

# Engaging Communities Through Lifelong Learning

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## Abstract

This paper identifies the issues and directions of engaging communities with lifelong learning with a focus on sustainability. Through drawing on case studies involving two communities in rural and regional Australia, critical success factors are identified which will influence the engagement of communities and lifelong learning.

## Keywords

Community, engagement, lifelong learning, vocational education and training, sustainability

## Background

Throughout Australia and internationally there has been considerable debate on the need to strengthen communities through the provision of more informed educational provision. There have been many successes in Australia and internationally — however, this may be due more to serendipity and the passion of individuals rather than a strategic, systemic and cross-sectoral approach by educational providers (Kearns 2004).

Learning from current examples provides a platform to progress and develop new models of engagement between individuals, communities and ‘lifelong learning’. Although there has been significant investment at state, national and international levels in ‘lifelong learning’, it is difficult to perceive a shared understanding of the expression. The definition used here is that of the European Commission (2001, p. 9):

“All learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competencies within a personal, civic, social and/or employment related perspective.”

This broad definition reflects the richer tapestry of human existence rather than the narrow definitions which measure value by employment related perspectives alone.

Within this broad context there are many challenges facing individuals and their communities and these as listed by Duke (2001) include:

- continuously accelerating technological change
- the changing demography of societies
- sustainability

- globalisation
- ICT and the power of e-learning and e-business
- social exclusion, widening gulfs within and between societies, and the damage caused by social and cultural discontinuities
- differences about the extent to which social objectives (equity, sustainability) are best attained via or are in conflict with economic strategies and pathways. To this could also be added the dimensions of environmental and ethical considerations.

How individual communities engage with these challenges will determine their individual futures. What role then should educational providers perform in this context?

### **The Nature of Vocational Education and Training (VET) in Australia**

VET in Australia has a focus on providing 'education and training for work'. In theory the system is:

- industry-led — employers and industry representatives define what outcome is required from training
- national — state, territory and Australian governments jointly manage the system
- client-focussed — it is flexible and relevant and responsive to client needs.

The fundamental elements of the system as described by ANTA (2005) are:

- the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) — a nationally consistent set of qualifications for all post-compulsory education and training in Australia
- the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF) — the nationally agreed recognition arrangements for the vocational education and training sector. The Australian Quality Training Framework is based on a quality assured approach to the registration of training organisations (RTOs) seeking to deliver training, assess competency outcomes and issue Australian Qualifications Framework qualifications and/or Statements of Attainment and ensures the recognition of training providers and the Australian Qualifications Framework qualifications and Statements of Attainment they issue, across Australia.
- registered training organisations (RTOs) — training organisations must meet AQTF standards to become registered. Only registered training organisations (RTOs) can issue AQF qualifications and deliver training and assessment services
- national recognition — all states and territories must recognise registered training organisations (RTOs) registered by other states and territories and all RTOs must recognise AQF qualifications and statements of attainment issued by other RTOs. This national recognition of RTOs and qualifications enhances mobility in the labour market.
- state and territory registering authorities — are the organisations responsible under the state or territory vocational education and training legislation and decision making framework for all decisions relating to the administration of the accreditation of courses.

- training package — an integrated set of nationally endorsed standards, guidelines and qualifications for training, assessing and recognising people’s skills, developed by industry to meet the training needs of an industry or group of industries. Training packages consist of core endorsed components of competency standards, assessment guidelines and qualifications, and optional non-endorsed components of support materials such as learning strategies, assessment resources and professional development materials.

The framework for VET within Australia allows for significant flexibility, responsiveness and contextualisation to meet the needs of individual industries and businesses. The framework also allows for a range of providers of VET including schools, adult and community education (ACE), Technical and Further Education (TAFE), universities and private providers.

### **Communities and VET providers**

VET providers have a long history of engagement with industry and employers, but as they become more aware of their role in contributing to the stock of social capital, the recent trend has been to widen this to whole of community perspectives. There are numerous definitions of social capital, however in this paper it refers to the OECD definition of:

“the networks together with shared norms, values and understandings that facilitate cooperation within or among groups.”

Until recent times, the role of VET providers in contributing to the development of social capital has had little prominence in national and international discussion and, as such, has not been a significant objective in VET policy development (Kearns 2004). There also exists a paucity of research on VET’s role in building social capital (ANTA 2003)

However, the current national strategic plan for VET, *Shaping our Future 2004–2010*, enunciates a goal that communities and regions will be strengthened economically and socially through learning and employment. To what extent the transition of ANTA to the Australian Government Department of Education Science and Training will have on government policy is as yet unclear, however the national government has made it clear that industry and business needs must drive training policies, priorities and delivery in VET (DEST 2005).

