



Preservice teacher education partnerships: Creating an effective practicum model for rural and regional preservice teachers

Final Report 2012

Australian Catholic University (lead institution)

La Trobe University

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List of acronyms used

ALTC	Australian Learning and Teaching Council Ltd.
ACU	Australian Catholic University
ICT	Information Communication Technology
LMS	Learning management system
PST	Preservice teacher
PLT	Professional Learning Team
VIT	Victorian Institute of Teaching

Executive summary

The Australian Learning and Teaching Council project *Preservice Teacher Education Partnerships: Creating an effective practicum model for rural and regional preservice teachers* was a collaboration between lecturers from Australian Catholic University (ACU) Ballarat and La Trobe University Shepparton to address the challenges of establishing effective teaching approaches in the school practicum for preservice teachers (PSTs) who are placed across a wide geographical area.

Project aims and outcomes

This project aimed to address the difficulties of providing effective practicum experiences for rural and regional PSTs within the context of increasingly constrained practicum budgets. The project built on the current programs of the partner institutions which allow PSTs to reside in rural and regional locations while completing their teacher education, and focussed on enhancing the practicum aspect of their courses. This led to an overarching aim to create a sustainable, cost-effective curriculum model for teacher practicum in this context. More specifically the project aimed to:

1. Create processes and protocols, including information communication technology [ICT]-based options, which will allow universities to share supervision of PSTs in rural and regional areas;
2. Develop processes and protocols for universities to share secure ICT platforms for the purposes of enhanced rural and regional PST practicum;
3. Develop new strategies for creating positive partnerships with rural and regional teacher supervisors to support a successful 'work integrated' (ALTC, 2009) environment for the teacher practicum.

Processes undertaken to achieve these aims were:

1. A secure ICT platform shared between ACU and La Trobe which supports learning within their PST practicum;
2. Establishment of inter-university regional clusters of PSTs who engaged in cooperative learning activities and peer assessment of each other's teaching using a range of ICT and face-to-face media such as using mobile phones to make microteaching videos, podcasting and online discussion;
3. Shared ACU/La Trobe supervision processes and protocols based on regional clusters of PSTs;
4. Creation of a work integrated curriculum model for ACU and La Trobe's PST education programs through collaboration between university lecturing staff and teacher supervisors;
5. Determination of sustainable methods for supporting and recognising the work of rural and regional teacher supervisors in the practicum.

Findings

The project found that shared supervision, achieved through the formation of inter-university regional clusters of PSTs, supervised by a lecturer from the proximate campus, was a practical strategy to address the challenges of supervision over distance. Clusters were groups consisting of PSTs from both universities who interacted with each other in the online space. The project partners shared the supervision of these clusters. The partner universities found that shared supervision could only work if the collaborating universities engaged with each other's courses rather than merely entering into a cost cutting arrangement. The experience allowed the project partners to develop a set of processes and protocols to guide inter-university supervision, thereby achieving its first aim (see Chapter 1 for more detail).

To address the second project aim, the regional clusters of PSTs led by their assigned lecturer participated in an online community, undertaking interactive curriculum activities while on practicum. However, the team found that purpose of the curriculum needs to be clear at the outset to ensure it meets intended

outcomes. Providing practicum communication that is supportive and/or also offers opportunities for reflective practice are possible outcomes of a practicum curriculum. The model is outlined in Chapter 2.

In exploring the third aim of developing and implementing strategies for improved partnerships between universities and rural and regional supervising teachers, the project found that teachers were interested in new methods of communicating with universities during practicum (email, phone, Skype) if they saw them as improving their supervision, but less interested in entering the project web-based environment. Teachers, sympathetic with universities' challenges in travelling to distant schools, were open to inter-university supervision, and preferred meaningful communication about PSTs using available media to cursory face to face visits. Most rural and regional teacher supervisors saw their role as intrinsically rewarding but would appreciate formal recognition of supervision as part of their professional portfolio. They were willing to get involved in short term professional development to ensure they effectively supported PST learning but were wary of major or compulsory professional development activities.

Deliverables

The planned deliverables of the project and a description of what the project achieved are outlined below.

1. A website for public information about the project and secure access for PSTs, lecturers and teacher supervisors from ACU and La Trobe to support learning within the practicum, together with sample materials and a discussion group on the Exchange (no longer available): The website *Rural and Regional Practicum Partnerships* (see <http://www.rpp.edu.au>) for public information about the project shows details of the secure practicum website in which participants interacted during the project and contains practicum curriculum. The project website was ultimately kept separate from the secure platform that was created for PSTs, lecturers and teacher supervisors to use during practicum. This curriculum-based website is discussed further in Chapter 2.
2. Guidelines for inter-university supervision of rural and regional PSTs in their practicum: outlined in Chapter 1.
3. Guidelines for approaching inter-university practicum curriculum: outlined in Chapter 2.
4. Recommendations for improved partnerships between universities and teacher supervisors of rural and regional PSTs: outlined in Chapter 3.
5. Conference papers, e.g. at conferences of Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE) and Higher Education Research and Development Association of Australia (HERDSA), and journal articles in Australian journals (e.g. *The Australian Journal of Education* and *The Australian Educational Researcher*), and international journals (e.g. *Teachers and Teacher Education*, *Asia Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*). These are outlined in the project website <http://www.rpp.edu.au>.

Evaluation

The project was evaluated using a mixed method design. Inter-university supervision, the shared practicum website and the various approaches to supervision were evaluated by participants using survey, interview and focus group methods and the data analysed using inductive methods (Bernard & Ryan, 2010). Lecturer and PSTs' activities on the practicum discussion board were analysed in terms of the extent to which critical reflective practice (Kreber & Cranton, 2000) was being supported through the site. Interviews with rural and regional teacher supervisors were the basis for analysis of their perceptions of how universities can develop stronger partnerships with them.

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Introduction to the project

The project was planned to enhance the practicum experiences of PSTs enrolled at ACU Ballarat and La Trobe Shepparton and to focus on rural and regional placements. Shared supervision between universities, and creating a practicum curriculum were central strategies for enhancing rural and regional practicum experiences, as was exploring strategies to enhance communication with teacher supervisors. The project team believed that improved communication between stakeholders would have an overall enhancing effect on the PST experience during the practicum period. Consequently, the experience of PSTs, teacher supervisors and university staff were all considered as a part of the project.

The project was conducted over a two year period, commencing in Semester 2 of 2010 with a pilot. This pilot informed the following semester 1 and semester 2 iterations that saw an expansion in both the number of participants and the number of strategies trialled to inform inter-university supervision, inter-university practicum curriculum, and recommendations for improved partnerships between universities and rural and regional schools. The nature and extent of the project activities over the two year period are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1 Summary of Project Activities

Stage	Activity	Evaluation
Pilot Semester 2, 2010	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regional clusters of PSTs (4 La Trobe and 4 ACU); • Inter-university supervision based on clusters; • School visits and online discussion on shared website (ACU Black Board) during practicum period; • Consultation with rural and regional teacher supervisors regarding ways to support their supervision roles. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supervisor interviews (11) • PST interviews (7) • Lecturer reports (4) • Analysis of PST online discussion forums.
Semester 1, 2011	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regional clusters of PSTs (52 La Trobe and 26 ACU); • Online discussion on shared website (La Trobe Web CT) during practicum period. • Trialling of Skype and phone contact with teacher supervisors and PSTs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lecturer reports (4) • Analysis of PST online discussion forums.
Main study Semester 2, 2011	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regional clusters of PSTs (52 La Trobe and 26 ACU); • Inter-university supervision based on clusters; • Online discussion on shared website (La Trobe PebblePad) during practicum period; • Various supervision methods (email; Skype; phone; visits); • Implementation of practicum website for teacher supervisor documentation and professional development on mentoring. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher supervisor interviews (14) • Teacher supervisor Survey Monkey (24) • Lecturer reports (4) • Lecturer Survey Monkey (4) • PST Survey Monkey (58) • PST university-based focus Groups (2) • PST inter-university focus group (1) • Analysis of PST online discussion forums.

