TREE CHANGES OR WHOLESALE CHANGES: THE ROLE OF ADULT EDUCATION IN TRANSITIONS IN REGIONAL LIFE

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Abstract

Regional adult education and training providers have been required in recent decades to adapt to funding structures rather than engage with their local communities. This has meant providing education programs that are funded based on national or State and Territory based policy frameworks, often linked to human capital development. Adult education and training organisations need to be given the chance to ‘see’ what their local communities need; to ‘see’ who their targets groups are. Contemporary adult learning programs and practices for regional communities need to encompass a combination of focused and flexible learning processes and resources, including classroom instruction, mentoring, social and cultural activities, community networking and workplace training. There is a need in Australian society to examine all adult education and training sectors in the light of emerging national social inclusion policy frameworks that impact on regional communities. The diverse provision of adult education and training has the capacity to foster social relationships in diverse rural, regional and urban communities. This article reflects on two research projects in relation to the educational experiences of mature age adults in Echuca and Bendigo in northern Victoria.

Keywords
Mature age learners, Adult and higher education, Rural and regional transitions

Introduction

The demography of regional communities in Australia is changing from a population profile of Anglo-colonial to that of complex cultural diversity and from agricultural and mining industry to a situation where tourism, hospitality, financial services, human services and education are now dominant industries requiring significant human capital and infrastructure changes. Individuals and families moving to regional communities via internal mobility or international migration are often doing so as part of substantial life changes for financial, familial or lifestyle reasons.

This article synthesises two research projects that were conducted separately in central and northern Victorian regional communities around the role that post-compulsory education sectors play in supporting individuals, families and communities experiencing transitions. The first research project was conducted from 2005–2007 and explored how individuals from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds participated in adult community education (ACE) programs in the Shire of Campaspe, specifically the town of Echuca, as a way of developing social capital in a regional and rural community context. This project involved interviewing 12 adult learners from a variety of cultural backgrounds who were invited to participate in the ACE programs.

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participate in the development of learner vignettes which holistically explored links between their experiences of regional and rural communities and how adult education promoted social network development. Ten females and two males from a variety of backgrounds with diverse education and training experiences were surveyed and then interviewed. Ten individuals who facilitated adult education programs with a variety of ACE providers in Campaspe were also interviewed about their roles in promoting and facilitating adult learning within the context of regional and rural communities. This project has been explored in much more detail elsewhere (Townsend, 2008) but is of interest here because a number of the participants in this project have gone on to access university programs in the region.

A subsequent research project was conducted from 2008–2009 where staff and students from La Trobe University, Bendigo were surveyed and interviewed. In total 10 staff, consisting of Social Work lecturers from the Bendigo Campus and staff from Student Support Services, were invited to discuss issues faced by mature age students in this regional community. The interviews were informal and individuals were encouraged to talk from their own experience of teaching mature age students, while reference to their own prior experience of being mature age students, if relevant, was made to prompt their thinking further on this topic. All but one had previous experience of being mature age students in this regional area. A mass survey via email was sent to all mature age students enrolled within the School of Social Work and Policy. They were asked to make general comments about the positive and negative aspects of being mature age students at the Bendigo Campus. Approximately 80 students were contacted and a total of 12 responses were returned, consisting of 10 female and two male.

**Tree changes, adult transitions and community renewal**

The regional community context of Australian society is significant because recent census data have highlighted emerging trends in regional communities involving significant social change (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007). The more recent redistribution of Australia’s regional population via internal and international migration ‘reflects a highly mobile population responding to a range of triggers including employment opportunities, housing costs and lifestyle preferences. These trends . . . suggest some major challenges for policy and service provision in regional education and employment’ (Mission Australia, 2006, p. 11). Currently there are immigration programs targeting humanitarian entrants for resettlement in regional and rural Australia. Skilled migrants can fill skill shortages and there are opportunities for guest workers to come to Australia to fulfil specific employment contracts in regional and/or rural communities (Broadbent, Cacciattolo & Carpenter, 2006; Institute for Community, Ethnicity and Policy Alternatives, 2006).

The experiences of social inclusion and exclusion by individuals residing in a range of Australian communities are influenced by a variety of compounding factors. This includes mobility and migration experiences; population demographics; the history of specific communities; government social and economic policies and local, state and federal political environments. Most of the individuals participating in the Campaspe research project had been searching for and creating a sense of ‘place’ and ‘community’, a sense of belonging to somewhere outside the realm of pre-existing familial and cultural experiences. This search for something ‘other than’ appears to be a function of age-related life transitions. No longer satisfied with or dependent on the same social connections that have sustained them in the past, they have been seeking some meaning to their individual lives rather than solely that of financial gain or familial stability.

