

Spotlight

Professional Learning for Rural,
Regional and Remote Teachers

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Acknowledgement of Country

The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) acknowledges the traditional custodians of the land, sea country and waterways from across Australia. We honour and pay our respects to their Elders past, present and emerging.

Teaching in a rural, regional or remote area is highly rewarding, but teachers in these areas face complex challenges that are unique to, or exacerbated by, their geographical location.



Challenges include limited support for students from diverse backgrounds, difficulty in accessing teaching resources, or a lack of information and communication facilities (Jenkins et al., 2011).

Educational disparity across Australia, for example lower NAPLAN results in rural and remote areas, may be a consequence of these challenges (Goss et al, 2018; Holden et al, 2018). The disparity has necessitated a national drive to find ways to not only attract and retain teachers in rural and remote areas, but also focus on developing those already there. The 2018 report of the Australian Government's *Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education* (IRRRRE) emphasises that more needs to be done to grow the expertise of teachers in these areas and that the key is “resourcing professional development which is delivered mostly in-situ” (Halsey, 2018, p. 43). Halsey stresses in the report that a highly competent teacher workforce is critical to raising the achievements of students and is central to a student’s successful transition to further study, training and employment.

In order to determine the current arrangement and selection processes of professional learning in rural, regional and remote areas, AITSL conducted stakeholder consultation and a targeted survey focusing on teachers’ experiences in 2018. The survey found teachers in these regions are prioritising the needs of their learners and their teaching practices when selecting professional learning. The teachers reported undertaking a diverse range of professional learning activities including regularly collaborating with colleagues within their schools. However, the majority of respondents found it difficult to choose professional learning opportunities due to cost, distance, and access to casual/relief teachers – factors related predominantly to undertaking external professional learning activities. This finding was reinforced by results from the 2019 AITSL Stakeholder Survey, where 48% of remote and very remote teachers reported it was either “Always” or “Almost always” difficult to access high quality professional learning compared to 19% of teachers in major cities.¹

¹ Of the 1,990 teachers who responded to the professional learning questions in the 2019 AITSL Stakeholder Survey, 63 were from remote or very remote regions and 1,211 were from major cities.

At a glance

- Australia can be divided into five Remoteness Areas, based on the Australian Statistical Geography Standard: Major Cities, Inner Regional, Outer Regional, Remote, and Very Remote.
- 46% of Australian schools are in rural, regional and remote areas.
- 28% of all Australian students attend school in a rural, regional or remote school.

Rural, regional and remote schools

The Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS) divides Australia into five levels of geographic remoteness - Major Cities, Inner Regional, Outer Regional, Remote and Very Remote (Figure 1). These classifications are calculated using road distances between localities and service centres of different sizes. In this Spotlight schools within the four classifications outside of Australia's major cities are considered 'rural, regional and remote.'

One in ten Australians (2.6 million people) live in a town with less than 10,000 people (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018) and 28% of all Australian students attend school in a rural, regional or remote area (Figure 2). The significant number of students in these schools highlight the vital importance of maintaining the quality and ongoing professional learning of teachers working in these schools.

Figure 1

'Map of Australia divided into the five levels of geographic remoteness', Commonwealth of Australia, CC BY 4.0

