



## Professional Experience Partnerships in Regional and Remote Schools: A Pathway to Employment

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### Abstract

The shortage of teachers in regional and remote schools remains a pressing problem and has been exacerbated by the current national teacher shortage. The preparedness and willingness of graduate teachers to work in regional and remote areas are central to this problem. Partnerships between professional experience sites, providers of initial teacher education, and education systems are considered key to a successful professional experience placement, combined they can prepare pre-service teachers for future graduate employment. This qualitative study provides insight into the perspectives of professional experience site leaders to understand the benefits and challenges of professional experience and graduate employment in regional and remote schools and how to address these issues. The findings suggest that the benefits and challenges of professional experience and graduate employment in regional and remote schools are complex and shaped by various factors. Mentor teacher availability, limited uptake of placements by pre-service teachers, a limited understanding of regional and remote contexts, specific preparation, and general early-career teacher retention all contribute to the multi-pronged complexity inhibiting regional and remote employment. Benefits such as offering an alternative to a city-centric lifestyle, fast-tracked permanency, and financial incentives have shaped policy with limited success in addressing the teacher workforce crisis. Our findings suggest an alternative approach may benefit the issue of teacher shortage in regional and remote schools. We propose the widespread implementation of successful context-specific instruction as pre-service teachers prepare for professional experience in regional and remote schools as a possible means to address the long-standing regional and remote teacher shortage.

**Keywords:** *regional schooling, professional experience, partnerships, graduate employment*

### Introduction

Over four million (4,042,512) students are enrolled in 9,614 schools Australia-wide (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022). Of these, over one million (1,103,723) students or 27.3% attend school in regional and remote areas (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022). More than 4,000 schools are in regional and remote areas of which 84% are identified as government schools (Australian

Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2021). While state and territory governments are responsible for teacher employment and workforce planning in public schools an increase in Australian Government intervention has recently occurred to recruit teachers. The workforce shortage of teachers in regional and remote Australian schools has been a long-standing issue. It has however been exacerbated by the dual complication of a broader national teacher workforce shortage and the impact of COVID-19. Although the impact of COVID-19 on teacher attrition could not be foreseen, the long-standing recognition of the general shortage of teachers in Australia and worldwide has been known and discussed for some time (Howse, 1991; Macdonald, 1999).

It has become apparent that the teacher workforce shortages in regional and remote areas have continued to negatively impact student learning and educational outcomes (Halsey, 2018; Downes & Roberts, 2018). To overcome this discrepancy interventions have been suggested such as fostering partnerships between professional experience sites, providers of initial teacher education, and education systems (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2015).

Over the past two decades a variety of approaches to professional experience and graduate employment have been developed in partnership between regional and remote schools and universities. Many of these approaches have been successfully implemented, however they have not been widespread nor sustained (Fitzgerald et al., 2021; Trinidad et al., 2014; White & Reid, 2008; White & Kline, 2012). More recently, because of the national teacher workforce shortage, attention has again focused on regional and remote teacher workforce shortages, and education systems have developed a new set of strategies to address this issue. For example, the *Rural and Remote Education Strategy 2021-2024* (New South Wales Department of Education, 2021) and the *Country Education Strategy 2021-2028* (Government of South Australia, 2021). The impact of these strategies on professional experience, graduate employment, and retention in regional and remote schools is unknown. Also unknown is the impact the teacher workforce shortages are having on pre-service teachers undertaking professional experience in regional and remote schools, and the effects this may have on prospective graduate employment in regional and remote schools.

To understand the impact of these strategies on professional experience, graduate employment, and the retention of graduates in regional and remote schools, a qualitative study was undertaken in regional schools in New South Wales and South Australia. An analysis of site leaders' perspectives was conducted to understand the ongoing benefits and challenges of professional experience and graduate employment and possible solutions. By doing so, this research contributes to the body of knowledge to help inform what has been described as a "perennial problem" (Knipe & Bottrell, 2023, p. 183) of teacher workforce shortages in regional and remote communities and the deleterious effects on the educational outcomes of school students. The research adds to previous successful regional and remote partnership literature evidenced in Australia (Trinidad et al., 2012; Ure et al., 2017; White et al., 2018) and will propose site-based solutions to the teacher workforce shortages in regional and remote communities.

### Literature Review

Australia is amid a teacher shortage. Projections estimate that by 2025 the demand for secondary school teachers will exceed the number of graduates by over 4,000 teachers each year (Australian Government, 2022). The identification of a teacher shortage is not new. Almost a decade ago, McKenzie et al., (2013) evidenced that 20% of primary school and 40% of secondary school principals have moderate or major difficulties in filling teaching positions. Already in some Australian states, the annual attrition from the profession is greater than the number of teacher graduates (Australian Government, 2022). While the teacher shortage is a national crisis, the issue is heightened in regional and remote schools. Staffing these schools has been a long-term concern with research consistently indicating schools located further away from major cities face

greater challenges in recruiting and retaining staff (Downes & Roberts, 2018; Burke & Buchanan, 2022).

