



PASCAL International Observatory

Briefing Paper 26

Connecting Urban and Rural Learning Initiatives

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Introduction

The PASCAL Learning Cities Network (LCN), *Connecting Urban and Rural Learning Initiatives*, examines the distinctive learning needs of rural, and remote communities to find ways in which learning city initiatives, and linkages to urban communities can support learning development and sustainable community building, that addresses the particularity of smaller places.

Key themes that have been discussed within this network have been the concepts of regional, local or community economic development with an emphasis on social justice and inclusive policies.

Venter (2022) notes that local economic development (LED)/community economic development (CED) means to think local and act global. This means fostering at a community level in areas of social, economic, cultural, and spatial growth. LED is usually aimed at the creation of jobs and wealth, quality of life and fighting poverty. Local government plays an important role - “municipalities are the foot soldiers of community economic development (CED) (Venter, *ibid.*, preface)”.

Osborne (2014, p. 1070) highlights the many benefits of including a lifelong learning approach to place-based CED. The proximity to communities and local stakeholders also puts local and regional governments in a privileged position to contribute to educational objectives. However, implementing governance of such educational systems involves multilevel partnerships that are vital for inclusive quality education. Australian examples in this paper demonstrating practical examples of a CED based on partnership underpinned by lifelong learning include Gwydir Learning Region in New South Wales, the City of Ballarat in Victoria and Tamworth

Regional Council in New South Wales with an Irish example from the Council of Derry City and Strabane District Council.

The role of Higher Education in regional and community development has long been a key theme of PASCAL (Carlot *et al.*, 2015), and Marius Venter, University of Johannesburg, and Norman Waltzer, with colleagues from the Illinois Institute of Rural Affairs from our network, have shared their knowledge in our discussions (Sudhipongpracha & Waltzer 2015, Venter, 2022, Waltzer & Merrett, 2023). Furthermore, Vocational Education and Training (TVET) has a vital role to play as illustrated by Idowu Biao (2021), in his presentation on rural-urban migration of young people.

Practitioners and academics in the community development field have for a long time been influenced by an asset or strengths-based approach based on the work amongst others of Kretzman & McKnight (1993, 1997), Beilharz (2002), Mathie & Cunningham (2008) and Preece (2017). Merrett, (2021) has noted that Asset Based Community Development remains an important way for the Illinois Institute of Rural Affairs (IIRA) to work collaboratively across sectors, with local communities.

Rural regions can sometimes be described as relatively isolating places with low population density and limited resources. On the other hand, people can also have deep connections to groups within the community and a sense of responsibility to the natural environment. In addition, there are risk factors that can threaten community prosperity and long-term sustainability (Kerezi *et al.* 2014). These factors include an ageing population, lower than median incomes and poor access to post compulsory education. For example, Dudgeon et al (2024, p.25), reports that the quality of education, particularly in remote communities in Australia, is often not equivalent to that available to metropolitan students. In many cases education in rural and remote communities is ‘neither widely available nor easily accessible’. There are also concerns about the quality of the education and whether it is culturally appropriate in a rural setting. Some of these concerns were canvassed from our network members.

Members stressed that regional, local or community economic development must include an emphasis on social justice and inclusive policies, for example issues such as:

- mental health and young people;
- social isolation;
- lack of broadband in rural areas;
- lack of access to skills training;
- lack of knowledge about food production;
- the role of Men’s sheds in rural areas; and
- the need for entrepreneurial learning.

While noting the issues our members highlighted positive local actions as frameworks for others to adapt. This briefing paper summarises the presentations and topics discussed between 2021-2022. In 2023 the City of Ballarat, in Victoria Australia, and the Regional Council of Tamworth joined the network and short case studies on those regional areas are also included.

Regional Economic Development

Regional Economic Development is a key focus for the network - in particular strategies that focus on employment, business start-ups and development. Regional economic development is a primary focus for rural communities, but our group demonstrated with examples that it must include ***inclusive economic development strategies***, otherwise issues such as the digital divide, housing stress, isolation, and mental health will remain entrenched.

