

PROVIDING POST-COMPULSORY EDUCATION OPTIONS THROUGH 'NEW-LOOK' RURAL PARTNERSHIPS

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Abstract

The tree change phenomenon started around Australia from about 2003 and continues to this day, even into places like the Western Plains area of New South Wales. Relocating from the city to rural areas for a lifestyle change is attributed to this phenomenon. An ever-growing interest in post-compulsory education solutions that run parallel to this change offers tantalising scope for research and discussion, especially in the way that rural communities continue to redefine themselves in the face of sometimes seemingly insurmountable odds. At the very least, many of these communities are 'under siege' from the effects of environmental extremes as a result of climate change, shrinking resources, lack of access to services, and sometimes, through the effects of negative human intervention. Although there are opportunities for some individuals and particular sections of a community to prosper and get ahead, there are others who rely on strategic partnerships to offer community solutions where everyone can 'have a go'.

This paper discusses a unique type of educational partnership – a co-enrolment program – between a rural technical and further education (TAFE) college and an inland national university (Charles Sturt University), whereby the challenges of delivering post-compulsory social work education to regional and rural communities is addressed in both philosophical and pragmatic ways. The situation will be discussed from several different angles, including how the programs run both in tandem with each other as well as separately, autonomously, but with a constant level of scrutiny that is a common thread in the precariousness of rural renewal.

Keywords

Rural communities, Co-enrolment programs, Post-compulsory education solutions

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Personal story

The following personal account of my initial experience with the TAFE/CSU partnership may at first appear to be a travelogue of events but in a way the travel details present as a metaphor to illustrate complex layers of operations, logistics, resourcing and pedagogical practice.

In 2004, when based at the Wagga Wagga Campus of Charles Sturt University (CSU), I used to drive weekly in the first semester between that campus and the one 'out there' (some 300 km away) at Dubbo, to teach a core communication subject in the Bachelor of Social Work degree program. That is, 'out there' in Dubbo seemed even more remote than the Wagga campus. Yet the distance was just over 4 h between the two sites, Wagga and Dubbo.

To drive to Dubbo from where I lived in the Blue Mountains near Western Sydney was actually closer by one hour than driving from Wagga Wagga. This was a significant factor for me. It also raises some interesting consequences for trying to deliver accessible and equitable educational opportunities to remote communities. If I could drive straight to Dubbo from my home in the lesser time, I felt that

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was a much neater process than going 'around the world' following the Wagga–Dubbo–Wagga–Blue Mountains route.

Operating within competing mindsets about the tyranny of travel and access-to-education for all was significant at that time because, on several levels, the newness of the situation created some relevant debates among our human services discipline group about who should go, why, when and for how long. Trying to achieve the 'neater process' as indicated above was an ongoing travel requisition 'nightmare', not just for me but for administrative staff as well I am sure. I would arrive in Dubbo on the Wednesday, stay overnight and then teach a three-hour lecture/workshop to 25 eager learners who were part of the first cohort of students ever to access a unique TAFE program of vocational studies alongside a university program. This was definitely 'parallel learning' in action. I would then drive back to Wagga Wagga or head the other way back to my home.

At this time, I was undergoing a 'sea-change' of my own, amenable to working and living between three different locations. But this way of working was not, and is not, for everyone. I had a vested interest in wanting to contribute to the success of the degree program in Dubbo, having a passionate focus for providing learning opportunities to marginalised and isolated communities, including to Indigenous people for whom I felt the university and our own social work degree program could accommodate through better and more meaningful ways. In addition, I had also co-written the communication subject so I wanted to ensure that it was delivered in the way I envisaged it should be. For me at the time, however, it was clear to see that competency-based post-compulsory education programs had well and truly addressed the evolving conceptual and policy trends of the changing patterns of participation in further education and training, and that the university sector was being compelled to sit up and take notice.

