (50%) or between 20-25 years (31%). The remaining respondent's age range was between 30 and 50 years. Interestingly, 72% (49) were living in the metropolitan area before they began their studies, while 28% (19) were from regional areas. In response to the question that asked where do they live now, 87% (59) were living in Perth and only (13%) or 9 were living in a regional area currently.

When rating *the development of appropriate teaching/learning strategies* 64 students who responded to this question, 70% agreed that through participating in a regional, rural or remote practicum/field experience they expected that their knowledge and skills would be improved. A further 24% of the students were in strong agreement.

More than half of the respondents strongly agreed (35 of 64 or 55%) that by participating in a non-metropolitan practicum/field experience they expected to improve their knowledge about the *characteristics of students attending regional/rural/remote schools*. This was the highest "strongly agree" response across the 23 questions of the survey. A further 23 students, or 36.5%, agreed with this expectation/view.

Of the under-graduate cohort that participated in this survey 29 (46%) expected that a regional, rural or remote practicum/field experience would improve their knowledge and skills associated with *managing student behaviour*. A further 26 students or 41% strongly agreed while seven students equating to 11% only slightly agreed that they expected such an experience would improve their effectiveness around student behaviour. Those who only slightly agreed that they expected to gain knowledge and skills in this field of their professional growth was higher than for the previous two questions with seven participants, or 11% holding this view.

The spread of expectations around the benefit of a regional, rural or remote experience associated with building knowledge and skills associated with *teaching in multi-age classrooms* was similar to that for managing student behaviour as the highest number of students, 27 (43%), agreed with the view. Similarly, 25 (40%) strongly agreed while seven students (11%) only slightly agreed.

While these expectations were high, the likelihood of having to teach in a multi-age classroom in a non metropolitan school on graduation for a primary graduate is high. In light of this, it is interesting to note that the expectations around the possible learning to be gained in this field of teaching and learning by participating in a regional, rural and remote practicum/field experience was not stronger. The breakdown of those studying to be primary teachers compared with secondary teachers responding to this question would be interesting. Likewise, as these students have not yet experienced a regional, rural or remote practicum/field experience, and few of them come from rural backgrounds, there could be a lack of understanding about the high concentration of multi-age classrooms in regional, rural and remote locations.

Response to this question was also positive with 29 of the 64 (46%) respondents expecting that participation in a non-metropolitan school experience would improve their knowledge about the *availability of support in regional, rural and remote locations* and their skills in accessing such support. A further 25 (39.7%) students also agreed that this would be the case for them while an additional 11.1% gave the notion slight support.

As to whether participating in a regional, rural or remote experience would enhance knowledge and skills associated with *staff-student relationships in school*, 36 of the 64 students (57%) expected that this would be the case. A further 17 (27%) of students gave the idea strong support.

Expectations that participating in a regional, rural and remote practicum experience would develop knowledge and skills around *staff-student relationships outside of schools* were strong with 30 students or 48% expecting this to be the case, 18 students (29%) gave the idea only slight support. This was the highest slightly agreeing response across all 23 questions covered in the survey. Further probing as to the reason for this relatively low level of support would be interesting. Such investigation could lead to some valuable insights about pre-service students understanding of the differences between regional and urban students and the close knit nature of living and teaching in regional, rural and remote locations. As with further probing around the thinking and reasoning to other responses, the information gained could illustrate gaps in the curriculum in terms of building knowledge associated with regional, rural and remote education differentials and the need to enhance the curriculum to build better understandings about those differences. This is considered in more detail in the discussion below.

Regional, rural and remote communities have difference expectations about their schools than their urban counterparts (for example see Hatch, 2010). As Hatch notes, these expectations revolve around a number of interactions including family-school relationships, community-school relationships and school-community relationships (Hatch, 2010, p. 180).

Again, the expectations associated with participating in a regional, rural and remote school experience enabling the development of knowledge and skills associated with *community expectations of the schools* were high with 29 students (46%) agreeing and a further 23 (36%) strongly agreeing. Nine students (14%) gave the notion only slight support again posing the benefit that could be gained from further questions to probe the reasoning behind the responses.

