

RURAL DECLINE AND COMMUNITY SERVICES EDUCATION IN VICTORIA: THE BENDIGO EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

In 1989 Phillip Institute of Technology (based at Bundoora (Melbourne)) offered its Bachelor of Social Work degree (BSW) and Graduate Diploma in Community Development (CD) in the Central Victorian city of Bendigo. This paper outlines some of the contextual issues and identifies certain key factors in addressing these issues.

Introduction

The social and community services field is expanding as many recent reports attest. Australia-wide studies cite a growth of 20.3% in the community services' sector over the five years to 1986, and an amazing 48.5% in the more specialised "welfare and religious institution" category. This compares to a total workforce rise of 3.5%. (see Wiseman & Watts, 1989) This industry has been characterised by a largely female underpaid and under-trained workforce especially in the country (Landvogt, 1989). In rural settings there are other issues as well. As Landvogt states:

Arguably the market for trained welfare and social workers in the cities is close to saturation, but these graduates tend to move only temporarily to the country, if at all. This not only restricts the quality of the services (experienced people are hard to retain, and young city graduates may not be as 'tuned in' to rural communities), but also many increasingly take employment opportunities from untrained locals (Landvogt 1989, p. 11) (see also Knight 1990; Community Services Victoria 1987).

In the Loddon-Campaspe region of central Victoria centred on the provincial city of Bendigo (Pop. 70,000) a recent report showed that 7,500 new jobs were created between 1966 and 1986, about 3,500 of which were in the social and community services sector (Budge and Henshall Hansen Associates 1989). The ability of the education sector to provide adequately educated and skilled graduates to this industry is one of the most pressing questions of the coming decade. The ability to do this in the supposedly declining rural sector of our society presents an even greater challenge.

Factors

Any consideration of the provision of services such as education must take into account the relevant, but often misunderstood or unrecognised, structural factors shaping the rural sector.

The Rural Context

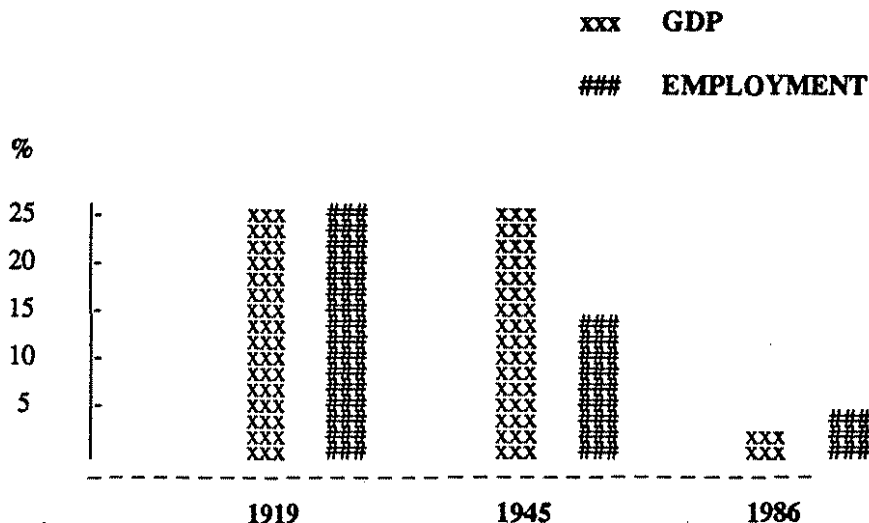
Population

In the state of Victoria approximately 29% of the population live outside Melbourne (Victorian Year Book 1988). Many of these people live in provincial cities, but 10% of the population live in small rural towns, communities of farms. However, it is estimated that about one third of

these small towns and communities are in absolute decline (see Henshall, Hansen & Associates 1988). That is they have sustained long-term population losses. This is paralleled by the decline in absolute numbers of farms. In 1950 there were 205,000 farm properties in Australia compared with 125,000 in 1989. The number of farmers has fallen by 19,000 in the 15 years to 1989 whilst the farm workforce has declined by 32,000 in that period and total rural workforce by 100,000. Much of the countryside is rapidly becoming denuded of people as farms become bigger, more mechanised and many of their associated "support towns" decline. It is estimated that a further 45,000 farmers will leave the land in the next ten years. (Lawrence 1987, p. 13) Sydney University's Planning Research Centre has provided a detailed analysis of such trends and their effects in New South Wales. (Planning Research Centre 1989).