Introduction

Within the post-compulsory education and training sector, there remain enormous challenges that demand multi-disciplinary approaches, agile responses to change and new strategic alliances

among relevant players in the community, private and government sectors (Skills Australia, 2009). The transforming world not only brings serious changes and challenges, but it also carries new opportunities, for example in terms of appropriate educational modelling to meet the needs of diverse rural populations as well as market demands (Falk, 2001). Indeed, the market mechanism and value of efficiency have become major driving forces in our society today; they determine the future of work and the work of the future (Owen & Bound, 2001) and permeate even the different education sectors such as vocational education and training and higher education (Marginson, 2000).

In a continuing political climate that is characterised by a market-driven emphasis, both nationally and internationally, strategic partnerships relating to types of learning solutions to improve workforce participation are most effective when they respond with relevant initiatives to redress skills shortages. Even better, is when such partnerships take a broader view of change made possible through both formal and informal settings designed to address underpinning skills and capabilities needed not only for fiscal economic growth but also knowledge-based economic growth. In exercising parallel learning initiatives that are starting to happen more frequently in the post-compulsory education sector, proactive institutions are deliberately creating ways to blur the traditional boundaries between vocational and higher education.

The partnership discussed in this paper is one such strategic alliance between CSU and Western Institute (WI) of TAFE. It was created in 2003 partly to provide opportunities for learners in the rural region of Dubbo, but also as a way to strategically revitalise opportunities to gain social work qualifications in a revamped program. There are high expectations with this kind of co-enrolment program. From a pedagogical point of view, students undergo ongoing adjustment-in-learning transition as they move between TAFE and university campuses for the first 2 years. The adult learning environments are quite different and the different modes of delivery also bring their own set of considerations and issues. Supporting this program is an ever-evolving dynamic as solutions are negotiated in order to increase participation from

all learners, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, and from several different circumstances. Finally, collaborating with community members to review the social work degree program in terms of its validity, relevance and future sustainability, is an ongoing process of trial and error not unlike aspects of the tree change phenomenon. At the outset, the partnership could be identified as providing 'functional flexibility' (Owen & Bound, 2001, p. 9) through focused involvement and networking. These are the kinds of qualities that governments also seek regarding the delivery of education and training options (Skills Australia, 2009). A snapshot of details used to showcase Dubbo Campus (Shipp, 2009) reveals that the City of Dubbo is located at the junction of the Mitchell, Golden and Newell Highways in the Western Plains of NSW. It has a population of nearly 40,000 but supports a much larger regional population that extends out to the borders with South Australia in the west and Queensland to the north. Dubbo boasts the impressive Western Plains Zoo, the Western Plains Cultural Centre and thriving sporting and cultural life, so there is plenty of variety to support people wanting to make a tree change regarding lifestyle as well as work and study.

From its geographical position, the Dubbo Campus is positioned to attract a very diverse range of students from local and regional students to city dwellers. The range of courses offered on the campus provides a useful and relevant base on which to build partnerships, either between people or institutions/organisations, and these include nursing, primary and early childhood education, social work, community and public health, accounting and business (Shipp, 2009).

In respect to the social work degree program, further reasons for the collaboration of the two institutions are summarised below:

The program arose in the midst of a restructure and review of the Social Work and Social Welfare Disciplines which until 2003 were separate groups. In 2003 they merged and triggered a review of all courses, including the on campus BA/Social Work at Wagga and B.Soc.Sci. (Soc.Welf.) at Dubbo. There were concerns that neither program were very successful in meeting the needs of students to attain a career qualification and in context of the decision to adopt a common curriculum for both programs it meant finding a

way to deliver a Social work program at Dubbo while all teaching resources were located at Wagga. In this process, discussions were occurring with WI TAFE and CSU with a number of Community Services agencies about the workforce needs of the region. This created the opportunity for CSU and WI TAFE to establish the co-enrolment program, using the new 4-yr on-campus Social Work program at Wagga as a template for the course and credit arrangements for TAFE while meeting the requirements of the AASW.