Given the project's focus on rural and regional schools and practicums, it should be noted that some PSTs in the main study (19) undertook practicum in a metropolitan setting. These PSTs, usually living in Melbourne, were enabled to undertake teacher education courses in regional Victoria because neither ACU's nor La Trobe's was a traditional on-campus course but rather took a multimodal approach combining intensive on-campus study with online and school-based work. The PSTs placed in urban settings were included in the project activities because their practicum took place at a considerable distance from the campuses and therefore they and their teacher supervisors were affected by the issues of communication over distance which is a central concern in this project. As Saba (2005) notes, in the digital age physical barriers are less significant but education providers still have communication challenges. Since their teacher supervisors could not accurately be called 'rural and regional teacher supervisors' analysis of their views was kept separate and not reported on in this document.

The following sections of the report present the findings and recommendations that emerged from the study and address the aims, outcomes and deliverables of the project identified in the Executive Summary.

Chapter 1 Guidelines for inter-university practicum supervision

Introduction

The project team found, over all phases of the project, that inter-university supervision to provide practicum support and learning for rural and regional PSTs was surprisingly easy to implement and accepted by both PSTs and teacher supervisors, subject to some important qualifications. Inter-university practicum supervision has both professional and cost-effective benefits for universities. However, as demonstrated by the findings discussed below, it cannot be seen as a pure efficiency measure.

Project activities

The project approach to inter-university supervision of rural and regional PSTs was to base supervision around the creation of four Professional Learning Teams (PLTs) consisting of a mixture of La Trobe and ACU PSTs (about 20 in each group), two led by La Trobe lecturers and two by ACU lecturers. In line with the view that social relationships need to be established in an online environment before learning is maximised (Salmon, 2002) the online clusters were kept stable in composition during the two practicum periods in 2011 when the main project activity took place (although the dates of the practicum of the two universities did not fully coincide in the first practicum period). The arrangements were that each of the four lecturers was responsible for organising the supervision, both in terms of arrangements and support, of their PLTs. To facilitate inter-university visits to practicum sites the composition of the clusters was based largely on proximity of the PST practicum site to the university supervisor's campus.

PLT 1 mainly consisted of PSTs placed in Geelong and surrounds and parts of inner and outer Melbourne. This group was supervised by an ACU lecturer based in Melbourne.

PLT 2 The second PST cluster mostly contained PSTs placed in some proximity to Ballarat and was supervised by an ACU Ballarat lecturer.

PLT 3 was made up mainly of PSTs who were placed in the north of Victoria/ southern NSW so that La Trobe Shepparton was the closest campus.

PLT 4 was a more eclectic group, supervised by a La Trobe Shepparton lecturer, and consisted mainly of PSTs who were placed in various, often widely distributed places in Victoria.

Although, with a view to facilitating supervision visits and to encourage PST relationships, the team aimed to make the clusters *regional*, this proved unrealistic. The need to balance the numbers in the groups and the fact that some placements did not fit the regional model (e.g. one student was placed in Wadeye, NT) meant that they could only partially be said to be geographic clusters. Every group had some PSTs from outside the region and one cluster was not regional at all. Although this went counter to the original project plans it did allow the team greater opportunities to consider practicum supervision over distance.

Supervision in the main iteration of the project meant taking on the responsibility for:

- establishing contact through email with teacher supervisors at the commencement of the practicum;
- providing teacher supervisors with the required practicum documentation and links to the practicum website;

- sending out ‘reminder’ emails regarding the PSTs’ progress such as *“It is now the second week of the professional experience and the mid round review will be due next week”*;
- setting up a supervision visit/Skype/phone meeting or email communication with the teacher supervisors of each PST in the cluster, depending on which mode of communication was to be used in each case.

To facilitate comparison between the various supervision approaches, each PLT cluster leader selected:

- Four PSTs (two from each university) to visit;
- Four PSTs (two from each university) to supervise via phone contact;
- Four PSTs (two from each university) to try Skype with;
- The remaining PSTs to contact via email.

Due to various constraints, the exact number planned for each form of supervision did not always eventuate for each PLT. However, there was an overall representation of each form of supervision and PSTs’ and teachers’ views of the value of each approach are discussed in the Findings below and in Chapter 3 *Recommendations for improved university school practicum partnerships*.

A further form of inter-university supervision included each lecturer engaging with their PLT cluster as the leader in the online space where they monitored and contributed to the professional discussions. Analysis of the value of this activity is included in the Chapter 2 *Guidelines for inter-university practicum curriculum*. The project team had agreed that if a PST within their cluster who was not from their university was found to be at ‘at risk’ in terms of failing their practicum, the home university needed to be contacted immediately as responsibility for final assessment for practicum ultimately lies with the home institution.

Findings

Lecturers found it was not difficult, and was professionally rewarding, to become familiar with a set of practicum documentation from another university. This is usually the challenge teacher supervisors meet and one about which they sometimes complain, wishing for more uniformity (Ure, 2009). For lecturers it was valuable to see how their own documentation could be made more teacher-friendly and how greater use of a shared language such as the AITSL guidelines (AITSL, 2011) might benefit all parties in the practicum.

Lecturers, apart from the beneficial challenge of being exposed to the other university’s approach to supervision, found the work with a PST and his/her teacher supervisor did not alter significantly when there was an inter-university dimension. As one lecturer noted, it was sometimes difficult to remember whether she was working with one of her own PSTs or one from the partner university. The focus was on PST learning and how to make the communication with the PST and supervisor as successful as possible. This seemed especially true when supervision involved a visit to the placement school, in some cases seeing the PST teach, but always to meet with both PST and supervisor. As will be discussed in more detail in the *Recommendations for improved university school practicum partnerships*, teacher supervisors recognised that it was sensible for universities to collaborate to overcome the challenges of distance. *“I don’t think it really matters. As long as they know what they’re looking for...I don’t think it matters”* (Teacher Supervisor interview 5D). There was a qualification that the PST needed to be comfortable with the visiting lecturer as shown by the comment *“It doesn’t matter to me...the thing would be whether or not PST felt comfortable with the person”* (Teacher Supervisor interview 3D).

Most PSTs who received a visit from a lecturer from a university which was not their own, found the experience positive: *“It was really reassuring to have someone from the outside look in. The person who visited me had a lot of years teaching under their belt, and could relate to the experiences I was having. It didn't matter that I didn't know them”* (Student Survey Monkey). There were some who expressed a different view. For example:

The comments would still be the same since he/she is considered experienced teacher. But, the level of comfortability of talking to someone you know for a long time is quite different from someone you just came across. (Student Survey Monkey)

Though the majority view was positive, three PSTs expressed the view that it would have been better having someone from their own university. *“It is wise to send someone who knows your previous performance”* (Student Survey Monkey). In the Survey Monkey Survey twelve students commented on the experience of being visited by a university lecturer other than their own; nine made positive comments about supervision being conducted by someone who is not teaching their course. This is an important finding given the misgivings in the literature about university supervision being conducted by sessional lecturers unfamiliar with the PSTs and the course (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training, 2007). While the project team found that supervision could be done by another university it needs to be noted that the way it was approached in this project did not equate to employing a sessional person with no understanding of the course or knowledge of the students to supervise. In fact, lecturers in the team had knowledge of the PSTs from the partner university through their engagement with their PLT cluster and knew their course expectations, processes and lecturers.

