School of Education

GPO Box 2100
Adelaide SA 5001

Tel: 61 (+0) 8 82015638
Fax: 61 (+0) 8 82013184
john.halsey@flinders.edu.au

Office 5.15

http://ehlt.flinders.edu.au/education

CRICOS Provider No. 00114A

Submission

Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Reference Committee

Inquiry into Rural and Regional Access to Secondary and Tertiary Education Opportunities

Dr John Halsey
School of Education
Flinders University
August 2009

inspiring achievement

Explanation

My submission to the Inquiry into Rural and Regional Access to Secondary and Tertiary Education Opportunities is made in relation to **term of reference g- other related matters.**

The central point I want to emphasize is that the construction of policy recommendations is significantly dependent on how contexts- like 'rural' and 'regional'- are perceived, valued and considered as inherently worthy of playing a major role, looking to the future.

Consequently, I submit extracts from 3 papers I have written or presented at conferences as a contribution to assisting the Senate Rural and Regional Affairs Transport References Committee frame its report and recommendations.

Each of the extracts is based around a fundamental belief: **vibrant and productive rural communities are integral to the sustainability and well being of our nation, AND, locally available high quality relevant education is integral to realising this.**

EXTRACT 1: An approach to secondary education to enhance retention of rural youth

> This extract focuses on *learning for choice* as a contribution towards addressing the decline of youth in rural areas and the concepts of *strong choice* and *weak choice* are proposed as ways of providing a quality, relevant secondary education locally. A copy of the complete paper titled 'Youth Exodus and Rural Communities: Valorising Learning for Choice' is available from john.halsey@flinders.edu.au

One of the common characteristics of rural communities globally, and especially those in the developed countries of the world, is the exodus of youth in search of 'greener pastures'.

Alston & Kent (2003) argue that "[t]he lack of meaningful full-time work in rural areas is one of the main reasons for young people leaving rural communities" (p. 6). Limited post-secondary education and training is another significant reason for the exodus of youth from rural areas. Often added to this is a gender imbalance, where young females leave rural areas at a higher rate than young males. There are also challenges associated with the education of Indigenous youth so they have choices about their cultural identity, employment opportunities and personal fulfilment.

While this exodus of youth has been happening for centuries and has often been spurred along by fundamental changes in the way societies organise themselves, such as occurred during the Industrial Revolution, it is now one of the most challenging issues confronting rural communities. This is because "youth are fundamentally future-oriented and, as such, are a critical human resource for re-building and re-energising rural contexts" (Halsey 2008, p. 2).

Salt (2004) asserts, "[i]t is the loss of youth and the partial replacement of that demographic by older people that is of most concern…[because the] structural shift has an impact on the economic wellbeing of a community and also on the sense of [its] vitality…" (p. 68). Put another way, the future of a rural town or community is linked to the choices youth make—to stay, to leave, or to return after moving out to experience life elsewhere or to complete education and training not available in the local area.

A *real* choice for rural young people and their education and pathways beyond schooling has often been defined and actualised as the choice to move out or leave home. As Corbett (2007b) remarks about youth living in the coastal fishing community in Canada that was the subject of his research: "community is not a place that can sustain youth throughout their working life" and "[t]he privilege of being able to choose to stay is fraught with uncertainty" (pp. 775, 776). This in large measure echoes Alston's and Kent's finding about rural contexts as quoted in the opening section of this paper.

Choice when linked with education frequently means being able to select between options such as which school to attend, which subjects to study, and which career pathway to follow. This concept of choice—of essentially selecting from a menu designed by others—for the purposes of this paper is called *weak choice*. The consequences of a *weak choice* nevertheless may be beneficial to an individual, such as achieving a high tertiary education rank by selecting subjects taught by teachers who have a track record of 'getting students through Year 12'. The relevant point to be noted is that in a *weak choice* context, the chooser has little or no say about determining the options available to them.

Strong choice on the other hand is where those who need to make choices about their learning participate in constructing the options available to them. A *strong choice* context might well have fewer options than a weak choice context, but the match between learning needs and aspirations and study program is a better fit. *Strong choice* is characterised more as a partnership—of "common effort toward common goals" (Seeley, 1981, p. 65)—than an obligatory set of arrangements set in train as a consequence of choosing from a predetermined range of options.

