

COAST TO COUNTRY: AN INITIATIVE AIMED AT CHANGING PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHING IN RURAL AND REMOTE LOCATIONS

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ABSTRACT

For more than a decade, it has become more of a challenge to both attract and retain quality pre-service teachers to both rural and remote locations within Australia. Many pre-service teachers are reluctant to leave a preferred metropolitan location to undertake a rural or remote professional experience and often have negative views concerning employment in rural or remote locations.

It has become apparent that higher education institutions and State Education Departments need to address new initiatives to encourage pre-service teachers to consider undertaking a teaching professional experience and then future employment in rural and remote locations.

One such initiative, introduced by a regional Queensland university, encourages pre-service teachers to experience new opportunities in rural locations for a five day experience, Coast to Country. This initiative is aimed at providing pre-service teachers with an experience of both living and working/teaching in rural communities and school environments through observing and teaching in rural classrooms and participating in school and community social events.

During the first year, nine primary education pre-service teachers in their first year applied and were accompanied by two university staff. During the second year, sixteen pre-service teachers in their first, second and third years across the early childhood, primary and secondary cohorts experienced this.

Written feedback was collected from the pre-service teachers and verbal feedback from the university staff, principals and school staff involved. All considered this a very worthwhile and positive experience and felt that it should continue. The feedback indicated that a five day rural or remote experience such as this can provide professional and social benefits to all concerned.

An experience such as Coast to Country can provide a sound basis for those pre-service teachers participating to allow them to make a more informed decision about living and working in a rural location based on real experience. Following

this experience, the pre-service teachers were then much more inclined to want to experience a rural or remote opportunity for their future professional experiences.

INTRODUCTION

The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's (HREOC, 2000) national inquiry into rural and remote education emphasised that there is a major concern for attracting new teachers into schools in these areas. Across Australia, attraction and retention of high-quality teachers is critical for the future of rural and remote education (Miles, Marshall, Rolfe & Noonan, 2004; White, 2006). The staffing of schools impacts on the quality of educational experience for rural and remote Australians (Australian Council of Deans of Education, 2001; HREOC, 2000) and is a central issue in ensuring equity in state education systems (Martinez, 1993, in Motley, Rossi and King, 2005).

As Roberts (2005), Hudson and Hudson (2008) and Hudson and Millwater (2009) have noted, rural and remote schools are increasingly difficult to staff; at the same time, fewer pre-service teachers from rural areas, who may be willing to return to a 'country' position, are going to university. As a result, there is a greater need for State Education Departments and other employing bodies across Australia, as well as higher education institutions, to work together on solutions to attract high-quality teachers, both graduates and experienced teachers, to rural and remote locations in all states and territories.

In Queensland where this study takes place, according to the Rural and Remote Education Framework for Action (2006-2008), the then Department of Education, Training and the Arts (DETA) acknowledged, "a continuing commitment to engage with the key and emerging challenges of delivering education to students in rural and remote areas and to build partnerships with communities, local governments, businesses and industry to develop responsive education and training solutions to achieve better learning outcomes for students from rural and remote Queensland" (DETA, 2006, p. 3). The current Department of Education and Training in Queensland (DET), as well as many other States and Territories such as New South Wales, Western Australia and Northern Territory recognise that attracting and retaining high quality teachers to rural and remote areas continues to be a major issue for all education employing bodies (HREOC, 2000; Roberts, 2005; Hudson & Hudson, 2008). As White, Green, Reid, Lock, Cooper and Hastings (2008) have noted, there are a number of incentives offered to pre-service teachers in different states and territories to enable them to undertake professional experience in a rural or remote area. These are mainly offered to final year pre-service teachers. In his report of 2005, Halsey identified that there are a number of reasons why pre-service teachers will not engage in a rural or a remote professional experience. Some of these reasons include: accommodation costs to be paid both at home and at the professional experience site; travel expenses; loss of income from part-time work; the possibility of losing their employment or hours; and, often, the need to care for their

own families, especially as many are more mature candidates entering teaching careers later in life.

Queensland is currently addressing the concerns of pre-service teachers with state based incentives in the form of scholarships tied to employment. One such incentive is a scholarship to final year pre-service teachers to complete their studies. Provided that they are successful with their professional experience and academic studies, they are granted employment in a rural or remote area which is considered more difficult to staff. Graduates are committed to employment for two years with this incentive. The problem still remains that young, inexperienced and often uncommitted pre-service teachers are often placed into these areas perhaps for the wrong reasons. Historically, new graduates have staffed many rural and remote schools and continue to do so today. Over thirty years ago McGaw (1977) noted that in Queensland 87 percent of teachers were appointed to country schools in their first two years of teaching.

