THE ATTRACTION AND RETENTION OF PROFESSIONALS TO REGIONAL AREAS[1]

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ABSTRACT: In recent years there has been a net migration from the regions to coastal and metropolitan Australia. Now the attraction and retention of professionals to regional areas is emerging as a major problem for Australia. This paper reports the results of a study to scope the nature, severity and extent of the problem in Queensland. Representatives of a cross-section of professions from five regions were invited to provide information on the issues within their profession. Issues raised included those relating to the professional's career, family and income. While some of the issues raised were similar, solutions found to work in one region were not necessarily transferable to another. The qualitative information gathered showed that there is no one-size-fits-all solution. A national approach is needed to develop and adapt solutions that match the needs of each region. Such an approach would extend the work undertaken here to quantify the problem and assess the impacts and service delivery issues by region for each of the professions/services.

1. INTRODUCTION

The issue of attracting and retaining professionals in non-metropolitan Australia is an acknowledged concern of the Australian Government as well as State, Territory, and local governments. Professional people are increasingly either choosing to remain in city and coastal regions, or are moving from

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[1] The information contained in this paper does not reflect the policy or position of the Queensland Government or the Queensland Department of State Development, Trade and Innovation.

regional, rural and remote areas. This demographic shift is ongoing and many regional, rural and remote areas are struggling to attract and keep their professional services. The labour force statistics from the 2001 census illustrate clearly the disparity between metropolitan Australia and regional Australia, with 20 percent of metropolitan Australia's labour force comprising professionals, compared to around 11 percent in regional Australia.

Current literature links the problem of attracting and retaining professionals with changes in regional population, and indicates that in order to develop appropriate responses an understanding of these changes needs to be based on the economic, demographic and social variations that bring about the population changes within the individual regions (McKenzie, 2003a). The key reasons why gaps in professional skill shortages might be expected in regions are summarised by McKenzie (2003a) as:

- Rapidly expanding industries;
- Limited infrastructure or services;
- Less diverse culture, activities or lifestyle;
- Limited professional development;
- Variable or seasonal demand for skills; and
- Low supply of trained staff.

Within Regional Queensland the effect of the trend toward city and coastal living is being felt. For many, the advantages of working in Queensland's metropolitan areas are perceived as outweighing those afforded professionals in more inland regions. Successful promotion of Queensland as a desirable place to live and work is reflected in the ability of the south east corner and coastal areas to attract professional service providers, but this success does not extend far inland. Scoping studies such as that conducted by the CSIRO (Greiner and Allan, 2001) illustrate the difficulties faced by organisations in attracting and retaining staff in remote locations, and the choices faced by professionals considering taking up positions in such areas. The CSIRO scoping study found that career considerations were the most important motivation for skilled staff to take up positions, while perceived limits to professional development was the major reason people didn't stay (Greiner and Allan, 2001).

Inland regions are vital contributors to the Queensland state economy and the prosperity of its residents. This was recognised in the development of the Queensland State Infrastructure Plan (QSIP). Future economic growth is dependent on the productive capacity of Queensland's industries. Integral to the development of the QSIP was the identification of development opportunities in Queensland's non-metropolitan regions, and the challenges these regions faced in progressing these opportunities (State Development, 2001). Additionally, these regions may provide important lifestyle advantages in the future as the south east corner of the State becomes more heavily populated. However if professional services in these areas continue to degenerate, the trend for declining inland populations will continue, and the non-metropolitan regions will be less sustainable. Great importance must therefore be placed on addressing the issues involved in attracting and retaining services in regional, rural and remote Queensland.

Gaps in professional skills are not limited to inland regions of Queensland. While regions that are remote and isolated are key areas that struggle to attract professional services, other regions that may suffer skills shortages include those that are:

- Perceived to have limited opportunities;
- Are experiencing population growth; and
- Are experiencing population declines (McKenzie 2003a).

Coastal and urban centres that share these characteristics may also experience shortages in professional skills.

Some action has been taken to begin addressing the problems non-metropolitan regions are encountering in attracting and retaining professional services. For example the North West Queensland Allied Health Service has developed a framework for providing allied health services to Queensland's north west (National Rural Health Conference, 2003). Cotton (2003b) has suggested the establishment of a service based management structure to provide health care services across the Wide Bay Burnett region. Cotton (2003a) has further suggested changes to the current service delivery models in regional and rural Australia. The Regional Business Development Analysis panel (RBDA) has identified a number of points for action on the issue of attraction and retention of professionals in its action plan for regional business growth, presented to the Federal Government in July 2003 (RBDA, 2003). A project to develop a Centre for Excellence in Mining is being progressed to help address the issue of the availability of skilled and professional workers in the mining industry. This project is intended to involve partnerships between industry, government and education and training bodies (QMITAB, 2003).

This paper reports the results of a field study conducted by Central Queensland University (CQU) into the attraction and retention of professionals in regional, rural and remote areas of Queensland. This study was commissioned by the Queensland Departments of State Development and Premier and Cabinet. For the purposes of this paper professional services refer to those services provided by practicing, tertiary qualified and/or industry accredited persons, for example, solicitors, doctors, health care professionals, teachers, engineers, etc.

The purpose of the study was to gather the views of professionals in non-metropolitan regions of Queensland – their experiences, their knowledge and insights, and their understanding of the issues and trends, along with their suggestions for providing solutions. This study was restricted to the views of the professional workforce and gathered qualitative data and information from people in these regions.

This paper provides an overview of the results of the regional survey, an outline of the methodology employed, followed by the results of the data gathering. The paper closes with a discussion of the study findings and how this information fits with other studies. It should be noted in reading this paper that the study only deals with the subject matter qualitatively. This limitation is discussed in the concluding stages of the report.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

A survey was distributed within regional areas of Queensland in October 2003 followed by a suite of five regional round table discussions facilitated during October and November 2003.

Participants invited to the regional round table discussions were asked to complete a short survey prior to their attendance. The purpose of the survey was two-fold. First, it was aimed at collecting some summary information about perceptions of the issues relating to attracting and retaining professional staff. This information was suitable for statistical analysis and helped to validate or correct conclusions drawn from the round table discussions. The second aim was to encourage thought and to help focus round table participants on their areas of interest and experiences prior to the meetings so as to expedite the discussion process. The survey also allowed for a wider range of interested stakeholders to contribute to the study than would have been possible in a round table environment.