Rural Economy

Along with these demographic shifts there has been a substantial shift in the place of the rural sector in the Australian economy. This is most cogently presented in Geoffrey Lawrence's book, "Capitalism and the Countryside" (1987). If we look at the following graph it shows that the percentage of employment and contribution to GDP by the rural sector is only a small fraction of what it used to be.



The declining contribution of the rural sector to Gross Domestic Product and Employment. (Source: Bureau of Agricultural Economics quoted in Lawrence 1987, p. 27).

Further, although agriculture used to contribute between 85 and 95% of export earnings up until the mid 1950s, this had dropped to around 35% by the late 1980s (Lawrence 1987, p.27).

This relative decline as against the rest of the economy, is exacerbated by the following five important factors:

1. The terms of trade for farmers has been in long-term decline. In other words the price which farmers can get for their goods as against the price they have to pay for farm inputs like

energy has been steadily reduced. They have dropped about 30% in the last seven years before 1987, thus continuing a trend begun after World War II.

2. Whilst the volume of agricultural production has risen dramatically, its relative value has not. The volume of agricultural output is approximately 27% higher than it was 15 years ago but its value has risen by only 4%.
3. Farmers are caught in a resultant cost/price squeeze and required to keep working their farms harder by more capital intensive methods. This is further exacerbated by economic policies which further integrate the Australian economy with the outside world.
4. Big agribusiness enterprises increasingly control not only the off-farm product, but on-farm activities as well.
5. Farmers are increasingly subjected to what I think of as an 'eco-eco squeeze'. This is, as they attempt to increase production and productivity the capacity of the land to withstand this increasingly technological intervention is reduced. Salination and the over-use of chemicals are the best known examples of this but even the use of large machinery has negative impacts as soils are compressed. The relationships between economy and ecology is increasingly becoming critical.

Employment in Rural Towns

Rural employment has also declined in the public service sector. Increasing rationalisation and privatisation of government services to country towns further emphasises the decline of employment opportunities, and the further exodus to the cities. Many rural towns rely upon such services not only for the jobs provided but the income input into the local economy (see McKenzie 1986). This coupled with the restructuring of other industries like meatworks, many of which have been closed across rural Australia; the introduction of new technologies in communication systems; rationalisation of the transport industry; and continued decline of manufacturing further exacerbate the plight of these communities (Bureau of Industry Economics 1985).

In many country towns the public sector is often the largest employer and has traditionally provided some hedge against seasonal and other variations in the local economy. This is increasingly no longer the case (Evatt Research Centre 1989).

As a result, people are less likely to be employed in the country as the following figures from Victoria indicate.

	Male	% UNEMPLOYED*		20-24 yr old	Total
		Female	15-19 yr old		
Victoria	5.9	7.5			6.6%
Melbourne	5.4	6.6	16.9	6.7	5.9%
Rest of Victoria	7.2	9.9	24.5	10.5	8.2%

* (Source: ABS: The Labour Force in Victoria, 1988)

Rural Education

The rural sector is therefore not only decreasing in economic importance and power, it is undergoing massive structural change as well with attendant social dislocation and upheaval. Further, it is increasingly unable to provide the necessary ingredients for servicing its own population. It is increasingly becoming marginalised as a supply base, playpen and dormitory for the people of the big metropolises. Further, it has increasingly suffered relative decline in services as these are 'rationalised' and centred in large rural cities or taken away altogether. The beginning of a rural underclass is perhaps well underway.

One of the service areas in which people are particularly disadvantaged is in the provision of education. For example in Victoria only 24.3% of rural females have post-school qualifications compared with 29.7% of females in Melbourne. 38% of rural males have post-school qualifications compared to 43.2% in Melbourne (see Ministry of Education 1989, p. 4). The experience in New South Wales is similar. (Coorey 1989, p. 113). This fact has been known for many years. For example an Australia-wide study of post-secondary education in 1983 concluded:

... students living in country areas are three times less likely than their metropolitan counterparts to continue to the final years of secondary school and enter a higher institution. (Anderson and Vervoom 1983, p. 84).

Other comparisons constantly emphasise that the choice of country people is extremely limited in this area. For example, the Australian Bureau of Statistics 1987 Survey on the Transition from Education to Work showed that students, particularly females, in rural Victoria were disadvantaged in attending post-secondary courses. (Ministry of Education 1989, p. 3)

If we are going to do anything about the increasingly polluted, crowded and sprawling megapolises, is not the provision of more equitable educational opportunities one starting point in any moves towards decentralisation?

