

Involvement of VET in Learning Communities: Relevance for Urban Areas.

Bernice Melville
Project Officer OVAL Research
University of Technology, Sydney

Abstract

While most studies on learning communities have focused on rural or remote regional areas, this paper outlines recent research focussed on learning communities in urban areas'. The study was undertaken by the Research Centre for Vocational Education and Training (RCVET now OVAL Research) at the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS). Four urban communities identified as experiencing a high level of disadvantage were selected from each of four Australian states. In each of the four communities Vocational Education and Training (VET) providers had been involved in a learning partnership within that community. The study focussed on the participation of VET providers in responding to disadvantage in urban communities while specifically examining how the equity strategies of VET providers are incorporated in approaches to community capacity in urban areas. An objective of the study was to link into emerging policy interest in expanding lifelong learning potential through the development of 'learning communities'. While a brief outline of the research process and references to the final integrating report are included this paper concentrates on the four case studies and the emerging themes.

The context for the study

This study on urban disadvantage links with and extends earlier RCVET research on *Regional Disadvantage and VET participation* (McIntyre 2000). As that study, and most other work on VET participation in learning communities, had been in the context of rural or remote areas a study on urban communities was seen as filling a gap in the understanding of 'learning communities' in general.

Within the wider Australian community there was also some sense of disenchantment and frustration with those in power evident in people who were trying to find their place in a rapidly changing world (Morris 2001). In many Australian regions and towns there was (Brown 2000) a sense of disenchantment with politicians, a fear of the future, and a growing sense of detachment from the wider Australian society. Although people were aware that Australia in general, and their local communities in particular, needed to find a place in this rapidly changing world, they did not trust those with the power to do this. Many felt that the powerful have no real interest in the concerns of the battlers, their families, and their communities. Nor were people 'at home' with the glib talk and the rhetoric about economic efficiency and globalisation, the clever nation, learning to become competitive, being delivered alongside platitudes about lifelong learning (Saulwick, 2001). The study is located within this context.

What the study was designed to achieve

The study was designed to develop a better general understanding about the extent to which urban communities that include significant populations of disadvantaged citizens are adopting community-based strategies built around learning and how VET organisations are contributing to this. More specifically it aimed to contribute to the understanding of the role of VET providers in building 'learning communities' and to identify how VET policy can

develop more robust concepts of equity strategy that take greater account of local and regional differences (Kimberley 2001 a).

‘Community’ and ‘learning community’—what do we mean?

For a discussion of learning communities to be at all meaningful and useful, a clear understanding of the sense in which the terms ‘community’ and ‘learning community’ were used in this study is necessary. However, efforts to define the term ‘community’ quickly uncover a ‘minefield’. As Morris (2001) in the literature review observed, Hillery in 1995 (almost fifty years ago!) identified no less than 90 definitions of ‘community’ from the then current body of literature. Since then there has been a considerable broadening of its use and more recently ‘learning community’ has become an extension of the term. Brown (2001) in discussing understandings of the use of the terms ‘community’ and ‘learning community’ said—

In Australia there are many centres where a range of educational provision can be found. It is not that unusual to find a regional centre with a university, TAFE, large adult education centre, local library and museum, perhaps a community resource and health centre, an indigenous resource centre and voluntary and community groups providing special interest activities. Is such a community a learning community? Yes and no. Clearly there are numerous opportunities for residents to participate in some organised, coordinated education activities. But I think a learning community is something different, it is more than a place where learning is available it is a place where learning is consciously used as a means of the community learning about itself, learning how to respond to pressing local issues, of establishing new partnerships and shaping its own future. Or as Landry and Matarasso (1998) put it ‘A true learning city is one which develops by learning from its experiences and those of others. It is a place that understands itself and reflects upon that understanding – it is a reflexive city ... developing new solutions to new problems.’ (Landry, C. & Matarasso p.3)

The question that seems more important then is how can learning organisations help develop learning communities by developing new ideas and practices of local governance by bringing together new partnerships for learning.