Some participants applied South Africa's Framework for Local Economic Development, and particularly the Six Core Policy Pillars, to their work (Venter, 2022). It was found that this Framework provided a useful analysis tool for assessing the implementation of regional economic development policy in a region. For example, a case study about Gwydir Learning Region in Northeast New South Wales (NSW), Australia, applied the six core policy pillars for local economic development to map how lifelong learning has driven inclusive economic development in Gwydir Shire, over the period of formation of the Gwydir Learning Region (GLR) in 2003 until 2022 (Eastcott & Wheeler, 2022).

The Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs (IIRA) use the term Community Economic Development. Christopher Merrett, Director and Professor of the IIRA said the purpose of the Institute is to be a major statewide source for applied policy research on rural issues. It is important to have such an institute embedded in the community with a strong focus on rural community development and strengths in policy development, research, education and outreach. Asset Based Community Development (A-B-C-D) continues to remain an extremely relevant way of working collaboratively, across sectors, with local communities. IIRA has developed a sustainable model of university-community partnerships which are much less vulnerable to the whims of policy and funding changes (Merritt, 23 September 2021).

Throughout the period Norman Walzer encouraged members of the network to publish. He has a standing invitation for practitioners and academics to contribute to a journal that he co-edits - *Local Development and Society*. In September 2023, his invitation extended to a book about innovative business transitions. The core issue to be addressed for him is that aging populations, especially in rural areas, are threatening many long-term business establishments that are essential to quality of life in the community. Business owners reach retirement age with no heirs willing to take over the business. This book will describe *innovative approaches used to transition these businesses* to new owners and thereby save essential services in the communities.

Rural-Urban Migration – Benin, an African Case Study

Idowu Biao, Professor of Lifelong Learning, Université d'Abomey Calavi, Benin, presented on '*Rural-Urban Migration and its Implication for Learning in Cities: the Case Study of Benin*'. Biao defined the types of migration (international and in-country migration); and the patterns of migration (rural-urban; rural-rural; and urban-urban), as well as providing a theoretical framework for sustainable development, and background to rural-urban migration in Benin. Biao noted that while there has been continuous urbanisation since the 1960s, as of 2019, 52% of the population still lived in rural areas. There was what he termed a "youth troop" to the city and therefore sustainable development was focused on the types of training those who migrate should get involved in. Vocational Education and Training (TVET) is important in three areas: literacy, entrepreneurial education, and general TVET. There is a need to understand the new industries and to ensure a matching of training to jobs (Biao, 2021).

Inclusive and Sustainable Learning Cities and Regions

The principles and values identified as key features of learning cities (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning 2014) are also applicable to rural and remote communities, in small towns and villages, and in disadvantaged neighbourhoods and communities.

The learning city movement values all forms of learning and Barry Golding illustrated how collaborative, informal, 'hands-on' learning in informal communities of practice through the Men's Shed movement can make a real difference in the health of well-being particularly of older men (and now women) located in rural communities (Golding, 2022).

Michele Murphy, the former Learning City Coordinator, presented on the Learning City of Derry and Strabane Region - a city region serving over 350,000 people with a land area of 1245 km². Challenges identified are a skills gap; lack of opportunities for education and employment and changing demographics. The aim is to provide decent work and entrepreneurship and educate for employment. The Learning City project ensured a learning festival and learning zones covered both city and rural regions (Murphy, 2021). Derry and Strabane Council established a collaborative Labour Market Partnership Strategy which is the main vehicle for prioritising local employability and labour market issues (Derry and Strabane, 2022).

Two Australian cities - recent members of the Australian Learning Communities Network (ALCN)- Tamworth Region, Central New South Wales, and the City of Ballarat in Victoria provide excellent examples of how to build on strengths to pursue a lifelong learning strategy as part of their respective Council and broader sustainable development goals. They are new members to the PASCAL Connecting Rural and Urban Learning Initiative Networks.

Australian Case Study One: City of Ballarat, Victoria, Australia

The Regional City of Ballarat (Australia) is the State of Victoria's largest inland city with a population of 113,725 (2021). The population has grown by almost 20 per cent in the past 10 years and is forecast to grow by a further 27 per cent to more than 144,000 by 2036. Much of the growth is happening in Ballarat West Growth area which covers rural areas.

