Developing Strategies at the Pre-service Level to Address Critical Teacher Attraction and Retention Issues in Australian Rural, Regional and Remote Schools

Sue Trinidad (Curtin University)**, Elaine Sharplin** (The University of Western Australia)**, Graeme Lock** (Edith Cowan University)**, Sue Ledger (**Murdoch University)**, Don Boyd, Emmy Terry (**SPERA**)**

This ALTC project is a collaborative endeavour between the four public universities involved in teacher education in Western Australia (Curtin University, Edith Cowan University, Murdoch University and The University of Western Australia), focussed on improving the quality of preparation of pre-service teachers for rural, regional and remote appointments. The project will create a nexus between the theory and practice of teaching and learning by developing models of pre-service teacher rural, regional and remote practicums. The project builds on the work of other recent Australian rural education research projects (conducted through TERRAnova and the Renewing Rural and Regional Teacher Education ALTC Curriculum Project. Existing rural health collaborative models will be drawn upon to inform the developing project. The project brings together rural community and professional partnerships (including SPERA and SiMERR) that will help to sustain rural communities through the provision of quality, prepared rural, regional and remote teachers.

1.   Aim of the Project

This ALTC funded project aims to strengthen the capacity and credibility of universities to prepare rural, regional and remote educators, similar to the capacity and credibility that has been created in preparing Australia's rural, regional and remote health workers. Links with the Combined University Centre for Rural Health (CUCRH) in Geraldton, Western Australia will be established in order to learn from their experience and to investigate the possibility of synergies that could be developed between the two organisations (e.g. the development of a regional professional network involving education and health professionals).

The project, beginning in May 2010 and will be completed in May 2012, will build effective and efficient working relationships between the four universities involved and the wider community, and in doing so raise the profile and encourage stronger recognition of the fundamental importance of quality teaching experiences in rural, regional and remote schools. The project aims to provide:

- An exemplar curriculum implemented by four universities;
- The development of the *Welcome to the Bush* experience model implemented by four universities and trialled in the Wheatbelt and Goldfields regions;
- The development and extension of a variety of rural, regional and remote field experiences;
- High achieving pre-service teachers who recognise working and living in rural, regional and remote communities as their first choice of employment on graduation;
- Pre-service teachers who have a comprehensive understanding of rural, regional and remote education grounded in practical experience and theoretical knowledge;
- Stronger capacity and credibility of universities in relation to teacher education especially in terms of preparing teachers for work in rural, regional and remote Australia;
- Opportunities to attract students from regional locations into teacher education programs, especially those who have high level prerequisite requirements and may not otherwise participate in higher education;
- Community capacity building; and
- Effective and sustainable university/community/industry partnerships.

2. Background and Rationale

This project builds upon two major research projects, one completed and the other continuing, investigating rural teacher education. The work of these two projects (the NSW Rural (Teacher) Education Project, or R(T)EP, and Renewing Rural Teacher Education: Sustaining Schooling for Sustainable Futures - TERRAnova) complement each other, with the latter developing concepts discussed in the former into a theory of successful pre-service teacher education practices. This research so far undertaken is calling for the need to reconceptualise pre-service teacher education for preparing teachers to teach in non-metropolitan locations (Lock, Reid, Green, Hastings, Cooper & White, 2009; Lock, Reid, Green, White, Cooper & Hastings, 2009; Lock, Green, Reid, Cooper, White & Hastings, 2008; Cooper, White, Lock, Reid, Green, & and Hastings, 2009; Reid, Green, White, Cooper, Lock & Hastings, 2008; Green, Letts, Novak & Reid, 2008).