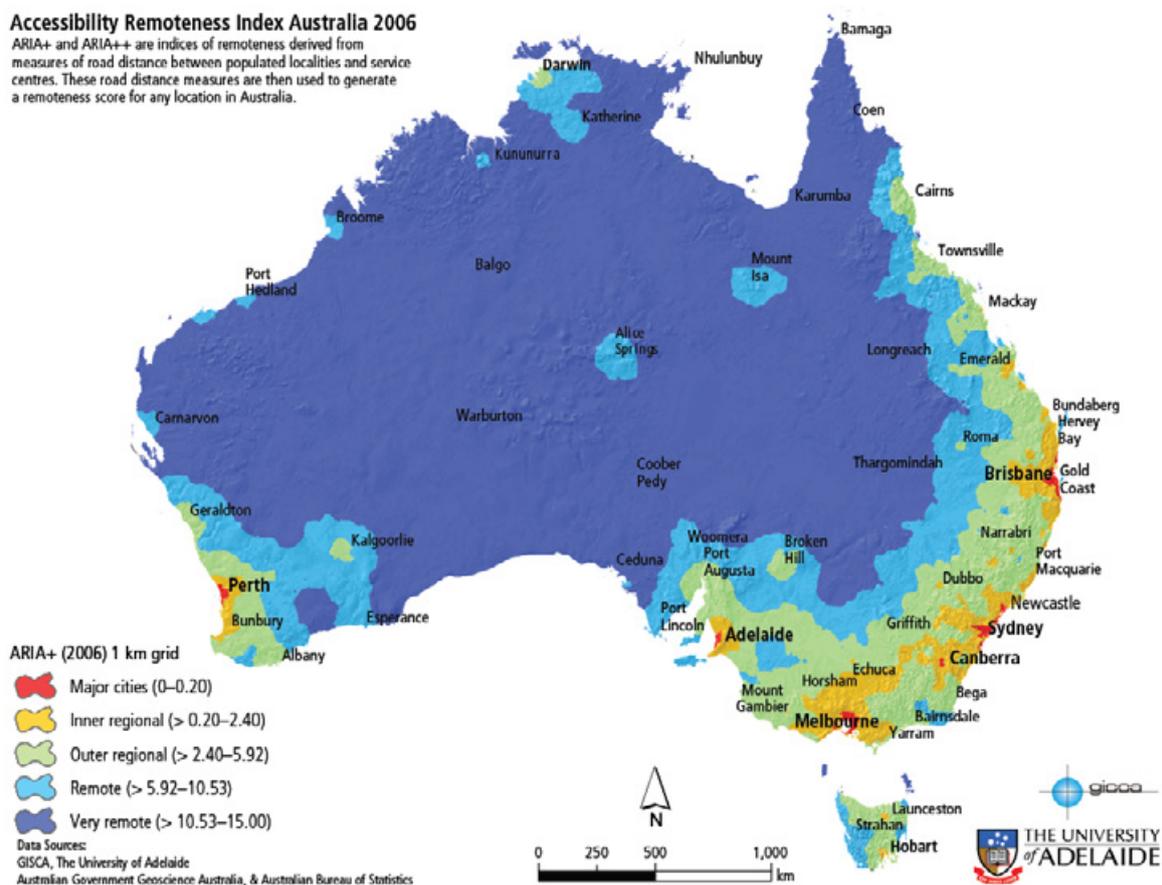
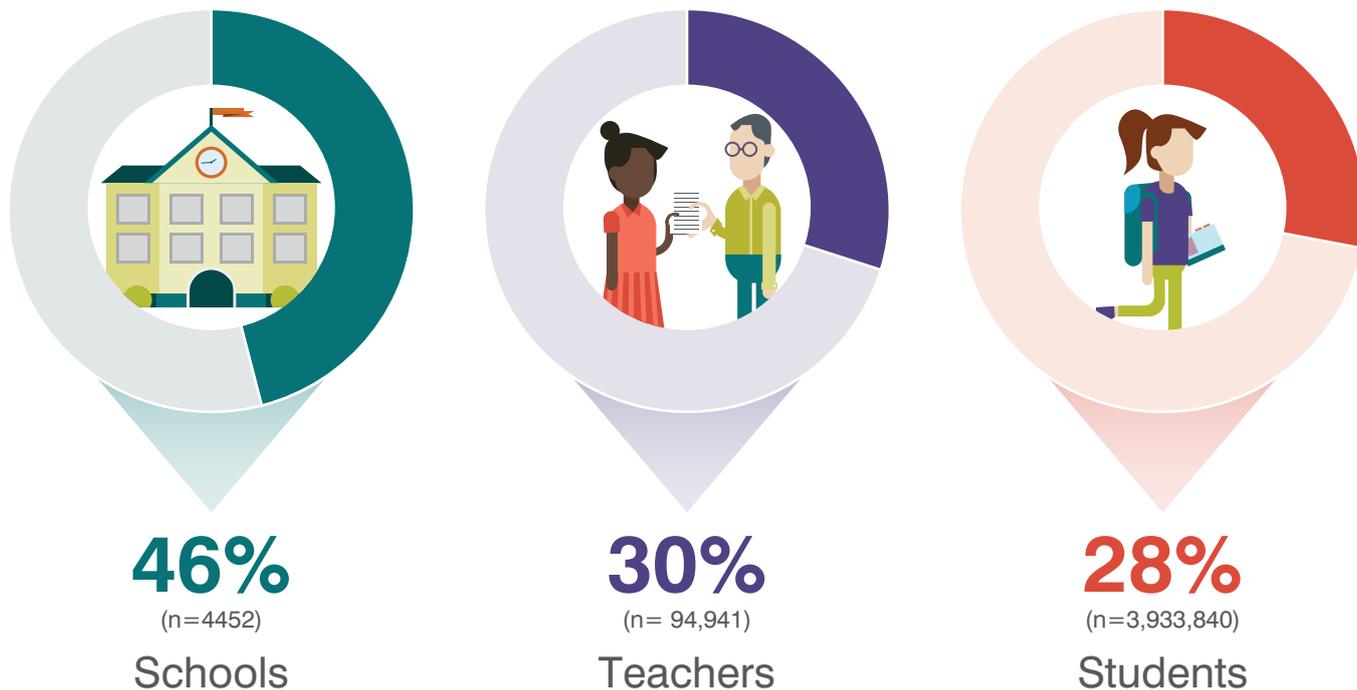


