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From the Margins to the Mainstream: the 'other' transforming
knowledge and wisdom

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*Quantum physics teaches that if you introduce new elements then you necessarily
change the shape of the whole. (Vella 2002)*

The understanding that no single model of regional development exists, rather a multiplicity of possible options that can best be shaped by local and regional perspectives, as promoted by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (Hugonier, 1999), is endorsed by studies from within Australia (Garlick 2001, Sher & Sher 1994). The Victorian 'Small Towns Study' recognized that for many small towns their future development would be closely related to those measures which communities in small towns themselves can identify, develop and implement (Henshall, et al, 1988). Since then, a range of programs supporting rural enterprise, women, youth, education and the environment have been initiated by the Victorian Labour Government (McDonald, 1991). Local people became the initiators of development, rather than those on whom decisions made in distance boardrooms impacted. Unfortunately most of these programs were short lived, subject as they were to the changing agenda of Governments that increasingly responded to corporate agendas of centralization and privatization.

Community perspectives were significantly absent within these competitive policies, and rural communities faced the additional barrier of smaller populations than their urban counterparts (Dax, 1996). The impact of these policies was particularly harsh in rural Victoria (Tesdaorf and Associates, 1996) and the absence of rural knowledge perpetuated the myths of the expendable nature of rural communities.

This paper tracks the learning, challenges and milestones associated with the creation of a home where rural and regional issues are the central focus of attention and are resourced through a partnership with a major university. Central to the approach is collaborative research into the strategies of previous regional programs that supported long term change directed from within communities. This became the Model of Collaborative Engagement for Transformation (Sheil 2000).

Collaborative Engagement recognizes the harm caused to community by past practices and that communities and organizations benefit from having the time and resources to learn to work more democratically and inclusively.

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The model also provides a systematic approach to engagement, skills and resource development, a process that enables the intimate local knowledge of people and landscapes to guide the future directions of communities towards the dual goals of social and ecological sustainability (Ife, 2002).

Figure 1: A model of collaborative Engagement

Despite the then prevailing ‘wisdom’ that regarded communities of under 3,000 people as expendable (Forth and Howell, 2001), the Centre for Rural Communities Inc (the Centre) was established in 1995 to work with rural communities. Individuals from Gippsland Council of Adult Community and Further Education, the TAFE sector and Monash University’s Gippsland Campus recognized that many challenges facing rural communities could be constructively tackled if people had access to the skills, knowledge and resources within regional institutions and formed an alliance with people from rural communities. Like David Suzuki, people regarded their community as important for human survival in the same way that natural habitat is important to animal survival (Suzuki and McConnell, 1997) yet were aware that local people rarely participated in decisions that impacted on their communities and lives.

The Centres’ vision is to enhance the capacity of rural communities to provide for their own optimal well being (Smith and Pearce, 1995). The research and identification of inclusive strategies that led to the development of the Model of Collaborative Engagement occurred within this context.

Earlier research in Gippsland had identified access, cost and distance as barriers to the participation of rural women in educational programs (Clarke, 1984). As women’s involvement is integral to community activities it was important to find a way to overcome these constraints. In Australia, study circles had been developed to enable people from very different backgrounds to become involved with Aboriginal Reconciliation (Reconciliation, 1993). This process saw pastoralists and indigenous people sitting at a common table on equal terms and listening to each other. It was a

radically different approach to the traditionally adversarial debates that frequently dominate public forums. Essentially study circles establish forums that foster respect, tolerance of difference and from which future actions can be developed. Study circles also enable groups to work collaboratively on issues that can not be tackled in isolation. Adult Learning Australia developed study circle kits on the Salt of the Earth on Dryland Salinity (Adult Education 1993) and the Murray Darling Basin (Education, 1996). Study circles do not require an expert and can be offered within communities at minimal cost with a trusted local person. They overcome the barriers identified in Clarke's research.

