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Productivity Commission Submission on Schools Workforce

Focus and framing

This submission argues for strengthening educational leadership for rural, regional and remote schools by:

- placing significant emphasis on preparing leaders for the complexity and challenges of working *and* living in small population centres, frequently distant from main cities, coupled with the 'big project' of securing Australia's long term sustainability
- challenging the historical and continuing country- to city career pathways 'model' of principalship which essentially perpetuates systems appointing the least experienced leaders to the most isolated and demanding schools
- making available to all educational leaders a high quality university and profession designed preparation and qualification.

The Productivity Commission's Draft Schools Workforce Research Report in section 8.1 specifies a range of skills and knowledge that principals require.

These are agreed but the task of raising the quality of educational leadership in Australia's non-urban schools requires a range of other contextual matters and career pathway factors to be addressed, together with a purpose designed tertiary qualification.

Put another way, being the principal of a rural school is *more* than being the principal of a scaled down version of an urban school. Context, community, distance and critical population mass combine to create unique conditions and challenges for educational leaders viz:

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In a rural community the educational leader never has any 'down' time. They are in the position 24 hours per day, seven days per week. Special skills are required to cope with the lack of privacy and the need to be always circumspect in both communication and behaviour. It is not a job for everyone. It is a job for someone who enjoys being part of a community. I love my job but I can never relax. Even shopping, visiting the doctor etc are events exposed to public scrutiny.
(Respondent to the 2010 national rural educational leaders Sidney Myer Chair research)

Data collected nationally from 683 rural, regional and remote educational leaders is very informing about what needs to be done to enhance the quality of school leadership. The full research report is available at:
http://www.flinders.edu.au/ehl/fms/education_files/coreacom/Resource_papers/Educational_Leaders_and_Leadership_in_Rural_Australia_-_Profiles,_Pressures_and_Priorities.pdf
Excerpts from the report appear later in the submission.

Australia's sustainability

The importance of rural, regional and remote communities for Australia's future will increase over the next four decades.

The fundamental driver of this is population growth, nationally and globally.

Population growth and an increasing preference for urban living will create unprecedented challenges around food security, water supply, energy sufficiency, environmental health and territorial security.

Vibrant productive country communities will be even more important than they are today because they produce and initially manage most of these basics for life.

Fundamental to having vibrant productive country communities to produce the basics for life are two things. Firstly, people to live, work and raise families in rural, regional and remote Australia. Secondly, ensuring they have ready access to high quality education and training, as well as other basic services like health.

Sustainable rural communities *matter* because without them, there will be no future. Not immediately, I admit, but certainly using a geological timeframe, in the blink of an eye. I recognise this is a big call but I believe the evidence is very clear in light of population growth and the enormity of moving to living on our planet, sustainably. The following extract from a paper I wrote in 2009, elaborates on the connection between rural education and sustainability:

> ... I see exploring new relationships between rural education and sustainability as having the potential to arrest, or at least influence, the continuing marginalisation of rural education in relation to contributing to Australia's future. I see rural education working with other essential human services like health and local government and the private sector to address the challenges of sustainability and, through this,

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reinvigorate rural education. Following her analysis of the possibility of "'ordinary' landscapes or communities within which we live, work and educate" to reinvigorate ways of shaping the future, Allison (n.d.) concludes that "sustainability immediately shifts the perception of 'ordinariness' of these…landscapes" (pp. 1 & 4) and opens the way to new possibilities.

Using Soja's (1996) terminology, the challenge—the invitation—is to explore sustainability and rural education together as *Othering*. Soja (1996) argues that the heart of *Othering* is discontent with the constraints of binary thinking and an openness to move beyond and outside conventional ways of thinking. From this, "new spaces of opportunity and action are created, the new spaces that difference makes" which may result in insights about phenomena, from the very personal to the global—like sustainability—that might otherwise remain blurred, hidden, suppressed or oppressed (Soja, 1996, p. 98).

Leadership

Historically in Australia, appointment to a country school as a principal (and also a teacher) was predominantly the route to eventually gaining a city appointment. Put another way, at a country school you learnt how to be a principal and at a city school you refined and further developed your expertise.

With some exceptions, the pattern continues today. Working to change it, or at least reduce it, is a critical part of the way forward. Corporate, city-centric models of leadership are not sufficient to create, drive, energise and harness the potential of *rural* in shaping and building Australia now and into the future.

A productive way forward would be to invest in a 'strengths based' approach to leadership; that is, one which nurtures a deep understanding and appreciation of rural, regional and remote contexts, is entrepreneurial and generative, and develops the knowledge and skills for effective, efficient and pro-active leadership (Rath & Conchie 2008; Whitney, Trosten-Bloom & Rader, 2010).

