RURAL RECRUITMENT & RETENTION PILOT PROJECT 2012-13
Introduction

Local governments and other organisations and businesses in rural areas face particular challenges in recruiting and retaining staff. The rural skills shortage poses a constraint to the growth of rural communities and their long-term sustainability.

The aim of the Rural Recruitment and Retention pilot project was to trial an innovative approach to providing enriched work placement experiences for university students so that they are more likely to consider rural employment as a career option.

Contemporary research suggests that a partnership approach between rural industries/employers and higher education institutions can have positive impacts on university students who are considering a career within a rural community. The impacts are further enhanced when the partnerships are formalised and a whole-of-community social approach is integrated into the practical work experience.

Borrowing from successful models in the health and education sectors that seek to integrate professional placement outcomes with immersion in the local community, this project emphasised a whole-of-community approach that actively involved the local council, higher education institutions, local employers and the broader community in the students' experiences.

The Northern Grampians Shire Council and the Wimmera Development Association worked with the Country Education Project to pilot a whole-of-community approach to encourage university graduates to live and work in a rural community. The project tested two approaches to immersing university students into rural communities: a partnership model (Northern Grampians) and an internship model (Wimmera). The pilot projects were evaluated through pre-program and post-program surveys with the students, and interviews with project partners.

Common challenges rural organisations face in recruiting and retaining staff include:

- a reliance on people needing to relocate to take up critical roles
- prospective candidates being unfamiliar with the regional and rural areas in which an organisation is located
- negative perceptions of rural and regional living
- lack of educational institutions supplying graduates with the required qualifications.

For many potential candidates, accepting a new job in a rural area means moving to a new location and swapping city life for life in the country. To generate interest, employers need to sell the location and the associated lifestyle as much as they need to sell the role and organisation.

Adapted from Department of Planning and Community Development (2010), Community Sector: Attracting and Retaining Staff in Rural and Regional Victoria.
THE PILOT PROJECTS
A partnership approach in the Northern Grampians Shire

This pilot was a targeted, single discipline approach that leveraged an existing partnership between Northern Grampians Shire and Monash University to design, plan and construct the ‘Stawell Steps’. This involved the development of new infrastructure which would provide a community space and improve flood prevention in Stawell’s Cato Park.

The program involved a group of 21 final-year architecture students over five weeks, to plan the Stawell Steps project in partnership with the council and local businesses. The students lived and worked together under the supervision and guidance of university staff.

Pilot outcomes

The survey results indicated positive immediate outcomes. Prior to the program, only 26% of the students had lived or worked in a rural area (the majority had grown up in metropolitan Melbourne) and 37% had a ‘good’ or ‘very good’ perception of rural communities. Just under half of the students (48%) stated that they would not consider taking up a career in a rural community.

At the end of the program all of the students had a good to very good perception of rural communities and nearly all of the students would either consider taking up a career in a rural community (53%) or were undecided (42%).

Location: Stawell
Local Leadership Group: Northern Grampians Shire (CEO and Flood Recovery Team), Monash University (Art Design & Architecture), Country Education Project, local project facilitator (a Council Flood Recovery Team staff member was released to undertake this role)
Partner university: Monash University
Academic discipline: Architecture
Students: 21 third-year students
Selection process: All students who expressed interest were selected by the university to participate.
Length of placement: 5 weeks
Accommodation: All students lived at the same accommodation site organised by the project facilitator
Online resources: Facebook page developed for students, university staff, council staff and project facilitator to connect, share ideas and experiences, and post information
Education immersion:
• University supervisor provided academic guidance, student support and management, and maintained links with university
• Professional guidance provided by Japanese architect
Local business and workplace immersion:
• Partnership between Monash University and the local Krause brick company
• Access to expertise of local tradespeople and suppliers
Community immersion:
• Pre-program site visits to Stawell, including induction session
• Welcome barbeque for students to meet project staff and community members
• Students received printed information about the local area (e.g. local events, transport options)
• Schedule of activities planned, but deemed unnecessary to implement
**Key Learnings**

- The focus of the program on a specific single project (the Stawell Steps) facilitated the development and strengthening of the partnership between the university and local council which was critical to the success of the model.
- The students felt that the Stawell Steps project was important to the community and provided a practical, ‘real’ task to put theory into practice.
- The students greatly appreciated the whole group approach of the placement.
- Having a single project focus required the students, university and council staff, and local businesses to collaborate. While this supported the students in improving their professional knowledge, skills and confidence, it may have limited the students’ broader community experiences – if they had been placed within a host business rather than a project, they may have been exposed to a greater breadth of work and social experiences and opportunities within the local community.
- Community immersion activities were planned but not implemented as the students easily and quickly made connections in the local community.
- The pre-program orientation sessions were valuable in providing students with necessary information and demonstrating to the students that the local council and the community valued the project and their involvement.
- Although hosting a large group of students presented some management challenges (for example, finding a venue with sufficient accommodation), it did make it easier for the students to support each other and for the university to provide on-site supervision and guidance.
- The use of the online platform was extremely high and the level of communication and sharing was well above expectations. It provided a valuable tool to keep the program partners updated about the Stawell Steps project, share ideas and celebrate achievements.