The role of the school in regional, rural and remote locations is different and related to the previous question associated with expectations regional people have of their communities. This is encapsulated by a comment by one of the participants who is already from the bush:

I would be interested in participating in such a unit [Welcome to the Bush] though having grown up in the bush and having worked for many years on remote mine-sites I probably know a lot about the lifestyle already. I have also switched to online studies so not sure if you would look at offering this course that way. I would be happy to undertake a regional practicum anywhere; of course the bigger hubs (Kalgoorlie, Karratha, Port Hedland etc) would be nicer, I think it would be great to experience teaching the lower economic and small areas like Meekatharra, Paraburdoo etc.

In terms of participating in a regional, rural or remote experience, students expected that they would be able to build on their own knowledge and skills associated with *the role of the school in the community*. This support was reflected with 32 students (51%) agreeing, 23 (36%) strongly agreeing and 10 (9%) slightly agreeing.

Just under half of the students, 29 (46%) strongly agreed that they expected to improve their knowledge and skills about the *general operation of regional, rural and remote schools* by participating in a non-metropolitan practicum/field experience. A further 27 students (43%) also agreed that this would be the case with five (8%) of students giving the notion slight support.

The pattern of responses in relation to expectations about building knowledge and skills around *staff-staff relationships in and outside of the school* reflected sound support with 34 students or 54% of the survey sample agreeing. A quarter of the respondents, 16 students (25%), gave strong agreement while 12 students (19%) gave only slight agreement.

Half of the respondents, 32 students or 50.8% of the cohort agreed that they expected to improve their knowledge and skills associated with *staff-staff relationships outside of school*. Another 13 students (20.6%) strongly agreed. 16 students or 25.4% of the sample gave the notion slight agreement.

More than half of the respondents, 38 students or 60% agreed that they expected their knowledge and skills about *parent-student relations* to improve by participating in a regional, rural or remote practicum/field experience. A further 15 students or

24% strongly agreed that this would be the case while seven students (11%) gave slight agreement. Two students slightly disagreed with the view.

Overall support for the expectation that a regional, rural or remote practicum/field experience would enhance knowledge and skill development associated with *school expectations of teachers* was also positive with 31 students, 49.2%, agreeing and 22 students (34.9%) strongly agreeing. Eight students or 12.7% of the respondents gave the notion slight agreement.

Responses to the expectation that participation in a regional, rural or remote practicum/field experience would enhance knowledge and skill development associated with *staff-parent relationships in school* was almost the same as those related to *parent-student relationships* (Question 13). Here 38 students or 60% of the survey cohort agreed that by participating in a regional, rural or remote practicum/field experience they expected their knowledge and skills about parent-student relations would improve. A further 17 students (27%) strongly agreed while six students or 9% of the sample only slightly agreed.

In terms of expected improvement in relation to knowledge and skills about *staff-parent relationships outside school* to be gained by participation in a regional, rural or remote practicum/field, 33 students (52%) agreed that this would be the case while another 15 students or 23% of the survey cohort gave the notion strong support. In comparison 12 students, or 19%, slightly agreed while a further two students slightly disagreed.

There was strong agreement, 30 students or 47% of the sample, for the expectation that by participation in a regional, rural or remote practicum/field one would improve their knowledge and skill development about the *availability of school resources*. A further 25 students (39%) agreed while a further five (8%), gave the notion slight agreement.

Of the cohort 29 students or 46% agreed that as a result of participation in a regional, rural or remote practicum/field they expected their knowledge and skills about *community expectations of teachers outside school hours* would improve. A further 22 (35%) strongly agreed while 10 students or 16% slightly agreed.

Expectations around the benefits to be gained by participation in a regional, rural or remote practicum/field in relation to building knowledge and skills about *how to gain acceptance by the community* received a similar range of support to those about community expectations of teachers outside school hours. 31 students or 49.2% of the sample agreed and 22 students, 34.9% strongly agreed. Only one student slightly disagreed.

