

SOCIAL INCLUSION:

INCLUDING PRACTITIONERS IN INCLUSION POLICY AND PRACTICE

Regan Harding
North Coast TAFE, NSW

1. Abstract

In implementing its social inclusion agenda, the Australian Government announced changing the way policies and programs are designed, developed and coordinated between all levels of government, business and third sector organizations and supporting new ideas or ways of working with disadvantaged or 'equity' groups.

As North Coast TAFE operates in one of Australia's most disadvantaged regions, it has recently sought to reposition its approach to social justice, equity and social inclusion to ensure that it is better positioned to respond to:

- Closing the gap for Indigenous people on the North Coast
- Place based opportunities through strength based planning and action
- Multiple disadvantage rather than siloed approaches to equity groups
- Community capacity building
- Partnership opportunities – internal and external and
- Transitions for TAFE students to higher learning, employment, self employment and social enterprise.

Through existing and emerging models such as learning partnerships and place-based learning, North Coast TAFE is therefore examining its approaches to access and equity so it can become even more elastic, resilient and adaptable to the needs and aspirations of communities and individuals. Using a strategic conversation methodology, staff are being brought together to first share thoughts and ideas about what is working well and what can be explored further, and secondly turn these ideas into activity, strategy and innovation. This paper provides initial reflections on the use of strategic conversation as a methodology to inform organizational design and innovation in the space of social inclusion for NC TAFE. It examines how VET practitioners are being supported to work together to achieve outcomes for learners and communities on the North Coast through their exploration of the ways in which programs are designed, developed and coordinated.

2. Introduction

This action research project '*SOCIAL INCLUSION: Including practitioners in inclusion policy and practice*' is based upon the strategic conversations being undertaken within North Coast TAFE to explore how staff within its *Community Partnerships and Inclusion* portfolio and the wider organization best meet the Australian Government's 'social inclusion agenda'. In 2009, *Community Partnerships and Inclusion* was created to bring together a number of existing equity and student support teams including: outreach, counselling, disabilities, VET in schools, North Coast Aboriginal Learning Partnerships (NCALP - the Aboriginal coordination team), and a number of other specialist and temporary roles including a Youth Project Officer and Institute

Corrections Liaison Officer. As a functional unit, *Community Partnerships and Inclusion* was to continue its work in addressing social inclusion through education and training and also explore emerging models of meeting the needs of disadvantaged learners.

Specifically, the portfolio of *Community Partnerships and Inclusion* was designed to focus the institute’s attentions on:

- Closing the gap for Indigenous people on the North Coast
- Place based opportunities through strength based planning and action
- Multiple disadvantage rather than siloed approaches to equity groups
- Community capacity building
- Partnership opportunities – internal and external and
- Transitions for TAFE students to higher learning, employment, self employment and social enterprise.

This focus was in response to a number of external drivers, namely the Australian Government’s social inclusion agenda and the unique profile of the North Coast of NSW.

Earlier this year, the federal government gave a clear commitment to ‘A Stronger Fairer Australia – A new Social Inclusion Strategy’, discussed in the following section of this paper. This strategy sets out to ensure that no Australian is left behind through additional efforts in areas such as employment, training, health and childcare, housing and anti-discrimination. Explicit in the Commonwealth’s approach is that various sectors and levels of government work together to address and alleviate economic and social disadvantage.

Achieving social inclusion on the North Coast of NSW presents its own set of challenges and opportunities by virtue of the profile and demographics of the region. Illustrative of what Deputy Prime Minister Julia Gillard describes as ‘poverty alongside plenty’, the North Coast boasts geographical beauty, natural resources and industry growth, yet high levels of unemployment, homelessness, low income, people with disabilities and Aboriginal disadvantage. The Socio-Economic Indexes for Area (SEIFA) identifies many North Coast localities as significantly socially disadvantaged and the work of Professor Tony Vinson, which identifies 1.7% of communities nationwide accounting for more than seven times their share of intergenerational poverty, reveals that more than one third (16 out of 40) of the most disadvantaged postcodes in NSW are located within the North Coast region. This is demonstrated in Table 1 below.

