

DECENT TRAINING FOR DECENT WORK

STRENGTHENING EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES

(STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN LEARN LOCAL
OFFERINGS AND EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES FOR LEARNERS)

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A REPORT FOR THE GRAMPIANS ACFE REGIONAL COUNCIL,
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT



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1. Executive Summary

*'Each thing you do creates another opportunity for you'
(Focus group member, October 2014)*

Learn Local Organisations (LLOs) located in rural and regional communities provide a vital service in supporting the most vulnerable learners in their communities, yet the outcomes from strategies to assist disadvantaged learners into vocational training and employment are not improving. This is despite the best efforts of LLOs and their partners and the focus placed on achieving such outcomes.

Project Purpose

This is the final report for the Grampians Adult, Community and Further Education (ACFE) Regional Council, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD). It investigates the issues impacting on achieving strong employment outcomes for the most disadvantaged learners in rural locations. It reports on the findings and also makes recommendations for actions to support LLOs located in regional and rural areas to strengthen the connections between LLOs and industry in order to ensure that they are able to support the most vulnerable learners in their communities.

The key research questions

1. How can LLOs better understand the strategies and resources available to support at risk learners to help them re-engage with further education and employment?
2. How can the design and targeting of programs by LLOs be improved to ensure they meet industry need?
3. What are the key best practice elements of sustainable partnership networks that work collaboratively to increase training and employment outcomes?

Project Methodology

This project contained a number of different data collection methods. These included a survey of LLO Executive Officers; a detailed regional labour market analysis; focus groups and individual interviews with stakeholders including learners; and desktop research of current literature, policies, case studies and existing practices in other locations state-wide, nationally and internationally.

Summary of key issues and findings

LLO Capacity

- Attracting suitable LLO Board members is an issue across the region, but is exacerbated in small communities.
- Competent governance is critical to ensure organisational viability.
- Continuous changes in funding arrangements are one of the key difficulties identified by Grampians LLOs. The lack of predictability for organisations that operate on knife-edge margins makes their position precarious and this has an ongoing deleterious effect on management and staff.
- Small LLOs are not RTOs, so partnerships must be developed or maintained with larger LLOs and other RTOs.
- RTO compliance was seen as a significant issue taking up scarce resources of money and time.
- LLOs are willing to participate in professional development but cost and location are barriers.
- Geography presents a challenge across all areas of an LLO's operation in the Grampians Region – for learners, Executive Officers and trainers to travel.

Engagement with employers

- There is a high level of engagement in partnerships by LLOs and they demonstrate good partnership skills.
- Partnerships tend to be project-based rather than strategic and capacity-building.
- Small LLOs in rural locations would like assistance in engaging with local government, business and industry.
- LLOs indicated a willingness to participate in more capacity-building, cross-sectoral networks that enhance engagement with employers.

Competition

- Competition from Private RTOs, especially 'fly-in/fly-out' providers, is a serious issue that impacts on market share.
- Preferencing of JSAs in some localities is locking LLOs out of a training market in which they have strong capability.
- Neither learners nor non-LLO organisations have an appreciation of the value of pre-accredited learning. Marketing of what Learn Local is and its value to the community needs to be improved.

Learners

- The learners who participate in LLO classes are often challenging, coming from disadvantaged and disengaged backgrounds. No allowance in the funding structures is made for the LLO to provide the support that is needed by people from these backgrounds to successfully engage in education.
- Blended learning could be better used if technology was enhanced. However, the on-line component of blended learning can be challenging for learners who have poor or no access to the Internet, or who have poor digital literacy.

Data and planning

- The skilled use of labour market data to plan programs is uneven in the region.
- LLOs are receptive to better use of data related to labour market opportunities for planning.

In summary

The small, rural LLOs in Grampians are not operating on a level playing field. They do not have the infrastructure or training resources of private RTOs, TAFE or industry, yet they play a vital role in reaching and supporting vulnerable learners and provide a critical pathway to accredited training and future employment. As such, it is vital that these organisations are more appropriately resourced and supported to ensure that vulnerable learners in rural communities do not lose this valuable resource.

The recommended Grampians ACFE Region Strategy

This strategy is based on conclusions drawn from the data gathering process. The strong engagement of Providers with the survey and the consultation process indicates that Grampians Regional Council has accurately identified a key issue for LLOs in the Grampians Region.