The complexity of finding and retaining teaching staff is further complicated by factors such as the teacher's level of experience and stage within their career journey. Regional and remote schools are often staffed by early-career teachers who, despite initial financial incentives, tend to leave after a short period of time (Roberts, 2004; Kelly et al., 2019; Sutcher et al., 2019; Wyatt & O'Neill, 2021). Research suggests that even when these positions are filled, many of these teachers report feeling unprepared for the unique demands of rural education (Kline et al., 2013) and appear to be at increased risk of anxiety and burnout (Carroll et al., 2022).

Although findings from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2013) highlighted 10 years ago the plight of rural educative disadvantage, recent data from the Australian Government Department of Education (2022, p. 1) affirms its continued existence. The Government report reveals the “average 15-year-old from remote Australia is around 1.5 years behind” in STEM (Science Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) learning when compared to their metropolitan counterparts. Evidence found in the literature has raised concerns about instigating further Government intervention. The *Action Now: Classroom Ready Teachers* report highlighted the complex challenges of regional and remote teaching and related systemic disadvantages. A key point within the document made note that to lift student outcomes initial teacher education programs have a role to play, especially in the preparation of graduates (Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group, 2014).

In response to this call, several Australian initial teacher education providers have made significant amendments to their professional experience programs to target regional and remote teaching opportunities. Several universities have offered bursaries or scholarships to support placement expenses and attraction (see Charles Darwin University, 2021; Flinders University, n.d.; The University of Adelaide, n.d. and The University of Newcastle, n.d.). Some of these financial incentives have been supplemented by education systems in each of these states. For example, in South Australia, both Catholic Education (Catholic Education South Australia, 2024) and the Department for Education (Government of South Australia, 2021) have also offered financial and logistical support to final-year pre-service teachers to undertake placement in regional and remote schools.

While financial support has been highlighted as an inhibitor, other issues are also seen as preventing pre-service teachers from being attracted to regional and remote professional experience and employment. Even when opportunities are provided to pre-service teachers to undertake professional experience in regional and remote environments the uptake is limited (Mitchell et al., 2022). Issues such as the type and context of the community, the geographical location, housing availability and expert mentor teacher availability all play a role in attracting pre-service teachers and graduates to regional and remote schools (Roberts et al., 2022; White & Kline, 2012). The *Teacher Education Expert Panel* discussion paper (Australian Government, 2023a) while acknowledging the need to host more pre-service teachers in regional and remote schools highlights the challenges to regional and remote schools and their capacity to mentor pre-service teachers, especially as Downes & Roberts (2018) purport that these schools are generally staffed by a high proportion of early-career teachers. To compound the issue further the geographical isolation faced by pre-service teachers when accessing university support systems inadvertently makes the regional and remote professional experience appear less favourable (as noted by Hudson & Hudson, 2019 and Mitchell et al., 2022).

Despite some viewing regional and remote professional experiences as unfavourable, initial teacher education providers have continued to recognise the importance of preparing pre-service teachers for regional and remote teaching. The *Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education* (Halsey, 2018) instigated by the Australian Government responded to the

challenges to improve education access and outcomes for students in regional and remote communities. The report suggested a need to first understand the varied contexts, challenges, and opportunities when selecting pre-service teachers to attend a regional or remote placement during the initial appointment processes and then ensuring ongoing professional support of teachers during the placement (Halsey, 2018). As Halsey contends, the more prepared pre-service teachers are in relation to regional and remote teaching by initial teacher education providers, the less likely early-career attrition.

More recently a Regional Education Commissioner was appointed in response to the recommendations from the *National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy* (see Australian Government, 2023b; Naphthine et al., 2019 and Halsey, 2018). This appointment offers the opportunity for the Commissioner to be a champion and advocate of regional and remote education. One way to do this is by supporting the readiness of pre-service teachers for teaching by working with initial teacher education partners to provide placements in regional and remote contexts (Kline et al., 2013; Hudson & Hudson, 2019). Increased placements, along with other initiatives, would attract more graduate teachers to schools in those locations. This would help to avert the current regional and remote teacher shortage. As suggested by Hudson & Hudson (2019) one of the most significant ways of addressing teacher shortages is to entice pre-service teachers to these contexts within their teaching programs. To this end, the current study investigated site leaders' perspectives about professional experience placements in their school to answer the research question:

*What are site leaders' opinions of the benefits, challenges, and implications of undertaking a placement in regional and remote schools and the consequent impact on regional and remote employment?*

## Methodology

### Participant Selection

The present study collected data from site leaders in regional and remote schools in New South Wales and South Australia that had hosted pre-service teacher placements in partnership with participating initial teacher education providers in New South Wales, South Australia and the Northern Territory between 2018 and 2021. The five participating initial teacher education providers were the University of Canberra, the University of Newcastle, the University of Adelaide, Flinders University, and Charles Darwin University. Site leaders in New South Wales and South Australia schools who liaised with the host universities were invited to participate. Site leaders in Northern Territory partner schools were not invited to participate in this study. Indeed, ethics approval was not granted by their employer due to workload concerns. Site leaders were selected to complete the survey as they liaise directly with initial teacher education providers to support and provide mentoring to pre-service teachers during placement, often providing leadership within school settings. Site leaders are at the forefront of the challenges associated with regional and remote education and have an in-depth understanding and knowledge surrounding future pre-service teacher employment in regional and remote schools.

