“Dreams, Visions and Realities”

by

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Abstract

This paper is the exploration of the visions and dreams for a local university campus and their relationship to the historical and practical realities in a small isolated rural community in Victoria. The community dream is to increase access to university education yet the position is taken that ‘higher learning opportunities are limited, with a significant number of study (sic) being done off-campus via distance education’ (Webb 2004). This paper further explores the disadvantages which face country students in accessing tertiary education.
Table of Contents

1. Introduction . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 3
2. Background . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 4
   2.1 Community Ethos . . . . . . . . . . . . . 4
      2.1.1 Employment versus tertiary education. . . . . . 4
      2.1.2 Intergenerational farming. . . . . . . . 5
      2.1.3 Minimal farmer education. . . . . . . 5
      2.1.4 Immigrant attitudes . . . . . . . . . . 5
   2.2 Other factors which impact . . . . . 5
      2.2.1 Geographical isolation . . . . . . . . 5
      2.2.2 Lack of local infrastructure . . . . . . 6
      2.2.3 Low incomes and drought . . . . . . . 6
      2.2.4 Experience of educators . . . . . . . 6
      2.2.5 Professional locals . . . . . . . . . 6
      2.2.6 Entry Scores . . . . . . . . . . . . . 7
      2.2.7 Lateral Transfers . . . . . . . . . . . 7
      2.2.8 Special Admissions Schemes . . . . . . 8
      2.2.9 The University of Melbourne Model . . . 8
   2.3 Student attitudes . . . . . . . . . . . 8
2.4 Government Policies . . . . . . . . . 9
   2.4.1 Assets Tests . . . . . . . . . . . . . 9
   2.4.2 Inadequate Living Away From Home Allowances 9
   2.4.3 Assessment of farm assets. . . . . . 10
   2.4.4 HECS and HELS . . . . . . . . . . . 10
      2.4.4.1 Anti-rural bias in HECS and HELS . 10
      2.4.4.2 Reduced Fees . . . . . . . . . . . 11
   2.4.5 Pensioner Education Supplement (PES) . 11
2.5 Other issues . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 12
   2.5.1 Limited TAFE access . . . . . . . . 12
   2.5.2 Inter-library loans . . . . . . . . . . 12
3. Dreams. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 12
4. Visions. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 14
   4.1 Proposed provider models. . . . . . . 14
5. Realities . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 15
   5.1 Life-Long Learning. . . . . . . . . . . 15
   5.2 Community Perceptions of Exclusion . . . 15
6. Distance Education . . . . . . . . . . . 16
   6.1 A Support Model for Distance Education. . 18
References . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 19
“Dreams, Visions and Realities”

1. Introduction

This is a very preliminary survey of the dreams, visions and realities of a small geographically isolated rural area in Victoria, the perceptions of tertiary education by the local supporters and my reflections on some of the issues which have been raised.

The Swan Hill and Gannawarra areas are significantly under-represented in the proportion of the population holding formal qualifications being 8% below the state average (Carboon 2004b, MMLLEN, 2004).

Swan Hill and Kerang are provided higher education opportunities through TAFE and other providers, but principally as an adjunct to the main campuses in Mildura and Bendigo. While there are some tertiary subjects and courses available with the region, it is provided on an ad hoc or temporary basis. As a consequence the Shire of Gannawarra and Swan Hill Rural City are under-represented compared to the state average in formal qualifications by some 8% (MMLLEN 2004, p.1).

The issue of a local university to address this imbalance is currently generating much discussion in the local press and has even reached the national press (Age 2004).

The three local municipal councils, viz. Rural City of Swan Hill, Gannawarra Shire, Wakool Shire (NSW), have called for ‘expressions of interest’ from local persons for appointment to a small committee to explore the issues of university education in the local area.¹

Under the auspice of the Murray Mallee LLEN and with the support of the three Councils, a Working group representing the community and local business interests will be formed to

¹ Although possibly the only member of the local community to have a doctorate in the field of education I was not a member of this committee.
establish the need and opportunity for tertiary education to be provided locally (MMLLEN 2004. p.2).

2. Background

2.1 Community Ethos

Before the future can be addressed and local needs met I believe the ethos of the community has to be contextualised by visiting the past.

The late Pierre Bourdieu (1977), who, most explicitly … demonstrated the various mechanisms by which tertiary education is designed to legitimate the intergenerational reproduction of privilege in society (pers. comm. Prof. Arthur W. Frank 2003).