The places that are the Shires of Campaspe and Loddon are representative of many regions in Australia where the population is diversifying as more people move away from large urban areas as part of a ‘tree change’, and as migrants and refugees are ‘diverted’ into regional areas by Federal and State Government policies. Within regional Victoria there are specific patterns of age-related migration, with different age groups moving out of and into these areas. Older adolescents, for example, show a pattern of movement towards urban centres, mostly for education. These patterns tend to reverse for 25–29 year olds in regional areas, reflecting the
attraction of regional areas for young families and the return mobility of some who have completed their tertiary education (Department of Planning and Community Development, 2006).

Agricultural production based on intensive irrigation is the largest industry in the Shire of Campaspe in terms of net worth, whereas mining and agriculture have been the largest industries in Loddon. Dairy farming and dry land farming involving cattle, sheep and grain are the main agricultural industries. However, employment in both regions now occurs mostly in the service sectors of retail, finance, hospitality and tourism. In recent years both Shires have been significantly affected by drought, which has had an impact on all economic, social and personal circumstances.

Communities in regional Victoria where 16% of the population have been born overseas are significantly less diverse than Melbourne, where 36% of the population are born overseas (Department of Planning and Community Development, 2006). Issues of cultural and social marginalisation motivate many people, especially newly-arrived migrants, to choose to reside within the greater social diversity of urban areas. However, in recent years a number of regional municipalities in Victoria, and around Australia, have actively welcomed more diverse groups into their communities for a range of economic and social reasons. The individuals in these two research projects had varied but specific reasons for living in the Campaspe or Loddon areas, with most moving to the region in the past 15 years. Internal migration was the most common factor, in that they came to live in Campaspe or Loddon from somewhere else in Australia. Individuals move to regional and rural areas for diverse reasons that include: work, financial considerations, family and/or personal relationships or for a sense of community. For most, there are significant benefits in changing their residence to a regional location, which can mainly lead to an improvement in individual or family economic circumstances (Townsend, 2008).

Education and employment emerged from both research projects as ways that individuals could connect to localised networks in their local regions. Most of the individuals interviewed in the Shire of Campaspe project were not employed, either because they were full-time carers for partners and/or children or because they were unemployed owing to a lack of skills in the industries and areas that they were wishing to work in. A cruel social and economic trap was exposed for students in regional areas. Education and employment are ways of connecting to economic and social capital yet it remains an exclusionary experience for many mature age people – however, one that some of the mature age individuals were able to overcome through personal determination.

The role of post-compulsory education in mature age adult transitions

Defining ‘mature age’ within the context of post-compulsory education is a current dilemma. Research indicates that mature age refers to any individual aged 21 or over and/or who enters education from a variety of pathways other than the traditional school leaver pool (Cullity, 2006; Kenny et al., 2007; Richardson, 1994; Stone, 2008). The major themes consistently reported in the literature are about the motivations and challenges that individuals face in entering education, how the personal, societal and economic commitments and obligations appear to impact on an individual’s overall success, and how learning processes and cultures impact on successful transition and what attempts post-compulsory education institutions have made to improve the transition and integration of individuals within student life (Fulmer & Jenkins, 1992; Kenny et al., 2007; O’Shea, 2007; Stone, 2000, 2008).

Diversity can be seen in the wide age groups involved, the motivating factors for study, and the location and/or ‘regionality’ of post-compulsory education in Australia. The number of positive or negative personal influences a person has within her or his life creates even more complexity within this cohort and the impact this has on attempting post-compulsory study can alter from individual to individual. Rendon (1994, as cited in O’Shea, 2007) comments that there now appears to be a ‘tapestry of differentiation’ among individuals, and it is this variation among and through different individual cohorts that makes truly understanding the mature age individual trajectory difficult. This creates difficulties in making generalisations about this group, as most studies of mature age individuals considered differing
demographics which either excluded or included several different variables. The difficulty in finding literature on specific individual groups suggests that research should be based on 'particular individual cohorts rather than generic groupings' (O'Shea, 2007).

Stone (2008, p. 269) identified that there appears to be some sort of 'catalyst for action, some event that had occurred which then led, directly or indirectly, to the decision to study'. McGivney (2006, p. 85) substantiates this notion and suggests that a variety of reasons prompt adult learners to consider education, including factors such as the 'need to deal with an immediate situation or crisis in their life' (life transition, illness, redundancy, bereavement, divorce). O'Shea (2007) identifies in her research on females who were the first in their family to study that the decision to study was related to some sort of recent catalyst which was both personal and work related.