Figure 2

Number of rural, regional and remote schools, teachers and students.²



What do we mean by ‘professional learning’?

“Professional learning is the formal or informal learning experiences undertaken by teachers and school leaders that improve their individual professional practice, and a school’s collective effectiveness, as measured by improved student learning, engagement with learning and wellbeing.”

– Australian Charter for the Professional Learning of Teachers and School Leaders

² Source: Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2018.

At a glance

- AITSL undertook nationwide consultation and surveyed more than 600 rural, regional and remote teachers.
- It was observed through the consultation that needs and challenges vary amongst the teachers in these schools, in terms of:
 - » finding relevant or appropriate professional learning
 - » collaborating within and between schools
 - » having the resources to undertake professional learning.

Professional learning experiences of rural, regional and remote teachers

To develop a better understanding of the professional learning experiences of rural, regional and remote teachers, AITSL undertook in-depth consultation with teachers, systems/sectors, associations and unions across Australia in 2018. This was a specific and targeted study, following research and consultation undertaken in 2017 into the professional learning practices of all Australian teachers (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2017). One of the key components of this targeted research was a nationwide survey, completed by more than 600 teachers and school leaders across various rural, regional and remote areas (Figure 3).³ This survey was completed by teachers across Australia (Figure 4), with teachers from the Northern Territory holding a large representation (46%).

Figure 3

Proportion of teachers from different remoteness levels who completed the survey.

"I feel that the Australian public appreciates teachers"

