

EDUCATING LAW STUDENTS FOR RURAL AND REGIONAL LEGAL PRACTICE: EMBEDDING PLACE CONSCIOUSNESS IN LAW CURRICULA

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ABSTRACT

As with other professions, the declining rates of recruitment and retention of lawyers in rural and regional Australia is of significant concern. Whilst the causes of this vary between communities, common depictions of the rural and regional lawyer's role indicate that employment as a lawyer in such areas is characterised by unique personal and professional challenges. Nonetheless, employment as a rural and regional lawyer also offers practitioners rewarding opportunities and lifestyle benefits. Research from other disciplines indicates that the challenges inherent in rural and regional professional practice may be alleviated, and benefits more easily harnessed, via place conscious discipline-specific curriculum that sensitises tertiary students to, and prepares them for, the rural and regional career context.

Largely oriented towards substantive content to satisfy external accrediting bodies, undergraduate legal education does not typically acknowledge the 'places' in which graduates will practice as professionals. This article argues however that there is scope to incorporate place within legal education, and documents an innovative curriculum development project which embeds place consciousness to better prepare law students for employment in rural and regional legal practice. Drawing upon methods from other disciplines, the project team designed a curriculum package which aims to sensitise students to the rural and regional legal practice context, and equip them with the skills to overcome challenges and take advantage of the opportunities available in a rural or regional professional career.