Kenny et al. (2007, p. 13), however, identified that a major reason that prompted mature age individuals within nursing to return to study is the desire to expand their education as a means of enhancing career/employment options'. While this may be true for a large proportion of mature age individuals, Harper and Kember (1986, as cited in Richardson, 1994) believe that, in particular, older mature age individuals might be more likely to be studying out of interest or for pleasure rather than for vocational reasons. Kenny et al. (2007) state that, as a group, mature age individuals appear to have a strong commitment to study and further suggest that motivation is intrinsic within them.

The Campaspe research project found that the motivation to attend ACE programs in a regional area provided social and personal benefits more so than economic benefits for persons. This in part was related to the social exclusion and isolation factors that this group faced. ACE programs provided an avenue for persons to engage meaningfully and therefore make a connection with the regional community they lived in. It was also found that individuals from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are often searching for cultural and social elements in adult education. It is clear that motivation has a defining influence on a mature age individual's decision to study and the complexity of diversity seen merely in identifying motivation for study reinforces the difficulty of analysing post-compulsory education in regional and rural communities.

Extensive research has been carried out on the issues or challenges that mature age individuals face which differentiates them from the traditional school leaver group (Cullity, 2006; Dawson, 2007; Fulmer & Jenkins, 1992; Kenny et al., 2007; O'Shea, 2007; Scott, Burns & Cooney, 1996; Stone, 2000, 2008; Trott, 2007). The major challenges for individuals in regional and rural communities included family responsibilities to a child or other family members, financial and work commitments and an overall lack of time to balance successfully these competing commitments in their lives.

Cullity (2006) believes that it is personal, social, attitudinal, educational, cultural, vocational and financial circumstances that can impact on beliefs about mature age study. Overlapping themes are evidenced in numerous studies of the juggling act required to balance financial, family and other work responsibilities (Reat, 2002, as cited in Kenny et al., 2007). It is worth noting that there appears to be a strong link in the literature between lower socio-economic class and systems of beliefs or ideals about what were appropriate gender roles. These cultural expectations did not always support furthering educational opportunities for women (Cullity, 2006; Fulmer & Jenkins, 1992; Scott et al., 1996). Cullity (2006) and Fulmer and Jenkins (1992) reinforce this in saying that the poor self-concept developed and held especially by women was derived from a mixture of social and cultural reasons which includes within it perceived priorities of women which reflect gender, class and ethnicity.

When the impact of learning processes and culture on transitions is explored, identifying the fears that individuals exhibit can be compounded by the discourse and jargon that are used as second nature in education and training institutions. Cullity (n.d., p. 2), in her research on the issue of whether a learning culture enthuases or intimidates mature age commencers, identified that the 'unexplained use of academic language can disengage individuals from the learning process'. This can then lead to a very real gap in the almost assumed requirements and expectations that staff have and the interpretations or assumptions that individuals make about those expectations (Street, 1996, as cited in Cullity, 2006, p. 190).
Furthermore, in exploring studies that identified entry to post-compulsory education through alternative entry programs, it was found that simply assimilating individuals into post-compulsory education can reinforce the ‘dominant/elite culture’ often associated within higher educational circles. However, utilising programs that gradually immerse individuals in academic culture can increase an individual’s overall academic capacity to succeed (Cullity, n.d.). Gradually increasing an individual’s understanding of the literary and academic skills required can promote academic confidence, which in turn assists the development of deeper learning strategies that need to be fostered successfully in adult education (Cullity, 2006, p. 4). Not understanding what is required or how to achieve what is required, coupled with individuals feeling insecure in approaching teachers or lecturers, only compounds fears that are present when commencing study.

There has been an increasing focus within the literature on the significance and benefits of successfully engaging mature age individuals through the transition process in adult education. Heirdsfield, Walker and Walsh (n.d., p. 2) comment that establishing social networks is clearly important in individual transition. How individuals make the successful transition to university life has been studied extensively by Tinto (1993, as cited in Erskine, 2000). Tinto (1993, as cited in Erskine, 2000, p. 44) commented that individuals who integrate into university tend to stay, while those who are not integrated tend to withdraw, and his conceptual model is the most widely recognised in the literature.

