

Detlef Bloecher

The youth missions conference is coming to its close. Many young people have responded to the call and dedicated their lives for cross-cultural missions. Mark is one of them, full of passion and wanting to go out as soon as possible. This summer he will be on a short-term outreach and a year later long-term, so he hopes. He is really on fire. At the mission exhibition he contacted several agencies and they advised him to attend Bible school first. But that takes him too long. Isn't that a waste of time? Life is too short and the opportunities of the day closing so quickly. Years behind the books, will they not extinguish his fire for Jesus? Is it really worth to spend so much time on preparation? These are some of his pressing questions, and he finds confirmation in the comment of mission director Bill the other day, who had complained: "These young academics are so specialised and unwilling to just serve where it is needed, to adjust to the pressing needs. They know exactly what they want to do and how. They already have all the answers. They expect so many services and care..."

We all have anecdotal evidence of these trends, but are there empirical facts for proof? How do training and missionary longevity go together? WEA's recent ReMAP II study¹ on missionary retention² and agency practices provided an extensive database which permits an answer to this question. Considering only potentially preventable reasons for attrition³ leads to the annual retention rate for preventable attrition (RRP); unpreventable attrition⁴ only gives the retention rate for unpreventable attrition (RRU) and unpreventable plus potentially preventable attrition gives the total retention rate (RRT). These parameters served as independent variables to which all organisational factors and practices were correlated. Mission executives, in general, gave relatively high ratings (only very few ratings 1 – 3) as they are convinced of their agency's actual performance. Therefore the agencies were grouped into three subgroups⁵ according to high (H), medium (M) and low (L) retention. Separate analyses were run for old sending countries (OSC)⁶ and new sending countries (NSC)⁷ of the South to acknowledge the differences in their mission movements. For clarity only the two subgroups of high (H) and low (L) retention are depicted in the diagrams.

¹ ReMAP II focused to long-term (expected to serve for more than 3 years), cross-cultural missionaries serving within or outside their national borders. In early 2003 a questionnaire was sent out to all known evangelical sending agencies in 22 countries around the globe asking for sociological and statistical data on their missionaries and a self-assessment of their organisational practices (measured on a scale 1=very poorly done to 6=very well done). 598 agencies with some 39200 long-term missionaries participated; in general the questionnaire was filled out by the director of the agency's sending base. The response rate was 30 – 95% of the total national evangelical mission force. Their response was multiplied by their number of active missionaries as this number of missionaries are serving under those organisational and working conditions and a leadership with those values and convictions.

² Retention R is the percentage of missionaries still in active ministry after 5 y or 10 y of service, and the Annual Retention Rate is defined as $RRT = 10^{((\log R) / t)}$, presuming a uniform probability of leaving the agency. Extensive studies of the author have proved that this is a reasonable assumption. ReMAP II covered the missionaries newly sent out in each of the years 1981-2000 and asked whether they were still in active service with the agency on 31 Dec 2002.

³ I.e. all personal, family, work, team, agency related reasons or dismissal by the agency.

⁴ E.g. normal retirement, illness, loss of visa, expulsion, appointment to leadership in agency's home office, end of project, completion of a pre-determined limited length of assignment, death in service.

⁵ In general 33% of the number of sent missionaries each.

⁶ 323 agencies with 26200 long-term missionaries from Australia, Canada, Germany, Netherlands, New Zealand, Sweden, South Africa, United Kingdom and USA

⁷ 275 agencies with 13065 missionaries from Argentina, Brazil, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Ghana, Guatemala, Hong Kong, India, South Korea, Malaysia, Nigeria, Philippines and Singapore.

Retention Rate for Preventable Attrition

The analysis according to RRP⁸ shows (figure 1) that high retaining agencies have almost twice as many missionaries with MA-degree and doctorate. When smaller subgroups (e.g. 1/6 of the total sample) were selected the difference was even up to a factor of 7, marking a huge gap in their educational standards.

In addition, high retaining agencies have much higher training requirement for ministry with their agency (figure 2). They expect more theological training plus 2 - 3 times as much formal missiological training plus 50 % more practical pre-field missionary training, on average. Unfortunately, the latter informal missionary training methods are still too little required and in use so that their effectiveness could not yet be assessed.

Executives of high retaining OSC agencies rated of their overall performance 7% higher than low retaining agencies (which is to be expected on the basis of their actual performance), yet specific questions like *Ongoing language and culture training are actively encouraged* was rated 12 % higher and *Missionaries are provided with opportunities for continuous training of gifts and skills* even 20 % higher, underlining the significance of continuous training for missionary longevity.

