

REGIONAL RESILIENCE: PRE-SERVICE TEACHER PREPARATION TO TEACH IN THE BUSH

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the outcomes of a two year ALTC Competitive Research and Development Project that aimed to "Develop Strategies at the Pre-Service Level to Address Critical Teacher Attraction and Retention Issues in Australian Rural, Regional and Remote Schools". As well as developing a 'training framework' and teaching guides to increase the capacity and credibility of four universities to prepare educators who might venture out of the metropolitan area to teach, data were gathered from pre-service and graduate teachers to analyse regional resilience. It was found that there was a strong likelihood to participate in a regional practicum and stay in a non-metropolitan community once they graduated from university if they had a positive attitude to regional Western Australia either through a family connection or previous experience. Recommendations from this study emphasise the importance of having pre-service students participate in positive regional experiences early in their university study.

BACKGROUND

In 2009 a group of tertiary educators from four universities in Western Australia with an interest and experience in rural, regional, and remote education, and especially in improving the attraction and retention of quality teachers to non-metropolitan locations, formed the Tertiary Educators Rural, Regional and Remote Network (TERRR Network). In 2010 the TERRR Network was successful in obtaining a grant from the Australian Council of Teaching and Learning (ALTC) now the Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT) to undertake a 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 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 healthcare workers. The

project was completed in five phases, allowed the production of a training framework and teacher guides, the development of rural, regional and remote field experiences, and the documentation of outcomes through the production of graduate teacher standards for the National Professional Standards. These resources have been provided on the SPERA website <http://www.spera.org.au>

THE OUTCOMES OF THE PROJECT

The project achieved the following broad outcomes and deliverables:

- Developing a pre-service *Training Framework* and rural, regional and remote studies curriculum modules linked to the *National Professional Standards of Teachers* that used by universities;
- Developing models of rural, regional or remote experiences for pre-service teachers who may be teaching in a variety of different locations such as a small rural farming community; a regional mining community; or a remote Indigenous community;
- Linking theoretical and practical teaching and learning processes for example practical field experiences into the curriculum;
- Documenting ways in which the participation rates of regional students in Western Australians in teacher education programs can be increased;
- Embedding collaborative strategies between rural, regional and remote teacher educators across four universities in Western Australia;
- Improving communication between teacher educators and regional authorities; and
- Expanding the research associated with rural, regional and remote education.

The *Training Framework for Producing Quality Graduates to Work in Rural, Regional and Remote Schools* is made up of ten components as illustrated in Figure 1:

- The National Professional Standards for Teachers (NPST);
- Pre-service Teacher Curriculum Mapping;
- An introductory module titled Social Networking and Teaching in Rural, Regional and Remote Western Australia;
- A pre-practicum survey;
- The National Professional Standards for Teachers (NPST): Graduate Professional Knowledge for Rural, Regional and Remote Context;
- A resource package comprising of seven teachers guides;
- A practicum calendar for the four public universities in Western Australia;
- A field experience that links pre-service teachers with rural, regional and remote schools, communities local governments and business;
- The placement of interns in rural, regional and remote training schools; and
- A post-graduation survey.

The ten components are grouped into two categories the 'lens' and the outcomes. Those that appear in the oval shapes are the 'lens' through which the experiences and outcomes have been developed and achieved. These lenses serve two functions. The National Professional Standards for Teachers as a lens provides a focus on the national initiative to improve the quality of teaching. Second, the lens of providing the curriculum mapping and the practicum calendar provide a focus on the need for greater attention on rural, regional and remote education across the four universities involved in pre-service education. As well as providing a focus on the gaps in the pre-service curriculum, this second lens provided a foundation for the Training Framework, and in particular the materials produced as part of the Framework, with more than a "rural lens" (Boylan & Wallace, 2007) expanding the

outcomes to “regional and remote lens”. It is through this lens that consolidated and innovative strategies to better prepare teachers for working and living non-metropolitan Australia have been developed. As Boylan & Wallace identify, applying rural lens ‘offers a practical means by which we might return to rural education issues with a rural rather than an outsiders’ agenda and embrace rural education in the process’ (2007, p. 15).

THE NATIONAL PROFESSIONAL STANDARD FOR TEACHING

The National Professional Standards for Teachers have provided considerable guidance for this project. By way of explanation of the impact of the Standards the project and the subsequent Training Framework the following is provided.

