

VOCATIONAL EDUCATION, REGIONS AND THE STATE TOWARDS 2000

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INTRODUCTION

Post-compulsory students in regional centres have been positioned within interesting futuristic view of training and work opportunities. Their futures are depicted as being influenced by educational "pathways" in the context of an "open training market" in a environment where information "superhighways" will provide unbounded opportunities. The current policy rhetoric urges a merging and integration of national strategies in education and training and those directed towards regional development. This intersection presents a range of interesting images about education and work in a changing rural and regional economy but also presents an interesting window on the conceptualisation of the individual, collectivism and the notion of nation at a time when these concepts are under debate.

This paper is an attempt to introduce and describe some preliminary work in regional North Queensland and Far North Queensland which examines elements of senior schooling, education and training. In a way this is an exploratory paper attempting to make explicit issues in regional education and training. This paper attempts to identify and examine key themes and describe some early findings in terms of a cluster of research projects being conducted at James Cook University of North Queensland.

These research Projects are entitled

Family, School and Work a Minor ARC grant conducted by Malcolm Vick and Peter Kell.

Private Training in North Queensland conducted by Peter Kell, Jo Balatti and Sandy Muspratt.

REGIONALISM: SOMETHING NEW?

Regional development emerges as a revived policy theme which links regional development and national economic development. The work of the National Taskforce on Regional Development Chaired by Bill Kelty in 1993 was contextualised by The Prime Minister words as:

"Regional Development means national development on a regional basis. It does not parochialism but partnership. It means pulling the regions of Australia into a national grid. It will require a spirit of collective responsibility- between communities, business and trade unions and between the three spheres of government"
(TORD 1994 p3).

The language maintains the merging of the centralist and collectivist themes

with national economic development but allocates special individual responsibility for regions to look after their own affairs. Keating continues saying.

"I think it is fair to say that that in each case the starting point will be to ask not what can the Commonwealth Government do for each region but what can the region do for itself "
(TORD 1994 p3).

Keating suggests that it is not the role of government to deliver "dray

loads of money" but to assist the regions take advantage of their potential. Complimenting the work of the taskforce the Government commissioned a report by the McKinsey consulting group to identify key economic and industry development issues from a regional perspective and to examine factors in private sector investment with a view to recommending adjustments to federal government programs to enhance regional development. The McKinsey group examined in detail the Townsville and Cairns regions, the site where some of the research conducted.

The McKinsey Report emphasised the value of teams of regional "change leaders" working towards the fulfilment of long term planning. The report repeats the language of business management and the training reform agenda by emphasising the necessity for "regional best practice", the need for a "learning agenda" and the need for "regional audits". The report cites a range of successful regional developments in Australia and overseas which the consulting group use to support their proposed strategies of collective leadership(e.g. Glasgow).

Whilst containing some valuable insights and advice, the report constructs regions as capable of developing homogenous and unified approaches to regional development and is reliant on a elite leadership groups to follow an implementation plan. The consulting groups reports tends to translate the logic and practice of strategic management reviews to a region. There is a clear impression of the necessity for the creation of an agreed strategy in a type of lineal and flowchart where the need for a corporate image and visioning are emphasised. In this report social and community issues are invisible.

This approach to regional development is a marked departure to the previous Labor initiatives in the Whitlam area which sought to provide a broad range of housing and infrastructure needs through state intervention and management by broad based community boards e.g Bathurst-Orange Development Commission later Corporation. It in the

1990's version of regional development the importance of partnerships within the private sector is given a clear priority.

WHY REGIONS ?

The notion of regionalism has particular appeal to governments as the population concentrates and consolidates in new growth areas such as North Queensland and Northern New South Wales. Interestingly the decision to move to these areas have less to do with economic considerations and more to do with lifestyle, climatic and retirement considerations. The urgency to incorporate these new communities is expedited by the changing voting patterns which has created a large number of marginal seats in regions. This is best illustrated in NSW where two traditionally National Party seats, Page and Richmond, have been won and retained by the Labor Party in successive federal elections. Owing to growing urban populations seats held with large majorities by the National Party in previous parliaments are now marginal (e.g. Parkes in Western NSW). Similarly in Queensland Kennedy and Leichardt are in the rapidly expanding region Far North Queensland sited around Cairns.

The ALP has been quick to realise the rapid urbanisation associated with regional growth and the accompanying changes in social and community issues. On the contrary the Opposition and to an extent government services like the ABC remain trapped in a time warp which associates all regional issues with agriculture and associated primary production. The ability of political parties to attune their policy

agenda to the changing demographic, political and social expectations of the new urban centre is critical for the retention of government in both the federal and state political arenas.