Retention Rate for Total Attrition

When the retention rate for total attrition (RRT) served as independent variable⁹ then preventable and 'unpreventable' attrition is considered. By definition, the latter includes normal retirement, completion of pre-set length of service, end of project, appointment into leadership position retirement etc. Some agencies deliberately send out missionaries for a definite period (to avoid a career dead-end) and may even hold a pastor position in their home country ready for returnees. In this analysis high retaining agencies expect twice as much Bible school and 3 – 4 times more formal missiological training (figure 3). Likewise, high retaining OSC agencies have twice as many missionaries with a doctorate (11±2 % / 5±1%), again proving the close correlation between missiological and theological training on missionary retention.

Total Attrition Rate

In the analysis according to the annual attrition rate (AttR) of the years 2001-02¹⁰ we find a similar picture: low attrition agencies have more missionaries with MA (NSC: 17±3 / 11±2%) and doctorates (OSC: 5±1% / 3.4±1%) and much higher minimal pre-field training requirements in Bible (OSC: 1.9±0.2 y / 1.1±0.1 y; NSC: 1.8±0.2 y / 1.3±0.2 y) and formal missiological training (OSC: 0.82±0.11 y / 0.71±0.06 y; NSC: 0.84±0.11 y / 0.33±0.08 y).

In addition, leaders of high retaining agencies rated their agency's performance 5-7% higher on average but relevant questions like *Missionaries are provided with opportunities for continuous training of gifts and skills* were rated 20-40% higher (OSC: 4.79±0.15 / 3.37±0.13; NSC: 4.62±0.20 / 3.99±0.21), again confirming the significance of missionary training.

Retention for Unpreventable Attrition

While the analyses according to RRT and AttR capture attrition for any reason, an analysis for RRU considers unpreventable attrition only, such as normal retirement, death in service, illness, loss of visa, expulsion, appointment to leadership in agency's home office, as well as completion of a pre-

⁸ 182 OSC agencies with 20583 missionaries and 119 NSC agencies with 11078 missionaries provided sufficient retention records (at least 18 missionaries sent) to permit the calculation of RRP with reasonable accuracy and a reliable assignment to one of the subgroups: OSC H (RRP > 99.0 %); OSC L (RRP < 97.7 %); NSC H (RRP > 99.0 %); NSC L (RRP < 98.0%).

⁹ OSC H (RRT > 95.3 %); OSC L (RRT < 94.0 %); NSC H (RRT > 98.75%); NSC L (RRT < 96.60%).

¹⁰ OSC L (AttR < 5.0 %) OSC H (AttR < 7.1 %); NSC L (AttR < 2.5 %); NSC H (AttR > 5 %).

determined length of assignment and end of project. The first group of reasons should be independent of organisational performance, but the latter could possibly be. In this analysis¹¹ we indeed find a peculiar pattern as shown in [figure 4](#): high RRU-retaining OSC agencies have more missionaries with trade school diploma ($13\pm 2\%$ / $5\pm 3\%$) and BA ($57\pm 3\%$ / $32\pm 4\%$) but significantly less with academic training i.e. MA ($20\pm 1.4\%$ / $35\pm 2.4\%$) and doctorate ($4.5\pm 1.2\%$ / $7.4\pm 1.0\%$). Apparently, academics are more affected by limited (specific) assignments and completion of project, or open to change of their organisational affiliation and prone to appointment to a leadership positions within the agency. They may also feel at home in agencies with dynamic personnel turn-over than missionaries with medium training.

NSC agencies with highly trained missionaries are less affected by unpreventable attrition, possibly highlighting their missionaries' organisational loyalty, and indeed their leaders gave higher rating of their missionaries' commitment and loyalty to their agency (5.16 ± 0.14) than low retaining NSC (4.88 ± 0.18) than OSC leaders (4.87 ± 0.08 / 4.24 ± 0.08). Are high-retaining agencies also less affected by completion of project or do they offer new opportunities within the agency?

Regarding pre-field training requirement we find the same pattern as in RRP and RRT: high RRU-retaining agencies expect 2-3 times more Bible school (OSC: 1.7 ± 0.1 y / 0.63 ± 0.14 y; NSC: 2.1 ± 0.2 y / 0.85 ± 0.22 y), formal missiological training (OSC: 1.0 ± 0.1 y / 0.33 ± 0.09 y; NSC: 0.93 ± 0.10 y / 0.38 ± 0.08 y) plus practical pre-field missionary training (OSC 0.32 ± 0.06 y / 0.1 ± 0.06 y). Again, we find a clear correlation between missionary training and retention for unpreventable attrition.

