# PROMOTING RURAL/REGIONAL SUSTAINABILITY THROUGH THE PROVISION OF A QUALITY HIGHER EDUCATION EXPERIENCE

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## ABSTRACT

*The final stage of a longitudinal research project that focused on identifying the impact of a new university presence in a South Australian regional city is presented in this paper, which continues the account given at the 2009 SPERA Conference. The early stages comprised focus groups of stakeholders, staff involved, and students, and surveys of the pioneering student cohort (2005 enrolments) during their first and third years of study. The project's action research nature gave the opportunity to implement improvements in course delivery and administrative matters as needs were revealed.*

*Late in 2009, a survey of graduates explored their overall perceptions of their university studies, as well as identifying their employment outcomes and aspirations, their motivation for pursuing further study, and their perceptions of the influence exerted by this university regional centre. Their ideas about further opportunities for university engagement with the region were sought, along with any research needs of which they were aware and their interest in being involved in future research projects.*

*The story of three participants is considered in further detail, providing insight into the experience and views of these graduates.*

*As well as confirming and amplifying many of the findings of earlier stages of the project, which included high levels of overall student satisfaction, the final survey, along with other data from stakeholder consultations, and significant anecdotal material, demonstrates the role that this regional university centre is playing in contributing to the employment needs of its region and the retention of its current and potential professionals, and provides lessons for other university outreach. Its presence, made possible by the collaborative efforts of university and community, has helped residents of the region to see higher education as a normal option for them, rather than something that previously seemed out of their reach.*

## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The concluding phase of a longitudinal research project tracing the impact of a new university presence established by the University of South Australia (UniSA) in 2005 in Mount Gambier, the largest South Australian city apart from the capital,

and the main centre for the Limestone Coast Region in the south-east, is discussed in this paper, continuing the story presented at the 2009 SPERA Conference.

UniSA's Mount Gambier Regional Centre (MGRC) initially offered business, nursing and social work programs through a blend of face-to-face and video conferenced delivery in an on-campus equivalent environment. Later UniSA's Foundation Studies program was also made available through the MGRC, providing greater access to university education. The establishment of the MGRC programs was undertaken by Whyalla campus lecturers, with collaboration and resource sharing with the local TAFE and Tenison Woods Secondary College, and was driven by a community stakeholder group. All these programs were the same as those provided by UniSA in the metropolitan area and in Whyalla to the north-west, headquarters of the Centre for Regional Engagement (CRE), which has the responsibility for UniSA's regional activities. To begin with, most of the video conferenced lectures originated in Whyalla, with local Mount Gambier staff tutoring, but the advent of full-time academic staff based at Mount Gambier meant that some lectures could also be delivered there by video conference to Whyalla students.

The operation remains a "centre" which is administratively streamlined, not having all the costs involved with becoming a "campus", as the full student services are provided from Whyalla and the metropolitan campuses. UniSA decided not to enter into a partnership with TAFE SA for the provision of library services on campus because the TAFE service model did not fit with the online learning environment that UniSA promotes, but UniSA students may borrow from the TAFE library if they pay an annual fee. The MGRC students access UniSA's Flexible Delivery Service that provides a 24-hour turnaround to an online request. An open-plan office serves the academic staff, who comprise a small number of permanent full-time and numerous sessional and casual personnel, who also practise in their profession in the community.

After consideration of some of the issues relating to regional higher education, and a brief summary of the earlier stages of the project, the focus in this paper is on the survey of graduates conducted towards the end of 2009, by which time 39 of the 2005 and 2006 cohorts had completed their programs. The overall experience of three graduates, who were able to be traced through the use of allocated code names from survey to survey, is also described.

## CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR UNIVERSITIES IN NON-METROPOLITAN REGIONS

Smaller population bases and low university participation rates are challenges for regional higher education providers; these participation rates have been projected to continue in most of Australia for at least the next three decades (DEEWR, 2008). In South Australia, which has fewer than 500,000 residents outside its capital, the number of 15 to 24-year-olds is expected to decline over that time; only Queensland is expected to have aggregate growth for this age group in regional areas that is at least equivalent to that in the state capital (Access Economics, cited in DEEWR, 2008, p. 109). South Australian regional education is thus particularly subject to "diseconomies of scale" (DEEWR, 2008, p. 111) and the need for resource sharing and innovative approaches, if it is to be sustainable.

