

Rural Education Forum Australia

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Submission to the Inquiry into Teacher Education

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14 April 2005

INTRODUCTION

The genesis of the Rural Education Forum Australia (REFA) is the 1999/2000 Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Inquiry into Rural and Remote Education in Australia which found that “*people in rural and remote Australia generally come off second best*”.

REFA is a collective of national organisations which represent the consumers and/or providers of education services in rural and remote Australia.

REFA’s work recognises the importance and value of people in rural and remote areas being able to realise their full potential and the fundamental importance of education in enabling them to do this.

REFA’s work is based upon principles of social justice, equity and improved access to the range of goods, services and entitlements that impact on education or on services related to education and educational outcomes.

REFA’s vision is:

Quality education and training outcomes in rural and remote areas, so that individuals, families and communities can develop their full potential in the social, economic, political and cultural life of the nation.

Ensuring that everyone can access appropriate high quality education and support services is an absolute necessity for:

- Individual growth and fulfilment
- Wealth generation and fair distribution
- Nation building
- International relations
- Cultural growth & enrichment
- Living compatibility with our environment

POSITION STATEMENT

REFA believes that the demands and challenges of teaching in rural and remote contexts are frequently greater and substantively different to those found in other contexts.

This means that the preparation- and post appointment support- of teachers for rural and remote schools must be “purpose designed and delivered”.

In other words, REFA is strongly opposed to teacher education models and programs which assume a metro-centric framing as being appropriate for rural and remote teaching.

GENERAL COMMENT ON THE TERMS OF REFERENCE

Firstly, REFA is very pleased that the Australian Government is conducting a review into teacher preparation.

Secondly, REFA is concerned that the framing of the terms of reference is somewhat ambiguous in that the title of the review uses the word education but the text of the review consistently refers to training. It would have been preferable for there to be consistent reference to teacher education rather than teacher training.

Thirdly, REFA is very disappointed that there is no explicit reference to early childhood education vice ToR 9 (and others). It is assumed that this ToR is seeking comment on possible changes to the present ways in which primary and secondary education are configured. REFA believes that any changes to these should be considered in light of the most recent and reputable information available about optimising the growth and development of children from 0 to 8 years of age.

Fourthly, in relation to ToR 7, REFA is concerned that specification of the level of detail presented may overly constrain the scope of the responses to the Inquiry. Notwithstanding this, given that a menu approach has been used here, REFA wants to draw specific attention to three other areas of preparation namely: the preparation of teachers for understanding how wealth-economic, social, cultural- is generated, distributed and circulated; the preparation of teachers for educating students for responsible international citizenship and, the preparation of teachers for Indigenous responsive pedagogy.

SPECIFIC COMMENTS ON THE TERMS OF REFERENCE

REFA’s submission focuses specifically on ToRs 1, 5, 6, 7(viii) and 11.

ToR 1 Examine and assess the criteria for selecting students for teacher training courses.

REFA believes that high quality teaching that sustains the engagement and progression of students, and rural and remote students in particular, requires teachers who are intelligent, can develop genuine relationships with children and students, their parents and /or carers, colleagues and community, and who are themselves learners. REFA also believes that teaching needs a major infusion of fresh ideas and thinking that is available from the wisdom, knowledge and experience gained by living and working in occupations outside of the profession.

Review outcomes therefore need to:

- *ensure that the selection criteria for teacher education programs have specific reference to rural and /or remote living/occupational experience for designated quotas within total annual cohorts*
- *ensure that there is realistic support available to enable people who meet the criteria to change careers and become teachers. This requires developing sophisticated recognition of other learning assessment policies and practices and paying people, many of whom will have family and home financial commitments, a living wage during the time required to become a qualified teacher. The economics associated with this approach need to be considered over a long time frame and in terms of the current wasted funding that is spent on recruiting into teacher education before people have had opportunity to experience the world of work more broadly and therefore realise that teaching is, or is not, the professional stream they want to take.*
- *give high priority to the development of policies and practices to capitalise on the huge expertise base of home-tutors, many of whom have taught in distance mode for 15 or more years and are now ready and available to become fully qualified and registered teachers.*

ToR 5 Examine the educational philosophy underpinning the teacher training courses (including the teaching methods used, course structure and materials, and methods for assessment and evaluation) and assess the extent to which it is informed by research.

In relation to this ToR, REFA's focus is on the need to significantly raise the profile and status of pre-service country teaching and the support it is accorded within degree and other teacher preparation programs. REFA sees this as a very important way to achieve two fundamental outcomes related to the philosophy underpinning teacher education courses. They are an actual reduction in the metro-centric orientation of most of the design and delivery assumptions and practicalities associated with teacher education. Secondly, an expansion of the pool of potential future employees of education departments and individual schools who will have had at least some experience of living and working in a country location before applying for a teacher position.

