

From Grassroots to Cap and Gown – 09.11.05

David Suzuki the well known environmentalist recently co-wrote a book specifically about good news. He, and his co-writer Holly Dressel, provided examples of where individuals and communities had developed ‘good news’ examples of sustainability practice. He said that small communities, committed to their place, will quickly find the strategies for sustainability, and that they are in the best position to know what will work over the long term. It is in their self-interest to keep their own area healthy. Such communities, with their committed populations, also mirror the fact that eco-systems change every few miles or so – so the answers for community sustainability will not be the same from one community to another. There is no one-size-fits-all answer to sustainability.¹

That scenario of course reflects real life complexities, and dealing with individual community differences is part of the challenge for policy makers. My PhD thesis was to explore the role that a community/university partnership might play in providing access to the knowledge and skills that are fundamental to rural community sustainability.

Until 13 years ago, I was (still am!), a farm partner on the western plains of the Southern Grampians. Our small wool-growing community, Woodhouse-Nareeb, legacy of the soldier settlement era, is a close-knit community right on the eastern edge of the Southern Grampians Shire, 45 kilometres from Hamilton, its municipal centre.

This community, in partnership with interested supporters and innovators at RMIT University, and others in the local region, initiated a relationship which eventually saw RMIT establish a learning site at Hamilton. Through my involvement in helping to bring RMIT University to the region, I undertook a personal journey which mirrored the community journey. The outcome - a university presence in Hamilton - was the culmination of a dream nurtured for forty years in a community priding itself on educational excellence. My own journey was from farmer to PhD – an achievement undreamed of, and impossible without the opportunity for higher education in my region. The title of my thesis, *From Grassroots to Cap and Gown*, is very apt!

My study thus explored the evolution of the partnership between RMIT University and the community of Southern Grampians to understand the relevance of such partnerships for rural community sustainability.

At the time my community took action, in 1993, wool prices were at an all time low, banks were being closed, schools rationalised, hospitals downgraded to nursing home status, services withdrawn and locally, the collapse of the Pyramid Building Society had a massive economic impact on individuals and communities.

Of course rural community sustainability interested anyone who lived through those times in regional Australia. There was a general concern for where things might be heading.

One of the members of my community commented at the time: When people leave the land, they’re not usually replaced. This strains resources. When these reduce then it’s an excuse for governments to cut services, and so on it goes.²

For our community, there was a question of: Who was speaking up for the ordinary person? The loudest voices from the bush tend to be the farm lobbies – not necessarily representative of the broader rural community, but only of their own industry sectors. And then at times we’ve had some abrasive and divisive voices purporting to speak out for rural communities. The media mostly notices the bush to

¹ Suzuki, D and Dressel, H, 2003, *Good News for a Change: Hope for a troubled planet*, Allen and Unwin, NSW

² R Alexander – interview, 1996

broadcast the sensational, the bizarre or the quaint. Four hours from city hall, you have to be pretty sensational to capture the attention of the city media. But rural communities don't want to be a one hit wonder. What they need is an informed and consistent voice, to speak from a position of knowledge and reason. And to be listened to and taken seriously.

This explains some of the motivation for why my community connected with an urban university in 1993. No longer content to be on the margin, to be victims of change, instead they wanted to be part of the general dialogue and to take responsibility for their own future.

In 1999, after the relationship between RMIT and the Southern Grampians community had been nurtured for 6 years, the university purchased the ex-government regional veterinary laboratory. This was to house a research centre, a flexible learning centre, and community/university projects. I began my role there in 2000 as Manager for Community Partnerships and Projects. Part of my role was to help build a regional learning community.

The partners could hardly have been more different. RMIT University has a student cohort of around 60,000 and is probably Australia's most culturally diverse university. On the other hand, Southern Grampians Shire has a population of less than 17,000 and falling. Its population is one of the most culturally uniform in Australia. Issues for the region at that time included its ageing population, the drift to the cities of the region's youth, and an over-reliance on one commodity – wool (nb, by 2005, the industry base has diversified to include two new major industries – the blue-gum and mineral sands industries.). RMIT University, whilst identifiably a city-based university, has three campuses in Melbourne, one in Vietnam, and two rural sites, of which Hamilton is one. Southern Grampians Shire is three and a half hours drive west of Melbourne, and is around 7,000 square kilometers in area.

In brief, the relationship began in 1993 with a community driven initiative supported by enthusiasts at the university. It was a serendipitous time for the emerging partnership. In many ways the partnership could be said to be quite uneven when issues to do with resourcing, voice, geography, planning, knowledge and ownership come into play. However, we are very much a work-in-progress.

The mission was defined as: “To develop a model for a leading urban university working in partnership with a rural community: to initiate projects which mutually enhance the Southern Grampians Shire and RMIT communities educationally, socially, environmentally, culturally, internationally and economically.” A broad statement perhaps, but enticing, hopeful and inspiring.³

To place the relationship in some context, some explanation of history is useful. The Woodhouse-Nareeb community was very reliant on the wool industry: In the 1950s there was a boom, in the '60s a drought. The 1970s saw a drop in wool prices and in the '80s – a boom. The 1990s brought the crash. All very character forming. In interviewing community members as part of my study, it was pretty clear that there was already a strong sense of identity in the community - a legacy of community spirit.⁴ The stage therefore was already set for community members to take action in some way.