An advantage that can be enjoyed in regional university activity is the experience of active community support, derived from community demand for a university presence, as experienced in the Limestone Coast Region. It has been recognised that, in order for university operations to be sustainable, there is a need to "upbeat" this engagement between university and community, by nurturing and developing university and community personnel with the expertise and interest to drive community learning and development (Powell, 2008). This community engagement assists in enabling higher education aspirations and participation to be seen as the norm in a community; it thereby takes community aspirations beyond meeting immediate community employment needs. National and international research into multi-partner campuses by Shoemaker and colleagues found that these "campuses had to be embedded in their local regions and to reflect the needs of such regions in order for both to thrive" (Shoemaker, Allison, Gum, Harmoni, Lindfield, Nolan, & Stedman, 2000, p. 163).

An opportunity available to universities servicing regional areas is to tap into the market of residents over 25 years of age who may wish to gain new skills and qualifications, and who are less inclined or able to move to the city or undertake distance or online education than younger people (DEEWR, 2008). These residents with a commitment to the local community provide professional employment outcomes desired by both university and community, where programs and courses are matched to local employment needs.

With a smaller population from which to recruit university enrolments, it becomes particularly important to retain students once they have embarked on their higher education studies. Institutions need to address the particular needs of students who have experienced educational disadvantage, whether because of their socioeconomic or physical circumstances, or because of limited choice of subjects in their secondary education, or because it has not been the norm in their family or community to consider university as an option that is realistic for them. Gale (2010) proposes that retention for such students can be increased by increasing student support and creating engaging learning environments in which they feel valued and included; such increased retention brings to all students the benefits inherent in being part of more diverse student cohorts. Awareness over recent decades that students, often working long hours in paid employment, have been less involved with both formal classes and extra-curricular activities at university (McInnis, 2001), has led to an increasing focus on student engagement in efforts to improve the university experience and student learning at all levels. It is a concept that is

> based on the premise that learning is influenced by how an individual participates in educationally purposeful activities. While students are seen to be responsible for constructing their knowledge, learning is also seen to depend on institutions and staff generating conditions that stimulate and encourage involvement. (ACER, 2009, p. 3)

UniSA's revised Teaching and Learning Framework (implemented through a project designated STEP 2010) is "designed to improve the quality and quantity of student engagement through experiential learning and to ensure that around one-third of all learning experiences are active experiences for students" ("Learning links", 2010).

While this is a university-wide program, it is still necessary to be watchful that the needs of small cohorts of students, such as those in regional areas, are fully addressed. A fundamental aspect of engaging students is ensuring that "the personal touch" (Attwood, 2009) does not disappear: "High-quality learning outcomes are rooted more than anything else in rich personal interactions between teachers and learners" (Attwood, 2009, citing Gilbert). These can be facilitated by low numbers in classes, but need to be worked on more intentionally when those classes are at a distance.

A quality higher education presence can play a major role in building sustainable communities (McLendon, 1999; Winchester, Glenn, Thomas, & Cole, 2002). Apart from the economic impacts of its needs for community-supplied goods and services, the employment of local people in the academic and administrative roles of the campus/centre, and the flow on effects of their spending, it can contribute to all four domains used to gauge community well-being – education, employment, social and health (Kilpatrick, Abbott-Chapman, Williamson, & Bound, 2003). (For a discussion of both economic and non-economic contributions, as well as influences on levels of engagement and influence, in a European context, see Boucher, Conway, & Van der Meer, 2003.) Halsey considers that "vibrant, productive rural communities are integral to the long-term sustainability of Australia" (Halsey, 2009, p. 5) and cautions that each rural community is unique (Halsey, 2009), ideas which planners and educators often fail to accept or remember.