Improve the outcomes for the most vulnerable learners by strengthening the connections of LLOs with industry through:

1. Building the understanding of the local labour market
2. Promoting, developing and supporting sustainable partnership networks
3. Expanding service delivery models that support the most vulnerable learners and take thin markets into account
4. Building ongoing professional development into the fabric of LLO operations
5. Stabilising the funding environment.

2. Project Methodology

The project used a consultative approach to facilitate the engagement of key stakeholders and the collection of information on the current environment within which adult education is delivered in rural locations. The consultants worked closely with the Project Steering Group and consulted with relevant stakeholders to investigate and recommend actions for developing best practice strategies in partnerships, program delivery and design of Learn Local programs that are aimed at assisting disengaged learners to pathway into further education or employment.

It also assessed previous analysis undertaken in the Grampians region to ensure that the project builds on a sound research base.

An Issues summary and recommended actions is attached as Appendix A.

The following streams of data gathering were used:

- a. Literature Review (Appendix B)
- b. Desk-top analysis of key documents
- c. Analysis of LLO data
- d. Analysis of regional labour market data presented to Grampians Regional Council and Focus Groups (Appendix C)
- e. Interviews, focus groups and video interviews with 26 LLO personnel, learners, community partners and stakeholders. (Interview Briefing Paper at Appendix D)
- f. Online survey of all Grampians LLOs (Appendix E)
- g. Attendance at Expansive Learning Network (ELN) and Asia South Pacific Association for Basic and Adult Education (ASPBAE) Forums.

A video case study accompanies this report.

Definitions

Vulnerable learner – those most at risk of long-term disengagement. Such learners may typically include, but not be limited to, people with low literacy and numeracy levels, low socio-economic status, the unemployed, people with ill-health - including mental health, aboriginal people, people with disabilities, people from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds and people living in rural and remote locations.

Regions - regions fall within one of four categories¹. The two categories, which are of particular relevance to the ACFE Grampians Region, are *Industry and Service Hubs*, and *Heartland Regions*.

¹ Regional Australia Institute 2014, *The Foundations of Regional Australia*, p. 3, <http://www.regionalaustralia.org.au/archive-blog/there-is-more-to-regional-australia-than-most-australians-realise/>

Further education and employment outcomes – the learner transitions from their pre-employment training program (whether pre-accredited or accredited) into further vocational study or employment. Whilst the long term aim is to assist people to find meaningful careers, for many individuals any job, even short-term casual employment, will help them to gain valuable employability skills and should be seen as a valid step on their pathway to permanent employment.

Sustainable partnership networks – in contrast to information sharing or social networks, a sustainable partnership network is a knowledge and innovation network, multi-faceted, heterogeneous and capacity-building, the characteristics of which are:

- ‘the members come from different sectors of society
- the network has a commonly accepted goal
- interactive learning is emphasised in getting results
- it produces several sub-networks
and
- the commonly accepted Executive Officer steers the activities’²

Terminology

For clarity, this report uses the term **Executive Officer** to describe the paid person who leads the LLO. Various terms are used in practice – for example, in some organisations this position is classified as a manager or CEO. Neighbourhood Houses often describe this position as a Coordinator.

This report also refers to the governance body of LLOs as the **Board** but this also encompasses those organisations that refer to them as Committees of Management.

² Harmaakorpi and Niukkanen, 2007, *Leadership in different kinds of regional development networks*, Baltic Journal of Management, vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 80-86

3. The Big Picture

If Learn Local Organisations are to survive and thrive in today's competitive environment, then they must learn to adapt and, in some cases, to 're-invent' themselves as community businesses, delivering adult education products. To do this, they must let go of the weight of the past, which includes their barriers to change, old worldviews and organisational resistance. They can then make the most of the push provided by their present situation, including technological, economic, demographic and societal factors, and allow themselves to be pulled into the future, where they can develop new goals and visions which will better place them to assist their vulnerable learners through the development of meaningful partnerships with industry and other stakeholders. This is occurring at a time when adult education has been going through its own transitions.