Another general point before proceeding to elaborate on the detail of REFA's perspectives here; there appears to be an urgent need to raise the actual unit credit rating allocated to teaching practicums as part of degree/teacher preparation

completion requirements. Information has been received from REFA members working in the health fields which shows that the status and the tangible support given to practicums is proportionally higher than that experienced in education. This is incongruous from REFA's perspective given the necessity of demonstrating that one can successfully teach before taking on the role of a full time teacher.

Recently REFA conducted a survey of all universities in Australia that offer pre-service country teaching as part of degree completion requirements. A total of 21 universities responded to the survey. A copy of the survey questions is attached. Key statistical results of the survey include:

- over 35,000 pre-service placements are organised annually by the universities that responded to the survey
- these translate into more than 613,000 placement days of pre-service teaching
- the mean duration of a pre-service teaching placement is 17.4 days and the most frequent length of a placement is 20 days
- pre-service placements range from 4 to 60 days in length
- 7,841 country pre-service placements were reported using each university's individual definition of "country"- this equates to approximately 22% of the total pre-service placements organised annually
- of the total number of country placements, 1,668 were defined by respondents as remote and 6,173 as rural- again using the individual definitions of each of the universities

Other findings of the survey relevant to the scope of the Inquiry are:

- no university compels pre-service teachers to include a country placement as part of their graduation requirements though all encourage or strongly encourage this to happen. One respondent has an expectation that pre-service teachers will undertake a country placement. Universities located in regional centres reported that a significant number of pre-service placements occurred in country schools.
- there are **four broad groups of reasons** for the non compulsory approach to a country pre-service placement and course completion requirements which essentially capture the spectrum of key issues that need to be addressed by the Review.
- **firstly**, there are university operations and resources reasons like faculty not being able to support the supervision and assessment workload of a large number of rural placements, and the costs of administration for a major field placement program.
- **secondly**, there is a raft of student personal circumstances that are very widely reported in the survey returns. They include direct financial costs of a country placement for a student such as travel, double rate accommodation because they have to maintain their home base and pay for their country stay, and extra day to day living costs. In addition, the vast majority of pre-service teachers rely on part-time work to "make ends meet" and while on a country placement, they have to forego the income from this and, in some instances,

run the very real risk of losing their job if the placement is for an extended period.

- in addition, many pre-service teachers have significant family responsibilities such as children to care for and aged parents requiring support. Both of these mean that the logistics of taking themselves out of a family context for an extended period is both complex and often requires extra resources to be organised and allocated for care. Some also have sporting and local club/association leadership obligations which they have to put on hold or find substitutes for if they take up a country placement.
- **thirdly**, there are school placement availability and suitability issues that impact on the likelihood of a pre-service teacher opting for a country teaching placement. In general, country schools are very keen to have pre-service teachers especially in their final year because they use the placement as a potential recruitment exercise- in essence a form of “test drive” before you buy approach to the ever present problem of attracting and retaining quality teachers for rural and remote locations.
- **fourthly**, there are also local community factors that impact on country pre-service placements. These include the availability of appropriate accommodation, the distance of a small town from other centres where the services that are normally taken for granted are available, and, for many pre-service teachers, quickly gaining an understanding of living and working in a country location where the level of anonymity they usually experience is often dramatically reduced and with this, working through issues of how to appropriately adapt to and manage this.

Review outcomes therefore need to:

- *ensure that the credit weightings allocated to pre-service teaching placements are equivalent to the academic/on campus components of a teacher education degree program*
- *ensure that changes occur to teacher education course policies, practices and resource allocations to expand the pool of undergraduates who annually undertake a country pre-service placement by 100% within a 5 year timeframe **Note-** this target will mean that well over half of pre-service teachers, based on the data in the survey reported above, will still not experience any country teaching as part of their professional education. This situation needs to be contrasted with the fact that a very significant proportion of teacher graduates commence their careers in country locations.*
- *ensure that adequate funding is provided to fully meet university, individual student and community costs of country pre-service teaching placements using a base of 20 continuous school days annually as the minimum amount of time required to experience and evaluate the challenges, complexities and professional rewards of teaching in a rural or remote context*
- *ensure that there is a significant increase in the explicit preparation of teachers for rural and remote locations over a 5 year timeframe by requiring universities to incorporate a non metro-centric philosophy into the design, content and delivery of teacher education courses linked to targeted funding*

ToR 6 Examine the interaction and relationships between teacher training courses and other university faculty disciplines.

REFA's position in relation to this ToR is very clear- there must be greater inter faculty preparation of teachers particular in terms of allied health services and involvement with significant others outside the academy during their professional education.

Although it is likely that there will be continuing decline of population in many rural and remote locations, it is also likely that the need and demand for professional services will either be maintained or indeed increase, as expectations rise and other factors intercede like aging. This means that there it is very likely that there will be growing pressure placed on professionals in these contexts to provide at least advice and/or deliver services outside of their immediate areas of preparation.