The program was replicated in 2006 at Deniliquin with Riverina Institute but on a firm basis that CSU components were part of the General Distance Education program from Wagga, not an on-campus tutorial program like at Dubbo (no CSU campus at Deniliquin). In 2008 WI TAFE began to enrol students from Orange and Bathurst as well as Dubbo, but that CSU delivery will occur in or via Dubbo. Currently CSU is negotiating with Riverina institute re expanding the program to other Riverina TAFE campuses from 2010.

(Barber, personal communication, 2009)

Students in the co-enrolment program undertake university education alongside their TAFE studies, become better qualified, contribute to capacity-building in rural community areas, and address much-needed social work services in the areas in and around Dubbo, Mudgee, Narrowmine, Orange and Bathurst. Now in its fifth year, students are accepted into a Diploma of Community Welfare Services TAFE program at the same time as they can choose to become part of a 4-year social work degree program with CSU.

There are significant logistical and resourcing considerations in maintaining such a program and supporting the students, especially in an on-campus program in a rural environment like Dubbo. However, the summary of notes cited above from Neil Barber, former Course Coordinator of the social work degree programs at CSU, indicates some fundamental links to the ways in which post-compulsory education in rural areas has itself evolved within a framework of *review, transference and consolidation*. These terms identify phases within a framework of evolution of post-compulsory education and they will be expanded throughout the paper.

Fundamentally, the review process looks at the changing nature of skills shortage and its link to

participation and development strategies (Skills Australia, 2008). Through transference, education and training opportunities must be seen to respond proactively to connections between what people are learning within institutions and future employment opportunities (Bradley, 2008, p. 181). The last two phases usually include a shift in substantial resource improvement and engagement through commitment to a project or program. They also have the potential to incorporate, as well as establish, successful models of education through patterns of pathways (Harris, Rainey, & Sumner, 2006) between community, training organisation and higher education institute.

Although the partnership under discussion has evolved into a successful course model for widespread adoption between the vocational education and training sector and the higher education sector, the real challenge is in separating the rhetoric of what such partnerships can achieve from the reality of what they have the capacity to achieve. That is, success is measured not just through the number of enrolments, which in fact are only half that of education or nursing, but in the ongoing engagement, interest and enquiry about the parallel learning that is offered through the CSU/TAFE co-enrolment program. However, in respect, at least, to CSU's vision of a National University of Inland Australia to support Dubbo Campus with the opportunity to contribute to the achievements of its regional students and communities, can higher educational courses for the professions be not only sustained, but also provide a contributing force for the training and retention of professionals for inland and rural Australia? In reference to the above co-enrolment framework, the task here is to examine the efficacy of the CSU/WI model of post-compulsory education delivery to address changing local community and global trends.

Research into global trends about post-compulsory education reflects movement in 'uncertain frontiers' (Evans, 2003, p. 415), but as well, an indication of the multiple complexities that overlay the sector in terms of economic, sociological and political determinants to control access to lifelong learning, as an outcome of post-compulsory education and training (Otero, 2007). These trends are reflected in the Australian sector.

However, there has been a subtle but definite shift in the emphasis on lifelong learning to focus on education and training to determine a capacity to respond to future labour market imperatives (Bradley, 2008; RMIT University, 2005). In order to achieve this outcome, there has been movement also in Australia's tertiary sector, between and within higher education and vocational education training, so that learners can either retrain to increase their employment prospects, or retrain for a different career (Harris, Rainey & Sumner, 2005).

Rural partnerships

In rural areas, partnerships and networks are part of an ongoing regime of strategies and methods to create joint management and integration of services (Considine, 2005, pp. 9–10). When organisations indicate similarity on several different levels, organisation theory refers to this phenomenon as isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991). In relation to levels of similarity, organisations may reflect 'convergence on effective and efficient structures'; however, 'isomorphism may also arise out of the pursuit of legitimacy without regard for effectiveness and efficiency, but rather for the sake of survival, advantage, or approval' (Leiter, 2008, p. 68). In response to government managerial discourse to become more efficient and effective, for example, the use of networks and partnerships is seen as one of the most appropriate activities that rural community organisations should utilise in order to create more effective outcomes (Darcy, 2001). When we discuss the CSU/WI partnership in question, isomorphism can be attributed through at least two different themes: (1) the capacity of two higher education institutes to provide effective post-compulsory education outcomes; and (2) the ties that bind through the juxtaposition of rural and regional remoteness. At the very least, any such partnership could be seen to address the following comment about future directions for creating a robust and internationally competitive higher education system.