The adult learning experiences of mature age individuals who participated in these research projects clearly revealed that individual experiences of migration, culture, family, relationships and health are very different throughout the life cycle of the individual. Informal learning needs and experiences that individuals have can impact on experiences of more formal adult education. Most of the individuals interviewed for the research projects were ‘looking at’ post-compulsory education as being the place where they could reconnect to adult education but also have the freedom to engage in learning in a way that suited their individual needs rather than being serviced as part of a group. Flexible education practice means leading, as opposed to controlling, individuals to manage their own learning. This then facilitates the use of learning resources designed to achieve the desired learning outcomes, focusing on what each individual wants and needs to achieve at any given time. Effective and inclusive education and training practice would mean encouraging active learning, cooperation and collaboration among diverse groups of individuals with real-world problems to solve, setting authentic tasks, accepting relevant applications and offering a degree of choice that enables individuals to be active learners rather than passive recipient vessels for eclectic education and training offerings. In regional and rural areas this is particularly evident because of the distance that many individuals have to travel and the disconnections between community and campus life.

The role of post-compulsory education in regional and rural communities

Staff and students interviewed for these projects identified that mature age students present with pre-existing competing priorities when entering adult
and higher education, which can then create greater complexity when attempting to integrate university study amidst these demands. Both staff and students stated that making connections with university life, either from academic support services or from the creation of social networks, had a positive impact on the education experience. The majority of staff and students identified that there are various struggles that mature age students face both initially and throughout their studies. Attempting to integrate family, work and other personal commitments successfully with study was referred to as a ‘juggling’ or balancing act by most and one that had the potential to create more stress during life transition.

Ann commented that ‘I initially found the whole experience challenging, trying to juggle uni, work and family, but I persisted and am happy to have completed this degree’. The contributing factors to this stress were described in terms of personal, financial, domestic, societal and other work related obligations. Students noted that long vocational placement times had the potential to have a profound effect on their financial stability. Lucy remarked about the very real struggles that had to be contended with:

Students with families have to do their placement part-time; finding the time for study, foregoing sleep to get work in on time, financial constraints, keeping a roof over head, paying the bills, food, etc. while studying is difficult, especially for single parents.

Half of the staff interviewed confirmed that they themselves struggled with this dilemma and also mentioned that ‘finding the time and having to juggle study on top of everything else’ was a hindering factor in their own mature age university journey.

Tom spoke about the difficulty of combining study with work and family commitments:

This was very difficult at times, especially around childcare arrangements. I had to find time to study and felt that I was neglecting my family at times. It was difficult finding an even balance between study, work, and family. I had little time to unwind myself.

In addition, three students identified additional emotional stressors as a significant factor that impacted upon university life. Interestingly these three students spoke as well about the extra pressure of being a single parent in a regional community and how that added a further complexity in their experience. Susie commented on the:

juggling act of family (kids), work, home and study (uni). Mature age students are faced with these demands more so than students straight out of high school as they often have existing living expenses such as a mortgage and a car loan. Also there are a number of mature age students who are separated/divorced from their child’s other parent, which brings further financial, physical and emotional pressures on a mature age student.

One staff member commented that major life disruptions can lead people to university; another staff member made similar comments and felt that often students’ return to study was prompted by personal crises in their lives such as unemployment, divorce or change in health status and so they often ‘bring baggage’ alongside other personal expectations that they may have with regard to study. Another commented that she had noticed over her years of teaching mature age students that perhaps a lot came to university seeking more meaning and connection in their lives. They have made a real choice to change paths in their personal lives and so bring with them an expectation or hope that this study will create that sense of meaning.

Both staff and students made the observation that mature age students in general entered university with higher expectations and a greater commitment towards studying. Staff spoke about the fact that mature age students were more willing to participate in conversation and generally displayed higher motivational and commitment levels towards subjects. Most staff had observed that mature age students had thought about study and had made a conscious decision to doing so, and so in that respect displayed a higher commitment to their study. Tessa stated that mature age students ‘in general had higher expectations of both themselves and the university’.

One staff member from Student Support Services mentioned that she believed that mature age students do indeed place higher expectations on themselves and when they present for support often do so with higher levels of stress. Despite this, she commented they often still have more ‘clarity’ about why they are at university and so in
that sense are much clearer in what they want to achieve from their university experience. Gary stated that it was important to ‘give some thought to how you are going to sustain yourself physically, mentally and emotionally as it is a long road. Learn to ask for help from lecturers, tutors and fellow students. NEVER think that you can’t do it …. PERSEVERE!’.