Table 1:
Localities **in bold** sit within the North Coast region

Band 1	Bonalbo , Brewarrina, Kempsey , Lightning Ridge, Tingha, Windale
Band 2	Bowraville , Casino , Deepwater, Menindee, Urunga , Wellington
Band 3	Armatree, Coraki , Harrington , Nambucca Heads , Tweed Heads , Walgett

Band 4	Forster , Kurri Kurri, Toukley, Weston, Woodenbong , Wilcannia
Band 5	Boggabilla, Claymore, Koorawatha, Lake Cargelligo, South West Rocks , Tenterfield
Band 6	Askford, Bourke, Broken Hill, Diamond Head , Iluka , Inverell, Mt Druitt, Sawtell , Taree , Warrawong

Vinson, 2007

North Coast TAFE has always recognized and responded to the need to deliver equitable and accessible education and training to its most disadvantaged residents, however with additional focus on social inclusion, the work of the *Community Partnerships and Inclusion* team and the wider organization took on added emphasis at the beginning of 2009.

The then Director of *Community Partnerships and Inclusion*, Mr Tony Dreise, developed a concept paper titled ‘Our Social Edge’ which sought to align North Coast TAFE to national and international agendas in social inclusion, social enterprise and youth engagement. Leaders or supervisors of the equity and student support teams described on the previous page were brought together to explore existing and emerging models of VET place-based approaches, personalized and integrated learner support services and programs to address multiple disadvantage and disengagement by particular learner groups - for example youth at risk and disabilities students. Now, more than twelve months down the track, the Institute’s Executive is committed to listening and consulting widely about where *Community Partnerships and Inclusion* is ‘at’, what the organization as a whole wants to achieve in social inclusion and how the organization can best achieve such goals. To facilitate this broad consultation process across all levels of the organization, a planning and coordination team has employed a ‘strategic conversation’ methodology – explained in part four of this paper.

This action research project provides an interim evaluation of, or thoughts from, staff involved in the strategic conversations and how they see the process contributing to future organizational design and innovation. The paper does not provide detail about the existing and emerging models of social inclusion programs and practice, but rather, reflections on the methods being employed to engage staff in thought leadership and provision of advice and ideas in relation to achieving social inclusion. Whilst the strategic conversations will broaden over coming months to include learners and communities, this paper is again limited to the thoughts and conversations shared amongst staff only.

3. Literature Review

Although there has been a long-standing interest in working with and assisting disadvantaged groups in Australia, attention to social exclusion or inclusion has been more recent than in Europe and the UK. The Rudd Government, over the last couple of years, has given a clear commitment to social inclusion as a policy objective and recently released its national statement on social inclusion – ‘A Stronger, Fairer Australia’ (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009). Explicit in this statement and strategy is an emphasis on partnerships and collaboration between

the various sectors and levels of government and the not-for-profit and business sectors to combat social and economic disadvantage.

Being ‘socially included’ as defined by the Australian Government means that no person is left behind, through provision of opportunities to secure a job, access services, connect with others in life, deal with personal crises and be heard:

‘While every person is ultimately responsible for making a go of their lives, not everyone begins at the same starting point and some people strike setbacks or crises during their lives. This strategy aims to give every Australian the help they need to access the opportunities society has to offer’ (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009, p 1).

Australian social inclusion policy goes on to identify improving the quality of essential government services, particularly in the area of education and training, as a high priority, together with ensuring such services work more effectively in the most disadvantaged communities through partnerships between governments, not-for-profit organizations and the community.

Being socially included means that people then have the resources (skills and assets including good health), opportunities and capabilities to:

Learn – participate in education and training

Work – participate in employment, unpaid or volunteer work, including family and carer responsibilities

Engage – connect with people, use local services and participate in local, cultural, civic and recreational activities; and

Have a voice – influence decisions that affect them.