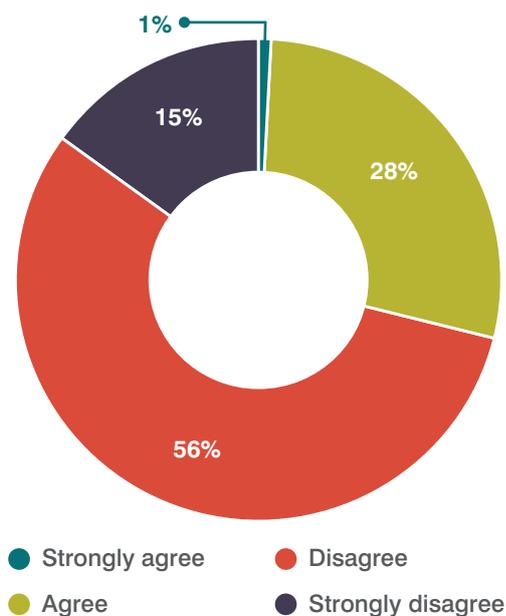
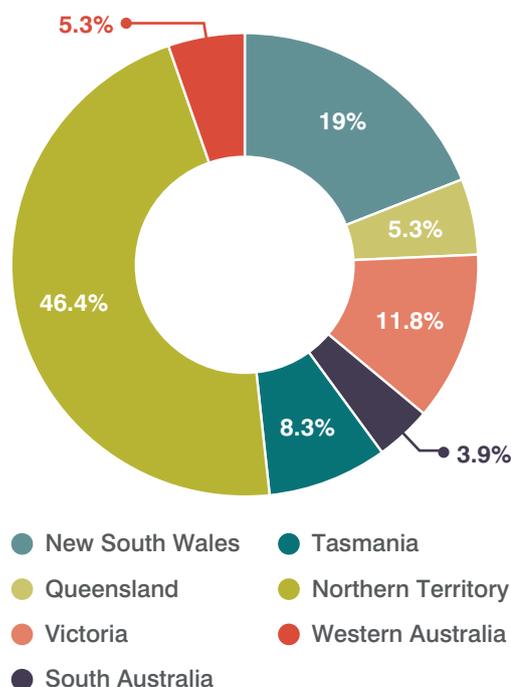


Figure 4

Proportion of teachers from different States and Territories who completed the survey

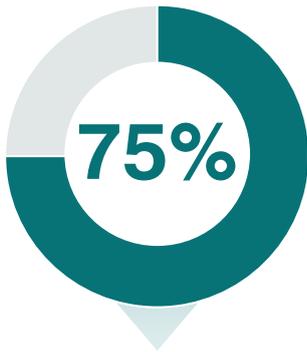


³ Survey respondents' refers to the 608 teachers and school leaders who completed or partially completed the Regional, Rural and Remote survey. As it was not compulsory for respondents to answer every question in the survey, the number of responses received for each question varies. There were 430 teachers who completed the survey in full.

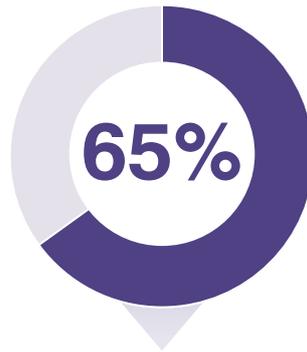
The stakeholder consultation showed that the needs and challenges vary between different regional, rural and remote areas. It is important to bear in mind throughout this report that it is a broad overview, rather than a reflection of every teacher's experience. The findings of the survey reveal critical insights into how professional learning is being conducted in these areas and possible areas for improvement.

Figure 5

Major findings from the rural, regional and remote professional learning survey.



of respondents find it "Difficult" or "Very Difficult" to select relevant and/or appropriate professional learning



of respondents often collaborate with colleagues within their own school, but only 8% collaborate often with teachers from other rural, regional or remote schools.



The ability to find a casual/relief teacher to cover a teacher is the most common consideration for Very Remote teachers in choosing professional learning activities.

At a glance

- Identified needs in teaching practice and identified needs in learners were the most important considerations for teachers working in rural, regional or remote locations when selecting professional learning.
- Distance, time and access to casual/relief teachers were identified as logistical considerations for teachers working in rural, regional or remote locations when selecting professional learning.