These issues are encapsulated in the definition of a learning community used in this study. It is one developed by Kearns, McDonald, Candy, Knights and Papadopoulos (1999) and adopted by the Australian National Training Authority ANTA (2000 p8)—

Any group of people, whether linked by geography or by some other shared interest, that addresses the learning needs of its members through pro active partnerships: it explicitly uses learning as a way of promoting social cohesion, regeneration and economic development.

The criteria used for identifying the learning communities in each state were (i) that there should be an active partnership with mutual interdependency, (ii) that it involved the active participation of all participants and (iii) that it used learning as its focus. In addition, the learning communities were to be acting to satisfy a specific need, be drawing on available resources in the community and be working towards an active learning community. In line with the research focus, there were two major provisos in the selection process. The first was that one of the partners must be a VET provider and the second that each learning community was formed in response to disadvantage in the urban community as identified against Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) (Kimberley 2001b p2).

A multifaceted methodology

The methodology for the study involved a diversity of people from different Australian states in a variety of ways. There were three principal facets of the research which were—

- (i) a critical review of major Australian and international literature on ‘learning communities (Morris 2001) which looked at questions of definition in relation to ‘learning communities’, the Australian experience of community education, lifelong learning, ‘learning cities’, the role of VET in the learning community and the revival of interest in the role of regions on economic development and finally capacity building and the learning community
- (ii) a research forum featuring three invited papers by leading researchers in the area of community learning. The researchers were asked to present accounts of their experiences and understanding in their own sphere of work. These papers were—
 - (a) VET/community partnerships (Malley 2001)
 - (b) ACE sector community initiatives in learning cities development in Australia (Brown 2001), and
 - (c) learning communities in regional Australia (Kilpatrick 2001)
- (iii) four ‘Learning Community’ case studies were prepared by independent researchers, and a summary (Hawke 2001) presented at the research forum. These quite diverse case studies (in alphabetical order) were from—
 - (1) Campelltown, New South Wales (Vaughan 2001)
 - (2) Dandenong Region, Victoria (Kimberley 2001a)
 - (3) Loganlea, Queensland (Cuskelly 2001), and
 - (4) Salisbury, South Australia (Shore 2001)
- (iv) an integrating report (Kimberley 2001b) that brought together the literature review, the invited forum papers and the case studies. Specific aspects considered in the case studies were the expectations of learning communities, the role of VET, building effective learning communities (social capital, leadership, collaboration and partnership, interactional infrastructure, resources, negotiations with providers, and local planning), challenges to building effective learning communities (culture, sustainability, skills, continuity, cultural inappropriateness and collaborative/collaboration tensions).

Literature Review

Morris (2001) concluded that there is a necessity to build on the emerging patterns of partnerships both between and among schools (such as with VET and other educational providers, local business and industry, and the more general community) to provide the basic building blocks for the desired learning community. It was suggested that this process can only begin by building the community’s capacity to end, or at least improve on, the following—

- the widespread fragmentation between institutions and services
- the gaps in local service provision; the lack of responsiveness of some national services
- the lack of accountability for outcomes, and
- the lack of information about and coordination between services and providers.

Such a beginning, Morris commented, may be less spectacular than some of the more grand claims of the learning city approach but in the longer term it may be much more real and valuable.

The research forum

Participants in the forum were the authors of the three invited papers, the researchers who had prepared the four case studies, researchers from RCVET, Faculty of Education at UTS, the Vocational Education and Assessment Centre (VEAC), and the University of Western Sydney and representatives from the Local Communities Services Association (Western Sydney), NSW Board of Studies, and ANTA. These participants, representing a cross-section of thinking about learning communities, were brought together to consider the four case studies within the framework of the three invited papers. From this came the direction for an integrating report (Kimberley 2001b) that summarised the multiple facets of the research and drew conclusions from them.

The main focus of each of the three papers presented was as follows. Malley drew on the experience of Local Learning and Employments Networks (LLENs) established by the Victorian Government as a focal point for the brokerage and co-ordination of education, training and employment services to meet, in part, the needs of disadvantaged groups. Brown drew on the Learning Towns Project, an initiative of Adult Learning Australia (ALA) to establish 15 learning towns across Australia. As a result, during the period 2000-2001 the Victorian Government sponsored ten Victorian communities to become learning towns. This initiative aimed at linking ACE organisations, TAFE and other educational institutions, industry and local government in the common purpose of economic and social development. In the third paper reported on a longitudinal study into the role of VET in learning communities in the ten sites in regional Australia that comprised the ANTA *Learning Communities Pilot Project*.

