Embracing change-- reengineering VET for triple bottom line and developing sustainable learning regions for the future

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Introduction

"The twenty-first century will be the century of interdependence, ...between economic systems, between people and their environment". Ellyard. (1998, p 28).

This year 2003, is the International Year of Freshwater, and the Department of Education, Science and Technology (2002) have defined environmental sustainability as a key goal for research and development for Australia. UNESCO, ILO (2002, p7) stating Vocational Education and Training (VET) is a vehicle for protecting the sustainable development of the world's natural capital, however developing learning partnerships to resource sustainable learning communities is not yet clearly defined in VET. Against a backdrop of public private contribution in a competitive, mixed market economy of VET this research is redefining 'learning ecologies' for community capacity building by mapping the types of learning partnerships in which small business as a VET stakeholder participates, and their engagement in the development of a learning community. It is using as a theoretical construct a capabilities based model of social partnerships for developing capacities for learning communities in VET in regional Australia. (DFEE 2000, Kearns, 2001, Kearns and Papodopoulos 2000, Cavaye 2000, Kenyon *et al* 2001, Falk and Kilpatrick 2002). Other papers have discussed the information and social ecologies (Plane, 2001, 2002, a,b); this paper's theme is the *regional ecology* and issues for VET in developing learning partners with small business for sustainable economic development, whilst protecting the natural capital of a growing, complex diverse region. The State of the Regions (2002) have found promulgating public private partnerships, developing networks and alliances has been a key strategy for success for regions in the European Union and the United States and conducive to increasing their capacity to be self governing. There is a danger though, in passively adopting overseas policies to VET in regional Australia without due critique of their appropriateness in the local context. There are questions about the capacity of a market driven culture of VET for building learning communities, the need for a paradigm shift to sustainable capitalism in VET versus the present neoclassic underpinnings. Also the direction for the new national strategy in embracing triple bottom line: the social, economic and environmental for developing public private partnerships for learning communities with a sustainable future. This is deemed particularly relevant in the light of findings for capacity building in high growth regions like the Adelaide Hills, (State of the Regions, 2002) the recent Integrated Natural Resources Management Plan Consultation which has found education for capacity building across all sectors should be a key focus for the region (Redden, 2002) and reducing the increasing inequality between more disadvantaged regions across Australia, (ANTA 2003).

Developing learning partnerships and learning communities have been advocated as one way to regenerate regions, (Kearns, 2002, ANTA 2003); build collaboration, leadership

and trust across the sectors (Falk and Kilpatrick 2002, Ellyard 1998) and resource VET for lifelong learning for the future (ANTA, 2002, p 12, OECD 2000). The South Australian Economic Development Board (2002, p3) stating that for regional Australia: "*Success will need partnerships; between business and employees; business and the various tiers of government; education institutions and both government and business*". Partnerships are also deemed essential for regional economic development, clusters for sustainable industries and protection of the natural environment (SATC 2002, SAEDB 2002, Mcdonald 2002); however the Schofield Skills Enquiry (2003) has found partnerships with the small business sector in South Australia are few. Triple Bottom Line, (TBL) community capacity building, and integrated 'whole of government' are the latest 'buzz words' to have crept into policy making lexicon, but there is concern for VET that regions deemed less deserving are likely to be overlooked. Anderson (2002) has called for a paradigm shift in VET for ecologically sustainable development for the long term, arguing environmental concerns have been abrogated to market 'productivism' in the previous VET strategies; Birch (2001) too has called for a model of 'sustainable capitalism' in the regions. For small business in particular, Ferrier (2001) has found the short term economic dominates their 'reality'; Vandenburg (2002) stating also, Triple Bottom Line for the small firm is neglected and embryonic as yet in VET. Sarre (2001) argues though, it is naïve to think any business that adopts socially and environmentally conscious strategies despite its merits, can survive in a market place which does not.