Strong choice is about creating contexts where learning is negotiated expansively and with the intention of being pro-active in addressing issues that impact on learning in-situ. In other words, as a 'local' might say, you roll up your sleeves and work out how to address the issues, to minimise students leaving their home and community perhaps for good.

What then are the enabling pieces of education architecture underpinning *strong choice* and learning for choice, and how might these play out in a rural community to reduce the drift of youth, and thereby potentially enhance community and wider sustainability?

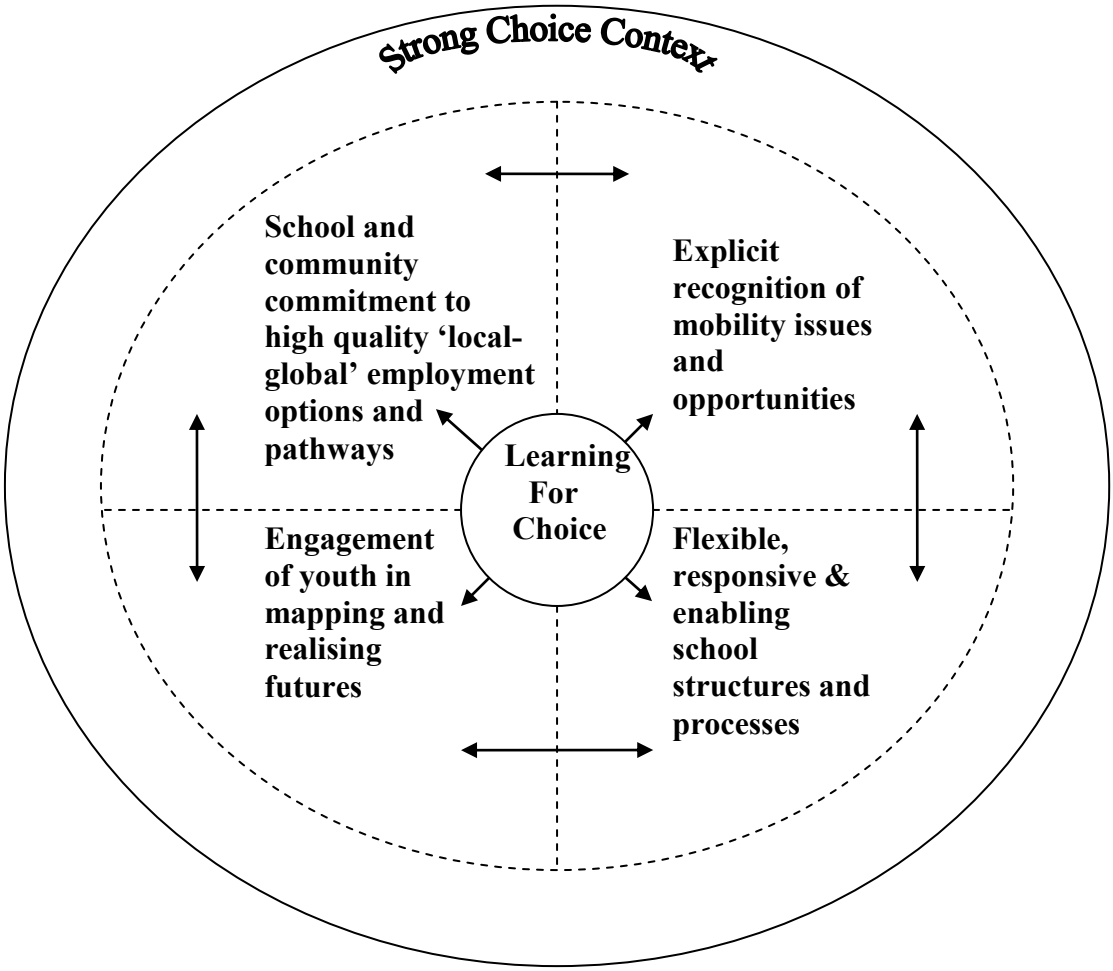
Firstly, there needs to be commitment by the school and community to profile and promote employment pathways for youth which include high quality and high qualification 'global jobs' locally, such as 'bore and ground water expert'. Secondly, in promoting and advocating the value of 'local' quality employment, the school and community recognise that youth may want to be mobile and may need to move outside the district for post-secondary education and training. Both of these framing elements highlight the local–global tension which has become a major issue for many, if not most, rural towns (Davison, 2005).

