Rural and regional preservice teacher education. Effective *and* cost effective? Is this possible? An exploration of the multimodal delivery of a secondary preservice teacher education program: perceptions of school personnel; preservice teachers and University personnel

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Introduction to the study

The recent Bradley Review of Higher Education noted that appropriate provision for regional and remote needs in higher education was one of the most difficult policy issues it had to tackle (DEEWR, 2008). Research into the effectiveness of the Graduate Diploma in Education (Secondary) Rural and Regional model (GDEDRR), based at Australian Catholic University's (ACU) Ballarat campus, provides data on a program designed to provide effective preservice teacher education to students based in dispersed geographical locations. Moving away from an on-campus model of teacher education, the GDEDRR course is based around placement in rural and regional schools combined with intensive on-campus instruction and online learning. The model is one which has potential to address both the financial needs of rural and regional preservice teachers, who find it difficult to relocate to study, and the problem of teacher shortages in rural and regional schools. It is also valuable to the university as a way of expanding its potential enrolees. The research tackles the question of the effectiveness of this approach through undertaking a qualitative study of the experience of the course from the perspectives of the various participants. The project: *An exploration of the multimodal delivery of a secondary preservice teacher education program: perceptions of preservice teachers and school and university personnel* explores the views of those involved in the first year of the course's operation in 2008.

Research context

Relevant Australian research into what makes for an effective preservice teacher education program has often been instigated by government bodies and has come in the form of reports designed to guide policy (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training, 2007; Parliament of Victoria, Education and Training Committee, 2005; Ramsey, 2000). The reports have sought the views of various stakeholders involved in teacher education: preservice teachers; teachers and principals and university-based staff as to the effectiveness of programs. Despite their varying political contexts, these reports have tended to emerge with similar findings. First and foremost the primacy of the school-based aspects of the course has been emphasised. For preservice teachers and school-based personnel it is maximum time in schools that is important with the reports

recommending increased school-based time as an imperative in an improved preservice teacher education system. Moreover, existing teacher education programs have been criticised for being overly theoretical and not taking sufficient account of school realities (House of Representatives, 2007; Parliament of Victoria, 2005). While not questioning the significance of the university-based academic components of the programs the reports have suggested that some preservice teachers are not assisted to see the links between the theoretical and practical aspects of their courses (House of Representatives, 2007; Parliament of Victoria, 2005). Hence the notion of 'partnership' between universities and schools to produce high quality teacher education programs has been significant in the recommendations of the various reports (House of Representatives, 2007; Parliament of Victoria, 2005; Victorian Council of Deans of Education, 2009).

In an era where programs like *Teach for America* question the need for preservice teacher education (Darling-Hammond, 2006) it is important to examine the research base for teacher education recommendations. International discussion about effective preservice teacher education has also been focussed on how programs can develop an optimal relationship between the theoretical and practical knowledge that a preservice teacher needs. International studies, like the Australian government reports, have tended to stress the school-based aspects of teacher education and this has led to some commentators arguing of the danger of teacher education being seen as an entirely practical business (Young, 2006; Hargreaves, 2006).

In the United States the Professional Development School model where universities and schools create cooperative programs based in schools so that the theory/practice separation is lessened for preservice teachers has been examined (Darling-Hammond, 2005). However, in 2005 contributors to the report commissioned by American Education Research Association Panel (Cochran-Smith & Fries, 2005) claimed that teacher education research, including research into the effectiveness of various models of teacher education, is in its infancy. In this same collection Clift and Brady (2005) suggested there is a need for investigations of teacher education which move beyond the current focus on the perceptions of the university instructors to those of other participants (preservice teachers, teachers and school students). They also pointed to a paucity of studies which go beyond participants' perceptions to 'objective' measures of effectiveness such the teaching performance of preservice teachers under various arrangements.

In Australia, as detailed, there have been multiple commissioned reports but Nuttall, Murray, Seddon & Mitchell (2006) have argued that the broader research into teacher education has not been not sufficiently useful. They suggested that much of the research is under-theorised and "small-scale, using 'captive samples' within single courses or institutions available to the researcher(s)" (p.324). They also noted that there is little by way of comparison between programs in different institutions. In making these critiques, the authors acknowledged the "tightrope" (p.331) which university faculties of education face in wanting to continue to research their own practice yet needing to fit into a research culture where this approach is not sufficiently recognised. Among other suggestions, Nuttall et al. argued for more tightly conceptualised studies which are methodologically designed to build on other studies.

They suggest that the area of the practicum is one in which there is potential to develop a broader perspective through comparison of programs and approaches.