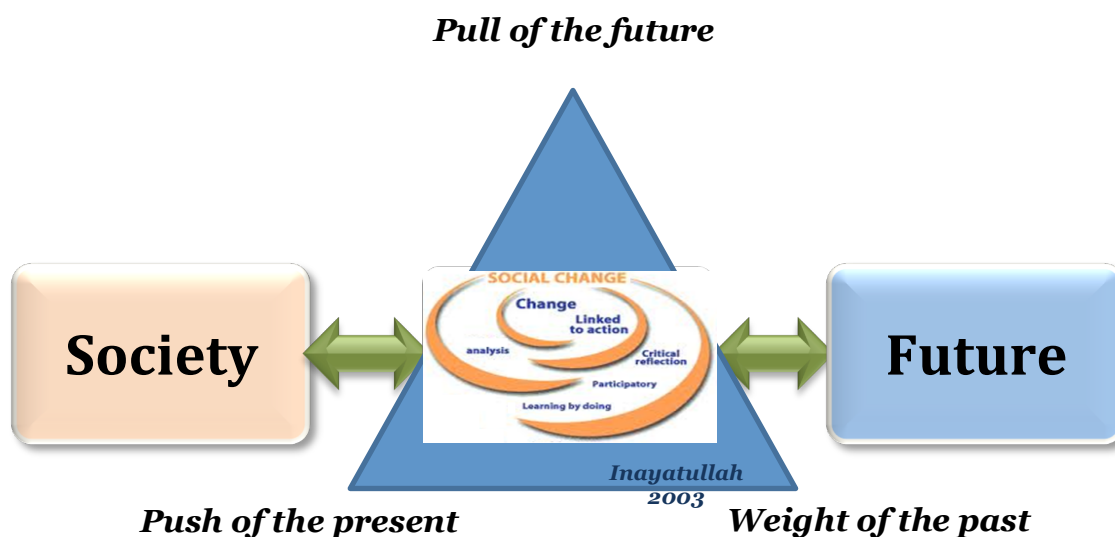


Figure 1 - The futures triangle (adapted from Inayatullah 2003³)

Adult education plays an important role in contributing to the well being of society. There is a wealth of international research on the wider benefits of learning (see Literature Review). Education in all its forms helps people to understand, adapt to and shape change. Participation in adult education programs has a positive effect on health, employment, social relationships and volunteering.

Adult education and workplace learning are also inextricably linked. There are many challenges in preparing adult learners, especially older workers and people from socially and educationally disadvantaged backgrounds, for the modern workplace. The workforce is aging while at the same time; international competition and new technologies are changing the face of Australian industry.

³ Inayatullah, S 2003, 'Teaching futures studies: From strategy to transformative change', *Journal of Futures Studies*, vol. 7, no. 3, pp. 35-40

This means that in this 21st century information society the adult learner must grow and learn at a more rapid pace than at any time in history and requires ever more advanced skills. This is at a time when a 2007 international adult literacy survey found 48.7 per cent of working age Australian adults had literacy and numeracy levels too low to cope with the everyday demands of life and work.

Internationally, interest in lifelong learning is gaining traction, especially through the re-emergence of the learning community concept. The UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning's (UIL) International Platform of Learning Cities (IPLC) was launched in Beijing in October 2013 (UNESCO 2014). One outcome of the meeting was a Declaration on Building Learning Cities in which, among other things, 'learning communities', 'learning cities' and 'learning regions' were recognised as pillars of sustainable economic development.

The European Commission has also set common benchmarks including school retention rates, university participation, and most importantly for adult education, a target that at least 15% of adults should participate in lifelong learning. They recognise the need to increase the participation of adult learning in all kinds (formal, non-formal, informal) learning for a range of reasons including acquiring new work skills, active citizenship, personal development and fulfilment. UNESCO's development agenda also describes emerging trends in education as moving from teaching to learning; recognising lifelong learning as a paradigm; the removal of boundaries between learning, working and living; the rising skill levels required, including employability; and foresight – being able to anticipate change for education and skills development.⁴

In Australia, both Federal and State Governments have enacted changing labour market policy in vocational education and training (VET). This has been done partly in response to the issue of skill shortages and the resulting need for changes to the VET system, and partly as a way to include disadvantaged groups such as those with disabilities, the long term unemployed and Aboriginal people in the labour market.