Community profiles from the case studies

Although the stated concentration in this paper is on the four community case studies, time and space constraints do not allow for the full case studies to be included. Nevertheless the following profiles include characteristics of each of the four communities together with a brief description of VET response to their needs. The full case studies prepared by the four independent researchers can be found as working papers at www.oval.edu.edu.au.¹

Case Study Profile 1- Campbelltown, NSW, (from Vaughan 2001).

Situated around 50kms southwest of Sydney and located on Tharawal traditional lands, the City of Campbelltown covered an area of 312 square kilometres and included 32 suburbs and a large nature reserve. Over the previous twenty years the Campbelltown area had experienced major residential and industrial growth and at the time of the study had a population approaching 150,000.

¹ The research forum papers, case studies, literature review and the integrating report can all be found in Working Papers on the OVAL Research website at www.oval.edu.edu.au

The area was very culturally diverse and included large public housing estates with very high unemployment and crime rates, while in contrast there were also very up-market newly-developed housing estates. Yet other areas of Campbelltown were surrounded by bushlands and more characteristic of a rural rather than an urban environment. Campbelltown had a relatively young population with over 50% of the population being under 24 years of age, and was home to a significant Koori community.

The Campbelltown City Council had taken a very active role in establishing and supporting learning communities in the Campbelltown area. With its recently developed 'Social Plan' it was working towards empowering groups especially those that were seen as disadvantaged. One of its aims was to provide more opportunities for people to have their needs heard and addressed by creating positions on Council committees including the Youth Advisory Sub-Committee, the Seniors Issues Group, the Aboriginal Advisory Sub-Committee, and the Macarthur Community Options Group.

As part of this active role the Council supported outreach programs by maintaining a number of Neighbourhood, Community and Youth Centres in different suburbs used to accommodate youth workers, community services and training programs. These Centres were a major resource providing access to self-help groups, youth and family services, and leisure and life skill classes. Having these Centres located in many different suburbs provided greater access for community members. All programs were run at minimal costs and were valued as social activities, potential money earners, and as stepping stones in gaining confidence and skills to participate in employment and formal educational opportunities.

TAFE ran a number of vocational education and training programs through its outreach initiatives including some in consultation with the Tharawal Aboriginal Lands Council who administered the Community Development and Employment Projects (CDEP work for the dole) and were involved in several independent projects with an aim to open up casual and full time employment opportunities. CDEP participants were encouraged to enroll in a TAFE program to expand their two-day work requirements. This in turn expanded opportunities for both the individual and for the Tharawal Community generally. In the previous year 35 of the participants had found paid employment, a number had enrolled in degree courses at university and others had moved into apprenticeships.

Other organisations, including Mission Australia and the Benevolent Society, ran outreach training and self-help programs to help build support networks and to encourage people to develop new skills.

However, there were considerable challenges in establishing learning communities in this area that included transport, lack of self-confidence, financial constraints, as well as that of meeting the identified needs of diverse community groups.

Case Study Profile 2 - Dandenong, Victoria, (from Kimberley 2001).

Situated 32 kilometres south east of Melbourne, the City of Greater Dandenong was a large municipality, richly multicultural and populated primarily by people from the lower socio-economic groupings. Very few of the many professionals, executives or managers who worked in Dandenong actually lived within its boundaries but commuted from more affluent areas. The Dandenong region experienced very high unemployment rates especially among young people. The region is characterized by extremes—young people of non-English speaking backgrounds are either strongly connected or strongly disconnected. As one participant described the region—*Some people get shit-scared of coming to Dandenong!*

Others love it! It's a complex region that evokes emotion. There's always a reaction, never a yawn.

