

# Exploring Social Accountability in Canadian Faculties of Education

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*Abstract: The uneven distribution of teachers is bordering on a crisis as rural areas across Canada are struggling to recruit and retain certified teachers. Medicine has encountered similar difficulties recruiting and retaining people to rural practice but has developed a rural workforce strategy that uses social accountability to guide medical training programs. Using Rourke's (2018) social accountability framework, a categorical matrix was created and applied to Faculties of Education in Canada to establish a baseline for social accountability in teacher education. 18 pre-service education programs were randomly selected, representing all ten provinces. Data were collected from the respective universities' Faculty of Education websites. A content analysis was selected to retest Rourke's (2018) framework with Canadian Faculties of Education. Results indicate that no university in this study highlighted rurality in mission statements, admission requirements, curricula, placements, or graduate outcomes. The Faculties of Education must begin to embed place-consciousness and social accountability into their structure or educational inequities will persist.*

*Keywords: social accountability in education; rural teacher recruitment; rural teacher retention; rural education; rural workforce shortages; retention and recruitment*

## Introduction

The recruitment and retention of professional teachers has become a pressing issue, particularly in rural areas of British Columbia, Manitoba, Newfoundland, Ontario, Quebec, and Saskatchewan (Arangio, 2022; Connors, 2022; Greenslade, 2023; Kulkarni, 2022; Macintosh, 2023; Pashagumskum, 2019; Roberts, 2022; Woodward, 2019). Although this issue is not new and has been a concern in North America since at least the late 1970s (Boylan & McSwan, 1998), it appears to now be reaching a point of crisis. The shortages are particularly severe with specialized subject areas, including Business Education, Chemistry, French Immersion, Home Economics, Mathematics, Modern Languages, Physics, Special Education, Technology Education, and Trades (Kitchenham & Chasteauneuf, 2010; Wallin, 2009, as cited in Farr Darling & Taylor, 2015). Rural teacher recruitment and retention challenges are driven by multiple interconnected factors with deep historical roots. Geographic isolation, limited access to professional development, fewer social and cultural amenities, lower financial incentives, higher workloads, multi-grade teaching responsibilities, and limited support all make rural positions less attractive to both new and experienced teachers (Ingersoll & Tran, 2023). To aid in the recruitment and retention of teachers, policymakers should consider examining strategies from other fields, such as medicine, that are facing and attempting to address similar workforce challenges.

Faculties of Education and Faculties of Medicine share many similarities as professional preparation programs designed to prepare individuals for regulated careers. Both must ensure graduates meet licensing or certification standards, whether through provincial teacher certification processes or medical licensing examinations. A central feature of each is the integration of theory with practice: teacher education blends coursework in pedagogy, curriculum, and child development with supervised practicums in schools, while medical education combines biomedical sciences with clinical rotations in hospitals and clinics. In both contexts, students assume increasing levels of responsibility under the guidance of experienced mentors, learning to apply knowledge in real-world settings. Increasingly, both fields are shaped by competency-based frameworks such as professional teaching standards or the CanMEDS model in medicine, which emphasize not only technical expertise but also broader skills like communication, collaboration, and professionalism.

Numerous interventions have been implemented to strengthen the rural workforce in medicine, which include financial incentives, flexible work schedules, advanced admissions criteria, and clinical placements in rural communities (McGrail et al., 2023; Wilson et al., 2009). While these different interventions have had varying levels of success, Faculties of Education can benefit from and learn from the significant work undertaken by rural medical leaders and organizations. For example, the College of Family Physicians of Canada and the Society of Rural Physicians of Canada led the development and launch of the Rural Road Map in Canada in 2017 (Advancing Rural Family Medicine: The Canadian Collaborative Taskforce, 2017). A core part of the Rural Road Map is the adoption

of social accountability in medical education, defined as the reorientation of training programs to focus on local health priorities. Such programs are encouraged to align their mission statements, programs, admissions, research, and service activities with local health priorities (Jones et al., 2021; Rourke, 2018). It can be argued that the adoption of social accountability has contributed to shifts in medical education, with approximately half of medical schools reserving seats or implementing a special application process for rural applicants, around 25% of students completing the majority of their clinical training in rural communities, and several schools identifying specific learning outcomes aimed at preparing physicians for rural practice (Button et al., 2023a; Button et al., 2023b). Beyond the clinical side, social accountability efforts can support student development. For example, Mikhail et al. (2023) found that students who participated in a social accountability related activity gained cultural sensitivity, courage to try new things, and a deeper understanding of core competencies. This multi-component approach can create opportunities for students while also benefiting local communities and maintaining national and international relevance.