Through participating in a regional, rural or remote practicum/field 31 students or 49% agreed that they expected they would build their knowledge and skills about *the importance of participating in community activities such as sports and clubs*. A further

21 or 33% of the students strongly agreed with this idea and nine students or 14% gave slight agreement.

There was strong support from pre-service students that by participating in a regional, rural or remote practicum/field experience they would expect to improve their knowledge and skills around *attitudes and values of people who live in non-metropolitan communities*. 32 students (50.8%) strongly agreed that this would be the case while another 25 students or 39% agreed. Only three students slightly agreed.

Similarly, there was strong support for the view that as a result of participating in a regional, rural or remote practicum/field experience pre-service students would expect to improve their knowledge or skills about *non-metropolitan lifestyle* with 29 students (46%) strongly agreeing that this would be the case while another 25 of these students or 39% of the sample agreeing with the view. Five students slightly agreed.

In terms of the development knowledge and skills about *development of own living skills*, 28 of the students or 44% agreed that by participating in a regional, rural or remote practicum/field experience would be helpful in this regard. Another 20 students or 32% strongly agreed while eight or 13% of the students slightly agreed.

DISCUSSION

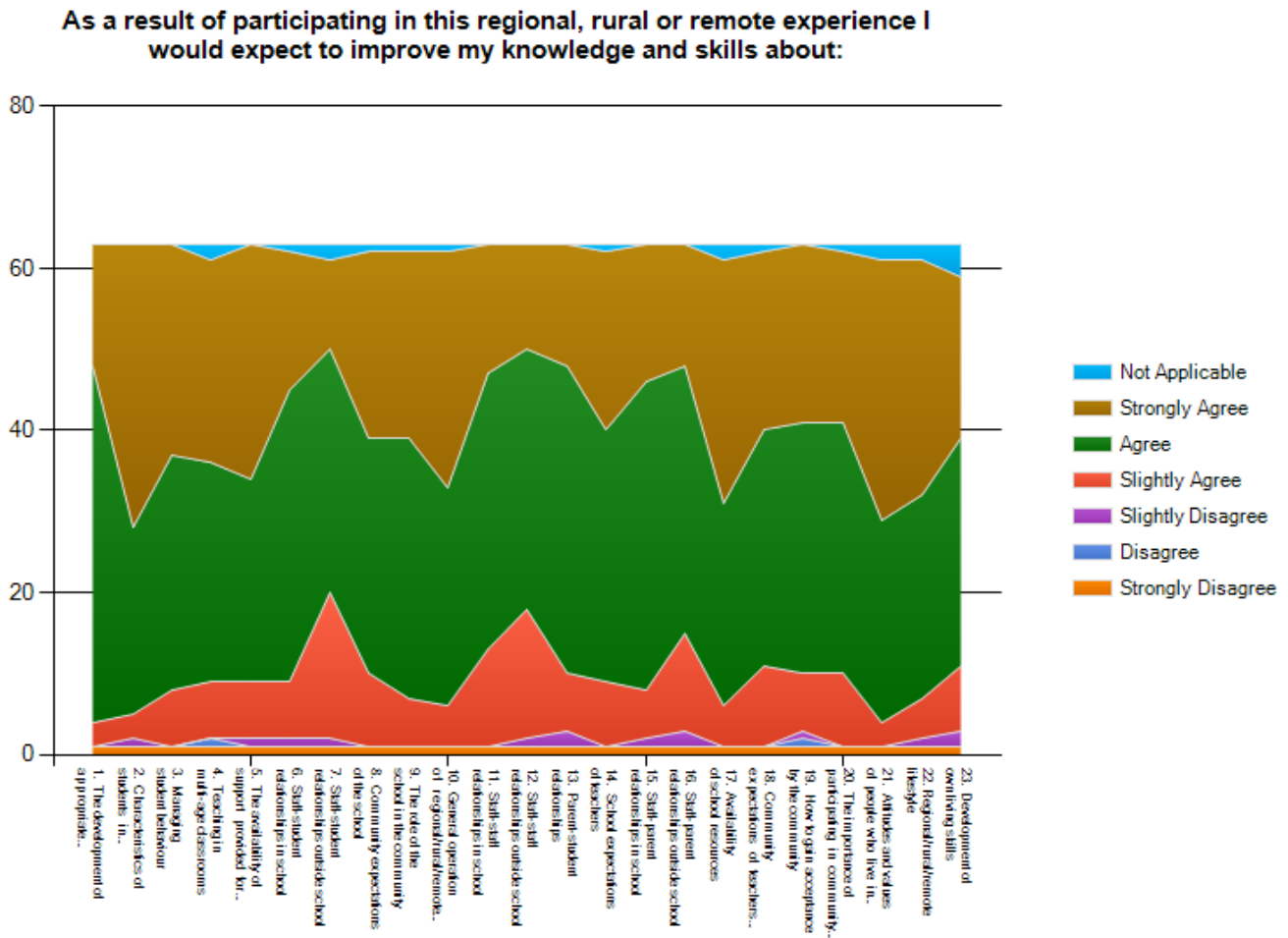
There is comprehensive acknowledgement from students that they would expect to improve their knowledge and skills across a wide range of questions associated with regional, rural and remote education by participating in a practicum/field experience outside of the metropolitan area. The aim of students participating in this module/object was to begin the process of building an understanding of rural education, to encourage them to think about 'going bush' and to survey them regarding the learning they expected to gain from undertaking a rural practicum. The highest percentage of responses in this cohort were always either in the "agree" or "strongly agree" category. Across 18 of the 23 questions, 50 or more of the 64 students responded by either agreeing or strongly agreeing that they would expect to improve their knowledge and skills as a result of participating in a non-metropolitan practice as illustrated in Figure 2.

