Regional – is the new black
Building sustainable communities and the role of post secondary education in regional leadership

Dr Ruth Schubert
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What is a sustainable and successful community, and how can the successfullness of a community be measured? Levels of wealth or financial capital, and human capital, are frequently considered measures of success. However, these forms of capital are not regarded as sufficient to ensure sustainability or success, or indeed the general well-being of a community. Another factor is missing in the discussion, namely the ingredient that worked as a catalyst on the other traditional resources. This critical ingredient has been referred to as social capital, and this has been taken to be a key indicator of a successful community. Social capital has been variously defined; however there is widespread acceptance of the core components as trust, reciprocity, norms, and networks. Social capital has been termed the “superglue” that enables communities and organisations to function more effectively.

At the same time as social capital was being debated, there was significant worldwide interest being generated by the concept of lifelong learning. This concept challenged the traditional view of learning as being largely confined to the formal, formative years at school, technical and further education colleges or university. Lifelong learning was considered to occur throughout life and across life, and was sometimes referred to as life-wide learning. Learning that was outside the confines of formal institutions was considered central to the wider concept of lifelong learning, described as non-formal and informal learning. Informal learning has been considered to contribute most of an individual’s knowledge, including that of highly educated people, and yet has been largely overlooked and ignored. One of the reasons may relate to formal learning being so obvious: formal institutions of the school, technical and further education colleges and university are unmistakable, since these are large physical institutions, also with the advantage of hard data on students and qualifications.

Therefore, when students are graduates of these institutions that is when governments and policy makers could be confident that improvements in learning and therefore skills are being made. Another significant reason is related to the view, that theoretical, published, and documented knowledge is a “higher” form of knowledge than tacit, practical, or verbal knowledge. This perception has resulted in the type of practical learning provided by TAFE as being considered “second class” and for this reason, and many others, it has meant that only the tip of the learning iceberg has been addressed.

Given the concerns about rural communities being sustainable, and the emphasis on formal forms of learning, it should be no surprise to note that governments and policy makers have in recent years reported worryingly lower levels of formal learning in rural communities. The concern for governments has been how to provide formal learning to these communities, hence the emphasis on formal distance learning, the use of information and communications technology, and since the Bradley Review a flurry of activity between universities and TAFE to form partnerships and capture this “new” low socioeconomic status market. This focus, while laudable for being concerned about rural communities, could be considered to be lacking in innovation and vision. The emphasis is still on formal learning and not looking at the opportunities and capacities fundamental to TAFE, which is to embed a more holistic model of learning that recognises the workplace as the site that develops lasting expertise, with the more theoretical and reflective approaches of educational institutions.
Discussion on research findings in South Australia

The focus of my recent research in smaller rural communities asked questions about building sustainable communities and the connections between learning, leadership and social capital. The initial model showed two outcomes: social capital as both an outcome, and a resource to be accessed by the community in dealing with crisis situations. However, the testing process showed two distinct models of community operation. In a stable situation, social capital was the outcome. But, when the community was dealing with a crisis, the community operation was distinctly different, with different relationships between the latent variables producing the crisis response outcome.


Given the recent reports from State and Federal Governments on formal learning, it was to be expected that the lack of overt formal learning institutions in rural communities would indicate little learning was occurring in rural communities. However, the findings demonstrated that the leaders of the communities were actively involved in learning. Not only were informal learning methods dominant in the methods by which the leaders learnt their skills and their preferences for learning, but also in the methods of transferring skills to other members of the community. These findings were consistent with the findings of earlier researchers such as Tough (1979;1999), Coombs and Ahmed (1974), and Livingston (2000;2001) who found that most learning was informal, most people were engaged in high levels of informal learning, and that even highly educated people learnt most of their skills informally.

Forums were of particular importance in rural communities; these forums included the local media, physical sites of interaction, and significant groups and organisations functioning within the communities. The local media provided a significant forum for local communication and interaction. It
is interesting to note that when one of these critical local institutions was threatened the communities were most active in finding innovative and collaborative solutions to ensure the preservation of a local service. This determination to retain access to the services indicated the importance and central role of these functions within the communities, and highlighted for State and Federal Governments which organisations were critical for sustainable rural communities.