The research described in this study is one which offers the possibility of replication in other settings in that it investigates the perceptions of three significant participants in the teacher education enterprise and does so with a focus on the often seriously neglected context of rural and regional teacher education (Green & Reid, 2004). Green & Reid suggest that it is important that teacher education, and by implication, teacher education research, frees itself from a metro-centric perspective. Without a focus on rural and regional needs, the well documented educational disadvantages, including shortages of qualified teachers (Alston & Kent, 2006), experienced by rural and regional students will not be addressed. *Top of the class* (House of Representatives, 2007) noted that rural and regional teacher education has been negatively affected by funding limitations which mean that the crucial communication between university lecturers and school-based supervisors has been undermined. Frequently sessional staff with little involvement in the course overall are used to supervise rural and regional preservice teachers. Rural and regional teachers share the more general teacher perception that their work with preservice teaches is insufficiently valued and acknowledged (House of Representatives, 2007). The current study was designed to investigate these issues.

University Context

The course which is the focus of this inquiry was designed with the specific needs of rural and regional preservice teaches and schools. The mixed mode delivery of a preservice program where students are able to remain in their community while studying is a response to issues faced by prospective teachers in many rural or regional areas who find themselves faced with "two often undesirable options": relocating to an urban centre or studying by distance education (Education and Training Committee, 2005, p. 26). The Graduate Diploma in Education Rural and Regional (GDEDRR) course brings preservice teachers from various rural and regional areas to Ballarat twice a year for a one week intensive program but for the remainder of each semester they are engaged in activities in their local school under the direction of a teacher mentor and connected to their lecturers through online study. The preservice teachers were in schools in six different centres: Ballarat, Warrnambool, Shepparton, Mildura, Ararat and Geelong.

The course differs from the traditional on-campus approach in that the on campus delivery of content has been largely replaced with school based activities linked to online units of study. In this design preservice teachers' development of professional attributes is encouraged though mentoring by experienced teachers in the school setting and though the instruction by their lecturers, largely mediated through online communication on the Blackboard platform (Australian Catholic University, 2009). The integration of online communication with face to face approaches is pervasive in contemporary higher education. Debate about its appropriate use is on-going (Bangert, 2004; Greener, 2008; Otero et al., 2005). A recent Carrick project has seen 'blended learning': online communication being combined with other experiences as the future for students studying 'at a distance' (Willis & Reid, 2006); the present investigation contributes to considerations about how this can effectively occur.

Methodology

In focusing on understanding the perceptions of the various groups of participants in the rural and regional course the research has taken a social constructivist point of view. Within this framework the social world is created by individuals and groups as they interact with institutions and experience the world (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998) so that peoples' perceptions are critical. Such investigations offer data which is useful for social policy (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). Phenomenology (Creswell, 2007) offered a useful approach to looking at an aspect of social life such as a course or a job in that it sees experience as being given meaning through individual consciousness of it. Through exploring the perceptions of individuals a picture of a phenomenon is built.

In line with the phenomenological approach the investigation was based on interviews with participants conducted by the investigators. The interviews were semi-structured with participants being provided with an outline of questions before the interviews and encouraged to bring up other matters of concern to them. The questions were centred around participants' experiences of the various aspects of the course and whether they combine to create the outcomes which they want from the course. The study was qualitative: a number of participants were asked to explore in some detail their experience with researchers (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) and these experiences were analysed for recurring themes.

To develop the validity of the data analysis two researchers were assigned to the material relating to one of the three categories of participants (preservice teachers, teachers-both mentors and Student Teacher Coordinators (STCs), and lecturers). The pair of researchers conducted an independent analysis of the data before working with their partner to discuss allocated categories and themes. Following the project's concern with the perceptions of the three groups of participants, findings from each group are reported separately followed by an analysis of what the groups share.

Findings

Lecturers

Six lecturers were participants in the study. The following Table 1 gives details of the units they taught:

Table 1: Lecturers and Units Taught

Lecturer	Unit
ME	Education Studies
JE	English Method
MS	Science Method
PH	Humanities Method
LC	Preparation to teach in Catholic Schools
MC	Religious Education Method

The lecturer participants discussed the three components of the course. Analysis of the transcripts of these discussions revealed key themes.

The intensive component

The university lecturers felt that the intensives were well planned and organized, providing a good opportunity for both staff and students to get to know each other. They also provided a very good context for in-depth learning and also to identify resources (people, facilities, study skill options etc.), University expectations and unit requirements. However, they were not long enough for a number of lecturers.