Anecdotal data was collected from professionals and community representatives working and living in regional, rural and remote areas of Queensland via the roundtable discussions. An attempt was made to include a range of sector groups, including councils (city and shire where possible), development and tourist organisations, Area Consultative Committees, local professional bodies, state agencies (e.g. health, education) and major industry (including SMEs).

The round tables were conducted in five locations throughout Queensland. These locations were Bundaberg, Mt Isa, Townsville, Longreach and Rockhampton. Participants were selected to provide as wide as possible cross section of the professional sectors found in regional, rural and remote areas, and included senior managers/representatives of shire councils, legal, medical and general health care professionals, accountants, ITC, tourism, veterinary, education, Australian and Queensland Government, business and industry. Approximately sixteen participants were invited to each round table and were sampled to represent the wider geographical catchment of the locations.

The locations selected were based on an interest to reflect the different characteristics of regional Queensland as follows:
• Lifestyle region: Bundaberg;
• Single traditional industry dependent region: Mt Isa;
• High growth and diversifying region: Townsville;
• Remote and diversifying region: Longreach; and
• Non-specific: Rockhampton.

In the course of facilitating the round tables, the project team was provided with a number of reports and papers relating to work done on this issue. Most of these reports came from organisations that the round table participants were representing. The information and issues contained in these reports have been used to support the issues raised by round table participants.

2.1 Survey Results

Surveys were collected from 38 of the round table attendees, and 19 additional surveys were submitted by invitees unable to attend. The respondents do not represent a random sample of the population in regional Queensland. They do however represent a broad cross section of the people in five regional areas who have some interest and/or experience in the attraction and retention of professional skills. The location of respondents to the survey is shown in Table 1. Because the sample of people invited to the round tables was non-random, some effort was made to gather a broad cross section of people (Table 2).

Table 1. Location of Respondents to the Survey

Location of Respondents	Number of Respondents
Rockhampton	8
Gladstone	1
Biloela	2
Other central Queensland	2
Townsville	9
Mt Isa	9
Bedourie	1
Cloncurry	1
Home Hill	1
Longreach	8
Bundaberg	8
Bundaberg/Wide Bay	1
Hervey Bay	2
Burnett Inland	1
Maryborough	3
Grand Total	57

Notes: Regional round tables shown in italics.

Table 2. Participants in the Survey by Sector

Sector	Number	Sector	Number
Medical Practitioners	8	Pharmacy and Hospital	1
Local govt	8	Finance	1
State Govt	7	Legal	1
Regional, community, economic devel.	5	QPWS/EPA	1
Education	4	DPI:Project officer/Grazier	1
State Govt- Bus/econ growth	4	St Govt: Emergency svcs	1
Agriculture	3	Housing	1
Mining, const & maintenance	3	Health	1
Community and social services	3	Fed Govt: Dept ES&T	1
Childcare	1	Recruitment of professionals	1

In the survey, respondents were asked if the organisation that they worked for had difficulty in attracting and retaining suitably qualified staff. Eighty nine (89) percent indicated that they did have difficulties in securing suitably qualified/experienced applicants for positions. Among the key skill areas nominated were engineering (9 responses), general medical practitioners (6 responses), accountancy, business and management (6 responses), allied health areas (6 responses) and administration/management (5 responses). A striking feature of the responses is that there is a very large diversity in the skills that have been nominated, ranging from teachers and stock inspectors through to engineers and medical specialists.

Respondents were also asked if they were aware of other groups in their region which also experienced difficulties, and 97 percent indicated that they were. Medical services were the most commonly nominated as experiencing shortages with more than 50 percent of respondents nominating some health area. This included general practitioners and specialist services, as well as allied health services. Accountancy, engineering management, and legal skills were other fields that received multiple nominations. The results indicate that perceptions about professional skill shortages in regional areas are focused on health services, while shortages appear to exist across a wide range of categories.

Survey respondents were asked to rank the main issues that affected the capacity of their region to attract and retain professional and other skilled workers. The results of this are summarised in Table 3 and Figure 1.

Table 3. Ratings for Major Issues

	Average ranking (1 = highest rank)	Number rating as most important
Telecommunications	7.38	0
Transport	7.01	1
Housing	4.85	2
Health services	4.88	3
Education & training	4.01	3
Salary levels	3.67	9
Career opportunities	2.91	14
Lifestyle	3.00	16

There are some slight differences in results depending on whether average ratings or primary ratings are considered (Table 3). Issues that were most important according to the average ratings given were Career Opportunities, Lifestyle and Salary Levels, while the order in terms of only the first rating given were Lifestyle, Career Opportunities and Salary Levels. Telecommunications and Transport rated as the least important issues.

Other key factors that were nominated included:
- Distance from major centres (and associated travel/holiday expenses);
- Lack of job opportunities for partners;
- Not enough variety in employment;

- High workloads, and difficulties of finding relieving staff;
- Professional isolation;
- Lack of social/cultural infrastructure;
- Education needs for children (particularly secondary);
- Negative perceptions of rural, mining and regional areas (excluding tourism centres).
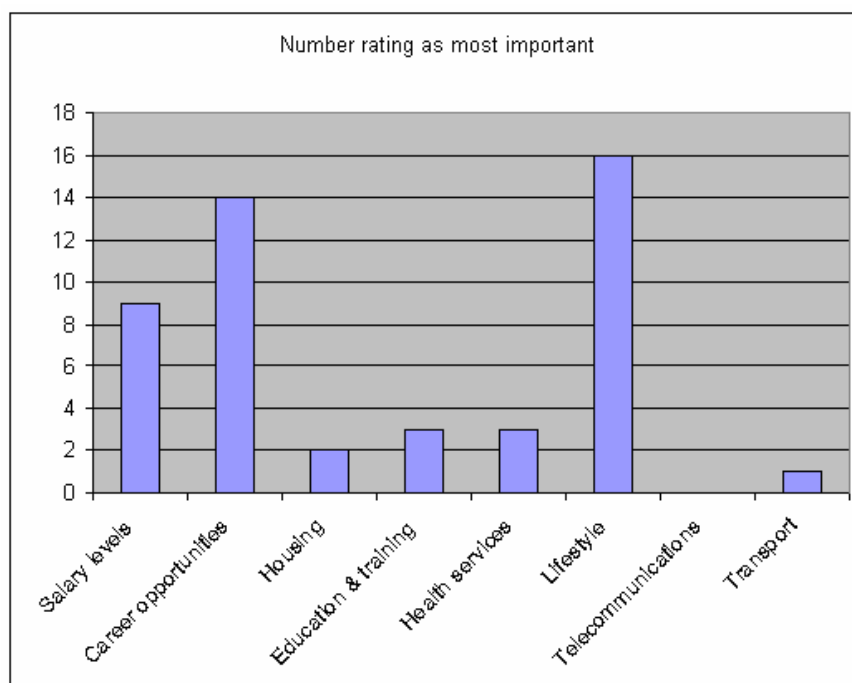