Any moves towards increasing the pool of adequately educated and skilled workers in any area must take into account both access to education and the context of post-qualification practice. There has been a rush of reports and papers in this area from which a number of key issues in the delivery of rural education services can be identified (see Country Education Project 1983; Henshall, Hansen and Associates 1983; Commonwealth Schools Commission 1987; Ministry of Education 1989).

Key Issues in the Delivery of Education in the Country

Five key issues or variables can be identified from the major reports on country education. These are Access, Attitudes, Situational, Institutional and Economic.

Access

The lack of a range of educational offerings within easy commuting distance for country dwellers is seen to be the "big issue" from which other issues spring. Nearly all the reports treat this as the most significant issue. This is exemplified by the distance that students have to cover to get to educational facilities, associated costs, and by lack of adequate student accommodation. This implies the need for a "decentralised" education system both in its location and type of offerings. It also implies that many country people do not wish to live far away from their homelands and do so only reluctantly.

Attitudes

There appear to be three major inter-related components to 'attitudes'. Firstly, the reports and surveys indicate that country people have a lower level of aspirations than do metropolitan people. Secondly, country people simply do not have access to the amount and range of information about course and educational offerings that metropolitan dwellers do. Thirdly, country people have lower self-esteem and self-confidence in the sense that they do not often see themselves as being able to achieve as much as their metropolitan cousins. The fact that there are fewer local jobs and therefore opportunities for change or advancement exacerbate these problems (Coorey 1989, p. 113).

Situational

There are a range of 'situational' factors that mitigate against participation by country people in post-secondary education. These are chiefly related to problems of geographical isolation, but also include lack of adequate transport services and/or the inability to meet transport costs, lack of child care to enable parents to attend classes and again, lack of information.

Institutional

There are a range of factors in this category which are of note. The reports reveal that selection into tertiary education consistently discriminates against country people in favour of white middle-class urban dwellers. Country schools are often isolated, have limited curricula and provide students with fewer career options and models. They also suffer from poor student support services such as careers education and counselling, are often staffed by more inexperienced teachers and are effected by high staff turnover, in part fuelled by lack of staff development opportunities.

Economic

As already indicated the rural sector is one characterised by massive dislocation and change. This is accompanied by higher rates of poverty and ill-health which mitigate against the continuation of students into post-secondary education. Recent restrictions upon Austudy's living away from home allowance have impacted heavily against rural students.

Important Factors in the Resolution of these Issues

There are at least five ways in which the issues briefly identified above can, in part, be addressed. These are the implementation of a 'developmental approach' to education provision; the need for local management and decision making; articulation; the recognition and importance of technology; and the government and key agency direction.

A Developmental Approach

Education happens in different ways to different people at different times. Traditional institutional frameworks are sometimes not sympathetic to or do not meet the needs of local people. There is consequently a need to provide a variety of educational offerings which allow people access to education at appropriate points. Country Victoria needs a network of community based Further Education and TAFE courses as much as University or Degree courses. Further, course provision must not be static but must continually monitor, adapt and change itself. A developmental approach therefore implies a range of education offerings which enable students to begin their post-secondary education at an appropriate level and build on this as required.

Local Management and Decision Making

For an educational offering to be successful it must be embraced by the community in which it operates (Ministry of Education 1989, p. 11-14a). That is, it will be related to the community's needs as determined by previous investigation and experience. It will also be likely to be more successful if there is an element of local ownership and autonomy, so that the local community feels both involved, consulted and has some degree of control. These objectives are obviously easier to achieve with informal non-institutionalised types of educational offerings but also, worth consideration at all levels. The existence of "Course Advisory Committees" attached to formal TAFE and University courses may not by itself satisfy these requirements especially if they consist of a narrow academic or professional group.

Articulation

For the best chance of success education should be structured to both encourage students to return to it and then facilitate entry and exit from one sector to another as required. This implies, *inter alia*, an increased level of inter-sectoral interaction, flexible and innovative delivery, and increased co-operation. (See for example Clarke 1987; TAFE National Centre for Research and Development Ltd. 1988.) This is a necessary precondition to the effective operation of a developmental model of education.

Technology

As a number of reports show, the innovative and improved use of advanced technology such as telematics can improve access especially in rural areas (see for example Ministry of Education 1989b). Whilst not always a complete and often suitable substitute for in-situ offerings it can facilitate greater flexibility in course offerings and in some well resources circumstances provide a useful alternative. The example often given in this latter category is the provision of social work courses in the large, thinly populated Canadian province of Saskatchewan (Knight 1990, p. 11).