Study circles

Equality is the heart of the matter of democracy
(Larsson, 2001)

Study circles create small group democracy that supports the participation and skill development of all participants. They also facilitate the qualities of equal participation, deliberation, knowledge that informs standpoints, recognition of diverse identities, horizontal relationships, internal democratic decision-making and action to inform society (Larsson 2001:201). Study circles enable people to 'overcome the isolation of individuals and the lack of interest in what is common, equality is the heart of the matter in democracy' (Dewey in Larson 2001:202). With funding from philanthropic trusts with an interest in rural communities the Centre systematically incorporated the nine steps of Collaborative Engagement into the 'Building Rural Futures through Co-operation' study circle kits (hereafter termed 'the kit') (Sheil 1997). The logo of the Centre features a teapot on a round table with hands reaching out, symbolising people sitting talking together at a common table. This promotes understanding that each person brings an equally valuable life experience to the table (Study and Centre, 1997). The work is not about a return to the past, but an opportunity for the unique heart of every community to become visible and feature in policy and planning.

Producing the kit was only the first step in educating of the relevance of nurturing local knowledge. To implement this process, trusted local workers with good facilitation skills were needed. When 'the kit' was launched in Gippsland communities in 1998 a community health nurse, a landcare worker, a lay minister and the researcher established study circles. Local participants agreed to meet for three hours usually on a weekly basis for 10 to 12 sessions with up to 12 people. The kit facilitated local people's access to the skills and knowledge of collaborative engagement, supporting them to determine the speed and scope of future directions. Each of the strategies of collaborative engagement contributes separate qualities that combine to achieve transformative change.

The kit begins by inviting dialogue on how the group will work and people's previous experiences of being involved with groups. No answers are given, although stories from other communities affirm that local people can make a difference. Community members are not told how to think but are encouraged to find their own voice through strategic questioning. While this degree of openness is initially challenging, study circle participants come to appreciate an approach that supports local ownership of any future actions. People not only gain confidence in speaking about their own circumstances, but also the maturity and tolerance to listen and respect the views of others. Belenky et. al. note this development of language as having an equivalent moral development (Belenky, 1997).

The outcomes from that initial trial of the kits exceeded expectations. Each group identified a common theme and began with a manageable project. For example the Bruthen community identified the need to improve communication as many people now worked outside the town and had little knowledge of local activities. They established the Tambo Rambler (a local newspaper) and held a Community Spirit Dinner, inviting representatives from the many groups in Bruthen to share a meal and consider if there were benefits in working together in the future (Sheil, 2000). From this experience they gained the confidence and credibility to take their skills into new areas (See diagram of study circle outcomes in following 12 months).

Waterways or coastlines were frequently a uniting feature in the community. Community members collaborated to improve water quality, access and flow and to prevent weeds or degeneration through erosion. Action is regarded as an integral component of learning, not an end product. Undertaking action together enables group members to apply their intellectual knowledge of working together. Action is followed by reflection as study circle members document and share their experiences at regional events. These inspirational stories are a trusted source for other communities that realize they are part of a growing movement of change from within rural communities. The majority of these groups continue to meet following the completion of the study circle and new projects continue to evolve.

Figure 2: Outcomes from Building Rural Futures through Co-operation Study Circle in Bruthen

However what also became apparent from that first trial was that most communities did not have access to a skilled and funded facilitator, and without this person the kits remained unopened (O'Connor, 1998). To overcome this gap steps were taken to develop a professional development manual 'Growing and Learning in Rural Communities' (Sheil 2000) introducing workers to the strategies within the model of Collaborative Engagement and documenting the stories of change.

Regional university campus – community engagement

In a knowledge based economy, innovation and learning are vital to communities leading their own development
(Garlick & Pryor 2003:7)

A critical step in making this work and resources more broadly available has been the Centre's alliance with Monash University and the accreditation of a Graduate Certificate in Regional Community Development that utilizes the professional development manual as a text and the study circle kit as a tool for implementation within rural communities.

The Centre received funding from the Commonwealth Governments' Regional Solutions program in 2001 to develop this work for accreditation. The mutually beneficial partnership between the Centre for Rural Communities and Monash was nominated as a best practice example of University – Community Engagement (Garlick and Pryor, 2002). The partnership demonstrated 'evidence of a clear purpose and clear expectations about roles of partners, existence of mutual trust, being results-oriented while generating tangible outcomes both qualitatively and quantitatively for the benefit of the regional community as well as the University ...' (op.cit15).