It is acknowledged that it has been difficult attracting and retaining teachers and other professionals to rural and remote areas (Miles, Marshall, Rolfe & Noonan, 2004). It is recognized that there are issues associated with the preparation of teachers by higher education institutions for work in rural, regional and remote locations. There is commentary that the higher education system has work to do in better preparing pre-service teachers for rural, regional and remote schools (e.g. Twomey, 2009) and feedback from graduates is that they are not well prepared for rural, regional and remote teaching and living (Frid, Smith, Sparrow & Trinidad, 2008, 2009). Within the first five years of rural and regional practice, isolation in the way of geography and professional development is likely to result in many professionals leaving their professions in country placements (Herrington & Herrington, 2001). For a significant number of pre-service teachers, knowledge of life beyond the outer fringes of the metropolitan area is scant. Boylan and Wallace (2007, p. 22) capture the issues:

> In Australia, most pre-service teacher education courses are based in the capital cities. The majority of students enrolled in teacher education courses are drawn from metropolitan schools. For these courses and their students, rural schools, and their communities are 'unknown', 'to be feared', 'to be avoided' and have little connection with these students' life experiences.

The importance of pre-service teachers being able to experience the unknown and be provided with the opportunities to enable them to make informed decisions and judgements about teaching and living in rural, regional and remote locations is made by others such as Halsey (2005, 2006), Lock (2006, 2007), Sharplin (2002), and Boylan and Mc Swan (1998). In addition to this, one of the most significant factors impacting on the attraction of teachers to work in rural, regional and remote Australia is fear of the unknown. Using the research of Ankrah-Dove (1982), Boylan and Wallace go on to say that "…this fear of the (rural) unknown can be reduced through more targeted preparation for rural teaching." (2007, p. 22). Many pre-service teachers have not experienced rural, regional or remote community living. To this end, pre-service education institutions need to expose pre-service teachers to: the significant issues relevant to rural, regional and remote education; a broad representation of rural, regional and remote contexts, assisting pre-service teachers to become familiar with the diversity of rural, regional and remote locations and communities; and range of potential experiences. Ideally, pre-service teachers need direct personal experience of rural, regional and remote education in context (Sharplin, 2002).

3. Project Deliverables and Outcomes

Section 3 of the Bradley Review discussed the need for contributing to Australia's regions and providing a more sustainable system of higher education provision in regional and remote areas that is flexible and innovative (Bradley, 2009). In meeting the project outcomes this project will provide relevant curriculum and non-metropolitan experiences to address the problem of recruiting and retaining teachers in rural, regional and remote locations. Specifically, the project will deliver these outcomes:

- Develop pre-service courses rural, regional and remote studies curriculum modules across four universities that can be used by other universities;
- Develop 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;

- Link theoretical and practical teaching and learning processes: e.g. practical field experiences into the curriculum and reflective journals;
- Expand the research associated with rural, regional and remote education;
- Document ways in which the participation rates of regional Indigenous Western Australians in teacher education programs can be increased;
- Develop tools to assist with the implementation of the institution based and field learning experiences, such as a practicum placement tool, modelled on the Queensland Rural and Remote Educators Network rural placement data base and in conjunction with SPERA, an online networking tool to link pre-service teachers with an interest in rural experiences;
- Embed collaborative strategies between rural, regional and remote teacher educators across four universities in Western Australia;
- Improve communication between teacher educators and regional authorities;
- Provide opportunities for school students in rural, regional and remote locations to improve their knowledge about teacher education programs and becoming a member of the teaching profession;
- Provide an interim report, including a financial and progress summary at the end of year one; and
- Provide the final project report following the ALTC Grants Scheme Guidelines.

4. Project Leadership Team, Reference Group and Partners

This is a collaborative partnership between a group of academics, who have an interest and experience in rural, regional and remote education, from four universities in Western Australia, that is, Curtin University, UWA, ECU and Murdoch University. The Project Leadership Team was established from the creation of a Tertiary Education Rural Regional and Remote network, established in February 2009 after meeting at an international conference. This network is an innovative cross-institutional, collaborative partnership which has met on a monthly basis, in order to further the interests of rural, regional and remote teacher education initiatives. The project proposal has been developed in consultation with SiMERR-WA members as well as the Society for the Provision of Education in Rural Australia (SPERA). The Project Reference Group committee will provide feedback through regular meetings and electronic communication throughout each phase of the project and will provide advice and input into the project activities, act as a sounding board for the Project Leadership Team, and participate wherever possible in the network activities.

