



Rural Education for Regional and Community Development

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Abstract

Education in any of its forms (early years, primary, secondary, tertiary, and adult education) in rural and remote communities, plays a critical role in sustaining and developing regions. In this issue the articles describe programs and approaches that work to build the regional workforce and create socially inclusive communities. The articles include research that addresses concerns about attraction and retention of teachers, about the relationships and partnerships that improve learning outcomes, and about the importance of place consciousness in regional, rural, and remote contexts. The Rural Connections articles document good practice in providing access to tertiary education that otherwise would not be available, to grow the local workforce and provide pathways and awareness for young people considering their career options. In this editorial we consider the findings presented using a policy and theoretical framework to help us consider the dynamics of rural education as an enabler for regional and community development.

Keywords: *workforce shortages, regional development, rural education, teacher attraction, teacher retention*

Introduction

The latest Australian federal government report on regional, rural and remote jobs and skills continues previous public policy efforts in identifying pressures and drivers of regional, rural and remote labour market performance to support communities outside the metropolis (Houghton et al., 2023; Jobs and Skills Australia, 2024). From the outset, this report makes clear that Australia remains an urbanised country where different forms of capital (human, financial, cultural) flow at a greater volume and pace in capital cities. Nevertheless, it also reaffirms the positive demographic trend of migration to the regions that was increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. People, human capital, are critical for the development of regional, rural and remote areas (Houghton et al., 2023; Jobs and Skills Australia, 2024). This migratory pattern continues post-COVID-19, albeit with some areas benefiting more than others. This is not news for people living in regional, rural and remote communities. It has well been established that regional coastal areas have benefited from population growth more than other regional, rural and remote places in the last quarter of a century (see Argent et al., 2018; Cook & Cuervo, 2020; Li et al., 2024). Similar imbalances in migration can be found in labour skill supply with remote areas experiencing a greater shortage than other non-metropolitan places (Jobs and Skills Australia, 2024). Other differences between regions can be found in the provision of higher education and vocational education opportunities, including tertiary studies completion and local skills development.

This report, *Towards a Regional, Rural and Remote Jobs and Skills Roadmap* (Jobs and Skills Australia, 2024), does a good job of enumerating challenges and opportunities for regional, rural and remote areas, including identifying broader drivers, such as housing, access to services, and transport and infrastructure, and their impact on jobs, skills and demographic development. While the report is clear on the shortcomings, successes and opportunities for the regional, rural and remote tertiary sector, universities and vocational education providers, it fails to make the connection between jobs, skills and demographic development to schooling. This new set of articles in the *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education* contributes to make the link between schooling and regional, rural, and remote development. It does so by emphasising the role of teachers and schools in community development, the importance of place in teacher retention as well as in the education of a local workforce, and by highlighting programs and practices that grow a local workforce.

Rural Education, Mobility and the Development of Local Workforces and Communities

It is surprising that rural schools are often missing from regional, rural, and remote labour market analysis. After all, they are a significant institution in the socialisation of children and young people, including on their education of the relevance of work and place. Teachers are in the frontline of this struggle to recognise and highlight the importance of local communities. Indeed, when rural schools close, the impact on communities is felt both from a social and economic position (Haynes, 2022; Lehtonen, 2021). This is not to say that in some instances schools educate their youth to leave their communities. Corbett's (2007) seminal book, *Learning to Leave*, long demonstrated how sometimes rural schools become talented-export industries by making sure their best students earn a place in metropolitan tertiary education institutions or urban labour markets. This trend has been found elsewhere in rural education, including in Australia (Cuervo, 2014; Cuervo, 2016) and elsewhere (see Biddle & Azano, 2016; Stenseth & Rød, 2022 for international perspectives).

Corbett's (2007) contribution includes the original proposition that there is a mobility imperative for rural youth to imagine their future outside their local community. In many instances teachers generate this imperative through best intentions by making connections for rural students of their world with the wider world. Drawing on Massey (1994, p. 154), teachers can build a "sense of place which is extroverted, which includes a consciousness of its links with the wider world", that can create for young people the imagination of building their biographies outside their local communities. This valorisation of the urban youth transitions can also be found in education research and policy—where the urban is often constituted as the norm and the rural lagging behind (see Guenther et al., 2015). Finally, graduate teachers making their first teaching experiences in rural schools can also be expected to return to the city as they struggle to cope with living away from family and significant ones, and amenities and services that they take for granted in metropolitan areas (Cuervo & Acquaro, 2018; Guenther et al., 2023; Willis & Louth, 2024).

