UCET Gordon Kirk International Research Scholarship

Application for Travel Scholarship

Applicant: Professor Tanya Ovenden-Hope

Institution: Plymouth Marjon University (UCET Member Institution)

Project Reference: Teacher Retention in Rural Areas (TERRA)

Scholarship Value Requested: £3000

Proposed Visit: Spring Term 2026 - 2027 (January or February 2027)

Duration: Two weeks

Countries to Visit: Norway

Overseas Institutions: UiT The Arctic University of Norway (Tromsø/Alta)

Proposal: Scoping Teacher Retention in Rural Areas in Norway

This proposal requests support from the UCET Gordon Kirk Memorial Travel Scholarship to undertake a scoping visit to Norway to investigate teacher retention in rural schools through an asset-based lens.

Purpose and Rationale

Norway faces significant challenges in recruiting and retaining qualified teachers, particularly in its northern and rural regions. Applicants to Norwegian teacher training programmes have declined by 21.9%, and by 2020, close to 18,200 primary school teachers had not completed teacher training. The availability of teachers differs markedly between rural and urban areas, with the northernmost county of Finnmark recording 9.5% unqualified teachers. These challenges mirror the patterns of "educational isolation" identified through my own research in England's coastal and rural schools, where geographical remoteness, socioeconomic deprivation, and cultural isolation create compounding barriers to teacher recruitment and retention.

This scoping visit is directly relevant to UCET's mission of advancing teacher education through international scholarship. It is fitting that this application honours Professor Gordon Kirk OBE, who himself undertook consultancy work in Norway during his distinguished career and whose commitment to international perspectives on teacher education defined much of his professional life. The proposed research aligns with his legacy of strengthening teacher education through cross-national learning and collaboration.

Research Questions

The scoping visit will address the following questions:

1. What school, community, and system assets do Norwegian rural schools draw upon to support teacher retention?

2. How do Norwegian approaches to rural teacher education and professional support compare with practices in England's educationally isolated schools?
3. What asset-based retention strategies (e.g., community-embedded induction, cross-school communities of practice) are already operating in Norwegian rural contexts?

Theoretical Framework

The research draws on two complementary frameworks. Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) (Harrison, 2019) reframes rural communities as repositories of strengths: relationships, professional networks, community cultural wealth, and place-based opportunities, rather than sites of deficit. Rural community cultural wealth (Crumb et al., 2023; Yosso, 2005) extends this by recognising the distinct forms of capital that rural places offer teachers, including strong community bonds, meaningful professional autonomy, and connection to place.

Norwegian institutions have been leaders in ABCD research and practice, publishing practitioner guides and teaching ABCD methods through international programmes in community work. This Norwegian expertise in ABCD provides a strong intellectual foundation for the proposed scoping work.

Research Design

The visit will employ qualitative scoping methods over an intensive two-week period:

- **Institutional visits and researcher meetings** — at UiT The Arctic University in Norway, Tromso with the RUR-Ed and Teacher Education teams to map existing research on rural teacher retention, review current projects..
- **Semi-structured interviews (6–8)** — with teacher educators, education faculty, and researchers specialising in rural education, teacher identity, and workforce retention.
- **Site observations** — at rural partner schools connected to host university, to understand the local educational landscape and community contexts.
- **Document and policy review** — of Norwegian national strategies for teacher recruitment and retention in rural areas, including incentive schemes historically funded at national level for northern regions.
- **Asset-mapping pilot exercises** — in consultation with Norwegian colleagues, explore ABCD-informed tools.

Overseas Institutions to Visit

1. UiT The Arctic University of Norway (Tromsø

UiT is the world's northernmost university, serving the vast and sparsely populated regions of Troms and Finnmark. Its Faculty of Education offers flexible teacher education from campus Alta — a model that alternates between on-campus teaching, home study, and online supported learning in distributed localities to serve communities unable to send students to centralised campuses.