The World Health Organization (WHO) defined social accountability in 1995 as the obligation of medical schools to direct education, research, and service activities toward satisfying the prioritized health concerns of society (Boelen et al., 1995). Since then, medical schools have adopted social accountability frameworks to help bridge community and academia in higher education and improve public health outcomes (Health Canada, 2001; Woollard & Boelen, 2012). Rourke (2018) highlights several of the major commonalities among award-winning socially accountable medical schools, which are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Rourke’s (2018) Social Accountability Framework

<i>Framework Item Number</i>	<i>Framework Item</i>	<i>Framework Item Description</i>
1	Purpose and Mandate	Social accountability being evident in the school’s purpose and mandate and integrated into its planning and day-to-day management
2	Admissions	School admissions being focused on reflecting the demographic mix of the school’s community, region, and nation
3	Curriculum	The curriculum being relevant to the unique geographic, social, and cultural context and the priority health needs of the school’s community, region, and nation
4	Service-Learning	The inclusion of clinical learning and service-learning experiences reflecting the diversity of the geographic, social, and cultural mix of the school’s community, region, and nation
5	Community-based learning	The inclusion of extensive exposure to community-based learning experiences to understand and act on social determinants of health for vulnerable and underserved patients, communities, and populations
6	Research	Research being inspired by and responding to the priority health needs of the school’s community, region, and nation and actively engaging the community in research, including developing the research agenda, partnering and participating in research, and taking part in knowledge translation/mobilization
7	Graduates	The school’s graduates and its health service partnerships having a positive impact on the health and the health care of its community, region, and nation with an emphasis on vulnerable and underserved populations

Given the success of this framework, Faculties of Education might consider adopting the social accountability framework, especially in areas of need such as rural education. The purpose of this study is to explore the extent to which Faculties of Education in Canada demonstrate explicit commitments to rural communities. Adopting a social accountability framework in pre-service teacher education may enhance new teachers’ preparedness, professionalism, and commitment to working in underserved communities.

## Methods

This research employed a text-based content analysis guided by an adapted version of Rourke’s (2018) social accountability framework. Content analysis is a research method used to identify and examine the presence of specific words, themes, or concepts within qualitative data (Kleinheksel et al., 2020). A text-based content analysis was

selected because it is well-suited to testing an existing framework within a new context. Minor modifications were made to align it with Faculties of Education, which included the adaptation of medical-specific language to better fit the context of education and the removal of the item related to research being focused on the needs of the community. Research was excluded from the analysis due to considerations of academic freedom and faculty-driven inquiry. Additionally, a preliminary review revealed that some institutions did not have a defined research theme for their faculty and individual researcher profiles often lacked information. A categorization matrix was developed based on six items of Rourke’s (2018) social accountability framework, named: *purpose and mandate, admissions, curricula, service-learning, community-based learning, and graduates*.

Pre-service teacher education programs were identified through the following techniques: 1) Using a provincial teaching regulatory body website to look for accredited programs, 2) Using provincial websites to find accredited programs, and 3) If steps one and two were unsuccessful, a Google search using Boolean operators was performed for Bachelor of Education programs in a particular province, for example, “Bachelor of Education” AND Manitoba. Next, all located Bachelor of Education programs were entered into an Excel sheet by province. Using the random command in Excel, two Faculties of Education were selected from each province. Two provinces only had one university that offered a Bachelor of Education program. This process led to a total of 18 Faculties of Education being identified with all Canadian provinces represented. Early years stream and concurrent programs were selected from these universities for data collection except in provinces where only after-degree programs were available. This approach was selected because it helped maintain comparability and ensured the data was manageable.

Data collection followed the systematic web review procedures outlined by Stansfield et al. (2016), which consist of three key stages: 1) planning the search, 2) conducting the search, and 3) screening and managing the information obtained. Table 2 provides a summary of each stage, its associated challenges, and the strategies we used to address these challenges.

Table 2: Data Collection Framework

<i>Stage</i>	<i>Challenges</i>	<i>Approach</i>
<i>Planning the search</i>	Discovering suitable websites	All universities had a landing page for their Faculty of Education. These were located by one of the following 1) Using Google to search for the university name combined with Faculty of Education 2) Using the search bar on the university webpage 3) Using drop down menus to navigate to the Faculty of Education page
	Deciding on the sample	The sample was selected to include at least one university from each province
<i>Executing the search</i>	Planning how to search the website (including individual approach and non-Boolean approaches)	All searches started at the landing page for the Faculty of Education. Pathways for mission statement, admissions, curriculum, service-learning, community-based learning, and graduate outcomes were searched for. If the tab was located, it would be examined and data would be extracted. All searches were within one link of the landing page. This limitation was selected by the research team because for a university to be socially accountable the information must be apparent
<i>Screening the information</i>	Level of detail	This study started with a specific framework and only the data that related to a specific framework item was extracted and categorized in an excel matrix

After the strategy was agreed upon, and before commencing data extraction, the lead researcher meticulously reviewed each university’s Faculty of Education website. Table 3 describes the criteria used for each framework item.