To increase the numbers participating we must also look to members of groups currently under-represented within the system, that is, those disadvantaged by the circumstances of their birth: Indigenous people, people with low socio-economic status, and those from regional and remote areas. (Bradley, 2008, p. xi)

The unique nature of partnerships formed within and among rural communities is quite often signified by an 'auto-management approach' (Mlcek, 2008) to the paucity of services and/or resources (Mlcek, 2005; Wagner & Mlcek, 2004). While there are quite often philosophical arguments for why things should happen the way they do, the reasons given for planning, designing and implementing services are motivated by more tangible outcomes. Fundamentally, there is a gap that has to be filled because policy direction has changed, government funding criteria is assessed and actions are either created or recreated, or someone has a passion to be innovative. Quite often, this process can start from professional bodies or industry advisory bodies being approached by interested stakeholders of all persuasions, affiliations and sizes supporting workforce development (Phillips, 2006; Skills Australia, 2009, p. 18). The needs of the community are sometimes of a secondary nature. This situation is exemplified more so in urban communities, where the mobilisation of people can be affected by too many disparate groups to reach a consensus of opinion. However, in rural communities, despite vast expanses of geographical area, needs and expectations become fairly focused and projects look for visible and immediate outcomes. In regional areas, for example, institutional cooperation is fostered such as the highly regarded collaboration between CSU and TAFE North South Wales (NSW) Riverina Institute (Skills Australia, 2009, p. 12). There is not much 'space' to hide in a rural community and word gets around pretty quickly (Gregory, 2005). Auto-management operates sometimes in a 'hit and miss' fashion, spontaneously, and generally through trust relationships between individuals who are comfortable in saying to each other 'how about we do this . . . or that' (Mlcek, 2008).

There are different ways to view partnerships at a philosophical level. Some partnerships are predicated on paternalistic attitudes or on the empowerment of individuals (Osborne, 2000; Osborne, Beattie & Williamson, 2006). That is, through a structuration process of either legal domination or resourcing, or whether through strength of systems, organisations can become involved in 'coercive' situations that can have positive outcomes (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

An institution could become involved with another through the latter having more human resources infrastructure, or better information technology interface capabilities. One may appear to need the other more in order to conduct its business, and uses persuasive arguments to indicate reciprocal benefits to both.

One premise behind the kind of CSU/TAFE partnership described above can be assessed on two levels: the first says as much about the way organisations want to be perceived within regional and rural communities, as does the second about delivering post-compulsory education options affect the way those same organisations and communities view themselves and the world. In the former assessment, both CSU and WI have worked hard to maintain a credible advantage at the community level – similar to the CSU/Riverina Institute collaboration – by being visible, accessible, and relevant to address training and educational needs (Skills Australia, 2009). In the latter example, for those rural and regional organisations that deliver the service, sentiments for involvement range from a philanthropic culture of giving (Daly, 2008) to addressing economic rationalist ideals, but there are genuine feelings of trying to make a difference for individuals and groups in an innovative way to overcome anomalies in services and that sets an example for the rest of the world.

One of the ways in which the CSU/WI co-enrolment program attempts to address the above factors is at the operational, face-to-face level through reactive, responsive and pragmatic practice. That is, dynamic processes around delivery and assessment are not 'fixed' but are negotiated and re-negotiated in a constant state of review. Just as importantly, community members who receive such services also feel justified, relevant, and able to contribute to the difference in a reciprocal way, so that their part in the arrangement is vital for its evolution and continuation. For example, as Indigenous Learners are enrolled in the program, they have every right to access further resources to help counter situations of disadvantage and marginalisation; they are nurtured and mentored through various stages of academic and pastoral support in the hope that their continued engagement will benefit not only themselves but their community

as well. These practices are in line with the recommendations from the Bradley Report about the need to address disadvantage and encourage participation from Indigenous Learners (Bradley, 2008).

