

# **What works where you are? A snapshot of training in five rural communities**

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## **Abstract**

It has been widely reported in recent years that Australia's regional and rural communities have extensive needs for skill development. Vocational education and training can assist these communities to develop the necessary skills to enable them to survive and to prosper in a social and economic environment transformed by globalisation, national policies and regulatory imperatives.

The purpose of this research was to investigate the implementation of training packages in rural areas and the ways in which providers, community and industry stakeholders interact to achieve positive training outcomes.

The major drivers of training in the five communities examined in this study were the same as those that influence training activity throughout regional and metropolitan Australia. National training policy, industry skill requirements and state government initiatives played paramount roles in determining what and how training was delivered. Considerable influence was also brought to bear by the market, which dictated the focus, direction and form that training was to take.

Thin markets and the small numbers engaging in training constantly challenged providers of vocational education and training servicing these rural communities. While competition policy has elsewhere engendered a healthy training market, it can be more productive for providers in rural communities to collaborate in order to deliver the most effective vocational education and training. This study found evidence of extensive collaboration between stakeholders in rural communities, where networking and partnerships have allowed resource and information sharing, avoidance of unproductive duplication of effort, and positive outcomes for providers, learners, enterprises and the communities. The study suggests that policies and incentives that support enhanced collaboration will assist in the broadening of training possibilities in non-metropolitan Australia, and better meet the needs of rural learners.

## **Introduction**

A considerable amount of research has been undertaken into education and training in rural, regional and remote communities in Australia, with studies consistently highlighting the extensive economic and social changes that these communities face. The most significant of these changes are considered to be the downward trend in world prices for agricultural and mining commodities, technological change, changes in consumer taste and lifestyle and revisions in government policy such as the lowering of trade barriers, the deregulation of the financial system and increased regulation to protect the environment (Centre for Research and Learning in Regional Australia, 2000, 2001, 2002).

The extent to which vocational education and training can help enable rural communities to meet these challenges will be largely influenced by how well training

providers are able to overcome the constraints that face them when providing training away from the major centres in regional Australia.

The study on which this paper reports set out to investigate training delivery in five rural communities, focusing particularly on their implementation of training packages. A rural community was defined as being one that was not metropolitan, not a major regional centre, and not remote; and as having a population within town boundaries of fewer than 10,000. (Clayton et al, in press).

While it was not possible, given the scope of this project, to generate a comprehensive picture of vocational education and training provision or its associated stakeholder relationships in any of the five rural communities, what is presented in the report from which this paper is drawn, is a snapshot of training activities and collaborations in each centre. The report's findings can only be indicative of the broader experience of vocational education and training in rural communities across Australia. What can be said, is that in rural communities such as those investigated in this study, the stakeholders and drivers of vocational education and training activity are no more nor less complicated than those which influence their urban counterparts. Issues such as workforce retention, competition, change management and the impacts of evolving technologies play their part in rural Australia just as they do elsewhere.

This study was conducted while Australia was experiencing its worst drought for ten years, and the far-reaching economic and social effects of that, in addition to its obvious environmental impact, undoubtedly contributed to the observations made by focus group participants. In rural communities the links between drought, international trade prices, business activity, the movement of young people out of rural communities and the demand for training are self-evident.

## **Literature review**

Many significant studies have examined the impact of globalisation and national policy imperatives on non-metropolitan Australia. This research calls for regional communities to adjust to the new circumstances that they are facing—shrinking rural economies, high youth unemployment and a drift to the city by the rural disenchanted. Research also indicates that vocational education and training has a role to play in supporting rural communities by providing skill development and strategies for managing change (Centre for Research and Learning in Regional Australia, 2002; Evans, 2001; Kilpatrick & Bell, 1999; Kilpatrick, Hamilton, & Falk, 2001; Owen & Bound, 1998).

While it is recognised that training packages have considerable potential to meet the training needs of rural communities, as do New Apprenticeships and User Choice, some researchers see the nature of rural communities and some of the policies and regulations governing vocational education and training as working against quality training provision.

The literature identifies a number of factors that impact upon how training is provided in rural communities. These include: thin markets (which result in lower enrolment numbers, lower levels of funding and reduced program offerings); geographic isolation (which is often compounded by inadequate public transport and telecommunications); and limited workplaces (which restrict work placements, workplace experiences and opportunities for assessment).