## THE PROJECT – EARLY STAGES

The early stages of the project consisted of focus groups of stakeholders, staff involved and students, providing initial qualitative data and acting as a check on content for subsequent surveys of the pioneering student cohort (2005 enrolments) in their first and third years of study. There was also a brief telephone interview of some students who had withdrawn from their program before mid-2007. The action-research nature of the project allowed for improvements in learning and teaching as well as administrative and technological changes as the need for them became apparent. Earlier papers (Watkinson & Ellis, 2006; Sawyer, Ellis, & Watkinson, 2007; Ellis, Watkinson, & Sawyer, 2008, 2009) report on these stages. Benefits of the MGRC establishment identified during the early stages of the project included the contribution that it was making to the region's capacity and social capital and retaining people likely to otherwise move away for university study.

## THE PROJECT – FINAL STAGE

The final survey was conducted late in 2009, and involved graduates from the initial 2005 cohort and also those people from 2006 who had graduated by that time. The survey sought their overall perceptions of their university studies, their employment outcomes and aspirations, their motivation for pursuing further study, and also their perceptions of the impact and influence of the MGRC. In addition, they were invited to suggest further opportunities for university engagement with the region, and associated needs for research, and to indicate whether they would be interested in being involved in future research projects. This paper-based survey was

posted to the graduates' most recent addresses in the UniSA system, whereas the earlier ones had been online. One was returned to sender, and some checking that the graduates had received their survey forms was undertaken by telephone to maximise the response rate. Some were re-sent on request, if they reported that they had not received the original, or had lost it.

## *Participants*

Of the 39 questionnaires mailed, only 13 replies were received. Thus the response rate was 33.3% or perhaps higher, as it is not certain that all graduates received the mailing. Table 1 summarises respondents' characteristics. It is noteworthy that over two-thirds (69%) were the first in their family to enrol at university, and that 11 of the graduates (85%) were still employed in the region.

**Table 1. Profile of respondents (Questions 1-7)**

| | |
|---|---|
| *1 Sex* | **Female (12);** Male (1) |
| *2 Year of birth* | **1981 or later (8);** 1971-80 (0); 1961-70 (3); 1951-60 (2) 1950 or earlier (0) |
| *3 First in family at university* | **Yes (9)** (including one whose daughter started university at the same time); No (4) |
| *4 Year of enrolment through MGRC* | **2005 (9);** 2006 (4) |
| *5 Code name supplied* | Of the 9 2005 enrolments, only 3 included their code name. |
| *6 Degree area* | Business (0); **Nursing (11);** Social Work (2) |
| *7 Still working in the Region* | **Yes (11);** No (2) |

## *Findings*

The graduate survey confirmed many of the findings of the earlier stages of the project regarding the difference that the MGRC had made to the students and to the community.

When asked to rate their agreement with statements relating to the impact of their MGRC studies on them personally, there was no disagreement concerning the good foundation provided for their current work, their enhanced ability to contribute to the community, and their willingness to recommend these study opportunities to others in the region. Just over half reported increased motivation for further study. (See Table 2.)

**Table 2. Impact of MGRC study impact (Q 8)**

|  | *SD* | *D* | *N* | *A* | *SA* | *No reply* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *(a) My studies through the MGRC provided a good foundation for my current work.* | 0 | 0 | 1 | **7** | **5** | |
| *(b) My MGRC studies enhanced my ability to contribute to this community.* | 0 | 0 | 1 | **4** | **8** | |
| *(c) My MGRC studies have increased my motivation for further study.* | 0 | 0 | **5** | **5** | **2** | 1 |
| *(d) I would advise people living in this region to consider seriously the study opportunities provided by the MGRC.* | 0 | 0 | 2 | **3** | **7** | 1 |

(SD=Strongly Disagree, D=Disagree, N=Neutral / Don't know, A=Agree, SA=Strongly Agree)

The additional comments for each of the above statements are summarised below. Where a name is shown in parentheses, this refers to one of the three students whose stories are looked at in more detail in the next section.