In Australia and overseas, TAFE has always been identified as the main public provider of vocational education and training. Through its involvement as the provider of training to the Sydney Olympic Games as well as the Athens Olympic Games, for example, the TAFE organisation was able to utilise its vast infrastructure of human resources capability and capacity, its levels of governance that are largely based around regulation of quality, and its ability to respond strategically to provide performance and choice to the market place. CSU has likewise taken a proactive approach to community development by growing its community involvement in several innovative ways through a mix of financial prudence and strategic investment (Goulter, 2009). For example, the CSU Dubbo/WI venture could be legitimately viewed as one of those investments; it could have been overlooked or categorised as 'not important', or a challenge not really connected to the so-called knowledge economy and its impact on the changing face of post-compulsory education and training.

A framework for 'new look' rural partnerships

The nature of partnerships and collaborations can be considered through several dimensions. Each of these dimensions reveals levels of complexity that are not 'bad' for post-compulsory education and training, but inevitable. The framework for identifying evolving viable partnerships in this sector through three discrete as well as overlapping phases relating to review, transference and consolidation, are used to give substance to the CSU/WI collaboration.

Review – opportunistic evolution

The process of review requires an adjustment to previously held views about an ongoing need by politicians to add to the debate about the purpose of education and training being only about its function in preparing learners with employment competencies. At a time when Australia's education system was undergoing major restructuring

(Lewis, 1992), the blueprint for reform was the 1991 Finn Report, which was seen as an integral part of a 'worker-led' economic recovery and the means by which Australia's economy would make the transition to the so-called post-industrial era.

Review and restructure are synonymous now with the adaptations required by post-compulsory education providers to adjust to meet the demands that come primarily from government sources and industry, about the need to have competitive advantage (Skills Australia, 2009). However, Australia is lagging behind in terms of competing effectively in the new globalised economy that requires a highly skilled and qualified workforce. It is in fact 'falling behind other countries in performance and investment in higher education' (Bradley, 2008, p. xi). There is an opportunity through the CSU/WI partnership to address one of the recommendations from Professor Bradley and her review panel, which is that providers develop innovative, collaborative and local solutions to provision of higher education. An off-shoot of this process must then include practical methods of reporting back to involved parties through a continuous, dynamic feedback loop.

Rural partnerships offer pragmatic solutions to communities, but they are also opportunistic (Alston, 2007; Mlcek & Bowles, 2006). These opportunities respond to particular social and cultural contexts (FitzSimons, Mlcek, Hull & Wright, 2005; Townsend & Waterhouse, 2008). In the late 1990s both industry and the community, including the local government, were serious about encouraging particular education programs to meet the needs of Dubbo. As previously mentioned, Dubbo is located in the centre of New South Wales and is known as a 'service' city. That is, although it has a population of over 40,000 people, its catchment population is in excess of 120,000 people, encompassing a third of the area of New South Wales. Geographically, it is also the third largest regional inland centre in New South Wales. Social welfare and community services were a high priority, and the push for staff to become qualified, as well as to open up career prospects/opportunities for other people, became a paramount focus.

Some interesting history has already been noted about what happened following the establishment

of a social welfare degree program to be taught through the CSU Dubbo Campus. Neither social work nor social welfare programs were successful in meeting the needs of the professions to achieve qualified staff, or of the students wanting to gain a career qualification. The reasons are both simple and complex, and yet overall have more to do with a lack of foresight about future directions, regarding the role of changing needs both in participation in the workforce and learning requirements, to address continued economic growth in the future (RMIT University, 2005).