REGIONS AS CORPORATIONS!

The concept of regionalism as presented by the federal government identifies a discrete area as unique and isolates the particular region on economic activities. The unifying themes of regionalism are also reinforced by the notion that leadership, management and strategic planning can collectivise and mobilise progress and development and ensure prosperity. This strategy transplants theories of management which interpret organisations as distinguished by defined boundaries against a broader social context. It suggests that the region is constructed as an isolated social system with unifying characteristics. It is systems management on a grand scale, with the same technical approach that management theories have applied to companies being applied regionally.

Whilst collective and collaborative efforts are clearly consistent with a democratic approach to development the extent to which broad range

issues and interests can emerge is limited by the adoption of a pseudo-corporate approach to regionalism. Questions need to be asked regarding the pressures for conformity which arise from this type of conceptualisation. What type of access to funds and policy support would "feral" developments have outside the guidelines endorsed by the local leadership groups or cliches proposed by McKinsey is questionable. It suggests that "image management" in relation to a regions viability will create significant pressures towards maintaining the regional corporate image. In such a context issues of ecology, juvenile justice and unemployment may vanish from the public culture. It is interesting to look at the chocolate box/travel brochure imaging of regions in the various government reports. They are almost identical to the images of the 1950's school Atlases.

The identification of regions by policy makers is also problematic. For residents in the region the impressionistic view of regions is often perceived as arbitrary and lacking coherence with local needs and services. Indeed the criticism of regional constructions exposes different and diffuse provincial loyalties. It also reveals the frustrations of poor integration between the allocation of a range of government services. A training needs survey in the Atherton Tablelands says:

"...definitions of regions imposed from outside without regards for feelings of local identity and the community of interest have, on the Tablelands, resulted in fragmentation of government services. This results in a misinterpretation of by outsiders that service provided through regional centres (not acknowledged locally as appropriate service centres) is reaching the people for whom that service is ostensibly for"
(Sheerston 1993 p 175).

The author attributes this to the centralist metropolitan nature of decision making saying:

"What seems to confuse service provision is what constitutes ... a region. The disjunction occurs between interpretations of 'region'. When viewed from the standpoint of outsiders -often decision makers in remote metropolitan offices means one thing. From the local residents view of themselves and their own identity, it means something else"
(Sheerston 1993 p 179).

These characteristics which have influenced the regional provision of government service has resulted in a disjointed and ambiguous approach to services. The lack of training opportunities and the poor co-ordination of existing services have significant impacts on both the social and community structure as well as the demographics of some regions.

EMPLOYMENT, TRAINING AND EDUCATION IN THE REGIONS

Insufficient and insufficiently diverse training and education and training opportunities have been identified as major concerns by young people themselves who recommend an expansion of TAFE offerings especially those courses which are more practically oriented "hands on" to developing skills immediately useful to industry (Cheers & Yip 1993 p 101; Bone, Cheers & Hil 1993 p 9). There is a general recognition that academic curriculum offered by schools is not appropriate to a growing number of people staying on in school and TAFE and that curriculum offerings and services to provide them in regional settings need to be expanded. Young people in surveys in both the Hinchinbrook and Whitsunday area believe that the costs of training and transport make participation difficult and that access to high quality training is limited(Bone, Cheers & Hil 1993 p 110). As identified by Cheers (1990) there is a cycle of low school retention rates, few job opportunities, resulting levels of high unemployment and limited tertiary and training options in rural centres.

This combination of poor post-compulsory education and limited job opportunities opportunities has contributed to "out" migration of young people to the larger centres where substantial population growth is being experienced e.g. Cairns. Apart from the obvious social impacts of esteem and alienation in these communities there are important demographic and economic ramifications. Training and education services are recognised as having not only an important impact on facilitating higher levels of skills development needed as a "magnet" for infrastructure investment but are seen as critical in also stabilising a population essential for the provision of both private and public sector services. The retention of young people from 15-25 age group is seen as critical to the ability of many communities to sustain viable commercial operations such as banking services and postal services etc.

Whilst development in Queensland has been heralded as ensuring a secure economic future the patterns of sharing in the new growth is segmented and not universal. In the emerging tourist industry opportunities for local young people have not eventuated as non-locals have secured the majority of the jobs. Unemployment rates in some regions where there is recognised boom conditions is as high as 30% of young people with some 70% being a situation of underemployment (Bone, Cheers & Hil 1993 p 109 & 112). Local young people have to be satisfied in with placement in the "old" industries and occupations which are in substantial decline and express resentment in relation to their increasing marginalisation in their own communities.