PSTs, while they appreciated the personal contact of a visit, were not adamant that supervision must be based on visiting schools. PSTs who were supervised by a lecturer from a university other than their own via phone, Skype or email did not comment either way about significance of the supervision having an inter-university aspect. Email was considered effective for communication for organisational matters. PSTs found it *“useful, quick and effective”* (Student Survey Monkey). In fact, inter-university supervision was successful from the point of view of all parties whether it was via a visit, phone call, Skype or in some cases email. A recent study (Neal, 2010) in which teachers reflected on their past and present experience of practicum was also based in rural and regional Victoria and it also found an expressed openness to various modes of communication during the practicum. The present study offers some evidence that this openness can be translated into practice.

Where the inter-university aspect of the project drew most comment from PSTs was the fact that the compulsory online discussions on Pebble Pad were inter-university ones. It was here that the inter-university aspect of the project had more impact for the PSTs in that they were asked to discuss their practicum experiences in a group which included a number of people they did not know. The experience was somewhat different for La Trobe's PSTs than for ACU's in that the La Trobe PSTs were very much in the majority with more than twice the number of participants in each of the PLTs from their home university than ACU PSTs. This situation was useful in exploring the value of the teaching solution for small, scattered cohorts of students in rural and regional areas offered by a number of reports: putting them together in a combined cohort (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2008; Tynan, Dunne, & Smyth, 2007; Willis & Reid, 2007). Both universities' courses being multimodal courses in which an intensive was combined with an online component had an established culture of online communication and learning through various channels both for the academic component of their courses and school activities prior to the practicum. For example, La Trobe had a regular lecture via Elluminate, some ACU PSTs used synchronous online chat through Blackboard.

The project team was interested in PSTs' perceptions about whether inter-university online communication was enhancing of PSTs' experience of support and learning during the practicum. PSTs' views of this were explored through several evaluation instruments:

1. Survey Monkey question: *With regard to the Professional Learning Teams (PLTs) does the inclusion of students from a different university have benefits beyond collaboration between members of your home university?*
Total responses - 38. Yes - 51.8 per cent (29 responses); No - 21.4 per cent (12 responses) Undecided 26.8 per cent (15 responses);
2. An Elluminate session in which three lecturers and seven PSTs representing both universities discussed questions about the activity;
3. Separate focus groups with PSTs from the two universities.

Collating the data from each of these sources produced findings that were highly encouraging of the enterprise, with important qualifications and suggestions for improvement. Of those who expressed their support for inter-university online clusters, the main reason was access to a wider pool of knowledge and experience, making comments like *"Always enriching to have different point of views and opinions"* (Student Survey Monkey). A comment from an ACU student gave support to the idea that rural and regional students' education is enhanced through collaboration.

It was good to get perspectives of a larger group of people. Also because the students at La Trobe had studied different things and also had experiences in primary schools - it gave a wider variety of types of responses. (Student Survey Monkey)

Those who were not so supportive showed the wisdom of the maxim of online teaching that attention to relationship building cannot be neglected if learning is to take place (Salmon, 2002). These PSTs expressed the idea that *"Being dumped with people you don't know changes the dynamic"* (Student Survey Monkey). However, those who were critical also often made useful suggestions about how to increase the social cohesion of the group such as hold a gathering 'at a pub'. While this might be difficult for the team, given the disparate spread of the groups, others, like encouraging more Facebook-type activity such as sharing of photos and other personal details on the project website were valuable. Moreover, PSTs had important suggestions for the best curriculum approaches. These will be outlined in Chapter 2 *Guidelines for inter-university practicum curriculum*.

The evaluation of inter-university supervision components of the project provided important insights into the different facets of inter-university supervision from the perspectives of the various stakeholders involved. This enabled the development of a set of recommended guidelines for other universities interested in exploring inter-university supervision practices which are outlined below.

Guidelines for inter-university practicum supervision

1. Lecturers from cooperating universities need to be familiar with each other's practicum processes and documentation so that inter-university supervision does not distract from the central job of PST learning. From lecturers' points of view there is no need for a common set of practicum documentation but teacher supervisors' need for clarity and explicitness in terms of requirements is key and therefore some uniformity of approach would be useful. See Chapter 3 *Recommendations for improved school university partnerships* for elaboration of this point.
2. Assessment is the responsibility of the home university, consequently there needs to be an effective process for immediate referral of 'problems' to the assessing university.

3. University supervisors of PSTs from a partner university need to be sensitive to PSTs who feel daunted by the idea of a lecturer they do not know watching them teach or discussing their progress. Taking the position of an experienced educator sharing expertise rather than an assessor is preferable.
4. Universities engaged in inter-university supervision need to be mindful that the students' need to be connected to their lecturers and fellow students must take precedence over efficiency priorities. Therefore attention must be paid to creating relationships between inter-university groups.
5. If universities enter into collaborative supervision in order to save travel costs to distant schools and do not embed their work in a broader approach which is supportive of PSTs and teacher supervisors, the enterprise is likely to be met with suspicion from PSTs who are highly focussed on making the most of their time in schools; and from teachers who undertake supervision despite feeling under great time pressure because they feel it is a contribution to the profession.

Chapter 2 Guidelines for inter-university practicum curriculum

Introduction

A key initiative in terms of inter-university practicum curriculum was the establishment of a shared website “with secure access for PSTs, lecturers and teacher supervisors from ACU and La Trobe to support learning within the practicum” (Ryan, Jones, McLean & Walta, 2009). Given that inter-university collaboration through technology is seen as central to innovation in the higher education sector in rural and regional settings (Willis & Reid, 2006), and university IT systems are often inflexible (Fitzgerald and Steele, 2008), this aspect of the project promised to be difficult. However, in the course of the two year project the team tried three different IT platforms: ACU’s Blackboard during the pilot; La Trobe’s Web CT platform; and finally La Trobe’s Pebble Pad in the main study. Across the three different platforms and the two host institutions, the team did not find establishing the basic structure of a shared platform overly challenging. What was more challenging and the experimentation continues, was to find the best teaching and learning approaches to use on that platform. It should be noted that some of the teaching and learning practices recommended could be applied by lecturers from individual universities seeking to improve practicum support and learning; they are not necessarily reliant on there being inter-university activity. However, as will be shown, there is some evidence in the project findings of the benefits of inter-university activity for small cohorts or as a way of opening up PSTs to a greater range of views.

Project activities

In this report, findings from the pilot and main study are discussed in turn because they reveal important features of successful inter-university practicum curriculum.

Pilot (practicum in Semester 2 2010)

During the pilot two inter-university clusters of four PSTs, two from ACU and two from La Trobe were established and communicated with each other using ACU’s Blackboard, one based around PSTs placed in central Victoria which was facilitated by La Trobe team members and one with PSTs on placements in the south west of Victoria, managed by ACU. As noted earlier, the clusters were largely geographic as the team was aiming to share supervision visits and possibly encourage inter-university relationships between PSTs placed in the same area. Each cluster had its own online discussion room. Access to Blackboard for La Trobe PSTs could be provided with reasonable ease in that it was a matter of providing details to the site managers and it was arranged. However, teacher supervisors did not have access to the platform at this stage.