Agencies with high educational standards

The subgroups of mission agencies with high and low educational standard of their missionaries were also selected and compared¹². Agencies with high educational standards gave 40% (OSC) to 150% (NSC) higher ratings of their candidate selection procedures, especially on *Psychological assessment*, *Previous cross-cultural experience*, *Previous ministry experience in a local church*, *Blessing by their family*, *Firm prayer support*, *Potential for financial support* and *Contentment with present marital status* as depicted in [figure 5](#). OSC agencies with many highly educated missionaries expect the same amount of theological training (1.34 ± 0.18 y / 1.43 ± 0.10 y) as low retaining, but 50 % more on Formal Missiology (0.61 ± 0.07 y / 0.33 ± 0.06 y) and Practical missionary training (0.47 ± 0.06 y / 0.35 ± 0.07 y). They gave higher ratings of their leadership (*Leaders solve problems readily* +9%; *Annual performance review with all missionaries* +16%), Member Care (+36% on staff time; +64% on finances and + 22% on preventative member care), and on key questions regarding their organisational ethos, like: *Missionaries regularly evaluate and seek to improve the agency's ministry* (+18%), *Missionaries are not overworked* (+28%), *Missionaries are provided opportunities for continuous training* (+24%), *Missionaries receive time for annual vacation* (+30%), *Missionaries receive sustained financial support* (+22%). They invest twice as much for their missionaries' old age pension (10.6% / 4.8% of the missionary's allowance) and gave higher rating on their home office performance (*Re-entry arrangements for missionaries coming on home assignment* +33%; *Formal debriefing during home assignment* +37%), but gave lower ratings on their vision statement (-9%) and on ministry outcomes (-6%). At the end of the day they are blessed by increased retention rates RRT (94.14 ± 0.15 % / 93.23 ± 0.11 %), RRU (97.02 ± 0.07 % / 96.65 ± 0.01 %) and RRP (97.51 ± 0.19 % / 96.91 ± 0.20 %); the difference in RRP may appear small, but it corresponds to an attrition rate 100% - RRP of 2.49% vs. 3.09%, which is a quarter less.

¹¹ OSC H (RRU > 98.2 %) OSC L (RRU < 95.7%); NSC H (RRU > 99.0%); NSC L (RRU < 97.0%).

¹² Edu = 1 * %6-10y + 2 * %High School + 3 * %Trade School + 4 * %BA + 5 * %Master Degree + 6 * %Doctorate. Agencies were sorted according to Edu and assigned to the following subgroups (33% of total missionaries): OSC H (Edu > 4.2) OSC L (Edu < 3.9); NSC H (Edu > 3.9); NSC L (Edu < 2.5).

The values and the performance of agencies with highly educated missionaries prove the agencies' professional organisation, personal care and co-operative leadership style – and professionals have chosen agencies that fit their expectations.

Discussion

All these analyses clearly demonstrate the close correlation between missionary training and retention, especially regarding Missiology and continuous training of missionaries. This correlation was found in old (OSC) and new sending countries (NSC) alike. Even unpreventable attrition (RRU) is positively affected by missionary training as it prepares staff for new assignments within the agency. Mission executives rating of continuous missionary training indicates that their leaders are aware of this fact. A similar correlation between low attrition and training was found in the earlier ReMAP I study¹³ which, however, focused on personal reasons for missionary attrition and confirmed a close correlation with pre-field training, especially in Missiology.

Best practice agencies provide careful candidate selection and sound pre-field training. They encourage their missionaries to continuous training and development of new gifts and to actively work towards the continuous improvement of their ministries. These factors are even more important in our modern time where missionaries' role is constantly changing as the social situation in the country of service changes in an ever increasing pace. A missionary may have started as an evangelist, then moved on to church planting, turns to Bible teaching, becomes a mentor of pastors or a consultant of the National church and may finally assist in the development of their own National cross-cultural mission movement. This global trend calls for increasing training standards of missionaries, a lifestyle of life-long learning - and quality agencies are rewarded with high missionary retention.

While missionary retention has in general dropped over the past twenty years, it has not declined in the subgroup of high retaining agencies which have been able to maintain their missionaries' loyalty and granted them new challenges within their agency. These agencies are blessed with experienced staff, their most precious resources, which finds its expression in very high retention rates. However, we do not consider longevity of missionaries as an end in itself, unless missionaries are really productive in ministry¹⁴. But unreached peoples and hard places will only be reached with the Gospel through dedicated, committed missionaries who have mastered the language, carefully adjusted to the local culture, living out an incarnational lifestyle in trusted relationships, day by day. This requires long-term commitment and experienced, long-serving missionaries and thus calls for well trained workers, high quality agencies and excellent missionary training programs - flexible, modular, wholistic in structure and geared to this new generation of missionaries and the diverse needs in hard places.