There is limited in-depth formal documentation about the CSU/WI venture, but the simplicity of the collaboration is highlighted in the following report from the CSU Regional News:

The collaboration between Charles Sturt University (CSU) and TAFE NSW Western Institute Dubbo Campus which enables TAFE students to articulate into a bachelor degree was celebrated recently at the United We Stand conference in Perth. The conference was described as a first for social and welfare workers and educators. CSU Humanities and Social Sciences senior lecturer Bill Anscombe presented a paper at the conference with TAFE education leader Andrew Crowley and head teacher for Community Services section Deanne Davis, who said the relationship has given TAFE students an avenue to new opportunities. 'This gives students access to a university level course that they wouldn't have thought of applying for before. Working together has helped tackle issues regarding access to education in rural areas.' Mr Anscombe agrees. 'By combining with TAFE we've been able to offer a full-time equivalent program that combines the best of uni study with the best of TAFE competency training'. (CSU Regional News, December 2006)

There has already been mention of the significant logistical problems for CSU in maintaining the program and supporting the students from the Wagga Wagga base, including travel from Wagga Wagga to Dubbo, and indeed finding staff who would even commit to travelling to Dubbo from Wagga Wagga. And unlike several programs of community intervention and support that operate from that base, such as the Kurrajong Waratah early intervention services, or the Riverina Eastern Regional Organisation of Councils (REROC), the CSU/WI model cannot even boast the successful

'hub-and-spoke' model of addressing community needs (Alston, Barber, Mlcek & Witney-Soanes, 2007; Battye & McTaggart, 2003; Davies, 2007). That is, rather than having effective satellite teams that outreach into local communities, operationally there are times when the CSU/WI partnership program seems to stutter and stagger along the kind of 'crazy paving' that is sometimes attributed to participation, by all relevant stakeholders, in post-compulsory education (Harris et al., 2006).

Having a united stance to delivering post-compulsory education opportunities like the ones described above reflects a convergence of ideas and ideals between CSU and WI. The reasons are several and often relate to attaining organisational goals, but also for the pursuit of legitimacy in a taken-for-granted world (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991). Both partners have a sense of engaging in both civic duties and civil society as a whole: WI meets its obligations in continuing to provide subsidised flexible, accessible programs to meet the needs of different communities and/or ethnic groups; and CSU is strategically poised to establish itself firmly as a national inland university with not only special expertise in the provision of higher education provision, but also the ability to review innovative educational models that address the needs of different communities across regional and remote Australia.

Transference – responding to community needs

This part of the discussion relates to actually recognising and responding to current community needs in a more adaptable and flexible system of regional provision (Bradley, 2008, p. 111). At the very least, the process begins with *transferring* away from historical 'artefacts' of provision that relate to funding being administered in the same way it has always been done in the past, and mainly from a vantage of influence (Bradley, 2008, p. 112). Such arrangements have the potential to lock organisations into unwieldy and costly arrangements. The challenges for transfer relate to how adaptable organisations can become in regard to current trends and/or future recommendations. For example, motivations for transfer are important, as is the impact of the role of external actors (e.g. governments and their capacity to provide funds).

Transferring educational opportunities from one context to another illustrates the possibility for the process being one of a matter of degrees depending not only on the learner's own enrolment context, but also on the nature of demand and access. This point is certainly illustrated in relation to the credit options offered to students undertaking the CSU/WI dual qualification program. Between the two higher education institutes, WI and CSU, Dubbo is ideally located to offer professional qualifications in both community welfare and social work. That is, by enrolling in both the TAFE component to undertake a Diploma in Community Welfare Services, students also have the option to enrol in the CSU Bachelor of Social Work 4-year degree program, *at the same time*. They can complete the 4 years of study with both a diploma and an undergraduate degree, otherwise they go through different formal application processes to access the degree program that may require the completion of the diploma in the first instance, which would effectively add 1–2 years more of study. Higher education provision of this nature is in keeping with recommendations regarding the future of post-compulsory education and training to be able to respond to sometimes extreme and variable demands that are a phenomenon of regional areas identified as 'thin markets' (Bradley, 2008, p. 111).

