

# The Rural Education Research and Development Centre

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*The Rural Education Research and Development Centre (RERDC) is the only national centre in Australia devoted to research in rural education. Below, I describe the history, structure, activities, and future goals of the RERDC, located at James Cook University of North Queensland.*

## Background to the Establishment of RERDC

James Cook University of North Queensland (JCUNQ), located in Townsville, the regional capital of North Queensland, is 1,000 miles from the capital city of Brisbane. While serving the needs of the region, JCUNQ has established an international reputation in marine biology, tropical medicine, tropical veterinary science, tropical rainforest studies, freshwater ecology, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies.

In the early 1980s, JCUNQ hosted a number of informal meetings of people interested in problems of rural and isolated areas. In 1983, in association with the University of New England's Australian Rural Adjustment Unit, a rural interest group was formed that included staff from JCUNQ, the Department of Primary Industries, the Burdekin Rural Education Centre, the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation, and other organisations associated with rural development. From these meetings emerged the proposition for a 1984 conference—*Needs of the West*—in North Queensland to focus on rural and isolated areas.

The conference succeeded in attracting considerable interest at both federal and state levels. Industry and community leaders, as well as the regional media in North Queensland, supported the conference; 160 people attended. Two publications resulted from the Conference: *Isolated communities: A major report on the needs of inland Australia* (Gregory, 1987) and *Needs of the west* (Gregory, 1984). Emerging from the many recom-

mendations was recognition of the role that JCUNQ already played in rural education and the recommendation that this role should be extended. In time, the Rural Education Research and Development Centre developed in response to this recommendation.

It is important to view this conference and the role of rural education at JCUNQ against a growing world-wide concern for rural education. As Sher (1981) stated:

In the past five years, a major shift in attitudes and policies towards rural education has occurred in many [Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development] nations. After decades of relative obscurity, issues surrounding the nature and provision of educational services in sparsely-populated areas have re-emerged and begun to occupy a prominent position on national education agendas.

Australia was no exception. The Western Australian government established a National Centre for Research on Rural Education in Perth, with government financial backing at the University of Western Australia. For a few years, it produced influential publications. The federal government, at a later date, also began to take an interest in the rural scene, although it was not until 1988 that a specific statement was made by the publication of *Schooling in rural Australia* (Commonwealth Schools Commission, 1987). There is no doubt that community-driven organisations, such as the Isolated

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Children's Parents' Association, played an important part in directing both state and federal governments' attention to rural problems.

It was in this period, when rural education began to occupy a more prominent position on both state and federal education agendas, that the 1984 conference took place. Ten years earlier, its impact no doubt would have been much less.

The conference stimulated further interest in rural education. After the conference, community meetings took place with JCUNQ members to consider what other steps should be taken (bearing in mind the recommendations from the conference). Within JCUNQ, a small group of key people promoted the idea of a larger commitment of JCUNQ to rural communities. Rural education became visible in the courses and practice-teaching placements provided for students. Papers written by staff members were read by the larger academic community throughout Australia. The federal government invited one of the JCUNQ rural education groups to undertake a study of schooling in rural Queensland and the Northern Territory, a study which contributed to the report, *Schooling in rural Australia* (Commonwealth Schools Commission, 1987).

By this time, it was clear that the National Centre for Research in Rural Education would not continue because of the departure of key staff members and the discontinuation of government funding. In fact, by the end of the 1980s, the mantle of leadership in rural education had passed from the National Centre for Research in Rural Education to RERDC in Queensland.

#### The Rural Education Research and Development Centre

It was the growing concern for rural education at JCUNQ, its firm links with the rural community, the growing national interest in rural education, and the decline of the National Centre in Perth that, together, prompted the development of the RERDC and the commitment to creating an endowed chair in rural education at JCUNQ.

It was decided that the chair should be community-funded and located within the RERDC. In early 1988, an appeal committee was formed with Lady Logan, a grazier, as its chair. It is worth quoting the statement she made in the appeal brochure:

I believe there is a pressing need to develop this Centre—the only one at a national

level—if we are to continue to provide effective and responsible assistance to those who live in rural Australia. All of us who have lived in remote areas know the real traumas of coping with problems on our own. Isolation is not purely psychological. There also are the physical elements of time and cost in trying to span long distances, with inadequate means of communication and travelling great distances on indifferent roads.

If we are to develop the natural resources of this great country, we need to keep a workforce in rural areas. To do this, it is necessary to improve the quality of life for women and children so that the family unit is kept intact. Accordingly, the Centre has aims to provide special kinds of services to cater for the educational needs of rural students and teachers. We need to provide buildings and equipment to endow it as a National Centre in Rural Education. (RERDC, 1989)

The appeal was officially and very successfully launched in Mount Isa in May 1989, with donations ranging from \$50,000 from Mount Isa Mines Holdings Limited to considerably smaller contributions from individuals.

The particular emphasis of the appeal was to endow a chair in rural education. As the appeal brochure stated: "The establishment of the Chair signifies the special concern of the community to foster a new era of scholarship and research."

In order to provide high-level leadership and the capacity to undertake significant teaching and research, the decision was made to appoint a Visiting Professor of Rural Education, on a short-term contract, to initiate the work of the RERDC. Such a professor would direct the activities of the infant centre until it was possible to make a more permanent appointment utilising the appeal fund monies. Emeritus Professor Jack Walton was appointed late in 1989; in November 1991, I was appointed Director.

Thus, from a rather modest beginning early in the 1980s, a new national centre in the field of rural education was created at JCUNQ. RERDC is considered an academic unit within JCUNQ, supported by the administrative infrastructure of the university, but largely financed from the community, business and industry, and income-earning activities of the Centre.