In 2010, the 'Beyond the Range Professional Experience Grant' was trialled by DET and made available to pre-service teachers completing their third and final years in all Queensland universities in 2011. It is aimed at pre-service teachers in shortage discipline areas such as Physics, Chemistry, Mathematics B and C and Industrial Technology and Design (Manual Arts). However, there have been pre-service teachers who have received this grant in other discipline areas. With this grant, pre-service teachers are approved for an amount up to \$1500 to enable them to undertake a rural or remote professional experience.

The purpose of this paper is to look at initiatives that the University of the Sunshine Coast has introduced to pre-service teachers to enhance their professional experiences and to make them more ready and willing to teach in a rural or remote location following graduation. The main focus is a field trip called *Coast to Country*. The intention of these initiatives is to give pre-service teachers a more informed view of teaching and living in rural and remote areas so that they are more likely to be committed to take up a teaching position and then remain there for longer. As Sharplin (2002) found in her study of secondary Graduate Diploma in Education pre-service teachers at The University of Western Australia (UWA), many have no real notion of what is it like to work and live in a rural or a remote location until they experienced this. It is envisaged that pre-service teachers will be more willing to take up employment with increased exposure to these rural and remote areas and be more aware of what lies ahead.

UNIVERSITY INITIATIVES

Towards the end of 2009, the University of the Sunshine Coast (USC) appointed a Rural and Remote Coordinator to accelerate and enhance the rural and remote program for pre-service teachers. The university is located in a regional area and as such there is opportunity for pre-service teachers to be placed in surrounding areas, within two to three hours, but which are still considered rural. Many of the schools

within this distance are one- or two- teacher Band 5 schools which can provide many opportunities in multi-age classrooms as a new experience for pre-service teachers. Yarrow, Herschell and Millwater (1999) found one of the main shortcomings in teacher preparation for rural schools is in the area of pedagogies for multi-age classes. This USC initiative is helping to address this issue with increased exposure to more of these smaller schools away from the coast.

Feedback from former USC pre-service teachers has found that the financial and family burdens of undertaking a rural professional experience make it prohibitive. These findings reflect those of Halsey (2005). Pre-service teachers rely mainly on casual and sometimes full-time employment, are reluctant to forfeit an active social life and are unwilling or unable to leave family and friends to go into the unknown for their professional experience. Another factor weighing heavily on pre-service teachers at USC is fear of the unknown. Furthermore, as noted by Sharplin (2002) in her study, many pre-service teachers at USC also believed that rural or remote locations have fewer resources and that teachers were not as experienced in rural and remote schools. Many pre-service teachers were not prepared to leave the coast because they thought that there would be a job somewhere for them on the coast, even if it took a while to secure. Several reported that they would rather be jobless than have to move away from the area they knew and loved and that they would resign if offered country service.

Working with these perceptions has proved difficult. To counter them, USC needed two ingredients: funding for rural and remote professional experiences and an initiative such as a field trip similar to *Beyond the Line* in NSW, *Beyond the Range*, a Queensland DET trial in 2009 and the Queensland University of Technology's *Over the Hill* (Hudson & Hudson, 2008; Hudson & Millwater, 2009). Field trips such as these help to conquer the fear of rural locations and to change the perceptions held by many pre-service teachers.

Firstly, the Rural and Remote Coordinator, supported by the USC Foundation, approached a philanthropic organisation that strongly supports rural and remote initiatives and the University. An application was forwarded and the organisation agreed to fund the proposed initiatives.

One of the resulting initiatives is a bursary available to pre-service teachers from all cohorts and year levels, not just final year students, to fund them on a professional experience placement in a rural and remote area. Underlying this was the belief that all pre-service teachers needed to be given rural and remote opportunities earlier in their training and not just during the final years.

A second initiative was a developmental bursary for second year pre-service teachers undertaking their first placements. This was available for an area two to three hours away from the Sunshine Coast where there was neither Priority Country Area Program (PCAP) assistance nor Education Queensland rental subsidies for housing.

The numbers of participants in these bursary schemes is steadily increasing and there appears to be a positive attitudinal change regarding rural and remote placements for pre-service teachers at USC. The cost factor argument has diminished although there are other factors regarding the myths and 'fear of the unknown' which still needed to be addressed. Hence the *Coast to Country* initiative.

COAST TO COUNTRY INITIATIVE

This initiative was only to be available to undergraduate pre-service teachers mainly due to the time of year at which it could be offered. It was originally decided that USC would take twenty pre-service teachers from all cohorts on this initiative: early childhood, primary and secondary. Many who expressed an interest were unable to participate due to exams, professional experience and intensive coursework prior to the end of the year. As a result, only nine first year primary students applied for the inaugural initiative. A decision was made to take these students as they were of a very high calibre and were very excited about the prospect.