This final objective connects to the rationale behind strategic conversation as a methodology or platform for people to create a future by collectively talking about that future. Strategic conversation is a methodology developed by Tony Golsby-Smith of 2nd Road Pty Ltd, a training and consulting firm which specializes in introducing large organizations and leadership teams to ‘design thinking’. Presented as an alternative to analysis, the approach is based on Aristotle’s ideas that conversation, invention and intent - the ‘great tools of rhetoric’ - allow people to design change together, through not only logic but also creativity and imagination:

‘The methodology tries to rebuild the second way of thinking using tools that teach design and right brain learning. The facilitator of a strategic conversation is able to build a community that creates real outputs and designs new ways to handle problems.....2ndRoad believe that visualization is the key to right brain thinking. A meeting becomes a creative workshop for ideas exploration using visual facilitation techniques’ (ICVET, 2010).

The visual facilitation technique is a one page thinking model referred to as ACDB which guides open dialogue around the issue or change in question. The ACDB methodology takes groups through the following steps:

A- Where are we at now? Explore the situation

B- Where do we want to be? Create aspiration

C- What do we do to get there? Determine strategies

D- How do we make this happen? Determine action plans

Some theorists argue that strategic conversations are ‘the means and not the ends’, whilst others argue they are the ‘to and fro’ between scenario and action. Hames and Oka describe strategic conversations as an adventure in learning – ‘a liberating process of intelligence gathering, collaborative inquiry and systematic mapping where exploring and responding to complex realities is made explicit’ and also an opportunity to ‘go beyond problem-based breakthrough to system-shattering performance, strategic innovation, optimal operating frameworks and global business ecosystem leadership’ (IBSA, 2010).

Collaborative inquiry has certainly been emphasized in VET research around equity, notably in Figgis et al’s 2007 research ‘Advancing equity: Merging ‘bottom up’ initiatives with ‘top down’ strategies’. This research identifies evidence-based protocols and mechanisms for aligning the knowledge, practices and intentions of practitioners, at the ‘bottom’, with the equity understandings, strategies and intentions of senior executives, at the ‘top’. This includes VET organizations engaging in action research to allow practitioners to knowledge-broker and ‘do their jobs better’ through building relationships, identifying needs, sharing ideas and also collaborating to support each other through sustained conversation and trust-building.

Building relationships, breaking down ‘siloes’ approaches and replacing these with place-based or multiple disadvantage approaches is gaining greater traction over recent years. Historically, education and training systems in Australia have adopted an ‘equity group’ approach to policy and programs by focusing on distinct equity groups – for example Aboriginal learners, youth at risk, non-English speaking learners, or learners with a disability. This however, doesn’t take into account learners or communities which experience multiple, or compound, disadvantage nor does it necessarily take into account inter-generational disadvantage, as described by Patricia Faulkner, Chair of the Australian Social Inclusion Board:

‘Disadvantage is often entrenched over generations. It is usually multi-dimensional and tends to concentrate in certain locations. This complexity requires responses that focus on:

- *the linked nature of the services people need to achieve greater inclusion*
- *the opportunities to work with communities as well as individuals, and*
- *the need to break cycles of disadvantage’ (Commonwealth of Australia, 2010, p 3)*

Hence the government’s and North Coast TAFE’s focus and thinking around ‘place based’ ways of addressing multi-dimensional disadvantage, mobilizing whole communities and sharing innovation so that no-one is left behind.

Figgis et al’s research also revealed a call for the VET sector to reinstate equity as a matter of principle, in line with the social justice foundations of VET established by Kangan in 1974:

‘A return to equity is.... an infinitely practical matter because there is every indication that there will be an influx of equity clients into VET, primarily due to federal legislation’ (Figgis et al, 2007, p 8).

NC TAFE and its *Community Partnerships and Inclusion* team have certainly observed this over recent years with the 2005 Disability Standards Act, Welfare to Work legislation, changes to the NSW School Leaving Age and the Commonwealth Government's social inclusion agenda.

4. Research method

Staff within North Coast TAFE, with particular emphasis on the *Community Partnerships and Inclusion* team, were provided with a conversation starter – a discussion paper titled 'Working Together on Social Inclusion'. Developed by an executive planning group, the paper provided both external and internal context for the consultations to follow, namely background information about the Australian Government's social inclusion agenda and COAG targets around education, training and employment. Background information about the formation of *Community Partnerships and Inclusion* was also included, together with an Executive statement of commitment to listening widely to staff, students and communities about how the organization might best work towards social inclusion.