A reflective practice model of learning in which PSTs were asked to reflect in a collaborative online setting on their practicum experiences was the basis of the teaching approach which aligns with Loughran’s (2002) assertion that PSTs need to engage in reflection based on their own practice-based situations. In order to explore the best pedagogy to support reflective practice, two different kinds of online forums were created. The first was a blog space which encouraged PST participants to relate their daily practicum experiences, challenges and successes; the second forum was a more structured issue-based discussion, using a threaded discussion tool. The topics in this second forum were:

Classroom management

Discuss strategies and resources that have worked well, haven’t worked well, why you think they did/didn’t work. Ensure you provide ideas for each other and try to link these ideas to different learning theories you

have studied to help justify/guide your thinking.

Teaching Strategies

Describe some of the teaching strategies you have trialled to engage students in learning. What theories of learning inform these strategies? Were they successful? How can you tell? Were they unsuccessful? How can you tell? Provide suggestions for one another to trial when things haven't worked out to plan.

The team was interested to see which of the tools was more attractive to PSTs and which was most powerful in encouraging reflective practice.

Findings

The pilot activity was evaluated through semi-structured interviews with seven of the eight PSTs who participated in the inter-university clusters; one PST filled out a questionnaire (see website <http://www.rpp.edu.au/evaluation.html> for questions used for interviews and written questionnaire). ACU PSTs, who were a part of a relatively small cohort, indicated they appreciated being linked to a greater range of PSTs than available from their own university. They stated that they found support and gained knowledge from the online contact during their practicum. There was evidence that La Trobe PSTs who were asked to negotiate another university's online system were wary of the extra work this involved, especially when they had already established online networks with La Trobe PSTs.

The team was also interested in PSTs' perceptions of the relative value of the two online learning activities, the blog and the issues-based discussion. (Members of the project conducted an analysis of the discussions' success in encouraging reflective practice which has been the subject of an article submitted for publication: Jones & Ryan, 2012 "Learning in the practicum: Engaging preservice teachers in reflective practice in the online space".) Findings were that the PSTs had a higher frequency of participation in the unstructured 'blog' where they could 'vent' their anxieties, frustrations and questions about their practicum and receive responses from fellow PSTs and lecturers; rather than participate in professional forums structured around particular issues such as classroom management or curriculum. In some cases the blogs did develop into reflective discussions about issues of teaching and learning but overall lecturers believed that the online activity, while supportive and communicative, did not display evidence of optimum critical reflection. It is likely that the instructions provided for each of the two types of forums contributed to the frequency in which they were utilised. A specific minimum three contributions per week was the instruction for the blog, while a less specific instruction of contributions throughout the practicum was given for the issues-based discussion.

Reflecting on this and the low levels of critical reflection evident in the blog space suggested to the lecturers in the project team that they had not been sufficiently purposeful in their teaching and instructional approaches. This resulted in the decision to be more focussed on encouraging reflective practice in the main study through offering a single forum type: an issues-based discussion and provision of more specific instructions for contribution expectations. Another factor influencing this decision was the comments provided by some ACU and La Trobe PSTs after the pilot, that the plethora of online activities that their multimodal courses expected of them was sometimes confusing. Therefore a goal in the main study for the team was to better integrate practicum online activities with those of the courses more broadly.

Eight teacher supervisors were also interviewed about their ideas about inter-university curriculum and how universities can support PSTs and their teacher supervisors during the practicum. Teacher supervisors were very supportive of any activity, such as online practicum discussions, which increased support and reflective practice. However, they did not see themselves as having time to participate in such a forum and felt that it was probably best for the PSTs and their lecturers to be participating in this without the presence of the teacher supervisor who is also the assessor. Their ideas on the practicum are discussed in depth in

Main study (Practicum in Semester 1 and 2, 2011)

In semester 1 2011 the practicum periods of the two universities did not fully coincide and most of La Trobe's PSTs were placed in primary schools whereas ACUs were in secondary classrooms. Despite these limitations, lecturers found it a useful opportunity to experiment with what made a suitable online platform and what teaching and learning approaches worked.

Following the pilot finding that the La Trobe PSTs, who had a significant pool of fellow PSTs to interact with without the project, were more questioning about its value, it was decided that it was better to integrate ACU PSTs on the La Trobe site rather than ask La Trobe PSTs to join an ACU platform. As with ACU's Blackboard during the pilot, La Trobe's learning management system (LMS) Web CT provided relatively easy access to outsiders with automatically generated passwords. The team spent some energy, but with limited success, trying to make La Trobe's platform look welcoming to ACU PSTs. Use of a site which was La Trobe's main LMS meant that ACU PSTs had to navigate around material which was relevant only to La Trobe PSTs and they found this confusing. It was not until Semester 2, when Pebble Pad, again a La Trobe hosted site but not their main LMS, was used, that this problem of one group being outsiders on the site was diminished and the site looked more like it was jointly shared. However, initial unfamiliarity with Pebble Pad drew some criticism from PSTs until they became used to the uploading and sharing of resource attachments.

The renewed focus on encouraging reflective practice in the main iteration of the project, was signalled by calling the online clusters Professional Learning Teams (PLTs) and deciding to make all the discussions forums threaded discussion groups framed around professional questions posed by the lecturers rather than unstructured blogs. There were no blog spaces. The professional discussion topics posed were altered each week for the five weeks of practicum and participants were instructed to make at least one original contribution and one reply that extended the conversation for each topic. The topics used are listed below.

Week 1. Briefly, report on your experiences in relation to classroom management OR a teaching and learning approach you used. Was it an effective/ineffective approach? What do you think made it effective/ineffective? Everyone should then comment on what could be done to enhance/improve a situation like this next time and provide evidence that supports these improvement ideas.

Week 2. Share your reflections on week 2 of your practicum.

Week 3. What are the top three strategies for creating a productive and effective learning environment and why do they work?

Week 4. Think about the following quote and respond to the question below:

"We're walking into schools full of all this knowledge on 'research done on the Middle Years of Schooling' and 'Teaching – Best Practice' etc and yet, what we're seeing and been forced to be a part of is almost a polar opposite."

Question: This is one rather pessimistic image of schools today. What are you seeing, (or what will you do in the classroom), that gives you hope that schools are giving students what they need for living in contemporary society?

Week 5. What are the most crucial things you have learned about students; about schools; and about how to best engage students in learning over the past 4 – 5 weeks?

For the La Trobe students participation in the forums was an assessment task attracting a small number of possible marks and for ACU it was a hurdle task for professional experience completion as well as linked to a 20 per cent weighted assessment task for those enrolled in a particular unit associated with the course.

The project had planned to ask the members of the clusters to undertake some inter-university peer assessment activities of the kind that both courses had used among their own PSTs. This would have been likely to increase the sense of purposeful collaborative learning the PSTs experienced. However, the differences in the assessment arrangements between the two courses made this difficult to achieve; ACU team members had less control over the assessment in their course than did the La Trobe team so that any required activity was 'on top of' what the ACU PSTs were already doing and seemed too much to ask. For this reason any peer assessment incorporated into the respective courses were completed between participants from their own university.

