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Anthony Potts

*School of Education, University of Adelaide*

Nina Maadad

*School of Education, University of Adelaide*

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## **World War II and Australia's First Rural Teachers' College**

Anthony Potts  
Nina Maadad  
University of Adelaide

*Abstract: This paper examines the effects of World War II on Australia's first rural teacher's college in 1945. The paper locates the college in wider national and international contexts. It looks at the effect of World War II on teacher supply and demand in countries affected by war. The war was a genuine reason for the basic conditions of the college in 1945. However, it was not only this that was to blame. Teacher education was conducted frugally in Australia at the time. The conditions at the college had not improved since its original foundation in 1926.*

### **Introduction**

World War II was a global conflict unlike any other. That said, different parts of the world experienced the war much differently - cities in Britain, Europe and Darwin, in Australia, experienced horrors from bombing that others did not. The USA and Australia, even though attacked by the Japanese, suffered less physical destruction than Britain and Europe. In Australia, there was real fear of invasion by the Japanese. The effects of war on education in Australia were minor compared to much of Europe and Asia but the type and quality of education was adversely affected.

### **The Effects of World War II on Education**

World War II affected education in Australia from December 1941, when it was feared Japan would conquer south-east Asia. From then, until 1945, educational building construction stopped and the commonwealth controlled entry into universities and teachers' colleges. However, the immediate effects of the war on education meant a repeat of practices operating during World War I and were the results of decisions taken before 1918. World War II adversely affected education in Australia but post-war prosperity and idealism saw education as the key to a new world order. By way of contrast post World War II Britain underwent profound economic and social change with periods of economic hardship, balance of payments crises and food shortages.

### **World War II and the Supply of Australian Teachers**

In Australia World War II had its most direct effect upon education in the provision of teachers. Approximately 1000 student teachers joined the Australian armed services during World War II (Hyams, 1979). Chronic teacher shortages, a consequence of the war, were state education departments' greatest problem, as teachers enlisted or joined other essential occupations. While school total enrolments rose by 0.6 percent between 1941-1945 teacher

numbers fell by almost 1.5 percent in the same period (Spaull, 1982). In 1942, total school enrolments fell by 2.2 percent compared to teacher numbers which fell 4.6 percent from the previous year (Spaull, 1982). In 1942 for example the number of male students in Victorian teachers' colleges dropped from 174 to 45 (Spaull, 1982). The war induced shortage of teachers especially affected the provision of primary education in rural areas and this was made worse in the more industrialised New South Wales and Victoria where 30 percent of children went to small rural schools (Spaull, 1982). This issue is vividly demonstrated in the ABC's television drama series of *Marion* that was televised in 1974. Here the newly graduated female teacher is sent to replace the male teacher in the one teacher country school, who has gone to fight in the war, much to the disappointment of the local Gippsland community who long for his return.

### **World War II and Teacher Shortages in Europe, America and Asia**

Teacher shortages and associated issues were even more drastic in other countries at war. In Germany during 1942-1943 the pupil teacher ratio in Bavaria rose to 68:1 (Giles, 1992). Fewer and fewer were willing to become teachers because of the influence of Hitler Youth. In Russia by 1942 over 40 percent of municipal education authority heads had left (Dunstan, 1992). In the USA in 1944, 20 percent of the mostly female teachers were new and there was a shortage of approximately 5000 teachers (Cohen, 1992). By 1945 Japan's teaching service was suffering from the effects of the war with many either on active service or employed in munitions factories (Rubinger, 1992). In Belgium, France and the Netherlands there were severe shortages of male teachers (Neave, 1992). Many teachers had been deported for activities in the resistance or sent to forced labour camps in Germany. Poland experienced an extreme shortage of teachers (Krasuski, 1992). They were deported or murdered at the start of the German occupation. In Hungary in 1943 large numbers of teachers were drafted into the army (Horvatch, 1992). Those not so drafted confronted harsh working conditions and were often forced to assist in the deportation of the Jewish community. Scotland's problems were serious but less so, for while conscription of all male teachers was damaging it was ameliorated with deferment in the latter stages of the war (Lloyd, 1992). For most of Britain's colonies there were reductions in teacher numbers due to the war (Whitehead, 1992).