The case study focused on an initiative of the South East Local Learning and Employment Network (SELLEN one of the LLENs initiated by the Victorian Government in 2001 see Malley 2001). The specific initiative was the creation of a Youth Advisory Council to SELLEN through its Youth Issues Working Party using a model that allowed it to be tested by the young people who were members of it. SELLEN comprised 85 members from adult and community education providers, community members, community agencies and organisations, employers and peak employer organisations, Koori organisations, private providers of education and training, secondary schools (state, Catholic and independent), TAFE institute/university representatives and trade unions. The Youth Issues Working Party comprised one student representative from each of the 39 regional schools and 6 young people of post compulsory school age (15-19) who were not attending school. All members had a two-year tenure beginning with a week's training in leadership, communication and decision making and other skills.

Although not conceiving itself as 'learning community' the process Dandenong utilised in this initiative did meet the criteria of a learning community as outlined for the project. The model was based on skills development, peer support and training, and development of ownership of outcomes and processes by young people and the support of SELLEN.

The Youth Advisory Council was part of a planned series of strategies to overcome problems firstly for young people but also for their families and local communities. In this new initiative, there was an embryonic sense that families of young people participating in the Youth Advisory Council would be influenced to learn, and in turn would influence others. This initiative was not just about those who were disadvantaged. It was about all young people. It was about the broader community of three municipalities. The goal was that everyone would benefit and, in the process, disadvantaged young people would find greater opportunities and more choices.

Dandenong was also rich in community organisations that worked to build their communities. While most of these organisations did not perceive of themselves as 'learning communities', most acknowledged that people learning together was vital for their success. Whether they knew it or not, most met the criteria for a learning community as defined in this study. There was no doubt that the number of community building projects— and hence learning communities—was set to expand in the Dandenong region. The challenges were (i) to engage people who had previous involvement in community learning, (ii) in building activities for community groups to find ways of relating to and working with other community groups rather than isolating themselves ('building silos'), and (iii) for government departments and institutions not to take over these communities but rather to support, resource and facilitate while staying at 'arm's length'.

This case study focused heavily on the involvement of young people and the filter-through effect that this might have into the community as a whole. While no direct VET involvement was outlined, VET input was available through members of SELLEN. Membership included a major representation of Adult and Community Education (ACE) providers, other community training organisations and the TAFE Institute. Employers, peak employers and trade unions were also represented.

Case Study Profile 3—Loganlea, Queensland (from Cuskelly 2001)

Loganlea was a small community within the City of Logan to the south of Brisbane. While the community included some affluent areas, ABS data identified Loganlea as having the lowest socio-economic standing in Queensland. Geographically and socially isolated by its boundaries of a river, a motorway and a railway line there was a low sense of community. The community was characterised at the time of the study by high rates of unemployment, homelessness and crime (described as 'petty' and 'opportunistic'). There was a mixture of cultures ('a mad mixture of everything'), a high proportion of public housing, a high level of transient workers and a high level of unemployment.

The implementation of the state government-funded *Community Renewal Program* was a response to community crime and safety concerns. Cuskelly (2001) listed 35 projects undertaken in the community through this program together with the Community Access Schools Program. In approximately one third of these projects VET was an identified partner in the initiative. In some projects TAFE was the VET partner, in others the role was taken by an ACE provider, by private providers, or by other community organisations. The two programs, worked together to promote community capacity building through empowering and enabling the community to actively participate in its own government and proactively identify and address its needs. Both programs sought to use the human, structural and environmental resources of the community to improve the social, economic, educational and environmental health of the community, focusing on the strengths of that community rather than its perceived deficits.

The sustainability of the various projects beyond the life (and funding) of the Community Renewal and Community Access Schools programs was a concern voiced by most people who were interviewed. There was one program, the Loganlea High Environmental Growth Systems (LHEGS a self sustaining environmental and farm forestry education, training and enterprise project) seen as one means of addressing this concern. Funded through Queensland Housing and managed by a committee (made up of school, multiple government agency, community and industry representatives) it had achieved sustainability through providing funding for not only school programs but also for programs initiated within the wider community. This project was described as having the greatest potential for success of any initiated in the Logan area.