There were seven additional comments concerning whether participants' studies had provided a good foundation for their current work. While one felt *"well prepared for nursing in rural community"*, others were less sure, saying that what the *"generic course"* provided was just a foundation, with further study needed to prepare for the *"type of work"*; it was believed that the limited face-to-face teaching (because of dependence on video conferencing for many lectures) made it more difficult *"to gain a great foundation"*. One commented:

> *Nursing degree needs more practical experience, a higher balance between theory and hospital placement. Was under-prepared when started full-time employment, lacked experience and level of responsibility.*

Another felt that *"better access and support for clinical placements"* was needed, for example support with accommodation, if relocation for placements was needed. (Others mentioned the *"few hiccups"* of the first year of the program, and the fact that *"If the uni was not here [they] would not have attempted it"*.)

Only three commented on whether their studies had enhanced their ability to contribute to the community. One referred to the shortage of nurses in the community in which they were continuing to work. One of those that had moved away recognised that *"staying would have provided a great community service"*. Another summed it up as follows:

> *Nursing greatly enables people to contribute to the community through providing skilled and efficient health care in a profession that is short-staffed.*

In six additional comments concerning motivation for future study, three respondents did not have immediate plans to study further, but did not discount the possibility in the future; one had already completed a graduate nursing year and another course; one planned to study from mid-2010; and one said that the only possibilities for further study were external.

Concerning whether they would advise others in the region to consider seriously the MGRC study opportunities, five made additional comments: two mentioned that the study opportunities kept people in the region, one of these highlighting the financial advantages and being able to keep on with part-time or casual employment – *"Huge benefit!"* One mentioned having *"encouraged other family and friends to consider studying through the MGRC"*. Another recognised that it would suit some people, but not others. One commented on the need for improvements, *"such as in the area of clinical placements etc."*, and thought that a library should be provided. Moreover, 11 respondents had already recommended (Q 9) to others that they should consider studying through the MGRC (No: 1; No reply: 1).

Open-ended questions (in Q10) probed further the graduates' perceptions of the best aspect of their MGRC studies, and what they would most like to change about their time as a student. They were also asked what they would probably be doing currently, had they not studied, and where they saw themselves as being in five years' time.

All 12 responses concerning the best aspect of their MGRC studies highlighted the advantages of *"being able to stay"* in Mount Gambier or the region and not having to move away to study. This provided *"convenience"* and also *"face-to-face feedback"* opportunities (the latter mentioned by two respondents). Two mentioned the financial benefits of living at home while studying. There were also social benefits, not having to move away from friends and family, these also being a source of *"support during university"*. One commented that it was *"also good to be in a small group and have a more personable approach from lecturers, instead of being just a number in the city"* and another mentioned *"the education and friendships formed"* while studying.

Three respondents (out of 10) would not have wanted to change anything about their time as a MGRC student: one called it *"a good experience"*, another (Madison) *"a **really positive** experience"* (though confessing that studying should have been taken *"more seriously")*. Two would have liked *"more social events"* or *"networking"* to be encouraged. One would have liked more *"face to face"*, and one commented on the video conferencing problems, which were *"frustrating in the early stages"*. Three mentioned placements, with one wanting more time on placement than in the classroom, but another liking *"the new system – two lots of eight weeks' rotation at hospitals"*. This graduate would also *"have liked more sciences"* in the final year of the nursing program.

Of the 12 responses concerning what they would probably be doing, had they not studied, four respondents would have still been Enrolled Nurses; three would have been living and working in another city (Adelaide or possibly Warrnambool for one); one would have been still doing a previous job; another would have been *"a checkout chick"*; yet another would have been *"working in another field"*; one would have been *"doing the same thing – but would have needed to move to the city to study"*; and one didn't know.

Most of the 12 who responded to the question about their situation in five years' time saw themselves as continuing in their current field, but *"more experienced"* or *"with senior skills"*. For one this meant *"enjoying myself in Mount Gambier in the role I'm in as I really enjoy it"*, but another wanted to work in a hospital

in Adelaide. One would be "*hopefully settled in a job I love*". Five envisioned further studies of one kind or another, in one case depending on whether the course was available externally. One (Madison) hoped to have young children by then and so would be "*working part time in nursing*". One had the goal of being "*a competent nurse, perhaps working overseas as a volunteer*".