In the context of the local community this would indicate that those with tertiary education will pass on their experiences to their children but if they have not had tertiary education they will not value it for the next generation:

2.1.1 Employment versus tertiary education.

Generally in the community there is the idea prevalent that tertiary education is not as important as having a job. This area is fortunate in having the lowest rate of unemployment found in rural areas in Victoria and even positions which remain unfilled.

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2 As far as I could ascertain no members of this committee had experience beyond the under-graduate level, and certainly no-one had any qualifications in post-graduate research.
2.1.2 Intergenerational farming.

On the cereal farms which spread over the largest area in this region there is the entrenched idea that the son will inherit the farm and continue farming into, in many cases, the fourth generation.

2.1.3 Minimal farmer education.

The need for on-farm qualifications, such as Farm Chemical User’s Certificates to be able to purchase chemicals has forced some limited TAFE education courses to be accessed. Professionals, such as accountants, will be employed to assist with the financial operation of the farm with assets worth more than one million dollars. Managerial skills to operate the business are not considered to be important and skills in mechanics are valued.

2.1.4 Immigrant attitudes

Within the small horticultural properties with many immigrant families from lower socio-economic backgrounds there is particular resistance to allowing their daughters to leave the district (and the parental supervision) to access higher education.

2.2 Other factors which impact

Other factors which impact on access to tertiary education.

Other factors impact on access to tertiary education and these include geographical isolation, government policy, low rural incomes, crop failures, drought, deficient infrastructure to support learning, and poor offerings of courses locally by TAFE.
2.2.1 Geographical isolation

The geographical isolation has created many access barriers. There are no university campuses which can be accessed by daily travel, either by car or by public transport due to both distance and timetabling. Students cannot commute but are forced to live away from home. Campuses at Ballarat, Warrnambool, Churchill, Albury-Wodonga and Wagga Wagga are inaccessible for students who have to use public transport and so the family is forced to find a vehicle for their tertiary student.

2.2.2 Lack of local infrastructure

There is the lack of local infrastructure which supports learning in the local community. There is no full academic library which can be accessed for studies. The rural telephone network is not up to standard for quick computer downloads. Broadband and other plans to increase download speed are not available in the rural areas.

2.2.3 Low incomes and drought

Low incomes also create a barrier and an Australian census discovered that Tresco (in this local area) had the lowest income in Victoria. Drought has only exasperated the low incomes.

2.2.4 Experience of educators

Country students often have to contend with inexperienced teaching staff and also live in homes where parents have had minimal education. This means that they do not have access to staff/parents who may ensure that they will receive high scores in their Year 12 tertiary assessment. With a few
exceptions, students do not gain access to the ‘elitist’ courses at the same rate as students who studied at colleges or the state system in the city.

2.2.5 Professional locals

Local students therefore miss out on access to the elitist courses such as medicine, law dental science, and have to settle for ‘second best’ courses which could lack appeal to them.

As it is known that country students tend to return to the country areas, this area is thus the poorer as we do not have doctors, dentists, solicitors returning who understand the local ethos.

2.2.6 Entry Scores

I am left pondering whether the system of allocating places at Universities (i.e. by the ENTER Scores) deter students from applying to go to University. In this area they will have to leave home and move away from their friends and relatives. It is a big change for a student to make and could it be, for some, a future to overwhelming to contemplate?

2.2.7 Lateral Transfers

The process known as ‘lateral transfers’ between courses may not be well known to students which allows students to ‘earn’ their place as university students into the course of their choice, but this can add additional time to reach the desired qualification/degree and further stress on parents supporting the student.
2.2.8 Special Admissions Schemes.

The University of Melbourne also has a special admissions scheme under which outstanding country students gain access to courses although they have not reached ‘the course cut-off score’. It was explained to me that often these country students may struggle in the first year of their course as they adjust to living in Melbourne, but in second and later years they will be the superior students in the undergraduate degree course.

2.2.9 The University of Melbourne Model

The new University of Melbourne Model commencing in 2008 is reflecting this. Students will commence in a handful of general undergraduate degrees and then go on to post-graduate studies in their chosen fields. This will also allow superior undergraduates from other institutions to study further at the University of Melbourne.

2.3 Student attitudes

(a) Often non-academic students are encouraged to attempt VCE so the school has sufficient teaching staff to teach a broad range of subjects but these students can be a detriment for the better students and disruptive in the classroom environment.
(b) Many students, who do have the necessary aptitude, choose instead to not work at school as they know the stress that their academic success would place on the distressed rural income and do not wish to create hurt for their parents. These students sacrifice their own futures out of consideration for

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3 I am often asked to mediate by family with their student member who has ‘slackened off’ and this is the reason given that they do not want to add further stress to their families and make their family feel guilty that they cannot afford the tertiary education..
their families. This is another reflection on the inadequate support which governments offer to rural students to study away from home.