On 1 January 2010, and in the early stages of the TERRR Network project, the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Learning (AITSL) came into being. One of AITSL’s first tasks was to assume responsibility for validating and finalising the National Professional Standards for Teachers (NPST) which had commenced by the National Standards Sub-group of the Australian Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs Senior Officials Committee (AEEYSOC) in 2009. AITSL completed the development of the NPST during 2010 and were endorsed by MCEECDYA in December of that year. The NPST are a major milestone for teaching and learning in Australia as the Standards that articulate a national approach to what teachers are expected to know and be able to do at four career stages: Graduate, Proficient, Highly Accomplished and Lead (AITSL, 2011). The TERRR Network acknowledged this important major initiative in Australian education by focusing the Training Framework and the Teacher Guides around the Standards.

The TERRR Network was also aware that AITSL is keen to develop supporting documentation for the NPST for the context of teaching in rural, regional and remote schools. Therefore, in addition to modelling the use of the Standards in the development of pre-service curriculum, the TERRR Network is supporting and supplementing the work of AITSL in providing documents that will assist graduates and proficient teachers to apply the Standards to their work in the rural, regional and remote context. The NPST are an integral component of the National reform agenda to improve teacher quality. It is therefore important that the Standards provide the lens for focusing the Training Framework.

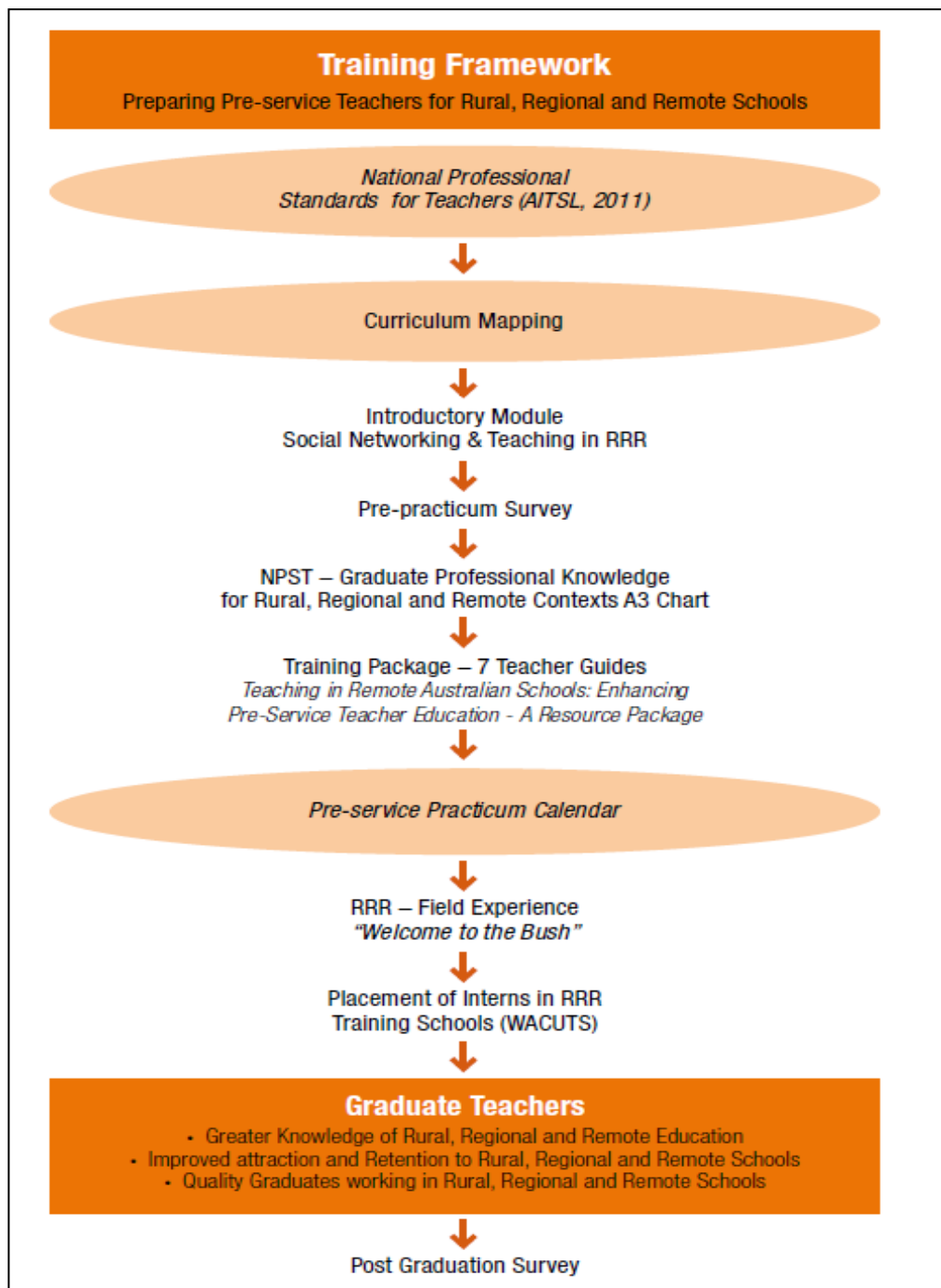


Figure 1: The Training Framework

CURRICULUM MAPPING

One of the first tasks of the project was to undertake a mapping exercise of the pre-service teacher education curriculum in Western Australian, as well as at the National and International level. Mapping at the State and National levels was comprehensive and identified that there is not a strong focus in Australian universities on preparing pre-service teachers for the challenges of education provision beyond the metropolitan cities. The exercise did, however, highlight pockets of innovative practice throughout Australia and these innovative approaches helped inform the Training Framework. Mapping of curricula beyond Australia was selective and determined mainly by knowledge among the TERRR Network of international curriculum initiatives for preparing teachers

to address the teaching and learning challenges imposed by geographic remoteness in countries such as Canada.

THE INTRODUCTORY MODULE