The discussion paper was circulated together with a link to an anonymous online survey, so that staff could prepare for the number of strategic conversations to be held across the institute over the following month. The conversations were planned to occur both within faculties and across faculties, with staff having an option to participate in one or more of these conversations.

An explanation of the strategic conversation methodology was provided as follows:

'Strategic conversations are structured conversations which seek to gather the thoughts and ideas from participants and then design these into activity, strategy or innovation which are focused on achieving desired outcomes. We want these conversations to happen within faculties and between faculties, and at the local level, within campuses and communities and across campuses and communities.'

This consultation process is extremely important. It's a moment in our organizational history where we have an opportunity to think about how we want to design the way we engage with communities and work towards achieving something to which we are deeply committed – social inclusion. We don't know what the answers will be but we do hope that we will have wide engagement with this consultation process and that our staff will approach this as an opportunity to think broadly about how we might work to achieve social inclusion for our region' (NC TAFE, 2010, p 6).

Staff were prepared for the strategic conversations and the four (ACDB) questions used within the methodology, by some general questions or prompts within the discussion paper such as:

- *What's our purpose in relation to social inclusion, why do we want to achieve it and how can we do this? Who are we and why are we doing this?*
- *What do we want our endeavors in social inclusion to look like? What relationships do we want and who do we want them with?*
- *What internal relationships and structures do we need to support our work?*
- *What do we need to say goodbye to or give up?*
- *What part can teams and individuals play in moving us towards these social inclusion goals?*

- *How might we increase course completions and pathways to further study and employment?*
- *How might we more effectively integrate our service provision*
- *What other questions do we need to be asking?*
- *How do we evaluate what we do?*

The strategic conversations then used the ACDB methodology, described earlier in this paper, through asking the four following questions:

- A- Where are we at now?
- B- Where do we want to be?
- C- What do we do to get there?
- D- How do we make this happen?

The strategic conversations were set up as two hour sessions either via face to face meetings, or tele or video conference, and brought together staff both within their faculties or across faculties. For example, there were strategic conversations convened just for *Community Partnerships and Inclusion* staff or just for *Community Services and Health* staff, and then ‘place-based’ conversations for cross-faculty staff at northern, central and southern locations across the Institute. Many staff attended more than one conversation, for example participating in an ‘internal’ faculty conversation before a place-based cross-faculty one. Two experienced facilitators were employed to manage the conversations, one from the organization more broadly and one from the *Community Partnerships and Inclusion* portfolio, so that any questions regarding the current roles and responsibilities within that portfolio could be answered. A Director, or member of Executive typically from the planning group, was present at each of the conversations.

Finally, for the purposes of this action research project, staff who had participated in one or more of the strategic conversations were asked the following questions:

1. What do you understand by the term ‘organizational innovation and design’?
2. What do you think about strategic conversation as a methodology for working towards ‘organizational innovation and design’?
3. How effective are the groupings of participants for the strategic conversations?
For eg: Within faculties, across faculties at local campuses, other?
4. What is *working well* in the strategic conversation process, or the way people are sharing ideas?
5. What are the *challenges* in the strategic conversation process, or the way people are sharing ideas?
6. What would you like to see happen as a result of the strategic conversation process?
7. If you could change anything about the process we are using, what might these changes be?

8. Is there anything else you'd like to say about what's happening in 'this space' or 'your space' at the moment?

These questions were answered through semi-structured interviews and/ or email by ten staff – seven from the *Community Partnerships and Inclusion* team and three from across the wider organization.

5. Findings and Discussions

Most staff understood 'organizational innovation and design' to mean opportunities to improve internal processes and '*how we can do things better around here*'. Many emphasized the significance of systems and structures in allowing change and innovation to be implemented and reviewed, but alternatively the importance of not being constrained by existing structures. A preferred driver was a commitment to consistently looking at how the organization can best meet its needs, and the needs of learners, in a safe to fail environment. This 'safety' to experiment, particularly in relation to addressing multiple disadvantage, encouraging whole-of-organization involvement and breaking down 'silos' was seen as very important:

'Maybe we need more flexibility around attracting and expending funds when we're talking about new or different ways of working across and for different groups. If you want innovation, then you need innovative funding models'.

