

Strategic Regional Leadership for the Future Conference: TAFE's Role

1. Overview

TAFE Directors Australia, in association with TAFE SA Regional and five TAFE NSW regional institutes, was the event partner for the Strategic Regional Leadership for the Future Conference national conference held on 29 October 2010 in Port Macquarie on the NSW Mid North Coast. The conference presented jointly by Regional Development Australia (Mid North Coast), The University of Adelaide and the international Regional Studies Association.

TDA's sponsorship investment was \$5500 (inc GST), with 50% contributed by TDA and the other 50% shared between the six contributing TAFE institutes. Other sponsors included Department of Regional Australia, Regional Development and Local Government; the NSW Dept of Industry and Investment; several NSW regional universities; ABC (Mid North Coast) and Port Macquarie Hastings Council. Presenters and participants at the conference, included Australian and international academics, representatives from regional development bodies, State and Federal departments, local government, business, and TAFE throughout Australia, with over 300 delegates attending.

Among the keynote speakers and panel discussion leaders were:

- The Hon Simon Crean, Minister for Regional Australia, Regional Development and Local Government and Minister for the Arts
- Rob Oakeshott, high-profile regional Federal Independent Member for Lyne
- Leading regional development researchers and academics Prof. Andrew Bear (University of Adelaide), Dr Markku Sotaruta (University of Tampere, Finland), Dr Chris Collinge (Birmingham University UK), Prof. Steve Garlick (University of Newcastle), Dr Bruce Burnett (QUT) and Assoc Professor Jeremy Buultjens (SCU)
- From TAFE, Dr Ruth Schubert (TAFE SA Regional), Pam Christie NSW DDG TAFE and Community Education and Elizabeth McGregor TAFE NSW-North Coast Institute.
- From the media, Michael Pascoe, high profile economics and finance commentator and ABC NSW State Director Peter Longman

Apart from providing an opportunity to strengthen TAFE's position as a key player in regional development, the conference presented research, case studies and observations (summarised in the following pages) that suggests that TAFE institutes could pay more attention to what we do and how we position ourselves, especially in relation to universities, in the following areas:

- How we can contribute to developing and exercising regional leadership capabilities and in facilitating regional networks and boundary crossing initiatives, because of TAFE's presence and proximity throughout rural and regional Australia.
- National and international emphasis on tertiary education, skills and employment and social enterprise as drivers of regional social and economic well-being.
- Capitalising on Australia's current political and funding spotlight on regions (both rural and outer-metropolitan) by identifying and articulating both place-based and reproducible cross-portfolio outcomes in funding submissions.

2. Key Speakers and Themes

Keynote: European and Australian Insights into Regional Leadership

Prof Andrew Beer, University of Adelaide

- The paper compared Australian and European approaches to regional leadership, noting that the latter tends to emphasise much more the concept of “place” (including metro and non-metro regions); public and private sector networking; collective, large scale and reproducible initiatives; and relationships between regional leaders and all levels of government.
- In contrast the Australian approach is often dominated by visionary individuals (usually private sector) who appear able to mobilise resources independent of normal public sector processes to drive local/small scale self-help initiatives, often supported or encouraged by government and NGOs.
- Identified RDAs and the current regional policy emphasis as major opportunities to generate scale and growth opportunities previously not seen in Australia.

Keynote: Regional Leadership and the Government’s Commitment to Regional Australia:

The Hon Simon Crean, Minister for Regional Australia, Regional Devt and Local Government

- The recent political landscape had created a once in a lifetime opportunity to entrench regionalisation in the way we govern and to deliver resources and a framework for cross-portfolio coordination to empower local communities.
- Responding to skill shortages and higher education and training opportunities is among the key drivers for regional and national growth.
- The National Broadband Network is an opportunity to address and link three key priorities for regions – education, e-commerce and e-health.
- In addition to the \$500m EIF Priority Regional Fund, 32% of new and existing education initiatives will be invested in regions and an additional \$573 million will be available for initiatives through RDAs.
- RDAs, Ministerial Councils, committees and sub-committees and various funding allocations will be sought to drive outcomes across portfolios, not just outputs from individual programs.