Social Networking and Teaching in Rural, Regional and Remote Western Australia is a curriculum learning object in the form of a guided set of tasks that focuses on rural, regional and remote education linked to technology. The curriculum learning object was developed at Curtin University and initially used with first year teacher students enrolled in the Early Childhood and Primary programs in 2011. Following the success of the Curtin University trial the learning object was refined and adapted for use by the three other public universities involved in the project in 2012.

The learning object has been a popular inclusion in the teaching and learning program reinforcing the role that technology can play in helping to address the challenges imposed by geography. It is able to promote the idea of participating in a regional, rural or remote practicum/field experience along with the notion of teaching in non-metropolitan locations on graduation needs to be embedded early in First Year programs.

PRE-SERVICE SURVEY AND DATA COLLECTION

As part of their engagement with the learning object *Social Networking and Teaching in Rural, Regional and Remote Western Australia* pre-service teachers were invited to complete an online survey designed to gauge the extent to which, as a result of participating in a non-metropolitan practicum/field experience, they expected to enhance their knowledge and skills associated with 23 different fields of teaching and learning. The 2011 First Year survey results have recently been published in the *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education* (Trinidad et. al., 2012). The survey has been repeated in 2012 with First Year students enrolled in teacher education programs at the four universities involved in this OLT project. The data collection process is an important component of the Training Framework. The Framework is evidence-based and through ongoing data collection and analysis, will remain dynamic. Table 1 summarises the 2011 and 2012 First Year student data collected through the survey. This data shows very similar proportions with 60% of both First Year cohorts willing to participate in a regional practicum.

	2011 cohort n=69	2012 cohort n=113
Response Rate		
CURTIN	98.6% 68	84.1% 95
ECU	0.0% 0	1.8% 2
MURDOCH	1.4% 1	0.0% 0
UWA	0.0% 0	14.2% 16
Teaching Area		
ECE	43.5% 30	43.4% 49
PRIMARY	58.0% 40	46.0% 52
SECONDARY	0.0% 0	13.3% 15
Gender	91% Females	88% Females
Age	Majority (79%) under 20 years (49%) or between 20- 25 years (30%)	Majority (77%) under 20 years (51%) or between 20-25 years (26%)
Living before study	72% were living in the metropolitan area before they began their studies, while 28% (19) were from regional areas.	75% were living in the metropolitan area before they began their studies, while 25% (28) were from regional areas
Where do they live now?	87% living in Perth; (13%) living regional	88% living in Perth; (12%) living regional with 2 remote
Would Participate in Regional Prac	NO - 40% YES – 60%	NO - 39% YES - 61%