Considerations for selecting professional learning

A 2006 Australian study found that the issues facing rural, regional and remote teachers when accessing professional learning included a lack of time to attend, difficulty in accessing casual/relief teachers, the challenge of distance and a lack of adequate Information and Communication Technology (ICT) systems (Beswick & Brown, quoted in Stack et al., 2011). Whilst ICT systems and internet access have improved since 2006, those respondents to AITSL's 2018 survey who found it difficult to select professional learning (75%) identified similar barriers more than ten years later.

When asked about difficulties in accessing professional learning, many survey respondents mentioned that it was too expensive to travel to external locations and to pay for a specialist to travel to their school. Furthermore, when teachers tried to access professional learning activities remotely via Skype or alternative means, the internet was unreliable, slow or the hosts of the professional learning did not value the participant's voice: "They didn't seem to know I was there."

Despite the barriers in accessing professional learning for rural, regional and remote teachers, the most common factors when selecting professional learning were identified needs in learners or identified needs in teacher practice. This indicates that despite barriers, when teachers have the opportunity to select their professional learning activities, they do so for the right reasons.

There were a small number of respondents who found it "Easy" or "Very Easy" to select relevant or appropriate professional learning (12%). These teachers identified that this was due to the availability of options (including structured, face-to-face, and online choices), readily available informal learning opportunities (including networks and in-school activities) and having leaders who were supportive and encouraging of teachers in their professional development.

Key considerations



Identified needs in learners

The most common consideration for teachers in rural, regional or remote locations when selecting professional learning is an identified need in their learners, with 92% of teachers rating this as “Important” or “Very important.”



Identified need in teacher practice

Teachers (89%) reported ‘an identified need in my teaching practice’ as an “Important” or “Very important” consideration when selecting professional learning.



Distance and related costs

Respondents identified limited access to external, often metropolitan-based, activities. This was because of distance and related costs including travel (petrol or airfares) and accommodation. They noted that the distances involved often required them leaving their classes and families for substantial periods of time. The majority of respondents (87%) highlighted the tyranny of distance as an “Important” or “Very important” factor when choosing activities.



Timing of activity

The timing of the professional learning activity (e.g. whether the professional learning activity was offered during business hours) was identified as an “Important” or “Very important” consideration when selecting professional learning (84%). Survey respondents also said that the variable quality and value of external professional learning often made it difficult to weigh up potential benefits against the time required.



Access to casual/relief teachers (CRTs)

Many respondents noted that the shortage of CRTs in rural, regional and remote areas made it difficult for teachers to participate in professional learning activities during school hours. If a CRT is not available, it places a burden on other teachers within the school to cover classes, take extra students or combine classes; factors which ultimately result in the teachers not being able to attend the learning activity. The challenge of finding cover gets more difficult with remoteness. 85% of respondents from Very Remote schools listed securing CRT cover as a “Very Important” factor in choosing professional learning, compared to 54% of respondents from Inner Regional schools. Inversely, schools should consider the professional learning needs of their CRTs to ensure they are also accessing development opportunities (AITSL, 2019).

At a glance

- Of the teachers from rural, regional and remote areas who were surveyed:
 - » 64% collaborate frequently with colleagues within their school
 - » Only 8% of surveyed teachers collaborate frequently with teachers from other schools.

Professional learning in rural, regional and remote schools

While most rural, regional and remote teachers found selecting professional learning to be difficult, the survey indicated that many were choosing and undertaking activities that incorporated elements of high-quality professional learning. There are a number of factors that influence the quality of professional learning. Some of the key components of high-quality professional learning is that it is collaborative, relevant and job-embedded (AITSL, 2012, 2014). Furthermore, the 2018 Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) report suggested that school-based and collaborative forms of learning focused on locally identified needs and school-specific contexts should be promoted (OECD, 2019). The AITSL survey revealed that many rural, regional and remote teachers are currently selecting and undertaking high-quality learning opportunities, including significant amounts of in-school collaboration, professional learning activities that are relevant to the growth of their teaching and students' learning, and high completion levels of in-school or self-directed activities.

