



## **Senate Inquiry into Regional Partnerships Program**

**Hearing held in Armidale June 28, 2005**

The University of New England is attempting, through the work of this Commonwealth funded National Centre, to understand an issue that is dear to the hearts of many parents and teachers who work in rural Schools and to provide a solution to improving the learning experiences of students undertaking maths, science and ICT education in rural Schools across the nation. Already some significant achievements are being made, notwithstanding clearly articulating this problem and placing it in the public domain.

The Commonwealth government should be congratulated in having a regional partnership program that empowers rural communities to develop solutions to highly complex issues and further develop the capacity of the nation outside of the cities.

The context of my involvement in this project arose with taking up my Deanship in 2002. As part of my strategy in positioning the Faculty in a stronger teaching and research position, and better linking it with rural issues, I gathered intelligence about some of the key issues that rural Australia faces. I identified three issues of importance to both the community and a rural University: the outcomes of education for rural young people; the shortage of rural medical practitioners; and the high rate of rural youth suicide, particularly young males living in rural communities. For all of these projects, proposals were either available or developed in terms of identifying the problem and providing a solution. I might add that these issues represent a considerable social

justice issue in terms of an imbalance of infrastructure development and investment favouring Australian citizens who live in cities.

Professor John Pegg had developed a comprehensive concept with regards to the poor outcomes for rural primary and high school students studying mathematics, science and ICT and a supporting proposal to address these issues and change the adverse trends for young people, their parents, rural Schools and for the viability of rural communities. Over a period of more than 12 months I championed this proposal (like the rural medical school) at various community forums, with various political contacts across all political colours (including Tony Windsor), the media and within the University and academic communities.

Eventually we found a funding source that was appropriate for this specific rural partnership project within the Ministry of Transport and Regional Services, and worked with the relevant Minister (as well as held discussions with relevant officers from the Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training).

When the application was successful we acknowledged the contributions we received. This included the Minister for Transport and Regional Services (and Deputy Prime Minister), Senator Sandy MacDonald (who assisted with the project as the local Senator), and The Nationals (who have a policy commitment to addressing such important issues for rural Australians). I participated in making public statements about such acknowledgement at the launch of the project and other public forum, as did the Director of the National Centre.

At no stage was there any discussion that funding was dependent on endorsing a political candidate or that the project would be funded on any criteria other than its significance, aims, innovation and merit.

As academics we are use to making acknowledgements and this is what occurred. The statements reflected, then and now, an honest and genuine appreciation that acknowledged the people who greatly assisted us with this highly innovative project for rural Australia.

Professor Victor Minichiello PhD

Executive Dean

Faculty of Education, Health & Professional Studies

June 28, 2005