Figure 1. Number of Respondents Rating each Issue as Most Important

Respondents to the survey were also asked to rate the current standard of service to their region in eight broad areas. Respondents were reminded that these services may be delivered to their region in a number of ways. The results are summarised in Figure 2, and show that no sectors score well in terms of "Very High" approval ratings, nor score badly in terms of "Very Poor" approval ratings.

Overall there is little difference in ratings between the sectors, except that Other Health has lower approval levels. Sectors that score highest in terms of approval ratings include Accountancy, Public Administration, Engineering and Education. Other Health scores poorest in terms of approval ratings, and also has high levels of disapproval ratings.
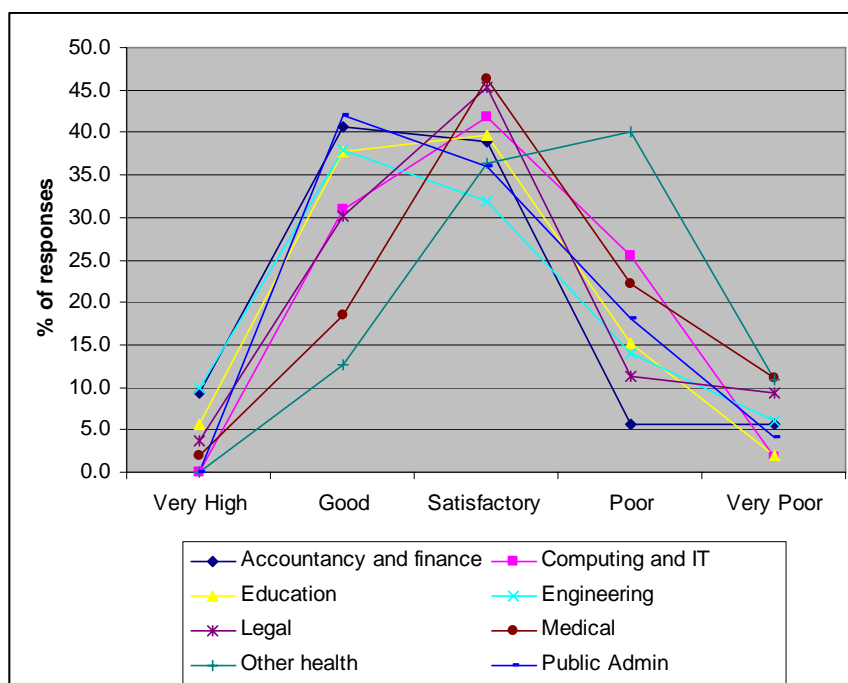
Figure 2. Ratings of Current Service Levels in Regional Areas

Respondents were asked to rate how easy they thought it was to attract different groups of professional skills to their region. The results are shown in Figure 3, and demonstrate that Medical and Other Health services are perceived to have more difficulty in attracting skills than other professions.

The final question in the survey was aimed at identifying how different mechanisms for delivering services to regions were viewed. Respondents were asked to tick the mechanisms that they thought were feasible across the broad categories available. The results are summarised in Table 4.

The two strategies that attract most support are to provide services through regional hubs, and to train local people in basic service delivery. There is relatively low support for using tools such as the internet to connect people, or to provide services on an 'as needs' basis through consultants and locums. There is moderate support for providing regular fly-in/fly-out services, particularly for medical, other health and public administration services. The average level of support for the alternate delivery mechanisms is shown in Figure 4.

2.2 Round Table Results

The round table results are broken into the key themes of issues and needs, future trends and drivers, novel ideas and models, and alternative delivery frameworks. The summary results of the round tables are presented under these headings below.
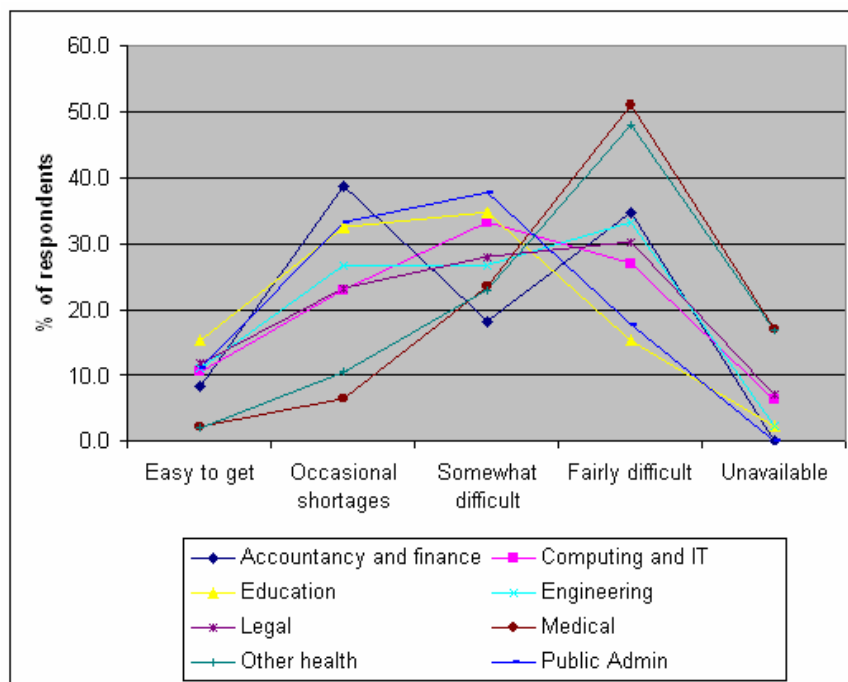
Figure 3. Ratings of the Status of Attracting Professional Staff to Region

Professional sectors raised as difficult to attract

Across all regions, medical, allied health, information technology/ computer, engineering, finance/ accountancy, teaching, legal, management level, and community and social service professionals were listed as being difficult to attract and retain. In Townsville environmental professionals and pharmacists were of particular concern, while in Longreach veterinarians were reported as difficult to retain. Bundaberg, Mt Isa and Longreach all indicated difficulty in attracting and retaining teachers, especially specialist teachers and guidance counsellors.