**Case study**

I am a city girl 100%, having lived in the suburbs all my life. When I signed up for this project I was quite fearful of where I was going. Would they have cafes? Where do young people hang out? It was quite nerve-racking!

When we arrived in Stawell we were looked after extremely well by people from the council and local businesses. Our accommodation had been organised by the Country Education Project, and the CEO of the council welcomed us. What an introduction to Stawell.

After spending five weeks on the project, living and recreating in Stawell, we began to gain a wider picture of the real career opportunities that were available within such a rural community – some of us hadn’t expected that there would be any jobs out here.

As part of our five weeks in Stawell we got to work alongside some great business people, met many of the local community and a number of local young professionals, and enjoyed the variety of recreation and social activities on offer – a great lifestyle.

One example is that we were invited to meet with local young professionals from the area at a bar and restaurant to share our stories and to hear from them what it was like living in a town like Stawell. We learned a great deal from these conversations and formed a number of friendships.

This project has been great: the opportunity to put into practice what we learned at university in a way that benefits a community, to hear of the employment opportunities in rural communities, the opportunity to work alongside great workers, and to enjoy the breadth of recreational and social activities on offer.
An internship approach in the Wimmera

This program was based on an internship ‘work placement’ model in which students were hosted by sponsor business relevant to their study discipline. Rural businesses located across small towns in the Wimmera each hosted a university student to undertake practical experience within the business and broader community. The length of the placement varied from five to eight weeks, depending on university requirements and the needs of the host business.

The approach did not require the universities to be directly involved beyond providing the opportunity for their students to participate, although it is worth noting that one university did provide a mentoring role for a student.

Pilot outcomes

The students had very positive experiences of living and working within the rural communities, and gained skills and knowledge through their work placement.

Prior to the program, 57% of the students had lived or worked in a rural area and the same proportion (57%) had a ‘good’ or ‘very good’ perception of rural communities. Just over half of the students (53%) stated that they would not consider taking up a career in a rural community.

At the end of the program all of the students had a good to very good perception of rural communities and nearly all of the students would either consider taking up a career in a rural community (71%) or were undecided (24%).

Location: Wimmera region (Horsham, West Wimmera, Yarriambiack, Northern Grampians, Hindmarsh)

Local Leadership Group: Wimmera Development Association (WDA), Latrobe University Bendigo (Faculty of Arts & Community Planning), Country Education Project, local project facilitator (a dedicated part-time position employed by WDA)

Partner universities: Deakin University, Latrobe University, University of Ballarat

Academic discipline: Accounting, town planning, surveying, engineering, environmental science, building design and architecture

Students: 20

Selection process: Shortlist and interviews with students expressing interest, and matching of students to interested employers by project facilitator

Length of placement: 5-8 weeks

Accommodation: Local accommodation organised by the project facilitator with easy access to the workplace and, where possible, in a group household situation

Online resources: Facebook page for students to connect with each other and share experiences, and for project facilitator to disseminate information about social opportunities and activities

Education immersion:
• Limited university involvement
• In some cases, university provided mentoring for students

Local business and workplace immersion:
• Employers contacted students prior to commencement of placement
• Supervisor in the workplace provided student management and guidance, though not necessarily mentoring

Community immersion:
• Students received a welcome pack containing tourism, council and WDA information
• No formal/planned activities
• Students formed social connections and participated in informal social activities with work colleagues and others
Key Learnings

• Individual businesses were approached by the project facilitator to be involved based on their preparedness and local connections. This was an extensive and time consuming process but proved beneficial to project success. The involvement of a local project facilitator with existing links into local business and industry was important in facilitating this step.

• Appropriate matching of the students to employers was critical to the success of the placements.

• The internship approach enabled students to gain a good understanding of how a business in their area of study operated within a rural community.

• Some students felt lonely at times, especially if they were the only student in their host business or local area.

