Rural Transitions: a description of a research project in action at a regional campus of the University of Tasmania.

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Abstract
The Cradle Coast campus (CCC) at Burnie is a satellite of the University of Tasmania. The CCC is in a rural region, which historically has had a low retention rate to higher education. It is playing an increasingly important role in transforming the community into one with higher education aspirations. The role of the Education Faculty is integral to this transformation, as it offers the first two years of its Bachelor of Education degree in this regional location. This encourages and supports the return to tertiary study of mature age students who form the bulk of its enrolment.

This paper will examine educational transitions in this setting: the students’ experience of transforming their futures through tertiary study; the growth of the regional campus; the writer’s own transition from that of teaching principal of a small school to lecturer, coordinator and conduit between unit supervisors, lecturers and students; and the potential for an increasing number of permanent residents with tertiary education qualifications to impact on the social capital and educational profile of the region.

The Cradle Coast campus (CCC) at Burnie is a satellite of the University of Tasmania. The campus is in a rural region, which historically has had a low retention rate to higher education. It is playing an increasingly important role in transforming the community into one with higher education aspirations. The role of the Education Faculty is integral to this transformation, as it offers the first two years of its Bachelor of Education degree in this regional location. This encourages and supports the return to tertiary study of mature age students who form the bulk of its enrolment.

The theme of this paper, Rural Transitions, allows me to explore various aspects of educational transitions in a rural context, including my own personal journey from educator to researcher. As I am in the very early stages of my research project, my work so far has been in formulating questions and this paper will explore some of the implications of those questions. The nature of the campus will be described and related to regional development policy, and the significance of building social capital in regional areas. Some brief information about the students themselves and the challenges they face in undertaking their study, suggests the direction of the research project and the methodology that will be used. I will start by placing myself in the context of the research.

As a teacher for almost 25 years in the most north-westerly municipality of Tasmania, I have had a wide range of teaching experiences beginning with secondary and adult literacy teaching which led me inexorably, to teach in the primary area specialising in literacy. Classroom teaching roles interspersed with support roles in literacy, special education, behaviour management, and arts curriculum gave me opportunities to work with some important educational developments, cutting edge teaching practice and influential educators. After several years as a classroom teacher in the early childhood area, I became a teaching principal in a small primary school with a multi-grade class from Grade 3-6. This variety of experiences has created a patchwork quilt of practical working knowledge supported by more in-depth theoretical investigations in several areas of teaching and learning.

When the opportunity came to move into a teaching role in the Bachelor of Education at the Cradle Coast campus, my quilt became a security blanket, which reassured me that I had a depth of experience to draw on in teaching pre-service teachers. Once I had settled in to the role and the newness began to wear off, I began to look around me and became aware that I was surrounded by people whose heads were in a totally different space to mine for much of the time. They talked about research and grants, qualitative and quantitative methodologies, masters and doctorates, data gathering and management – all sorts of jargon with which I had no familiarity at all. I clutched my security blanket even closer and kept my head down.

It soon became evident that research was not just possible, it was a necessary part of being a tertiary educator and with some encouragement from colleagues, I began to consider the possibilities of the research journey. Peering somewhat tentatively into the shiny opening of the tunnel before me I received a quick push in the back, and before I knew it, was off down the slippery slope. My security blanket had transformed into a magic carpet and I was irrevocably on the journey of research for a Masters in Education. Once started there was little time to think as deadlines for one thing after another, arose. Each step was a frenzy of preparation like the downhill rush on a roller coaster, followed by the short calm of a milestone achieved and then, the emergence of the next milestone – the proposal, the preliminary research plan, the ethics submission, the annual review – each with its own slow inching up the slope, followed by a
teetering pause before the next downhill plunge. Now, my first conference paper – another crest – another rush. My transition from primary school teacher to university academic has passed the point of no return.

As I worked with students in my first semester at university I became aware that the cohort was rather different from my expectations in that there was a large proportion of mature age students. There appeared to be a different age balance in the student group who attended Cradle Coast compared to those who attended at the Launceston campus. Conversations with students about their motivation and expectations of the course aroused my interest and suggested the direction of my research. Why had these students chosen a path of transition from established life styles and occupations to a different future as teachers?

The ever-important goals of the university and the Cradle Coast campus in particular, in attracting and retaining students, gave a strong purpose for seeking insight into the characteristics of the current and potential student body. A vigorous state-wide advertising campaign, entitled “Revolutionise Your Life”, certainly promoted a vision of positive change through education. It was aimed at people who for one reason or another had “missed the boat” and could now grasp a second chance to gain a tertiary qualification with its promise of greater financial and personal status. To what extent had this campaign influenced the student cohort?