Amidst this backdrop of heightened mobility, the rural education and rural sociology literature has recently been soaked with evidence of young people, teachers and other segments of the population staying, moving or returning to regional, rural and remote areas (Cook & Cuervo, 2020; Guenther et al., 2024; Ravn, 2022; Waite, 2022). These studies have served to demystify that rural youth lack aspirations. Unfortunately, it has been often posited in education policy that young people outside the metropolis lack the capacity to aspire—particularly to imagine a future in their communities (Bradley et al., 2008). This deficit approach to rural ways of being has been rebutted by research, as cited above, and by policy information that shows the growing workforce in regional, rural, and remote areas (Jobs and Skills Australia, 2024).

Key in this capacity to aspire to stay in a local regional, rural, and remote community is the work of teachers. Despite the well documented teacher shortages in rural and remote areas

(see Guenther et al., 2023), those teachers working at the coalface of rural education have a significant responsibility to develop in students a sense of place that is not extroverted. Indeed, throughout the collection of articles offered in this issue, the idea of place seems key for community sustainability and workforce wellbeing. As teachers are at the centre of education and learning, developing a place consciousness on them and subsequently on students and the community at large seems to be the first stone to build a regional, rural, and remote workforce that can support local areas.

This development of place consciousness and/or the relevance of place is embedded in most of the articles. The role and importance of place is discussed throughout this issue in teachers' professional work, within school—community relationships, and on the idea of 'funds of knowledge' in students' learning. In this way, the link between place, rurality, schools, and teachers connects with the idea of workforce and community development. Other articles make this connection in a more explicit way. For example, there are articles on the importance of growing your own workforce as an antidote to shortages of skills and labour. This includes bringing to sharp relief the pivotal role that local tertiary education institutions, such as regional university centres and hubs (for example Stone et al., 2022), occupy in the empowerment of a workforce and community capacity. Ultimately, this collection of articles makes the link between the different stages of formal education, from early childhood to tertiary education, and the empowering and development of communities outside the metropolis. By looking at the big picture of the nexus between education, labour and place, this issue of the *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education* aims to contribute to evidence for the robust sustainability of regional, rural, and remote people and places. In what follows, we offer a brief description of each article.

Articles in this Issue

Mary-Anne MacDonald and colleagues open the series by discussing the role of place consciousness and connectedness on teacher retention. They find two cohorts in their research: those who are *place conscious* and those who are *place ignorant*. The former group engages well in community, the latter does not, and experiences negative wellbeing. They argue that place ignorance "*can provide teachers the opportunity to socialise in a homogenously White setting which... is detrimental to the development of true belongingness and cultural responsiveness in communities of a mixed racial demographic*". (p. 8)

They go on to argue that:

Aboriginal cultural responsiveness learning which is specific to the location and community should be provided in all schools that service towns with sizeable Aboriginal populations, even if the school has few Aboriginal children enrolled, as the impact on the wider community of ignorant teachers reinforcing racial stereotypes and divisions can be significant. (p. 12)

We are sure many of us have thought this (or even experienced it ourselves): "*The tyranny of distance is often perceived as the greatest challenge for teacher retention in regional and remote schools in Australia. Perhaps more accurately, it is the tyranny of placelessness*". (p. 12) To remedy this, the authors push responsibility for place-consciousness, back to the systems that import people into rural and remote communities to fill workforce gaps.

The onus is on systems (government policy, Initial Teacher Education, graduate induction, and rural teacher support programs) to increase teachers' capacity to value and contribute effectively to remote and regional experiences. (p. 12)

This is not a new suggestion (Thiele et al., 2023; White, 2015) and is consistent with high level calls for better selection and preparation processes for pre-service teachers, with the aim of reducing

teacher turnover (Halsey, 2018). However, in terms of rural community development, we think one of the key points that emerges from this paper is the need to go beyond importing people to fill skills gaps to a place where social inclusion—tapping into the cultural capital of communities—is the driver for recruitment and professional learning opportunities.