Collaboration

Collaboration creates a community through sharing practice, knowledge and problem solving. Teachers across the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) report collaborative professional learning having a higher impact on teaching practices and student achievement (OECD, 2019). The AITSL survey found that most teachers (64%) were frequently undertaking collaboration within their own school. These activities include observation, planning, moderation, team teaching, feedback and discussion. The small number of respondents that never or almost never collaborated with fellow colleagues (8%) said it had not occurred due to feelings of isolation within their school, a result of the structure and demands of their classes, workloads or timetables, or because their speciality role did not allow for effective collaboration.

The rates of collaboration dropped significantly when asked about working with other rural, regional or remote schools. Only 8% of respondents said they collaborate often with colleagues from other schools, with 47% collaborating never or almost never. Teachers said the biggest barrier was the geographical distance to other schools and towns (in the extreme, a charter flight would be required to collaborate in person with another school). Finding the time to collaborate, feelings of isolation, cultural differences between schools, and a lack of pre-existing facilitation were other reasons for not having inter-school collaboration. This suggests there is a space where school leaders could take the lead through establishing or expanding inclusive collaborative spaces and opportunities either within their own school or between schools, both face-to-face and online, in which teachers could share and build upon their practice together.

At a glance

- Of the five most popular professional learning activities undertaken 12 months prior to being surveyed,
 - » two were in school,
 - » two were self-directed learning, and
 - » one was external.

Relevant professional learning that meets the identified needs of teachers and their students was a priority for survey respondents. Whilst the timing of an activity, the time commitment required, and the cost also ranked highly, these practical factors were less important than an activity's relevance. Similarly, the kinds of activities ranked most useful were student learning focused, and those relevant to the educational program and practices at their current workplaces. This supports the literature that says that professional learning is most effective when it assists teachers to adapt to their challenges and improve student learning in their specific contexts (Darling-Hammond et al, 2017).