> *The students are also able to put a face to the lecturer and fellow students with whom they will be interacting during the semester. …Possibly more time could be devoted to the intensive --- maybe two rather than one week* (PH)*.*

Staff also said that the mid-year intake of students exposed a weakness in the course design in that these preservice teachers became engaged in a teaching practicum without having undertaken either the academic or practical experiences designed to prepare them for this practicum. These students generally would have had little or no experience of lesson planning, adolescent development and learning. There needed to be separate classes devoted lesson planning for this group.

 The School-based component

Staff saw the school based experience as potentially providing an excellent context for gaining confidence in their learning and making links between theory and practice, and to link academic assessment to activities undertaken in schools. Students had access to a range of different classes, teaching and learning styles and strategies, curriculum approaches and discipline strategies. These experiences have the potential to be woven into the units and developed further.

> *I think it helps students bridge the gap between theory and practice – particularly if we build a lot of read, look, reflect, discuss into the online components to ensure strong links between theory and practice are established* (MS).

It also provided an excellent opportunity for students to become closely involved with the whole school community - staff, parents, students and the wider community.

However there was a belief among some lecturers that a stronger more effective system for keeping in touch with preservice needed to be developed. They tended to 'disappear' and lecturers had little idea of progress being made. There were questions about whether preservice teachers and mentors understood the purposes of the school-based component "*Some students seemed to see being in the school as just a context to finish their assignments- did not see they could assist teachers* (JE)." And lecturers found it difficult to communicate unit content to preservice teachers.

I did find it challenging at times when I wanted to demonstrate or model a particular approach and I had to rely on students' ability to interpret readings/PowerPoints and identify it for themselves in schools (MS).

The Online component

The use of Blackboard required considerable work to learn effectively for both staff and students. Lecturers said it should not be assumed that all students have well developed computer skills. Some did not have computers at home or were not clear about where to find help if required.

I think the variety in students' competency in using Blackboard is challenging. Even though they have a training session, it doesn't appear to provide great support. Their internet connections and browser settings and supporting software (Java, etc) also appear to be a challenge (MS).

Some staff felt that the time taken to administering the units posed health problems such as eye strain and limb stiffness. Staff initially took time to learn to work effectively with Blackboard, but this has become easier with time. Staff acknowledged the helpfulness of the IT support staff. [Blackboard] is "*reasonably user friendly when you get used to it. The IT people were good and encouraged me to try new things* (JE)"

Preserve Teachers

Six Preservice teachers were interviewed for the study. Of these most completed a full year in the one school, while one attended two different schools. There were 6 Catholic schools and 1 Department of Education government school involved and as noted above these placements were spread across Victoria. Like their lecturers they discussed the three components of the course.

The intensive component

The participants emphasised the importance for them of face to face contact with lecturers and other students. In fact for them the face to face contact during the intensive components helped them to engage in the online component. This insight from one of the preservice participants was indicative of the predominant view held: "*I feel I would have struggled had I not had a personal introduction to the lecturers and other students I have been communicating with for the year* (NOR)".

All agreed that the intensive sessions provided a valuable opportunity to clarify unit issues and assessment demands through critical discussion with the lecturer and other students. "*It was also good to be able to go through assessments and the booklets for each unit I was undertaking so I had a better understanding of what was required of me when at home*" (NOR). "*I was able to ask questions and clarify what was being asked by the tasks and through the unit outline*" (MAT). Further to this they appreciated the information sessions related to professional requirements such as teacher registration and accountability. "*The intensive definitely helped me with job interviews and writing a CV. I referred to the hand-outs given a*

number of times when writing up my own CV at home" (NOR). This satisfaction expressed with the intensive was tempered by a feeling that they were overwhelmed with too much information in a limited time. "*There was so much information in a short space of time. We often ran out of time and didn't cover important information well enough in my opinion (COC)*". The main suggestion for improvement was to offer an additional single day intensive during the semester.

The school-based component

For the preservice teachers being assigned to a specific school provided essential insights into a range of teacher roles which challenged the preservice teachers to think about their own professional responsibilities both within the classroom and beyond. "*Being involved in the curriculum and being treated as a junior member of staff was great; everyone was very welcoming and accommodating. I participated in staff meetings, staff social events, marking of students' work, observing report writing, yard duty, excursions* (IOP)"

It was a commonly held perception that classroom experience was dominated by an over-emphasis on classroom observation. This was frustrating especially as they gained more experience and wanted an active classroom role. "*It is not very hands on, and after the teaching rounds it is like a backwards step (CHE)*". They attributed this to classroom teachers not really knowing how to work with them as associate teachers and engage them more in team teaching type experiences. "*Some days where I only had to take one class I felt I was sitting around not doing much- tried to observe as many classes as possible but at times felt a little in the way.* (NOR)" A potentially valuable recommendation made by the preservice participants was that a 'charter' for teacher mentors be developed.