We contacted the Melbourne College of Textiles, and eventually, after some persuasion, they sent up a bus load of international students. All weekend we (the community) promoted the virtues of wool to these future practitioners in the international fashion industry! It was a great weekend. One of the students on that trip was an RMIT student. She reported back, and the international student coordinator, looking for a way to add value to her students' Melbourne study experience, got in touch and asked to join in. The rest, as they say, is history. The partnership developed from there. The impact on the community was immediate and positive. But the community's input was prodigious – generous at a time when it was hard to make ends meet. The community however, was working to forget its troubles, to mend the hurts of the recession and build community spirit, to provide 'good old country hospitality', to speak for itself, and

³ Beanland, D *et al*, in Bonney, L, Karthigasu, Y, Scholfield, K, *The RICE Paper*, 1998, RMIT University

⁴ Woodhouse-Nareeb community interviews 2002

eventually, to build something new and hopeful for the region so we would never be caught short again by the destructive force of global commodity swings.

Tangible outcomes of the partnership so far include:

- a Bachelor of Nursing program by mixed mode of delivery – 80 students. (next year will see our one hundredth graduate);
- A locally based research centre, the Centre for Regional and Rural Development conducting local, national and international research around community sustainability issues;
- Research partnerships – the region participates in a number of research areas, through the relationship with RMIT University, such as applied and natural science, education, health, economics and so on. This helps to get the voice out there, and brings in new knowledge.
- Recognition of local expertise- Local people are included, and local expertise applied where appropriate;
- Visits from students from 55 countries, hosted by 200 families and 35 regional schools;
- \$3.135 M refurbishment of RMIT Hamilton infrastructure. The wonderful facilities are now a community/university asset;
- Economic impact – something like a \$m ripple out economic impact in 2002⁵ for the region;
- Developing learning community – strengthened networks – the capacity to be a catalyst for a whole range of community/university activities. Resourcing this role brings into question the place of a university's community service role – the basis on which the program progressed in the first place!

Some outcomes are less easy to define. There are many, but I will touch on just a few:

- Optimism – What was very clear in my research was the sense of hope and gratification that a large university, RMIT, took seriously their commitment to this struggling, rural community. Although the shape of the relationship is still not entirely clear, that commitment to a partnership was, and remains, a source of pride to the community;
- Narrowing the urban/rural gap - This is a critical issue for our time. Apart from the notion of balanced development and community sustainability, and the social and economic ramifications of regional development policy, there are issues about natural resource management. By dint of geography, most of the responsibility for this lies in the country. Currently the lion's share of export income is earned in the regions. Yet the lion's share of education dollars is spent beyond rural Australia and in the largest regional centres and metropolitan areas. We need equitable access to quality lifelong education, we need quality research, and we need well trained professionals. Making the case is the first step. Hence our community's commitment to narrowing the urban/rural gap through this partnership;
- The confidence engendered by the availability locally of further educational opportunities. Availability of Commonwealth supported places, and the capacity to fund programs is an issue for us. This markets obviously dictate the carve-up of available resources. Nevertheless flexible learning options make new delivery methods achievable. For regional communities the higher education participation rate is lower than urban – issues include: the drift to the city of youth, and a high rate of homesickness and attrition of those ex-year 12s who leave to attend university elsewhere. There needs to be more regional options. Similarly, in a global economy, access to continuing education and re-training options is important for mature age students and workers as well. Give new technologies and pedagogies flexible learning choices should now be attainable.
- Community participation. Our formal community engagement process is the Community Advisory Network of over 50 members. There are numerous other ways in which university and community engage. This provides an avenue for rural community members to overcome the marginality issue alluded to earlier. It is also important that the community-university link be maintained to preserve the integrity of the partnership's history. The community engagement processes enable a two-way flow of information important to developing a learning region. It also gives rise to a model of community development that could be called the 'triumvirate' model. The

⁵ Brooks, Gangemi and Stewart, 2002, RMIT University

three arms of this are: research, teaching and learning (skills provision) and community partnership.

In the Hamilton experience it seems impossible to say which of these three is more or less important. All are essential to the partnership and the value a university presence brings to a community – and vice-versa. However, resourcing this triumvirate approach is a challenge. If I had one real, take-home message for this forum, it would be to strengthen the link between regional development and the higher education sector to enable smaller or larger projects, based on the triumvirate model, to develop as a means of contributing to sustainable regional communities. I am quite certain much could be learned from this.

The benefit of partnerships between higher education and rural communities struggling with rapid change can be observed in the Hamilton experience. The potential for communities to define their own future increases as the means become available through new knowledge, networks and quality partnerships. Even though communities may already have considerable assets such as that intangible community spirit, they need critical friends. As one of the community members reflected: “Vision? Well, that’s what you get when you turn the lights on!”