5. Approach/Method

The project will be completed in five phases, allowing the production of exemplar curriculum modules, development of rural, regional and remote field experiences and the documentation of outcomes through the production of case studies. The *Welcome to the Bush strategy,* initially developed as a proposal for the *Rural and Remote Education Advisory Council,* in partnership with the Wheatbelt and Goldfields/Esperance Development Commissions, will be developed and integrated into the project. A strength of the process is that there will be on-going evaluation of the process and product at each phase through the events undertaken. The use of face-to-face and virtual support throughout the project is dependent on the commitments of the partners to 1) take a risk; 2) rethink tasks; 3) implement; 4) add to collective knowledge; and 5) contribute to the professional learning of others (see Figure 2 project model).

6. Dissemination and Value-Adding

Dissemination will occur throughout the phases of the project as well as at the end of the project. Plans for the dissemination and embedding of the successful strategies and outcomes are integrated within the project design to build and strengthen the capacity and credibility of universities to prepare rural, regional and remote educators through both engaged-focus dissemination of consultation, collaboration and support for ongoing dissemination during and after the project; as well as information dissemination through reports, websites, conference presentations & publications. The project will both utilize, and advance existing national and international knowledge already developed through ALTC projects and ARC projects. Each of the four universities and partners are committed to this project to take action to embed and upscale rural, regional and remote teacher education and to be able to replicate and sustain this innovation after the completion of the project.
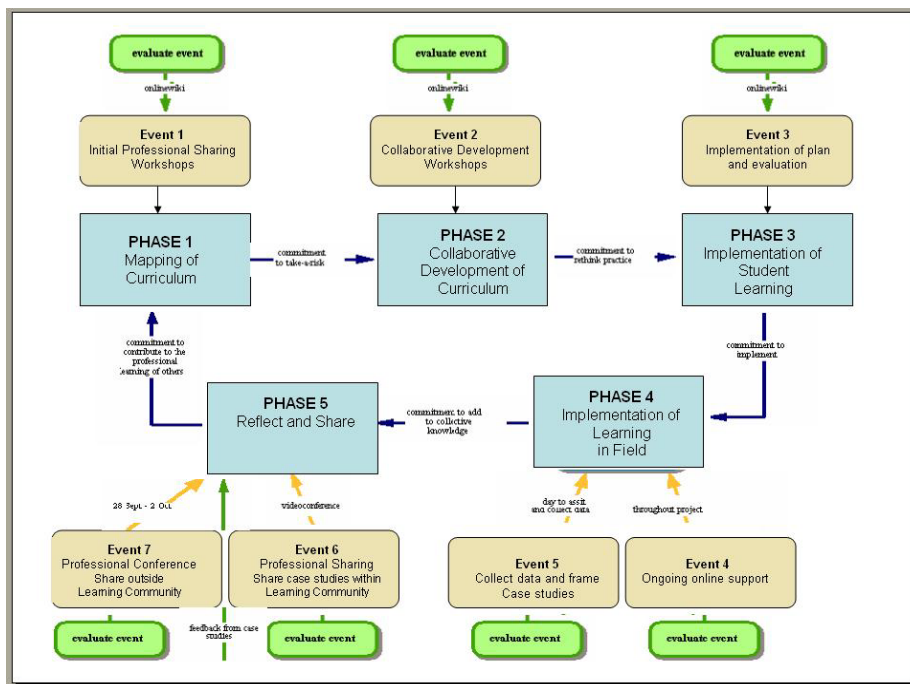
Figure 2: The five phases, events and evaluation of the ALTC Project

The case studies will be relevant to Australian teacher education programs throughout Australia providing examples for teaching in varied situations such as small rural towns, regional mining centres and remote communities, and therefore, Australia wide dissemination of these resources and experiences is intended. Central to the dissemination process will be the strong links the partner universities will form with other pre-service education providers that have a focus on rural, regional and remote research building on the existing links members of the Project Team have with the national SiMERR and TERRAnova networks. A particular focus of this project will be engaging and sharing information and outcomes achieved with Professor Neil Anderson, Pearl Logan Chair in Rural Education at James Cook University and Professor John Halsey, Sidney Myer Chair in Rural Education and Communities at Flinders University.