In country communities, schools are often the largest organisation in a town or area, frequently touch the lives of everyone, and contribute significantly to the local economy. They are usually a major employer in the area. Schools in rural communities are strategic assets for transitioning to new, composite human services access sites for rural communities.

However, moving towards new, more comprehensive and flexible approaches to human service delivery requires leaders who can transform rural, regional and remote schools from being exclusively places for schooling to places for education and all round community capacity building. To achieve this requires leaders who have the knowledge and skills to build and effectively use partnerships between local governments, enterprises and other essential human services providers with communities.

Research findings

As reported above, in 2010 the Sidney Myer Chair of Rural Education and Communities at Flinders University collected data from 683 rural, regional and remote school leaders from all of the schooling sectors across Australia.

The purpose of the research was to identify the key issues and needs of this cohort of the profession within the context of the broader challenge of developing and sustaining vibrant rural communities.

Key findings of the research are:

1. The working and living environments of a rural, regional or remote principal have contextual complexities beyond those typically experienced by urban based educational leaders. They include:
    a. higher need for relational and strategic leadership skills within a community setting
    b. negotiating and managing local and historical complexities that inform community behaviors and expectations
    c. personal identity, personal visibility ('space') and professional isolation
    d. community expectations of the role- expected to be more than an educator of children

2. Current and aspiring principals acknowledge the critical need for skills and knowledge development as instructional and community leaders within their rural and remote settings

3. 46% of respondents said they received no preparation before being appointed a school leader

4. 29% said they had only attended a short course(s) prior to appointment

5. 89% of leaders surveyed said becoming an educational leader in a rural community needs to be a more attractive career pathway

6. The most demanding aspects of being a leader of a rural, regional or remote school are:
    - 63%- accessing services for students with disabilities
    - 61%- securing adequate funding to address inequities
    - 54%- ensuring ICT is suitable for effective learning
    - 53%- managing underperforming staff
    - 49%- balancing local community expectations with regional, state and national priorities
    - 48%- having to spend time explaining/justifying resource needs due to location
    - 47%- professional development
    - 47%- providing appropriate curriculum diversity for students and parents
    - 43%- maintaining the enrolment viability of the school
    - 42%- ensuring that buildings meet required standards for teaching and learning
    - 42%- attracting appropriately trained staff.

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7. Appropriate professional recognition – acknowledgement by employing authorities of rural, regional and remote leadership as unique and valuable role.

The job size and demands of being a rural/regional/remote educational leader was commented on quite extensively, sometimes in a colourful and unambiguous way- "bloody hard work all the time". A rather pessimistic warning came through from some such as "it is just too demanding for a genuine sustainable tenure…we are generally valued too little compared to our metropolitan colleagues- if anything… it should be reversed" and "most teachers, corporate staff, parents and principals of larger schools don't get [what it is like to be the leader of a small school]". A principal and rural educator of 38 years experience wrote of changes experienced in recent years:

> I have lost faith in the moral and ethical dimensions of my system and have come to resent the politicisation and shallow, hollow spin that forms so much of education today… there are few folk in the hierarchy who can be trusted beyond the narrow focus of their contracted performance indicators… having to be the apologist for the latest systemic back-flip, funding cut or service reorientation from yet another 'restructure' is one of the hardest things that I find to personally cope with… the focus is now on the organisation and not on the work of the organisation.

Isolation from others- colleagues, family, friends and regional support- pervaded numerous comments. Isolation or at least separation by significant distances is a defining feature of being a rural/regional/remote educational leader, particularly in smaller community settings. Improvements in ICT, while very important and enabling are not a substitute for human contact and face-to-face interaction.

Apparent employer indifference or lack of responsiveness to the particular demands and requirements of rural/regional/remote education and the leadership of it was commented on by respondents. A pervasive feeling of disconnectedness from 'the main game' is one way of capturing aspects of many comments as evidenced by frequent references to being unable to readily attend professional development sessions for example. A sense that systems are driven by a one size fits all approach to policy and practice and that 'my small school's issues do not register' is another variation on theme. Yet another is the apparent undervaluing or recognition by central offices of the complexities and tensions that leaders have to manage in small settings where 'everyone knows everyone' and there is little or no real private life space.

While respondents reported on the rewards of being deeply immersed in the life of communities, they also want to see this aspect of the role given far more support and recognition than appears to be the case at present. Several respondents suggested that the level of expectation that rural/regional/remote educational leaders experience emanating from their reading of a community is a major factor in leaders leaving positions early. The statistical data about location preferences confirms this- 61% of leaders of remote schools, 23% of leaders of regional schools and 20 % of leaders of rural schools said they were most interested in working somewhere else.