### Data Collection

Contextual, demographic and qualitative data were collected using a Qualtrics survey (<https://qualtrics.com>). The survey contained a range of background questions along with three open-ended questions requiring a written response (see Figure 1).

Questions 1 and 2, provided information concerning the schools' location. Questions 3, 4 and 5 collected information about the initial teacher education institutions that provided pre-service teachers to regional and remote schools, the number of pre-service teachers hosted by those schools for placement, and the number of pre-service teachers directly employed after the

placement. Five initial teacher education providers supported placements to the 14 regional and remote schools: the University of Canberra, the University of Newcastle, the University of Adelaide, Flinders University and Charles Darwin University (Adelaide Campus). A complete data set to determine the number of pre-service teachers who were hosted for placements and the number of pre-service teachers directly employed after the placement was not collected from all 14 sites.

Responses from questions 6, 7 and 12 highlighted site leaders' opinions of the challenges, benefits and outcomes of hosting pre-service teachers in regional and remote schools, the reasons for these, and how initial teacher education providers can work with their school to address these issues. Three site leaders fully completed these questions, and these data were analysed. Pseudonyms have been used to maintain anonymity.

Questions 8, 9, 10, and 11 provided further information regarding the employment of graduate teachers, type of teacher registration, whether the school had any shortage of teaching staff and the number of teacher vacancies they had at the beginning of the teaching year. Responses to these questions were not completed by many participants and the reasons given included the impact of COVID-19 on workloads and difficulty in accessing relevant data. Data were also inconclusive concerning the shortage of teaching staff and the number of teacher vacancies at the commencement of the teaching year.

### Figure 1: Survey Questions

1. In which regional and remote region is your school located?
2. In which state or territory is your school located?
3. Between 2018-21 which initial teacher education institutions provided pre-service teachers to your school?
4. How many pre-service teacher placements did you host in your school?
5. How many of these pre-service teachers were employed in your school?
6. Between 2018-21 what were some of the challenges, benefits and outcomes of hosting pre-service teachers undertaking education placements?
7. What were some of the reasons for these challenges, benefits and outcomes? (For example, the impact of COVID-19)
8. Have you employed any graduate teachers in your school between 2018-21?
9. If yes, what category was the registration?
10. Is your school facing a teacher shortage?
11. How many teaching positions were vacant in your school at the start of the school year?
12. Can you suggest ways for initial teacher education providers to work with your school to address this issue?

Site leaders were emailed a link to the anonymous survey. Fourteen site leaders partially completed the survey. Five came from New South Wales schools in the regional areas of Queanbeyan, Rural South and West, Southern Highlands, and Yass. Nine were from South Australia schools in the regional areas of Limestone Coast, Lower Southeast and the Riverland. Of these, three site leaders fully completed the survey: one each from Rural and Southwest New South Wales, the Limestone Coast South Australia and the Riverland South Australia. Because pre-service teacher professional experience and graduate employment are shaped by state policy, funding and incentives, the two states in which the site leaders were situated became the focus of this study: New South Wales and South Australia.

## **Research Approach**

This research employed a qualitative approach to uncover site leaders' perceptions of their everyday experiences of hosting preservice teachers for professional experience, along with the implications for graduate employment in their school and community (Miles et al., 2020, p. 21). We analysed the open-ended survey data through the theoretical lens of constructivism. Constructivism posits that reality is constructed by a group of people in their own context as they assign meaning to actions and interactions. Knowledge is local, specific, and subjective (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

We analysed the data by following Miles et al.'s (2020) three-step qualitative analysis procedure. First, we undertook initial coding. We assigned In-Vivo codes to label segments of data for further analysis. In-vivo codes include participants' words in the code and "*honour the participant's voice*" (Miles et al., 2020, p. 63). For example, "*mentors (un)available*", "*availability of mentors in a small school*" and "*availability to take on placement students*". Second, we undertook pattern coding to reduce the initial codes to fewer, more significant concepts. For example, we grouped the initial In-Vivo codes listed above and assigned the pattern code 'mentor teacher availability'. The pattern code 'mentor teacher availability' is one of the concepts that explain the theme of 'mentor teacher capacity' (see Figure 2). Third, from the summative findings we developed "*assertions*" (Miles et al., 2020, p. 92). For example, developing mentor teacher capacity was identified as a challenge along with pre-service and graduate teacher attraction and retention. No solutions were identified to address the challenge of mentor teacher capacity however context specific preparation for professional experience was identified as solution to address pre-service teacher attraction and retention.