### **World War II and Australian Teachers' Colleges**

World War II affected the supply of teachers and the colleges that trained them. Most Australian colleges for primary school teachers were state government institutions. While in Europe and Asia schools, colleges and universities were severely affected by the war, in Australia, this disruption was less. Furthermore, Australian college lecturers became experts at coping and improvising in less than ideal conditions.

Australian teachers' colleges were often located in inadequate and substandard physical facilities, had low enrolments, and were geographically located because of political considerations. Colleges' facilities were much worse than in pre-war years with many colleges in buildings originally used for other purposes. Libraries, study and sporting facilities for students were often substandard. However, the reasons for inadequate physical facilities extended to the Great Depression and to low priority given to properly equipping Australian teachers' colleges. In Victorian teachers' colleges, books were purchased from an

annual fee of five shillings that students paid, supplemented by an annual state government of one hundred pounds (Hyams, 1979).

Wartime measures and problems of teacher supply meant that in Victoria and Western Australia the minimum entrance standard for teachers' college was four years of secondary education. In Victoria, primary teacher training was one year with practice teaching in schools taking 12 weeks. For trainee primary teachers the academic component of their course varied according to the state they trained in. For example, in Victoria the only general subject that trainee teachers took was English and this was largely concerned with teaching methods. For all Victorian primary teacher trainees, their general education, beyond their secondary schooling, was negligible and the academic content of college courses varied from three to seven hours a week. It was the professional aspect of the courses which dominated with the emphasis on classroom survival and not educational theory. The students' timetable was crowded and much that was covered was superficial. Teacher training was problematic in quality.

The Australian teacher's colleges of this time were conservative institutions in staffing, methods of operation, curriculum and disposition. They were followers not innovators. They borrowed overseas ideas and practices especially from the United Kingdom. But they preserved their own institutional bias of pragmatism, expediency, governmental parsimony and centralised control (Hyams, 1979). In Victorian colleges, the state education department appointed and inspected college staff. The main consideration in appointment of college staff was school teaching experience. College life was marked by official supervision of students, extra-curricular activities cultivated a strong college corporate spirit, and rules and regulations governed student and staff lives.

### **Some Comparisons with other War Time Colleges**

While Australian teachers' colleges experienced their own problems during World War II these pale in comparison with those experienced in war ravaged Europe and Asia. The hatred for primary teachers in Vichy France saw provincial primary teacher training colleges closed in September 1941. Strict military control commenced over those that remained in the larger population centres (Neave, 1992). In German occupied Poland, the Polish resistance was active in teachers' colleges (Krasuski, 1992). In Hungary, in 1939, the Ministry of Education set up 'screening committees' to ascertain the trustworthiness and loyalty of all teachers and in 1940 all educational institutions were put under military control. Teachers had to prove their Christian origins and the employment of Jewish teachers was forbidden (Horvatch, 1992). In German occupied Jersey, those who would normally have gone to England for teacher training now commenced their teaching career in a Jersey classroom instead of a teachers' college (Likeman, 1992). While some may have found the enforced college spirit and departmental mindset in Australian teachers' colleges jarring this was not confined to Australian colleges. In Cologne, in March 1946, the British Government proposed 'Teachers; Training Courses' to re-train German teachers in modern educational practices and concepts (Apel, 1992). If Australian trainee teachers were susceptible to college efforts to socialise them into governmental mindsets the same was not the case for many older German teachers who had already experienced re-education by the National Socialists and were not willing to be re-educated yet again (Apel, 1992: 221).

## **Bendigo Teachers' College**

Bendigo Teachers' College commenced on May 4, 1926 with an enrolment of 54 students. The college, its location, staff and students exhibited the characteristics of Australian teachers' colleges outlined above. It was Australia's first college located in a rural area. The course of one year in duration was designed to prepare students to teach in rural schools. For two years, the college was in rooms at Long Gully State School but then moved to rooms at the old Bendigo High School. In December 1931, the college closed because of the Great Depression.