Methodology

The research is adopting qualitative techniques of appreciative enquiry and asset mapping (Kenyon and Black et al. 2001; Kretzmann and McKnight 1993) with semi structured interviews, with two key groups of participants: practitioners working with the small business community and small businesses themselves. (Strauss and Corbin 1990, Piantinida and Garman 1999; Guba and Lincoln 1989). Small business is defined as the owner managed small (6-19 employees) or micro workplace (1-5 employees) respectively. Practitioners as those supporting small business with training, mentoring and information and library services across business and community sectors, and may be formal, informal and non-formal VET partners. Any case study analysis has limitations in not being able to generalise findings to other communities in VET, but it may offer new interpretations on community capacity building and the regional ecology questions below:

1. What types of partnerships are you involved in with the small business community?
2. Where are the challenges for you in working with the small business?
3. Are there issues pertinent to the Adelaide Hills as a region as opposed to other regions? What are they?
4. What would you like to see, what is your vision for the region and why?

Findings: capacity building partnerships in the Adelaide Hills

The Adelaide Hills is a part of the Mt Lofty Ranges in South Australia, a series of north to south escarpments, which run towards the plains of the River Murray in the South East and are bounded by the Adelaide Plains in the west. It is a relatively small area 1391.6 square kilometers neighboured by Murraylands in the North and the Fleurieu region to the

South, but due to its close connectivity with Adelaide, it is also 1391.6 square kilometres of prime real estate land and a key tension is the competition for the use of natural resources. Ninety percent of the water catchment falls within the Adelaide Hills Council and includes areas in the Mt Barker Council region too, with the whole watershed providing sixty percent of the City of Adelaide's clean drinking water supply. Environmental concerns therefore are very high, juxtaposed with the need for sustainable business and economic development. It is a region of small businesses, with very few larger employers (AHRDB 2002); approximately 4,800 small businesses and very small micro businesses. The industries include agricultural production, market gardening, viticulture industries and dairy, fine foods and regional tourism. There are new emerging, highly specialised industries and industry clusters developing in technologies, spatial technologies, gourmet food, light manufacturing and engineering. Many small businesses though are in the traditional retail and services areas with employment highest in the areas of wholesale and retail trades, finance property and business services, health and community services. The region has a population of 62683 people (ABS, 2002a) including the Adelaide Hills (38,718) and Mt Barker District Council (23,965) respectively, with Mt Barker one of the fastest growing regional cities in South Australia.

The region is diverse and extremely heterogeneous with more than one hundred individual communities and townships, which makes any strategic development somewhat problematic. It has not traditionally been seen as an area of high need by policy makers as opposed to outer Adelaide and more outlying rural regions of South Australia, however retraining older members of the community, retaining youth and supporting the demand on services, especially community services, brought about by the increase in population have been voiced as areas of new need by participants. One stating: *It is becoming a higher developed community with more younger people and families moving up into the community and an expansion in the employment base.* There are questions for the infrastructure in the region because of the increasing population base, the township boundaries and demographics and distance between communities: *'So this whole question of partnership, and within the Hills its pretty difficult isn't it? There must be seventy-eighty communities at least within the whole gamut'.* Some of the small satellite townships appear to struggle with 'small town syndrome' and supporting community assets and there has been much heated debate with local government about retaining community parks and heritage buildings in the towns. According to practitioners it is becoming a commuter belt with approximately 40% of residents working the Hills, 17% work in the City of Adelaide and approximately 30% in the suburban Adelaide. This proximity to Adelaide is not always seen as a benefit for the region: *'What we have here in Mt Lofty –is the City of Adelaide right next door and a million people – that plus the rate of change which extenuates those structural adjustments.'* That closeness, the rate of change, the fragmentation of services, a changing social fabric in the community, a commitment from business and environmental sustainability, are issues mentioned often.

The environmental concerns include increasing participation by small business in sustainable development and continuous care of the environment by business, particularly the small landholders and the wider community and preventing unnecessary further damage to the biodiversity. One voiced: *'We are in a water catchment area and so we*

are extremely constrained with what we can do within the rural areas because of the policies that are in here in the development plan.' There are tensions in developing new business for the economic development of the region whilst still protecting this natural environment; the creation of local employment is a key challenge; and there is now more demand for local training, which was previously met by metropolitan Adelaide. One voiced: '*The actual characteristics of the region give rise to a different set of issues like land use and land management and so on. So there are a whole lot of things that one can't do in small business in a catchment area and that is a limitation, and it means a certain profile of small businesses has developed here because of what can and can't happen.'* However there are very successful industry clusters such as the primary food producers, apple and pear industry, wine industry and cherry industry and in tourism and hospitality which have been instigated through the Regional Development Board and other partners developing the existing networks and clusters with business. But in cases, practitioners have stated it is a very delicate relationship with the ecology of the region, the natural capital being the very basis for the success of these industries. Although they saw profitable, healthy small business as being essential for the region, they did not want to see this lost to unbridled, poorly planned development, and in some situations, voiced considerable damage has been inflicted to the regional biodiversity already.