There may be further flexibility in how credit arrangements for previous study and work experience can be both extended and expanded (Charles Sturt University, 2006). Recognising the similarities between programs, whereby making assessments of what they do have rather than what they do not, allows a window of opportunity to adopt a more pragmatic and less deficit model of interpretation. That is, in looking at pathways from TAFE study to university study, assessment of credits that can be offered in recognition of module content in training packages used in TAFE, would be served better by using a positive and proactive response from universities to identify not only those specific things that are covered and match existing degree curriculum, but also non-discrete skills that relate to sound graduate attributes and an ethos of scholarship. This idea may, however, turn educationists' ideas on their heads; for too long we have been socialised into only comparing 'apples

with apples', or like with like, but there are many that may now have to concede to 'apples with oranges' in order to keep abreast of the changing face of post-compulsory education.

A comparison can be made between the kind of flexibility described above, and the need for 'integrative rural practice' espoused in human services delivery (Chenoweth, 2004; Martinez-Brawley, 2002). There is no doubt that rural practice poses a unique set of expectations and conditions different from those encountered in metropolitan areas (Pugh, 2003). People who move in a 'tree-change', migratory fashion soon pick up what locals have experienced for years: factors that eventuate in a lack of support and resources, lack of infrastructure and specialist services/facilities, and the difficulty of attracting high quality experienced practitioners to rural and remote positions (Chenoweth, 2004; Lonne & Cheers, 2000). The recent issues raised in the media about potential delivery of medical services to the public, whereby hospital staff were highlighted as having 'no confidence' in management practices at the Dubbo Base Hospital (ABC Western Plains NSW, October 2008), make us mindful that events cannot be viewed in isolation to what is happening in the whole community and, indeed, the whole country. With senior doctors threatening to resign over lack of resources for staff and patients at Dubbo, it is important to take into account the contextual nature of isolation, environment, and history that is typical of the Dubbo area.

Transference requires a constant questioning and feedback process that is participatory and collaborative. So, in regard to whether the post-compulsory education opportunities that have been instigated at the Dubbo Campus, can they be replicated in other rural areas? The answer lies partly in the way that 'ruralness' (Mlcek, 2005, 2008) is constructed in certain communities in a way that signifies levels of isomorphism that are created through expectations of similar attainment, replication, and collective rationality (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). The original and current program was set up to accommodate a combined cohort of students who come from Dubbo and other towns like Orange and Bathurst. Whether the program could be, or should be, set up in those latter towns as well (after all, both WI and CSU have campuses

in both the above places), is a matter for careful future consideration. From several aspects that determine effective rural practice, a model of integrative thinking is recommended in order to embed processes that build knowledge bounded by contextuality. Martinez-Brawley (2002, p. 295) says of 'integrative thinking' that:

It is the kind of thinking that looks backwards and forward at every step of the way, because the practitioner knows that all experiences must be interpreted in terms of conceptual schemes that are historical, linguistic, contextual and so on.

Therefore, it makes sense to think of ways that Bathurst and Orange can be established in the future as autonomous sites because rural practice educational opportunities such as the CSU/WI partnership programs must be grounded in the issues that revolve, at a micro level, around those specific communities. In addition, at the macro level of practice, the transference and application of knowledge about rural situations can best be understood through the impacts of social issues and policies on those specific rural environments.

Consolidation – looking backwards and forward

One of the main factors relating to consolidation is the level and extent to which increased participation in higher education and post-compulsory education and training actually translates into better-qualified and skilled communities, with members able to engage in meaningful employment. Therefore, interested sectors must not become complacent; they must look backwards to see from where they have come, and forward to the demands for change that is being lead exponentially by governments in response to global trends regarding the knowledge economy. Interested parties must communicate with each other to make links between education and training sectors, industry, professions and enterprises. Consolidation requires a fundamental shift from sectors trying to hold on to their traditional terrains, to embracing more critical dialogue and transparency about reciprocal ways to improve 'non-completions and uneven participation', for example (Skills Australia, 2009, p. 12).