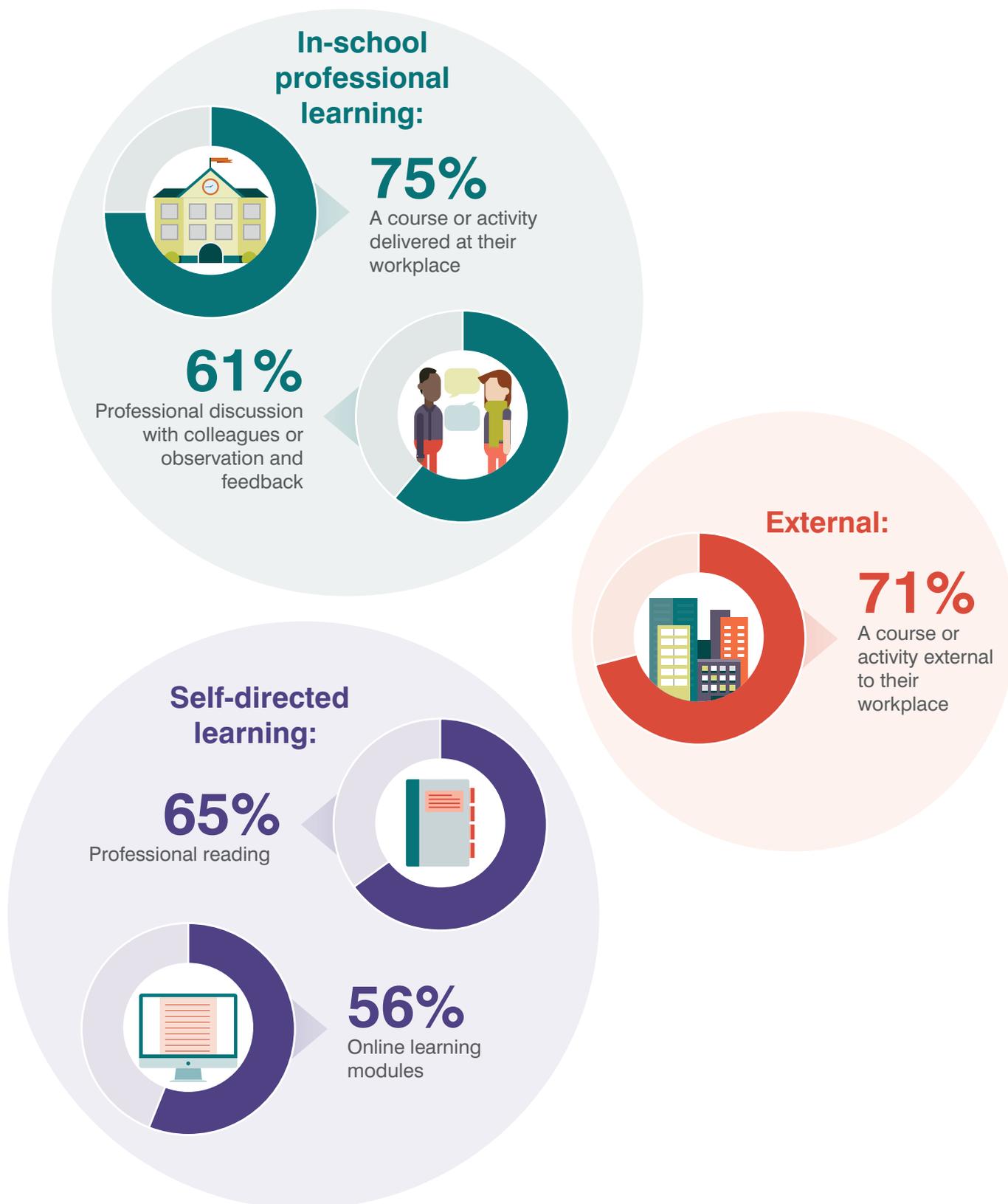
Four of the five most common professional learning activities for rural, regional and remote teachers involved school-based or self-directed learning, with the most common being a course or activity delivered at their workplace undertaken by 75% of respondents (Figure 6). While external courses or activities were in this mix (undertaken by 71% of respondents), when survey respondents were asked about challenges in accessing professional learning, they raised issues almost exclusively linked to these external activities such as travel costs and the tyranny of distance. This implies that teachers may have more control over selecting external professional learning opportunities compared to in-school professional learning which might be selected by a teaching team or school leadership.

The most recent form of professional learning undertaken by rural, regional and remote teachers was a course or activity delivered at their workplace (37%). However, when in-school professional learning focused predominantly on the needs of the school, teachers expressed feeling a loss of agency over their own learning intentions. In these situations, teachers might look to external expertise as opposed to school-based professional learning options.



Figure 6

Most common professional learning activities undertaken in the previous 12 months.



Job-embedded learning

Job-embedded learning is grounded in day-to-day practice where teachers assess and find solutions to real challenges being faced. It is shared and ongoing, makes a direct connection between learning and application in daily practice, and has the intent of improving student learning (Croft et al., 2010). It relies upon the wealth of professional knowledge within a school and among the teaching cohort. Job-embedded professional learning activities include mentoring, coaching, action research, peer observation, examining student work, and virtual coaching (Croft et al., 2010). It can be undertaken alone, one-on-one, or in teams.

The fact that many surveyed teachers from rural, regional and remote areas undertake in-school collaboration as a professional learning activity indicates that job-embedded learning is likely occurring in their schools. However, in-school collaborations could involve both 'job-embedded learning' as defined above and other school-based professional learning, such as courses or activities delivered at the workplace.

Activities which may have been job-embedded were professional discussion with colleagues or an observation and feedback discussion (undertaken by 61% of respondents in the prior 12 months) and a coaching or mentoring activity (undertaken by 38%). Other activities that could be job-embedded, depending on the process through which it was undertaken, were professional reading (65%), online learning (55%) or a self-directed project (22%).