In his Budget Speech of 19 September, 1944, the Victorian Premier and Treasurer, Dunstan announced that in keeping with the government's policy of decentralization, as well as to cater for more teachers needed when hostilities ceased, his government would re-open Ballarat and Bendigo Teachers' Colleges which had closed in 1931. He claimed the re-opening would further decentralization efforts and "have a very encouraging effect on the teaching service" (Dunstan, 1944, 982). He lamented that as the buildings that had housed the colleges were now no longer available, accommodation in other schools would be utilized, until permanent buildings could be provided. The war had affected the re-opening of the colleges. In his budget speech, the Premier noted that suitable buildings were not only in short supply, but so were tradespersons and materials, to either renovate existing buildings or to build new ones, even if finance was available. Furthermore, difficulties caused by the war were compounded by the severe drought in the state which was the most severe since European settlement.

## **The Re-opening of Bendigo Teachers' College in 1945**

In 1945, the college re-opened with 54 female students and 3 permanent staff members in temporary accommodation at Bendigo's Camp Hill Primary School. The college again exhibited the features of other Australian colleges of the period. This study relies not only on official reports, used above, but the firsthand accounts of life in the college by one of the foundation staff members, the only female, who at the time wrote of life in the college and later wrote a history of the college. Lowe (1988) in his classic history of education in the post war years admits his use of the *Times Educational Supplement* as his major source was fraught with dangers and difficulties. So too could be the use of this staff member's accounts. But like Lowe's use of the *Times Educational Supplement* the use of Burnett's writings especially has "the advantage of bringing colour and vividness to these issues" (Lowe, 1988, introduction).

In his report of 1 October 1945, the Minister of Public Instruction noted that "although progress has been necessarily slow, some of the advances envisaged in my last report have been made, namely the establishment of the teachers' college at Bendigo" (Holloway, 1945, 3). Minister Holloway observed that much more would have been achieved by the department but for the lack of trained personnel, buildings and equipment. He reported that so severe was the staffing situation in country schools, at the commencement of 1945, that drastic measures were needed to provide primary teachers for small rural schools. In his report on primary education, attached to the Minister's Report, the Chief Inspector of Primary Schools Ellwood (1945) reported that the Department, to supply residential accommodation for the students at Bendigo Teachers' College, had signed a 12-year lease on a boarding house but this had meant the college would enrol only female students until a permanent building was found. He noted the curriculum at the college was altered to include a short course in cooking so students could teach in rural schools. He observed that as wartime

controls eased it would be easier to achieve more. But while a new building was anticipated it took years to eventuate.

Part of Camp Hill Primary School was taken over to house the re-opened college. The small staff enjoyed the geographical surroundings, views and location in the centre of the city whether the same could be said for the students was uncertain as they complained of the hilly entrance to the college (Burnett, 1955). The accommodation provided was rudimentary. Two rooms, with sliding doors, were converted to a lecture room- the only one. A much smaller room was fitted with shelves to become the library. The three-staff shared one room. The college had no assembly hall so assemblies were held in Bendigo High School's hall which was located close by.

By 1948 a collection of old brick horse stables, which were owned by the police department and located at the back of the school, were converted into another room which was used for assemblies and college social events. In 1948, a former army hut was relocated from Tatura, approximately one hour away. In 1949, this was converted into two common rooms for the then male and female students. But this rudimentary provision was inadequate as numbers increased to 110 female students. It was not until later that a proper shower block with hot water facilities was installed. By 1955 more temporary accommodation in the form of two aluminium 'prefabs' were added which provided art, craft and science facilities (Burnett, 1955a).

Burnett and her colleagues were outwardly calm, cheerful and positive either through personal disposition or because of departmental socialisation. They willingly made do with basic buildings, equipment and curricula. Burnett (1955a: 351) thought "fine buildings are not necessary for a fine college". For her this was the result of the lecturing staff and the college students. Students overcame the obstacles at the college and this fostered their personal and professional development, initiative and co-operation (Burnett, 1955a). But they were sorely tested by the makeshift facilities and having lectures in the grandstand of the adjacent sports' oval and physical education classes in Rosalind Park. At these public venues, they would often be watched by members of the public who loudly pointed out deficiencies in both staff and students. (Burnett, 1955a).