When investigating the field of tertiary education in regional areas, it soon becomes apparent that there is a strong connection to the concept of social capital and its central importance in regional development. The term, social capital, attributed to Bourdieu, was defined by Woolcock (1998, as cited in Falk & Kilpatrick, 1999) as “encompassing the norms and networks facilitating collective action for mutual benefit” (p. 2.) The OECD (2001) gave a clear definition: “Social capital is networks together with shared norms, values and understandings that facilitate cooperation within and among groups” (Kearns, 2004).

Falk and Kilpatrick focussed on “the structure and outcomes of social relationships” in their study in 1999. They proposed a definition of social capital as “the product of social interactions with the potential to contribute to the social, civic or economic well-being.” They further argued that “the interactions draw on knowledge and identity resources and simultaneously use and build stores of social capital” (Falk & Kilpatrick, 1999). The OECD (OECD, 2001) recognised the role of social capital and its networks in facilitating and maximising the flow of knowledge and information that strengthens communities. It is these connections to growing the body of knowledge in a community and spreading it through the existing networks among social and professional groups, that resonates strongly with the work of tertiary education. Kearns (2004) argued that VET (Vocational Education & Training) can contribute to social capital building in many ways and I would argue that these points also have considerable relevance to a vocational tertiary degree such as the Bachelor of Education. He argued for recognition of “the fundamental interdependence between social capital, human capital and economic and community well-being.” He further discussed the way in which “local partnership strategies such as learning communities have considerable value in building social capital and a local social infrastructure for innovation across economic, social, cultural and educational sectors” (Kearns, 2004).

The argument for connecting learning, which is seen as human capital development, more closely with the social, business and professional networks already existing in a community, will not only use those networks to advantage but will further develop the strength and value of the social capital within the region (Falk & Kilpatrick, 1999). This interactive process can be seen operating strongly at the Cradle Coast campus, with the Tasmanian Institute for Agricultural Research (TIAR) conducting research and knowledge development in the state wide farming sector, with collaboration between farmers, business and academics. The Rural Clinical School is also using local medical practices and expertise in developing innovative medical training programs in rural areas across the state for medical undergraduates, nurses, paramedics and other medical professionals from all around Australia. In a recent paper at the Pan Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning, Professor Judi Walker described a model for delivery of vocational degrees in small island states. She suggested that “successful existing programs can be adapted for efficient delivery in the local context provided there is a culture of collaboration, partnership and innovation” (Walker, 2006). If it is accepted that social capital is seen in the social networks of a community, then those networks can be utilised to enhance educational goals and by doing so, the social capital of the region will continue to grow.

At a national level, policy has been developed to promote and support regional growth through education and economic development. In 2003, the Federal Government initiated the Sustainable Regions Program that collated information to provide a regional profile of the Cradle Coast and this data provides some insight into the educational needs of the area (Dept of Transport & Regional Services, 2003). It shows the catchment area of the Cradle Coast campus as exactly one-third of the land area of Tasmania with a population that is 22% of the state and is declining. In travel time it is 2 hours away from the Launceston campus and 4 hours from the Hobart campus. According to the Regional Profile document The Index of Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage (SEIFA) indicates that the region is lower than the Tasmanian average and that Tasmania is disadvantaged compared to the rest of Australia (DOTARS, 2003). The statistics presented in this document are drawn from the 2001 Census and indicate educational provision at university level as an
area which could be improved.

Access to and participation in tertiary study for people in rural and remote areas continues to be an issue that concerns educators. “People living outside urban regions continue to be a significantly underrepresented group and should be given specific consideration within the equity policy framework” (James, Baldwin, Coates, Krause, & McInnes, 2004). In the Tasmanian context university level tertiary education has been historically located in Hobart and Launceston, and during the last decade, has been extended to the Cradle Coast campus at Burnie for units of some courses. Compared to the distances involved in travel in the mainland states, Tasmania may seem a geographically compact unit with easy access to all parts. Indeed, there are often instances of interstate visitors who arrive in Tasmania on the ferry, believing they can drive around Tasmania in a day and sail back on the return voyage. This, however, is far from accurate.

Hobart is the capital city and the traditional home of the Tasmanian university. In addition to being one of the oldest universities in Australia, the University of Tasmania is also one of the youngest. In 1991, a year after its centenary, the University merged with the Tasmanian State Institute of Technology in Newnham, Launceston (TSIT), to form a 'new' University of Tasmania. Education, Nursing and Aquaculture are three of the major degree courses offered from the Launceston campus. In 1995, the university extended its state wide representation when it opened the Cradle Coast Campus in Burnie (www.utas.edu.au). The Tasmanian Institute of Agricultural Research, (TIAR) has been a major focus. This site was called the Cradle Coast campus in line with the promotion of the region as the Cradle Coast, which referred to the famous Cradle Mountain National Park that dominates the skyline providing a backdrop to the beautiful beaches and spectacular bluffs, which form the coast.