Rural Australians are well aware of the costs of training and maintaining professionals in small communities but nevertheless expect that core human services for them are available, accessible and affordable. There is also a preparedness to embrace new multi-skilled professionals who can work across traditional professional boundaries.

Rural Australians are also aware that large cities and regional settings are integral to the continuing development and well being of the nation.

However, rural Australians are not at all confident that those who live and work in large cities and regional settings are aware that the continuing development and well being of the nation also depends on sustaining vibrant rural and remote communities.

To address this increasing dualism which has very real potential to exacerbate divisions and unproductive debates like entitlements versus economic efficiencies, those who have played, and will continue to play a key national bridging role in society- teachers- must be involved during their undergraduate years with a diverse range of others whose primary work includes building and sustaining social capital.

Review outcomes therefore need to:

- *ensure that the over a 5 year timeframe, the design and delivery of teacher preparation courses comprise 20% inter faculty learning and significant community/enterprise/service experiences that have demonstrated capacity for nurturing professionals whose practice is strongly oriented towards interconnected ways of working*

ToR 7(viii) Examine the preparation of primary and secondary graduates to deal with senior staff, fellow teachers, school boards, education authorities, parents, community groups and other related government departments.

Leaving aside the earlier criticism of the terms of reference omitting the preparation of early childhood educators, REFA's response to this ToR can be summarized as, all teachers need pre-service education(and other experiences) that prepares them to be/become confident and competent communicators in diverse and at times, problematic contexts. A strong focus on the fundamental value of developing and

sustaining productive relationships through communication and having a robust sense of personal worth and place are vital for teaching and living in rural and remote communities.

Review outcomes therefore need to:

- *ensure that all teacher education programs incorporate substantial opportunities for pre-service students to develop and demonstrate capacities required for confident and competent communication*
- *ensure that pre-service teaching placements provide significant opportunities for pre-service teachers to observe a diversity of effective communication styles, to practice communication in professional and community contexts and to have this included in pre-service teaching reports*

ToR 11 Examine the adequacy of the funding of teacher training courses by university administrations.

REFA's contribution to the Inquiry here is in relation to the adequacy or otherwise of funding for pre-service country teaching placements, often referred to as practicums.

Included in the survey reported above was a specific question on budgeting for country pre-service placements within each university and the availability of any other sources of support.

The responses to the question, with very few exceptions, clearly demonstrate at least at the practicum operations level, a distinct lack of knowledge of either the quantum of funding available for teaching placements or the sources of it. Only 1 of the 21 responses named a total amount for all pre-service teaching programs and specified a set percentage for country pre-service placements.

Additional sources of funding for country pre-service teaching include Shire Council sponsorships, department of education scholarships, practicum incentives, Telstra Country Wide, alumni fund raising and the Priority Country Area Program.

In a related question on cost pressures, responses included those documented in REFA's contribution to ToR 5 and in addition emphasised again the high costs of providing quality pre-service teaching supervision.

Anecdotally, REFA has been made aware that there seems to be widespread practice of central university administrations "creaming off" significant percentages of funds intended for practicums, for overheads. REFA understands that large organisations do have legitimate overheads that benefit the whole and therefore need to be paid for in ways that reflect fair and reasonable user return. However, REFA also wants to place on record that funds allocated by authorities for specific purposes like pre-service teaching must be used for those purposes. Cost shifting onto clients who are in the least advantageous position to pay is not acceptable and neither is diverting funds allocated for one purpose being used for another.

Review outcomes therefore need to:

- *establish an expert and community based task group to develop models that meet the complete costs of high quality pre-service placement programs which have a strong focus on pre-service teacher choice and flexibility*
- *ensure that funding allocations to university administrations prohibit the diversion of funding allocated for specific purposes being diverted to others*

REFA Additional ToRs:

Examine the preparation of teachers for understanding how wealth-economic, social, cultural- is generated, distributed and circulated

Examine the preparation of teachers for educating students for responsible international citizenship

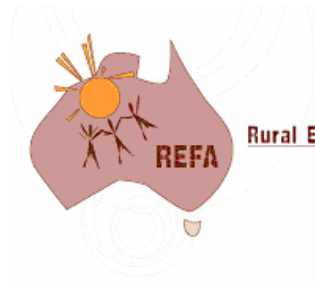
Examine the preparation of teachers for Indigenous responsive pedagogy.

Each of these additional ToRs is derived from the stem of ToR 7. The first two are in essence responses to the increasing reach and impact of globalisation in the framing of opportunities at individual, community and societal levels. The third one is recognition that opportunities for Indigenous students to experience sustained and sustaining success in and through education remains an elusive goal for far too many of them. The HREOC Inquiry into Rural and Remote Education which forms the roots of REFA, drew particular attention to Indigenous education and some seminal changes that must occur in order for there to be a major closing of the gap between the achievements of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students.