As noted in our introduction, teacher shortages in regional and remote areas have a significant impact on schools and communities. Claire Bartlett and colleagues focus on attraction, considering the impact of partnerships on employment outcomes, and addressing critical workforce shortages in rural and regional areas. They see partnerships between institutions and regional/remote schools as a vehicle for understanding the dynamics of pre-service teacher professional experiences. Indeed, not so long ago we devoted a whole issue to the role that partnerships play in attracting and retaining staff (see Cuervo & Davie, 2023; Dollinger et al., 2023; Thiele et al., 2023).

Mentor availability and capacity were identified as issues that affected experience. One strategy suggested to address attraction and therefore employment was ‘context matching’ where an attempt to bring together the needs of the individual pre-service teacher and the regional/remote school they were destined for, but perhaps what is really needed is one that looks for flexible pre-service teachers “to become reflective practitioners who can adapt their skills to a range of contexts and the diverse needs of learners” (Stahl et al., 2022, p. 1). The missing part of this paper was the limited discussion about the role of community in supporting professional experiences for pre-service teachers. The authors push the responsibility for improving experience back to initial teacher education programs, which may or may not have a connection with a range of communities (Harris et al., 2025). Connection with community matters and does affect the experiences in professional experience programs, as noted in the article by Macdonald and colleagues.

The other issue not discussed here (perhaps because it was out of scope for the researchers) is the importance of home-grown graduates. That is, there is an embedded assumption that teachers will by default be imported from areas that are not rural and not local. This assumption is challenged later in the Rural Connections articles by Ashenden and Millington, Wuttke and Ashenden, and Barry and Samson, who all talk about the need for communities to grow their own teachers and professionals more generally.

Sharon Louth picks up similar themes in her article on professional dissonance and developing a regional/rural/remote consciousness. She asserts that teacher effectiveness/readiness is affected by development of rural consciousness. In the quote that follows we see how teachers can effect rural consciousness in themselves by taking initiatives that build the foundations required for teachers to develop a sense of belonging.

Participating in community events enabled the teachers within this study to establish meaningful connections and laid the foundations for building a strong sense of place... Such community activities involved attending and organising community events like barbecues, and enjoying the natural environment while hiking, fishing and swimming. Taking part in such activities enabled teachers to ground themselves with the environment and make deep connections to their sense of place. (p. 46)

But what is missing here is an appreciation of the impact of these engagements on the community itself—for sustainability through volunteering and participation. Often, as discussed earlier, the impact of schools on communities is most strongly felt when they close (Haynes, 2022). While they are open, they may be taken for granted, but schools and their teachers have a considerable impact on the life of a rural community.

The other point we would raise is that generalisation of regional/rural/remote experience may unwittingly conflate the differences that exist between the three representations of rurality. As

we noted in the introduction to this editorial (with reference to Argent et al., 2018; Cook & Cuervo, 2020; Li et al., 2024), the post-COVID drift of people moving to regional coastal communities is evidence that regional communities have an attractiveness that rural and remote communities may not.

In her article, Olivia Sfetcopoulos focuses on student engagement through implementation of Universal Design for Learning for improved academic achievement—specifically, year 4 writing. However, she suggests that “drawing on students’ funds of knowledge, strengths, and interests during teaching and learning” (p. 61) is effective. She then goes on to encourage professional learning as a way of meeting student needs.

To draw on funds of knowledge, Universal Design for Learning also implicitly relies on understanding the contextual, or place-based, needs of diverse students. In this way the strengths of community are reflected in teaching and learning practice. Perhaps ‘universal design’—which to us implies one size fits all approaches—is a misnomer. “The main objective of UDL is to provide equal educational opportunities by encouraging teachers to offer representation, expression, and engagement for all diverse student” (Almeqdad et al., 2023, p. 3).

Sfetcopoulos argues that: “these findings implicate the importance of providing differentiated learning opportunities based on students’ individual learning needs and academic abilities in a regional education context” (p. 60). We would argue that while this sounds good from a pedagogical perspective, the weakness of Universal Design for Learning is that it does not explicitly allow for context, place, or Country in First Nations contexts, to inform pedagogy. We would further argue that without place, engagement is divorced from a student’s ontological understanding of reality. As we mentioned earlier, some teachers have an ‘extroverted sense of place’ (Massey, 1994).

Ben Archer’s article about academic support and teacher-student relationships in faith-based schools primarily focuses on benefits that accrue to students, particularly in regional areas. As we noted earlier, the combination of relationships, place consciousness, community development and pedagogical practice are all intertwined. In this context, Archer concludes incidentally that relationships between teachers and students have a strong impact in the broader community.