There is evidence of a decline in the stock of social capital in rural areas in Australia (Alston and Kent 2004; ANTA 2003) brought about by sustained periods of drought and economic hardship. This has been reinforced through the collection of anecdotal information.

Learning communities are dependent on strong social capital but also provide a means of further developing and strengthening its stock. They can be a powerful means of creating and sharing new knowledge and have a number of characteristics:

- Members of a learning community share a common goal or purpose
- They are operationalised through collaboration, cooperation and/or partnerships
- They respect diversity which enhances the learning capacity of a community
- They develop the capacity or enhance the potential of members (Kilpatrick et al. 2003).

Australian research has drawn attention to the role that VET providers can play, particularly in regional areas, to lead and facilitate this growth (Kilpatrick 2003; Kearns 2004; ANTA 2003). In addition to this, Balatti and Falk (2001) show that strong social capital is the primary factor in maximising the impact of adult learning on socio-economic well-being.

TAFE New South Wales (NSW) New England Institute (the Institute) is publicly funded and the largest provider of VET in the New England and North West regions of NSW. It has eleven campuses servicing 13 local government areas, many of whom have low socio-economic levels. Research by the Centre for Research and Learning in Regional Australia shows that VET providers, through providing what is referred to as 'enabling leadership' play an integral role in assisting rural communities to manage change (Falk 2000). Along with local government they can be key facilitators of 'interactional infrastructure', which refers to the opportunities, structures and processes for interaction of community members (ANTA 2003). Unpublished information from the ANTA National Learning Community Project 2001, indicates that the TAFE leadership role is more significant in smaller communities whilst in larger communities it takes a partnership role (ANTA 2003).

The Institute has a strategic focus to develop strong links with its communities and since 2000 has played an active role in nurturing the development of two learning communities in its geographical region, the Gwydir Learning Region and Gunnedah.

### **The Gwydir Learning Region**

The Gwydir Learning Region (GLR) covers a large area based on the council boundaries of the Gwydir Regional Council in New South Wales.

The Gwydir Regional Council is located in North West New South Wales within the North West Slopes and Plains region. The shire covers an area of 9121.7 square kilometres and has a population of approximately 5790 people (ABS 2001).

The centres of population are at Warialda, Bingara, Warialda Rail, Gravesend, North Star, Croppa Creek, Coolatai and Upper Horton. Both Warialda and Bingara have hospitals, aged care hostels, medical centres, caravan parks, swimming pools, pre-schools, libraries and tourist information centres, with a mobile pre-school based at North Star. The shire's economy relies mostly on the agricultural industry followed by related services, light industrial and retail. Tourism is developing as a larger contributor to the economy.

Gwydir area agricultural residents are starting to diversify from their main income source of beef, sheep and cropping and expanding into aquaculture, olives and seed oils such as sunflower and linseed. As times and demand change, this shire is becoming more focussed on manufacturing and tourism.

The shire has a number of primary schools, one central school (kindergarten to Year 10), and one high school (kindergarten to Year 12). There are three adult and community education providers, and no physical TAFE or university presence.

The Gwydir Learning Region was initially established in 2000 as a partnership involving three shire councils (Yallaroi, Bingara and Barraba), Warialda High School and the New England Institute of Technical and Further Education. This partnership has evolved through changes of organisational structures and names. The most significant of these has been the merger of the Yallaroi and Bingara local government areas (LGAs) and part of the Barraba LGA to form the Gwydir Regional Council.

The successes of the partnership have drawn a larger number of partners and support from individuals and organisations throughout the communities. These additional partners include Adult and Community Education, the University of New England and Hunter New England Area Health.

The support for the Gwydir Learning Region approach is exemplified in the vision of the Gwydir Shire Council for 2004 to 2007, which is:

“To be the recognised leader in Local Government through continuous learning and sustainability”.

This is further illustrated within the council’s 2004–2007 Management Plan that has as strategic objectives:

“That the Gwydir Shire is recognised as a community that encourages lifelong learning and this will lead to a sustainable community through:

- increases in residents’ work and life skills
- providing individual fulfilment
- assisting those in the community who are excluded from the workplace or are isolated from their community
- providing for economic regeneration and community capacity building”.

This LGA is recognised as one of the most impoverished in Australia on a per capita income basis (ABS 2001). At the same time the social fabric within the region is resilient and there is a strong sense of community.