(c) Could this area be better served if we had one institution servicing the last two years of secondary education (with shared staff if appropriate) – this would mean the Swan Hill Secondary College and McKillop College would amalgamate at this level. As McKillop College already transports students from Kerang, perhaps the students of the Kerang Technical High School could be considered in this model. This model may attract more experienced teachers and better study facilities and perhaps could assist students to obtain higher VCE scores so they can access the ‘elite’ tertiary courses.

2.4 Government Policies

2.4.1 Assets Tests

Government policy in the form of Assets Tests creates problems as families who have to send their children away are denied access to Austudy to assist with the expenses. Some school leavers try to circumvent this difficulty by joining the local workforce for a year to establish their independence for assessment and in the interim decide that they will remain in the local area as they have employment, possibly have made a relationship with a member of the opposite sex, and are succeeding in the local sporting teams.

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4 I am also approached by senior secondary students to discuss their personal dilemmas as their ambitions of tertiary education are contrary to what their heavily mortgaged rural and pensioner families can afford. Often the student is confused and is depressed as they chose to give up their options of a tertiary education and feel that there is no future for them. This stress on the student is ignored and they seemed to be pulled in many directions with teachers and parents wanting them to do well yet knowing they cannot expect their families on their limited incomes (often in debt) to support them. With their ambitions of a tertiary education unattainable it is even possible some may contemplate suicide. The family, school, and community would write off any suicide as being caused because the student was not handling the stresses of Year 12. How far from the true trigger of the tragic outcome they would be and so the problem is not addressed for other students placed in this dilemma. The other option is to under-achieve and give up on their studies and sacrifice their ambitions. Their poor academic results would reflect on the attainments of their rural school.
2.4.2 Inadequate Living Away From Home Allowances

Austudy, if available and not denied because of the Assets Test, is too low to allow students to live independently while attending distant campuses which require living away from home. The allowance for Living Away From Home is totally inadequate and the government responses ‘that parents have to be prepared to support their student family members to live away from home’ is not equitable. Students, who live in the city with their parents, while not be contributing to the family home financially, also have amenities like soap, food, telephone, and even a vehicle on occasion, available to them. The country student, forced to live away from home has the full cost of accommodation, food and also the costs of returning to their country homes.

Until a realistic allowance for Living Away From Home is paid there can be no equity for country students or equality of access to tertiary institutions from this district (along with many other rural areas in Australia).

2.4.3 Assessment of farm assets.

Professionals, such as accountants and medical practitioners, can construct their employment in such a way that their children are eligible for allowances. The way in which many farm businesses are structured does not allow for this flexibility, and even with a discount for farm assets, equity still is not attained.

All farm assets necessary for earning the farm income should be excluded from the farm assets tests especially as primary industries such as grain growing, dairying and fruit growing require expensive expenditure such as costly farm machinery, cool stores, etc.


2.4.4 HECS and HELS

These loans, which allow students to defer the costs of their university education, are constantly misrepresented in the popular press and political figures. Parents are loathe to let their children commence life with a large debt burden and seem to equate it in the same terms as a home loan rather than as a levy on the student’s income in the same way that the Medicare levy is paid.

There needs to be more publicity and clarification in the local press by our rural politicians of how repayment of these loans will affect tertiary students later in life.

2.4.4.1 Anti-rural bias in HECS and HELS

Students who have parents who are able to pay their fees upfront receive a substantial discount. Students are not offered this discount if their families are too poor to pay their fees up front and this adversely affects the student from a low income family such as in farming recessions, drought, crop failure or pensioners. These students suffer a financial penalty because they come from poorer families.

2.4.4.2 Reduced Fees.

It should be a consideration that fees be discounted if students return to the country to take positions in skill shortage areas, e.g. dentistry, medicine, paramedical.
2.4.5 Pensioner Education Supplement (PES)

The Pensioner Education Supplement which is paid to pensioners on Disability Support Pensions, Carer’s Pensions, and in certain other conditions, is not available to study beyond the Honours level. This means these students are not assisted to do any post-graduate course or graduate diploma.

2.5 Other issues

2.5.1 Limited TAFE access

There are only limited courses available at the local TAFE which is a branch of the main campus of Sunraysia Institute of TAFE is located two hundred kilometres away in Mildura (TAFE 2004). Latrobe University does offer some limited on-campus studies in nursing and education at the Mildura Campus of SIT, but has not seen fit to include the Swan Hill area as a venue when offering these courses. The courses which are on offer locally would seem not to meet the needs of the local people. They seem to be confined to agricultural TAFE certificates, training nursing assistants and introduction to computers.