The relationships between teachers and students in regional settings frequently transcend traditional classroom boundaries, extending into sporting activities, community events, and informal interactions within the broader community context. (p.76)

Of course, he is right! But too often schools are narrowly defined as institutions which produce academic outcomes for students, who become economically productive citizens.

The first Rural Connections by Kalie Ashenden and Rhys Millington draws attention again to workforce shortages, this time in the health sector. Regional university hubs have been around since 2018 and work on the assumption that accessible tertiary education was a key factor in addressing low participation rates in higher education programs, while at the same time providing much needed skills for the regional workforce, and the evidence we have seen in articles published in this Journal (Jaggi et al., 2024), and others (Davis & Taylor, 2019; Stone et al., 2022) is that they do make a difference for several reasons.

Study hubs illustrate the nexus between rural education and community development through development of human and economic capita. Communities benefit economically from students who fill skills gaps, and individuals benefit from access to support to gain qualifications. The authors of this article argue that:

Local partnerships are central to effectiveness. Uni Hub actively works with local health networks and health service providers. The conversion rate from university to regional employment as registered nurses or social workers to date is 100%. (p. 87)

In the second Rural Connections article, Cate Wuttke and Kalie Ashenden focus on careers advice and engagement with schools in the Eyre Peninsula region of South Australia. As with Ashenden and Millington's paper, this paper positions rural education as a benefit for the community, facilitated through collaborative partnerships. This paper also argues that rural education creates human and economic capital benefits for individual students:

In collaboration with university and industry partners, it aims to facilitate alternative entry pathways, micro-credentials, and skill sets tailored for professional and technical careers that are in-demand locally. These initiatives will give individuals with practical job-ready skills and facilitate access to university. (p. 94)

Sue Barry and Hannah Samson's article is the third and final Rural Connections article and is about the Spencer Gulf Study Hub. This article also addresses the key issue of skills shortages—in this case it is in the context of early childhood services in the remote mining community of Roxby Downs. Again, we see a combination of factors coming together (facilitation, collaboration, resourcing) to produce benefits (addressing workforce shortages, early childhood learning) in the community.

Uni Hub's facilitation of this project, building a mutually beneficial collaboration with BHP, the Centre, and CQUniversity, has led to increased early childhood education places in Roxby Downs, benefitting children and their parents while simultaneously addressing critical workforce needs. (p. 102)

The focus of the three set of practice articles from Uni Hub colleagues is on building community capacity or 'empowering' regional communities using place-based and collaborative approaches. We see a recurring theme about what rural education can do for communities. This contrasts with the earlier articles which are more about what communities can do for schools, and how communities can work to make rural teaching more attractive to individual teachers. The contrast could be described as the difference between building a local workforce and importing a workforce.

John Halsey's book review of *Rural School Improvement in Developing Countries* looks at rural community development from a macro (country) perspective. In the case studies presented in the book, 'school improvement' is the vehicle for development. In other words, focus on getting rural education right and you will get community development right.

Halsey concludes with this pertinent comment:

Given how central teachers and educational leaders are to driving and sustaining the desired changes, attracting and then retaining the best educators to the most demanding and challenging locations must be a top priority. The challenge continues to be pertinent for education in rural, regional and remote locations, not just in the nominated case studies, but universally. (p. 107)

This comment is echoed in several of the articles in this issue. Educators in rural locations (early years, primary, secondary, and tertiary) are in demand! The focus on workforce shortages no doubt drives initiatives in Australia (like the Rural Study Hubs), but we cannot afford to lose sight of the other pressing needs of many rural and remote communities, related to social cohesion, health and wellbeing, and sustainability.

Concluding thoughts

At a first glance, this issue contains an eclectic set of articles. However, as we read the articles, there are threads that hold them together. We see how critical workforce shortages are driving responses in programs to attract and retain teachers. Without a sustained effort to build rural and remote workforce capacity, communities will suffer, and in turn students will miss out on

opportunities. Schools and post-compulsory years educational providers play a key role in rural community development.

A second thread that holds this issue together is the theme of education-community partnerships. The significance of relationships between teachers and students, between schools and communities, and between universities and local industries is strongly reflected in the evidence presented in this issue. Those relationships are critical for creating opportunities for training, career development and for social cohesion in rural communities.

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