Keynote: Connecting People, Coast, Valley and Plains:

Rob Oakeshott, Federal Independent member for Lyne

- Emphasised the need for cross portfolio cross-government and cross-sector linkages and place based solutions. Observed that both the Minister and PM “get this.”
- Referred to employment, productivity and investing in tertiary education as important challenges and opportunities in the current policy and political environment.

Keynote: Regional Development Offices as Leaders – A European Perspective:

Dr Markku Sotaruta, University of Tampere Finland

- Spoke of regional leadership as a multi-sector/multi-action process that creates ways for others to contribute.
- Cautioned against tendencies to mechanically formulate and articulate visions and shortages in well-worn regional development catchwords (“creativity”, “sustainability”, and “network”) and emphasised the need to make better use of visions and strategies as tools to lead collaborative processes and actions.
- Provided a regional development case study from Finland in which strengthening a polytechnic and attracting leading academics were key elements in the development of a science innovation park.
- Outlined a “relay” model for translating the seeds of knowledge and vision into a sustainable regional development initiative that mobilises knowledge and influence from different leaders at each step of the process.

Panel Discussion: The role of Post-Secondary Education in Regional Leadership

Led by Pam Christie, Deputy Director-General TAFE and Community Education (NSW), with other speakers including Dr Ruth Schubert (TAFE SA Regional) and representatives from five universities and Mid North Coast RTO, The Enterprise Training Company

- Key themes included education for leadership; education and business partnerships; educational institutions generating and exercising leadership for specific regional development and community initiatives; investment in human capital, especially in young people; cross-sectoral pathways and collaboration; educating and training people in regions to retain and/or attract skills and human and social capital to regional areas.
- The importance of TAFE, the geographic proximity of its campuses and working across educational, workplace and organisational boundaries was emphasised by Dr Schubert and also by Mark Burdack from CSU.

Keynote: Creating Community Wealth

Michael Pasco, Media and Finance Commentator

- Provided an engaging presentation on the “three key lies” relating to the economic debate in Australia – Fed Govt debt; population and taxation; and the promise from emerging economies and domestic consumption.
- Said that Australia’s real crisis is a lack of investment in people, skills and education and there is a need to fix up the under spend in tertiary education.
- Provided an optimistic outlook for the Australian economy and for regional economies that grasp the potential to be part of the “China/emerging major economies” opportunities.

International Keynote: The Leadership of Luck? Planning and Spontaneity in Local Innovation

Dr Chris Collinge, Birmingham University, UK

- Like previous speakers, emphasised that “place matters” and there is a need to work across silos and lead across networks.
- This calls for new and different skills sets and ways of working for regional leaders, with facilitation skills, trust and a desire to “compete through cooperation” being important.
- Research shows that universities can have a vital role as facilitating networks and secretariat that enable regional leadership to emerge (comment – could equally be true of TAFE).

There were two other panel discussions:

- One focussed on “Self Investment to Build Community Wealth”, in which speakers drew attention to the community contribution of cooperatives, mutuals and social enterprises
- The other panel discussion on “Leadership and the Big Issues”, focussed on communications and technology, environmental sustainability and the sea-change phenomenon as they relate to regional areas.
- In these discussions the contribution of TAFE Institutes was referred to by speakers and/or comments from the floor in relation to: e-learning; a regional environmental sustainability network; training and support for an Aboriginal Arts collective; and bringing together affordable housing and construction training initiatives.

3. Conclusion

TAFE Directors Australia was prominent in the conference promotions and both TDA and the supporting regional TAFE institutes were promoted in the conference program and visual displays, making the event sponsorship a worthwhile investment in raising TAFE’s profile in regional leadership among participants and opinion leaders present.

This benefit was strengthened by several keynote speakers such as Rob Oakeshott, Minister Crean, Michael Pascoe and both of the international research academics drawing attention to the regional leadership role of tertiary education providers and by the participation of TAFE representatives Dr Ruth Schubert, Pam Christie and Elizabeth McGregor as panel speakers and leaders.

There was also much learning from the conference about how TAFE can:

- Leverage our presence and proximity throughout rural and regional Australia to make a major contribution to both exercising and developing regional leadership capabilities.
- Facilitate regional networks and boundary crossing initiatives.
- Capitalise on the current political and funding opportunities in regional development by identifying and articulating cross-portfolio outcomes in funding submissions.

For more information and conference presentations go to <http://www.rdamidnorthcoast.org.au>