Over time, problems have been encountered in the enactment of social policy in this area. The 1970s saw a focus by Governments on addressing inequalities and promoting social justice, but in the 1980s this was superseded by a more punitive approach where commitments to equity and social justice were subordinated to the broader needs of the economy.

A continuing emphasis on economic rationalism saw increased competition amongst VET providers which continued to grow with the introduction of Skills Victoria in 2008.

⁴ UNESCO, 2014, *Education and skills for inclusive and sustainable development beyond 2015*, presentation by Dr Heribert Hinzen, ASPBAE Seminar, Melbourne, October 2014

The focus of VET policy over the past decade has been on more strongly connecting the VET sector with industry in an environment where VET providers have been identified as not meeting the needs of industry and in which the VET system 'has not benefited from the ambivalence of Australian industry to training and a reluctance of all stakeholders to fund a world class VET system'.⁵

This emphasis on a competitive environment has had an adverse effect on providers of youth and adult education in rural and regional areas of Victoria. According to the Victorian State Auditor General:

'Many of the programs that deliver support to rural students are in fact provided to students across all parts of the state. However, the program evaluations rarely consider the specific impact on rural students. The issues and barriers that prevent students in rural areas from getting the most out of their educational opportunities cross both the school and the further education sectors. Unless DEECD adopts a cohesive and targeted strategy, it is unlikely that outcomes will improve'.⁶

The report goes on to identify the factors which affect students' participation in higher education and training. These include:

- 'academic aptitude and achievement
- individual, cultural and familial aspirations
- local skills demand
- availability of accessible, affordable courses'⁷

One of the factors which is important in trying to identify appropriate strategies to assist vulnerable learners, is for LLOs and other regional stakeholders to clearly understand the type of region within which they are located as this will have an impact on the types of interventions which are likely to assist in the development of a healthy economic and social community. For the Grampians Region, the two types of regions which are of particular relevance are the *Industry and Service Hubs*, which are 'regional centres with between 15,000-50,000 residents, located further from major metropolitan areas. Their performance is linked to industry outcomes, but their population size means they could be resilient to change', and *Heartland Regions* which are 'smaller regional areas that are not close to other major metropolitan or Regional Cities. Industry trends and local ingenuity will shape their future'⁸

⁵ Kell, P, 2012: *VET in Australia: Contested ideologies, multiple pathways, diverse experiences and rethinking the ethics and morals of VET*, International Journal of Training Research, 10(2):74-78

⁶ Victorian Auditor General's Report, 2013, *Access to Education for Rural Students*, p. vii, <http://www.audit.vic.gov.au/publications/20140403-Rural-Students/20140403-Rural-Students.pdf>

⁷ *ibid*, p. 18

⁸ Regional Australia Institute 2014, *Foundations of Regional Australia*, <http://www.regionalaustralia.org.au/archive-blog/there-is-more-to-regional-australia-than-most-australians-realise/>

LLOs – their value and importance

LLOs offer local access to training opportunities that might not otherwise be available. They are diverse and include neighbourhood houses, community learning centres, ACE centres and community colleges. They offer an informal, welcoming, adult-focused approach to learning.



LLOs have developed specific expertise in working with people from educationally and socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. They also provide a critical point of re-engagement for many people who are disconnected from education and lack the confidence or opportunity to re-connect through other providers. This is even more important in rural Victoria where there are a greater proportion of adults who did not complete secondary school than in Melbourne, but they are less well represented in pre-accredited courses. There are also proportionately more unemployed people and more people with disabilities in rural Victoria and again, they are less likely to participate in pre-accredited courses.

LLOs have proven to be flexible and adaptive, providing courses that range from basic literacy and foundation education through to post degree professional development. This includes accredited and non-accredited courses, in a range of modes, including tutor-led, self-run groups, class-based, work-based and distance education.

In rural areas, LLOs may also provide a range of services and may be running social enterprises such as recycling services or coffee shops.

Rural LLOs offer a higher proportion of Vocational Education and Training (VET) programs than their city counterparts and are often the only providers of post-compulsory education. They play a vital role in widening participation and providing fundamental workplace skills for adult learners.