The City falls within the traditional boundaries of the Kulin Nation, with the Wadawurrung and Dja Dja Wurrung people being the Traditional Custodians. Ballarat is also renowned for its Gold Rush era history with a rich and unique heritage apparent in the architecture of the City.

Notably, the City's population is characterised by the disparity in socio-economic status (SES), with some suburbs having relatively high levels of education, employment, and income, while others (e.g., Wendouree, Sebastopol, Redan) are among the 2.5 per cent most disadvantaged areas in the state – with low levels of employment, literacy, income, and wellbeing.

In 2022, Ballarat Libraries launched its new Libraries and Learning Strategy 2022-2027. This key document emphasizes the importance of literacy, lifelong learning, digital inclusion, and wellbeing.

Ballarat has an extensive network of educational institutions and Ballarat Libraries is, through a collaborative approach, developing a range of lifelong learning programs and resources to improve skills in adult literacies, digital literacies, financial literacies, health literacies and information literacies.

The main library in the City of Ballarat is being updated and to ensure equality and access of learning opportunities for all residents, the opening and activation of Community Hubs in the outer neighbourhoods is happening in 2023 and 2024. These will offer low-cost learning programs in a diverse range of areas as well as co-locating with kindergartens, Maternal Child Health, senior citizen clubs and others. A Lifelong Learning Festival is planned, and the regional city is exploring membership of UNESCO GNLC (Lockwood, 2023).

Australian Case Study Two: Tamworth Learning Region (Kamilaroi Country), New South Wales, Australia

The Tamworth Region with a population of 64,522 (2022), located in the state's Central North spans from the vibrant regional city of Tamworth to include the towns of Manilla, Barraba, Nundle, and Kootingal as well as 17 hamlets, villages, and rural areas. Strategically located between Sydney and Brisbane, Tamworth is a dynamic and progressive city, bursting with infrastructure and activity.

The learning region concept is being driven in part by the Tamworth Region Inclusive Community Advisory Committee (TRICAC). The broad purpose and aim of the TRICAC is to provide strategic advice to the Council in relation to diversity and other specific cultural matters, within the region and make recommendations regarding priority areas for development and or support. One of the main roles is to advice on and monitor the implementation of actions in the Tamworth Region Cultural Plan which relate to cultural diversity.

Two key actions in the Cultural Plan is 1) to increase the range of educational opportunities for residents, and 2) to develop a community learning plan to promote health, creative aging, and positive youth and child development (Delahunt, 2023).

Building on its reputation as a Country Music Hub for Australia, in 2019, Tamworth Regional Council partnered with United Way Australia to launch Dolly Parton's Imagination Library (DPIL) Tamworth. Adopting a whole of community approach, Council, business, philanthropic organisations and community have joined together to ensure that all children born since 2019 in the Tamworth local government area (LGA) are enrolled in the Imagination Library, giving them the best chance to start school ready to learn. Each child receives a book in the mail every month from birth to five years (60 books) and Tamworth Library provides wrap-around programs and support to families. Researcher Claire Galea, found that the programme is having a significant impact with 65 % of young children participating read to more than 10 minutes a day, nearly double the average Australian child (Begley & Ackew, July 2023).

Summary

The topics examined in this network are but a snapshot of the distinctive learning needs of rural, and remote communities. A place-based approach based on local/community economic developed underpinned by lifelong learning is vital. Local and regional governments are well placed to contribute to educational objectives. It takes a multi-level approach, and key partners include Higher Education and Vocational Education and Training, as are community members/residents and local businesses who understand the issues faced and a good knowledge of the assets in the areas they reside.

Konvitz (2014) notes that medium-sized cities, often closer to their rural areas, have the most potential for growth and that rural-urban interdependence must be strengthened. To achieve equality of access, learning opportunities and other services that are available in urban areas must be extended to rural areas. This is a challenge, but our network members have illustrated innovative, inclusive actions to strengthen their communities with links to nearby regional cities.

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