Concepts of 'sharing' surfaced often, with many respondents describing 'shared vision', 'shared input' and 'shared authorship' where everyone's ideas are valued and respected and processes of organizational design and innovation are therefore inclusive as well as creative. One staff member quoted Ricardo Semler's description of combining transformational leadership and shared responsibility throughout the whole organization, where there is a concentration on 'building organizations that accomplish the most difficult of all challenges: to make people look forward to coming to work in the morning' (Semler, 1993, p 282). '*Allowing staff and issues to guide processes and structures, as opposed to the organization dictating to staff in relation to issues*' was seen as crucial to true innovation and mastering change or improvement.

Almost all participants believed strategic conversation to be an effective methodology for working towards organizational innovation, design, change or improvement through '*genuine consultation and collaboration and new or renewed ideas and approaches*'. Interestingly, the perceived ability for strategic conversation to create transparent, open and trusting environments was balanced against an observation that some staff entering into conversations might at first be preoccupied with their own position, roles or responsibilities, and any perceived threats to these, rather than looking at the bigger picture within the organization:

'When participants are not sure that their individual perspective is understood or respected, or they are unsure of where this is all leading, then you only get defensive responses'.

All respondents however, described an appreciation of the methodology for inviting frank and fearless contributions and authorship of organizational innovation and design at all levels within the organization:

'Making our own future through creative and 'big' ideas is great....and because these ideas are generated across the organization, it is the opposite from a 'top down' approach to driving change and improvement'.

Some hesitation was expressed about the capability or willingness of staff to move towards the operational strategies and the mechanics of getting to an 'ideal place'. That is, when it came to the C (What do we do to get there?) and D (How do we make this happen?) parts of the model, some staff felt unable to provide clear responses:

'The wish list part is great... where do we want to be?'

'In some instances people felt the task was too big or too hard because it could take massive systemic and/ or cultural change within the whole organization....I walked away feeling like a can of worms was opened'.

'People have found the design space challenging, mainly through lack of time. The more you can un-pack 'A' the better you can envision 'B' the desired state'.

All participants agreed on the importance of opening up the conversations to a variety of groups, although also recognized that encouraging broad participation was difficult due to individual staff perceptions of their own value or relevance in relation to working towards social inclusion:

'I think in some ways we are missing important people from the conversations because people self-nominate to attend. Perhaps the conversations should have been made more compulsory at every campus level?'

'Unless a member of a Community Partnerships and Inclusion team, staff may not see this particular conversation as having a high priority for them'.

For reasons such as this, staff also agreed on the need to share background information and context, through mechanisms such as the 'conversation starter' discussion paper and the online survey.

Staff described feelings of empowerment, increased understanding and empathy for others within the organization and also increased levels of understanding about external drivers for innovation and change - social inclusion and internal drivers and capacity - who 'we' all are, 'what' we want to do and what we 'can' do:

'It's provided an opportunity for teams and sub-teams to think about their role and their place in North Coast TAFE.... It's allowed people to hear stuff they wouldn't otherwise have heard.... enabled them to think about some of our challenges in a whole of business way (sometimes) and provided a positive way for Community Partnerships and Inclusion to connect with other staff'.

Challenges around use of the strategic conversations were related mostly to time, both provision of too little or too much:

'Two hours is a big commitment....the challenge is to compete with big workloads and convince staff that they have an important contribution to make'.

'If we had more time, and I wish we did, then we could talk more about the complex spaces like 'how do we make this happen?'.... I think we need to be able to come back to the conversations, you can't just participate in one, because you hear all these new ideas and then have more of your own a few days later.'

Having Executive connected to the conversations, through the inclusion of at least one Director, added weight and value to the process. However whilst it was clear that senior leadership was valuable, hidden agendas or fear of management discarding more confronting or complex ideas were also expressed:

'Having a Director there made you feel like we weren't just going through the motions, with no real intention to take on board what we have to say....that there hadn't already been a decision made at the top and that this was a Mickey Mouse exercise'.