7.   Project Evaluation and Conclusion

The success of the project will be monitored through the project evaluation which will determine the extent to which the curriculum innovations, including the *Welcome to the Bush* strategy, or other field experiences, have achieved the intended outcomes. Both formative and summative evaluation methods will be employed, including the use of quantitative and qualitative data gathering methodologies. As previously stated the model to be developed and tested will be evaluated extensively at each phase; with face-to-face and virtual support throughout; and is dependent on the commitments of the partners to take a risk; rethink tasks; implement; add to collective knowledge; and contribute to the professional learning of others (see Figure 2). An online Wiki has been used to develop this proposal and each of the team members will continue the use such tools to help evaluate the project and provide ongoing feedback and data collection. The ALTC Exchange is to be used for the purpose of keeping Higher Education colleagues informed of the project. The evaluation results will provide information to relevant stakeholders including the Project Leadership Team; participating universities; and the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC), the funding organisation.

The project aims to produce high achieving pre-service teachers who recognise working and living in rural, regional and remote communities as their first choice of employment on graduation and have a comprehensive understanding of rural, regional and remote education grounded in practical experience and theoretical knowledge. It will develop and extend the variety of rural, regional and remote field experiences and practicums; building effective and efficient working relationships between universities and the wider community. The project aims to build stronger capacity and credibility of universities through effective and sustainable university/ community/ industry partnerships to promote

and support the preparation of teachers for work in rural, regional and remote Australia. This will include the development of opportunities to attract students from regional locations into teacher education programs, especially those who may not otherwise participate in higher education. This project will add to current rural, regional and remote research in this area through its research and development methodology.

8. References

Boylan, C., Sinclair, R., Smith, I., Squires, D., Edwards, J., Jacob, A., O'Malley, D., & Nolan, B. (1993). Retaining teachers in rural schools: Satisfaction, commitment and lifestyles. In, C. Boylan & M. Alston (Eds.), *Rural Education Issues: An Australian Perspective.* Wagga Wagga, NSW: SPERA.

Boylan, C. (2004). Putting rural into pre-service teacher education. Paper presented at the Australian Association for Research in Education, Melbourne. Retrieved 17 February, 2008, from http://www.aare.edu.au/04pap/boy04081.pdf

Bradley, D. [Chair] (2009). *Transforming Australia's Higher Education System.* Commonwealth of Australia: Canberra.

Cooper, M., White, S., Lock, G., Reid, J., Green, B. & Hastings, W. (2009) Encouraging and nurturing teachers in small rural communities in Australia. Presentation to the Association of Teacher Education Conference in Dallas, USA. 14-18 February.

Davis, M.S. (2002). Teacher retention and small rural school districts in Montana. *The Rural Educator, 24*, 45-52.

Donehower, K., Hogg, C. & Schell, E. E. (2007) *Rural Literacies*, Carbondale; Southern Illinois University Press.

Frid, S., Smith, M., Sparrow, L. & Trinidad, S. (2009). An examination of innovations in Mathematics, Information and Communication Technology and Science in a pre-service teacher education program. *International Journal of Innovation and Learning , 6*(5), 517-536.

Frid, S., Smith, M., Sparrow, L. & Trinidad, S. (2008). An Exploration of Issues in the Attraction and Retention of Teachers to Non-Metropolitan Schools in Western Australia. *Education in Rural Australia, 18*(1), 20-29.

Gibson, I. (1994). Policy, practice and need in the professional preparation of teachers for rural teaching. *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 10*, 68-77.

Green, B. & Reid, J. (2004) 'Teacher Education for Rural-Regional Sustainability: Changing Agendas, Challenging Futures, Chasing Chimeras?' *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, Vol 32, No 3, November, 255-273.

Green, B., Letts, W., Novak, M., & Reid, J. (2008). Rural Teaching and Teacher Education: Space, Difference and Situated Practice. Paper presented at the Australian Association for Research in Education International Education Conference, Brisbane, 30 November-4 December.

Halsey, R. J.(2005). *Pre-service Country Teaching in Australia.* Rural Education Forum Australia.