Within communities people can grow and develop unconstrained by imposed boundaries, hierarchical institutions and political agendas. Communities are becoming organized and are prepared to invest for the long term, as evidenced by the proliferation of community banks that return profits to the community and create local employment. This contrasts with the cyclical nature of government funding that is determined by political processes and short-term budgets. Departmental approaches are divided into portfolios and specialised services with limited responsibilities. David Adams' (senior policy advisor to the State Government) drew attention to the very different agendas and experiences that exist within government departments to community life (Adams, 2000). With awareness of these distinctions the limitations and opportunities for interaction between all levels of government and communities can focus on policy and programs that incorporate shared responsibilities.

An important step in this direction has been the proliferation of community building programs. Social researcher, Mike Salvaris has noted this step as 'potentially the most important long term political and policy strategy for social democratic governments, offering a coherent agenda to counteract the current decline in citizenship, democracy and the ethic of the public good' (Salvaris 2004:56). The current policies of community engagement with a common agenda of community building, or capacity building, (Kenyon, 2002) are welcomed by rural people but to date these programs have been targeted at specific communities and few have offered access to accreditation or educational resources and the work remains marginal.

Community engagement workers find this transitional work challenging as the shift towards agendas of sustainability raises awareness of the damaging nature of past and present policies. From a community perspective these workers are the accessible 'face' of government, and they are frequently junior staff, or people on short-term contracts in vulnerable positions that have little ability to change policies affecting regional communities. The need to build on past experience has been a consistent recommendation of the Department for Victorian Communities Community Building Resource Services committee established to look at the needs of community building initiatives (West, 2004). Few undergraduate programs incorporate these skills and knowledge of community engagement. Regional universities are well placed to actively participate in this work and complement initiatives by all levels of government and communities if there is the scope to incorporate findings from research into accredited programs.

Graduate Certificate in Regional Community Development

I'm not saying that the Graduate Certificate is the only thing happening, but by using the strategies taught in the course it did bring things together much faster

(Cartwright in Clancey, 2004)

The Graduate Certificate is a one year part-time program that provides access to university resources, skills and knowledge, enabling regional workers to integrate current issues with theoretical strategies of community engagement. The cross-sectoral nature of the course reflects the need for an integrated approach to regional development and participants come from diverse backgrounds that include health, recreation and culture, natural resource management, business, local government, environment, agriculture, youth groups, spiritual groups, women's groups, adult education, neighbourhood houses, community associations and indigenous communities. The participants share a common concern for local people and the environment and each contributes important awareness of the health, stagnation or decline of a community.

Both HECS funded and fee paying places are available with admission dependent on either a three year Bachelor degree or demonstrable experience in community development or a field of adult education (www.monash.edu.au/humcas). The mix of community members and professional people within the course fosters engagement with diverse interests and skill levels. As people meet together on a fortnightly basis they become aware of the limitations or opportunities associated with industry, government or community resources.

Each face to face session introduces both practical skills and theoretical knowledge of adult learning principles that can be incorporated into everyday practice. Students report on the positive responses to their improved practice in their communities or workplaces (Sheil, Pugliesie et al. 2004). The course work, readings, guest speakers, field trips and in time, application of this knowledge affirms the value of a collaborative approach to community engagement. Fieldwork practice, which is an integral part of the Graduate Certificate, enables participants to be supported in making the transition from theory to practice as they establish study circles or workplace projects. Participation by community members in the study circles is accredited by TAFE and this provides recognition of the value of this learning for community members.

From Theory to Practice

In establishing the study circle or workplace project the student's first public task is to bring together a group of people who share a common interest in a situation but who may hold quite different views on how to initiate change. The personally challenging nature of this experience was recorded by one student.

At the start of this course I had several community groups with whom I was confident I could commence a study circle. Despite some interest and offers from different people, I was quite selective about with whom and where I would work. I credit this to a fear of embarrassment should the group fail or move in a political direction outside my comfort zone.

The necessity of having to find a community group by advertising, cold canvassing, installing posters and delivering flyers in the neighbourhood made me aware of just how entrepreneurial the people driving community change have to be in order to overcome the natural reluctance of people to become involved in community issues (Paton 2004).

The establishment stage is an intense one for the students, but this role changes as community members begin to take on responsibilities for organizing the group. The

activities gradually become less dependent on the skills of the student as each study circle participant facilitates a session. In time study circle participants proudly share stories of their initial fears of taking on public roles and their growing confidence as they are supported to successfully carry out these responsibilities.