It can be a challenge in many rural, regional and remote schools to undertake job-embedded learning due to factors including not being able to fund release time to observe (or be observed) or working in schools with a small number of teachers or those with limited expertise. Whilst access to ICT is currently a problem, there are emergent technologies which could allow for more job-embedded learning opportunities to take place in these schools if the infrastructure was available (Trinidad & Broadley, 2010).



At a glance

- Jurisdictions are introducing initiatives to bring activities and casual/relief teachers to rural, regional and remote areas.
- Survey respondents suggested ways that providers could make learning opportunities more feasible and accessible for teachers, including:
 - » offering high-quality online or in-school opportunities
 - » scheduling courses to accommodate the school calendar
 - » providing value for money.

The role of systems, sectors and providers

Working toward a greater proportion of job-embedded professional learning will help remove some of the barriers rural, regional and remote teachers face, and there are positive jurisdiction-based initiatives underway to alleviate some of these challenges. The programs are a positive step towards providing better learning opportunities for this cohort and creating a more coordinated and effective approach to accessing casual/relief teachers.

One of the recommended actions in the IRRRRE report is to “improve the availability and diversity of in-school/locally based professional development for teachers in rural, regional and remote schools and communities, including by using visiting curriculum and pedagogy specialists” (Halsey, 2018, 45). The Queensland Department of Education is implementing initiatives in line with this recommendation, through minimising time and travel requirements by providing in-school coaching and workshops. The Department has invested more than \$30 million over four years to establish four **Centres for Learning and Wellbeing in regional areas** (Queensland Department of Education, 2019). These centres will provide professional learning and capability development for teachers and school leaders at all career stages by running satellite services and providing service delivery across a wide geographic area. Casual/relief teachers will travel with centre staff to schools so that the permanent teachers can be released to undertake the learning opportunities.

The South Australia Department of Education is also implementing creative solutions to the issue of casual/relief teacher cover. The Department runs the **Country Portfolio Relief Teaching Initiative**, in which small teams of casual/relief teachers go to a rural, regional or remote area so that groups of teachers can be released for professional learning activities. The casual/relief teachers work up to 15 working days and in return, on top of their wage, they receive an incentive payment based upon the location of the school and the number of days the teacher has worked.

Survey respondents made some suggestions as to how external private providers could better cater to the needs of remote teachers:

- a course with several days of learning could justify the necessary travel time rather than a single day course
- courses would be most accessible if offered at times that teachers did not need to find cover, such as during school holidays or pupil free days
- if ICT offerings were of a higher quality, then teachers could participate in courses online or externally with greater confidence
- private providers could bring more and varied professional learning opportunities to rural, regional and remote areas
- learning providers could lower the minimum number of participants necessary so rural regional and remote teachers could attend courses with low numbers (although this might raise cost efficiency issues for providers).

Whilst online professional learning is an important part of the mix, it must be improved in conjunction with, not only instead of, face-to-face and in-school programs (Downes & Roberts, 2018).





Conclusion

Through an increased focus on job-embedded, relevant and collaborative learning for rural, regional and remote teachers, the burdens of long distance and high cost could be reduced. For this approach to be successful, school leaders and jurisdictions must ensure that these school-based activities are of a high-quality, are useful and are relevant for teachers. As teachers may have their own individual learning goals as well as school learning goals, leaders need to be flexible and take a collaborative approach in choosing which professional learning activities teachers and schools will participate in. Jurisdictions can also look for ways to provide improved structural support to provide learning activities or to assist teachers to attend, like in South Australia and Queensland.

The research demonstrates there is an exciting opportunity for rural, regional and remote schools to become learning communities in which ongoing learning focusing on the specific needs of teachers, students and the school is seen as a core component of every teacher's role. This will be achieved most effectively in a culture where teachers and school leaders expect and are expected to be active learners, to reflect on, receive feedback on and improve their pedagogical practice and by doing so, work to improve student outcomes.

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