'Some of the more confronting comments made during the conversations, which can be uncomfortable, shouldn't be watered down'.

'Some people come along with their own axe to grind and dominate the conversation, without really thinking about the bigger picture and how everyone can work together. There's still a lot of fear that prevents people from moving out of their own heads or personal future, to a bigger one for the organization and the wider community. We need leadership, but leadership that takes real account of all these voices to move beyond this'.

It was also observed that the proficiency of individuals' communication skills impacted upon the nature of the conversations, with more articulate staff being well heard whilst quiet or fearful staff might not be participating as fully as they'd like to:

'Staff sharing their real feelings on issues can be difficult for some to do and hard for some to take. Some find it hard to say how they actually feel for fear of creating divides between themselves and fellow staff they need to work with.'

'This is particularly the case for staff who don't have security of tenure. As if they're going to speak up about an ideal new structure or model if that means their position could become deleted, or their classification or location changed!'

A very clear message from all the respondents was that the conversations shouldn't be a 'one off' but rather just the beginning of an ongoing organizational commitment to listening to the coal face, and importantly, acting upon the information gathered:

'The process is a long one and it can be frustrating waiting to hear what is going to be the future and what the outcomes will be....ironically some people what a black and white response, when there isn't necessarily one!'

'Accurate recording and honest and open sharing of the outcomes of the strategic conversations is crucial follow through, preferably with actionable timeframes and clear guidance for how people can continue to be involved in the organizational design and innovation space'.

All the participants said they would like to see the results of the strategic conversations taken back to the *Community Partnerships and Inclusion (CP & I)* team:

'To be unpacked by CP & I staff and for them to go through a second layer of conversations around how we do this work, so they could actually design the 'how', deal with the challenges and problems perceived by those external to CP & I and make whatever changes they can to enable them to work more flexibly'.

Other staff members highlighted the need to retain what is good and already working:

'I am more than happy to support improvements to our models and to my own practice, however I am anxious that we don't ignore what is good in our efforts to appear innovative and as a result simply re-badge our efforts with new language'.

'Can we not throw the baby out with the bathwater....or re-invent the wheel?'

Finally, and congruent with previous observations that the strategic conversations may have opened a 'can of worms', one respondent commented on adopting the methodology more broadly across the organization:

'When the only constant is change, then we have a choice to embrace or resist. I would like to see this process lead to a more wide ranging discussion about the way we are structured.....this includes questions about faculty models and funding allocation models..... I am concerned that the 'silos' in which we still, to some extent, operate sometimes leads to compromises in delivery and support that can be overcome with a more focused approach to our 'customer first' philosophy'.

Six of the ten respondents also volunteered positive feedback about this action research project itself – that is, the systematic process of reflecting upon the use of strategic conversation. They identified such reflection and action research as something that sometimes isn't highly valued against competing organizational and operational demands.

6. Conclusions

The data collected through the action research project '*SOCIAL INCLUSION: Including practitioners in inclusion policy and practice*' aims to guide North Coast TAFE staff around the use of strategic conversation for organizational design and innovation. This methodology is without doubt seen as a viable and desirable mechanism for not only working towards social inclusion and meeting the needs of disadvantaged learners on the North Coast, but also meeting the broader needs of the organization. Engaging in action research, such as this project, was also seen as advantageous, with staff feeling valued and empowered through both processes.

These methods were seen to engender a climate of trust, openness and inclusivity around 'doing the job better'. There was a sense of ownership and belonging from contributing 'bottom up' ideas and initiatives rather than a sense of subordination through simply acting upon 'top down' strategies or directives. However, staff still felt a need for and appreciation of strong leadership and support from management. It was identified that challenges such as time and provision of adequate background and context for strategic conversation could be addressed through strategies to encourage wider and more frequent participation and also communication to staff regarding their valued contributions to a 'bigger picture' or future of the organization and its programs. 'Follow through', respect and acknowledgement were all important to the participants, so that the conversations or action research weren't perceived as rhetorical exercises, but rather genuine attempts to include as many staff as possible in social inclusion policy and practice in the immediate instance and ongoing, rather than 'one off' organizational design and innovation into the future.

7. References

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