Growing and learning

Gippsland study circles frequently revealed features of mature relationships that Belenky and her colleagues refer to as constructed knowledge (Belenky et. al. 1997). At this stage of personal development people are aware that they can help shape perceptions of a situation by sharing their experiences, ‘about knowledge and truth and self that guides the person’s intellectual and moral life and personal commitments’ (op.cit:136). Described as a narrative sense of self, this process incorporates the past and future, frequently acknowledging conflict and contradiction.

The study circles enable people to discuss challenging, seemingly contradictory situations within rural communities and seek change. For example it is common for study circle participants to speak enthusiastically of why they enjoy raising their children in a safe and caring community, then their distress at not being able to support these young people when they need to find work, or return to communities after completing further study. Youth suicide in rural communities is the most extreme example of their inability to care for young people and a cause of great community distress. By meeting and talking together communities have increased their awareness of ways to include and support young people. They have also become aware of the way changing policies are impacting on their communities and the future for young people.

Recording change

Indicators that record the subjective state of the community as experienced by study circle members are used at the beginning and end of their involvement with the work of the Centre (usually a 12 month period). Named ‘Capital Indicators,’ they build on the concept of a measurable quantity that can be increased or decreased according to changing circumstances. They extend beyond social capital to also record how community members experience the political, economic, personal and spiritual as well as environmental capital of their communities (Ife 2002, Sheil 2000). The Country Fire Authority graphic fire risk image familiar to rural people is adapted as the visual record.

As study circle members participate in this exercise, they not only pay attention to each aspect of their community, but also are frequently affirmed in the knowledge that their experiences are important in a public forum. Previously individual concerns of living on a rural property and no longer being able to drive, or concerns of local businesses and farms needing to earn another income, had been regarded as personal issues to be tackled alone.

A study circle working with indigenous people found that the commonly depleted indicator for their group was cultural capital.

Every couple of sessions we would talk about this measure in passing. While the group felt that the measure couldn’t change significantly until something concrete occurred, there was a feeling of increased happiness expressed about the fact that our idea was evolving and there was hope of realizing a significant change to local circumstances. It’s clear from our work

together that we have come a long way as a group during which time we have developed ideas into concrete propositions. We have staged our activities realistically and because of this will be able to carry out the proposal into some form of reality. We are prepared to do that and will continue working together until the dream of an arts centre is realized (Paton 2004).

Figure 3: Cultural capital

These broad categories of social, political, economic, cultural, environmental, personal and spiritual capital enable individual projects to be located within a broader context. For example, one community that identified their social capital as low, planned social events during the coming year. This included holding regular music hall activities, a singing group, a stroke support group, Christmas in July to welcome newcomers to the town, support for young people not involved in organized sport, Christmas carols in the park and the hosting of the Other Awards bringing together people from seven communities to celebrate the activities of their community groups.

Collaborative approaches

Local government staff observed that communities involved in study circles had a constructive approach to issues and sought funding to enable other communities to access this resource. In 2003 East Gippsland Shire, Latrobe City Council and the Centre for Rural Communities Inc. all applied to the Department of Family and Community Services (FACS) Stronger Family and Communities program to support involvement in rural communities. Each organisation supported the other's submission and regarded access to the Graduate Certificate as vital. The Department co-ordinated discussions to clarify the roles of each organisation and determined the separate responsibilities towards a shared goal. The local governments received funding to employ local people and sponsor their participation in the Graduate Certificate. The Centre received funding to support community engagement through study circles to increase community involvement in the long term. This level of support is beyond University funding that is targeted primarily at research and teaching. The Graduate Certificate gave access to professional resources, qualifications and skills that will stay in these communities.

Creating Stronger Communities – an East Gippsland Shire project

It's been great to share my experience with others. Before I started the training I was feeling a bit isolated and stuck. The stimulation of the course has really reinvigorated my thinking. (Rachel Bell, community planner)

The Creating Stronger Communities project's focus was the long-term capacity of East Gippsland communities to respond to change by enhancing the social capacity of their

young people. However, the approach extended beyond programs targeted only at young people to help community development workers initiate local solutions to local issues (www.communitybuilding.com.au).