In this context, the protection of this biodiversity and natural capital is vital, when demographically only 8% of native vegetation is remaining in the Hills, seventy percent of which is on privately owned land; only one percent of the stream network of the Adelaide Hills has riparian (connecting watercourse) vegetation that is described as being in a healthy condition (MLWPO, 2000, p5). 'The hills' as it is known by locals, has been affected like the rest of the world by an increasingly globalised economy, industry restructuring particularly for agriculture and dairy, escalating land prices and housing, shrinking margins for the small farms, whereby it may be more viable and economic to subdivide land for urban development than to farm it. What has resulted is a decreasing number of broad acre farms and an increasing number of small hobby farms, small landholdings and lifestyle type small businesses predominantly privately owned. Along with this, is the higher incidence of commuters seeking work in the '*big smoke*' as one interviewee said, the term *dormitory suburb* has been mentioned on more than one occasion by participants- and not entirely in jest. For those 'lifestylers' commuting daily to the city for work, maintaining another job leaves little time for land management on the farm at the weekends. Although not considered by participants an area in need of regeneration in comparison to other areas of regional South Australia, many have clearly identified structural changes taking place such as the increased growth in the large townships and gaps in training provision and spoke of a need for increased support for services; a tendency also for the local community to be somewhat complacent and for much better integration between planning and development.

I think the issue that we face here that is different from other regions is being close to Adelaide the capital value of the land is very high compared to the return so the traditional broad acre farming and cropping properties are diminishing rapidly and the growth of irrigated horticulture where they need a good water supply. And so coupled with the proximity to Adelaide is that we have an average turn over of properties or the average property is held for seven years before it is sold and so there is this tremendous

turn over of people and so our capacity to be able to skill people up and then they are moving on and that is just a constant flow. That is a big challenge it itself.

Due credit though needs to be given to the community based partnerships in which stakeholders are presently involved which include Water Catchment Groups, Soil Boards, Local Government, and a plethora of community based and voluntary associations already enculturing learning for sustainable development in the region and there are some excellent success stories of organisations developing local solutions to local problems at the community level. Some initiatives have successfully reached the small business community such as the Chemical Users Project, the Small Landholders Land Management Workshops, 'Our Patch Programmes' KESAB Field Days and there is a mushrooming of numerous local land management and environmental interest groups; Sixty Waterwatch local groups, a new Natural Resource Management Centre and Water Catchment Centre for the dissemination of information and resources and support to the community. Some of these people voicing:" *They too have been trying to find their learning community'.* The Draft Integrated Natural Resources Management Plan Consultation (2002) has been a clear attempt to address a 'whole of government integrated approach' to sustainability and environmental protection within the water catchment area- but the role for VET appears to be noticeably absent. Community based providers of environmental and land management training in the region have won best practice awards for their work, but voiced the need for further support for ongoing work and resourcing collaborative learning partnerships for the long term benefit of the region. For other service providers in the community sectors there is the issue of how to resource their work with the competition across portfolios for a different set of priorities as stated here: *I was told by one of our main funding bodies that there is flood mitigation work that needs doing locally and the money has got to come from somewhere. .... so things like education and lifelong learning are always going to be back burner issues when there is flood mitigation work to do.*

In response to the challenges in working with small business, most considered small businesses in the region were just focusing on survival and staying afloat and the more esoteric issues not relevant to their daily running of their businesses, would not be high on their agenda. *'We are working in an area where chemical education is probably way down the list of priorities with the target group that we would need to get".* Perhaps in this light, it is not surprising that lifelong learning, learning communities and protecting environmental sustainability are not seen as integral for getting through the day. So there are questions about what makes an environmentally conscious entrepreneur who can address more than just one bottom line and has the capability and resources to do so. There are those who do demonstrate a social and environmental commitment but: *'It costs him and I guess that is part of the problem in that small businesses are struggling to make ends meet all the way along the line.'* This comment below highlights the ongoing stress of being self-employed and the pent up feeling by some small firms that no one is listening to their needs: *I know when we did up the ......main street most would not come because they were all too tired or you know just did not have the interest. The ones that did come were aggressive and they wanted to blame.* And another stated:

So there are very few that come with an open mind because they are having a hard go of it. So no- I don't think there is enough generated interest in community development because I think yes- its just too hard making a living.