An additional aspect of the Pebble Pad site included discipline-based 'rooms' for the PSTs from both universities to share lesson ideas and resources specific to their areas of specialisation (e.g. English; Science; etc.).

The project team decided not to include teacher supervisors in PLTs due to a potential conflict of interest in fulfilling their role as assessors of PST practicum. This was supported by advice from the project reference group. In the evaluation activities associated with the main study, PSTs were asked how they would have felt about teacher supervisors being involved in these discussions. Some PSTs said this may enhance overall learning opportunities; however, the majority concurred with the decision to exclude teacher supervisors from this discussion space, recognising the potential conflict of interest and feeling that teacher supervisor presence may inhibit their sharing of practicum experiences, particularly if they were experiencing difficulties.

Findings

Evaluation of the inter-university website took the form of analysis of its use by each group of participants as well as exploring their views about it through Survey Monkey (all participants), focus groups (PSTs) and interviews (teacher supervisors). Project team members also contributed their views during recorded discussions at meetings. (See website <http://www.rpp.edu.au/evaluation.html>.)

Analysis of the use of and perceptions of the website by the various groups of participants

PSTs

The PSTs, not surprisingly given that it was compulsory, almost universally participated in the PLTs. However, the subject area 'rooms' were largely unused. Although in the evaluation there was not a question directly asking why this occurred, there were comments by PSTs suggesting they already very busy so the compulsory discussions were as much as they felt they could manage.

Analyses of PSTs' views of the chosen reflective practice approach as expressed through the various evaluation instruments used in the project revealed that the largest group (39 comments) preferred the structured discussion compared to a more unstructured blog format of the former semester, usually saying something like *"It helped give me a framework for my comments and directed the focus towards sharing positive learning experiences"* (Student Survey Monkey). Even though some expressed pressure about the finding time to do so they were glad to be 'forced' to reflect. On the other side, some PSTs (16 comments) lamented the lack of opportunity to share their practicum experiences in a free flowing way such as permitted in a blog, making comments like *"The structured discussion feels like assessment - I want to debrief"* (La Trobe Focus Group). Eight PST comments were divided, seeing benefit in both. It was clear that

some PSTs wanted a more immediate opportunity to share their daily experiences without the constraint of a discussion focus. *“I thought the discussions were really good and I just answered ...but it wasn’t what I needed right then ... I was finding a lot of stuff tough and I would have loved to be able to get some feedback from people”* (La Trobe Focus Group). However, the La Trobe Focus Group also revealed that this sharing was occurring through social media (Facebook) and some PSTs felt that it was useful to have a more academic approach in the university sponsored site.

Lecturers

Lecturers found the structured discussions satisfying to moderate as some rich reflections ensued. The model, like any online teaching, was certainly not a time saver; engagement in the online environment needs to be consistent and purposeful (Altbach, Reisberg & Rumbley, 2009). Moreover, in examining the discussion data the team found that there was not sufficient lecturer scaffolding of reflective practice, despite the intention to do this. It seemed that the team perhaps assumed a common understanding of how to achieve it. This finding that critical reflection on practice is a professional skill which needs concerted work concurs with that of the Victorian Deans of Education/VIT study (Ure, 2009) which found that too often PSTs were not engaged in such reflection during practicum.

Teacher Supervisors

For the teacher supervisors, while there was use of the website to search for documentation (and complaints from some teachers that they couldn’t access it) there was almost no use of the website for professional discussion and development about practicum. This outcome confirmed a finding of the pilot that teachers are willing to use technology for accessing information to facilitate the practicum but are wary of extending this to getting involved in professional development activities. Teachers’ views of professional development are analysed in Chapter 3 *Recommendations for improved partnerships between universities and teacher supervisors of rural and regional preservice teachers*.

Guidelines for inter-university practicum curriculum

1. Inter-university curriculum through a shared website is possible through any number of platforms (Blackboard/PebblePad/Web CT). It is not possible to recommend particular platforms in that the nature of the information technology environment is constantly changing and new possibilities emerging. However, for successful collaboration the site must be one that can be adapted to joint ownership, ideally allowing lecturers from all collaborating universities some ability to manage the content; also not be overly onerous for organisers in terms of allocating passwords. Sites which are not supported by any university are not as likely to be secure and this limits what can be done on them.
2. Inter-university activity is quite feasible and useful. Inter-university shared assessment is more difficult. Courses tend to be inflexible with centralised guidelines and requirements and assessment criteria.
3. PSTs have a need to be able to process practicum experiences in a space where they are not observed by their teacher supervisors. There is little evidence that including teacher supervisors in debriefing or reflective practice activities would be valued by either PSTs or teachers, and it may in fact create a conflict of interest and even an ethical issue given the assessment role that supervising teachers have of the PSTs involved in the practicum experience.
4. Online forums are valued by lecturers and PSTs as opportunities for much needed contact during practicum. The need for moral support during demanding practicum is ongoing but there is some evidence that, especially when they are not in their first school practicum, PSTs find their own ways of supporting themselves (e.g. through Facebook) and that lecturers need to focus on their teaching

role rather than simply offering social support. Therefore, the purpose of the online forum needs to be ascertained to guide the type(s) of forum(s) that are established. E.g. A 'debrief/recount' is better suited for support/contact. Structured questions are better suited for encouraging critical reflective practice around theories and experiences. There was a suggestion in some of the data from the PSTs that the discussion forums should have been method based rooms allowing them to focus more on sharing ideas and resources with a subject specific focus. This may have been useful especially for the small method cohorts.

5. Other kinds of inter-university activity such as PSTs giving each other feedback during practicum might be undertaken and have some advantages for small cohorts or if the clusters are regional and PSTs could visit each other's schools. The project cannot offer data about their success.

Chapter 3 Recommendations for improved partnerships between universities and teacher supervisors of rural and regional preservice teachers

Introduction

At the outset of the project it was the view of the team that insufficient was known about what teacher supervisors in rural and regional areas thought about their roles as supervisors and how universities could best work with them. However, there was some material which provided a useful background to the present project.

The ALTC study by the Victorian Deans of Education and the Victorian Institute of Teaching *Practicum Partnerships: Exploring models of practicum organisation for a standards-based profession* (Ure, 2009) provided a most useful broad analysis of teacher supervisors' perspectives and a context from which to delve into the particular experience of rural and regional supervisors. The Deans/VIT study found that teacher supervisors felt there was inadequate communication between themselves and the PSTs' universities especially with regard to final assessments, and that practicum documentation was at times not useful for feedback to PSTs (Ch. 7). There was also a view expressed by the teacher supervisors in the Deans/VIT study that there needed to be more three-way conversations between lecturers, preservice teachers and themselves. Despite their misgivings about aspects of the present arrangements participating teacher supervisors did not see mentoring training as necessary or something in which they would want to participate (p. 82).

In more rural-focussed work, Neal's (2010) study *Teachers' perceptions of the impact of a university-school partnership on their preservice practicum education*, completed after the design of the current project, explored the ideas about practicum of teachers based in the Sunraysia and Mallee network of schools in the far northwest of Victoria. Neal provided evidence that rural teacher supervisors in that area were highly supportive of strong partnerships between schools and universities although they did not always see them as occurring. Studies both international (Hardré, 2009) and Australian (House of Representatives, 2007) have argued that rural teachers are particularly disconnected from universities in terms of the practicum supervision, with contact between universities often delegated to a local person with few connections to university programs. The present project was interested to see whether this was true to the experience of teacher supervisors in rural and regional areas of Victoria who worked with ACU and La Trobe PSTs; and to trial communication and support activities which might assist these rural and regional teacher supervisors in their work.