The third element is an approach to curriculum and learning that directly engages the learner in what they want to learn and what it might be opportune for them to learn. Central to the third element is the school and community being explicit with 'their youth' about the kinds of likely future expertise required so continuation of the local economy, and therefore the community, is optimised and has capacity to respond to fluidity and change over time. In relation to the example used of continuity of local bore water supply expertise, this element would include exploring with youth what education and training for a career in this field requires, likely resourcing to start up a small business or take over an existing one, sources of support to do this and, very importantly, introductions to relevant community mentors to help facilitate their transition from the world of a student to the world of a worker. It would also explicitly include discussions about social and occupational mobility with a view to ensuring that the learners knew about the choices available

beyond school. This is essential because youth need to be deeply aware that their post-school life is being negotiated and planned linked to local community needs while also keeping open options of moving out and away from community.

The fourth element focuses on school structures and processes. Preparedness by a school to be very flexible about when and where learning occurs, and under what kinds of supervisory arrangements, are crucial factors. Challenging the youth of a rural community to think seriously about building their beyond-schooling future around likely local community expertise succession planning requirements is in many ways 'a big ask'. This is particularly so when taking into consideration what is happening in primary industries due to the impact of globalisation. As Lawrence (2005) argues, "many of the changes occurring are not conducive to the retention of natural capital, or to the building of social capital..." (p. 105). Notwithstanding these significant cautions, there are some ameliorating contingencies that can be put in place at a local level. They include building into the overall design and delivery of study programs for the purposes intended safeguards for career and life mobility, like ensuring that negotiated study plans and expected outcomes meet approved national standards.

The diagram below summarises the main dimensions of *strong choice* and learning for choice.



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EXTRACT 2: Brief case studies of 4 rural secondary schools in South Australia working with partners in their communities to generate economic viability and sense of future for youth (and others). The key message of the extract is that the economics of providing access to education in rural and regional contexts must be considered in terms of the total viability and well being of a community. Silo thinking about the cost dimensions of educational provision hides the full benefits of it.

A copy of the complete keynote presentation to National Community Education Conference in Dallas Texas, 2008, is available from john.halsey@flinders.edu.au

Cowell Area School enrols students from pre-school age through to year 12, the final year of secondary education in Australia. It is located 500 kilometres north-west of Adelaide (the capital of South Australia) in the township of Cowell which is situated on Franklin Harbour. The district population is approximately 1,250 and at the time of writing, the school had an enrolment of 180, with 33 students in years 10-12. The school has a community library—as do all other Area Schools in the state—which serves the needs of students and adults of the community.

About 20 years ago, it started becoming very clear that Cowell was essentially dying due to the impact of poor grain yields arising from drought and near-drought conditions, and the continuing drift of young people out of the town to greener pastures. Sitting on the town's doorstep, however, was a pristine body of protected water, Franklin Harbour, a local council keen to do whatever was necessary to save their town, a state government that was active in trying to support local communities to take action, and a school leader willing to go beyond the confines of policy and

established ways of being a school principal—ideal 'raw materials' for a new venture in aquaculture. The school's website tells the story (Cowell Area School Website, 2008).

The Aquaculture Course at Cowell Area School has grown from an idea put forward by a group of local oyster growers to a structured course undertaken over two years of senior secondary schooling.

In 1991 Cowell oyster growers initiated contact with Cowell Area School and requested a course that would suitably equip students for entry into the Aquaculture industry. 1992 was spent developing a curriculum, in consultation with local oyster, yabby, abalone, and fin-fish growers, Department of Education, TAFE (Training and Further Education), AFA (Australian Fisheries Academy) and SAFITC (South Australian Fishing Industry Training Council). The course was appropriate for the industry, while still maintaining the educational outcomes of a senior secondary program. The first course was offered in 1993 and has continued to grow to this day, with a 90% success rate of all students undertaking the course.