• The level of use of the online platform by the students was lower than expected. This could be due to the individual placement of the students within different host businesses and communities which made it more difficult to develop a ‘group identity’ and personal connections, and to the placements not being a set requirement of the university courses.

• It was important that the employers involved recognised that the main aim of the program was to attract skilled workers to the local area, rather than to their business specifically, and supported proactive community immersion approaches to achieve this goal.

• The openness of the community to students helped to create a positive experience.

Case study

I live in Ballarat and am about to commence into my second year at the University of Ballarat. My internship was in Warracknabeal, working with a not-for-profit organisation. As part of my internship I was provided with accommodation and a minimum wage, and part of my travel was paid for.

The project facilitator organised my accommodation in a house in Warracknabeal: 3 bedrooms, bathroom, laundry, kitchen, dining and meals/lounge. It had basic furniture and the kitchen was filled with all the necessary basics. I had to provide my own TV and anything else, which was easy, as I just brought a car load down with me.

On my first day at the organisation, I was introduced to everyone and the CEO took me on a tour of the town and the facilities. After the tour, he had made a list of jobs the wanted me to do over the period I was with them.

A staff member at the workplace, who was also a member of the Rotary Club, invited me to the club’s meeting on Wednesday night. I went along and met the presidents of all the clubs, businesses and local community programs in Warracknabeal. I sat with my work colleagues and had a few beers and a steak for tea. It was nice to meet some of the locals and just talk to people about the town and nothing do with work.

My time at the organisation has been great. The staff were all so welcoming and, by the end of the second week, I felt a part of the team. I was well looked after and have formed a friendship with one of the staff and will stay in contact with her. All the staff and I went out for a goodbye dinner and drinks, it was great to get together with everyone in our personal time and I wish we had done it a bit more — it was a great night.

Warracknabeal has great facilities. I spent time at the local pool, fishing by the creek and walking around the main street, having a little look. I bought scented soaps for my family and enjoyed every minute I have been up here. The weather is great, and I am going to miss it but am planning to come back to Warracknabeal in September for the races and to catch up with everyone.
PROJECT OUTCOMES

Both pilot programs were extremely well received by the students and program partners, and provide a good basis for understanding and further developing an effective approach to address the rural skills shortage. The outcomes of this project support contemporary evidence that community immersion approaches can build broader and stronger community connections, which increases the likelihood of the students returning to work in the locality or in another rural area.

Key outcomes of the project

While it is too early to gauge the longer term impacts of the pilot program, many of the students stated that they would consider applying for a position within a rural community as a result of their experience. This included some metropolitan-based students, although students who had lived in a rural area or were studying in a regional university were still more likely to consider employment in a rural setting than their metropolitan counterparts.

Students indicated that their experiences enhanced their understanding and perception of rural employment and lifestyle. The programs provided them with opportunities to:

• understand the available career opportunities in rural areas
• experience what it is like to live and work within a rural community
• apply their theoretical knowledge to the practical needs of a workplace
• build their professional and social confidence and skills
• recognise that the job and workplace is more important than the actual location/area.

Key learnings from the project

Partnerships and programs need to be tailored to suit local conditions, resources and needs. A whole-of-community model should consider the following key elements:

• A partnership between key proponents (university, council, employers, community leaders) is critical and should clearly define the program purpose, roles and responsibilities and plan of action.
• The role of a local project facilitator is essential, especially in developing and maintaining the partnership and coordinating the implementation of the Action Plan.
• Employers and local businesses should be involved in program planning from the outset and have a clear understanding of and support for the program’s focus and outcomes.
• The students commented that the job and work environment were more important determinants of their employment choices than the actual area/location. This highlights the importance of ensuring a high quality of workplace inclusion, supports and mentoring.
• Placements should span a minimum four-week period to allow work-based learning and achievements and community involvement.
• A program of community activities and events for the students to form community connections and experience the rural lifestyle can assist the community immersion.
• It is important to provide financial assistance to students to support them to participate in the program, such as providing or subsidising accommodation and travel.
• Providing an online platform for students, employers and project partners to connect and communicate before, during and after the program can support the experience and longer-term outcomes.

Key recommendations for future approaches

• A collaborative approach that involves a number of councils, such as the approach used in the Wimmera pilot, can enable councils to pool their limited resources and achieve coordinated and improved outcomes in recruitment and retention programs.
• Research indicates that a focus on the recruitment of skilled workers, without a similar strategic approach to retaining existing workers, will produce limited outcomes. A more holistic approach that encompasses both recruitment and retention can maximise outcomes.
Further information
For more information about the Rural Recruitment and Retention Pilot Project or a copy of the full project report, contact Rural Councils Victoria at:

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