Other factors seen to be influencing the quality of training provision relate to the training providers servicing these areas. A number of studies present ‘outsiders’ as inhibiting positive training outcomes. Some literature suggests that training providers from beyond the local community are seen as lacking necessary local knowledge or the commitment to meeting community vocational education and training needs. Further, the open training market is often portrayed as having generated an unhealthy degree of competition between various providers.

However, throughout the literature there is also clear evidence of co-operative training activity occurring between training providers and employers, governments, schools, group training companies and other key stakeholders in rural communities. There are case studies of networking, resource sharing, information sharing, formal and informal partnerships and strategies to avoid unnecessary duplication of training effort. Researchers have identified an increasing maturity in the relationships between training providers where competition had begun to be replaced by collaboration. Although small in scale, this study certainly supported such a range of findings.

### **Research method**

This qualitative study began by reviewing literature and websites relating to vocational education and training in rural Australia and training package implementation. It then proceeded to focus group interviews with key stakeholders in five rural communities. During these interviews, focus group participants were asked to identify and describe their linkages and partnerships within the vocational education and training sector, using network mapping. (Golding, 2002).

Potential focus group participants were identified through community websites and by a chain referral process that provided the contact details for key stakeholders involved in training package implementation and delivery within each rural community. They included representatives from: TAFE providers; private providers; senior secondary schools; Adult and Community Education providers; local and regional government; New Apprenticeship Centres; Group Training Companies; community organisations, including indigenous advisory groups; state government departments; chambers of commerce and industry associations; and employers.

### **Findings**

Although this study had intended to focus on the implementation of training packages in these communities, in every instance training packages were only a part of the total training effort. The discussion in focus groups could not be restricted merely to training package applications as the participants invariably displayed a concern for, and focus on, their communities’ training needs and experiences as a whole. The training picture for these communities comprised everything from literacy and numeracy training through to higher education, and concerned itself with non-accredited as well as accredited training. Where the communities’ needs were met by the provision of industry-specific, tailored short courses, even if those were non-accredited, then those needs took priority over any preference for accredited training.

However, the scope of training package delivery was diverse, and covered such generic packages as business services, financial services, retail, hospitality and tourism as well as specific qualifications related to plastics, rubber and cable maintenance; nursing; meat processing; floristry; conservation and land management

and agriculture and horticulture. The training was very much market driven, in response to the needs of local enterprises and those of the broader community, for example, programs for 'Youth at Risk', migrant and indigenous groups, or long term unemployed.

Even though whole qualifications were being delivered in many instances, training programs also included clusters of units of competency (e.g. chemical users) and single units of competency (e.g. chain saw operation).

Much of the training was offered to address the specific needs of existing workers in enterprises and small business owners. In each rural community there was a strong focus on equipping farmers with the skills they needed to manage their diverse small businesses and those required to compete successfully in new global markets. For many it was the initial training to pursue a pathway into other qualifications.

Government legislation and the needs of local businesses exerted the most powerful influences on what, where and how training was undertaken. For example, in recent years, the increased legislative and regulatory requirements for such areas within industry as welfare, occupational health and safety and risk management have increased the training needs of employers and created demand for training. It is increasingly the case that even volunteer workers must receive accredited training and this impacts on rural training markets just as it does in the city.

Likewise, some rural businesses and industries need to attain or maintain ISO or other quality assurance status in order to compete in business and to export, and these initiatives require a training component. Focus group participants observed that participation in compulsory training has made many rural people much more aware of the range of training available in their community. It has also offered training providers the opportunity to market training packages and to promote the value of further training to individuals and organisations.

Local councils in rural areas are often major employers and create a significant demand for training, particularly in the diverse areas of civil works. In addition, two growth areas for rural training that were nominated by focus group participants were hospitality and aged care, and growing demand for services in these areas is expected to drive a demand for training as a consequence. Many rural areas are already faced with the problem of not having local trainers with the necessary skills to deliver such training.

Delivery of VET in Schools programs was on the increase in the five communities studied, despite it being quite challenging to implement in communities with only limited numbers of workplaces available for student placements, and where it might be quite difficult to find secondary school teachers with the requisite skills. However, one focus group commented that almost regardless of which VET in Schools program students had participated in, they came later to vocational education and training with improved job-readiness skills and attitudes compared to those who had not participated in such programs, and for this reason alone, the VET in Schools program was judged a success in that community.