Herrington, A., & Herrington, J. (2001). Web-based strategies for professional induction in rural, regional and remote areas. In P.L. Jeffery (Ed.). *Proceedings of the Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE) International Educational Research Conference.* Fremantle.

Hudson, S., & Millwater, J. (2009). 'Over The Hill' is not so far away: Crossing teaching contexts to create benefits for all through rural teaching experiences. Paper presented at The Australian Teacher Education 2009 Conference. Albury, NSW. 28 June-1 July.

Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. (2000). *Recommendations: National Inquiry into Rural and Remote Education*. Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission: Sydney.

Lock, G. (2007). The Student Teacher Rural Experience Program: Preparing Pre-service Teachers to Live in Regional Locations. Paper presented at the 23rd SPERA National Rural Education Conference, Perth, 30-31 August.

Lock, G. (2008). Preparing teachers for rural appointments: Lessons from Australia. *The Rural Educator 29*(2), 24-30.

Lock, G., Reid, J., Green, B., Hastings, W., Cooper, M., & White, S. (2009). Researching rural-regional (teacher) education in Australia. *Education in Rural Australia 31*(2)*,* 31-44.

Lock, G., Green, B., Reid, J., Cooper, M., White, S., & Hastings, W. (2008). *Designing a national research project in rural-regional (teacher) education.* Proceedings from the 24th National Rural Education Conference: The Face of Learning – Generation M: The Mobile Generation., Melbourne, Victoria, 27-29 August.

Lock, G., Reid, J., Green, B., White, S., Cooper, M., & Hastings, W. (2009). University- and state-based incentives supporting a rural practicum or placement: Pre-service teacher comments. Paper presented at the National Rural Education Conference, Flinders University, South Australia, 8-10 July.

Massey D. (2005). *For Space*, London: Sage.

Miles, R.L., Marshall, C., Rolfe, J., & Noonan, S. (2004). *The Attraction and Retention of Professionals to Regional Areas.* Queensland Department of State Development: Queensland Department of Premier and Cabinet. Australia.

Moir, E., & Gless, J. (2001). Quality Induction: An investment in teachers. *Teacher Education Quarterly, Winter,* 109-114.

Murphy, P., & Cross, W. (1990). Preparing teachers for rural schools: A Canadian approach. *The Rural Educator, 11*, 10-11.

Munsch, T., & Boylan, C. (2008). Can a week make a difference? Changing perceptions about teaching and living in rural Alaska. *The Rural Educator 29*(2), 14-23.

Novak, M., & Page, J. (2009). Enhancing the preparation of students for teaching in rural and remote locations. Paper presented at The Australian Teacher Education 2009 Conference. Albury, NSW. 28 June-1 July.

Ramsey, G. (2000). *Quality Matters*. Sydney: New South Wales Department of Education and Training.

Reid, J., Green, B., White, S., Cooper, M., Lock, G., & Hastings, W. (2008). New Ground in Teacher Education for Rural and Regional Australia? Regenerating Rural Social Space. Paper presented at the Australian Association for Research in Education International Education Conference, Brisbane, 30 November-4 December.

Reid, J., Green, B., White, S., Cooper, M., Lock, G., & Hastings, W. (2009). Understanding Complex Ecologies in a Changing World. Paper submitted for inclusion in the Symposium on Education Practice and Rural Social Space, Rural Education SIG, AERA Annual Conference, Denver, Colorado, USA, 2010.

Sharplin, E. (2009). Getting them out there: A rural education field trip. Paper presented at Innovation for Equity in Rural Education. First International Symposium for Innovation in Rural Education. New Armadale, NSW. February 11-14 2009.

Sharplin, E. (2002). Rural retreat or outback hell: Expectations of rural and remote teaching. *Issues in Educational Research, Vol 12*, 49-63.

Sharplin, E.D. (2002). Having their cake and eating it too: Pre-service teachers' perspectives of internships. Paper presented at the Australian Association for Research in Education, 3-6 December 2001.

Twomey, L. [Chair] (2008), *If you think Education is Expensive*. Department of Education and Training, Perth, WA.