Creating connections once enrolled was seen as an essential component which could successfully enable integration into regional education culture. Half of the staff interviewed felt that students who utilised English language or academic skills support and student support services were more likely to integrate effectively and go on to succeed within the first year. Likewise several students attributed their own success partly to acquiring skills and knowledge gained from accessing such resources. Lin remarked that:

> having to commence study again after a big break (something like 15 years) was difficult, stressful and frustrating . . . I can thank [the] Academic Skills Unit to assist me get back into the swing of things and introduce valuable advice and support.

Furthermore, the majority of staff felt that students who had a sense of connection to the local and education communities remained and went on to complete courses successfully. Both staff and students identified that the ‘issue of connectedness’ was a contributing factor in their own personal journeys as mature age students. Julie revealed:

> I enjoyed being able to talk to other mature age students and teachers. I enjoyed utilizing the mature age lounge where it was quieter and more relaxing to spend time with my mature age friends (that I met at uni). My friends understood the pressures of studying whilst working and having family commitments and so it was nice to feel normal in this circumstance.

The majority of staff and students stated that ‘making new friends’ and ‘increasing their own personal support networks’ were positive aspects of their adult education experience. Cate stated it was because ‘there was a group of mature age students; we were able to support and encourage each other throughout the course’. One staff member, when commenting on his own student experience, referred to the support of other mature age students as providing ‘a sense of camaraderie’ which was vital in regional and rural contexts where students relied on one another as a crucial resource.

Overwhelmingly students spoke about the significance of their own prior life experience and how they were then able to relate this to coursework. Connie said ‘I remember on many occasions the younger students not being aware of certain life experiences and learning from the older students . . . such as childhood development, pregnancy, parenting and experience in the workforce, organisations and team work and managerialism’. Some of the staff acknowledged that a student’s life experience brought a greater sense of ‘richness’ into the classroom dynamic and others agreed that mature age students were often more ‘conceptual’ in how they then applied this academically. Staff mentioned that they felt mature age students were more likely to work from their own life experience and so in part the knowledge that they gained was in making the connection from their own experience and applying that to what they were learning directly to coursework.

Despite staff acknowledging that there are differences amongst student cohorts, when asked about their thoughts on separating mature age students and school leavers for some subjects, most staff disagreed and conveyed that all students regardless of age display different learning styles and that rather the emphasis should be on teachers developing ways that engage different groups and that promote a reciprocal transfer of knowledge across the generations. Most students felt that they benefited from the interaction with other age groups. Jodie wrote ‘I believe we are also in a position to assist some of the younger students which in turn helps with our own learning. It is good to be able to draw on the strengths of all age groups’.

**Conclusion**

What was evident from these research projects was that all students felt that the benefits gained from accessing education in a regional context – benefits such as increased ‘confidence and self worth’ and the acquisition of new social skills and support networks – far outweighed the challenges or ‘juggling act’ that accompanied this life transition.
Advice that students offered to others contemplating study reinforced this:

Don’t be scared to get back into study. It is a juggle and a lifestyle change, but it is well worth it in the end. Go for it, give it your very best shot and be proud of your victories, even the small ones.

The challenges for mature age students accessing education in a regional context are complex; they bring with them motivation to study from their life experiences but also the major disruptions that can distract and cause emotional and financial stressors. Issues such as being a single parent or an individual with a partner whose children have ‘fled the nest’ or having to care for an elderly parent or relative or having a disability can all act as impediments for individuals via financial and time poverty.

Access to education is now easier but also more costly for mature age individuals; higher education reforms over the past 10–15 years have included the introduction of the Higher Education Contribution Scheme and fee-for-service places as funding mechanisms for all major courses of education. The reforms have also led to an expansion in the number of higher education institutions that service populations living in regional and rural areas. The new Rudd Labor Government has received the Bradley Report on Higher Education Reforms, which has recommended a package of reforms regarding new national targets for educational attainment, more comprehensive individual support, higher quality accreditation and systems management within institutions and specifically greater funding in regional and rural areas. The Commonwealth Minister for Education Gillard has also signalled that the vocational education and training (VET) sector will be expanded both in size and in the types of programs on offer.

Historically, the ACE sector in Australia has found itself outside such structural or national policy reform. In recent years, as an indirect response to VET reforms, most ACE organisations have shifted their program delivery and emphasis. Government imposed funding frameworks have led them to the planning and delivery of VET programs, especially in regional contexts where there are no other VET providers in the vicinity or where funding is offered for programs not provided by local Technical and Further Education organisations.