The Bradley higher education review has recommended that the Australian Government provide an 'additional \$80 million per year from

2012 in funding for sustainable higher education provision in regional areas to replace the existing regional loading' (Bradley, 2008, p. 112). There are calls to create collaborative arrangements between institutes like TAFE and universities; in fact, the 'divide' between the two is critiqued as being unsustainable and 'no longer a sensible distinction' (Bradley, 2008, p. xi). Globalisation also means that Australia is very much part of an interconnected world that asks for more highly skilled workers to meet the challenges of change. In this part of the discussion about consolidation, we come full circle.

The problem of producing highly qualified and trained human services workers is critical for all rural areas including the Dubbo region. Such services are generally not as well resourced as metropolitan or urban areas. As people move more, especially, towards the lifestyle attractions of rural life, so too does the demand for such services increase. Lonne and Cheers (2004, p. 163) suggest a range of remedial strategies to entice and recruit rural social workers to places like Dubbo, and in light of the CSU/WI type of program, enticement can take the form of ongoing education to attain better qualifications and higher monetary remuneration. Although there has been a significant growth in employment opportunities in rural locations since the early 2000s (Hawkins et al., 2000), the problem of recruitment has been compounded by the lack of suitably trained and experienced staff. A phase of consolidation must be included in any post-compulsory education reform in order to capitalise on the gains made already, and to assist realising a vision of innovation for future stability within rural communities.

There are still anomalies and inconsistencies to work through in the structure, delivery and support of the CSU/WI program. The support of Indigenous Learners, for example, provides a sobering reminder that all too often we try to look 'backwards and forward' before the chance to consolidate meaningful ideas. We then revert to a 'whiteness' view of how that 'should be done' and with still too little participation from the Indigenous Learners and communities themselves about what might be a better possibility. That is, we often support a pedagogy whereby 'whiteness is the erasure of inequality because it presents as the norm

in many adult education teaching situations; quite often manifested as indulgent practice, but one that also reinforces the hegemony of normativity' (Mlcek, in press). In terms of consolidating a position regarding post-compulsory education and training opportunities for all learners, tensions could arise between the demonstration of inappropriate indulgence and complacency to the exclusion of the desire to improve and participate.

Conclusion

Global cultural expectations operate to shape systems of education to produce highly skilled and qualified workforces. The Bradley (2008) review into higher education makes this point clear. In addition, there is the need for Australian communities to address those gaps that identify the country as lagging behind several others within the OECD group in regard to education. We are positioned precariously to slide further behind if access to, and flexibility of post-compulsory education opportunities are not explored in a timely fashion. Skills Australia (2009) warns of a fundamental shift required to stem the flow of complacency among relevant sectors and potential partners. The partnership between CSU and WI of TAFE has evolved through the needs of communities, industry and institutions to provide an opportunistic co-enrolment program for learners. Furthermore, factors that impact rural communities have been addressed, and continue to be so, through ongoing development of the program, including isolation, resourcing, distance, harsh environments and socio-economic disadvantage.

There are further future decisions to be made about the pedagogical approach to delivery of the program at the micro level of operations involving students and campuses, but considerations for the maintenance of the program remain firm in the face of macro level shifts in vocational education training and higher education philosophy generally. Part of that philosophy relates to what and how higher education should be funded. Twenty years ago, the phenomenon of lifelong learning was not just based in rhetoric, but a reality. The phenomenon created education and training programs to meet the demands of a burgeoning adult education movement relating not just to skills development for employment but also to promoting the notion

of learning for life (Jarvis, 2004). Collaborative research happened between countries and student numbers grew. However, based on current concerns in several discussion papers and research reports assessing the skills and knowledge development within Australia, there appears to have been a 'sea-change' to that past phenomenon and education trends represent more rhetoric than reality. Hopefully, the tree-change positioning of people and institutions to move in and out of rural and remote regions, in order to achieve pragmatic learning solutions for communities, is a trend that will continue to see partnerships like the CSU/WI one consolidate and expand.

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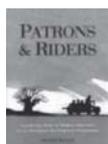
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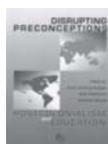
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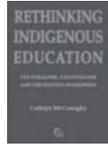
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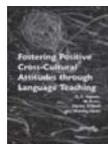
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