2.5.2 Inter-library loans

It is very costly to arrange for inter-library loans between the municipal libraries and university libraries and this pathway for borrowing should be overhauled so that there is equity for local professionals. Professionals may endeavour to negotiate with a university library for direct borrowing access but find that university regulations, such as books must be borrowed in person, prohibitive for local professionals to keep abreast of their fields. In turn this will mean that professionals in the local area will remain in an
academic backwater or be forced to leave the district so that they can remain on a par with their peers.

3. Dreams.

The arguments which have been put forward for a local university have included idealistic and emotive reasons and the benefits to the local community if the youth remain in the local area especially with the aging of the population. Sporting teams are merging due to the lack of players and the aging of the population, and amenities are being lost such as banks, schools, police and midwifery services in hospitals.

Much of the emotional argument for regional development is: how can we keep our young people in the region (MacBean 2004, p.2)?

… it has been a concern of mine that talented hard working students are denied the chance to fulfil their dreams and aspirations due to the extra burden of paying for accommodation and transport while living away from home. If a university is set up in Swan Hill in some form it will have a number of benefits which include the continued contribution of our youth to the community, increased revenue and business opportunities for the region and greater engagement of our youth at school knowing that a university degree isn’t decided by how well off your parents are (Wardle 2004, p.5).

Research shows the region’s youth are disadvantaged due to the high cost of living to study away from home which results in some students deferring study and joining the workforce and not returning to education. The state average for deferral of study is six per cent while the figures supplied to Wakool shire show MacKillop has a deferral rate of 17 per cent while Swan Hill College’s rate is 15 per cent (Carboon 2004b).

Arguments based on economic grounds have been put forward and the provision of a local university is offered as the solution both for the loss of
services due to economic rationalisation and also as a means for the future
development of the region: a rural renewal. Adman points out that while
rural communities fight to retain facilities

[they] face a losing battle …[with] perfectly understandable
service-delivery decisions … It is about turning the argument
around and building communities not focussing on maintaining
services … so also strong regional communities can made strong
and relevant regional universities (adman 2004, p.15).

The current economic expansion of the region, based on the
major and corporate investment in irrigated agriculture has
highlighted the growing need to attract professional and skilled
staff and to provide opportunity for local youth to undertake
careers in this growing local industry and in the support services
(MMLLEN 2004, p.1).

Service delivery in rural and regional Australia is an issue that is
much wider than the provision of higher education. Regional
universities have the potential to be major economic drivers for
their regions – out of all proportion to the direct and multiplier
effects of their expenditure (MacBean 2004, p.1).

4. Visions.

These have been some of the arguments supporting the establishment of a
rural university in this region. Issues such as long term sustainability
(Sellars, 2004) and the size of the local population have been ignored. The
thinking seems a bit like the early settlement ideas moving into the arid
areas South Australia of ‘the rain follows the plough’ and the idea seems be
that the population will follow the university. Only MacBean has given
consideration to this practicality.

A ready answer to guiding future population growth in Victoria
and nationally would be to redistribute funded university places
to regional campuses – in America quite small cities are the
home to major universities (MacBean 2004, p.3).
4.1 Proposed provider models

Considerations are now given to the form which the proposed university would take in the local area.

Discussions have been held with a number of universities and a working party will be set up to determine what is needed and how best to achieve it (Carboon 2004a).

Identity, service and relevance to its stakeholder communities are the differentiating factors which define a regional university. A regional location offers both an identity and the potential for local ‘ownership’ of the university that is less readily achieved in a metropolitan context. Relevance in courses and research are the means for strengthening the region and the sense of ownership (Adman 2004 p.14.).

MacBean (pers.comm) has suggested a model for the Mid-Murray University Centre of a Multiversity with various academic disciplines being provided by a number of institutions. He has omitted the major provider of Distance Education in Victoria, Deakin University, from his model.

An alternative structure has been suggested by Smith for the Colac Otway Shire and he says he is

… arguing for no permanent buildings or staff, with courses as periodic offerings on demand, rather than being established as regular events. I wonder whether this model may serve the interests of rural Victorians much better than holding scarce funds in permanent buildings and staff with, too often, small numbers in courses (Smith 2004 p.17).

5. Realities

5.1 Life-Long Learning.

The availability of Lifelong Learning in the community has not been considered. People still see further education in the context of a ‘meal
ticket’ and older people who do access tertiary education are asked what they will do with ‘it’ – there is no idea that learning itself can be fulfilling for all ages. Councillor Trewin has made the only observation which acknowledges the need for lifelong learning in this area:

Cr Trewin said in the last 12 months he had seen a number of the region’s youth return home after studying away, however, there was a need to provide education options closer to home and be able to have a facility to update skills within the area (Carboon 2004b).