The nine first year primary pre-service teachers, once advised they were successful, were gathered for a preliminary meeting. At this meeting a proposed itinerary was given out and the program discussed. Bus transport was organised and accommodation arranged by USC in local establishments. Although other initiatives have accommodated pre-service teachers in education housing, this aspect did not seem to change the outcomes for these participants as compared to previous experiences such as in DET Queensland's *Beyond the Range*. More important was the fact that the pre-service teachers were constantly occupied and engaged in activities organised by the schools and the University staff during the evenings.

The field trip was in mid-November (15 to 19 November, 2010), three weeks before the end of the school year. The areas chosen were the Darling Downs and South West Queensland and the South Burnett regions. Both State and Catholic schools were chosen; among these schools there was a mix of larger schools of up to 500 students and smaller ones with as few as 30 students. The towns chosen were Goondiwindi, Yelarbon, Inglewood, Texas and Benarkin. These towns and areas were favoured because they offered a diverse range of schools and experiences. Inglewood and Benarkin offered the opportunity to view schools with a Stephanie Alexander Garden which was a new concept for most of the pre-service teachers. Because there were only primary pre-service teachers on this field trip, the decision was made to limit visits to primary schools and 'high top', Prep to Year 10 schools, in the areas.

Activities arranged included school tours and talks to the pre-service teachers by Principals or Deputy Principals and both experienced and early-career staff. The discussions were frank and the pre-service teachers were invited to ask questions about any topics. Pre-service teachers were placed into classrooms and observed and taught some groups and participated in one-on-one sessions. As there was no reimbursement for taking one of these pre-service teachers, the teacher mentors did

not have to report and so could have the pre-service teachers just observing their classes or taking an active role, depending on their preference. However, all mentors were very happy to have the pre-service teachers in their classrooms. Some were placed with the younger members of the school staff who had only been teaching for one to two years so they could talk openly about their experiences. This proved to be successful. Resources were often collected and freely given to the pre-service teachers and one Head of Curriculum briefed the students for over one hour during a bus journey to a nearby excursion.

During the evenings, social events were organised. As well, the pre-service teachers met and spoke with a Regional Education Director and had the opportunity to visit Education Queensland houses and duplexes to view and discuss the subsidised costs once they begin teaching.

Prior to this field trip, four of the pre-service teachers had not travelled away from the Sunshine Coast; three had not travelled past Ipswich, a distance of 129 kilometres away and two had travelled as far as Toowoomba, a 205 kilometre journey from the Sunshine Coast. Females dominated the group (eight out of the nine) and the group consisted of both mature-age and younger pre-service teachers. The oldest was forty and the youngest eighteen, with the majority being in their early twenties.

Feedback

Towards the end of this field trip, an open-ended feedback form was distributed to the pre-service teachers. All responded in a very positive manner and were exceptionally thankful that they had been chosen for this event. They all wrote that it had been an opportunity of a lifetime and an invaluable experience.

One commented: "Seeing all the different schools and communities was a great opportunity early in my studies as I originally thought I never wanted to go out rural or remote. I now would really consider it. I had a fantastic 5 days."

Another wrote: "The experience we have just had was one that I believe all students should have. My eyes were opened to the opportunities we as teachers have, not only within the profession but a lifestyle as well. This is something I would not be aware of if this initiative did not take place. I think that *Coast to Country* should be made compulsory to all university students of the city areas. Without this trip, so many students like me would have no ground to stand on when making a decision to take on rural teaching."

This feedback expressed the same sentiments as pre-service teachers in the findings of Sharplin (2002), Hudson and Hudson (2008) and Hudson and Millwater (2009) when they undertook rural field trips with pre-service teachers.

Professional Experience Placements in Rural Areas in 2011

Of the nine first year 2010 primary pre-service teachers who participated in the inaugural *Coast to Country* initiative, eight have asked to return to a rural location for their second professional experience of three weeks duration during Semester 2, 2011. Two have asked to return to the Darling Downs and South West Queensland area, and two to the South Burnett region, all where the original field trip took place. The remaining four have requested areas further north and in more remote locations such as Cloncurry, Aramac and Clermont.

One pre-service teacher is remaining on the coast due to family commitments and an enjoyable learning experience at her current school. However, this pre-service teacher intends to take up a rural placement in 2012.