When asked whether they were working in a higher level or better position now than before they had graduated (Q11), 10 of the 13 said that they were. Two respondents had been high school students before their degree course, one adding that now "*a break from further study at this stage*" was wanted. One was studying further (midwifery), and another had done further studies "*in a specialty area*" through another university. Another had the same role as previously, but was now full-time. While one was "*still not making same amount of money*" as before university, another had gone from "*working in a roadhouse*" to earning enough to buy a house. One commented: "*Should have done it earlier.*"

There were 12 responses to the question seeking their opinions of the greatest contribution made by the MGRC to Mount Gambier and the Limestone Coast Region (Q14). The most frequent contribution mentioned was that the MGRC allowed people to study in the area, thus retaining them (8), particularly, but not only, young people:

> *Means local people can study locally without having to uproot lives and lifestyles and move to the city. This affects all age groups.*

Those who studied locally were "*more likely to stay local*". These graduates then contributed to "*filling the gaps*" in professionals' ranks, particularly in nursing staff, where younger graduates would lower the average age of the workforce. The MGRC contributed to the "*retention of locals with skills*", encouraging people to work locally and producing "*higher levels of graduates*" in the region. One highlighted that the MGRC had the "*ability to open up [a] university path for some who could not have gone otherwise*", like the respondent (Erin). Another (Madison) identified that the MGRC represented a foundation, which had "*the potential for expansion, to include other courses, promoting the region as an educational centre, where people come here to study*".

Several questions aimed to elicit opportunities for further UniSA–community engagement. The final parts of Q10 asked for ways in which the graduates' employers or organisations, or groups with which the graduate was associated, could work together with UniSA. There were nine responses regarding employers/organisation: eight referred to placements or work experience – either continuing their current support or increasing places available to students. Such local placements would encourage "*local students to work locally*" (Madison). Having a "*teaching hospital would be fabulous!*" Other suggestions were for "*sharing of information and using up-to-date equipment*" and "*further liaison*" involving nurses going to the university to educate students about working as a nurse. Regarding other groups, the only response, apart from one repeating a response about employers, was for "*perhaps more consistency with learning objectives*", perhaps calling for more attention to be given to ensuring that course learning outcomes met the needs of the workplace. A further question asking for additional ways in which the MGRC could engage with its community (Q15) drew nine responses. Marketing aspects were mentioned by six respondents, three of whom identified open days as a

promotional means, also suggesting school visits (primary and secondary) and other promotion through schools, throughout the region, such as graduates speaking *"at high school career days"* (Madison).

> *Really speak out about who they are. Many people still say, "So you're at TAFE."*
> *It would be great to see UniSA on its own campus.*

In particular, nursing should be promoted as a profession, indicating the range of work opportunities it provided. Three respondents suggested having *"more courses"* (programs). One thought that university facilities should be improved. Other suggestions were to offer a scholarship in the region, and to provide health clinics.

Associated with probing community engagement possibilities was a question seeking respondents' interest in being involved in research in the region (Q12) and one asking them to suggest areas of need for research (Q13). One did not reply to Q12, but seven of the others said that they were interested in future research, two additional comments being that one would be interested only in data collection, and for another involvement would depend on work demands. Only three respondents suggested areas of need for research: work/family/study balance, support for graduates during the first year after completion, and a longitudinal study of MGRC graduate employment in the region.

## THREE GRADUATES

As the student participants in the study had been allocated code names at the start of the project, particular students' responses could be connected from survey to survey, tracing the movement of those students through their university program. The researchers could not link code names with students, as these aliases had been allocated by administrative staff outside of the research team. This should have made it possible to trace changes in attitudes over the years. However, only three (3) students included their code name on the final survey, despite having had the opportunity to verify their code name by e-mailing an administrative staff member who had access to the codes. These three students – with code names Madison, Erin and Amelia – had participated in the two earlier surveys and so their individual stories can be told. Their responses provide insights into the experience of some of the MGRC's original student cohort and the impact of the MGRC on them.