¹³ Detlef Bloecher & Jonathan Lewis, Further Findings in the Research Data. pp. 105- 125. in: Too valuable to lose, William D. Taylor (Ed.), William Carey Library 1997

¹⁴ Missionaries can stay for too long and hinder the development of local leadership instead of moving on to a new ministry possibly within the same people group. Agencies need to have clear criteria for the completion of a project and a well-understood exit-strategy even before starting with a project in the first place. Likewise, wounded missionaries need care and restoration and/or be brought home with grace and dignity.

Figure 1: Percentage of missionaries with the given highest educational degree in agencies with High (H) and Low (L) missionary retention considering preventable attrition only (RRP) in old (OSC) and new (NSC) sending countries.

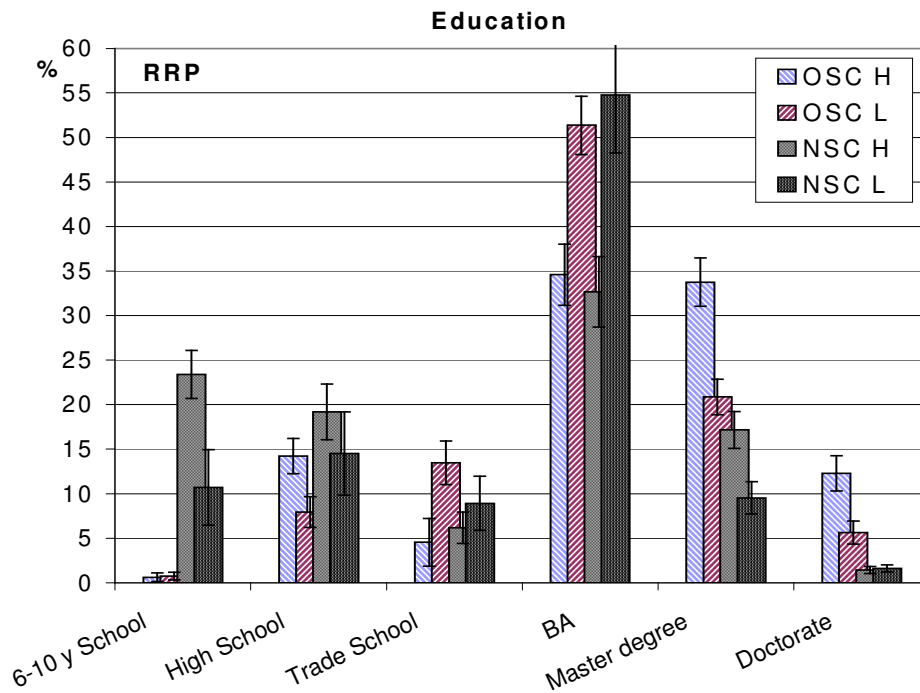


Figure 2: Pre-field Training Requirements of agencies with high (H) and low (L) missionary retention considering preventable attrition only (RRP) in old (OSC) and new (NSC) sending countries

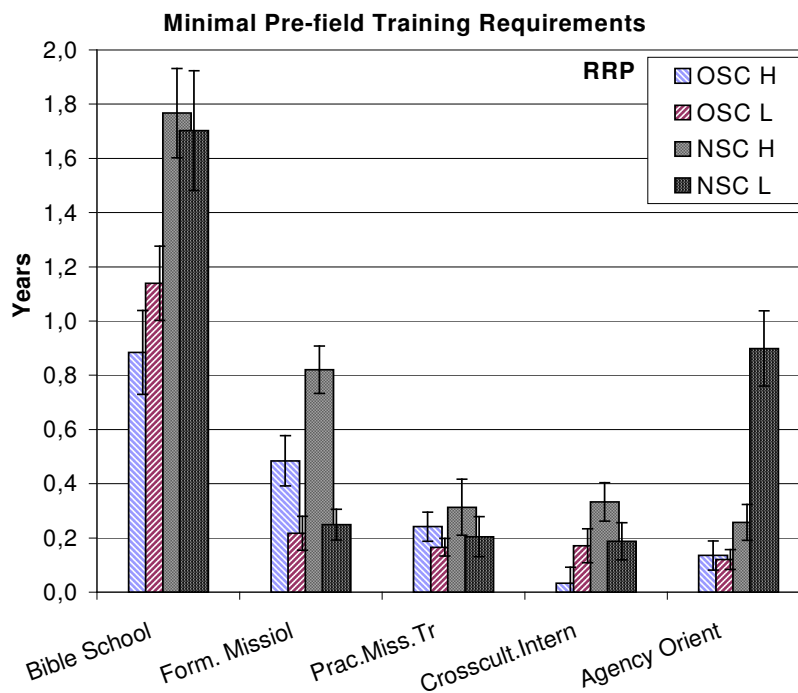


Figure 3: Pre-field training requirements of agencies with high (H) and low (L) total missionary retention considering(RRT) in old (OSC) and new (NSC) sending countries.