1999 saw the implementation of a full time farm manager and a 0.5 time teacher to directly support students whilst in the classroom. Since 2000 the teaching position has been full time (1.0). Skills in aquaculture are gained through work placements within the industry, at the school's oyster lease and fish farm tanks at the school. Graduating students have increased career options, either in the form of employment, a traineeship or further study. Aquaculture is part of the South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE) requirement for the students and has units accredited by TAFE and AFA.

Since the commencement of aquaculture studies at the Cowell Area School, 100 students have graduated and entered the industry, gone on to further study or achieved employment in other fields. The aquaculture industry in Cowell has an estimated annual turnover of $A5 million and employs 80 people. Critical to achieving this has been the leadership of the school and the preparedness of the school to see itself as a resource for community revitalisation.

Others schools in the region have since taken on aspects of aquaculture, which is probably why there has been a slow down of enrolments. In typical style, leaders of the Cowell School have developed other options for students in close consultation with local employers. This year Cowell is running Australian School Based Apprenticeships for 11 students in 9 different occupational areas such as Boiler-making, Hospitality, Hairdressing and Carpentry, in partnership with local businesses. It has also introduced Marine Studies which includes small boat handling and safety navigation.

Quorn Area School (Quorn Area School Website, 2008) is located at the gateway to the ancient and beautiful Flinders Ranges. It has an enrolment of about 270 students. In terms of rural revitalisation and community sustainability, the 'stand out' feature is the school's very close working relationship with the historic Pichi Richi Railway. The railway is a fully operational section of the original Ghan railway, with headquarters and workshops in Quorn, which was built to open up the interior of South Australia from Port Augusta northwards. The building of the railway commenced in 1878. The Pichi Richi Railway is one of the state's premier tourist attractions.

Essentially, each year since 2001 between 16 and 20 year 10 students from the Quorn Area School access the resources of the Pichi Richi Railway and, in particular, the knowledge and skills of expert tradespersons who are historic railway volunteers. The students work under supervision on various projects such as steam locomotive restoration, rolling stock refurbishing, and line repairs

and maintenance, to complete components of school-based apprenticeships and traineeships in building and construction, carpentry and furnishing. They also develop skills in introductory plumbing and electrical. Welding is an option taken to a substantial level by some students given the heavy engineering nature of various projects.

The Pichi Richi Historic Railway is known worldwide amongst steam engine enthusiasts. It generates an estimated $A4 million into the local economy via accommodation, tours, rides, meals and other tourist-based activities. The school reports there has been an increase in the retention of students into years 11 and 12, and that significant numbers of them go on to complete apprenticeships and traineeships within the region.

Kimba Area School is 500 kilometres from Adelaide, located in the township of Kimba. It has an enrolment of 180 students. The district economy is essentially based around broad acre grain farming with sheep for wool and meat production, and some beef cattle. The local website provides a brief snapshot of the history and origins of the town and district (Kimba Area School Website, 2008).

Kimba, a pioneering town, was established in 1915, the name derived from the Aboriginal meaning of "Bush Fire".

Pastoral leases were held over the area from 1872 until pioneer farmers grew the first crops in 1908. The Kimba district is now one of the major wheat-producing areas in South Australia. Explorer Edward John Eyre made two exploratory journeys north of Adelaide to Lake Torrens and across Eyre Peninsula. Eyre discovered the Gawler Ranges in 1839, naming them after the Governor of South Australia. On June 18, 1840, Edward John Eyre ventured again, traversing from Adelaide to King George Sound in Western Australia. During this gruelling expedition Eyre camped at Refuge Rocks, now locally called Secret Rocks.

Kimba was originally a little shed by the railway line. It was first named in 1913. In 1915 it was proclaimed a government town and the first general store was built on the site where the Kimba Drapery stands today. Reticulated water was first available in Kimba in 1973.

As can be seen from the extract above, Kimba identifies itself as a "pioneer town". The town has one of the best functioning pioneering villages and museums in Australia for a district population of around 1,200. The school has two traditions which occur annually to deeply engage students with the local pioneering history of the town and district.