Project activities

Activities undertaken to explore teacher supervisors' perceptions of their roles and their partnerships with universities were conducted in both the pilot phase of the ALTC project and the main study. During the pilot 11 teacher supervisors from rural and regional schools were interviewed about their ideas about practicum partnerships with universities, and in the main study 14 interviews were undertaken. These teachers all worked with preservice teachers from either La Trobe or ACU and experienced some of the project initiatives. Teacher supervisors' views of the project were also sought through use of a Survey Monkey

questionnaire. Twenty-four teachers responded to the survey which represents about a third of teachers who supervised preservice teachers in the project.

Findings

Teacher supervisors were asked to respond to questions regarding various forms of communication with the universities at different stages of the supervision process, the duties and roles they associate with supervision, professional learning linked to supervision and recognition and reward for their work as supervisors. The following sections outline their perceptions in each of these areas.

Forms of Communication with Universities

Documentation and communication with teacher supervisors

The Deans/VIT report on the practicum noted that the myriad and confusing terminology in the documentation provided by universities “seems to predispose them to reject much of the written information they are given” (Ure, 2009, p.23). However, this was not supported by the findings in this study. A convincing 20 out of 24 supervisors who responded to the Survey Monkey question agreed with the statement “*The documentation supplied was satisfactory*”; 4 were undecided. Although teacher supervisors in the current study did not see the particular documentation given as unduly confusing they did express a preference for documentation which was quick to peruse and easy to negotiate. “*It was easy to understand – a quick read and I was right*” (Teacher Supervisor interview, 2B) and “*There probably should have been more room, but I’m glad there wasn’t in the end because you’re always pushed for time with these matters.* (Teacher Supervisor interview7C) summed up most teachers’ views.

In an effort to promote communication between the universities and the schools the team communicated with teacher supervisors via email as well as providing links to the practicum website. Teacher supervisors liked the idea of the website as a backup but preferred documentation in their email and some were glad to receive a hard copy as well. The project team decided, following an established practice at La Trobe, to communicate directly with the teacher supervisor regarding the practicum rather than go through the School’s Preservice Teacher Coordinator as ACU had done. The use of the Preservice Teacher Coordinator as a conduit between universities and teacher supervisors seemed to make little sense when establishing communication promptly at the beginning of a practicum is important. Despite on-going efforts by universities, teachers often lack information about practicum requirements and processes (Parliament of Victoria, 2005; Ure, 2009). Communicating directly with teacher supervisors required asking PSTs to send their supervisors’ email address and this process sometimes took some time to achieve but it was largely seen as effective. A small minority of teacher supervisors (4 out of 24) said in the survey they did not appreciate emails at all and lecturers did find that some teacher supervisors were slow or did not respond to emails. However, as will be discussed below, phone calls to schools were not always effective or efficient and email as a form of contact seems invaluable.

The provision of the teacher supervisors’ website for documentation received appreciation from teacher supervisors but only a few used it. Pebble Pad worked well in terms of providing a secure space in which to place assessment documents, and passwords for teachers were easily generated, but given that few accessed the site it would seem that it would take some time to establish a web-based approach for practicum documentation. However, the project did not thoroughly test the viability of the web-based system because it gave teacher supervisors documents in email form as well which somewhat negated the need for any web-based access.

Except in a small number of cases, teacher supervisors were glad of the email contact which the universities used to inform them about what 'should' be happening at various stages of the practicum. An email timed to arrive about half way through the practicum said *"Hopefully preservice teachers are starting to take full control of a number of classes per week by now and are successfully using a range of classroom management techniques..."* Despite the usefulness of these communication measures, the project found that rural and regional teacher supervisors, like those the Deans/VIT study (Ure, 2009) were somewhat detached from the teacher education programs that preservice teachers were involved in. They read documentation sufficiently to find out how to fulfil their role but were not concerned to investigate the overall goals of the teacher education programs in which the PSTs were enrolled. The following comments articulated teachers' position.

"The elements that are important are where the university spells out to me what the expectations are, what is the student expected to do, it's the nuts and bolts stuff of how many hours class time are they supposed to experience, what is expected, what are they expected to get out of the experience and it was that information that is obviously the most pertinent and useful."

(Teacher Supervisor interview 3N)

Overall, if clear, straightforward documentation is provided in a timely and efficient manner, teacher supervisors appear untroubled and quite tolerant of the differences in the language and layout of university practicum documentation.

Contact with teacher supervisors during the practicum

A central question of the project was whether contact with rural and regional teacher supervisors and PSTs during practicum could be managed both effectively and sustainably. Sustainability in this context meant limiting costs in terms of time and travel. As noted in Chapter 1, like PSTs, teacher supervisors were not especially concerned that the person contacting them during practicum was not from the PSTs' home university although they hoped that an unfamiliar lecturer would not distress the PST. However, the team also wanted to know what kinds of supervision were favoured by teacher supervisors, in particular whether supervisors were committed to supervision in the form of face to face meetings between themselves and university partners as this is expensive even if the inter-university approach is adopted. As also elaborated in Chapter 1, in order to facilitate a comparison between different approaches the lecturers who were working with the PLTs tried a variety of modes of supervision and asked teacher supervisors for their views of them. The survey results showed that the large majority of the teachers who responded to this question in the survey (16 out of 19) said they were satisfied with the contact made by the university (two said they were not and one was unsure) and the 14 who were interviewed were satisfied. However, the more elaborated insights offered by the interview data below showed a more complex view of what teacher supervisors wanted from universities.

School visits by lecturers

While some of the teacher supervisors said that the personal contact of a visit was very important to them because *"the university would be able to pick up nuances from what's going on and they can make a judgement about what sort of teacher they're working with so therefore you can give weight to what sort of judgements are being made..."* (Teacher supervisor interview1H), this was not the most common response. In some instances visits were not always successful for the teacher supervisors. As in Ure's (2009) analysis and also noted in Neal (2010) even when lecturers did visit, some teacher supervisors found the experience limited. *"It did not allow a decent opportunity to discuss the progress of my student teacher"* (Teacher Supervisor Survey Monkey). The teacher supervisors thought that the "once-only visit" (p.147) as Neal describes it, is not sufficient to create a useful working practicum relationship between themselves and the universities. Moreover, a number expressed an understanding of the constraints universities are under in

terms of finding the opportunity to visit schools at a distance from the university so were happy to receive contact in another form. Neal suggested that from the point of view of teacher supervisors there was an opportunity for universities to try other modes of contact such as phone and online contact and the current project confirms the value of her recommendation.

Skype

Skype, where it was successfully undertaken, was praised by a teacher supervisor as *“embracing technology ...better than telephone.”* Another saw it as opening up various useful possibilities. *“Skype was an innovation and I was really happy to use that and there’s other options besides Skype in terms of Apple programs so Messenger and Facetime...those things work well.”* (Teacher Supervisor interview 2D).