Professor Unn-Doris Karlsen Bæck, Professor of Sociology at UiT, is an internationally recognised expert in rural education, spatial inequality, and youth studies. Her research on spatial manoeuvring in education and local opportunity structures for rural youth in Northern Norway provides critical

contextual understanding for TERRA. Professor Bæck is already a Visiting Professor at Plymouth Marjon University, having contributed to the Context, Agency, Place and Education (CAPE) Research and Knowledge Exchange Group Masterclass in November 2024. This existing institutional relationship provides an established foundation for the scoping visit and offers a natural pathway into UiT's rural education research community.

Researchers Lisbeth Bergum Johanson and Silje Solheim Karlsen at UiT have published on the challenges of teacher education in rural areas, documenting how flexible models must address structural, technological, and pedagogical demands to serve rural communities effectively.

How the Scholarship Would Assist

The Gordon Kirk Memorial Travel Scholarship offers up to £3,000 to colleagues from UCET member institutions to investigate aspects of teacher education or undertake educational research in overseas universities. The scholarship would directly support the following costs:

Expense	Estimated Cost
Return flights (Bristol to Tromsø) and associated travel to/from airports, plus parking	£800
Accommodation (12 nights Tromsø and school areas)	£1200
Local travel (rail, bus, ferry between campuses and rural school sites)	£300
Subsistence (meals and incidental costs)	£600
Research materials (recording equipment, translation support)	£100
Total	**£3,000**

The scoping visit will enable a full grant proposal of the TERRA project to ESRC, as ESRC supports collaboration between Norway and the UK.

Expected Outcomes and Outputs

The scoping visit will produce:

4. **A report for UCET —** a detailed account of findings, published on the UCET website in line with scholarship requirements, documenting Norwegian approaches to rural teacher retention and the asset-based strategies operating in rural Norwegian schools and communities.
5. **A scoping paper —** a co-authored working paper with Norwegian colleagues mapping the landscape of rural teacher retention research and practice in Norway, suitable for submission to a peer-reviewed journal such as BERJ or the Australian and International Journal of Rural Education.

6. **TERRA project protocols —** refined and culturally adapted research instruments (interview guides, asset-mapping protocols, survey tools) for the Norwegian sites, informed by direct engagement with Norwegian researchers and school contexts.
7. **Formal partnership agreements —** memoranda of understanding with UiT for their participation as Norwegian partner institution in the TERRA project.
8. **A network of Norwegian collaborators —** established working relationships with key researchers in rural education, providing a sustainable foundation for large scale research proposal.

Contribution to Teacher Education

This research contributes to UCET's core mission by generating new international knowledge about how teacher education can better serve rural communities. The shift from deficit-based to asset-based understandings of rural teacher retention represents an important conceptual advance for the field. By examining what makes teachers stay and thrive in rural schools — rather than focusing solely on why they leave — the research offers practical insights for teacher educators, school leaders, and policymakers in England and internationally.

The findings will inform Plymouth Marjon University's own provision of teacher education for rural and coastal areas and will strengthen the evidence base that UCET and its member institutions draw upon when advocating for place-sensitive approaches to teacher supply and workforce planning.

Applicant Background

Professor Tanya Ovenden-Hope is Professor of Education and Dean of Place and Social Purpose at Plymouth Marjon University. With over 36 years' experience in teaching, teacher education, and educational leadership, her research is recognised on teacher recruitment and retention in rural and coastal schools. Her concept of "educational isolation" has been cited in the Social Mobility Commission's State of the Nation report to Parliament and has shaped policy and practice in England and internationally.

Declaration

Plymouth Marjon University is a UCET member institution. I confirm that the information provided in this application is accurate and that I will submit a full report to UCET upon completion of the scholarship visit, for publication on the UCET website.



Signed: _____

Name: Professor Tanya Ovenden-Hope

Position: Professor of Education and Dean of Place and Social Purpose

Institution: Plymouth Marjon University

Date: 25 MARCH 2026