The online component

The data revealed a limited level of ICT competencies amongst the preservice participants themselves as well as amongst some of the lecturing staff. "*At the start of the course I found Blackboard hard to use because I had no previous experience and also there were some technical problems which made it even harder to grasp. I don't find it a problem any more* (TON)"

The preservice participants recommended more ICT training than had been provided.

> *Lots of problems using Blackboard. Some difficulties accessing Blackboard. Sometimes information that should have been on Blackboard was not there. However I must admit I am not very good on computers. Perhaps some intensive training on how to use Blackboard would be beneficial during the orientation stage.*

Despite these issues preservice teachers appreciated the opportunities for online discussion and interaction with peers about their professional learning. "*It has been really beneficial to talk with other students via Blackboard – sharing experiences from the teaching experience is a great way to assess your own experience, and consider alternatives for coming teaching*

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experiences. (IOP)" But they were also critical of the educational value of some of the online activities associated with units, suggesting there were too many and sometimes unrelated to their professional growth as teachers. "*Not so many assignments, tasks and online chats overlapping one another. With four subjects in semester 1 and five in semester 2, I struggled at times to stay on top of it all as well as preparing for classes and doing English corrections for most of the year* (NOR)".

Teachers

Face to face interviews were conducted with 12 teachers. These teachers came from the seven regional Victorian schools where preservice teachers completed their two days per week in-schools placement and/or their block teaching round. The role each teacher had in the preservice teachers' placement was either that of mentor teacher or student teacher coordinator (STC). In some cases the teacher mentor was also the STC. The following table represents the schools and teachers involved and their roles. The teachers' insights into the course model have been grouped together under themes. (This cohort of research participants only experienced the school-based aspect of the course.)

Table 2: Schools and Teachers Involved

SCHOOL NAME	TEACHERS INTERVIEWED	TEACHER'S ROLE
Burke College	PB	STC
	SB	Mentor
St Wills College	DH	STC and Mentor
St Hume College	MS	STC and Mentor
St Mitchell College	PR	STC and Mentor
	BH	Mentor
	GB	Mentor
St Sturt College	BL	Mentor
	PG	Mentor
	ET	STC
St Forrest College	KS	STC
St Flinders College	NL	STC

Insight into the profession

A number of benefits of the model under consideration in this paper were acknowledged, the most prevalent being the insight into the profession the structure of the model provided. "*You learn the rhythm of the school, the stresses of the school and to see that real stuff, changing plans to whatever is happening on that day, the cycles, interviews, reporting.*"(BL)

> *I think what it does is allows her to see all the different responsibilities that a Teacher has and allows her to see a snippet of the college in a limited way but kind of how things happen in schools, this time of year when there is all kinds of loads being discussed. It must then allow her to weigh up whether this is where I want to be (KS).*

The benefit of the school placement across the year was also noted: "*Depending on when you do your round depends what you see. If you are there 1 day a week you're seeing a cycle*"(KS).

Preparing for Block Round

The model was seen to help prepare preservice teachers for the block teaching round:

> *This model makes sense in respect to their teaching block. Your model is far superior and what you would expect student teachers to be doing. That to me works better than [that of] other universities where they come out for three weeks and that's their teaching round. Having this model I think that it's a proactive way of trying to address some of the issues that I have seen and observed (ET).*

Further specific benefits to be derived from the model noted by the STCs included opportunities for pre service teachers:

- To become established in the schools; (KS)
- To learn the students' and staff members' names; (KS and BL)
- To become familiar with administrative procedures in the school; (PB)
- To become comfortable with the school environment; (MS)
- To practise basic classroom routines and use of equipment; (MS) and
- To become aware of possible behaviour problems among the students (BL).

Extreme praise for the model was expressed by one of the STCs who described it as "*near as perfect a teacher training model as possible*" (BH).

Concerns

In addition to these benefits a number of areas of concern were raised. These included concern with the experience limited to one school so that the preservice teacher's exposure to school life was constrained.