Burnie is centrally placed in this region although not the largest urban centre. It draws on an urban population from Devonport through to Wynyard along a coastal strip but also services a very large, more sparsely populated rural area which stretches through to the west coast of Tasmania and south to the mining area around Queenstown. It is surrounded by farms including dairy, beef, and cropping, with a wide range of vegetables being grown. The area is also famous for its fishing industry based on abalone, oysters, scallops and crayfish as well as scalefish.

Retention of students to higher education has been an on-going problem in the region, particularly in the more remote rural areas. In the 2001 census, 9.4% of employed people in the region held a university degree, compared to 15.1% for Tasmania as a whole and 18.7% for Australia. However, the Cradle Coast region has comparatively more with a skilled vocational qualification, with 20.8% having completed Certificate 3 or 4, compared with 17.7% for Tasmania (Dept of Transport & Regional Services, 2003). The data from the census shows the proportion of young people attending secondary school and TAFE is similar to Tasmania as a whole but the proportion attending university is much lower, at 3.6% compared to Tasmania at 17% for those aged between 20 and 24. This reflects the fact that many students have to move away from the region to pursue university studies. The movement of youth to the urban areas for education and the proportion who later return to their home region as qualified professionals, would have to be the subject of another study but anecdotal evidence would suggest that relatively few return following graduation. These figures may also suggest that young people are willing and able to pursue tertiary education when it is available to them in their home area as they do pursue vocational education through TAFE. However, concern was noted in the study that there is a relatively high proportion (16.3%) of youth aged 20 – 24 who are disengaged from education or employment, compared to 12.4% for Tasmania and 8.9% for Australia. (Dept of Transport & Regional Services, 2003)

The picture then, is one of young and mature-aged students having to leave the region to pursue university level tertiary education with the likelihood that they will not return upon completion of their studies. This ‘brain drain’ from the region is often commented on anecdotally, accepted as “popular wisdom” and has been analysed as part of “the politics of regional youth migration” (Gabriel, 2000, 2002). Gabriel examines more closely the aspirations of young people and shows that a range of options are desirable, meeting the needs of those who wish to leave as well as those who would like to stay in their home region or return as qualified professionals. The establishment of a university campus in the region has the potential to give greater flexibility by providing degree options that lead to employment within the region. Since its establishment in 1995, the Cradle Coast campus has been addressing this perceived need.

The access to degree units at Cradle Coast has been gradually growing and in 2006 the Bachelor of Regional Resource Management became the first full degree offered wholly at the campus. The Bachelor of Education is a degree course that has been steadily increasing its availability at the campus. Prior to 2004 students could enrol for Year 1 units; in 2004 some units of Year 2 were offered; and in 2005, all of Year 1 and 2 could be completed at CCC before students went to Launceston to complete their degree. It is hoped that the full four years will be available at the campus in 2008.

In addition to the young secondary college leavers, the Cradle Coast campus aims to attract mature-aged students who have made the decision to return to education for a variety of reasons; resuming an interrupted education, changing direction in their lives or advancing in an established occupation. The majority of students currently studying Year 1 and 2 of the Bachelor of Education degree at Cradle Coast, are mature age, i.e. over 23, which is the age at which TCE
(Tasmanian Certificate of Education) scores are no longer used to determine TER (Tertiary Entrance Rank) entry level. An intake of approximately 55 in each of the past two years has included 39 mature age in 2005, and 33 in 2006. The year 2 group of 2005 (first year in 2004) had 22 of 36 students over the age of 23. In round terms then, 60 – 70% of Cradle Coast Education students are mature-aged.

This research project aims to investigate what motivated these students to return to study and to the Bachelor of Education in particular, as mature aged students. The significance of its availability at Cradle Coast campus will also be investigated as part of the research. As many of these students have family commitments as parents of dependent children, and/or work commitments, which are necessary for supporting families, the opportunity to study without leaving home to go to a distant campus, could be a major deciding factor. These factors of access are frequently cited in the literature as critical. Marion Bowl, investigating this issue in the United Kingdom explored “the everyday reality of access, widening participation and lifelong learning for those who enter university as mature students with family, work and caring commitments” (Bowl, 2003) and suggested that there are several paradoxes which make access difficult in practice. Heagney suggested that in Australia we have a case of “widening participation for some, but not others”(Heagney, 2006). The rising costs of education mean that “low income rural families cannot afford to send their children to university”(Heagney, 2006). In the case of Bachelor of Education the time taken in travel, added to the cost, is a serious disadvantage. In the third and fourth years of study, the majority of these students travel to Launceston daily, a round trip of 4 hours, rather than relocating, in order to maintain their family commitments.