Community development workers were offered the chance to undertake the Graduate Certificate and implement study circles in their communities. Ten workers from seven East Gippsland communities took up this offer. Bruce Smith, one of the participants, commented that the course boosted both his confidence and skills. “It not only provided the theoretical basis to confirm many of the things I already knew but stimulated new ideas and approaches” (Communities, 2004).

The Paynesville study circle knew that the whole community was passionate about getting an ambulance. They also knew that getting a positive outcome generates motivation to continue with other projects and that they needed to have fun while they did this work. They decided on a pre-loved fashion parade as a fund raiser. The group had or made connections with the Neighbourhood House, the op-shops, businesses, the scout ladies, Adult Day Care and children from the primary school who contributed the decorations with an ocean theme. The event was a huge success with 120 people attending the fashion parade and with one of the op shops planning to hold the parade again next year. Study circle members visited other communities and are now supporting projects for Paynesville to become plastic bag free, historical signage in the area and the establishment of a community bank.

In Mallacoota the study circle decided to produce a documented account of the contribution of every voluntary group in their town. They know that this will not only produce a record of group activities but also will facilitate and encourage networking, information and resource sharing and promote community spirit and pride. More than 80 groups have been contacted, and in this process relationships between the groups are strengthening.

Strengthening Seven Small Communities – Latrobe City Council project

The Strengthening Seven Small Communities project built on previous mapping of services, needs, issues and capacities in the city. From this information a focus on the smaller townships and interest in the employment of facilitators to work in each town was developed. The project was funded by FaCS at the end of 2003. Latrobe City worked closely with a reference group comprising community members, township association representatives, council staff, the Centre staff and community based agencies (Sheil, Pugliesie et al. 2004).

A facilitator was employed in each small town to strengthen and improve the well-being of these communities. The combined population of these seven towns is 5,000 people. The township facilitators were to develop and support local community groups and assist them to meet the needs of their communities. The community development approach was understood to be inclusive of all groups and to work towards the establishment of new partnerships with government and non-government organizations in response to community interest (ibid).

The funding enabled the facilitators to undertake the first semester of the Graduate Certificate with the second semester being optional. Four facilitators completed the

course and facilitated study circles in their communities. They proudly showcased their work at the 'A Regional Affair' conference. This included establishing Township Associations in two towns, township newsletters, holding community expos of groups in the community, developing new residents welcoming kits, development of community and business directories, establishing fitness classes and adult educational programs, a country market, voice and music workshops, gardening groups and women's social nights, participation in hall committees and working with sporting groups. Young people were included with the establishment of youth groups, girls dance groups, involvement in a folk and drum festival, bus trips to skateboard parks and movies. In all cases these small towns were now 'on the map' as the Council and other agencies could plan with the Township Associations (Sheil, Puglisie, Gay 2004). The diverse range of activities reflects the different stages of development of each community but participants also identified commonalities and collaborative responses have evolved. This generation of activity within the small towns put them on the map with a range of services and organizations that are now working with these township associations.

In each of these examples the multiplier impact of the skills, knowledge and resources accessed through the Graduate Certificate is evident and exceeded expectations of the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services that funded the project. Feedback from the facilitators indicates their appreciation of the consistent support of the University and the regional network throughout the project.

Both the commonwealth and the local governments respected the right of the communities to determine their own directions during the study circles and did not limit the scope of activities. This was a significant factor in ensuring local ownership of activities and is evident as groups continue to initiate projects.

Across the region

In 2003-2004 twenty-two people from local communities successfully completed the Graduate Certificate with approximately 200 people gaining skills in working in community committees, through participation in the study circles and developing projects. Management committees and Township Advisory Committees became aware of more participatory ways to work alongside a skilled facilitator, and to liaise with local government. Many local people also participated in the community events planned by the study circles. These skills remain in the community.

The following extracts provide glimpses of personal and community changes resulting from the Graduate Certificate and the study circles.

Chelsea's experience - I felt uninvited to be part of any structural process (Stewart, 2004)

After living in Melbourne for eight years and spending time overseas, Chelsea had returned to the small community in which she had grown up. Whilst living away she had maintained a commitment to the local area and to the community where in 2002 together with her parents, she became active in initiating a local festival. In returning to the area she could further her commitment to the festival, to other community projects, to the local environment, and to her relationships with family and friends. She sought to reintegrate herself into her community, this time with a more worldly enthusiasm about what can be achieved in rural towns, and also with a need to belong to 'a place'. She did feel welcomed back into the community; however she found the community, including local

government and businesses, had remained divided on many environmental issues. Marie Mies speaks of those who care most potentially being the one's who are the most harmed (Eldridge, 1996; Mies, 1996) and Chelsea's observation of destruction of the natural environment had a parallel destruction of her trust in government. A state that Moira Rayner named a political malaise, for people see no way for their opinions to be heard and distance themselves from political processes (Rayner, 1997).