5.2 Community Perceptions of Exclusion from Tertiary Education.

Many people think they are precluded from a university education as they did not complete their secondary education especially as the only route of access when they hear about is ‘cut off scores’ for entry into tertiary courses. The doors are not closed for all time and they do not need to go back and do their VCE.

There needs to be further publicity in the rural press on adult entry requirements, especially for adults who never completed their secondary education. Media releases from politicians could help in disseminating this information.

6. Distance Education

Distance education has been ignored as a provider of tertiary education in this region. Except for one mention in the MMLLEN paper Distance Education has been ignored as a provider of tertiary education in this region. Only one comment has been made, attributed to John Webb when CEO of Swan Hill Rural City Council, which mentions Distance Education.

Consequently locally provided higher education opportunities are limited. With a significant number of study [sic] being done off-
campus via distance education, requiring travel of some distance to block release or attendance on campus (MMLLEN, 2004).

The comment treats Distance Education as a poor substitute with many negatives of having to travel for practical components of courses and other practical requirements such as for registration in a chosen field.

It seems that there is a mindset of thinking ‘campus’ when thinking of the provision of university education is considered in this region: the thinking has been more directed toward physical buildings, staff and on-campus study which probably reflects the academic experiences of those promoting this university facility.

The fact that much investment is tied up in building infrastructure which does little for the access to tertiary education or the quality of that education has been ignored. Smith has tried to direct attention away from physical buildings but on the other hand has not spelt out his alternative model of service delivery.

The same arguments which have been put forward to support the establishment of a university campus in Swan Hill can also be put forward for better access and improved facilities for Distance Education. Distance Education will provide training locally, the retention of the youth, provisions for professional upgrading of qualifications and for lifelong learning.

The greatest difficulties which I observed in my earlier research work and from own personal experiences were the difficulties of isolation, lack of physical access to support people, lack of adequate information technology support and computer laboratories (with broadband) for online learning and the lack of access to libraries and laboratories. Some students have also
pointed out their problems with self-discipline when studying from their own homes and feel that having somewhere to attend would assist them.

6.1 A Support Model for Distance Education.

My proposal is that, for students studying through Distance Education, a ‘Tertiary Education Learning Access and Support’ facility would address many of these needs. It could be known by the acronym of TLC – Tertiary Learning Centre – but TLC would also reflect that there is the need to foster and encourage our local Distance Education students in their endeavours. In turn, they will enrich our local area.

The problem of isolation and lack of access to other students is something that is very difficult to overcome but the provision of the facility could provide the central meeting place which presently is lacking for Distance Education students in this area.

Students could physically attend the facility whether for IT support, how to write essays tutorials, or just interaction with others who are studying. There would be a Learning Support person to assist when there is the need for additional encouragement, bridging learning and equity is required. Due to the poor telephone infrastructure access to broadband in a computer laboratory would facilitate online learning and a small branch library for instant although limited access (based on the subject areas which the local students are studying) to some reference books.

There is certainly the need to improve the image of Distance Education in isolated rural communities – currently Distance Education and Off-Campus

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5 It is incorrect to presume that such a facility would not be supported by Distance Education students who have already shown their initiative by enrolling in tertiary courses, either for their own career betterment or for their personal edification.
Education is seen to equate with correspondence schooling and something which is akin to the School of the Air and the pedal radio.

The potential of on-line service delivery and the adoption of newer technologies, including interactive technology need to be promoted to lift the image of Distance Education. Perhaps use of the television media and rural newspapers could encourage more people to decide to access tertiary education though Distance Education.

Only Distance Education can successfully deliver the complete spectrum of tertiary education, across all academic disciplines (except currently medicine and dental science), and at all levels in this isolated rural area. The real problem lies with the image and not the reality of Distance Education.

The big question therefore remains - how the improved provision of a Distance Education facility that could satisfy the community perceptions of a physical university campus and whether it could improve the access to tertiary education opportunities in the Swan Hill Rural City and Gannawarra shire?

Costing of this TLC Model: One rented house and initially the employment of just one Learning Support person is envisaged and so our community can see if this model will work in our local area.

Note it would not be appropriate to locate such a facility at the TAFE Campus or on a school campus for the Distance Education students as this would only reinforce their feelings of not belonging anywhere. After all, they are not TAFE students but students of a distant campus which perhaps they have never even visited in the course of their studies.
References:


Dr. Dorothy I. W. Morris, Lake Boga