Some of the large enterprises that existed within these communities conducted much of their own enterprise-specific training in-house, while others used local training providers and training services from outside the community or outside the state. In the

current training market, enterprises and learners have access to a plethora of training options, even in rural locations. Trainers described using a range of delivery modes, including on-line, distance and face to face as well as mixed mode. Some rural learners, however, were travelling large distances for specific or technical skill training.

This brings us back to the challenges posed to education and training in rural locations that mark them as unique. Previous research into vocational education and training in regional and rural communities has highlighted a range of factors which act as significant barriers to the effective delivery of training packages and accredited training (Evans, 2001; Kilpatrick & Bell, 1998a; Kilpatrick & Bell, 1998b; Spierings, 2001; TAFE Directors Australia, 2000). Similar concerns about delivering training were raised by a large number of focus group participants in this study, who, despite some regional differences, largely agreed that they faced the same difficulties related to: thin markets; geographical isolation; difficulties in accessing skilled teachers and trainers; negative influence of 'outsiders'; limited workplace opportunities; and lack of promotion or coordination of training within communities.

Focus group participants in this study were therefore asked to identify the strategies for delivering training that had worked best for them. Discussions centred on meeting learner needs, meeting employer and industry needs and, as a consequence, meeting community needs. The provision of training that was timely, relevant and cost effective was a concern for participants across all five communities.

Participants insisted that training had to be flexible in terms of content, delivery modes and location. Without such flexibility the diverse needs of stakeholders could not possibly be met. Providing recognition of prior learning, existing qualifications and skills were also cited as imperatives.

Further, training had to be targeted towards identified group needs. Several participants, including private training providers and VET in Schools co-ordinators commented that bringing learners together from a number of employers or schools across the community made the training more cost-effective and increased the richness of the learning experience for those involved. As training in rural regions quite often meant that training was conducted in smaller groups, outcomes could be witnessed and resources could be shared. Some training providers commented that going out to where their potential learners were located was a successful strategy. Providing frequent dialogue between the trainee, the provider and the enterprise mentors was seen as critical, especially in the early stages of the learning cycle. Employers noted that young people usually needed a lot of support in the first few months of their training. Support often included providing life skills training and access to numeracy and literacy assistance. Particular support strategies were also needed for indigenous and mature age learners.

Many informants to the study saw the relationship between the training provider and the enterprise as a key factor in providing quality training to rural communities. Enterprise representatives considered that training providers needed to be client focused and able to tailor training to suit enterprise needs and production schedules; one preferring to establish a longitudinal relationship with their training provider, as long as it was reviewed periodically.

The major industries in the five rural communities in this study generally established collaborative arrangements with any training provider in the region (or beyond the region) who had demonstrated the capacity to deliver the enterprise-specific training that they needed.

Industry representatives in one community emphasised the importance of maintaining strong, co-operative and visible links with training providers. They acknowledged that they were more inclined to give their support to those training providers who maintained contact and provided resources and assistance. Building the relationship was important; however, to maintain the collaboration it was clear that the training provider should be able to communicate with the employer, identify their needs and think creatively to come up with suitable arrangements to meet their training needs.

This theme of collaboration is one that appears throughout much of the literature on vocational education and training in regional, rural and remote Australia. The importance of training providers working closely with industry and other key stakeholders within the local community is emphasised by many authors (Balatti & Falk, 2000; Centre for Research and Learning in Regional Australia, 2001; Kilpatrick & Bell, 1998b; Kilpatrick & Guenther, 2003; Sidoti, 2001a; Sidoti, 2001b).

The public providers in this study had developed particularly strong links with local government, major industry bodies and employers. At the same time, they had relatively strong relationships with the secondary schools in their own areas.

The private providers appeared to have much stronger links with New Apprenticeship Centres and other private providers than did most TAFEs. Some private providers, particularly those involved in the provision of training in a narrow industry area such as disability support, connected most strongly with other organisations with a similar focus.

The secondary schools in these communities clearly worked closely with local employers, local business and industry associations and their neighbouring TAFE provider.