This has been evidenced through the successes of the Gwydir Learning Region during its five years of existence. The vision of the Gwydir Learning Region is that of locals taking control of their futures and building their community the way that they want it.

There have been many successes to date including:

- Tailoring delivery to primarily meet the **demands of individuals**, and through this approach improve the responsiveness and flexibility of educational providers. The aim has been to assist individuals to identify what they want to achieve in terms of career and life experiences, develop a plan and strategies of how best to achieve that plan as well as contingency plans. A guiding philosophy of the GLR is that training is sought for the individual — and then identify a provider who can deliver a quality service. As a result, delivery has been provided by schools, adult and community education, TAFE and universities. This approach has improved communications among educational providers in an environment of collaboration and sometimes competition. On occasions this approach has necessitated negotiating delivery from educational providers located elsewhere in Australia — for example, flexible delivery of programs from South Australia.

A range of positive outcomes for individuals of all ages has been the result. One interesting outcome of this is a local boy who is now working between the United Kingdom and Africa rehabilitating tigers and big cats back to the wild. This resulted from his passion for that vocation expressed early in his high school years, high school staff devising a training pathway and then the implementation of this in negotiation with a range of educational providers.

- **Broadening the student demographic** — For example the provision of training in aged care and nursing at Certificate III level to school and community students. This mixing of school aged and more mature aged students enables the delivery of face-to-face teaching and creates a real sense of community through the blending of different generations and the building of community support systems, essential to the strengthening of community ties. The graduates can secure employment locally or throughout Australia.
- **Involvement of the community** — The community has taken a leading role in the development of the learning community including planning, provision and evaluation of the outcomes. One example is the provision for students in their senior years of high school of traineeships in retail, hospitality, business services, information technology, rural and engineering. In 2005 there are over 30 such traineeships involving local businesses and the council as employers. This involvement of community and businesses in provision has resulted in mutual learning and understandings. The students display strong self-esteem and direction. There is very little graffiti in the towns as the young are increasingly are seeing that their community generally supports them.
- **Community Health** — The Gwydir Learning Region targeted enhancing mental health as a major factor in revitalising rural communities. The GLR had little or no provision of

mental health services. Through negotiations with the Psychology Department of the University of New England and linking to the Barwon Division of General Practitioners, the outcome has been placement of doctorate level psychology students, one day per week in the township of Bingara and one day a week in the township of Warialda. These students assist in counselling, both preventative and remedial. Support for the project has been forthcoming from direct and indirect funding locally as well as through one-off project funding. The long-term goal of this development is for the link between the University of New England and the GLR to result in mutually supportive research and community industry placements. The PhD supervisors will all be practising psychology clinical specialists closely communicating with local medical professionals, school counsellors and community support officers and programs.

- **Increasing the range of providers** — The collaborative dialogue among providers has enabled the first provision by Adult and Community Education of accredited Certificate III level training in Aged Care. The balance between complementary and competition has accentuated the need for each of the providers to be responsive, flexible and maintain quality educational provision.
- **Roxy Theatre** — in common with many rural towns, Bingara had a once beautiful icon, an art deco theatre known as the Roxy Theatre. This facility once a life force within the community had been last used in the 1950s and, since then in many ways, was witness to the decline of the town from its main street location. The Bingara Council had a vision for what was possible and secured a portion of the grant money needed to rebuild the theatre. In 2001 the then-new Gwydir Learning Region suggested that the Roxy could be very effectively play a major role in delivering cultural and educational programs within its brief of paying its own way.

The committee of the Gwydir Learning Region:

- successfully convinced council and TAFE to deliver a course in construction and so provide training to local youth in an industry with national skills shortages and at the same time undertake part of the building work required on the Roxy
- recognised the opportunity to provide residents with a career avenue and the community with a local cultural attraction and negotiated the provision of training for community members and school-aged students in theatre and performing arts. From those beginnings the Northwest Theatre Company has emerged and is delivering high quality theatre productions and musicals.

The Premier of New South Wales, Bob Carr, subsequently opened the Roxy Theatre in 2004 with a gala concert drawing on the talents of local artists with a standard of performance that in many ways was better than professional. The Roxy is a visual symbol of what is possible — and its sustained strategic development has facilitated a sense of positive direction for the community.

### **Gunnedah — A community portrait**

Gunnedah is situated in the centre of the Namoi Valley, New South Wales, Australia and is 440 kilometres northwest of Sydney. The shire covers an area of 5092 square kilometres. The town is known as the 'Koala Capital of the World' due to the abundance of healthy koalas living right in the township.