The geographic location of the Logan Institute of TAFE was a challenge and called for innovative solutions to meeting community VET needs. The location was across the railway line and just outside the boundaries of Loganlea. This physical boundary together with a community resistance to formal education posed a real challenge for TAFE to enroll Loganlea residents in its courses. In response, TAFE formed partnerships with community bodies including the High School, the Logan Hospital, the Logan City Council and community organisations. At the time of the study TAFE had also obtained funding to open an access centre for 6 months. During that period 100 people visited the centre, 37 were placed in employment, while issues such as literacy levels were also addressed. Since 1989 TAFE had conducted a program of tertiary access to Griffith University (a preparation course for non-standard entry) and of those who had undertaken the course, 70% had graduated and gone on to university.

Anecdotal evidence suggested that after the introduction of the programs mentioned, there was increased community involvement in the school and that the local Community Renewal Committee had become the 'most focused' of the local community committees.

Case Study Profile 4 - Salisbury, South Australia (from Shore 2001)

Situated on the outskirts of Adelaide, the City of Salisbury was a community with high unemployment and a lack of social cohesion at the time of the study. Having had a long association with manufacturing industries, there were concerns about lower than average tertiary education rates and also higher than average unemployment rates. Within the city itself there were conspicuous variations in the economic resources available across Salisbury postcodes. City management had been relatively stable in contrast to a number of other local government organisations in South Australia. The city's strategic planning document *Salisbury 2000 & Beyond: Strategic Directions* emphasised community, partnerships and information technology. While it flagged a vision for the future that explicitly focused on community building, there were few visible references to learning.

Whilst some people from beyond the city used the term 'disadvantaged community' with ease when talking about Salisbury, many within the city recognised the paradox of the label in terms of simplistic classifications that described community life. For some building a more explicit 'learning culture' within the city was one way to address some of the effects of these concerns. At the same time there was recognition that different kinds of learning were already happening within the city boundaries.

This case study set out to build on the work already completed in *Turning on Learning Communities* (2000) and connect that work with the City of Salisbury life long learning strategy designed to position the Salisbury as a learning city. It described the strategies and processes used by a group of people within city departments and in the Neighbourhood House network to build relationships with other groups, provide VET opportunities, and promote learning. Unlike other cities (for example, Albury-Wodonga) the Salisbury had not (at the time of this case study) formally announced itself as a 'learning city'. Nevertheless, there were many examples of how the city encouraged and promoted learning. The case study described strategies and processes used by a group of people within City departments and in the Neighbourhood House network to build relationships with other groups, provide VET opportunities, and promote learning. The case was bounded by the overarching goals and philosophical approach the city of Salisbury had taken to promoting learning within the community (although this was not always an explicitly named 'learning' strategy).

Specifically there was what was described as a move from 'arts and crafts' to a lot of job skills, more 'pathways stuff' around getting people back into employment. This re-positioning of houses as learning centres and sites for VET pathways influenced how houses were managed. Houses were then seen by other VET providers as viable sites for VET .

In Salisbury partnerships were both formal and informal, with community history and memory influencing their development. Everyone had an opinion about 'partnerships' particularly partnerships with local TAFE Institutes. There was a common concern that TAFE was large and impersonal, difficult to find and access, had complex enrolment procedures, with classes often located in buildings where you couldn't take children while attending classes. In addition the pedagogy in TAFE was often aligned with large classes that were structured around self-directed learning from manuals. While these issues were recognised as not applying to all TAFEs, or all classes within a TAFE institute, these impressions influenced the development of partnerships and how they evolved. Previous partnerships between TAFE and community houses (as in many other communities in South Australia) had been formal agreements for establishment of clearer articulation for students to move between sectors. However in this case study, the partnerships between TAFE and community houses just seemed to happen.