Pathways for vulnerable learners – the challenges

In Victoria's regional communities, barriers to access include wide dispersion of the population, distance to travel, lack of specialised transport or facilities, higher costs of provision or access. Pre-accredited courses offer a pathway to reverse the disadvantages of limited education and precariousness in the labour market. Many of the men and women who enrol in pre-accredited courses are economically vulnerable. They are often in relatively insecure situations within the labour market and they commonly have low levels of qualifications (or none) and incomplete schooling. Census data (2011) shows that only 43.1% had completed Year 12; 19.7% had left at the end of Year 11; 22% had completed Year 10; and the remaining 15.2% had achieved Year 9 or below, or had not attended school⁹. Furthermore, only 51.9% of the regional population held any post-secondary qualifications¹⁰.



4. Labour Market Data Analysis

Regional and local labour market data reports have been prepared and presented to the ACFE Grampians Regional Council. The Grampians Region has the highest proportion of learners with incomplete schooling coming from Lower (48%) and Lowest (42%) SES quartiles in Victoria. Only 9% are in the Higher SES quartile and there are no learners from the highest quartile. It also has the highest percentage of adults with incomplete schooling (44%).¹¹

⁹ Walker, J, *Grampians Region Labour Market Report 2014*, Appendix C, p. 8, ACFE, Melbourne

¹⁰ *ibid*, p. 9

¹¹ Teese, R, Klepetko, R & Lai, A, 2013, *Learners in pre-accredited courses: a labour force perspective on students, their motives and the benefits they gain*, ACFE, Melbourne

The data analysis shows that there are very large numbers of people in the region with no post-secondary qualifications (this is common throughout Victorian regions). The most prominent group is men aged 45 and over who have low levels of qualifications. Other key indicators are the low completion rates of courses in some of the smaller LLOs in the region and the poor articulation into further education, training and employment. In addition, the ACE sector connection in the region with all cohorts is diminishing.

Regarding employment opportunities, there was no LLO training provision in the region in the growth industry of Transport and Logistics. This training appears more likely to be provided by 'fly-in/fly-out' providers. The Health sector is now the largest employer in the region and provides a wide range of employment opportunities, and there are opportunities for LLOs to increase their penetration into this industry training sector.

A comprehensive labour market report of the Grampians Region and Local Government Areas is at Appendix C.

5. Key findings

LLOs in Grampians - what they think

Twenty-three LLOs in Grampians were invited to participate in an online survey between 14 July and 13 August 2014. 15 survey responses were received (65%). Of the LLOs that responded, nine (61.5%) had less than 5 EFT staff (smaller LLOs), only one was a Registered Training Organisation (RTO) and five (71.4%) offered accredited or pre-accredited programs on behalf of or in partnership with other organisations. Three LLOs (23.1%) had between 6 and 15 EFT staff (medium LLOs) and all were RTOs. Two LLOs (15.4%) had 16 or more EFT staff (larger LLOs) and both were RTOs.

In addition, Grampians LLOs and their stakeholders participated in interviews and focus groups to explore the issues raised from the survey and the Literature Review and test the interim findings.

Summary of main issues facing the LLOs

*'Changes in funding have led to loss for courses for disadvantaged'
(Grampians LLO Executive Officer in focus group, October 2014)*

The survey found that continuous changes in funding structure was the main issue in organisational viability facing LLOs in the next 5 years, with 100% of medium LLOs and 75.0% of smaller LLOs identifying this as a critical issue. As stated by a member of one focus group:

*'There should be more differential funding for regional and remote LLOs'
(Grampians LLO Executive Officer in focus group, October 2014)*

Where funding was sufficient in the short term (usually from other sources), LLOs found that *'Additional funding has given us the space to think more strategically, not just about day to day survival'* (Grampians LLO Executive Officer, October 2014).

The two most common organisational issues identified by 71.4% of all Grampians LLOs were:

- Sufficient capable trainers
- Ability to engage vulnerable learners.

The two next most common organisational capability issues identified by approximately half of Grampians LLOs were:

- Sufficient relevant networks, partnerships and collaboration
- Governance - sufficient capable Board members

Governance was a larger issue for smaller LLOs with 62.5% listing it.

The most common organisational capability issue identified by 80.0% of medium LLOs was RTO compliance requirements.

A comprehensive summary of the survey responses is at Appendix D.