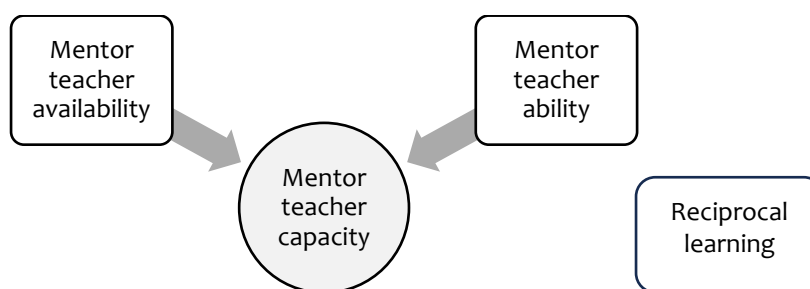
## **Trustworthiness**

We drew on Lincoln & Guba's framework (1985) to put in place measures to ensure trustworthiness. Lincoln & Guba (1985) argue that because social reality is constructed, and there are many conceivable interpretations, the quality of qualitative research is best assessed by considering credibility, confirmability, dependability, transferability and authenticity. To establish credibility, two of us analysed and interpreted the data, and we all revised the results, analysis and interpretations. This supported reflexivity, a technique for establishing confirmability through the ongoing discussion of understandings, perspectives and assumptions. Ongoing analysis established dependability and confirmed that our interpretations of the data did not change upon repeated readings. Furthermore, changes to the assignment of pattern codes and themes that occurred during the process of mapping codes and member checking were documented as part of the audit trail, also a technique to establish confirmability. We employed the strategy of methodological documentation to establish transferability by detailing our methodology so others understand its rationale and logic and can determine whether the findings are transferable to other settings and groups. To establish authenticity, we provided verbatim quotes to convey the participants' realities along with figures to demonstrate the logic of our interpretation.

## **Findings**

### **Theme 1: Mentor Teacher Capacity in Regional and Remote Schools**

Theme 1 explains the perceptions of the site leaders from Heritage Heights and Valley Ridge regional schools of the dual challenges of mentor teacher availability and ability and the factors that impacted on this. Informal reciprocal learning was identified by them as a benefit of hosting placements (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2: Mentor Teacher Capacity in Regional and Remote Schools**

**Mentor Teacher Availability and Ability.** At Heritage Heights School, the site leader's responses suggest that staffing challenges impacted mentor teacher availability and mentor teacher ability. For example, "*mentors being available (staff shortages, unwillingness, training)*". It is unclear what caused "*staff shortages*". However given the longstanding teacher shortage in regional and remote schools, this is not surprising. Teacher shortages have an effect teacher's workloads and in turn, 'mentor teacher capacity.' The site leader at Heritage Heights School did not explain why mentor teachers were "*unwilling*" or why "*training*" mentor teachers was a challenge. One explanation could be that the dual challenges of availability and ability impacted mentor teacher capacity and contributed to the unwillingness of teachers to mentor pre-service teachers.

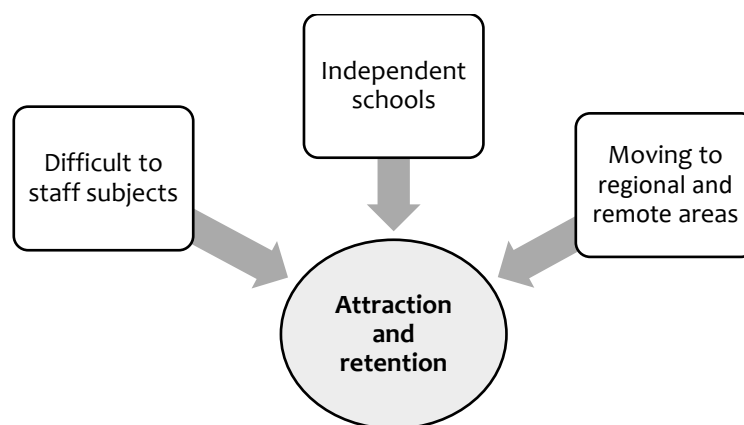
Similarly, the site leader at Valley Ridge School identified a range of factors that contributed to mentor teacher capacity in their school. For example, "*COVID 19 had a massive impact on our staff and availability to take on placement students*" and "*availability of mentors in a small school where staff are already taking on multiple roles*". For this site leader, it appears that mentor teacher availability was also affected by teacher workload. At Valley Ridge School, the challenge of 'mentor teacher availability' appears to be one that many regional schools faced: size and staffing, compounded by COVID 19. Moreover, this site leader stated that they had not faced any staff shortages due to strategies they put in place which were not ideal, "*unfortunately placed staff they weren't quite what we were looking for, but we were desperate.*" This site leader did not explain the impact this had on mentor teacher availability. However, it is possible that hiring less than ideal teachers exacerbated the challenges already faced by the small staff. The challenges of mentor teacher capacity identified by the site leaders at Heritage Heights and Valley Ridge schools differed but were both impacted by school staffing which limited mentor teacher availability. In Heritage Heights School, a lack of mentor teacher training also affected mentor teacher ability. Solutions to address the challenge of mentor teacher ability were not provided by site leaders.

**Reciprocal Learning.** A benefit of hosting professional experience placements identified by the site leaders at Valley Ridge and Heritage Heights schools was reciprocal learning, a concept that explains informal professional learning between pre-service teachers and teachers. For example, the site leader at Valley Ridge School stated, “*new placement students bring new techniques and learning activities into the school which can be used by teachers*”. This comment suggests that the site leader at Valley Ridge School valued pre-service teachers’ currency of practice and expertise. Similarly, the statements made by the site leader at Heritage Heights School point to a view of professional experience as two-way learning where the pre-service teacher’s contributions to the school are valued. For example, pre-service teachers “*bring in new and innovative ideas*” and are a “*welcome addition to staff.*” Whether reciprocal learning can be harnessed as a solution to address mentor teacher capacity was not evident in the data.