Madison, Erin and Amelia shared a number of characteristics: all female, all born in the period 1981 to 1987, all with a high school education as their highest qualification when they enrolled, and all full-time students. All three said that they would not have studied at all, had the Mount Gambier Regional Centre (MGRC) not been established. As graduates, all agreed that the MGRC had given them opportunities that they would not otherwise have had. While their overall satisfaction with their study program had varied initially, all on looking back over their university studies claimed to be *"very satisfied"*. Madison and Erin had both studied nursing, while Amelia had done the social work program. Madison and Erin were each the first member of their family to attend university, while Amelia's sister had started a degree in another field. Madison and Amelia were school leavers, enrolling on the basis of a tertiary entrance ranking, but Erin was a mature student who had done the Special Tertiary Admissions Test (STAT) to gain entry. They were

all full-time internal students, but Madison (second survey) and Erin (first and second surveys) had to take some courses externally. All had part-time employment when the first two surveys were conducted: Madison and Amelia both worked for more than 30 hours a week to begin with, though Madison had dropped some hours by the second survey; Erin worked 21-30 hours originally, but dropped back to 11-20. All three had been partnered, with no children at home, at the time of the first survey; by the second one, Erin identified as single. Amelia was living in Mount Gambier at the time of each survey, whereas the other two had lived in an outlying area at first, but were based in Mount Gambier for the second survey; Madison and Amelia were still in the Limestone Coast Region for the third survey, but Erin was not.

## Madison

In the first survey, Madison gave her reasons for not taking up other study opportunities as not wanting to leave the region, and not being able to afford to move, as well as having no desire to live in a big city. She had rejected external studies as an option, fearing that she would feel isolated, would need to be on campus to keep motivated, and preferred to study in a group context. However, by the third survey when asked what she would probably be doing if she had not studied, she believed that she would have been living and working in Adelaide. In the second survey she said: "*[The MGRC] has given me the opportunity to live at home and obtain my degree.*" Her employment goal to begin with had been possibly to "*work full time in aged care as a Registered Nurse, further studying to enhance [her] registration, and continuing to work part time in this area whilst raising a family*". By third year she mentioned only gaining a "*graduate position*".

## Erin

Erin also said that she could not have afforded to leave the region to study, and mentioned as well her family and work commitments. External studies did not appeal to her for the same reasons as those given by Madison. Her original employment goal was maternity and neonatal nursing, but unfortunately there was no neonatal ward in or near Mount Gambier. Later she found that she would have had to move to the city to do a graduate nursing program in paediatrics, but she was "*a country girl*".

Erin volunteered an additional comment in the second survey:

*I am grateful for this experience. There were hard times and easy times, but on a whole I feel that UniSA allowed me to develop my skills and helped me to become the person I am today. Thank you for the education.*

## Amelia

Amelia's reasons for not taking up other study opportunities were similar to Madison's, with the addition of family commitments. She also preferred a group study context, fearing the isolation and insufficient feedback that she associated with external studies. Without studying through the MGRC, she would have been working in another field. Initially she was somewhat unsure about her employment

goals, just that it would involve working with children. Later she wished to continue as a social worker in an alternate care field.

## *Satisfaction with particular aspects of the study experience*

While all three graduates had been very satisfied with their lectures in first year, by third year Madison and Erin's satisfaction levels had dropped to moderate. In the first survey Madison felt that:

> *[h]aving lectures face to face and in smaller classes provides the opportunity for more effective lecturing, as asking questions or for clarification is easier. The smaller classes provide better feedback and lecturers can be directed to focus on specific areas of topics longer, and those topics that are better understood can be skimmed over.*

Amelia likewise found that face-to-face contact with lecturers enabled better understanding of concepts, but lamented that this was not more available; however, *"The tutors did a great job to fill the gaps."* Erin found some lectures by an inexperienced lecturer *"frustrating"*. The *"smaller class sizes make it easier to become involved in tutorials"* (Madison) and for these to be targeted to students' needs. Amelia appreciated the *"good job"* done by tutors, who were *"all very understanding and supportive"* and also provided an opportunity *"to get to know people working in the field already"*. Less satisfaction was expressed for video conferenced lectures. While Amelia was moderately satisfied in the first two surveys, she felt that *"it took a while to get used to it and it did inhibit discussion a lot"* and made *"connecting with the lecturer"* more difficult; however, she recognised the effort that lecturers made to get to know them. Madison and Erin both mentioned the frustrations with technological problems, particularly in the early days, though Madison highlighted its value in what it made possible.