The first is known locally as the 'Station Trip' and involves staff and community members taking year 6 and 7 students out into the pastoral district for a 3-day camp every year. It has been happening for 40 years. Some of the community members involved today were themselves former students of the school. **The trip is, in essence, a rite of passage and provides common reference points for all students (and all staff) who attend the Kimba Area School.**

The second tradition is that all year 9 students undertake a major local history research project, frequently based upon their family, with the local historical society. This tradition commenced in 1984. The culmination of each research project is a formal recognition ceremony and lodgement of documents in the museum. **The local history research project builds and nurtures intergenerational social capital. As Cocklin and Dibden (2005, p.5) state, "[s]ocial capital occupies a privileged position in discussions of sustainability [and rural revitalisation] since it has been seen as facilitating the creation and use of other types of capital", which together, are 'the building blocks of futures'.**

Cleve Area School is located on the Eyre Peninsula approximately 600 km from the capital of South Australia and has a total enrolment of 350 students. While providing local and district students with a broad and high quality general education, the school specialises in agriculture from years 10 to 12. According to the school's website, there are two course streams or pathways, and combinations of both can also be taken (Cleve Area School Website, 2008).

The first stream is intended to lead to tertiary study in the field of Agriculture. This involves formal studies in a range of subjects especially the sciences (Biology and Chemistry), with subject combinations at Year 12 level to ensure that students are eligible for entry into the tertiary course of their choice. This pathway provides for end of school certificate completion and the calculation of a Tertiary Entrance Rank, both of which are pre-requisite to tertiary entrance.

The second stream, the Cleve Certificate in Agriculture is a two year course undertaken by students studying in year 10 and 11 and/or yr12. On satisfactory completion, students receive a Cleve Certificate II in Agriculture from the Australian National Training Authority, auspiced by Training and Further Education and the State Statutory Authority for Senior Secondary Assessment. This program is an excellent pathway for students to complete both their end of schooling certificate and gain a qualification in Agriculture that links directly with the On Farm Training Scheme, which operates at Certificate III and IV level and is conducted once a student has gained employment within the farming sector. Students are actively encouraged to pursue this course in future years.

Note: certificate levels are based upon the Australian Qualifications Framework which covers all formally recognised national education and training certification from entry level workforce (Certificate 1) to doctoral level. End of secondary school certification in Australia is Certificate 3 level.

Studying agriculture at the Cleve Area School 'comes alive' because the school has a 'state of the art' model farm of 450 hectares (1,100 acres) and access to the latest dry land farming and minimal impact technology. It is also assisted by the school having a boarding facility so students from outside the district can take the program.

Since 1975 there have been well over 400 graduates from the Cleve agriculture program. An estimated 60% of these graduates have stayed in the district to work on farms or in agri-businesses. A further 20% have gone onto tertiary education, and another 20% returned home to their out-of-district farms or to other employment. The Cleve agriculture specialisation directly supports a multi-million dollar broad acre farming enterprise and, through this, employment in a wide range of commercial businesses and human services.

EXTRACT 3: Improving the viability of rural regional secondary education by resourcing urban based students to spend extended time studying and living in rural and regional communities. A complete copy of the article 'Australia's Sustainability: A New Policy Front for Rural Education' is available from *Education in Rural Australia*, Volume 19, 2009.

Urban schools in the main are where the largest enrolments are; rural schools and communities are in the main experiencing population drift and decline and under-utilization of resources. Bringing

the two sets of factors and contexts together is a basis for addressing some fundamental viability and survival issues confronting rural schools, and making a significant contribution towards national sustainability.

Historically, rural schools have played a crucial role in building individual and community capacities (Kyle, 1990; Higgins, 1994; Lyson, 2002; McSwan, 2003; Halsey, 2007). While, as stated already, for many years there has been a relentless focus on maintaining the economic viability of rural schools through consolidations and closures, it also needs to be recognised that there are numerous features of rural schools and rural education 'ripe' for progressing *city-to-country*.

Firstly, there are instances of outstanding educational performance in rural contexts. This is especially so where rural schools and communities have worked together closely to expand options and drive up standards as strategies to retain existing enrolments and attract new ones into a district. The many instances of sustained high performance provide the basis for challenging a widely held view that the only way to get a good education is to leave town (see Corbett, 2007 for an extensive discussion of this matter).

Secondly, many rural schools have developed specialized vocational curriculum pathways like aquaculture, agriculture, tourism and hospitality, and environmental management, as well as the traditional academic ones, which are highly valued by students, community and employers. They are making a very significant contribution towards the knowledge and skills required for Australia's sustainability and international competitiveness.