On census night, 7 August 2001:

- the population was 11,993 of which 91 per cent were born in Australia and 10.1 per cent were Indigenous
- the average family income in Gunnedah was \$38,000 a year, less than the NSW average of \$56,000
- the unemployment rate was 9.3 per cent
- agriculture, forestry and fishing employed 21 per cent of Gunnedah's workforce followed by retail which employed 15 per cent and health and community services (10 per cent)
- the most common type of occupation was managers (18 per cent). This includes farmers and small business operators
- 15 per cent left school at Year 9 and 39 per cent left at year 10; 25 per cent left at Year 12
- 17 per cent of residents had a certificate-level qualification, 4.8 per cent had a diploma and 5.6 per cent had a degree (ABS 2001).

Between 1996 and 2001 Gunnedah's population declined by 1.3 per cent, however the number of mature-aged people (55-74 years) increased.

During the past decade Gunnedah has experienced a series of economic blows with the closure of a number of coal mines and the abattoir; the adjustment to ground water allocations in the Namoi Valley and the continuing drought conditions. In addition to this, the withdrawal of a number of government service providers and the redistribution of local government boundaries have all had an impact on the economy of the shire.

### ***The story so far...***

The Centre for Lifelong Learning and Development identified six significant steps in the process of establishing a learning community:

- Probe and research the learning in the community
- Involve people in the development
- Promote the benefits of learning
- Set objectives and evaluate progress
- Look at strategies to encourage sustainability.

The Gunnedah learning community is in the initial stages of development.

Twelve months ago the process commenced with the Institute facilitating a well attended community forum, which drew representation from a wide group of organisations — council, educational providers, service groups, health providers, business groups, progress associations and charity groups. Adult Learning Australia, a peak body in Australia, provided support and, after hearing of Lithgow's experiences as a Learning City, the parallels between the situations facing Lithgow and Gunnedah were immediately obvious.

There was overwhelming support to pursue the concept of a learning community in Gunnedah. A key objective for this model is that it must focus on becoming financially self-sustaining. It was also recognised that learning needed to occur based on the experiences of other communities for the purpose of establishing frameworks through which the project will be sustained. The findings from the 2001 ANTA National Learning Community Project have informed the model so far. The Audit Reports collected as a result of the ANTA Project highlighted the need to:

- have sound communication strategies so that understanding and commitment are enhanced
- engage key community stakeholders in the project
- accept that the community itself has the responsibility for achieving learning community status.

Information dissemination strategies were established and communication between a number of key stakeholders, including the council and business community commenced. During Adult Learning Week these stakeholders worked together to promote and focus community attention on life-long learning. Whilst there were low participation rates, it was successful in terms of showing organisations that they could share their resources to work together on common projects. That is, it contributed to the development of trust and reciprocity, so critical in learning communities.

In 2005 the Institute, having sourced external funds, employed a project officer to broker the development of a learning community in Gunnedah. The project involves a number of deliverables including: the conduct of a learning audit to identify successful partnerships that support learning and to establish learning needs; coordinating a variety of learning activities that will build partnerships; and developing sustainability of the learning community. A Reference Group of stakeholders representing council, the business community, educational providers and community groups oversees the project. On the basis of the findings of the audit the group will set priorities and develop a vision of a Gunnedah learning community. The results from the audit will also be made available to a variety of agencies and be used to inform service delivery.

### **Progress — What has been learnt?**

Leaders within many communities as well as those from a state and national level recognise the importance of providing opportunities for lifelong education in this information age. However, for as many communities that are positively engaged there are even more examples where such development is not occurring. As will be detailed below there is also an issue in terms of sustaining such developments.

An analysis of the dynamics of the several years experience of the Gwydir Learning Region and the progress thus far in establishing the Gunnedah Learning Region reinforce some findings from other similar research.

Firstly, there must be a clear and shared vision and a positive outlook from appropriate individuals throughout the community on working towards that vision. In the case of the Gwydir Learning Region a formal strategic planning exercise was undertaken including the development and recording of a vision. However, the real vision was not the vision recorded in the strategic plan but the vision that was shared, tested, refined and distilled by members of the executive committee. This vision transformed as strategic opportunities were identified, initiated and pursued. This vision was transferable among the individual towns that comprise the region, as well as having ownership by those outside the region.

This vision has been transformed through the 'helicopter' vision of many of the individuals involved, focussed on the needs of the community as a whole rather than their personal needs. As Kearns (2003) states these people are able to see how ideas, systems, and objectives can be combined in novel ways to produce something new.