Comments on early assessment feedback showed room for improving practices. Amelia's high standard of work apparently meant that lecturers could not find much to comment on to help her to improve. She said, *"I would like more feedback on some of my work. I don't find it easy to work out where I am going wrong with 'Good work' written at the end of an assignment."* Madison wrote, *"Generally, I wasn't too upset with my feedback."* An instance where she had only a grade put on her work was a disappointment:

> *I had rushed the piece so I wasn't bothered by the mark, but if I was to do the assignment again I wouldn't have any idea what to do better (apart from apply a little more time).*

She elaborated on the importance that she placed on adequate feedback:

> *For myself personally, giving feedback and acknowledging where I have and have not done the 'correct' thing is showing me where I have the room to grow and what I can do better the next time.*

Not receiving feedback in time to use it for improving her next assignment was also a source of concern for Madison, along with general feedback to the class in *"sweeping statements such as 'most students did poorly'"*, which did not indicate to her how well she personally had done.

The library situation led to some dissatisfaction, as the flexible delivery service did not allow any opportunity for browsing shelves at a UniSA campus library, such as students at UniSA's other locations had. The wait for books ordered for purchase was also frustrating for Madison and Erin; however, Amelia was fortunate in getting hers when she needed them.

## DISCUSSION

Student comments demonstrate positive and negative aspects of the economies necessary to balance quality teaching and strategies to ensure sustainability of university operations, as discussed by the Bradley Review of higher education (DEEWR, 2008). It must be pointed out that participants' suggestions cannot always be acted upon just at local level: for example, nursing placements are organised as part of a complex state-wide system involving the health services as well as universities, and curriculum issues such as the science components of the nursing program are addressed through formal evaluation and program review.

It was evident that small tutorial groups helped to compensate for the somewhat more impersonal video conferenced lectures, or for the fact that, in the early days of operation, technology sometimes lacked quality. MGRC students seemingly had no awareness that metropolitan lectures for the same programs were attended by hundreds of students at a time, also limiting the personal approach. It was recognised that video conferenced lectures allowed access to expertise not necessarily available locally, thus promoting quality learning.

Another benefit was that students were tutored by local professionals with whom they aspired to work after graduation. This is an important contribution to the necessary "embedding" of the university in the local region, advocated by Shoemaker and colleagues (2000).

Comments relating to inadequacy of assessment feedback are from the first survey, when many local tutors were inexperienced. Much progress has been made over time in developing this aspect of quality education. Comments relating to feedback in the third survey focus more on the advantage of face-to-face situations for receiving timely feedback on study progress and on queries about issues that had been raised in course content. These face-to-face interactions provide more opportunity for building congenial interpersonal relationships between staff (both professional and academic) and students (Attwood, 2009). However, while the advantages of smaller classes, and the ease of contacting local lecturers, have been highlighted by participants, there can be a downside to this. One graduate (Amelia) mentioned that, although she had not had problems in relating to lecturers, some students had experienced *"issues"*, suggesting that smaller numbers of staff could mean that it was more difficult to avoid any situations of conflict.

A key issue raised by students is that the on-campus TAFE library is available to them for borrowing only if they pay a $75 yearly fee. Some of the TAFE resources have relevance for the students, but there is no dedicated collection there for UniSA students. Business students in particular have expressed a desire to have access to more texts locally. Recently there have been some discussions about the possible future provision of UniSA textbooks, which would be more equitable, as students at Whyalla and metropolitan UniSA campuses are able to use such resources in the

library or on short-term loan. TAFE co-operation is also needed with regard to the ongoing issue of limited availability of rooms: close communication with TAFE is needed to optimise the use of teaching space and provide appropriate sized facilities for individual classes.