> *Initially she was doing a lot of aid style work and joining in different groups and activities and that style of thing. Then after doing a teaching round here it was very difficult to keep her within the role that she should have been in which was teaching.*

> *We found it difficult because the teachers themselves needed to get back into their classes, get back on top of the kids and do assessments etc and everyday things (DH).*

Concerns with school arrangement:

> *I actually don't like the day here and there, I prefer the blocks, I don't think 1 or 2 days is consistent enough to get to know the students and get to know the unit of work and understand the work. … The 1 or 2 days a week doesn't give the full understanding of a school. For the student I think they take the student teacher more seriously when they are there day in and day out (MS).*

And there was one issue associated with placement in a small rural community:

> *C has different roles in the community as a small business owner (who employs students at the school) then as the teacher professional in the school. The roles need to be maintained separately and there is a risk that they can interfere with one another as was the case with C and small town gossip can then be a problem.* (DH)

Impact on Teacher

STCs discussed the impact of the model on their role in different ways. Most agreed that there was potential for significant impact with comments such as:

> *It's a massive imposition sometimes particularly in a school like this because we have 50 student teachers in the year that come through but then if the student teachers are good and proactive and come with the right attitude we would take 100. You get 1 bad one and it taints it for everyone else.* (ET)

But it also helped bring energy into the school and enabled STCs to reflect on their role. "*I've had to keep it in mind of what she's up to and where she's at. It certainly means that in some ways I'm more accountable.*"(DH)

> *I find it energising. I love having them. They have new ideas and are enthusiastic and not weighted down with responsibility. It re-energises you as a teacher and you get to know your kids in a different way and gets you to reflect as you observe and make comment of another* (MS).

Communication and support

In discussing links with the university, teachers identified strengths and weaknesses. One STC commented on the clarity of the information provided:

> *Your contact and explanations to me gave me a very clear idea of what the program is about. I think the University has obviously put some expectations on you to make sure that schools understand what the program is all about and I think they have done a good job at doing that. I don't have any problem with how your communication has been conducted* (PB).

And another was pleased with the university's support in responding to an issue that had arisen saying 'It was good how quickly the university responded to the situation with COC' (DH). Others felt there had been too little communication. One said "*I needed to know what was going on – not receiving the material or the expectations of the days in schools*" (GD). Another complained that "*At the beginning I had no idea, she turned up on the doorstep and I had no idea, whether that* [documentation] *had gone to the Principal, which they often do and not get to the next step* (KS). One teacher commented on the issue of preservice teachers overusing the school for assignment completion. "*Last minute planning and showing up re the assignments. They were very focussed on these.*" (NL) But this was unique to the one school.

There were some concerns from two schools about the lack of monetary support for teachers involved. "*What I found really difficult was the arrival at 8.30 and having to allocate them because it was unpaid for teacher – not overburdening same teachers each week. We might wear out welcome with teachers when it's not paid.*" (NL)

Recommendations

Teachers made a number of recommendations which featured ideas for improving communication, in-school placement and the breadth of experience for preservice teachers. Teachers encouraged more regular phone contact and visits to the school with comments like. "*Maybe a bit more contact between the Schools and the University, whether it's a meeting once a term or something like that just so we make sure everyone is clear on where we are it.*" (DH) They also recommended clearer outlines of what was expected in the two day per week placement in a form that was easily accessible and readable "*something simple like a 1 page checklist would help*" (MS).

To enhance the in-schools placement it was recommended that:

- Preservice teachers are sent in pairs (BL)
- The placement was treated as two separate placements; one for each semester (MS)
- Increased observation of their teaching was instigated (GD)

All teachers indicated that they would be involved in something like this again.

Conclusions

Examination of the data from the three groups reveals common issues. It is clear that both lecturers and preservice teachers were sure that the intensive component is an important part of the course. While contemporary students may value the flexibility that online learning brings (Greener, 2008) they also appreciate opportunities to meet face to face with their lecturers and fellow students; and their lecturers agree. However, again perhaps going against assumptions about contemporary students, a number of the preservice teachers needed ICT support to work effectively in an online environment. Lecturers also saw themselves (and sometimes were seen by their students) as needing to improve their work in an online teaching environment. While studies of rural and regional education may see online learning as a

significant way of managing the challenges of learning 'at a distance' (Willis & Reid, 2006), the research on the GDEDRR showed that the 'solution' is not always a simple one for participants.

As has been argued in many reports on teacher education in Australia (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training, 2007; Parliament of Victoria, Education and Training Committee, 2005; Ramsey, 2000), the school-based component of the course was seen by research participants as pivotal to preservice teachers' professional learning. But as these reports also argue, it is not enough to just send the preservice teachers to the school and expect them to learn. All three research cohorts raised problems which occurred when the purposes and arrangements of the school-based component were not sufficiently clear or were inadequately monitored. The research found that the achievement of an effective 'partnership' in preservice teacher education is not easy.

The GDEDRR course is increasingly cost effective for the University in that enrolments have increased since the year of the research study. It seems therefore that preservice teachers are seeing it as a course which is meeting their needs in terms of accessibility. As has been argued, however, participants suggest the need for improvement particularly in the way the online and school-based components work, if it is to be more effective as an educational experience.

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