The progress of engagement develops from a platform of shared values and trust. This has been developed for both the models through focusing on the significant external challenges for the communities. Throughout the Gwydir Learning Region experiences, there have been periods of questioning and of conflict. However, these experiences if engaged in positively result in growth in values and trust. The dynamics of collaboration coupled with competition among individuals and organisations within the Gwydir Learning Region have resulted in improved delivery to the communities.

For example, there is a range of training opportunities — including face-to-face as well as e-learning — now available, which were considered economically unviable five years ago. Training solutions are constantly becoming more available and diverse. This has placed the emphasis on providers working increasingly closer with communities to assure their service delivery meets the needs of the individual community.

On the other hand, Kilpatrick (2003) observed that tensions between collaboration and competition could lead to a reduced effectiveness of the outcomes of training especially in the thin markets of smaller communities. This was identified to especially be the case when training is provided on a 'fly-in fly-out' basis, which often failed to take account of local needs.

Partnerships in such arrangements necessarily are then open, honest, direct and strongly established (ANTA, Centre for Lifelong Learning and Development in Adelaide). The progress of the Gwydir Learning Region has been successful in this regard and has been further facilitated by most of the stakeholders being the same individual throughout the history of the project. There has been a sharing of formal and informal experiences that have cemented the bond among these individuals. This continuity of the people who take part in the collaboration has been recognised by Kilpatrick (2003) as a success factor. At the same time the value of diversity and entropy within a system to facilitate change should not be understated.

The experiences for both Gunnedah and Gwydir highlight the need to have passionate people to provide energy within systems. However, there is concern that such passion can often be diluted as the zeal declines or as the zealot moves on to other passions. This may be especially the case in rural communities — however, it is more likely to be a common thread across all locations. The issue of sustainability and of providing adequate support are significant issues.

Advocacy by communities especially in small rural communities is often problematic. Sometimes this is due to the lack of individuals able to or willing to articulate vision, whilst in other cases it may be more that the message is muted through the communication channels. This is especially the case when systems are large and the transmission may often take considerable time and experience significant distortion as it travels through the system. A feature of both Gunnedah and Gwydir is that senior leaders of training organisations have personally visited the locations to discuss training needs and solutions at a local level. This has resulted as much by the boldness and passion of individuals at the local level as senior managers being receptive to the invitation for dialogue.

Engagement across all the community and its organisations is another success feature. In the case of the Gwydir and Gunnedah, individuals and organisations appear to be increasingly resilient and prepared to seek solutions that will sustain their community. In both locations there have been surprisingly well-attended public forums to discuss and debate how lifelong learning can be developed to have positive impact throughout their community. Consultation recently conducted throughout Australia on lifelong learning confirmed that there was wide agreement that holistic strategies are required for social, economic, and cultural objectives (Adult Learning Association 2005).

Sustaining the Gwydir Learning Region has occurred through the goodwill of the individuals on the executive committee as well as the broader support of the community stakeholders. There have been no additional funds provided to facilitate the process. The return on time and money expended has been through achieving positive outcomes — for objectives reached through consensus rather than shaping progress merely to meet funding guidelines. Research indicates that this can be effective in the development of such models and that many projects are often sustained only while the project funding is made available (ANTA).

Issues of appropriate models for sustainability have been discussed for both of the Learning Regions. In both cases whilst they have been initiated by educationalists, the ongoing management model has been through local government. The development has relied upon the individual rather than the system and the stance of local government representatives may largely determine the results. In cases where there is little support towards social goals it would presumably be a challenge for learning regions to keep going. Kearns (2004) lists a number of models including:

- civil society and local government
- government support for local and regional initiatives
- comprehensive and integrated state and territory initiatives
- development of a national framework to build Australia as an inclusive and innovative learning society.

Experiences for both Gwydir and Gunnedah are that it has been advantageous to focus locally, whilst sourcing information and as much support as possible from state and national levels. It is not possible to extrapolate such findings from the case studies across the nation, however it does reflect that if Australia is to maximise opportunities in an information age that debate occurs on the best model to achieve this.

Issues of appropriate performance indicators also vex the development of lifelong learning and community engagement and development. While one accepts the need for funding models and accountability against these models, it has often been achieved through having performance indicators that are narrow and quantitative. How can managers of the respective organisations measure and report on the value of having staff and resources allocated to the growth of the development of social capital? This is compounded by the time period of the reporting framework — often this is limited to a financial period (e.g. month, quarter or year) rather than the longer-term impact of such engagement.

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