For small business, there are limits on that income development because of the demographics of the region and some felt there were unrealistic restrictions and barriers. One spoke of the need for collaboration and some flexibility for business, a greater understanding that it was being hamstrung in its development by the authorities:
I had a meeting with some of the authorities ...and I stopped the meeting to make it clear that we were here to see how we could help a developer develop a business not to put up the barriers to why he couldn't set that business going. I would like to see more collaboration and cooperation with the authorities to understand the needs of people in small business rather than to put up all the barriers to stop them.

Other practitioners were deeply concerned though about compliance and they did not see that care for the environment could be self regulated and regulation was the only way to enforce best practice because: *'They don't do damn thing until they get caught.'* And *'Self regulation is no good, regulation is only as good as the big stick that follows it'* suggesting a need for further legislation in some areas of environmental protection. There is a considerable question mark for VET too over the degree to which learning needs to be accredited and formalised and whether land holders and non land holders like the bed and breakfasts in the tourism industry should be encouraged to manage an accredited product, or whether regulating and formalising that learning is likely to become another barrier to participation in VET for small firms.

We are probably a more conscious society on the environment so the question you have to ask is where did they learn or where were they influenced or where were they educated to be responsible and is that by attitude, by example or by compliance?

There are those participating in TBL with the encouragement of key bodies and implementing best practice, but the extent of management skill levels, particularly given that many businesses are lifestyle businesses is not clear:

It is an interesting some landholders are very switched on and others are generally pretty…....A lot of them are naturally quite clever people but often they don't have any formal training but others I am surprised at their level, or lack of what I would consider as level of ignorance about natural resource management given that and lack of degree of sophistication that the commercial farmers have.

There are challenges for providers in meeting the learning needs of a diverse group and encouraging participation: *'Water catchment that's pretty essential out here- interestingly enough that is well attended. But we are still like trying to get an eight year old to go to the dentist to come to these workshops.'* And in cases combating ignorance is a problem and juxtaposed with this for the firm, is finding the time and the motivation to learn new skills outside of their daily demands and admitting what they don't know:

There is a common theme there in that the resource that they often use has hit crisis point and they have had to look at the way in which they manage their property or their land. For some people it is not until they are actually in that crisis situation. For example, the irrigators in the .....area that pumped the daylights out of their groundwater resource to the point where it went saline and threatened their viability of their entire irrigation and their entire industry that they said we have to become more sophisticated in how we manage our resource, and they went through a baptism of fire in a crisis.

A key issue then for VET providers is in risk management training for environmental sustainability and being able to offer this type of proactive learning to business and the community for the long term, when user pays may not be an option: *'I don't think we would be able to do what we are doing if we charged for it - I think a lot of the institutions are finding it difficult now as money is becoming harder and it is spread more thinly'*

In answer to the question what would practitioners like to see for the region, these comments below show similar concerns about the degree of regulation that should be placed on business, the protection of the regional environment and the very delicate, fine balance between the two:

What I would really like to see is a better understanding from the authorities that control businesses, a better understanding of the needs of people that go into business for the authorities to listen a little harder to the cries of people in small business, because I believe some of the restrictions and some of the regulations that they put on are far to imposing for people that go into small business.

More encouragement, more encouragement by the authorities not necessarily that they become so flexible that we become built up and we get ourselves into a mess, but to see what we can do and work with them without always referring to various rules and regulations.

I'd like to see a bringing together of all of the educational organisations, of all sorts into some sort of collaborative approach and then that linking into each others organisations and into business and to private individuals…….

I think it's a fine line between maintaining what we have got and trying to improve it. We would like to protect the special qualities that we have, the environment and the rural landscape, the historic character of the townships ….So yes enhancing the character of the townships and keeping the rural areas as they are in between as green as possible.

Discussion: a culture shift for a preferable learning future for sustainability in VET?