The importance of the three broad groupings of leaders, described as community leaders, business leaders, and government leaders, was also illuminating, and their leadership of organisations also considered significant to communities. The correlation between types of leaders and the importance of particular types of organisations was very strong. The most significant group of leaders was categorised as community leaders and included education leaders and teachers, professionals, sporting club leaders, church leaders and service club leaders. These leaders were the boundary crossers, and were of greater importance than business and local government leaders. The role of these leaders in working with other organisations and bringing together disparate sections of the community should not be underestimated.

Of equal interest were the models examining community processes at a time of crisis or significant change. The change in processes meant the wider engagement of the community in the situation. For any community attempting to address a problem, the widespread involvement of the population was usually necessary to reach a resolution.

However, of equal interest was the variation in community response. A number of communities showed high levels of social capital and higher responsiveness to a crisis or significant change. The community of Cummins was high on both measures, and, using the Australian Tax Office mean taxable income results, was also comparatively high in financial capital. This finding supported Putnam’s (1993a; 1993b) original thesis that civic engagement is a necessary precursor for economic growth, not the other way round. Therefore, it would appear that the communities that scored well on both scales would be in the best position to ensure the sustainability of the community.

The importance and development of social relationships are central for effective learning and leadership, and for the development of social capital. Equally striking is the sense of an effective community that involves a complex set of interrelationships. As Peirce and Johnson (1997) put it, “there is no magical leadership structure, just people and relationships”. While relationships are a unifying component in the connections between the four main concepts, equally important is that of collaboration. Learning by working together, and alongside others, produces learning. The concept of working together and facilitating collaboration has been considered to be a central goal for leaders. Such collaboration produces better results for individuals, communities and for the wider society.

**Structures of a sustainable community**

The question of what makes for a sustainable rural community has significant implications for the government. Clearly not all organisations, facilities or forums within a community are of equal importance, however, some are vital. For a sustainable community a diverse mix of organisations must be maintained, and government has a role in planning access to these functions and services. What is critical is a comprehensive plan for rural communities, that engages the wider community, and community leaders, in partnership with the government in reaching solutions and designing the future of regional Australia.

Communities need sustainable industries: the loss or reduction of the employment base either due to the closure of the major employer, or the gradual changes in technology in broad acre agriculture areas, or the combined effect of a 10 year drought has had a major impact on regional communities.
The removal of government employment from the regions, and resultant loss of population and associated services, has had a detrimental effect in rural communities. A reversal of these decisions, with a proactive decentralisation plan (such as in Victoria) and a re-establishment of a hierarchy of government services in regional and rural locations would serve two purposes. It would take the pressure off our capital cities (Melbourne and Sydney now rank in the top 100 cities in the world). It would also moderate the effect of distance and isolation on rural communities so that individuals can remain in the smaller more remote communities, while being able to access more specialised services at the major regional hubs, such as health or tertiary education services.

In South Australia, TAFE is the formal adult educational institution with the largest presence across regional South Australia; arguably this is also true for much of regional Australia. TAFE has a rich tradition of practical skills training, an expertise that needs to be valued and cherished along with theoretical “academic” forms of learning. TAFE in partnership with Universities is well placed to develop new models of learning in rural communities that value informal, non-formal, and formal approaches to learning. The success of the Flinders University Rural Clinical School based in the Riverland is a shining example of the innovative workplace model of learning that provides advanced skills for the medical student, and a pool of young doctors willing and able to practice in regional communities. The national objective should be about developing partnerships across the formal educational institutions that recognises the best of each sector utilising informal, non-formal and formal learning methods, to form a new form of tertiary provision that meets the needs of regional Australia.

The human and social capital that the learners and educators bring to community capacity and leadership in regional Australia is invaluable. We know regional communities are passionate and willing to be part of the solution. The question remains then are Federal and State governments ready, willing, and able to deliver on behalf of regional Australia? When we have a yes to this question, then we will then know that Regional is the new black!