It is relevant here to discuss lecturers’ experience in terms of their ‘side’ of the partnership in that they had an overall view of what took place, for there were more plans for Skype to take place than there were successful contacts made. The lecturer who was most successful was the one who addressed an email to both the supervising teacher and the PST, inviting them to nominate a preferred time for a Skype meeting and specifying in this email that the PST take responsibility for arranging the Skype set up. Instructions for first time users of the software outlining how to download and use Skype were attached to this email. PSTs then seemed to take their responsibility seriously. Otherwise, it did not seem to happen as often as the project team hoped. The less successful attempts to establish Skype meetings seemed to be associated with forms of contact that were directed to the PST only. Apart from the project team receiving no response when suggesting a Skype supervision session, some reasons given for it not occurring were teacher supervisors saying they were unfamiliar with the technology or a suitable time could not be found.

In retrospect, given that Skype is a relatively untried medium, it may have been better to try it with as many teacher supervisors as possible to better find the conditions in which it is successful rather than setting up a comparison in the study. However, in the cases where it was successful, like for the teacher supervisors, Skype was largely seen by lecturers as a great option for making a three way communication happen at a distance. One lecturer said *“I ...prefer Skype over the phone call because of the potential for video - adding a dimension to the forms of communication (verbal and visual for body language) and because it is easier to involve all partners in the meeting. Most phone calls I had were with the teacher only and it felt more like a checking up than a supportive opportunity for the PST to talk about successes/challenges.”* Its potential as a communication medium for practicum at a distance was somewhat undercut by one teacher supervisor who was truly remote (in the Northern Territory) who said that it quite often did not work and the phone was more reliable. However, it did work with this teacher supervisor (4F) on the occasion it was tried in the project. Another lecturer who used Skype successfully did note that it may not be as successful when there were difficult practicum issues to discuss.

Phone calls

There was satisfaction with phone calls from a number of teacher supervisors. In many cases if phone calls were to be successful a speaker phone and a private space were needed to encourage three-way-communication. Where it worked well the lecturer had prearranged the time and had prepared for the discussion. *“It wasn’t a random phone call because we made a time and I told the daily supervisor...to keep me free”* (Teacher Supervisor interview 2D). As a lecturer put it *“I had lengthy and informative calls with both the supervisors and the PSTs, together on speaker phone and independently. It was easy to set up. I emailed the PST and asked for a suitable day and time and had immediate responses.”* However, without this kind of preparation the phone call could be quite limited and not conducive to three-way communication. Lecturers also found that in busy schools phone messages to teacher supervisors did not always reach their destinations.

Email

As outlined earlier, email contact was critical to establishing initial communication with all teacher supervisors in the project, but in the interests of comparison, the team also used email *only* contact with some teacher supervisors. This involved supervisors emailing their thoughts about the PST they were supervising to the supervising lecturer with the idea of a productive exchange. While there were comments suggested email was sufficient contact “*I could just email straight back to raise any concerns*” (Teacher Supervisor interview 5H), there were also comments which expressed disappointment with email only contact. Also some lecturers, hoping to establish a partnership with teacher supervisors to assist PST learning, found it limiting. While some supervising teachers used email as a way of communicating about the work of a PST such an approach was not usually more than a summary. One lecturer said “*[Email is] a communication tool. I don’t think it is an effective way to talk about the PSTs’ progress or performance in the classroom. It is also valuable in thanking the supervisors for hosting a PST in their classroom.*”

It is difficult to sum up which is the best means of contact for teacher supervisors in that all approaches were liked by some and criticised by others. However, it is possible to say with Neal (2010) that teacher supervisors were critical of cursory approaches to supervision by lecturers. They wanted lecturers to be readily available when they needed them and they did not want to be operating alone.

“The ideal is to have the option there, all the time...to know the contact details of the person. You should know what their position is and how that is going to help the student teacher and how that’s going to be passed on. Just to have that support there, even if you don’t use it, is really important. So that could be a phone call, it could be the option of a visit; they all need to be there the whole time” (Teacher Supervisor interview 7C).

A question which arises from this finding that teacher supervisors were keen to have close connections to the PSTs’ universities is whether this meant that teacher supervisors were interested in involving themselves in the universities programs in more formal partnership arrangements.

Duties and Roles Associated with Teacher Supervision of PSTs

One of the aspects of teacher supervisor involvement which the project discussed when establishing the study was whether to involve teacher supervisors in the online space set up for preservice teachers during the practicum. One action considered was inviting teacher supervisors into the PLTs’ online discussions. Whilst this did not eventuate in the project due to considerations of potential conflict between teacher supervisors’ assessing role and PSTs’ need to share their practicum problems in an open way, teacher supervisors’ opinions of this sort of involvement were sought. Teacher supervisors in our study did not see it as part of their role to be involved in the PLTs. However, they did express enthusiastic support for the idea of the PSTs being involved with lecturers in professional learning teams for reflective learning. One said “... *to be able to share their experiences might make them feel not so [isolated during their practicum]...*” (Teacher Supervisor 5H interview). “*I think it would be great because they are working in isolation so they can talk to other students ... Because they’re country students and they’re isolated and they don’t have those networks and contacts, it’s good way of doing it*” (Teacher Supervisor interview 2L). Their view that they would prefer to stay out of the PLTs was also partly due to recognition that it was PSTs’ space to share their experiences free from the gaze of their teacher supervisor. This aligned with the view of the project team, and was ultimately the reason this initiative was excluded from the project activities, so it was affirming to see that teacher supervisors also sensed the same potential conflicts. In addition to this key reason, teacher supervisors also felt they did not have time for this level of involvement.

Recognition and rewards for teacher supervisors

Reports on PST education have argued that teachers see supervision as insufficiently recognised and rewarded (House of Representatives, 2007; Parliament of Victoria, 2005). Therefore the project asked

teacher supervisors how they felt about the “recognition and reward” for their work with PSTs (See website Evaluation <http://www.rpp.edu.au/evaluation.html>). Most said they did not do it for the monetary reward but saw it as part of their professional life with the rewards being largely intrinsic. *“I don’t think it’s necessary to have a reward...”* (Teacher Supervisor interview 2B). *“It’s something I enjoy doing and that’s probably one of my little interest areas – new teachers, mentoring graduate teachers...so I don’t class it as something that I want monetary value for...”* (Teacher Supervisor interview 6B). Only three teachers of the fourteen interviewed felt they were insufficiently rewarded especially in terms of time and two were unsure. A couple of teachers expressed disappointment at how little time was allowed for what they saw as important work. *“The school could probably do a bit more in terms of that [recognition] because sometimes it was really hard to catch up with the student teacher because the school doesn’t see that you’ve got a student teacher and don’t seem to care so you will try to make plans...to catch up...and I’ve got an extra or there’s this thing on...”* (Teacher Supervisor interview 2D). This finding fits in well with Ure’s (2009) recommendation that PST mentoring should be part of the staffing formula for teachers’ workloads.

Of those who felt unrewarded the following comment expresses the tensions felt. *“I just see it as part of my professional responsibility...but if you have a dud teacher it’s the hardest thing in the world ...I think we’re grossly under-recognised. The pocket money is handy, make no bones about that. Last year I had two student teachers and I managed to buy a new BBQ. Whoohoo!”* (Teacher Supervisor interview 2L). However, almost universally, even those teacher supervisors who felt under appreciated by the school and the profession, stated that they found significant professional rewards from the work, both helping the PSTs and in allowing them to reflect on their own teaching. *“It’s a happy partnership because it is a two-way street...”* (Teacher Supervisor interview 5D).