There tended to be a less clear set of linkages between public and private providers of vocational education and training and those providing mainly adult and community education programs. Adult and community education providers had very strong relationships with community and special needs groups, local government and regional development entities.

In all but one rural community, universities had formed working relationships with training providers, major employers and industry associations.

Interestingly, there were only limited numbers of formally documented arrangements underpinning any of the collaborative training activities being engaged in by the organisations represented in the focus groups. Instead, partnerships were entered into in good faith and the sense of achieving a common training goal. Interactions may be underpinned by memorandums of understanding (formal partnerships), or they may simply be constructed on the basis of personal relationships and trust (loose collaborations) (Bateman & Clayton, 2002).

In one community, training providers, employers and other agencies working in the youth services area had pooled their resources, networks and information to better

provide for the training that was needed to address high youth unemployment. Much of the impetus for this collaborative activity came from research conducted for local government that recommended strategies to bring community youth services together.

Community collaboration extended beyond networks and partnerships. Information and resource sharing was one of the most common activities that participants identified as occurring in their communities. Training providers talked of frequently referring learners to other providers.

It is apparent from these examples of co-operation that many stakeholders in these communities have developed a level of trust in each other. This trust seems to be very much dependent on personalities and personal relationships rather than more formal arrangements between participating organisations. Leaders or champions of training, who have community credibility, play a significant part in the development of this trust.

Participants described the advantages of collaboration as being a means of making the most of scarce financial, physical and human resources. Strategic pooling of expertise enabled them to achieve training outcomes for industry and learners that could not be achieved without such cooperation. Collaboration was a way of sharing and disseminating information, as well as a means of ensuring the viability of some training, for example, by providers aggregating their students to ensure sufficient numbers for particular training to occur.

However, competition is also commonly identified in the research on vocational education and training in rural communities (Balatti & Falk, 2000; Centre for Research and Learning in Regional Australia, 2001; Owen & Bound, 1998). The training market is a competitive one, and while there was clear evidence of networks and partnerships occurring in each of the rural communities, participants also raised the issue of competition between training providers and distrust by other key stakeholders.

Despite competition being seen as a barrier to collaboration by many participants, there was sufficient evidence provided in focus groups of the majority of stakeholders trusting each other enough to be willing to work together. While those working in niche markets were concerned about competition from other providers, those working in more broadly based areas of training recognised that there were opportunities for all of them to have a share of that market, and what's more, that there were advantages in working together to service the needs of individuals, employers and the community.

## **Conclusions**

This study into the implementation of training packages in rural Australia confirms much of the previous research into vocational education and training in regional and remote Australia, finding that the same issues reported in previous studies continue to impact on the communities described in this paper.

Although training packages have been extensively implemented in these rural communities, providers still struggle with thin markets and small numbers of dispersed learners engaging in training. This has a significant effect upon funding for training provision, limiting the range of programs that can be delivered. For offerings

to be enhanced in these communities, differential funding formulas may need to be applied.

At the same time, many training providers and employers who participated in focus groups for this study were frustrated by some of the rules and regulations that attach to the funding and delivery of training. They see these as working against the national and community goal of maximising the number of people engaging in training. It was apparent that the impact of these regulations was magnified when compared with the outcomes of such policies in metropolitan areas. Larger providers working with larger populations in cities have more capacity to absorb the impact of these rules and regulations than providers servicing rural communities.

Rural training providers who were delivering in thin markets face many of the same difficulties as those in remote locations, without the assistance of some of the policy and funding considerations that are made for remote communities. If rural training providers were allowed greater flexibility in the application of policy and procedures, they may be better enabled to meet the needs for skill development within their local communities.

Despite some of the prevailing challenges of the current competitive training market, key stakeholders in rural communities were becoming more willing to enter into collaborative activities in the interests of their learners and their communities. Clearly, much can be gained by collaboration, as is evidenced in the literature and in the five training communities in this study. The sharing of information through networks, the sharing of resources in partnerships and the joint working through of the particular issues that confront individual communities, combine to result in more effective training, business and social outcomes.

Any policy and financial incentives that actively support the development of networks and partnerships may be expected to encourage more providers to engage in collaborative activities. More importantly, the co-operative efforts between stakeholders that have been shown to pay such positive dividends for rural communities also have direct application to any vocational education and training environment, regardless of location.

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