Professional nurseries

All regions indicated that they were able to attract graduates, but had difficulty attracting trained, experienced professionals. A common problem with retention was the use of regional areas as a "professional nursery" – a graduate takes on a position and builds up skills and experience, which enable them to secure a position on the coast or in the city. For example, Mt Isa TAFE has no problem attracting teaching professionals, but once they have gained skills and experience they head back to the city or the coast. Those who stay once they have a level of skill and experience are commonly "poached" within the region, as has been the case with environmental professionals employed by the

Hinchinbrook Shire Council. That council has difficulty attracting fully skilled professionals, and tends to take on under-skilled personnel. They then spend time and money increasing the professional's skill level, at which point they are poached.

Table 4. Support for Alternative Delivery Mechanism

General Skill area	Alternative service delivery mechanisms					
	Provide regular fly-in/fly-out service from major centre	*Use telephone or video-conference to provide service from a distance*	*Provide better services in regional 'hub'*	*Train local people to provide basic service delivery*	*Use better tools such as the internet to connect people with specialist services in major cities*	*Rely more on consultants and locums to provide services on an 'as needs' basis*
Accountancy and financial	14	11	24	20	9	5
Computing and IT	11	8	20	24	12	6
Education	10	17	30	17	13	5
Engineering	12	4	18	17	5	8
Legal	11	8	18	13	4	10
Medical practitioners	17	13	27	17	10	13
Other health services	21	12	30	17	7	10
Public administration	19	8	20	18	7	5

Family issues

In all regions surveyed, personal and family issues were cited as some of the most influential in determining whether a prospective employee would take up a position, and whether they would stay. Social and support networks are important for any family moving into a new region. For professionals with a young family, or looking at starting a family, availability of medical services is an issue of great importance. Availability of jobs for spouses, whether they want to work full time or in more flexible arrangements, is of particular concern for potential professionals, particularly those with professional partners keen to continue in their own careers. Education is an issue for professionals with school-age children – families tend to relocate to major centres as their children move on to secondary school. The availability of quality rental housing is also an issue for professionals with families. This issue can be exacerbated by regulatory bodies, as was the case in Moura recently – there are a large number of housing commission premises vacant, yet accommodation could not be provided for health professionals coming to the town.
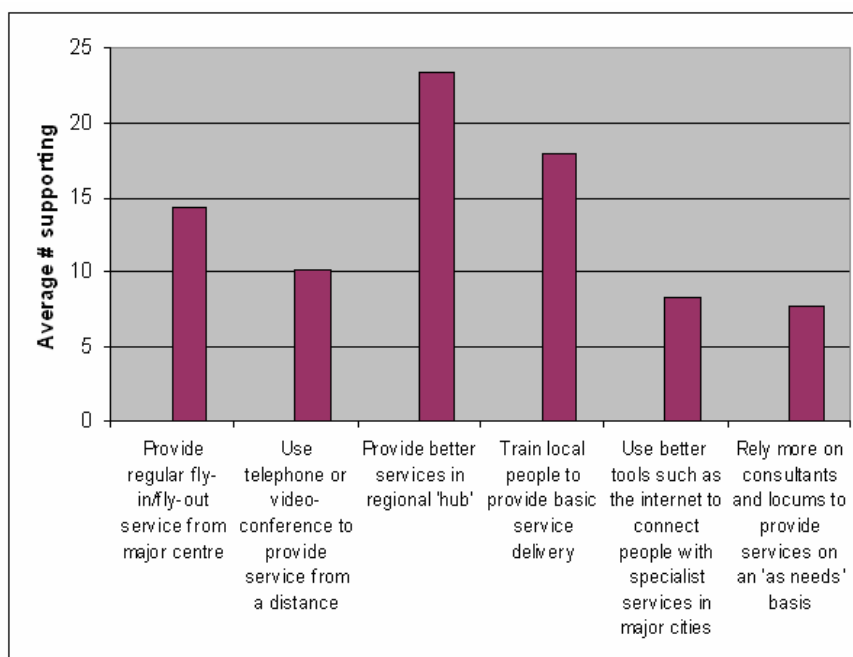
Figure 4. Average Number of Respondents Supporting Alternate Delivery Mechanisms

Aging workforce

Respondents in all regions commented on the implications of the aging workforce – while many were ready to retire, there were not necessarily others ready to step up and replace them. This was not limited to the professions, and within the professions was particularly applicable to the health, management and local government (especially CEOs) sectors. Within the medical sector, this is of particular concern, because the older generation of doctors are accustomed to working 70 hour weeks. The new generation of GPs is not prepared to work these hours, and it will require two new GPs to replace the older retiring GP. The aging workforce also brings issues of high support needs. For example, in the case of older primary school teachers, additional classroom support is needed.

Career Options

Limited career options was a major issue in both attracting and retaining professionals in all regions surveyed. This was reported as both the cause of and the result of the lack of professional support and development opportunities in the regions.   A lack of mentoring was raised as a particular problem.   For example, Centacare in Mt Isa has no difficulty finding graduates, as they are

attracted by the range of experience and opportunities available to them. However, there is difficulty in Centacare's ability to provide them with enough professional support to retain them.

With the exception of Townsville, all regions reported that the perception amongst professionals was that experience in a regional, rural or remote area is of less value than experience in the city or more populous area. Taking a position outside of the city or coast is seen as being detrimental to the career.

Overseas trained professionals

Bundaberg, Rockhampton and Longreach all reported that sourcing overseas professionals has merit, but also has many accompanying issues that need to be addressed to make this a viable alternative. For example, in the medical profession, employing an overseas trained professional to fill a gap is complicated by the need for supervisory support, which is often not available. If there were a local doctor available to go to the region in need to provide the supervision, there would be no need to employ the overseas doctor in need of supervision.