The opportunity to facilitate the Boolarra study circle transformed this thinking. As people participated in small group learning, they set their own agenda for future activities. The group made time to agree about how they wished to work and Chelsea notes this as a significant milestone that 'allowed the group to move beyond questioning how the process could work and begin to focus on what they would choose the content of the session to be. It was the beginning of establishing equal ground and role clarification'. Chelsea felt supported by all the group members, able to make mistakes and to learn in her role as facilitator (Stewart, 2004).

Rose notes the significance of relations that give identity and belonging that cannot be created in isolation, but only in our relationship with others. These are not defined by class, race or national territory but overcome these barriers by establishing common ground while respecting diversity (Rose, 1997). Study circles foster these relations of equality from which citizens can embark on civic activity for the common good, building social capital from which they all benefit (Putnam, Leonard et al., 1993; Larsson, 2001).

Chelsea appreciated that working with those she may have traditionally opposed created opportunities for new partnerships as relationships improved and understanding of shared goals increased. The Boolarra Study Circle facilitated by Chelsea established long term goals of improving local river sites through weed removal and revegetation. In working towards these goals they established partnerships with Latrobe City, Hazelwood Power, the West Gippsland Catchment Management Authority as well as with the Boolarra Community Development Group and other members of the community. They found these organizations responsive and inclusive of their concerns for the environment and hopes for the future. They acknowledged that the community voice was absent in previous planning and welcomed local involvement.

Laurie's experience - Plank that we will use to walk our way through our visioning
(Study Circle participant – Morwell Indigenous artists)

The Morwell Study Circle facilitated by Laurie welcomed the planned time to think about how they wished to work. By reflecting on past experiences in groups they noted barriers to effective meetings they wished to avoid. They identified ways they could approach these situations differently. For example, meetings dominated by individuals would need strong people and a constructive response would be to give responsibilities to this person. Comments from the group indicate the value of this time to work through each of the strategies within the model of Collaborative Engagement.

It's been really good to have time to talk about issues and agree on a concept. If we hadn't created the time to develop the concept we'd still be talking and complaining in 2 years time about nothing being done. We felt happy about the obvious benefits of working together.

Other contributing factors to our performance were being able to record and consolidate ideas, the personal connections we made and the ability for us to be able to work on an idea in a supportive rather than an adversarial atmosphere where people listened to each other

and showed respect for each others opinions. The Collaborative Engagement for Transformation Model provided us with a pathway along which the further we walked, the more confident we become (Paton, 2004).

The study circles engaged with a broad cross-section of people within each community extending involvement beyond the 'usual suspects'. This strengthened engagement of people in community building activities and community decision making at a local level. Many of the people who presented at 'A Regional Affair' organized by the Centre, in 2004, had not previously participated in a regional forum. This opportunity to have their voices heard at a public forum is an important step as many people do not participate in community life because they do not believe they will be listened to.

With this wealth of local knowledge regional workers and organisations are in a better position to be creative and responsive to community needs, not in isolation but with combined resources of the regional university. The insightful transition that accompanies this integration of theory with practice benefits from the supportive regional network established in the program and through the graduating alumni.

Transferability of the Model

A Community Hub project designed the strategies of collaborative engagement into their approach. Local government had decided to co-locate the community service desk and the library services. No progress had been made in 12 months. The student used the collaborative strategies to work with both groups of staff to overcome their fears and to explore how they saw the new model could work best for community and staff. Focus groups were held in each of the council's service centres. Staff came to realize this change meant a more interactive role in managing community resources and a broadening of context for service delivery. This model worked so well in bringing the Hub into being that the Council has offered the student a Masters scholarship and the State Library of Victoria have asked her to produce a resource for them.