The fact that these students are firmly located in the region through owning homes, having family ties, having work commitments and social networks, means that many will seek to return to work in the region after graduation. It may be that their aspirations for the future are quite different to those of the younger students who enter the course. As they work in local schools on their practicum experiences, they build their professional networks and become an increasingly valuable resource for the future. This pool of new teachers with professional training in addition to life skills and a deep commitment to their local region will be a valuable asset in a region which historically has found it difficult to attract staff to some of its more remote areas. Their potential to enhance the social capital of the region through bringing additional knowledge and skills which add professional connectedness to already established social networks, will be an interesting focus for research.

A survey of the demographic profile of the students who entered the Bachelor of Education at Cradle Coast in 2003 and 2004, and who have been successful in continuing their studies to year 4 and year 3 respectively, will provide information about the educational and social backgrounds of these students. It will also reveal a little about the factors that motivated them to seek a degree in education, and the factors that they perceive to have helped them succeed. This data will be analysed to give a statistical picture of the mature aged cohort. From the initial survey of approximately 70 students, 6 will be selected to represent a range of factors: gender, age, previous educational background, marital status, and family commitments. These students will then be invited to share their individual stories about their experience of tertiary study through a recorded interview. These interviews will be transcribed and presented as a narrative inquiry. Polkinghorne (Hatch & Wisniewski, 1995) described narrative inquiry as “a subset of qualitative research designs in which stories are used to describe human action” (p.5).

Bruner (1985, cited by Polkinghorne in Hatch & Wisniewski) argued that narrative is more than “mere emotive expression; rather it is a legitimate form of reasoned knowing” (p.9). Claidnin and Connelly(2000) examine four different ways that a narrative inquiry can focus attention; on the “inward” or internal conditions such as hopes and feelings; “outward” or the environment: and “backward and forward”, investigating the past, present and future to develop a narrative which shows the experience of individuals (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Hatch and Wisniewski (Hatch & Wisniewski, 1995) describe two different types of narrative inquiry; the paradigmatic type gathers stories and analyses them to produce themes across stories and taxonomies of types of stories. Concepts and theories are induced from the data. The narrative-type narrative analysis gathers data from a variety of sources and develops a coherent account to link past events in an explanation of an outcome. The present study may develop as either six narrative analyses or an analysis of six narratives. That adventure in learning is still to come and will explore the individual persons and present their stories of transition, while drawing out common threads and analogies which will inform educational practice in the Cradle Coast context.

This investigation will provide information on the factors motivating students to enrol in Education, which will assist the faculty in targeting its recruitment efforts and further the agenda of the university. Insight into the challenges encountered by mature aged students, both in the act of studying and in the social and personal changes they experience, will inform the Faculty and the Cradle Coast campus, in providing assistance and support as these students pursue their goals. Access and learning opportunities can be enhanced to maximise the success of students studying in this degree at Cradle Coast. The University Preparation Program developed at Cradle Coast and implemented on all campuses, is one way that the university supports all entrants when they need it.

One of the constraints that students often express relates to university not being for “people like them”. A colleague, Dr
John Ewington, has come to refer to this as the “social cage”, drawing on a reference to Australian sociologist, Hugh Mackay. Mackay (1994), when talking about communication described a “lifelong process of constructing personal cages around ourselves”, (p. 61) made up of knowledge, values, beliefs and convictions, which give a sense of identity and personal security. Mackay argues that this cage mediates our communication with others so that we “deal with messages in a way that confirms what we already thought or what we expected to hear” (Mackay, 1994). People from rural, lower socio-economic backgrounds where tertiary education is not part of their family history and experience may well be constrained by a social ‘cage’ which includes seeing themselves as a certain kind of person; “not academic”, “not having the intelligence required”, “not knowing the language”, “not having writing/reading/IT skills”, “not for someone like me”. As school leavers, they may have believed or been told that tertiary education was not possible for them and indeed, they may not have had a sufficiently high score to give them entrance. As mature age students the doors are now open but the bars of the cage may still be closing them off from success as they struggle to change the picture they have held of themselves in the past. This is particularly problematic in issues of educational status, with social dialect and academic dialect impacting on how students view themselves and are viewed by others. Supporting this transition to successful student is the work of lecturers and tutors in the university; addressing the skills, developing the language and widening the space between the bars of the cage to admit more and different information and communication. As these students persist and succeed, their expectations for their own children will change and tertiary education may well become part of their family history into future generations. This is an exciting, long-term transition, which is possible with the accessibility of tertiary education in regional areas.

There are challenges inherent in the delivery of an equivalent but not necessarily identical course in regional locations, which require collaborative partnerships between lecturers as well as flexible learning options. Utilising local skilled educators and professional networks is one way that can be explored to enhance both the delivery of the course, and the strength of the network itself. This paper has argued that delivering degree courses at a local level and supporting the further education of mature aged students will contribute to the social capital of the region through enhanced knowledge and additional skills and confidence. The range of different directions and transitions possible within educational contexts can be widened and meet the needs of a greater range of people at different stages in their lives.

REFERENCES

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