Government and Key Agency Direction

Rural development in Australia has lacked any overall coherent, articulated or powerful policy guidelines. However, it is probably essential, at least in the initial stages, for government and its' bureaucracies to provide a catalyst or a base from which policy can be formulated and action commenced. Much of the success to date of the effort in Victoria to bring Social Work education to the countryside has rested upon the active role initially played by the Minister for Community Services and then by Community Services Victoria principally through its Education Liaison Unit. This Department has been able to bring together all of the sometime competing and fractious elements in education and industry so as to enable a degree of cross-sector and intra-sector communication and co-ordination (see Community Services Victoria, 1987).

This is not to downplay or abrogate the efforts of local communities, or the principles mentioned above for they are equally crucial to the success of a rural initiative. Nevertheless, the active involvement of government is desirable and in some cases necessary.

Background to the Phillip Extended Campus at Bendigo

Some years ago, Caroline Hogg, then Minister for Community Services, was concerned about the difficulty of recruiting and retaining trained staff in rural offices of her own Department as well as in voluntary agencies and local government. Because of this she convened a colloquium in February 1987 to raise the issue with representative of schools of Social Work and Welfare

Studies. The general aim of this colloquium was to explore the possibilities of providing education in country Victoria in the Social and Community Services Field (SACS).

A Task Group was set up to research the issues and initiate action. With the help of an ANZ Trustees grant it contracted the Rural Affairs Unit at New England University to carry out some preliminary research. At the same time a staff member of Community Services Victoria was seconded part-time to meet with the various educational institutions. Out of these processes an Inter-Sectoral Committee was formed bringing together representatives from TAFE, Colleges of Advanced Education and the Universities.

The research carried out was based upon two surveys; the first looking at agency's needs and views, the second at community interest. Four rural regions were targeted - Mallee, Loddon Campaspe, Glenelg and Goulburn. The 63 agencies which responded represented a wide cross-section of the field. Major outcomes of the agency survey are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1

Summary of Agency Survey

- * 74.5% of agencies believe they cannot meet their client's needs because of insufficient, inadequate and unqualified staff.
- * Only 33% of applicants for position had the basic qualification necessary.
- * 94% of staff stay for four years or less, 50% stay for less than 2 years.
- * 71% of applicants come from metropolitan areas with 100% of unqualified applicants coming from country areas.
- * 60% of agencies indicated that their staff were in need of further training.

(Community Services Victoria 1987)

Responses from the group revealed an overwhelming need in regard to community services training. 99.2% of the respondents felt that rural people were disadvantaged by not having locally based educational opportunities. They suggested that if local people were trained they would be already committed to stay in their area (79.2% of respondents). The occupations of the respondents could be divided into three categories:

- homemaker and/or pension of some type
- those already employed in the SACS field
- those employed in totally unrelated fields but interested in a career change

The respondent's understanding of various course and career options varied considerably. Most of the respondents (20%) who wished to do social work already had a tertiary qualification. 42.8% of respondents indicated a desire to do welfare studies or social work.

From the data thus provided and the impetus provided by the Intersectoral Committee (Chaired by Community Services Victoria), several Colleges and Universities sought and obtained funding

through the Victorian Post Secondary Education Commission to expand their existing courses into country areas. Monash University joined with Gippsland College of Advanced Education to expand its offerings, and offer a Bachelor of Social Work by distance education in 1989. Gippsland CAE also arranged to offer its Welfare Studies course in Albury/Wodonga. La Trobe University offered its BSW full-time at Mildura by flying staff in every alternate weekend with co-ordination provided by a local person and hosted by the local Sunraysia College of TAFE. Loddon-Campaspe College of TAFE expanded its Associate Diploma in Welfare Studies to Kyneton by offering a part-time format there with local co-ordination. Finally, Phillip Institute of Technology offered its Graduate Diploma in Community Development and Bachelor of Social Work at Bendigo based initially in the Loddon Campaspe College of TAFE (1989) and then in the Bendigo College of Advanced Education (1990).

Profile of the Phillip Bendigo Extended Campus

Six elements of the establishment of the Phillip course are of note.

1. The appointment of a local person to co-ordinate and lecture in the courses.

As a long-term resident of Bendigo, the Co-ordinator's knowledge and close involvement with the field is valuable in promoting the local content of the course, field education planning and contacts with the local community.