Fostering student engagement is a continuing task for all involved with the MGRC, as elsewhere. The whole of the student university experience needs to be considered: social events and "bonding" with fellow students play a role in this, as well as caring course lecturers. Course content that is challenging and enriching and includes experiential learning and other service learning opportunities is conducive to engaged learning. (See the STEP 2010 "In a nutshell" presentations, UniSA, 2010a.)

While the MGRC has led more people in its environs to consider higher education, it is never too early to start raising awareness of the options:

> engaging students at an early age is needed to inspire an interest in higher education, especially in areas where parents who left school early are unlikely to encourage their children to seek a tertiary education. ("Schools link", 2009)

Marketing activities often target senior secondary students; however, programs such as UniSA's UniReady Program for Year 10 students (UniSA, 2010b) or Swinburne University of Technology's Knox Innovation, Opportunity and Sustainability Centre (KIOSC) project with primary schools ("Schools link", 2009), which raise awareness and introduce primary and junior secondary school students to university studies, ensure that the young know of their future options.

A consultation workshop with regional stakeholders in Mount Gambier in 2007 (Fairley, 2007) affirmed many of the positives highlighted by our project, particularly the opening up of opportunities to groups previously barred from higher education by their circumstances. The workshop participants identified such groups as "young mothers, mature-aged [like Erin], those with limited means, and people who want to upgrade skills or re-enter education" (Fairley, 2007, p. 3). They also saw the MGRC as a catalyst for a range of learning activities, and an influence on others, including the college where nursing students used the science laboratory in the early stages. They identified considerable potential for the development of joint research and capacity building projects. In promulgating such initiatives, UniSA would do well to draw on the human resources of its graduates. About half of the graduate survey participants expressed some interest in being involved in such research; possibilities for drawing on willing graduates to participate in research opportunities should be further investigated, with information about involvement possibilities disseminated to graduates' work places. The particular expertise and insights of MGRC staff constitute an invaluable resource – availability of professional development opportunities can nurture this.

## CONCLUSION

This development of the MGRC has been in harmony with the 1990 Act that established the University (University of South Australia Act 1990), including among its functions the provision of tertiary education to meet the needs of industry, commerce, the professions, or any other section of the community; and also to meet

the needs of groups considered to have suffered educational disadvantage. Moreover, it demonstrates the University's commitment to its positioning statement: "Educating professionals. Creating and applying knowledge. Engaging our communities" (UniSA, 2007). The MGRC is providing new higher education opportunities for the community and contributing to meeting the employment needs of the region and further development needs of its professionals.

The University of South Australia, also through its founding Act, has a mandate to consider the needs of the whole state. At the same time, ensuring the financial viability of such ventures as the MGRC is essential for long-term survival. Student satisfaction and consequent favourable word-of-mouth publicity, efficient and effective program delivery, and strong community support are all important to achieving such success.

This study has identified positive aspects that can be reinforced and negatives to be minimised in the blended model of delivery. While greater use of new technologies by universities may suggest that traditional face-to-face teaching may not be so necessary, and hence a physical university presence could perhaps be replaced by a virtual one, our findings clearly indicate the preference by students, and many staff, for face-to-face course delivery where possible, while recognising that the use of other media provide opportunities that may not otherwise be available.

Having a physical university presence within Mount Gambier is valued by the community, and something for which the community had striven for many years, and they want it to be successful. It has contributed to "normalising" university education for the region, so that attendance at university is seen as one of the options open to its residents, and one now much more accessible than before. Further developments could include the introduction of postgraduate programs, and expansion of the undergraduate offerings: community interest has been expressed in particular in the areas of midwifery and teaching. Developing research partnerships with government and non-government bodies and community organisations, and increasing community engagement activities, are needed to maximise the contribution of the MGRC to the Limestone Coast Region.

When the Centre for Regional Engagement was first established, it was envisioned that the MGRC would be the first of a number of regional hubs to be set up in South Australia. What is learned from the current project, and from the insights of staff involved in this educational enterprise, will be invaluable in implementing such future developments and also, we anticipate, for other universities planning similar outreach.

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