The Issues

Of the Grampians LLOs surveyed and interviewed for the ACFE Project, the key issues were:

LLO capacity

Capable governance and attracting suitable Board members is an issue across the region, but is exacerbated in small communities. Competent governance is critical to ensure organisational viability.

Continuous changes in funding arrangements are one of the key difficulties identified by LLOs across the region. The lack of predictability for organisations that operate on knife-edge margins makes their position precarious. This may militate against innovation or it may encourage it, but the risks are high and genuine medium or long-term strategic planning is compromised.

Through the consultations, Grampians LLOs identified Adult, Community and Further Education (ACFE), the Department of Human Services (DHS) and the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) Student Contact Hours for accredited training as their major sources of funding.

There were strong, but uneven indications of strategically determined vocational training. Of the Grampians LLOs survey respondents, 64.3% conducted research to identify the employment needs of their region.

Research strategies included surveys, word of mouth, networking, labour market data, local business contacts and industry consultation, local government economic development plans, and research conducted for Capacity and Innovation (CAIF).

In addition, 83.3% of LLOs offered programs that are linked to the employment needs of their region. Examples included computer training including bookkeeping, First Aid, Food Safety Certificate, Responsible Serving of Alcohol, Social Media Marketing for business, Workplace literacy, and Make it Work, a pre-employment program focussing on the soft skills and planning needs of clients looking for work making them more employable.

However, small LLOs indicate that they want assistance with engaging local government and industry. There was also agreement that lack of awareness of LLOs in general and pre-accredited training in particular is a major ongoing issue that hampers LLOs in gaining traction in a crowded market.

This is compounded for small LLOs in the Grampians region as they are not RTOs, so partnerships must be developed or maintained with larger LLOs and other RTOs. Such arrangements require skill, persistence, time and flexibility. They are more likely to be developed through exposure to the wider community and have a better chance of delivering outcomes if the partners have aligned values and a common purpose. The partners must understand that they may need to cede some of their territory in order to make a significant impact, but recognise that the outcomes achieved in partnership will exceed those achieved alone.

Medium and large LLOs in the Grampians region are more likely to be RTOs, and are also more likely to be located in areas of higher population density. Their accredited training is more lucrative and makes a better contribution to organisational viability.

There was reasonably strong recognition of the value of professional development with 76.9% of survey respondents taking part, 61.5% saying trainers and other LLO staff took part, but less than a third saying that Board Members took part.

58.3% of small LLOs said the professional development they currently undertake assists them with attracting and working with vulnerable learners but this dropped to a third for medium LLOs. There is a strong view that professional development is focussed on compliance and not on building the market. Most small LLOs would like more professional development relating to management of their work with vulnerable learners, including how to attract and engage these learners, how to market to them and how to work more efficiently with people with a variety of special needs.

The consultations indicated uneven recognition by key people in LLOs (Executive Officers and Board members) of the Regional Council and its role.

However, there was strong endorsement of the support received from the Regional DEECD Officers and programs provided by ACFE were highly regarded. Face-to-face sessions were preferred but cost, time and distance were all cited as barriers to participation.

*'Some organisations do great things, but things change and there's not enough funding to keep those great things sustainable'
(Grampians focus group member, October 2014)*

Geography presents a challenge across all areas of an LLO's operation in Grampians – for learners to travel, for Executive Officers to meet, for trainers to travel. The use of technology to communicate is applied inconsistently with both infrastructure and capability being impediments.

Engagement with employers

The survey showed that 78.6% of LLO respondents participated in at least one partnership that assist in service delivery and engagement of vulnerable learners. The partnerships included Universities, health providers, Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENs), Local Government, Neighbourhood Centres, Careers Program for targeted groups such CALD, employment agencies, libraries, Job Services Australia (JSA) and Disability Employment Services (DES) providers, disability service providers, DHS, and family and youth services. Half of LLO respondents had a second relevant partnership and two indicated they had a third partnership.

About half of the LLOs indicated that there were issues causing difficulty with the partnerships. These issues were 'poor communication and understanding of our sector and what we offer', constant changeover of partnership personnel and the time and money required to participate effectively in partnerships.

There were quite a few suggestions for new networks or partnerships to enhance the capacity of LLOs to engage vulnerable learners including better engagement of local schools and agencies that work with vulnerable people.

