

RURAL SKILLS TRAINING AND RESEARCH

May 2005

We are a group of post graduates located in the Hamilton region of rural South West Victoria. Collectively we have a background in agriculture, natural resources, community development, education, health and information services. Through RMIT University's campus in Hamilton we have been given the opportunity to undertake work-based research. This submission particularly addresses Terms of Reference Three and Four, but has relevance to all four of the parameters of the Inquiry. The attached précis of the post-graduates' abstracts and research questions give an indication of the breadth of workplaces and research that has been undertaken in the Hamilton area over the past five years by this group of students.

The purpose of this submission is to illustrate that a program such as the Master of Education by Project, is an outstanding example of how a culture of relevant research, carried out in the workplace, can be an empowering experience for rural –based practitioners. Although not all of the post graduates have an agricultural background, or career, what is apparent from this experience is the importance of an integrated approach to scholarship which leads to a vibrant, interconnected rural learning community. The agriculture sector is as dependent on the vibrancy of the local community – including its ability to supply services such as training and health – as the community is dependent on the viability of the agriculture sector. Most post graduates concluded that there is no simple, or one size fits all, solution to the skills training and research needs of rural Australia.

Overwhelmingly, this group of post graduates found that their study experience has been pragmatic, relevant and stimulating. That the research is situated within the workplace and within the community has meant that it is both relevant and timely. This also meant that mutually supportive clusters of scholars emerged. In each case, people moulded their research to what they were involved in and what suited their own research needs and the needs of their workplace. The research outcomes are genuine and contextual. What the group perceived as of particular importance was the emphasis on *learning* and on *mentoring*, which were clear strengths of the program in which the cluster were involved. The benefit of working in a cluster, even though students came from a range of backgrounds was found to be of particular value.

Additionally injecting the regional knowledge asset base with regular *booster shots* of external information and input contributes significantly to building the capacity of the region and its people.

As a result of this program, there are stronger linkages within the community. This strengthened networking may be a precursor to developing pathways in an educational community which has traditionally been competitive rather than collaborative. The cross sectoral linkages developed between university and community, between individual community members, and amongst local organisations has resulted in increased activity in the community. The conclusion of one study has found that three interwoven strands of activity – teaching and learning; research; community engagement – when delivered flexibly, may be a template for responding to rural training, research and extension in rural areas where there are thin education markets, but a real need for further education.

The example at Hamilton has resulted in a core of highly qualified research practitioners in a rural environment. Three are currently planning to extend their studies to doctoral level. The researchers have developed a common language through the use of Action Research methodology. They have found that their increased capacity to apply knowledge and to transfer knowledge in their workplaces and community has been an empowering experience. The research journey has built self-knowledge through the practice of reflection, as well as a greater questioning and understanding of the cultural values within which we operate as rural practitioners, farmers and natural resource practitioners and trainers. These are critical skills for leaders and decision makers in rural Australia. As such, this mode of work-based study may have implications for rural extension and advisory services to rural industries, including the agricultural sector. In particular, the links between education, research and extension can be demonstrated in this model.

The use of Action Research methodology in the workplace enables an open ended research process. An exploration of a particular problem can be undertaken without a defined outcome at the outset, yet result in a relevant end product by using the Action Research paradigm. Whilst farmers and other practitioners may undertake such exploration in isolation, there is not always the opportunity to translate outcomes back to institutes. The approach undertaken at Hamilton illustrated the benefits of a partnership approach to research.

In the Hamilton experience, the research projects were mostly supported through scholarships. Without this support, the program would not have proceeded. Despite the obvious success of the program, cost is a barrier to future students. This conclusion is mirrored in the experience of local post-compulsory educators. Paying full fee costs impedes the access of local students to further education. In this case, all students were mature age. Many were already paying for their own children to be educated at universities away from the region. Few of these children return to the area, thus pointing to the need to educate the people who live here. In this rural community, few potential students have access to cash resources to finance their further education even though many wish to undertake further study, and see a need for it. Similarly, in most cases, there are not enough employers who are committed to paying education fees for their staff, or even understand the benefit of doing so. For many potential students in rural areas, unless this changes, there is currently insufficient incentive to undertake the commitment to further education.

Communities need assistance to develop their research and education potential so that in turn the benefits can flow to rural industry.

In conclusion, the Master of Education (by Project) experience at Hamilton has proven to be a truly embedded, grassroots approach to education. It has appealed to people committed to their local areas, and to their industries and communities. It did not have to rely on a heavy, top-down administrative structure. However, critical to the success of the project was the quality of supervision. In the case of this example, the supervisors were vitally important to student completion, but most of all, to the richness of the student experience. As one student commented:

It wasn't until we had this opportunity - the scholarship, the methodology and the support – to have the experience as committed practitioners in a rural environment, that we realised we didn't even know where the gaps were. It showed how a grassroots driven research program can fill the gaps. In the future, capacity may depend upon continuing to build on what has been learned, rather than what has been taught.

The strength of the Hamilton model is that a diverse cluster group in a rural community found a research avenue that enabled them to explore the issues they were grappling with. The research was a tool for a more considered approach – timely, contextual, appropriate and empowering. It was well supported by empathetic supervisors, both local and from RMIT in Melbourne. It built knowledge, solved problems and led to the building of local community capacity.

Attachment: Hamilton District Master of Education (by Project) students and supervisors

Michael Blake, Assoc Dip Bus Mgt., Dip Nat. Resources Mgt. – Master of Education research student. ‘Farm Safety – What a Life Saver’. My Masters is based on influencing tertiary agricultural training institutes, government agencies and farming bodies on the importance of farm safety and a better way of influencing appropriate bodies to facilitate a faster uptake.

Tracey Currie, M.Ed., Grad.Cert. Health Law, B.N., RN., ‘Developing an environment to facilitate the teaching and learning of clinical nursing procedures in an undergraduate nursing program.

Gillian Jenkins, M.Ed., Grad Cert. Bus.Mgt.,RN Div1 – ‘Going Home from Hospital with an Effective Discharge Plan’

Mary Johnson, Master of Education research student. My Masters is based on an investigation of how to build *sustainability* into community development training projects. In researching the issue of sustainability I will also identify key characteristics of successful community development projects and the challenges or blockers to success.

Adele Kenneally, Dip Lib., Grad Dip Bus Mgt., M.Ed – ‘Sustaining a community service in a challenging rural environment: Case Study of the Glenelg Regional Library’.

Leigh Kildey, M.Ed – Training Manager – Rural Industries Skill Training – ‘The interrelationship between training and on farm change’.

Marilyn Lyons, B.A. M.Ed – ‘Finding the Middle Ground’ - an examination of learning experiences in a TAFE classroom and the role of teaching in that learning.

Sue McArthur, Dip Ed., M.Ed - ‘Through the Looking Glass Lightly’ – how can changing teaching strategies engage, empower and encourage ownership in students’ learning?

Dr Kaye Scholfield, PhD – Exegesis: ‘From Grassroots to Cap and Gown’ – how a partnership between an urban university and rural community can contribute to rural community sustainability.

Dave Warne - Master of Education research student. ‘Common Grounds: Strategies for Developing Partnerships for a Shared Vision of Future Land Use in South West Victoria.’

Cathy Wagg, BA, M.Ed. - Exploring Opportunities for the Application of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) to Work Processes with Staff at the Department of Natural Resources and Environment’s Hamilton Office.

Dr Laurene Vaughan – Supervisor, Master of Education (by project), RMIT University

Dr Bill Vistarini - locally employed RMIT research associate and supervisor

Robert Bain – locally employed supervisor