The inequitable nature of education and employment opportunities is most critical for groups such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island

communities. Their retention, participation and employment rates are far worse than the non-Aboriginal community. Importantly, the critical issues for many Aboriginal communities relate to juvenile justice and police harassment. Inspite of policy to the contrary there is widespread institutional racism in the regions researched and this

has impacted on the education and training facilities. From the perspective of young people and the regional communities there is ample evidence that training offered in regional centres are viewed as being inadequate to contemporary needs.

POLICY CONTRADICTIONS: REGIONALISM AND OPEN TRAINING MARKETS.

The system of education and training in Australia has moved significantly from a predominantly public sector activity by TAFE to a mixed model of public and private provider see (Kell 1993 a&b). Following the Report of the Training Costs of Award Restructuring Committee report chaired by Ivan Deveson in 1991 and the NBEET report entitled TAFE in the 1990s the emphasis has been on initiating a mix of private and public providers of education and training in an "open training market". In terms of the sectoral arrangements this represents a departure for the previous monopoly position held by TAFE in training and education and reserves a crucial position for private trainers many who are funded by the federal government for labour market training. The assumption in this changed policy is that vigorous competition will lead to an improved quality and quantity of training.

The success of this initiative in broadening the provision of training lies in the options that students and trainees have in articulating and accrediting their programs across sectors. In this context schools, private training providers and in-house enterprise level providers and their clients will require credit and articulation arrangements with public sector providers in TAFE and universities. This scenario creates a range of new challenges for cross sectoral collaboration between and across groups such as adult and community education, Skillshare projects and other emergent providers. The manner in which these providers meet industry needs and simultaneously provide options for articulation in further study and enhance participants skill levels for employment will critically determine the success of this reoriented policy stance.

The policy themes contain inherent contradictions. On one hand there is an emphasis on cross sectoral and inter-institutional co-operation and collaboration and on the other hand the ideology of a competitive and open training market is invoked. Systemic collectivism and market individualism are uncomfortably merged in the policy rhetoric.

The systemic collectivist view of regional development is reflected in proposals on education and training by the Taskforce into regional

development chaired by Bill Kelty. The Taskforce recommended the establishment of Vocational Education Centres in the regions which would be a consortium of business, trainers, universities, TAFE and presumably other private providers. The proposed funding of these centres is a tax waiver on company tax on the proviso that bona fide training expenditure exceeds 1% of total firms wages.

This collaborative policy positioning in relation to regional provision of training would seem to contradict some of the recent findings by the Allen Consulting for the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) group regarding the implementation of the national training agenda. The report found that the "market place is confused as to which agency is responsible for which aspect of the reform and the relationships between agencies are not understood" (ANTA 1994 p 17). Similarly the report concludes that "the lack of a coherent strategy for managing reforms is striking" (ANTA 1994 p 17). The contradictions between managing reform in a systematic and integrated manner and the development of a training market seems evident in the disjointed and unco-ordinated manner in which young people experience training.

THE GRASS ROOTS VIEW OUT IN THE REGIONS: THE BUSINESSES, THE SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES

The present experience of training for young people is far from the image of pathways and information super highway. Even though the National Training Agenda rhetoric has created an image of a "seamless web" of opportunities there is evidence that rigid demarcation exist which typify new class boundaries.

In high schools there seems to be an urgency and enthusiasm to accommodate the needs of those unlikely to go to university. Attempts to meet the demand for vocational education has meant that innovation has fallen at the school level. As Gleeson (1993) argues people only need to think a reform is happening and it does happen! The primary asset for these schools has been a creativity to finance, resource and adapt programs and generate enthusiasm amongst young people. In many cases has not been supported by the mandarins in training authorities who argue for innovation and diversity but remain obsessed with registration and demarcation issues. At one school there has been a comprehensive effort to introduce national metal modules which has included a substantial renovation of facilities by staff with funds raised from the community. The curriculum has been redrafted to provide appropriate accreditation within a comprehensive high school. Their initiatives are however marooned between the contradictory demands of schools and training organisations. Registration requirements and the demands of best practice are difficult to attain in the context of the institutional histories and expectations of comprehensive schools. The reduced class sizes and flexible

timetables necessary for vocational education programs to be successful create specific difficulties in resource poor schools.