### **Theme 2: Pre-Service and Graduate Teacher Attraction and Retention in Regional and Remote Schools**

Theme 2 explains two regional site leaders’ perceptions of the challenges of attracting pre-service teachers in difficult to staff subjects and attracting graduate teachers to independent schools. Retaining graduate teachers who move to regional and remote areas was identified as a challenge by one site leader (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3: Pre-service and Graduate Teacher Attraction and Retention in Regional and Remote Schools**



**Attracting Pre-Service Teachers in Difficult to Staff Subjects.** For the site leader at Coastal Plains School, mentor teacher capacity was not the challenge. Attracting pre-service teachers to undertake placement in difficult to staff subjects was. This site leader’s experiences are contrary to those outlined previously where site leaders reported challenges to mentor teacher capacity. For example, the site leader at Coastal Plains School stated, “*we always have plenty of mentor teachers*” but countered this by adding, “*attracting students in design and tech and secondary math and science is still difficult*”. This was impeded by an issue of supply as explained by the site leader, “*most of our PSTs are from (name of) University that offers a primary education course only.*” The term ‘most’ suggests that pre-service teachers from other universities undertook placements at Coastal Plains School. The site leaders’ response to questions 3 and 4 of the survey supports this interpretation: between 2018-2021 Coastal Plains School hosted placements for pre-service teachers from three participating universities. It is unknown why mentor teacher capacity was not an issue at Coastal Plains School, or whether mentor teacher capacity was a challenge in difficult to staff subjects.

**Attracting Graduate Teachers to Independent Regional and Remote Schools.** This challenge was identified by the site leader at Valley Ridge School. This school requires teachers to be practising Christians as explained by the site leader, “*finding good quality Christian teachers who are willing to move to the (name of region) is difficult.*” It appears that this requirement narrowed the pool of graduate teachers in the first instance and being in a regional area



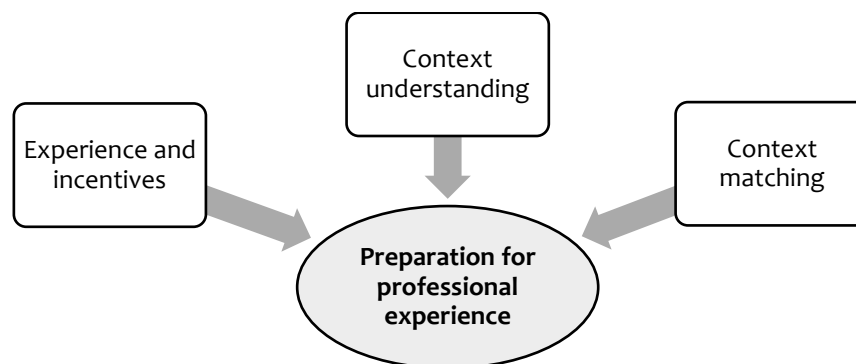
compounded this challenge. The impact of this challenge is unknown. However as discussed previously, this school averted a teacher workforce shortage by hiring teachers they usually would not. This suggests that attracting graduate teachers to regional and remote independent schools—that are diverse and often affiliated with cultural, religious or non-mainstream educational philosophies—is even more challenging in these areas.

**Retaining Graduate Teachers who Relocate.** At Valley Ridge School, retaining graduate teachers who relocate, was also a challenge. As explained by the site leader, many graduate teachers were “*young and hadn’t lived away from home before and so they became homesick.*” An outcome of becoming “*homesick*” was that these graduate teachers “*only served out a year or even less*”. This suggests that for this site leader, the challenges to hosting placements and graduate employment were multi-faceted.

### **Theme 3: Preparing Pre-Service Teachers for Professional Experience**

Theme 3 was identified by all three site leaders as a solution to the challenges identified above. Nonetheless, each site leader identified different strategies to achieve this. Solutions included “*experience living and teaching in regional and remote schools*” supported by “*incentives*”, “*context understanding for placement*” and “*context matching for future employment*” (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4: Preparing Pre-service Teachers for Professional Experience in Regional and Remote Schools**



**Experience Living and Teaching in Regional/Remote Schools and Incentives.** Professional experience placements in regional and remote areas were a solution put forward by the site leader at Valley Ridge School to address homesickness and in turn, graduate teacher turnover. For example, “*country placements to help preservice teachers to get accustomed to being away from home*”. According to this site leader, pre-service and graduate teacher attraction and retention requires experience and an understanding of working and living in regional and remote areas.

Similarly, the site leader at Coastal Plains School viewed placements as a way for pre-service teachers to develop a greater understanding of the schools’ context and called on host universities to support this. For example, “*we would like the universities to offer more incentives to PSTs to experience a country placement*”. For this site leader, incentives may attract more pre-service teachers in difficult to staff secondary teaching areas.