This aside, it is still worth considering why the "strongly agree" support was relatively low in comparison to the strongly agree responses. Across the 23 questions that students were given the opportunity to consider, there were only six questions that received the highest percentage of "strongly agree" responses, those being:

2. *Characteristics of students in regional/rural/remote schools*
5. *The availability of support provided for teachers in regional/rural/remote locations: e.g. Regional Office*
10. *General operation of regional/rural/remote schools*
17. *Availability of school resources*

- 21. Attitudes and values of people who live in regional/rural/remote communities
- 22. Regional/rural/remote lifestyle

Figure 2: Improve my knowledge and Skills through a Rural, Regional and Remote Experience



As can be seen, in all but one of the questions the words *regional, rural and remote* was used. The other questions do not use these words and are more generic in nature, asking students to respond about their expected acquisition of knowledge and skills such as: *community expectations of the school; the role of the school in the community; and staff-parent relationships outside school*. The work of Green (2008), Reid et al. (2010) and White (2010) has focused on the “Rural Social Space” and how the three interrelated factors of economy, geography and demography connect to create rural social practice and space. In a similar vein Boylan (2004) notes that a range of social, cultural, geographical, historical, political and service access factors work together to “define the difference in working and living in rural contexts compared with other locations” and that “the preparation of teachers for rural appointments require specific attention to these factors”. In all of the questions to which the students responded, the situation is very different between metropolitan and non-metropolitan schools because of the interplay between those factors that make up

Rural Social Space along with those to which Boylan refers. When the words *regional*, *rural* and *remote* were not used in the questions, it is possible that First Year students see no need for developing a specific knowledge base and skill set to equip them for work in regional, rural and remote locations.