Table 1: Summary of 2011 and 2012 First Year Cohorts Survey

PROFESSIONAL KNOWLEDGE FOR GRADUATES IN THE RURAL, REGIONAL, AND REMOTE CONTEXT

The A3 chart titled Professional Knowledge for Graduates in the Rural, Regional and Remote Context makes a start at mapping the key knowledge, skills and concepts that need to be mastered at the Graduate level for successful teaching in rural, regional and remote Australia. The project reference and network groups contributed to the chart. The intention is that the chart remains dynamic and the team encourages pre-service teachers and their lecturers to keep adding content to the document. As noted, the chart only reflects a small percentage of the body of knowledge available in the complex top of regional, rural and remote education.

TEACHERS GUIDES/RESOURCE PACKAGE

The first and foremost stated deliverable in the TERRR Network application was the development of: Regional, rural and remote teacher education curriculum Teacher Guides for pre-service courses across four universities, based on the guidelines being developed by the parallel ALTC project “Renewing Rural and Regional Teacher Education Curriculum” (RRRTEC) that can be used by other universities. The resource package consists of seven Teacher Guides and is a key component of the overall Training Framework. In keeping with the intention of building on the work of the RRRTEC, the TERRR Network team committed to focusing the teacher guides on teaching and learning in the remote context. The RRRTEC project considers the rural and regional context in depth while the Teachers’ Guides from this project challenge the pre-service teacher to come to terms with what it means to address the National Professional Standards for Teachers at the Graduate level in the remote context.

Within the scope of the project the TERRR Network concentrated on three of the Standards and selected Focus Areas and Descriptors within those three Standards. Specifically:

- *Standard 1: Know Your Students and How They Learn*
 - Teacher Guides based on 1.1; 1.2; 1.3 and 1.4
- *Standard 6: Engage in Professional Learning*
 - Teacher Guide based on 6.1
- *Standard 7: Engage in Professional Learning*
 - Teacher Guides based on 7.3 and 7.4

The entire NPST framework is important in every context and requires all teachers, no matter where they are teaching, to engage in deep thinking about their work across all Focus Areas and Descriptors. The TERRR Network believe, however, that Standards 1, 6 and 7 provided a good starting point for the development of teachers' guides as work associated with these Standards represent significant challenges for Graduates.

PRACTICUM CALENDAR

This part of the project resulted in mapping the practicum times during the year on to a singular calendar with the intention of identifying common times where all four universities have pre-service teachers on practice placements. With this knowledge the TERRR Network have worked towards maximising opportunities for non-metropolitan practicum placements, for example; establishing a network of schools that are willing to accept a number of practice students from all four universities, the possibility for pre-service teachers sharing transport and accommodation, building strong rural, regional and remote practicum networks encompassing all key stakeholders and enabling action research.

The work associated with mapping both the pre-service teacher curriculum and the practicum placement times has also provided an opportunity for the four universities to provide a joint non-metropolitan field experience.

NON-METROPOLITAN FIELD EXPERIENCE

The non-metropolitan field experience component of the Training Framework builds on the benefits of such an exercise identified by Sharplin (2001, 2002, 2009). The first week long field experience is planned for August 2012 with the intention of linking pre-service teachers with schools and their communities, local governments, industry and business, a range of agencies both government and non-government, and the environment as a teaching and learning resource in the Goldfield-Esperance Region. Another intended outcome of the field experience is the strengthening of the rural, regional and remote education network that is emerging as a result of the Training Framework. Pre-service teachers from all four public universities in Western Australia are invited to participate in the field experience.

PLACEMENT OF INTERNS IN RURAL AND REGIONAL TRAINING SCHOOLS

An outcome of this ALTC/OLT project has been the awarding of a contract by the Department of Education (Western Australia) to the Combined Universities Training School partners. The Training Schools project is a partnership between Murdoch University, the University of Western Australia, Curtin University and The Society for the Provision of Education in Rural Australia (SPERA), to develop and deliver an innovative pre-service teacher training program. The Training Schools Project is part of the Australian Government's Smarter Schools National Partnership for Improving Teacher Quality to increase the capacity and work readiness of pre-service teachers in both metropolitan and rural areas. A corner stone of the Combined Universities Training School project is the placement of interns, final year pre-service teachers from the participating universities, in schools between two and

three days pre-week over the entire school year. The project has placed 50 interns of which 19 are in rural and regional schools.