Cultural support and community acceptance were cited as necessities for skilled migration to be successful. A representative of the Multicultural Settlement Hervey Bay Project reported an instance of people of Muslim background having come to the regions to work and leaving because of persecution and racism. It was suggested that this problem is an institutional as well as a community problem.

Financial service provision

In the case of both overseas and local professionals, the financial institutions were seen to exacerbate retention difficulties due to outdated policies. In most sectors, it is being recognised that professionals may not hold down a traditional "permanent" position, and yet may never be "unemployed". A professional may take on a series of projects, gain experience that provides them with access to constant employment, and yet be unable to take out a home loan because they don't have a "permanent" job.

Competition for professionals

Competition with the coast and South East Queensland was raised as an issue in all regions surveyed, along with national and international employment markets. This issue is related to the previously mentioned "professional nursery" issue. Graduates who gain skills and experience in the regions are then attracted to the coast. Offering more money was acknowledged as being an unsuccessful strategy, as was offering other work related incentives. Each region also reported a degree of difficulty in competing for professionals within its own surrounding region, for example, Townsville pharmacists poached by Cairns, Biloela industry competing with the larger (and higher paying) industries in Gladstone, SMEs competing with large industry. While poaching was an issue in all regions surveyed, Longreach indicated that it was a good way of getting a professional who wanted to stay.

Education and training

Bundaberg, Longreach and Mt Isa all raised the issue of the nature of training and education currently available – it is not adequate to prepare professionals for life in regional, rural or remote areas. It was reported that city education provides professionals with skills relevant to working in the city environment. Professional development opportunities in the regions are not readily available, and the costs and timing of travelling to cities for development and networking opportunities are prohibitive. When conference and training opportunities in Brisbane arise, they are timed to suit professionals from the city.

Community expectation

The Rockhampton region reported that community expectation can be a limiting factor in introducing new service delivery models. Many communities expect people to move to the region when a new venture is developed. This can be managed, as is the case in Xstrata's Rolleston mining venture. It was made clear from the outset that personnel would not be relocating to the town, so there has been no community expectation in this regard.

Planning and development

There are barriers to setting up new service delivery arrangements in regional, rural and remote areas. Integrated planning is not always workable – council and Queensland government requirements are not necessarily parallel. There is a need for seamlessness between the levels of government. Another factor is the provision of services to a developing business – an example was given in Mt Isa, where a business person setting up in the town had to wait three months for an electrician.

2.3 Future Trends and Drivers

In all regions surveyed, the aging and retiring proportion of the current workforce was mentioned as a major issue in managing the workforce over the next ten to fifteen years. Issues include the high level of support the aging workforce needs, and the leakage of knowledge and experience as older workers leave. Another issue is the retirement of many professionals in their 40s and 50s for lifestyle and other reasons. One positive aspect of these developments is the potential pool of skilled professionals this provides, in the form of "boomers in denial", who are ready to slow down but not yet ready to retire. They are attracted by the opportunity to "give back" to the industry or community that has sustained them this far. Utilisation of this potential source would reinforce the current trend for casualisation of the workforce (employment figures released November 6 2003 indicate an increase in casualisation). It will feed into the demand for workplace flexibility that is being created by other groups such as working parents.

The changing nature of the career structure is another driver that was acknowledged in all regions surveyed. Young professionals no longer look to secure a "job-for-life". Two to three years appears to be the norm – a young

professional who spends longer than this in one position is often questioned about the length of their stay. In contrast, it was noted at some of the roundtables that many teachers are opting to stay longer in one place. However, at the Longreach roundtable younger teachers were identified as being reluctant to commit to a single inland location for a three year period.

Career and life cycles were raised as being recognisable and as processes that can be managed by the implementation of appropriate succession planning. One recognised cycle is that of locals who leave to go to university and to see the world to some extent, then return in their late twenties to early thirties with partner and perhaps a young family. This group tends to stay until the children are ready for education, when the choice needs to be made between boarding school and relocation. They tend to head to a regional hub and the south east for secondary and tertiary education for the children, and are then free to return once the children are through their schooling. While they may opt to stay on the coast or in the south east for career related reasons at this time, in the later stages of their careers there is the opportunity for them to return to the regions to pass on knowledge and provide mentoring to the current young professionals.

Another recognised cycle is that of the keen young professionals, who head out to the regions to gain the experience and breadth of knowledge that will provide them with career advancement opportunities, which will inevitably necessitate gravitation to the regional hubs, and in time to the south east corner. Somewhere along the way family and children will play their part, but on the whole, their movement will be dictated by their career options. Once again, in the latter stages of their career, the option to return to the regional, rural or remote area may be attractive to them. Recognising and planning for cycles such as these may be a key to maintaining constant access to professional services.

A number of comments were raised in all regions surveyed with regard to characteristics and peculiarities of the younger generation (Generations X and Y) that impact on their work practices. These generations are perceived as believing there are no opportunities in the regions, a belief perpetuated by schools, guidance/careers officers and parents. They have grown up negotiating terms with their parents and expect this to continue in their working life – they expect to have a lot more say about what their role entails and what is expected of them, and expect to have their contribution acknowledged. They will follow development and career opportunities, rather than staying with one employer. They have different expectations of the hours and work conditions of their chosen employment. Professional development is perceived as an entitlement that employers will provide them. Their focus is on their need for support and encouragement, that is, what they can gain from the position rather than what they can bring to it.

In Mt Isa, it was suggested that school leavers are opting for university as a way to get to the coast rather than because it is their chosen career path – they want the lifestyle, and are expected by their school, their peers and their parents to want it. In previous generations, if Dad worked at the mine, for example, kids had the opportunity to take on a job or apprenticeship at the same workplace – this is no longer the case.

The new generation of GPs was acknowledged in all regions surveyed as being particularly different to previous generations – communities can no longer expect a doctor to be on call 24 hours seven days a week, or to work 70-80 hour weeks. In the city and on the coast, they have the opportunity to work in a practice where they may be on call one night in ten, and this in outfitted premises set up specifically for the doctors on call. Doctors in the regional, rural and remote areas do not have these options.

Current issues with indemnity and insurance are intensifying the trend for procedural medicine professionals to deskill. This, in combination with the aging workforce, has led the Central Queensland Rural Division of General Practice to predict that a large proportion of its current workforce will be gone in the next five years (CQRDGP, 2003). This statistic illustrates the urgency of addressing the problems being encountered in attracting professionals to the medical sector in the regions.