Whilst teachers are pre-empting the arrival of Australian Vocational Certificate they are justifiably nervous about several issues. The catchment groups for such courses are considered to be the less academically inclined not interested in university entrance, a group which nationally represents some 70% of years 11-12. Initiatives which provide alternative pathways become quickly identified as low status and as "vegie" classes by teachers, students and parents. Indeed many young people who find the academic curriculum unstimulating many find satisfaction and performance in their vocational subjects. However their achievement receive little parity in tertiary entrance and within the culture of achievement in the school. I recently attended a prize giving night at a regional high school where there was no mention of any work related or vocational, technical or joint schools /TAFE initiatives were announced. The night was a procession of triumph in "academic" (subject areas were unnamed) and sporting prowess.

Of similar concern are issues of progression and credit transfers between the TAFE, school and university system in regional centres. Teachers express real concern and disillusionment with the options available for students. Clearly the espoused "pathways" do not exist. The historic demarcations seem amplified in rural centres where opportunities for further studies are limited and the teenage labour market declining. The real danger is that initiatives in vocational education become "institutional orphans" accepted by neither the schooling system nor TAFE and isolated from employment connections in industry. Without options to convert qualifications to full awards and to transfer them intersectorally students are left in a "credential hiatus".

New class barriers have emerged around the institutional features of

training providers. Institutions erect blatant barriers in relation to servicing new class structures and referral agencies such as CES maintain demarcations between providers. Transition between organisation such as Skillshare and TAFE are subject to arbitrary separation. Similarly some Skillshare programs do not have the resources and organisational history to provide broadened curriculum offerings to assist students and their clients remain trapped.

More disturbing is access to courses in areas of high unemployment at the lowest rungs of the training system. One scheme which the research team visited was shown a maths entry test for a catering course for the long term unemployed. The test was abstract, academic in content with vague connections to the trade. It was debateable whether these calculations would have been used in the industry. Competitive entry for a minimum number of places meant that failing students were

excluded from the course. There was no remedial maths program offered to assist people qualify and the entry test was based on a deficit notion of skills. These exclusionary practices act to reinforce new class barriers which are now assigned by different levels of the training system. Where does this underclass now go ?

THE REGIONS AND THE STATE

What does this mean in terms a view of the state. There appear to be several interesting directions and images about regions, the state and the way in which the state services needs which are crucial in the regions. In terms of servicing the needs of regions this paper has argued that education and training occupies a critical role and links with regional development in several ways. The themes which emerge from a preliminary analysis of education and training provides indicators on the nature and character of the state.

Several themes emerge:

- i) The nation is divided into discrete, identified regions with a specific economic and social identity. This identity often represents a partial and superficial view which has more to do with centralised priorities than with the needs of the communities.
- ii) The notion of region and the policy rhetoric strategically positions regions as requiring the same technical management which would apply to a corporation. The policies and consultant reports on regions suggest that a co-ordinating "leadership group" and "a mission statement" and an "implementation plan".
- iii) The image management of regionalism has dangers in concealing issues in terms of social justice. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues are mentioned sparingly and outside the context of regions. Similarly the differential and unbalanced nature of development and growth in employment for many "locals" is not acknowledged. The "trickle down" effect in the boom regions is not evident to many, particularly the young.
- iv) The strategic initiatives in training and education sit in a contradictory matrix of policies on regionalism which stress systemic collective partnerships and the National Training agenda which stresses the notion of market individualism.
The evidence from our studies shows that the integration of service needed and demanded by communities is not being achieved in a climate of contradiction.
- v) In several research projects young people in regional and rural contexts view the training system as inadequate to their needs. The

need for expanded opportunities which link with local employment opportunities in emerging industries is critical.

vi) New class structures are being reinforced within the training systems which service regional centres. In the private sector, trainers largely funded by government contracts may have created niche markets and that create differential and class structured training. Is abseiling for executives the same for abseiling for the long term unemployed. How does this translate to a competency framework ?

vii) For the National Training Agenda to successfully provide greater options and choice for the young people in regions, the structures and strategies need to recognise and account for the institutional, cultural and social histories of the regions which have impeded training and educational opportunities. The state structures need to simultaneously intervene to nurture reforms and practices which promote access, mobility and equity in the provision of quality training and employment opportunities and challenge those historical themes which segment and differentiate. Its unlikely that a reliance on policy which stresses a market philosophy will ever achieve such a critical balance.

The pattern of state responsibility contains conflicting messages about integration and systemic collaboration under the umbrella of government and at the same time displays a ideological commitment to competitive practices. Much of this training market in fact is funded by the state to underpin the market framework. The new market framework also contains evidence of a new class formations which are exacerbated by the erosion of old industries and the emergence of new service oriented industries.

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