Table 3: Criteria for each Framework Item

<i>Framework Item</i>	<i>Criteria</i>
<i>Purpose and mandate</i>	Inclusion of the term “social accountability”
<i>Admissions</i>	Having reserved seats within the faculty for rural applicants
<i>Curricula</i>	Course titles that pertain to rural areas
<i>Service-learning</i>	Short-term educational approaches that integrate service in the community with intentional learning in a rural community
<i>Community-based learning</i>	Extended community-based learning that pertains to a rural community or region
<i>Graduate data</i>	Data collected from the university on graduates practicing in rural areas

For this project, the focus was solely on the term "rural," allowing each university to define it in ways that were meaningful or significant to their context.

### Data Analysis

All data was anonymized and entered into a categorization matrix based on Rourke’s (2018) framework. A data categorization matrix is where the framework items (e.g., purpose and mandate, admissions, etc.) are presented in the rows, and the schools being analyzed are arranged across the columns. After the authors reached agreement regarding the inclusion of items in the structured categorization matrix, the occurrence of each framework item was recorded. Next, each framework item was examined for references to ‘rural’ or any considerations related to rural education.

### Results

Table 4 summarizes the occurrence of each framework item. No schools included the term social accountability in their mission statements, included admissions considerations for rural populations, or provided information regarding the geographic locations of their graduates’ practice. Based on course titles, no mandatory courses were identified to address the unique needs of rural education. No university included mandatory placements in rural areas.

Table 4: Summary of Structured Categorization Matrix

<i>Framework Item</i>	<i>Rural Specific</i>
<i>Purpose and Mandate</i>	0/18
<i>Admissions</i>	0/18
<i>Curriculum</i>	0/18
<i>Service-Learning</i>	0/18
<i>Community-Based Learning</i>	0/18
<i>Graduates</i>	0/18

### Discussion

Using an adapted version of Rourke’s (2018) social accountability framework, this research analyzed the websites of 18 Canadian Faculties of Education to explore the extent to which their pre-service teaching programs demonstrate explicit commitments to rural communities. The results indicated that Faculties of Education across the ten Canadian provinces rarely consider rurality in their admissions, curricula, or placements. These findings may provide insight to the current certified teacher shortage in rural areas of Canada.

Mission statements are used at post-secondary institutions for purposes including strategic planning, accreditation, promoting institutional objectives, and marketing for current and prospective students (Holosko et al.,

2015). Davis et al. (2007) contend that the quality of education offered by a university must be assessed by its own chosen aspirations – its mission. The importance of mission statements was also highlighted by Ash et al. (2025) in their analysis of social justice content in social work program mission statements. No faculties included the term “social accountability” in their mission statement. This suggests that social accountability is not a term commonly used in Faculties of Education. Social accountability refers to “the obligation to direct their education, research and service activities towards addressing the priority health concerns of the community, region, and/or nation they have a mandate to serve” (Boelen et al., 1995). Some Faculties of Education included terms such as social consciousness or social justice, which can be linked to social accountability. Socially accountable institutions aim to address community needs and reduce inequities, goals that align closely with broader commitments to fairness and equity. Although it is important that institutions maintain their unique identities and address specific regional, cultural, and academic priorities, having a shared commitment to social accountability could indicate a shared vision for education in Canada and facilitate positive systemic change.

The present study revealed that none of the universities included admissions criteria targeting a rural demographic for their main campus early years program. Mitra et al. (2018), in a study of eight Canadian medical schools involving 1,542 students, found that medical students who grew up in rural communities were more likely to practice in rural settings. One approach to aiding in recruiting and retaining rural teachers could be for Canadian Faculties of Education to include admissions criteria for rural students, as they are more likely to practice in rural communities upon graduation (Yarrow et al., 1998).

No schools in the study included a mandatory course on rural education within the selected program streams. Of all the K-12 schools in Canada, approximately 25% are located in rural settings (Ertl & Plante, 2004). Preparing pre-service teachers for success in these contexts would aid in their preparedness to teach multi-grade classrooms, deliver many different courses, and serve in administrative roles while maintaining full-time or near full-time teaching workloads (Barley, 2009; Medina et al., 2019). Although the literature does not suggest that a single course can resolve the complex issue of rural teacher recruitment and retention, Oyen and Schweinle (2020) found that courses preparing students for rural practice may help attract teachers to rural areas. Similar conclusions were reached by Azano and Stewart (2015) in a small study involving four student teachers.