The deskilling of procedural medicine professionals to non-procedural professionals due to insurance and indemnity issues has implications for communities – young couples looking to start a family will not remain in an area that cannot provide the skills required for infant delivery and neo-natal care. Young families will not remain in a region that can not provide service much beyond writing a prescription – if Johnny falls out of a tree in Longreach, he shouldn't have to fly to Townsville, Rockhampton or Brisbane to have the broken arm straightened and set for lack of availability of a doctor to provide anaesthesia. The 40$^+$ age group doesn't want to have to travel from central or western Queensland to the coast or the south east to have sunspots removed.

Technology is recognised as a driver for changing service delivery methods; however, all regions indicated that unless the quality of the technology services currently provided is greatly improved, it is unlikely that its utilisation will be of great benefit. Remarks on the use of technology indicated that it should be used to enhance and improve existing services, rather than replacing them, and that it should only be used to provide a service in place of a local provider where a local provider is not available.

Economic growth was seen as a necessary driver in both Longreach and Townsville. Longreach in particular emphasised that if the region simply maintained its current population and economic base, it would not be able to sustain services. Townsville's strong economic growth was seen as a positive in aiding in the attraction of professionals, and it was suggested that ways be sought for surrounding regions to feed off this.

Townsville acknowledged that regional service hubs seemed to be the way forward, but the concern was raised that this may be at the expense of the regional communities.

2.4 Novel Ideas and Methods

Employment opportunities for spouses was a common suggestion for attracting professionals. Suggested recruitment strategies include seeking out professional couples in conjunction with other employers in need of professional services. A suggestion raised across all regions was to provide flexible work

options for spouses with children, who may not want to work fulltime, but wish to remain active within their profession. This may include flexible working hours and job share arrangements. While it was suggested that this may be administratively complex, it was also recognised that in areas where the alternative was to leave positions unfilled, it could be a workable option. An example of a successful flexible arrangement that has tapped into this kind of professional resource is that of a nurse in western Queensland who is working a 0.2 load to provide diabetes training.

It was acknowledged in all regions surveyed that if the partner and family were not happy, retention of the professional was unlikely. Suggestions other than employment opportunities for the partner included ensuring social and other support networks relevant to family needs were made available, and providing a welcome and community introduction to the family when they arrive. Education and extra-curricular needs for children were also raised as important issues, and potential professionals and their families need to be able to access information on these to help them in their decision-making. Groups such as Townsville Enterprise Limited and Bundaberg Region Limited indicated that they could package such information for easy distribution.

Each region suggested that attracting professionals could be enhanced by promotion of the benefits of the region. It was acknowledged that money was commonly not the deciding issue for potential employees, particularly those with families. The benefits, including lifestyle, employment/ professional opportunities for spouses, and any other factors important to potentials, need to be packaged and marketed to encourage professionals to conclude that working in the region will be of benefit to them. Collaboration between industry, community and government is needed to drive this promotion.

Experience and career advancement opportunities, as well as professional development, support and networking, need to be provided to reduce the leakage of professionals from the regions. One suggested method for achieving this was to build and maintain a "professional community" within a region to provide support and networking opportunities. Another suggestion was the establishment of partnerships with other businesses, sectors, government departments and agencies outside of the region to allow transfer and rotational schemes to enhance and broaden the experience of the professional. This would allow professionals in the more rural and remote areas access to mentoring, professional development and networking opportunities during a rotation in a more populous region. In addition, it would provide services to regions that may otherwise have been unavailable. On a regional scale, cooperative partnerships could be formed to "share" professionals between employers that otherwise would not have the range of work to attract a permanent specialist.

The issue of up-skilling locals was raised in all regions surveyed. Using workplace training to increase the skills of current employees and setting up scholarships and bursaries for young locals in grow-your-own schemes were two suggestions. It was also suggested that a local skills audit be conducted to determine what untapped talent existed, and what needed to be put in place in order to make using this talent a possibility.

All regions wanted to emphasise the benefit a professional gains due to the breadth of experience afforded them in the non-metropolitan areas. All believed that the perception that working in the regions was bad for the career could be dispelled with the aid of some careful marketing. Professionals also need to be reassured that they will not be "stuck out there" indefinitely. This implies community acceptance that professionals will no longer commit to a position for long periods.

Succession planning was raised as a key tool in retaining access to professional services. It was suggested that we need to accept that, as a professional's children approach secondary school age, they will look for relocation to the coast or the south east for easily accessible secondary and tertiary education facilities. Employers can plan for this, and provide the opportunity needed, with a further plan to bring the professional back once the children's educations are complete. It was suggested that, while these professionals were in the more populous regions for their children's needs, they should also be provided with opportunities to fulfil their own professional development needs.

An alternative suggestion to accepting the leakage of professionals to enable the education of children was to build up the level of education in the regional areas.

Mentoring was raised as an important issue in retaining professionals across all regions. One suggestion was to revisit the "Master Apprentice" model. It was also acknowledged that there is potential within the 50^+ age group to provide this resource, with the aid of technology such as video streaming, online facilities and telephone conferencing for the more remote areas. (Once again, use of technological aids is dependent on the reliability of technological service provision in the region.)

One community association has taken the decision to provide infrastructure such as housing and business premises to be used by visiting health professionals. This process was begun after a long period of unsuccessful recruiting attempts. The community has had to accept that they will no longer have their "own" professional, and is making sure there are incentives for visiting professionals to provide them with the required services.

All regions indicated that it was important to make students aware of the advantages of working and living in the regions. Business and industry need to collaborate with the education sector to ensure students are being given correct information, not the "urban legends and rural myths" that there are no opportunities outside the city. It was also suggested that undergraduate training should include work placement in a regional, rural or remote area, to give students some experience of the realities of working and living in these places. It is believed that this will reduce the effects of the "culture shock" experienced by many new arrivals that come to work in the regions. It is important to ensure that any work placement schemes be positive, valuable experiences, and that "potential keepers" be identified for recruitment down the track.

Some services such as counselling are being provided by "outreach services" sourced from the coast and cities. These are achieved using fly-in, fly-out and

telephone access. Telephone supervision is also being used to assist in the supervision of young professionals.