2. The establishment of a local Course Advisory Committee comprised of representative from Phillip, local education sectors, students and local industry to oversee the courses.

This Committee has provided further local input into the project and accountability vis-a-vis teaching content.

3. The parallel establishment of a local Intersectorial Committee chaired by Community Services Victoria to review education offerings in the Social and Community Services Field.

The establishment of this Committee in 1989 has provided the impetus for a far ranging and innovative review of existing inter-sectoral relationships between various educational sectors and education and industry. In June 1990 it held a seminar on the issue of intersectoral co-operation, open to the community and titled 'Crossing the Great Divide'. It has initiated contact between several educational institutions to establish "articulation protocols" and provides a forum for information dissemination and sharing.

4. The use of local sessional teachers and practitioners in selected subjects to enhance the 'regional/rural' flavour of the course.

Most core subjects have included some 'rural content' and lectures have encouraged students to draw on their own experiences in discussion, assessments etc. Sessional teachers from the local area have been used to provide a rural context for theory and practice. Electives in 'Rural Practice' have been held in both the Community Development and Social Work courses.

5. The provision of funds to enhance local library resources as part of the "rental agreement" with host colleges.

Phillip Institute has provided funds to both the local TAFE and the Bendigo CAE to build up their stock of books in the Social Work and Community Work areas. This was enhanced in 1990 by the provision of a substantial sum by the Bendigo College of Advanced Education as part of its commitment to the running of these courses.

6. The formation of a 'Summer School Committee' to assess local needs for, and provide short practice oriented workshops and seminars.

This was a joint committee established between Phillip and the Bendigo College of Advanced Education. It provided a range of practice skills workshops and ran a major seminar entitled "The Rural Decline" in the early part of 1990.

The result of these intersecting elements has seen the Phillip course used as a developmental catalyst to foster discussion and action particularly around access and articulation issues. The development of permanent course offerings is presently under discussion. It has also fostered those factors mentioned of local management and decision making, and involved key sector agencies (government and non-government). The factor which has not been addressed in the Extended Campus project to any extent is the use of advanced communication technology. However, as Bendigo is only two hours by road from Melbourne the cost of equipment needed in relation to the scale and temporary nature of the project makes this option unattractive. However, it may be a useful part of any future development.

Flexible Educational Delivery

Course timetables are organised to allow employed students with adequate study leave to undertake the course. Lectures for the BSW course are conducted on Thursday evenings, Fridays, and three weekends during normal semesters. Lectures for the Graduate Diploma in Community Development, a part-time course, are conducted on alternative Fridays during normal Semester dates.

The courses were deliberately kept small due to resourcing limitations taking in eighteen BSW students and 17 CD students in 1990. A survey of the students during second semester 1989 largely reflected the results of the survey conducted by Community Services in 1987. The average age of the group is thirty-six years. About two-thirds have dependent children and two thirds are female. Just under half of the students list their place of residence as Bendigo with the remainder coming from country towns and regions spread across central Victoria, from Ballarat in the west, Shepparton in the east, Swan Hill in the north and Kyneton in the south. All except one of the students surveyed indicated a preference for a local course rather than an equivalent off-campus course. Nearly all emphasised the importance of frequent and constant contact with other students and staff, and the mutual support and stimulation this afforded.

In summary the group of students enrolled represents those who have been previously identified as either under-qualified or qualified in professions (e.g. teaching, nursing) which do not fit them to the range of tasks required by their agencies, or in which they want to direct their professional energies. They express severe reservations about distance education offerings and the impossibility of attending a course in Melbourne.

Conclusion

The Phillip Extended Campus at Bendigo represents a small dint in the wall of disadvantage experienced by country dwellers. Education is one of many vital and necessary services whose provision is unavailable to many throughout Australia and most notably in country Australia. This is compounded by the steady decline of much of the traditional social infrastructure in rural communities and of the relative importance of the rural economy. The Phillip courses at Bendigo have attempted to integrate rather than impose themselves upon local structures and provide a catalyst for future development. There remains much more to be done.

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To secure access for all members of rural communities to opportunities appropriate to their needs.

SPERA is a national organisation of community people and rural educators from schools, TAFE, universities, adult education and agriculture. We welcome individuals and institutions who feel they are able to make a contribution to the conference theme by participating and assisting in the advancement of the provision of education in rural Australia.

Further Information:

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ABSTRACTS due:

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