Themes from the case studies

There were many messages that could be drawn from the volume of data produced from the case studies in the context of the forum papers and the literature review. Some important points that had implications for the future directions of VET policy and practice (Hawke 2001) were :

- at least in urban areas (although there are indications this is more broadly true), VET organisations were not playing pro-active roles in creating or developing learning communities: they were involved but typically within a fairly reactive framework
- the focus of VET on solely vocational outcomes inhibited its capacity to contribute to broader learning outcomes that are more often the focus of such communities
- there was a significant tension between the centralised policy frameworks within which VET has come to operate and the focus on regional economic development and community building that was more often the focal point of learning communities
- real involvement in a community requires mutual trust. The development of learning communities is a long-term project that had been damaged by the high level of uncertainty, change and instability experienced by many VET organisations
- there was a significant tension between the commercial imperatives required of VET providers and the need for community involvement that provides no measurable, short-term return.

Conclusions

If involvement of VET in learning communities is to have relevance for urban areas there are significant challenges that must be addressed. The conclusion drawn by the author of the integrating report (Kimberley 2001b) was that if VET policy is to meet these challenges and VET providers in their many manifestations are to be active partners in their local communities and committed to serving local learning needs, then policy makers and providers need to be able to articulate the following clearly—

- different ways of conceptualising VET
- their willingness and capacity to put things into the community with no immediate or measurable return and the contingent question of how the learning of a community can be measured
- what VET has to offer a community of learners that includes many who will never step into a formal institution
- what VET can give to a learning community, and
- how VET can meet the challenge to satisfy the paradox of simultaneously working from the bottom up (learning community enterprise) and the top down (policy imperatives).

Reference List

- Adult Community Education Unit, 2000, *Turning on Learning Communities*, ACE Unit, Adelaide.
- Australian National Training Authority (ANTA), 2000, *Turning on learning communities report*, ANTA, Brisbane.
- Brown, A, 2000, *Governments focus on community capacity and a learning society*, ALA Newsletter, Autumn p3.
- Brown, A, 2001, *Urban disadvantage and learning communities*, paper presented at Learning Communities in Disadvantaged Urban Areas Research Forum, RCVET, UTS, Sydney.
- Cuskelly, E, 2001, *Urban disadvantage and learning communities: A case study in Queensland*, report prepared for RCVET, UTS, Sydney.
- Hawke, G, 2001, *Learning Communities: Some case studies*, paper presented at Learning Communities in Disadvantaged Urban Areas Research Forum, RCVET, UTS, Sydney.
- Hillery, G, 1955, Definitions of community: Areas of agreement, *Rural Sociology*, 20 (2), pp111-113.
- Kearns, P; McDonald, R; Candy, P; Knights, S and Papadopoulos, G, 1999, *VET in the learning age: The challenge of lifelong learning for all*, V2 Lifelong learning, NCVER, Leabrook SA.
- Kilpatrick, S, 2001, *Building dynamic learning communities in regional Australia: The role of VET*, paper presented at Learning Communities in Disadvantaged Urban Areas Research Forum, RCVET, UTS, Sydney.

- Kimberley, H, 2001a, *Urban disadvantage and learning communities: A case study in Victoria*, report prepared for RCVET, UTS, Sydney.
- Kimberley, H, 2001b, *Urban disadvantage and learning communities: Integrating report*, prepared for RCVET, UTS, Sydney.
- Landry, C & Matarassa, F, 1998, *The learning-city region: Approaching problems of the concept, its measurement and evaluation—a discussion document*, Comedia, Stroud Gloucester.
- Malley, J, 2001, *Urban disadvantage and learning communities: the role of VET in building communities for disadvantaged urban groups*, paper presented at Learning Communities in Disadvantaged Urban Areas Research Forum, RCVET, UTS, Sydney.
- McIntyre, J, 2000, *Regional disadvantage and VET participation*, RCVET, UTS, Sydney.
- Morris, R. 2001, *Urban disadvantage and learning communities: A review of literature*, review prepared for the Learning Communities in Disadvantaged Urban Areas Research Forum, RCVET, UTS, Sydney.
- Saulwick, I, 2001, *By-election was a test of trust in which all parties failed*, Sydney Morning Herald, Monday July 16.
- Shore, S, 2001, *Urban disadvantage and learning communities: A case study in South Australia*, report prepared for RCVET, UTS, Sydney.
- Vaughan, K, 2001, *Urban disadvantage and learning communities: A case study in New South Wales*, report prepared for RCVET, UTS, Sydney.