The perception was raised that for something to be of value, it needs to come from Brisbane. It was suggested that this attitude could be discouraged with the aid of local success stories acting as champions and ambassadors for the regions in a targeted marketing effort.

Collaboration with local employment agencies was suggested in some regions. The traditional "advertisement in the newspaper" is no longer attracting quality applicants. Instead of spending money on readvertising due to limited response or the inability to retain the successful applicant, recruitment specialists can match the person to the position. It was also suggested that employer interview techniques were resulting in poor applicant selection. Recruitment agencies could help resolve this issue, either by coaching employers or handling the recruitment process.

Burnett Inland Economic Development Organisation, Townsville Enterprise Limited and Bundaberg Region Limited are examples of organisations that can aid business and government agencies in their recruitment and collaboration efforts.   Collaboration between employers to recruit, share and rotate professionals would have the added benefit of forming the basis for a professional support network.

An example of a strategy that has worked comes from Hervey Bay. Someone advertised for all newcomers to the region to come to a barbeque. Approximately 100 people attended, the majority of them professionals. These barbecues became monthly events, and professional and social networks were established. One business person found their business manager by attending one of the barbecues.

Sourcing professionals from overseas has potential, but at present there are many inhibiting factors. These include the lack of supervision for the newcomer (this is particularly relevant to the medical sector); lack of support networks specific to the culture of the overseas professional; lack of community acceptance and the existence of both community and institutional racism.

Other issues raised in relation to skilled migration included the upper age limit of 45 years being too low; slow and cumbersome immigration processes; and the perceived inequities with regard to packages offered to overseas professionals when compared to what is offered to local professionals.

It was suggested that recruitment of professionals should be conducted in a more selective and targeted manner. A professional should be appointed because they suit the region, not simply because they have the required qualifications. This assessment process could begin with the previously suggested work placement during tertiary education – students who respond well to placement in the regional areas should be identified as recruitment prospects, although not necessarily upon completing their university studies. Another option raised was to seek out the 25-30 year olds with a rural background – while not all are interested in returning to the regions, some may be keen but not aware of the opportunities available to them.

Outsourcing/ contracting out of services was raised as an option that can

work in some situations. It could be implemented in conjunction with some of the collaborative arrangements previously mentioned, such as rotation and cooperative sharing of services. It may not always be necessary to source contract services from the city or the coast – other regions may be in a position to provide services on a contract basis. All areas indicated that this solution should not be used in competition with existing services; it should be used to provide services that are otherwise unavailable. The previously mentioned outreach services are an example of this style of service delivery.

Making use of the store of knowledge and experience residing in the baby-boomers and grey nomads was suggested in Townsville, Bundaberg and Longreach. While these age groups may not be willing to take on full time positions, they are potential back-filling, training and mentoring options.

The impact that one individual can have on a community should not be underestimated. An example comes from Moranbah, where the appointment of a new Principal to the State High School greatly reduced the turnover of staff at the school. This mobilised the community into giving support to the school, with the result that the school and community now provide support and encouragement.

2.5 Alternative Delivery Frameworks

A number of comments were made in the roundtables about alternative delivery frameworks. These are summarised below.

- Complementary services between regions could improve delivery. In the same way that some local governments share large machinery items, perhaps they could share professional services. This could work for businesses as well, for example, an IT specialist "employed" by a cooperative of businesses/ agencies. This would remove duplication of difficult to source services, provide a range of experience for the professionals involved, and make both attraction and retention more affordable for the employers involved. An example of this comes from the Belyando, Nebo and Broadsound Shire Councils, who obtained funding from the Local Government Incentive Program to conduct a feasibility study, "Councils in Co-operation". This has been completed and addresses IT, plant and equipment and human resources being shared across the three shires. A draft management plan and a draft operational plan have been developed. The Hinterland Tourism and Economic Development Corporation are involved in the implementation of these plans, with plans for implementation in early 2005.
- Dr Paul Cotton (2003a) has provided a suggested model for GPs and other health services. The model suggests the development of working partnerships between regional practices & demographically suitable areas of need.
- Rotation of professionals around regions/ agencies was suggested with local government in mind, but could work for other employers. It would provide the professional with access to mentoring and opportunities for broader experience. It would also provide rural and remote-based professionals with

opportunities for professional development and networking while on rotation in the more populous regions.

- Succession planning, taking into account the life cycles a professional may follow, was suggested. In short, plan for professionals to move away from the regions, for example when their children are ready for secondary school. Accept that shorter terms of commitment are the norm and plan accordingly.

- Fly-in, fly-out, drive-in, drive-out arrangements for short term stays while not ideal from the viewpoint of the community, are at times the best solution, particularly for short term projects or in providing service delivery to areas that are too small to sustain a permanent professional. However, these arrangements should not be seen as "the" solution to the problem of getting professionals into regional, rural and remote areas.

- Development of business hubs and regional service hubs was seen as being a probable way forward. It was noted, particularly in Longreach, that these should not be set up to replicate existing sustainable services, for example, a service already available in Winton should be supported by Longreach and other surrounding districts, rather than an identical service being set up in Longreach as part of a service hub. Hubs can be "naturally" created by the clustering of government agencies – in order for hubs that grow up around these clusters to remain viable, the government agency presence needs to be maintained.

- Employing local people in flexible conditions was a suggestion raised in most regions. This would help employers tap into the pool of skills within the partners of the current workforce, and the semi-retired 45 to 50^+ age group. An example of this was given at the Mt Isa round table – a podiatrist in western Queensland, married to a grazier, provides clinics on a part-time basis.

- Outreach services using technology supported by regional visits (fly-in, fly-out basis) was suggested to either provide a service or to provide support and supervision for the service providers in the regions. As previously mentioned, the success of this scheme is highly dependent on access to quality technology service provision.

- Ensure undergraduate training includes exposure to regional, rural and remote practice via university partnerships with industry, peak bodies and government. The proposed Centre for Excellence in Mining anticipates developing such partnerships to increase the mining training and education carried out in Mt Isa.

- Provide infrastructure for the use of visiting professionals, once it becomes evident that a continued presence will not be sustained. Part of this process will involve community acceptance that a service is no longer "theirs".

- Offer a private practice set up to a professional couple. This is particularly relevant to couples in the medical and health professions. Tied up with this would be promotion of lifestyle, provision of infrastructure and government-business collaboration.