**Context Understanding for Professional Experience Placement.** At Heritage Heights School, a solution identified by the site leader was to prepare pre-service teachers by developing a “*greater understanding of our school’s context*”. The site leader did not elaborate on what this might entail. However, given the reported staffing challenges, one interpretation could be that it would be the role of the initial teacher education provider to prepare pre-service teachers for placement.

**Context Matching for Future Employment.** A benefit identified by the site leader at Coastal Plains School to improve graduate teacher attraction (and possibly retention) was context matching during professional experience. Context matching describes a process whereby the school and the pre-service teacher each decide, based on their experiences during placement, if the pre-service teacher is a good fit for living in the regional community and teaching in the school. Context matching was identified by this site leader as akin to a trial for graduate employment: *“there are always benefits as we get to work closely with teachers and observe if they are a good match for our school and for regional living”*. From the perspective of this site leader, it appears as though context matching works both ways *“for them they decide if this is a place, they can see themselves living and working”*. Context matching may support graduate teacher attraction and retention by assisting school leaders and pre-service teachers to decide if they are a good match for the community and school and then supporting the pre-service teachers’ employment in the regional and remote school.

### **Assertions**

Taken together, these findings suggest that for these three site leaders, professional experience placements in their schools were beneficial. Pre-service teachers were perceived as having currency of practice that promoted reciprocal learning. Challenges to professional experience included developing mentor teacher capacity and pre-service and graduate teacher attraction and retention in regional and remote schools. No solutions were provided by site leaders to address the challenge of mentor teacher capacity. Context specific preparation for professional experience was identified as a solution to address pre-service teacher attraction and retention.

## **Discussion**

The aim of this study was to investigate the perspectives of professional experience site leaders to understand the benefits and challenges of professional experience and graduate employment in regional and remote schools and how to address these issues. The main findings suggest that in these three regional schools, the challenges of mentor teacher capacity and pre-service teacher attraction and retention limited opportunities for professional experience. Solutions to these challenges included context specific preparation for professional experience and providing incentives to support pre-service teachers to experience teaching and living in regional communities.

### **Mentor Teacher Capacity**

A key point raised by site leaders was concern about the availability of mentor teachers to supervise pre-service teachers during regional and remote professional experience due to the existing high workload, extenuated by the impact of COVID-19 limiting teacher capacity. While the issue of workload has been identified as a systemic issue (Australian Government, 2022) the New South Wales Teachers Federation has perceived the *“unsustainable workloads”* within the teaching profession as one of the main causes of teacher shortages, leading to burnout, with *“two-thirds of teachers say they are burnt out”* (New South Wales Teachers Federation, 23 April 2023). To further inform the state of teacher employment the Federation adds that in New South Wales public schools alone 2,172 permanent teaching positions were vacant in February 2023 with a widespread shortage in every area of New South Wales affected and in country areas, as many as 1 in 8 positions were vacant. This data is supported by the Australian Teacher Workforce Data for teachers registered in South Australia and New South Wales collected in 2018 (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2021, p. 6).

While the New South Wales Teachers Federations and the Australian Teacher Workforce Data support the contention that many teachers are overworked, a body of literature also confirms this premise (Gore, 2022; Hunter et al., 2022). The response of the site leaders affirms the findings

and literature in relation to the national teacher workforce shortage, the impacts of COVID-19 and specific issues prevalent to regional and remote schools (see Australian Government, 2022). To further inform the impact of COVID-19 on teacher workforce shortages, Collie and Mansfield (2022) highlight that staffing shortages resulted in increased workloads and stress as teachers covered classes when staff were absent, reducing planning, assessment, and professional development time.

Although the current models of professional experience rely heavily on mentor teachers being paid minimal money, in many cases teachers must self-nominate or be nominated to mentor and supervise pre-service teachers during placement. If a teacher is already under significant stress adding to the workload is likely to contribute to burn out. Teachers who self-select may not always have the skills to mentor and support pre-service teachers. Similarly, those who are selected may have a certain skill set that seems appropriate but still may need further support and training.

A range of interventions can be undertaken to engage more regional and remote mentor teachers. These may range from specific micro-credential courses aimed specifically at regional and remote education, associated pre-service teacher needs, or generally at early-career teachers. It may require targeted release time to engage in learning to explore new mentoring knowledge and skills, or the development of increased mentoring capacity through creating a group of key mentor teachers in a school community who lead this work and build mentoring knowledge capital and capacity across the broader school community.

### **Preparation for Professional Experience**

Several respondents identified the importance of initial teacher education providers appropriately preparing pre-service teachers for professional experience and graduate employment in regional and remote schools. The importance of appropriate preparation, while important for all pre-service teachers, has greater significance for regional and remote education as many teachers are early-career teachers defined as those in the workforce for fewer than five years. Data collected in 2018 found that 18% of the teaching workforce were early-career teachers with more early-career teachers working in rural schools than in major cities (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2021). Although some argue that having early-career teachers as mentors is not the answer to solving the regional and remote teacher workforce shortage as they lack experience (Knipe & Bottrell, 2023) as well as the possibility to more likely to experience stress and burnout (Carroll et al., 2022), others suggest early-career teachers were just as effective as mentors as experienced teachers (Gore, 2022).