The new national professional standards for teachers are the key strategy underpinning the national reform agenda to improve teacher quality in Australia (Council of Australian Governments [COAG], 2009). In addition to ensuring the standards were embedded across the project outcomes, the project team remained aware of the National reform agenda to improve teacher quality and attempted to support and reinforce stated objectives, outcomes and outputs wherever possible. The most concrete example of this is that the collaboration initiated in this project submitting a joint tender to form the Western Australia Combined Universities Training Schools (WACUTS) to develop and deliver an innovative pre-service teacher training program as part of phase two of the Department of Education's (WA) Training Schools project. In terms of the National Partnership Agreement on Improving Teacher Quality, the Western Australian Training School equate to *Schools of Excellence* which means the facilitation reform School Centres for Teacher Education Excellence (COAG, 2009). Winning this tender has meant that the two projects could work in parallel and play a significant role in enabling the development of the *Training Framework for Producing Quality Graduates to Work in Rural, Regional and Remote Australia*. In line with COAG's agenda, this has strengthened the partnership between Higher Education and Western Australia's major school education service provider and along with establishing a process for quality placement for pre-service teachers as interns. Consistent with COAG's reform agenda, more than 50 mentors will be trained as part of the WACUTS project. The decision by the Project Team to develop the teacher guides for the remote teaching and learning context, also addresses COAG's social inclusion and Indigenous disadvantage agenda.

THE GRADUATE SURVEY

An adapted version of the pre-practicum survey was used to survey new graduates in 2011. This data collected assisted with the development of the materials. The survey will be used to follow up future Graduate teachers in future cohorts after their graduation.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THIS PROJECT

Three recommendations have arisen from the Research and Development undertaken in this project. These recommendations are highly relevant to the work undertaken in this project and with the ongoing partnership with the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL). The project was influenced by the National reform agenda in education especially the work of the AITSL and the Australian Government's Quality Teaching initiatives, and in particular the National Partnership Agreement on Improving Teacher Quality. AITSL is keen to develop supporting documentation for the National Professional Standards for Teachers (NPST) for the context of teaching resilience in rural, regional and remote schools. Therefore, in addition to modelling the use of the Standards in the development of pre-service curriculum, the TERRR Network is supporting and supplementing the work of AITSL in providing documents that will assist graduates and proficient teachers to apply the Standards to their work in the rural, regional and remote context.

The three key recommendations from this project are:

1. The Australian Government makes resources available comparable to that which occurs in medicine to prepare rural GPs and other healthcare professionals, so that pre-service teacher education students have the option of taking a fully funded semester length rural/remote/regional professional placement and that appropriate resourcing is allocated to support teacher educators to properly prepare, support and debrief teacher education students who take a rural/remote/regional placement;
2. Pre-service and early career Country Teaching Scholarships are made available to all candidates willing to do a practicum or internship in non-metropolitan locations; and

3. Resources from the two projects, RRRTEC and this current project completed by the TERRR Network, be widely promoted to universities and used in their teacher education courses to better prepare graduates for teaching in rural, regional and remote Australia.

CONCLUSION

National project funding has enabled a group from the four public universities in Western Australia to work together on an issue of national importance. It has enabled resources and research to be undertaken to answer what strategies can be used to encourage educational professionals to 'go bush' and build resilience to stay in the bush? The subsequent 'Training Framework' emerging from this project and the data analysis provides a clear finding that pre-service students need to experience 'going to the bush' while they are training to understand and gain a positive perception of what it will be like to teach and live in the bush. The Project Team has successfully formed an extensive network of partnerships with key stakeholders involved in rural, regional and remote education becoming the catalyst for facilitating a unique collaborative process across four universities to bring about change in initial teacher education to improve the quality of workforce taking up appointments beyond the metropolitan areas of Western Australia. These networks and the variety of dissemination strategies undertaken have allowed for peer-review, guidance and external perspectives of the project to achieve its overall outcome of better preparing more resilient teachers who will 'go bush' both during their pre-service training and after graduation.

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