About a quarter of the LLOs in the region are engaged in other collaborative arrangements to deliver programs and services to vulnerable learners. These arrangements include venue hire to other organisations, being the lead agent for community hubs, referring people to other organisations and links with employment agencies 'which has allowed us to deliver and provide services to a wide range of people'. There is strong cooperation over sharing resources such as A-frames that definitely assists smaller LLOs.

About a quarter of LLOs in the region were satisfied with the level of engagement they currently have with employers and industry groups in their region, indicating that whilst they would always like to engage more, there is a need to 'balance operational needs, capacity and planning'.

'There are some employers who work well at supporting vulnerable employees. Not all of them have the skills or time, but some would like to'
(Grampians focus group member, October 2014)

To varying degrees, LLOs used a wide range of recognised best-practice strategies to engage with employers including cross-sectoral networking, advertising, alliances, leveraging other relationships, and consultation with businesses about what their training needs are.

'We are going to business to see what they need'
(Grampians LLO Executive Officer in focus group, October 2014)

LLOs said that these strategies were time-consuming and required good networking and communication skills, and ideally 'a person devoted to the task.' In order to attract employers, LLO's also needed to have specific and very flexible low cost options to offer, as economic conditions and the abolition of the training guarantee negatively impacts on investment in training.

The barriers limiting the level of engagement LLOs have with employers and industry included the lack of employer networks in the more isolated communities, large travelling distances to deliver training, and employers conducting in-house training. A persistent observation was that there is 'no understanding of what Learn Local is and what it can do.' The preference for accredited training meant LLOs needed pathways from their pre-accredited courses, which were not always readily available or affordable.

'The feeling is that because it is not Certificate level it isn't important'
(Grampians focus group member, October 2014)

Competition

The survey showed that two-thirds of Medium LLOs and half of Small LLOs said there were other organisations offering programs that competed with their courses and that this affected their ability to conduct programs. Half of the LLOs indicated that the competition affected their ability to deliver programs to vulnerable learners.

The Grampians LLOs all noted the accumulated stress caused by the introduction of the open training environment introduced under Skills Victoria in 2008 and the failure of the government to support LLOs in competing with private RTOs. The ensuing, constantly shifting funding environment requires rapid changes to eligible clients (in already thin markets), additional pressure on technological infrastructure and pedagogy, and often changes in key partners. The cost of compliance with VET poses an additional burden, especially in small LLOs, seeing some LLOs de-registering as RTOs and even de-registering as LLOs, which in rural communities will further limit the training options available for the most vulnerable.

Private RTOs are soaking up student numbers for courses in already thin markets. There is particular concern with 'fly-in/fly-out' RTOs, opportunistically attracting clients through incentives or fee waiving, with little or no regard to employment prospects or quality of the training experience, and this is having a critical impact on the viability of LLO courses throughout the region. It is having an impact on learners and consequently, an impact on building community capacity, as vulnerable learners find themselves saddled with large debt and ineligible for further funded places in LLO programs which may be more suited to their abilities and strategically aligned to local labour market opportunities. Poor practice in training by some RTOs is having an impact on the capacity of LLOs to deliver, as market share is taken away and the reputation of particular credentials is diminished.

Another aspect of this is that, in some localities, the preferencing of courses delivered by JSAs over those offered by LLOs by key referral agencies such as Centrelink is having a critical impact on viability of courses throughout the region.

The LLOs are not operating on a level playing field. They do not have the infrastructure or training resources of private RTOs, TAFE or industry. Yet they play a vital role in reaching and supporting, vulnerable learners and provide a critical pathway to accredited training and future employment.

Learners

There are large numbers of vulnerable learners in the region and the most vulnerable learners remain hard to reach for all Grampians LLOs. The consultations identified that the reasons these learners are not engaged included:

- Cost of courses (more pronounced in Medium and Small LLOs)
- Learners are not interested in attending programs
- Lack of awareness of LLOs and their offerings

The survey identified groups of learners who participated in the programs offered by LLOs as people with physical and learning disabilities, those with limited access to learning opportunities elsewhere, disrupted learning, low income, low levels of confidence, low literacy and numeracy, new arrivals, long term unemployed, early school leavers, rural and remote learners. The labour market data analysis also showed that a cohort that is particularly vulnerable in the labour market is men aged over 45 with low levels of qualifications. This group does not traditionally participate in LLO courses. Other reasons cited for lack of engagement by vulnerable learners generally were the time and cost involved in trying to explain pre-accredited training, funding and eligibility restrictions, particularly for Centrelink-JSA clients, the lack of appropriate intensive support in more rural locations to address the multiple barriers faced by vulnerable learners, and lack of transport.