The strategies within Collaborative Engagement were also used to evaluate the effectiveness of different committee models used by Catchment Management Authorities (CMAs) supported by one CMA and the Department of Sustainability and Environment. While focusing on primarily on one CMA this comprehensive work involved liaison and surveying of all CMAs across the state as well as working closely with the CEO, Board, technical staff and co-operating agencies (such as local government) of each CMA. Phase 2 involved detailed and in depth meetings with 3 CMAs across the state.

The longer term outcomes from these organizations having access to professional development and university resources will be an area of continuing interest.

Transformative Change

Ten years on there has been a dramatic shift in relation to community participation in decision making and a willingness to work with rural Australians. The amount of community development and industry restructure funding received by towns of under 3,000 people in Gippsland from government grants over a 6 year period 1999 – 2004 was estimated to be at least \$20m.

New stories and new alliances are evidence of changing agendas. Two recent initiatives of campus – community engagement evolving from the Centre’s work are indicative of a willingness to include local knowledge and the growing awareness of the way the University can resource communities.

The Communities for Children project with Kilmany Uniting Care has welcomed an approach by the Centre to employ graduates from the Graduate Certificate as local researchers within five areas of East Gippsland. The regional advisory board for the project has identified the inclusion of local knowledge and circumstances as a priority. Investment in local skills is also a primary consideration in the program. A Masters scholarship will enable further research in developing and evaluating this integrated approach for the benefit of other organisations and regions.

A Community Newspaper Conference held at Monash University in 2004 was jointly organised by community members and the Journalism Department. There has been a recent and significant increase in the number of small towns producing a community newspaper. These newspapers provide a forum for local issues and support the well being of a community. People came from Tasmania, New South Wales and across Victoria, from community newspapers, commercial newspapers and academia to share their knowledge and learn from each other.

These university – community engagements offer opportunities for mutual learning and will have a continued relationship with the Gippsland campus.

Heading in the Right Direction

Two points emerge from the Centre’s experiences over the last ten years. The first is the positive endorsement from regional workers and their organizations who have participated in the Graduate Certificate and had access to resources at the regional university (O’Connor, 2004; Sheil, Pugliesie et al., 2004). Workers indicate a greater level of confidence and skill in resourcing their communities and working with local and regional organizations. They no longer feel isolated and have initiated partnerships of benefit to their communities. The post-graduate qualification gives workers professional recognition for work that had frequently been dismissed as of lesser value than technical expertise. Their experience as educators to facilitate skills of community engagement complements and informs policy development within their organizations. Both roles benefit from their ability to draw on a range of analytical and research skills and a number are continuing with Higher Education. It would appear that in this time of transition to the global knowledge economy, education does have a key role (Freire, 1972; Garlick, 1998). Funding is being sought to extend the one year part-time course to include a Graduate Diploma and Masters.

The second point is the increasing role of regional campuses in supporting sustainable development in the region. Robyn Eversole in her paper ‘Regional social research and university-community engagement’ (Eversole, 2004) notes that with increased political interest in regional issues there is now incentive for universities to engage in regional research. The Australian Research Council has committed 20% of available funding to collaborative research on ‘issues of benefit to regional or rural communities’ (ARC, 2003).

It is not surprising that Universities with a regional campus are actively engaged in regional research. 'Universities can play a key role in actively working with communities to ensure access to the opportunities that are created from university-based knowledge, teaching and learning' (Garlick and Pryor 2003). The increasing interest in regional issues has been accompanied by the challenge to produce research that is relevant to, and done in collaboration with, rural and regional people (Eversole 2004: 3). Eversole names this socially responsible research and cites a number of Universities that are adopting this approach.

The Graduate Certificate underpins local ownership and direction of research by local people while providing access to increased resources for communities to make informed decisions. The Victorian Universities Regional Research Network has negotiated a partnership with Monash University to roll out the Graduate Certificate to other regional universities as a means to increase university-community collaboration (Martin, 2004).

At a national level the Australian Universities Campus Community Engagement Alliance (AUCEA) has drawn attention to the important role of universities in community engagement. However, the lack of targeted resources to support campus community engagement in the same way as teaching and research leaves the work dependent on external funding and therefore vulnerable. Rural people and organizations have indicated their desire to move beyond research which reports on their activities and enter into collaborative partnerships in which they are prepared to invest time and resources towards building sustainable futures. The combination is proving to be a dynamic one as awareness of potential new partnerships emerge.

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