In a regional context, all sectors of post-compulsory education are expected to encourage adults to reconnect to education. Education and training providers are agencies integral to community transition and development. The research projects outlined in this article, however, have identified some of the adult education processes, cultures and attitudes in Campaspe and Loddon that are established in a traditional pedagogy of classroom-based and teacher-centred practice. Adult learners in a regional community context could gain more from formal and informal learning experiences if all adult education programs adhered to well informed adult learning principles that include allowing learners to direct their own learning and decide what to learn; acknowledging and utilising a range of life experiences to further the learning of the group; and encouraging learners to connect their learning to experiences that are more meaningful in their own contexts. This then satisfies learners’ needs to know why they are learning something, whilst maintaining respect for individual learners, and thereby ensures that learning is relevant and practical.

Adult learners are also searching for the social aspects of learning: wanting to connect to new aspects of community or utilising education as a way of connecting to a new community. The social capital elements of adult education have been neglected by government funding and by education institutions (Townsend, 2008). Networking and recreational activities on-campus and within the educational experience have been lost to a major extent for mature age students. In regional areas this is exacerbated by many individuals having to travel long distances to and from education campuses.

The lack of recognition given to the varied outcomes of adult education programs within diverse communities and disparate education sectors means that there is limited research, practitioner debate and practice and policy development of the adult education sector required by those, like the mature aged individuals in Campaspe and Loddon, who are accessing these services. Research and policy development around adult learning and development increasingly faces challenges of understanding the multiple sources of
influences that contribute to how and why people learn. Future research on adult learning and development in Australian adult education and training needs to understand the multiple pathways through which learning occurs within and across demographics such as age and cultural groups and rural, regional and urban communities, requiring an ecological approach to understanding learning as a set of cultural processes.

The research projects outlined in this article have revealed that in places like Echuca and Bendigo in Victoria there can be a pivotal role for all of the post-compulsory education and training sectors in social capital development for individuals and sub-groupings. The research projects can be seen to be adding to the emerging knowledge of the strong relationship between the importance of place and space and education practice as well as education participation and links to social outcomes like civic efficacy and identity, levels of community trust and increased social activity and inclusion within local contexts.

Given that most of the individuals accessing post-compulsory education in Campaspe and Loddon were motivated to use education as a gateway to other education and training programs, to test their current interest or skill levels and/or to explore an employment transition, there is a clear need for direct and regular links among ACE, VET and higher education providers in the region. However, an examination of program offerings at the regional level suggested that there were no coordinated approaches to information, articulation, recognition of prior learning and so on.

This suggests the need for a co-operative approach in regional areas amongst the sectors and providers that presents local communities with clear options and the links and pathways among ACE, VET and higher education programs and providers. This would realise the overt policy goal of people using education and training pathways and eliminate the reproduction of programs while highlighting the needs of distinct groups within the broader region. Introduction to tertiary study and transition programs for mature age and culturally and linguistically diverse individuals at a regional level would provide the same opportunity for them to understand the adult education and training sectors and to begin to negotiate their way through the programs they might want to participate in.

Post-compulsory education providers in regional and rural communities are clearly situated at the centre of crucial social, cultural and educational activities. However, a concentration on human capital development via vocational training has prevented these community-based linkage processes from occurring to any significant extent in Campaspe or Loddon, and one suspects a similar situation exists in most regional communities where resources are limited. A broadening of the role of post-compulsory education programs and providers in regional areas to incorporate social and community development would require systemic policy and funding change. The role of education as social and community engagement and development would demand a new policy framework to acknowledge and fund diverse programs as well as educate managers with the vision and community connections to encourage the facilitation of diverse programs.

It is vital to ensure that the education and training practitioners are able to adapt and be flexible in their program management and delivery to meet the needs of diverse groups. The recent Bradley report has acknowledged the complexities and unique nature of regional communities in Australia and made some recommendations regarding the distinctive role of education in regional areas and the need for a policy and funding framework that provides more flexibility. Will a new Federal government seize the chance to develop new policy frameworks for all sectors of post-compulsory education that will lead to the wholesale changes needed to support the tree changes and transitions that individual are making in ever changing regional and rural communities in 21st century Australian society?

Acknowledgments
Thanks to Victoria University for funding PhD research in the Shire of Campaspe, La Trobe University for funding HEESP research in Bendigo, Mel Delves for her thorough research of literature and for interviewing academic and support staff at Bendigo, all the participants in both research projects and the staff of education organisations and universities who agreed to discuss the issues.
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