Thirdly, it is often the case that new specializations as outlined have capacity to take extra enrolments at very little extra cost. In some instances, additional enrolments increase class viability not only in terms of efficient resource use, but also in terms of improvements to the learning environment. For example, an enterprise-team-based approach to aquaculture can be assisted by having a significant number of students to debate and trial alternative ways of growing high-quality market-ready produce. The same can be said for courses that have an extensive field experience component like agriculture or construction industries—sufficient students to simulate work place conditions is a major factor in the delivery of the intended learning experiences and outcomes. For other areas of the curriculum like history, English, mathematics and the sciences, an increase from a few students to 10 or 12 can also benefit teaching and learning.

Fourthly, rural education has embraced ICT and Australia is a world leader in distance education. There is a rich and long experience to draw upon here to propel further advances in using ICT to enhance pedagogy and learning. Finally, in most rural and remote communities there is a very strong desire for community survival and with this a real openness to working in new ways with new partners.

At the heart of progressing a *city-to-country* education initiative is the belief that it makes economic, social, cultural and political 'good sense' to improve the utilization of *all* the nation's schooling infrastructure, urban *and* rural. Linked with this is the belief that it is also economic, social, cultural and political 'good sense' to have opportunities readily available for youth to access their school-level education in *rural* as well as urban contexts. What is required to bring a *city-to-country* initiative into being?

Firstly, resourcing is needed for city students to access country learning and living and for country schools and communities to appropriately host and care for them.

The national Country Areas Program, which ran in Australia for over 25 years and which focused on 'adding what's missing' for country students, is very instructive when considering a new approach to education provisioning.

One of the main reasons for the Country Areas Program's success is that it provided additional funding—around $120 million over 4 years (DEST, 2006)—to rural schools to augment and enrich learning. Frequently the extra money was used by schools and communities to access learning experiences that were outside of their locality, either by travelling, bringing in specialist expertise or purchasing additional teaching resources. The Country Areas Program was an acknowledgement of the fact that external impetus and additional resourcing for schools and communities are often the difference between the success and the failure of a venture.

In addition to resourcing, opportunities need to be arranged with states, territories and key stakeholders for envisioning the potential benefits of a *city-to-country* initiative for national sustainability. As Kotter and Cohen (2002) found from their research, the compelling thing to do when undertaking a major change, like reversing the predominant flow of students from country schools to city schools in search of a 'better education', is to "*show* people what the problems [and opportunities] are and how to resolve them" (p. 8). Kotter and Cohen (2002) also found that "[p]eople change what they do less because they are given *analysis* that shifts their *thinking* than because they are *shown* [and have opportunities to explore] a truth that influences their *feelings*" (p. 1).

One of the 'truths' that needs to be embraced is that education and training acquired in a country location has equivalent merit to education and training gained in a city context. Differences and uniqueness need to be acknowledged and valued—it will be counterproductive to achieving the development being advocated if either of the partners ('city' or 'country') is considered to be the junior member. One way to avoid this occurring is to recognize that partnership approaches to change "are in most cases complex but [also] dynamic in the sense that they evolve and change as they move through successive phases of diagnosis, planning and implementation…[and] there is a balance to be struck between the motivating activities of mutual encouragement, recognition and celebration and the essential disciplines of challenge, critique and evaluation" (Woolhouse, 1999, pp. 96–97). As well, "the chief characteristic of partnership is common effort towards common goals" (Seeley, 1981, p. 65).

Secondly, individual students currently attract resources into schools and then decisions are made by systems and at a local level about the best way to gain maximum outcomes from the inputs. These existing resources for education open the possibility of different decisions being made about how to use them, consistent with the proposed approach.

Thirdly, given the central role and place of schools in most rural and remote areas, a *city-to-country* initiative provides a vehicle for engaging other service providers like health and transport, as well as the private sector, in developing better integration of policy and programs that could add momentum to the approach to educational provisioning being advocated.

In addition to the matters outlined above, there are others that will require discussion and decisions, like which age range(s) should participate, how will timetables and releases be determined and coordinated, and how will the care and custodial aspects of exchanges be managed. Matters such as these can be resolved because there is a wealth of relevant expertise and experience available to facilitate the formation and implementation of new rural–urban schooling partnerships nationally.

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