Review outcomes therefore need to:

- *ensure that the recommendations contained in the HREOC Inquiry into Rural and Remote Education on Indigenous education pertaining to pre-service teacher education are actioned*
- *ensure that the content of teacher education programs facilitates students being able to acquire substantial understandings of processes of wealth generation, distribution and circulation*
- *ensure that the content and design of teacher education programs facilitates students developing understandings and dispositions for responsible international citizenship*

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Executive Summary

Submission Structure

The submission prepared by the Rural Education Forum Australia (REFA) comprises a brief introduction to REFA, a position statement, some commentary on the Terms of Reference and a series of proposals for changing specific aspects of pre-service teacher education.

The REFA submission makes significant use of data and information obtained from the national mapping of pre-service country teaching programs it is undertaking.

Position Statement

- REFA believes that the demands and challenges of teaching in rural and remote contexts are frequently greater and substantively different to those found in other contexts.
- This means that the preparation- and post appointment support- of teachers for rural and remote schools must be “purpose designed and delivered”.
- In other words, REFA is strongly opposed to teacher education models and programs which assume a metro-centric framing as being appropriate for rural and remote teaching.

Terms of Reference

The REFA submission focuses on ToRs 1, 5, 6, 7(viii), 11 and three additional ToRs.

In relation to ToR 1, Review outcomes need to:

- *ensure that the selection criteria for teacher education programs have specific reference to rural and /or remote living/occupational experience for designated quotas within total annual cohorts*
- *ensure that there is realistic support available to enable people who meet the criteria to change careers and become teachers. This requires developing sophisticated recognition of other learning assessment policies and practices and paying people, many of whom will have family and home financial commitments, a living wage during the time required to become a qualified teacher. The economics associated with this approach need to be considered over a long time frame and in terms of the current wasted funding that is spent on recruiting into teacher education before people have had opportunity to experience the world of work more broadly and therefore realise that teaching is, or is not, the professional stream they want to take.*
- *give high priority to the development of policies and practices to capitalise on the huge expertise base of home-tutors, many of whom have taught in distance mode for 15 or more years and are now ready and available to become fully qualified and registered teachers*

In relation to ToR 5, Review outcomes need to:

- *ensure that the credit weightings allocated to pre-service teaching placements are equivalent to the academic/on campus components of a teacher education degree program*
- *ensure that changes occur to teacher education course policies, practices and resource allocations to expand the pool of undergraduates who annually undertake a country pre-service placement by 100% within a 5 year timeframe **Note**- this target will mean that well over half of pre-service teachers, based on the data in the survey reported above, will still not experience any country teaching as part of their professional education. This situation needs to be contrasted with the fact that a very significant proportion of teacher graduates commence their careers in country locations.*
- *ensure that adequate funding is provided to fully meet university, individual student and community costs of country pre-service teaching placements using a base of 20 continuous school days annually as the minimum amount of time required to experience and evaluate the challenges, complexities and professional rewards of teaching in a rural or remote context*
- *ensure that there is a significant increase in the explicit preparation of teachers for rural and remote locations over a 5 year timeframe by requiring universities to incorporate a non metro-centric philosophy into the design, content and delivery of teacher education courses linked to targeted funding*

In relation to ToR 6, Review outcomes need to:

- *ensure that the over a 5 year timeframe, the design and delivery of teacher preparation courses comprise 20% inter faculty learning and significant community/enterprise/service experiences that have demonstrated capacity*

for nurturing professionals whose practice is strongly oriented towards interconnected ways of working

In relation to ToR 7(viii), Review outcomes need to:

- *ensure that all teacher education programs incorporate substantial opportunities for pre-service students to develop and demonstrate capacities required for confident and competent communication*
- *ensure that pre-service teaching placements provide significant opportunities for pre-service teachers to observe a diversity of effective communication styles, to practice communication in professional and community contexts and to have this included in pre-service teaching reports*

In relation to ToR 11, Review outcomes need to:

- *establish an expert and community based task group to develop models that meet the complete costs of high quality pre-service placement programs which have a strong focus on pre-service teacher choice and flexibility*
- *ensure that funding allocations to university administrations prohibit the diversion of funding allocated for specific purposes being diverted to others*

In relation to the additional ToRs proposed by REFA, Review outcomes need to :

- *ensure that the recommendations contained in the HREOC Inquiry into Rural and Remote Education on Indigenous education pertaining to pre-service teacher education are actioned*
- *ensure that the content of teacher education programs facilitates students being able to acquire substantial understandings of processes of wealth generation, distribution and circulation*
- *ensure that the content and design of teacher education programs facilitates students developing understandings and dispositions for responsible international citizenship*