The need for appropriate preparation and training remains important and is strongly supported by several education systems and initial teacher education providers. The *Rural and Remote Education Strategy 2021-2024* (New South Wales Department of Education, 2021) and the *Country Education Strategy 2021-2028* (Government of South Australia, 2021) highlight the need for specific regional and remote school preparation. The former document provides several resources to address the challenges of the limited uptake of pre-service teachers undertaking professional experience in regional and remote schools. Resources have been developed to induct and aid pre-service teachers to not only better understand the school context to support a more positive placement experience but to also increase the possibility of graduate employment (New South Wales Department of Education, 2021, p. 9). This approach resembles and builds on the federally funded project by Trinidad et al. (2012) and offers tangible support to address the issue.

Addressing the issue of pre-service teachers understanding of context falls within the remit of initial teacher education providers and host schools. Initial teacher educators need to appropriately prepare coursework for pre-service teachers for professional experience in regional and remote communities (Green & Reid, 2004; Roberts et al., 2022) supporting pre-service teachers to understand the school and community contexts, the learning needs of

students, and the best pedagogies and practices (Reid et al., 2012). Some researchers argue that few universities have coursework that focuses on preparing pre-service teachers for working in rural schools (Roberts et al., 2022; Trinidad et al., 2014; White & Reid, 2008). Roberts et al., (2022) posit that a continued lack of engagement in regional and remote schooling in initial teacher education programs exists. A lack of acknowledgment of the importance of this in the *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers* (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2011/2021) and the *Accreditation Standards and Procedures* (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2011/2019) reflects a lack of recognition of the need to address the diversity of environments of rural teachers work. However, some initial teacher education providers have bucked this trend and responded by including regional and remote educational content in their initial teacher education programs, either through practical or simulated experiences (Ledger & Fischetti, 2020).

Initial teacher education providers such as the University of Adelaide have responded to the needs of regional and remote schooling by initiating specific training embedded within the core course content. The content has been tailored to prepare pre-service teachers who will undertake a regional and remote placement and is linked to both the placement and course assessment. As part of the professional experience program, pre-service teachers undertake a compulsory regional and remote placement in the third year of the undergraduate teaching degree drawing upon research to prepare them to understand these school and community contexts, the learning needs of students, and pedagogies and practices to effectively address these (Reid et al., 2012). Trinidad, et al. (2014) reported that 11 out of 39 Australian Universities provide courses on rural education. While implementation is not widespread nor sustained it is a start. It is not surprising however that gaps in coursework still exist, and many pre-service teachers feel unprepared for teaching and living in regional and remote contexts (Kline & Walker-Gibbs, 2015) with regional and remote schools continuing to experience issues in relation to the professional experience of pre-service teachers, graduate employment, and retention (Halsey, 2019). It is imperative that in any instance the widespread implementation of evidence-based approaches is adopted and embedded systemically to address the long-standing regional and remote teacher shortage (Gore, 2022).

### **Incentives**

Although some site leaders identified the need for universities to offer more incentives to pre-service teachers to experience a regional and remote placement, none provided insight into what these incentives should be. Some initial teacher education providers and educational systems have begun to incentivise placements. While this is not widespread some educational systems have begun to work in conjunction with initial teacher education providers to introduce incentives.

Universities such as Charles Darwin University provide, under certain circumstances, a travel grant to support regional and remote placements (Charles Darwin University, 2021). Flinders University also has a financial incentive for pre-service teachers who meet certain conditions to undertake professional experience in regional and remote schools. Several education systems also offer a range of incentives to pre-service teachers to undertake placements. For example, the New South Wales Department of Education (New South Wales Department of Education, 2021) in collaboration with major universities offers rural placement and facilitates the placement of pre-service teachers to regional and remote areas of New South Wales, provides access to funding for travel, accommodation, and expenses during their rural placement, arranges accommodation and provides an opportunity to attend placement with a peer who is also eligible for the program. Recently the South Australian Department for Education (Government of South Australia, 2021) and Catholic Education South Australia (Catholic Education South Australia, 2024) trialed a very similar incentivised system for 4th year pre-service teachers, even in some cases providing USB Dongle Wi-Fi sticks to aid pre-service teachers who could not access Wi-Fi due to

geographical isolation. In these innovative programs the education systems liaised closely with the initial teacher education providers in South Australia to select and coordinate pre-service teachers and the regional/remote placements. The process involved interviewing and then selecting candidates to try and provide the best *match* for both the school and pre-service teachers. Both education systems considered the pre-service teachers' life experience, subject specialisation and general background in considering the regional/remote placement location. Data are not available as to whether this program led to an increase in any regional and remote employment.