Not only did the Bendigo college lack purpose built accommodation but it "had no equipment of any kind" in 1945 Burnett (1955a:352). Staff and students had to borrow what they needed including chairs and desks, the one typewriter and paper supplies from Camp Hill Primary and Bendigo High School. Lack of supplies were due to general wartime shortages.

Sandhurst Coffee Palace in Bendigo was the location of the first female hostel for the college. The Victorian Department of Education leased the building and arranged for its renovation. The latter was undertaken while students lived on the premises. Not only were renovations coped with, but shortages of hostel domestic staff lasted till after the war ceased and so students involved themselves in yet other tasks. This was seen as character building by staff even if less so by students (Burnett, 1955a).

In the re-opened Bendigo college of 1945 there were 3 permanent staff, 2 males and one female. They were all were members of the Victorian Education Department. They had to teach all the academic subjects while staff from local schools took subjects such as music, needlework, art and physical education. Students in 1945 enrolled in the one year Trained Primary Teachers' Certificate. The course concentrated on courses of study mandated by the Victorian Education Department for primary schools up to grade 8. Students studied the courses of study for each subject for each grade, to know what to teach as well as how to teach the subject, in a subject Methods or Techniques. They also enrolled in Education which included history and psychology of education. Student teaching practice was undertaken at schools close to Bendigo with a focus on teaching in rural schools (Burnett, 1955a). Cookery

was a subject special to Bendigo Teacher's College but with an increase in student numbers and difficulties in finding suitable venues and staff it was dropped from the course (Burnett, 1955a).

Students who enrolled in Bendigo college in 1945, all female due to the war, were all at least 18 years of age and had six months teaching experience as junior teachers in schools (Burnett, 1973). The pre-requisite for enrolment was the Victorian Department of Education Leaving Certificate. By 1946 there were eight male students all ex-servicemen and 45 female students. Perquisites for enrolment slowly increased to passes in five Leaving Certificate subjects and Matriculation.

Student life at Bendigo college in 1945 was shaped by a range of sporting, cultural, social and community activities. These occurred both in college time and in periods outside this. These activities cultivated an *esprit de corps*, bounding students to each other and to staff and fostered an ethos of teaching in Victorian rural schools. The central tenant of this ethos was to have a go and do not complain no matter what the circumstances. These activities gave students an opportunity to be "in it" (Burnett, 1955b; 357). Equally important these activities enabled college students to play a part in the social, cultural and sporting activities of Bendigo and prepared them for the roles needed to embrace as members of small rural communities. Students crammed into the space of their short twelve-month course, in addition to the academic and professional components, a range of cultural, sporting and other pursuits. They staged plays, for instance from Shakespeare on April 23, 1946. They held the yearly presentation ball in the city, they participated in the city Anzac Day Services, they organised rural schools' sports days, they performed plays such as 'Arsenic and Old Lace' and 'The Importance of Being Earnest', participated in sporting events in local teams and in competitions against other teachers' colleges, they participated in debates, went on hikes and excursions. These events were approved, supervised and monitored by college staff with Burnett herself being present at most if not all of them.

## Conclusion

While the small teachers' college at Bendigo in 1945 was geographically far removed from the horrors of World War II the effects of the war found their way to the re-opened college in terms of its buildings, staff, students, curriculum and general provision. Bendigo Teachers' College in 1945 was a small and basic operation with respect to buildings and accommodation. Staff and student numbers were small due to the war. The student enrolment was all female due to men serving in the armed services or other mandated occupations. Of the three permanent staff members at the college one was female. This was due to the war, but also due to the all-female student enrolment. The sensibilities of the time meant the department of education wanted at least one female staff member who would exercise a female presence.

While lack of finance due to wartime hostilities could be blamed for poor physical facilities the prolonged drought was also another reason. War not only meant lack of finance but it meant lack of buildings due to other more pressing needs and lack of tradespersons to build facilities even if money was available. The war could be blamed for most of the shortcomings that the college faced. However, the state of the college along most dimensions simply reflected the fact that even in more favourable times teacher education in Australia was conducted very economically and pragmatically. Bendigo Teacher's College in 1945 could use war as the reason for its defining features but these characteristics were no different to those that characterised teacher education in the period leading up to the commencement of

hostilities in 1939. The conditions of the college in 1945 were not much changed from those of the college in 1926.

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