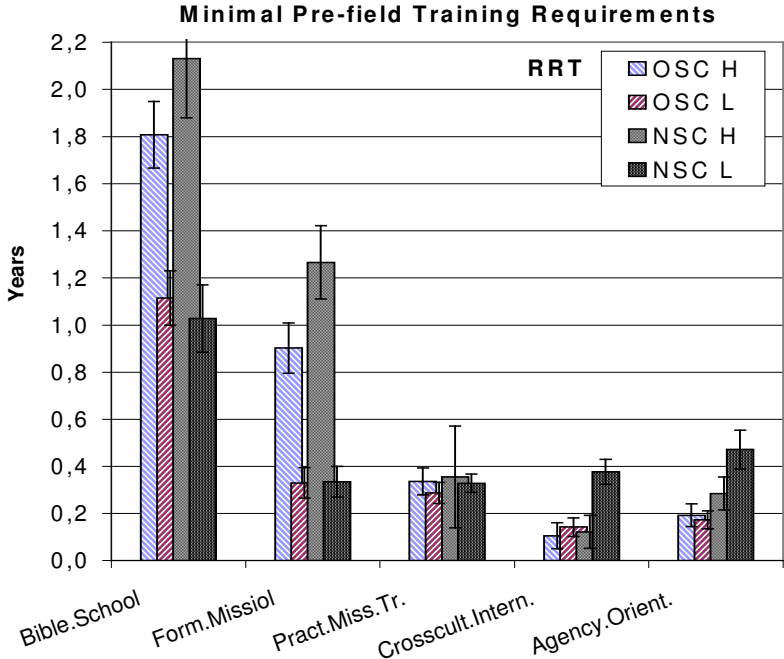


Figure 4: Percentage of missionaries with the following highest educational degree in agencies with high (H) and low (L) missionary retention considering unpreventable attrition only (RRU) in old (OSC) and new (NSC) sending countries.

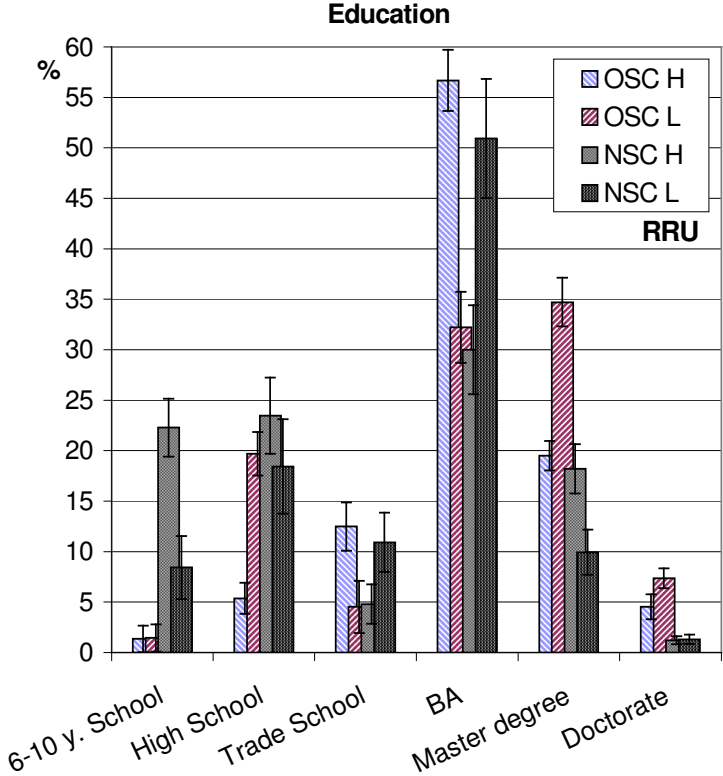


Figure 5: Mission executives' rating of their own candidate selection procedure. Agencies with high (H) and low (L) educational standard of their missionaries in old (OSC) and new (NSC) sending countries; rating on a scale 1 (= very poorly done) to 6 (= very well done) (subgroups contain a third of the mission force; definition in footnote 12).