- Accept that attraction of young professionals won't always be possible – look for solutions in the other groups, including the 50^+ group.

- North West Queensland Primary Health Care has developed an outreach allied health service. The service is based in Mt Isa and provides "a multi-disciplinary allied health service to eleven culturally diverse (Indigenous, non-Indigenous and mixed) remote communities, spread over 373 000 km^2, utilising a hub and spoke model. The key features of the model include allied health professionals (AHPs) operating and travelling in functional teams, under a calendar established for a 6 month period. Each team visits its target communities on a 6 weekly rotation, working for 2–3 days in the community dependent on size. The teams travel by charter aircraft to most communities, and a centralised booking number is used to make appointments where culturally feasible. The model includes the development of therapy assistant positions in each community to provide follow-up to clients between visits by the allied health professionals. Collaboration with the resident health professionals and other agencies, carers and families is seen as core business to promote co-ordinated care and client self-management." (North West Queensland Allied Health Service, 2003).

3. IMPLICATIONS OF THE SURVEY FINDINGS

In all regions surveyed, it was acknowledged that none of the novel ideas or suggested alternative delivery frameworks provides a quick fix or definitive solution. However, a combination of some of the suggestions, implemented as appropriate to the particular situation, could provide viable solutions. In some areas, skill shortages are associated with growth in a region and the subsequent tightening of the labour market. In many cases the focus in these areas is satisfying new needs that are developing. In other areas suffering low growth and population declines, the emphasis is more about holding on to existing services and personnel, and attracting young people to return to a region.

While many of the issues raised at the regional round tables were common to all regions, it became apparent that some issues were specific to some regions and not others. For example, the Bundaberg region, particularly Hervey Bay, cited a large influx of retirees, raising issues of health service provision that are different to those in the other regions. Longreach and Mt Isa attendees were more concerned with education for children than the other regions.

It appears that population groups, particularly skilled professionals, are becoming more mobile. People are shifting for a variety of reasons, but education and lifestyle are emerging as major driving factors. Many professionals are moving to major centres as their children reach secondary school age. Succession planning that accounts for this mobility will aid in the provision of consistent professional services.

Lifestyle choices are becoming more important to people. For the baby boomer generation, these choices are represented in terms of early retirement, lifestyle/employment changes in the later part of their careers, preference for reduced workloads, and moves to different locations for lifestyle (eg shift to coastal region). There is also some evidence that lifestyle choices are very important to younger generations, who appear more likely to focus on 'liveability" as a key factor in choosing to move to a region, tend to switch

between jobs faster, and are less likely to be 'captured' by a region once they move there.

Skilled migration, while filling some of the gaps in regional, rural and remote areas, has its own set of challenges (Gambaro, 2003). Apart from the gaps in cultural support, the need for supervision is a major issue for regions wanting to attract migrating professionals. The complexity of this issue is illustrated by the fact that if suitable supervision is available, the need for the skilled migrant is negated. The lack of acceptance of immigrants to what some reported as racially intolerant homogeneous rural communities (largely Europeans) places additional stresses on migrants trying to assimilate into these communities.

It is clear from the range of issues brought forward by this project, and others (Greiner and Allan, 2001; RBDA 2003; Budge, 2003) that understanding the cause of the decreasing ability of a region to attract and retain professionals is an important part of finding solutions to the issue. The issues raised in this study are similar to those raised by the RBDA (2003) and the CSIRO (Greiner and Allan, 2001), in particular those relating to access to professional development and training, and professional support.

Acknowledging changes to regions and changes to career structure are important starting points. Thinking beyond the current or traditional pools of professionals, and identifying potential resources not currently being tapped are vital elements in finding solutions (McKenzie, 2003b). The availability and reliability of technology to both support and provide professional service delivery are important aspects in assuring the retention of services in non-metropolitan areas. Packaging and promoting the benefits of living and working in a region, and identifying and addressing any detracting issues, are necessary strategies that require the involvement of employer groups, the community and government.

4. CONCLUSION

Trends in demographic, cultural and generational shifts occurring in non-metropolitan Australia are having a significant impact on the attraction and retention of professionals. This study has shown regional, rural and remote Queensland communities have not been immune to these changes. From all published reports this trend will continue to occur, in Australia and across the globe. A partnership approach between the Government, Industry and the Community is needed to address this issue. Furthermore in order to keep regional and rural communities viable, the communities themselves need to accept and adapt to the global drivers of change. It is of note that the emerging global career culture does not espouse long-term stays by professionals in any loci (regional, metropolitan or otherwise).

Communities, peak bodies and government need to work together to bring about acceptance of the changes that are driving through the regions. Communities need to accept change, and generate responses that reflect their particular needs. Peak bodies and government need to assist communities in the assimilation to the new culture.

This study has provided some useful qualitative insights into the issues in

non-metropolitan regions of Queensland. It is noted however that the problem occurs across Australia and this study has shown considerable regional variation exists. Differences are also likely to be evident between each State and Territory due to geography, industry and the community structure. It is reasonable to conclude however that the changes impacting on non-metropolitan regions are now of such dimension and breadth that there is a need for Government to undertake additional research and to consider the development of an integrated Regional Policy. This additional research is needed as while this paper provides a qualitative overview for Queensland it does not address the issue nationally or quantitatively. In addition there are a number of important issues yet to be addressed.

For example:

- What is the actual demand for these services?
- What are the thresholds that are required to support these services?
- What are the key considerations in attracting and retaining professionals?

Furthermore work needs to be undertaken to assess what limitations this shortage of professionals has on business performance. For example if a business requires a service that is too costly or difficult and time consuming to secure, that business is likely to relocate to where the services are more cost effective or more readily accessible. Accordingly the absence of a professional service may restrict the economic development activity of a region.

In addition consideration needs to be given to the impact limited professional services will have in sensitive environmental/development areas and their long-term ramifications. As an example the adequacy of the coastal planning/zoning in remote coastal areas may impact negatively on the Great Barrier Reef. Accordingly there is a need for a formal holistic study into the problem at the National level.

The information presented in this paper, while derived from a small data sample, demonstrates that the problem is complex and intractable unless an integrated approach is realised. It is only when a detailed understanding of the issue is achieved that suitably tailored strategies and polices can be developed and effectively implemented.

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