Professional development ‘credit’ for supervision

The finding that teacher supervisors were generally positive about their work with PSTs certainly leaves open the possibility of greater engagement in PST education programs, as has been proposed (Ure, 2009). However, teachers in the project were wary of any proposal which might significantly increase their workload. In line with this perspective, rather than opting for further professional commitment they preferred the suggestion that their work with PSTs might be ‘counted’ as part of the required professional development for VIT registration. One teacher in a rural school said that it was difficult to find useful professional development at her school. She was obliged to travel and it was expensive. Another teacher said *“...it does help me reflect on my teaching so that is...a vital part of your professional development.”* (Teacher Supervisor interview 5H). Another said *“...now we’ve got to keep logs of all professional hours, so it would be really good...for that to be officially checked off on”* (Teacher Supervisor Interview 2D).

Professional development for teacher supervisors

Ure (2009) recommended that there be a Victorian Institute of Teaching initiative in which both academic staff and teacher supervisors be engaged in professional development about working with PSTs to meet the Professional Standards for Graduating Teachers (Recommendation 5.0 in Ure, 2009, p.86). Teacher supervisors in the project were asked whether there was a need for some professional development related to supervision. There was some interest in professional development of a limited kind: *“maybe train up a few people in the school...who are prepared to take on a student teacher”*(Teacher Supervisor 2D interview) or training for inexperienced teacher supervisors. Teachers recognised that their knowledge of the university program was sometimes tenuous and a number were keen on the idea of some kind of orientation to supervision:

“I think that would be valuable, particularly for supervising teachers that haven’t supervised teachers before like I was in this instance. It would be valuable to have a training workshop or something where you just go through how you can add the most value to that student teacher’s time here...” (Teacher Supervisor interview 2M)

However, our project found that rural and regional teacher supervisors in Victoria were not different from those in the Deans of Education/VIT study (Ure, 2009): they were aware that greater connection with the university programs might develop a coherent approach to PST learning but they were not keen to commit to further significant professional activity to create a closer partnership. They tended to put their faith in being better informed by the university about the required role, what Kruger, Davies, Eckersley, Newell and Cherednichenko (2009) would call a complementary rather than a collaborative partnership.

In the project this attitude came through in the lack of teacher supervisor engagement in the professional material on mentoring and the teacher supervisors' discussions space offered on the practicum website. In the information letter to teacher supervisors the project invited teachers to get involved. But the discussion board was accessed by only two teacher supervisors and the mentoring material not looked at by any supervisors. When asked about whether undertaking Masters programs on mentoring would be of interest, some teacher supervisors said it might but others were definitely not attracted to the idea. Teacher supervisors saw such an idea as an individual choice but certainly not one that would be the norm.

Accreditation for teacher supervisors

In the same way, although teacher supervisors valued their work with PSTs and wanted to do it well, the provision of an accreditation scheme for teacher supervisors was looked at sceptically by most supervisors. While some said they might themselves be interested in doing such a qualification *"I think it's a good thing to do...but...once they've done it, they shouldn't have to do it every year..."* (Teacher Supervisor interview 1H). The others were inclined to say no. One teacher put it, *"all of a sudden you do lose that flexibility and autonomy and ability for what we do to work as a team, to a certain extent"* (Teacher Supervisor interview pilot). Teachers felt that compulsory accreditation *"will really turn people off doing it because some people [are] prepared to take on a student teacher but at the same time [are] not prepared to do all the paperwork or go to the PDs"* (Teacher Supervisor interview 2D).

Schools' recruitment needs and the practicum as means of recruitment of staff

Teachers interviewed made varying reports of the numbers of PSTs at their schools; some had quite a few and others not as many as they liked. It did seem as though distance from main centres was a factor when there were not enough PSTs. *"We don't get many student teachers, mainly because of our location, because we're not in [name of city] or we're not in areas where the students are located, so we don't get a lot."* (Teacher Supervisor interview 2M). Given that all teachers interviewed said that having preservice teachers at the school was a means of recruiting new staff, the interviews suggested that, even in relatively compact Victoria, rural areas are disadvantaged in terms of recruitment, as has been claimed elsewhere (Country Education Project, 2012). It must be noted that most of the areas in which PSTs teachers in the study were placed were not remote and not ones which historically have especially experienced significant teacher shortages (Teacher Supply and Demand Reference Group, 2009) so the study did not offer significant insight into what more remote schools experience and what they want from universities. Most participants in the study noted that their school sometimes had experienced teacher shortages in certain areas (e.g. maths, science, languages) but these were not necessarily addressed through having PSTs at the school since PSTs in these areas did not always emerge.

However, it was noticeable that most of the rural and regional teacher placements in the study were in towns and centres not far from the campuses of La Trobe Shepparton and ACU Ballarat, suggesting that preservice teaching courses based in regional campuses do assist in maintaining teaching standards in rural and regional areas (Parliament of Victoria, 2007). Moreover, a number of the teacher participants said that local connections brought PSTs to do a practicum at their schools.

"Most of the student teachers I've had had some sort of connection to the area. I've had a couple that come from Melbourne but most of them have had some sort of connection to the

area be it they lived in the area when they were kids or some of them still live here. Usually, you don't get a lot of people from Melbourne coming out to the country areas, which is a shame, because they could find they like it" (Teacher Supervisor interview 3D).

This suggests that encouraging rural people to study close to home assists with providing a pool of potential employees in the area (Lyons, Cooksey, Panizzon, Parnell & Pegg, 2006).

The evaluation of the various strategies undertaken to explore partnerships between universities and schools with a view to improving them yielded a range of data that informed the development of the following recommendations.

Recommendations for Improved Partnerships between Universities and Teacher Supervisors of Rural and regional Preservice Teachers

1. Provision of clear, straightforward documentation in a timely and efficient manner. Efficiency appears to be increased when documentation is provided through a variety of means (e.g. hardcopy, email, web-based). A practicum website maintained by universities seems a practical approach to move towards and offers opportunities for enhanced partnerships through provision of documents and other support material. As a way of encouraging them to use such a site teachers could be emailed links to it making access easy.
2. Where possible send documentation directly to the teacher supervisor as well as, or instead of, school Preservice Teacher Co-ordinator (dependent on school processes);
3. Use email contact with teacher supervisors throughout the round to communicate practicum milestones and to provide opportunities for ongoing communication and support;
4. Universities should be mindful that 'one-off' visits to schools are neither essential nor necessarily useful as a means of promoting partnerships during the practicum; meaningful partnerships are cultivated through regular contact that teacher supervisors welcome in a variety of forms (e.g. email, phone, Skype). More extensive research on the value of video-based technology for university involvement in practicum supervision would be timely;
5. Arranging meetings between supervising teachers, PSTs and university supervisors needs to be a three-way communication;
6. Due to potential conflict of interests, involving teacher supervisors in practicum online discussions with PSTs should not be a part of normal university-school practicum partnerships;
7. Schools and universities should join teacher accreditation bodies such as the Victorian Institute of Teaching to investigate ways in which teacher supervision could be more formally valued as a sphere of professional activity for teachers and recognised as a professional development activity for teachers' ongoing registration;
8. To promote better practicum outcomes universities should offer professional learning opportunities which are purposefully planned so they are seen by teachers as attractive and professionally useful. Collaboration with teachers will be necessary to achieve this.
9. Regional universities/campuses tend to service rural and regional schools in terms of PST placements so where possible, regional campuses and universities need to be supported to enhance

partnership links and rural and regional recruitment.

10. Inter-university supervision is appropriate from the teacher supervisors' perspectives as long as there is familiarity with the PST and the program, and the universities conduct the supervision in a way that nurtures the partnership with teachers.

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