### *Objectives of RERDC*

The objectives of the Centre are to:

1. provide facilities and resources dedicated to achieving excellence in research into rural education, developmental projects related to education in rural areas, teaching in rural areas, and specialist tertiary courses;
2. conduct and facilitate conferences, seminars, and workshops on rural education;
3. act as a national clearinghouse for matters related to rural education;
4. conduct research into, and comment on, rural education issues;
5. provide a consultancy service for appropriate outside bodies; and
6. seek to benefit people generally in rural and remote areas who have particular educational needs.

### *Management and Functions of the RERDC*

Management of the Centre is vested in the Centre Advisory Committee, the Centre Management Committee, and the Director. The Appeal Committee, under the chairmanship of Lady Pearl Logan, includes a majority of community members as well as JCUNQ staff. The Centre receives basic funding support from the university and enhances its income by teaching fee-paying courses, selling services and engaging in consultancy and contract work. Without support from beyond the university, the Centre's functions and services, would be severely restricted.

The Centre has been fortunate in the support it has received financially from industry, commerce, the community, and in human resources from state instrumentalities and JCUNQ. Commencing in 1990, for example, the Queensland Department of Education has seconded on full salary two of its officers to undertake doctoral programmes and contribute to the work of the Centre for two-year periods. The Queensland Catholic Education Commission did the same thing with one of its officers. Currently, the Queensland Department of Health is considering similar appointments.

As research is one of the particular missions of the Centre, it has responded to nationally-advertised calls for proposals in areas relating to rural concerns. Four proposals have been submitted: one relating to access of rural communities to higher education, another relating to a statistical

comparison of rural and urban completion rates in tertiary education, a third concerned with a needs analysis of the federally-funded Priority Country Area Programme in Queensland, and a fourth regarding research priorities in education.

As part of its development activities, the Centre hosted Australia's first "think tank" on research in rural education in June 1990. This has proven to be a timely and valuable contribution to scholarship and research. One outcome of the think tank was the development, sponsored by the Centre, of the Australian Rural Education Research Association (ARERA), which brings together Australia's parents, teachers, community groups, and researchers to focus on research issues and priorities in rural education. ARERA sponsors conferences on rural education issues and recently has received a \$115,000 grant to undertake research on the educational implications of otitis media among Aboriginal children. ARERA's inaugural conference had the theme "Education, Equity, and the Crisis in the Rural Community." Its second conference, "Towards 2000: Schooling Through Distance Education," was hosted jointly with other associations and organisations.

The training of teachers, researchers, and other professionals to work in the rural field is a very real concern of the Centre. A preservice course for teachers who wish to teach in rural areas is offered, as well as an inservice course for teachers in the field who wish to gain a higher qualification in education. Perhaps the major development is the creation of a new Masters degree specialising in rural education which, for those who show particular expertise in its research components, serves as a qualification for entry into a Ph.D. programme. (The Ph.D. programme is now available to overseas candidates.) JCUNQ offers the most comprehensive rural education program available in Australian universities.

In 1993, the Centre was commissioned by the Northern Regional Health Authority to establish its Rural Health Training Unit. Under the leadership of Dr. Steve Clark, this unit provides vocational training and continuing education programmes for health service practitioners—doctors, nurses, and allied health personnel—who are planning to work in rural and remote areas, and inservice training for those already working in such locations.

As well as the health programmes and the aforementioned degree courses, the Centre offers four fee-paying non-award external courses in

care and supervision, which are marketed Australia-wide and attract enrollments from staff of boarding schools, nursing homes, aged care institutions, community care organisations, and so on. These courses meet a pressing need and are the only such courses available.

Services offered by the Centre include careers guidance for adults and senior school children in rural areas, and consultancy services to residential care institutions that include boarding schools, hostels, post-school residentials, family group homes, and aged and special-care facilities.

RERDC has published two monographs (Higgins, 1993, McShane & Walton, 1990), and a third is in preparation. RERDC also produces a semi-annual newsletter, *Rural Education*.

In July 1994, the Centre will host an international conference, *Issues Affecting Rural Communities*, which, to date, has attracted global interest from scholars and professionals in the fields of health, education, and community development. Anticipated outcomes of the conference include an international association, a rural Ph.D. programme, an international faculty, joint projects, and the development of international cross-disciplinary networks.

Future prospects for the Centre both nationally and internationally are very encouraging. Given adequate funding and support from JCUNQ and the community, the Centre can realistically aspire to maintain a position of national leadership and international prominence in the field of rural education and development. The Centre has the good fortune of having the support of people both nationally and internationally. Following his 1992 visit to the Centre, Dr. Jonathan Sher prepared an assessment of the Centre's situation and activities:

Were the RERDC to realise its national potential, it would become a centre having international importance (because no other nation has created a truly first-rate rural education and development unit yet). However, the international connection could and should consist of more than leading by example. I remain certain that JCUNQ is uniquely well-qualified to establish itself as *the* world centre in this field. The plans we have discussed for a rural education and development Ph.D. programme, drawing upon an international faculty and student population, strike me as being eminently sound, worthwhile, and feasible. Indeed,

the Rural Centre could put James Cook University "on the map" internationally to an extent I cannot imagine being true of any other area within the field of education. Similarly, the international conference . . . for 1994 promises to be a much-needed, well-timed, and influential event.

RERDC has sought to develop as a multidisciplinary centre with a diverse range of functions related directly to needs and problems of people in rural and remote areas. This mix of disciplines and professions is seen by many practitioners, researchers, and rural residents as an important innovation capable of fresh approaches to research and development in rural areas. In doing this, the Centre has attracted national and international interest and support by way of visitation, communication, and financial assistance.

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