

Over the Hill . . . and she's only 21

City education students taste life in remote communities



It took some convincing but graduate teacher Jessica Bruce loves her rural placement



For 21-year-old devoted coastal-dweller, Jessica Bruce, the thought of moving west is a daunting prospect but one that she could well face when she graduates next year from the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) as a teacher.

In the third year of her Bachelor of Education, Jessica has spent her time at uni dreading a posting to a remote or rural school, imagining such a position as a physical and intellectual wasteland, parched of more than just water.

"I thought that living in a rural town would be dusty and boring," said Jessica. "In my head I had every negative stereotype about rural towns bound together to create a place I was certain I would despise."

And it is these bleak preconceptions that QUT Education program co-ordinator, Sue Hudson, has in mind when she chooses students to participate in the university's innovative Over the Hill program.

While Over the Hill sounds like some quirky scheme introduced into far away nursing homes, this dynamic initiative is actually sending students to primary and secondary schools in the Miles District in the hope that the experience will dispel those preconceptions about what it is

like to teach in a school in a remote or rural area.

"In many cases, these students have never travelled outside the city, so they are very worried about how they would cope if they were to eventually teach in a rural area," Ms Hudson said.

To test out this theory, Jessica travelled to Condamine State School, six hours west of Caboolture and 373 km west of Brisbane and in her week there she learned that distance from the coast and a capital city does not determine whether a school and its community is worth the change in lifestyle.

While Condamine State is nowhere near as big as some of its metropolitan counterparts – the school has 52 enrolled students under one teaching principal and two teachers – Jessica quickly discovered that being part of a rural school means being an integral part of a living, breathing community.

"We mingled with a lot of members of the community, at the pub, playing touch football, going to dance lessons, watching the local band and attending P&C meetings," she said.

"After actually experiencing life as a teacher in a rural school I have realised that there is a lot to do and that I would not get bored easily (if posted to a rural school).

"I lived with the principal of Condamine State School and his wife across the road from the school and next door to the two other teachers. It was great living with the teachers because I was able to see what life was really like for them – (the) housing arrangements, cost of living, relationships with family who still live in metropolitan areas and relationships and ties with the community," Jessica said.

The success of programs such as Over the Hill will be closely monitored by rural and remote schools that are not naturally blessed with the lifestyle attractions of their coastal cousins.

"Rural and remote schools generally have a much harder time attracting teachers than metropolitan areas, so we hope that through this program more students will consider taking up pre-service roles in these areas," Ms Hudson said.

So far the program has made a lasting impression with at least one student. Jessica started the program wanting to avoid rural or remote schools at almost any cost. Now, she has gained some insight into the benefits of living in a small rural community.

"After experiencing life in a rural community for myself, I would definitely consider teaching in a small town out west," Jessica said.