Three of the pre-service teachers above are taking a friend on their professional experience, having convinced them that a rural placement is a very worthwhile experience. Being primary undergraduates, they realise the value of different and varied experiences, as opposed to remaining on the coast. They are constantly advised that if they want employment on completion of their degree, they must have as many different experiences as possible. From the advice given by all Education Queensland officials during the field trip, this also became very apparent.

FUTURE INITIATIVES

Following the success of the inaugural initiative, two further *Coast to Country* experiences were planned during 2011, one in July and one in November. A call for expressions of interest was again distributed, with thirty-nine applicants registering their interest. Two meetings were organised at different times inviting interested applicants with the 2010 participants discussing their experiences and showing a video clip during the meeting to increase interest. Eight pre-service teachers attended the first meeting and 23 pre-service teachers attended the second. The video clip of the 2010 trip generated much interest and from these meetings, 20 more expressions of interest were forwarded.

The second *Coast to Country* initiative has once again proved to be extremely successful. The July initiative had 16 participants, 14 were female, with 10 primary, 1 early childhood and 5 secondary pre-service teachers with different teaching discipline areas. These current pre-service teachers ranged from first to third year. Once again there was a mix of ages ranging from early twenties to mid forties. Although this experience took place in different areas within the Darling Downs and South West Queensland Region in Chinchilla, Miles, Wallumbilla and Roma, the experiences and activities organised were similar to the previous initiative, as were the outcomes. Feedback was once again collated and very positive as for the first initiative.

One pre-service teacher wrote: "My goodness, there have been so many highlights! The main highlight would have to be that I have my own first hand experiences of rural/remote communities. There is a warmth and genuineness in the community and schools that I've never seen before. Witnessing that and being a part of it has been amazing."

Another wrote: "This trip was honestly one of the best things I have ever been a part of. Country schools have a much more community based appreciation, are welcome and open and I felt teachers were much more respected within the towns."

In another pre-service teacher's feedback, she stated: "This trip has been an amazing experience which has reinforced my eagerness to move and teach in a country town. It was amazing to have the opportunity to interact with teachers, principals and students about their way of life in the country. To be able to visit student and teacher accommodation has been valuable as it has shown me the standards of each. Overall these activities have been amazing, the people we have met and the experiences I have had have been life changing and I believe I am a much better person because of this. The program is one of great value and I wish we had the opportunity to participate in it again."

One Principal noted: "It's great for us as we get to see the pre-service teachers before they choose to undertake a professional experience and employment. If they contact us now and say that they were on a *Coast to Country* experience, we'd take them as we now know what this is about and know that they have stepped outside the square to be a part of this. As it is voluntary, the pre-service teachers have had to make a commitment."

Another Principal said: "Great initiative! I wish we had something like this at uni. It would have answered a lot of our questions and concerns and showed us what the country was all about before we got here."

Following the success of the July experience, a third field trip is planned for November. Already fifteen students have indicated their desire to participate in what is clearly an increasingly popular initiative.

CONCLUSION

Attracting and retaining teachers to both rural and remote areas across Australia continues to be problematic for employing authorities, schools and higher education institutions. The *Coast to Country* initiative indicates that given the opportunities early on at the pre-service teacher level, even for a short period of time, graduates may be more inclined to consider future professional experience placements and employment in rural and remote locations. Those pre-service teachers, who have not undertaken any professional experiences, or an opportunity such as this, may have unrealistic expectations about rural living and teaching (Hudson & Hudson, 2008). The pre-service teachers' feedback certainly appears to support the recent research

(Sharplin, 2002; Boylan, 2004; Lyons et al.; 2006, Hudson & Hudson, 2008; Hudson & Millwater, 2009) that to teach and live in rural areas, pre-service teachers require first hand experiences to create changes to attitudes. This initiative has brought about positive changes in perceptions of pre-service teachers about living and working in rural and more remote areas and helped to dispel many misconceptions.

The successes of these initiatives thus far are reflected in the following outcomes. For Semester 2 2011 there are 39 pre-service teachers placed in rural and remote schools for their professional experience. Of these, 34 have won bursaries to support them while they are there. More importantly, since the commencement of the scheme in June 2010, 17 recipients of a bursary have taken up their first teaching appointment at rural and remote schools throughout the State, and the feedback from them has been extremely positive. Thus, pre-service teacher initiatives such as this, may well assist in future recruitment in these locations, which in turn may assist in retaining these teachers (Hudson & Hudson, 2008; Hudson and Millwater, 2009). Although just a taste of country life, the *Coast to Country* initiative has already been instrumental in shaping the attitudes of nine pre-service teachers towards rural teaching in the future in the first year and 16 in the subsequent initiative.

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