No university in the study required service-learning experiences involving rural placements. Service-learning refers to a course-based experience in which students take part in organized service projects that respond to specific community needs. Through guided reflection, students connect their service to academic content. This process can deepen their understanding of the field and strengthen their commitment to civic responsibility (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996). For example, Weber (2017) describes a program in which pre-service teacher candidates participated in a book club in urban New York State. Initially, students expressed apprehension about teaching in urban schools, describing the settings as run-down, chaotic, dirty, overcrowded, and unsafe. After the service-learning experience, students’ perceptions shifted, highlighting the cleanliness, resources, and safety of urban schools. Similarly, incorporating rural service-learning placements for pre-service teacher candidates could help challenge misconceptions about rural schools, increase familiarity with rural communities, and foster a deeper understanding of the unique opportunities and challenges in these contexts (Yarrow et al., 1998). Service-learning programs may help address issues with retention, recruitment, and preparedness of certified teachers in underserved areas.

Experiential learning is a central component of Faculties of Education in Canada. All pre-service teacher education programs include a field-based practicum experience. No universities explicitly stated mandatory rural placements, but rural placements are likely occurring as some schools use a student’s home address or use a radius of over 100km from the university to find student placements. However, these placements would happen more for logistical reasons rather than as part of an intentional rural teacher preparation strategy. Reagan et al. (2019) investigated practicum learning experiences as a means of fostering pre-service teacher learning about rural settings. They found that participation in a rural practicum resulted in pre-service teachers encountering positive learning experiences that encouraged them to consider teaching in rural schools. Among the studies described in the review were two field experiences that ranged from a few days to several weeks, both of which improved social and cultural perceptions of rural communities (Reagan et al., 2019). To promote rural practice, Faculties of Education should integrate rural teaching experiences, as long as students have support from the university and placement locations to ensure it is a positive experience.

Data regarding graduates' employment locations, particularly in relation to rural communities, were unavailable within the search parameters. Making this data publicly available would help build public trust between the university and the community as it could show that the university is fulfilling its mission to prepare students for working in public education and contributing to areas that are most in need.

Limitations of this study are that data extraction was limited to one pathway away from the main landing page. It is possible that relevant data exists outside of this pathway, but to ensure consistency across website searches this restriction was necessary. Data was only included for one specific program at the selected university. Universities across Canada have many streams and programs within their Faculties of Education that are designed to serve a specific group or geographical area. In fact, there are many different programs and activities in Canadian universities that result from social accountability-related efforts. For example, the University of Winnipeg Access Education Program, the University of British Columbia Rural and Remote Teacher Education Program, or the University of Calgary Community-Based Bachelor of Education may align more closely with a social accountability framework, but the authors were interested in the larger programs enrolling and graduating greater numbers of students. The authors used a text-based content analysis framework that focused on identifying specific words or phrases on university websites. This methodological approach may have led to some loss of context, given that some universities use terms like "social justice" to refer to ideas related to social accountability, and the term "remote" to refer to both rural and remote areas. For this study, the analysis specifically focused on the term "rural" across university websites. However, we recognize that institutional definitions may differ or may not be explicitly stated on their websites. Since there is no standard definition of "rural," it is important that universities clearly explain what they mean when they use the term. Without such clarity, understanding the scope and implications of rural-focused initiatives becomes difficult. This lack of consistency may hinder inter-institutional collaboration, equitable resource allocation, and the development of targeted programs addressing rural needs. Therefore, further research is needed to address the limitations of this exploratory study and to develop a clearer understanding of how universities approach rural education.

## Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that none of the institutions examined explicitly incorporated rural considerations in their mission statements, admissions requirements, curricula, practicum placements, or graduate outcomes tracking. These results do not suggest that Canadian universities, faculties, or higher education programs are not working toward social accountability. Rather, such initiatives were not consistently visible on the main public webpages of major programs when assessed through Rourke's (2018) social accountability framework. This framework has shown itself to be useful for higher education as, in our research context, it highlighted the limited focus on rurality within Canadian early years teacher education programs. It also underscores the need for place-conscious teacher education to address persistent inequities in rural teacher recruitment and retention (Farr Darling & Taylor, 2015). It further highlights the need for holistic and strategic policy interventions at the system level. As Corbett (2014) argues, "Until rural places ... are considered as key parts of national and international economics, as complex cultural landscapes, and as spaces of opportunity rather than ... of liability, we are likely to continue to see rural depopulation, environmental degradation, and underdevelopment." Rural teachers, both present and future, are a key part of any solution to this complex problem and they can be bolstered or impeded in this role by universities and Faculties of Education. Adopting a social accountability framework in higher education may be one small step in the right direction.

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