## Conclusion

Research undertaken in this paper investigated the research question: *What are the benefits, challenges, and implications of undertaking a placement in regional and remote schools and the consequent impact on regional and remote employment?*

It is evident that a key part of finding a solution to the employment needs of regional and remote schools, and to inspiring/encouraging pre-service teachers to undertake a regional/remote placement, is ensuring that students have quality experiences in regional and remote schools, either experiential or placement. Experiential visits to schools in these areas have been successful in highlighting an appealing lifestyle in rural areas (for example *Beyond the Line*) (<https://education.nsw.gov.au/>). The professional experience placement, as Kline et al. (2013) suggest, is integral to ensuring awareness of teaching and living in communities and makes the transition easier if employed in regional and remote schools. Successful professional experience in regional and remote schools can lead to pre-service teachers deciding upon graduate employment in regional and remote communities (Halsey, 2009). Taken together this indicates benefits for both schools and pre-service teachers when professional experience in regional and remote communities considers the importance of context matching.

These findings suggest that the priority is securing a placement, rather than promoting professional experience in regional and remote schools for educative purposes. As highlighted previously, the benefits of sourcing a placement may be outweighed by the challenges of undertaking professional experience if not part of a larger strategy to prepare pre-service teachers for regional and remote professional experience. Many universities and departments offer financial incentives for pre-service teachers to undertake professional experience in regional and remote schools, such as at Flinders University where incentives are available for those who have a grade point average above five. This appears to be a way to select pre-service teachers with the understanding and skills to succeed in regional and remote schools and reflects the literature (Fitzgerald et al., 2021). Taken together, the data indicate that incentives provided by universities to promote the uptake of professional experience in regional and remote schools remain limited. This study and subsequent findings are relevant to current debates and issues surrounding teacher shortages and particularly shortages in regional and remote contexts. The findings provide insight into the lived experiences of schools and their strategies to support regional and remote professional experience placements and transition graduates into the workforce within their schools. Themes extracted from the survey data centered on mentor teacher capacity in regional and remote schools, preparation for professional experience and graduate employment, as well as incentives for professional experience and graduate employment.

## Implications

We argue that education departments and schools focus on the role of mentors in regional and remote schools. We suggest that we may need to reimagine mentors as someone beyond the classroom and not necessarily the class teacher. This would take pressure off the class teacher during times of massive teacher shortage. The mentor would be supernumerary and work as a

conduit between classroom teacher and pre-service teacher. This allows for reflective practice and processes as advocated by Jennifer Gore and the implementation of the *Quality Teaching Rounds* (Gore et al., 2023).

Previous studies have evidenced the importance of preparation for professional experience and the perceived lack of attention provided by universities (Roberts et al., 2022). They caution against incentives for regional and remote professional experience that are not supported by coursework and argue that while the New South Wales Department of Education provides incentives to attract teachers to rural areas and scholarships and support for initial teacher education in rural areas, initial teacher education courses are not required to provide a focus on rural schools and communities. They further argue that new graduates cannot be community ready or school ready for regional and remote settings, let alone classroom ready (Roberts et al., 2022) if this is not evident in the initial teacher education program. Sending students to regional and remote schools without being prepared can be detrimental for all parties. This view is also presented in the literature. Although teacher educators argue that professional experience can help pre-service teachers decide if they want to teach in regional and remote locations (Kline et al., 2013) and are a good opportunity for a school to *trial* pre-service teachers to determine if they are a good match for the school and the community, the match would be better if the students are better prepared for the context.

Finally, based on the findings we recommend a commitment to regional and remote schools to be more evident within initial teacher education programs like those already developed in South Australia, Western Australia, and New South Wales. This commitment needs to be recognized at a systems level and differentiated within initial teacher education professional standards and practices. Attention and specialization in these diverse contexts can be undertaken as either a stand-alone model or embedded in courses that specialize in differentiation, inclusive education and more importantly place-based pedagogies (Gruenewald, 2003; Yemini et al., 2023). Supporting, encouraging, and raising the profile of teaching in regional and remote areas may attract more pre-service teachers to these areas and in turn improve the learning outcomes of students within these contexts.

### **Limitations**

This qualitative study was limited by the number of site leaders, regions and Australian states represented. This study was also limited by capturing only site leaders' perspectives. Understanding the perspectives of different professional experience partners who represent regional and remote schools across Australia would have provided the opportunity to triangulate the data over space and with different groups of people and strengthen the credibility of this study. A further limitation of this study is the single data source: a survey. Interviews and observations may have enabled a more comprehensive understanding of the benefits, challenges, and implications of pre-service teacher professional experience and graduate teacher employment and strengthened the credibility of this study. Finally, this study presents site leader's perspectives at a moment in time and the conditions and contexts what shaped site leaders' experiences during this time may have changed.

### **Ethical Considerations**

This research is approved by Charles Darwin University (H22074) and adheres to the National Statement Ethical Conduct in Human Research and the Australian Association for Research in Education Statement of Ethics.

### **Authors' Note**

In this paper, the authors use the terms 'regional and remote' to define geographic remoteness, which is determined according to population and distances travelled to access services. Five

remoteness classes are described in the Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia Plus (ARIA+). The remoteness classes are *Major Cities*, *Inner Regional*, *Outer Regional*, *Remote*, and *Very Remote* (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021). In much research and policy, schools located outside *Major Cities* are described as regional or remote, conflating *Inner* and *Outer Regional* and *Remote* and *Very Remote*.

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