Keeping in mind that only 19 of the respondents had a non-metropolitan background, it is worth speculating the degree to which these students had an understanding that there are many aspects of *regional*, *rural* and *remote* education that are different across all 23 questions to which they were invited to respond. Extending this speculation further, it could be assumed that the understanding of the differences in non-metropolitan school/education held by metropolitan pre-service teachers is limited (Sharplin, 2002). These students with a non-rural background may, therefore, have responded in a way that reflects their *expected* benefits of participating in any practicum/field experience no matter what location. In other words, the responses to those questions without the use of the words *regional*, *rural* and *remote* could have been made assuming that a “*school is a school*” and that differences caused by geography, distance, location and place have no bearing a school or the education that takes place within them. A comparison of pre-service survey results with those obtained from a graduate cohort who the same survey after actually participating in a regional, rural and remote experience highlights some interesting differences which could support the fact that it is not until students have an understanding of rural, regional and remote experiences that they full appreciate the benefits that could be gained by participating in a non-metropolitan practicum/field experience.

As a result of actually participating in a regional, rural or remote experience graduates strongly agreed that their knowledge and skills had improved across 15 of the 23 questions whereas in was only in six of the questions that pre-service responses expected this to be the case. As noted above pre-service teachers only gave a *strongly agree* response when the *words regional, rural and remote* were used. Data from the other participating institutions will provide further clarity on this assumption.

The results discussed above are only from one of the universities participating in this ALTC project. The intention is to now survey First Year pre-service teachers in the other three universities.

COMPLETING THE SECOND YEAR OF THE PROJECT

As Phase three is completed it is intended that Phase four will undertake an interrogation of a successful field experience program currently in place at one of the universities that will help inform the development and implementation of the ‘Welcome to the Bush’ strategy. Phase five will conclude the project through evaluation, reflection and sharing through a state Forum in May 2012.

Ongoing dissemination has occurred at National and International research events. Further communication and dissemination has taken place through TERRR Groupsite, the SPERA and Rural Education Forum of Australia (REFA) websites to build a community of practice with pre-service and newly graduated teachers, along with media releases to major media organisations. This ALTC project is also exploring how resource material gathered during the project can be located on the Regional, Rural and Remote Teacher Education Curriculum (RRRTEC) website. (<http://www.rrrtec.net.au/>). What the project team understand is that students need to experience 'going to the bush' to understand what it will be like.

Another important part of the project has been the role of Evaluator and the Reference Group for this project. The Evaluator has included attending monthly meetings, intensive planning days and several points of dissemination therefore developing a thorough understanding of the aims, deliverables and outcomes for the project. An initial meeting of the Reference Group was held in July 2010 at the beginning of the project with a second formal meeting in July 2011 reporting on the outcomes of the first year of the project. These meeting have included stakeholders with a vested interest in rural, regional and remote education, including educational governance, community and industry partners. The Reference Group has provided a broad range of expertise and perspectives which has informed the future directions, actions and outcomes of the project.

CONCLUSION

National project funding has enabled a group of educators from the four public universities in Western Australia to work together on an issue of national importance and that is what strategies can we use to encourage educational professionals to 'go bush'? The team has successfully completed the first year of the project which has involved in Phase one extensive mapping of the current pre-service teacher education curriculum in the four partner universities as well as conducting a thorough investigation of an exemplar model of a combined university initiative within the health sector (CUCRH). From this investigation, common goals were identified to inform the project deliverables. Phase two has involved revising the project objectives and deliverables, which provided a very clear direction of curriculum planning. Further consideration has been given to the practical application of the curriculum into pre-service teacher programs at all universities with the development of generic objects and modules of curriculum, rather than entire units allowing the building on best practice. The implementation of student learning, in Phase three is currently being undertaken. This phase involves an extensive data collection process from pre-service teachers and graduate teachers. The trial curriculum module/object was implemented in one unit, at one university. This data analysis has informed the future development and implementation phase.

The Project Team has successfully formed an extensive network of partnerships with key stakeholders involved in rural, regional and remote education. These networks and the variety of dissemination strategies undertaken have allowed for peer-

review, guidance and external perspectives that will inform the final year of the project to achieve its overall outcome of better preparing pre-service teachers to 'go bush'.

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