Ellyard (1998) has argued sustainability is marginalised to environmental groups only and is not adopted well by economic or social agencies in Australia. Unlike our short term, competitive tendering VET policy environment, Ellyard (1998) states damage to the natural environment conversely is insidious, long term and gradual and we are in need of a vision for a sustainable society one which is economically, culturally, socially and ecologically sustainable (1998p 98, 101). Bourne (2001, p 1) argues sustainable

development demands business leadership, that it will not deliver itself, and needs to be addressed through tripartite partnerships and a coordinated effort between business the community and government. The ANTA Shaping the Future Consultation Reports (2002) finding there is a role for VET in addressing the broader social and environmental agenda in regional Australia, but there are questions about governance in the regions, how that will be operationalised, and the extent to which that will need to be resourced by government and the partners in the next national strategy. Birch (2001) is concerned short term, neoliberal economic systems do not support or encourage environmental sustainability for the long term, which are often not deemed a priority, and he cites the evidence in other countries that are redressing government intervention in an attempt to bring about corporate sustainability and triple bottom line values into everyday business and society. He has suggested the need for a shift to 'sustainable capitalism' a rethink of the results of fundamentalist, economic rationalist strategies for a more democratic, corporate responsible society in Australia.

In summary, whilst there is evidence of innovative community based partnerships for learning for sustainable development across the sectors, a key theme was the restricted capacity and resources to reach a wider section of business and the community, or to sustain those partnerships for the long term. Most of these are also outside VET, community based and community led, which is perhaps where many would argue they should be, but what of those outside the water catchment area or the small businesses in the regional townships? Community capacity building is the popular 'catch cry' of policy makers and is perhaps quite pertinent for a region which needs to be more self sustaining, but there are serious questions about demanding too much of the regional community without support for the necessary infrastructure for VET, local government and local environmental stakeholders conducive to partnerships for a growing region. For small business battling to exist in an increasingly globalised, competitive economy they need to keep their eye firmly on the small picture, but due thought needs to be given to the long term impact they have on the environment and crucially how much they are prepared to learn about sustainability and adopt a the "out of firm" big picture view. Small business as big business, is being expected to consider its ecological footprint, participate in building a preferred sustainable future in the regions and as another interviewee poignantly stated '*become more responsive*". Learning for sustainability and defining a realistic environmentally conscious role for the small firm albeit being adopted admirably by some best practice small business in this region, is likely though to be relegated to the too hard basket, or something that governments should do, or only for those who can afford to take the step towards TBL. It may be some small businesses in this region are admirably adopting triple bottom line already but for others, promulgating their environmental contribution as one interviewee bluntly told the researcher means' *you are being unrealistic*". In the light of the above suggestions for further research include:

- How VET can be equipped for capacity building across the sectors, cross industry to meet the TBL needs of small and very small firms
- How to improve navigation of the VET system to ameliorate choice and access to learning and training for small business in TBL and flexible delivery alternative approaches to learning

- Showcasing examples of best practice by small business already implementing TBL and developing an environmental cluster of small firms, for those not already served by existing programmes, those that may not be landholders or in the catchment area.
- Skill building and mentoring in enterprises in TBL approaches, encouraging sustainability and social reporting in small business and greening the supply chain for small firms
- Support for an integrated approach to lifelong learning environmental awareness and community capacity building in business and the community
- A critique of the benefits of a regional strategy *for learning for sustainability* which is inclusive of all small business and community stakeholders in the region.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed some of the issues pertinent to the regional ecology of the Adelaide Hills South Australia. Whilst there are a considerable number of successful community based partnerships the role for VET appears noticeably absent, and it argues for the need to develop the VET infrastructure to support a *learning landscape* conducive to learning partnerships for TBL for the sustainable environmental, economic and social well being of this growing region. It finds VET has the opportunity as facilitator for a 'whole of community approach' to open up the TBL debate across the sectors, engage existing stakeholders, increase participation by small business and the community in developing the infrastructure conducive to a environmentally conscious learning community. Connecting VET, communities of practice and small business at the grass roots level, resourcing collaborative learning partnerships at the regional level, integrating learning for sustainability into environmental policies for sustainable development at the macro level and supporting the professional development of practitioners, business and the community in capacity building, however, are still challenges for VET for the future.

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