Leadership qualifications for rural, regional and remote schools

Flinders University has designed, in partnership with Principals Australia, an articulated set of post graduate educational leadership programs and awards to significantly improve the preparation and support of rural, regional and remote leaders and aspiring leaders.

The aims of the programs are to:

- increase the educational/learning outcomes of students in rural, regional and remote communities through better prepared, qualified and supported educational leaders
- build the capacity and capability of educational leaders to contribute to the development of vibrant and sustainable rural communities
- attract and retain high caliber educational leaders in rural, regional and remote communities

Three levels of awards are available – graduate certificate, masters awards and doctoral qualifications- as well as short duration courses (1 to 2 days). Each is 'complete' in itself and can be used to build towards a further qualification.

The design of each level of award has been informed by AITSL's Standard for Professional Learning Programs and the National Standard for Australian Principals.

As well, the Flinders/ Principals Australia initiative has flexibility and capacity to become the mooted AITSL national flagship 'rural and remote' program for school leaders.

Four key principles inform the design and delivery of the programs and awards:

1. The *ongoing professional learning* of leaders
2. Leadership formation as a *critical and humanistic* endeavour
3. The *relational* and *contextual* nature of leadership
4. *Strengths-based* and *sustainable* approaches to leadership

Research shows that location, distance and isolation, community contexts, small populations and meeting diverse learning needs with limited resources, are all challenges for rural educational leaders which require purpose designed learning and training to meet them (Halsey et al, 2011; Wildy & Clarke, 2005; Tonts, 2005; Anderson et al, 2010; Starr and White, 2008).

Each of the topics have been designed so they connect with and address a diversity of contextual issues and challenges as well as the diversity of backgrounds and experiences students bring to their learning. In this way, as well as scope to develop new topics based upon the needs and interests of students, research, national priorities and international best practice, the awards represent a major improvement in the preparation and support of rural, regional and remote educational leaders.

The National Rural Leadership Program awards draw upon existing topics and staff expertise from the School of Education. Existing topics offered within the Graduate Certificate of Education (Leadership and Management) and the Master of Education (Leadership and Management) include the following:

- strategic thinking and planning
- leadership and management in rural communities
- leaders and leadership
- organisational change
- managing human resources
- knowledge management
- planning change in organisations

- developing people and organisations
- managing innovation
- financial management
- project management
- special interest topic
- coursework preparation
- coursework project

The Master of Education (Leadership & Management) award culminates with a Coursework Project (CWP). The Coursework Projects is a way of contextualising an in-depth supervised inquiry by students that draws together key ideas from their previous learning.

In addition up to 50% of the content of the studies for the Flinders specialist rural, regional and remote educational leadership award(s) may be delivered by academics and by institutions outside of the School of Education, subject to the academic recognition requirements of Flinders University being met.

Topics are delivered using a diversity of delivery modes that are client friendly and responsive, and variously involve hard copies of topic materials and study guides, online Moodle learning software, ICT technologies such as SKYPE and *e*portfolios, and intensive delivery. They will complement the rollout of the National Broadband Network (NBN) which will contribute to revitalising rural communities.

Topic delivery will also be supported by *palnet* (www.palnet.edu.au) which is currently under development by Principals Australia. *Palnet* is an online professional portal for practicing and aspiring principals for professional development, networking and support for leadership in schools via moderated groups, professional portfolio tools, online webinars and online collaboration and sharing of best practice.

Summary

High quality educational leaders make a difference to learning outcomes, staff performance and satisfaction, community capacity building, systems policy and operations, and more.

If the big project of the 20th century was building the modern world, the big project of the 21st century is sustaining the modern world. This framing has great potential to re-invigorate the place and importance of rural education and rural educational leaders in terms of our nation's future and, most critically, for communities and individual students.

Being an educational leader in a country location is invariably an experience of being known of and about by more people than are known to the leader. There are many message carriers and mediators about their behaviour. In other words, educational leaders are subject to frequent surveillance and, conversely, there is little anonymity afforded them. This complex situation means leaders have to have ways and means of maintaining, and, if necessary, renewing their capacities to optimise their effectiveness in the light of perceptions of them formed in contexts other than teaching and schooling such as playing sport or socialising with friends.

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Flinders University and Principals Australia have developed high quality programs to enhance significantly the preparation and support of rural, regional and remote educational leaders. The programs have been designed using national and international research linked with best practice advice from the profession. Making the program available to current and aspiring educational leaders through national and/or state funding would represent a major step forward in ensuring that Australia's country school leaders are optimally prepared for their roles.

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