LLOs find that vulnerable learners who participate in pre-accredited courses need to pathway into accredited training to then successfully make the transition into further education or employment. This means that LLOs have to have pathways into accredited training available, either through their own RTO status or through partnerships.



All these requirements present many challenges for successful engagement of these vulnerable cohorts, and this puts pressure on the slim financial resources and expertise available in the more rural LLOs.

LLOs that report successful engagement with vulnerable

learners say programs need to invite learners in, rather than be imposed on them according to funding or policy. The *Next Steps Work and Learning Centre* (the Centre) in Ballarat is an example of resources being gathered through partnerships that are not limited or constrained by externally imposed eligibility criteria determining who the learners might be or what the outcomes must be. The performance indicators of the Centre are developed through business planning with the partners (which include DHS, Brotherhood of St Laurence and Commerce Ballarat), rather than being defined by externally imposed eligibility criteria. The Centre employs Work and Learning Advisors who develop highly individualised programs, including any required supports, for each learner when and where they are required, resulting in very effective employment and further training outcomes for very disadvantaged learners.¹²

Vulnerable learners comprise the main cohort of LLOs and the support required to ensure they participate successfully in courses and transition effectively to further education, training or employment presents a drain on scarce resources that is unable to be maintained with current models of delivery. Partnerships are required with agencies that can assist with intensive support. Additional funding is required to provide and maintain adequate infrastructure, including technology. The issue of compromised markets through fly-in/fly-out private RTOs delivering sub-standard training also needs to be addressed.

¹² For more information on this model: dhs.vic.gov.au/for-individuals/housing-and-accommodation/public-housing/living-in-housing/training-and-employment/work-and-learning-centres

Data and planning

There was some evidence that current training and pathways are related to labour market opportunities but often they were determined by the availability of scope of registration, trainers or facilities. The LLENs are a valuable source of data for planning but the use of this resource beyond the LLEN was limited. The potential loss of this resource, with LLEN funding under threat, poses a further hurdle for the already stretched resources of the smaller and more remote Grampians LLOs.

6. Recommendations

The Grampians ACFE Region Strategy

This strategy is based on conclusions drawn from the data gathering process which included a review of the literature, desk-top research, face-to-face consultations, meetings with the Project Steering Group and Grampians ACFE Regional Council, and a survey of Grampians LLOs. The strong engagement of Providers with the survey and the consultation process indicates that Grampians Regional Council has accurately identified a key issue for LLOs in the Grampians Region.

Improve the outcomes for the most vulnerable learners by strengthening the connections of LLOs with industry through:

1. Building the understanding of the local labour market
2. Promoting, developing and supporting sustainable partnership networks
3. Expanding service delivery models that support the most vulnerable learners and take thin markets into account
4. Building ongoing professional development into the fabric of LLO operations
5. Stabilising the funding environment.

The strategies

In order to improve the outcomes for the most vulnerable learners by strengthening the connections of Learn Locals with industry, these strategies are recommended:

1. Build the understanding of the local labour market

'Why do we focus so much on data? When we see numbers, we see people. Charts like these help us figure out how to prioritise our work. They show us which problems can be changed, and help us see the innovations that are needed'
(Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Seattle, USA)

The Grampians labour market data analysis shows that there are very large numbers of people in the region with no post-secondary qualifications (this is common throughout Victorian regions). The most prominent group is men aged 45 and over who have low levels of qualifications. Other key indicators are the low completion rates of courses in some of the smaller LLOs in the region and the poor articulation into further education, training and employment. In addition, the ACE sector connection with all cohorts in the region is diminishing.

Regarding employment opportunities, there was no LLO training provision in the region in the growth industry of Transport and Logistics. The Health sector is now the largest employer in the region and provides a wide range of employment opportunities.

If LLOs are to devise meaningful and useful strategies to better engage vulnerable learners in the future, then they will need to base those strategies on a strong foundation of defensible, data-based evidence which can be used to put their argument to a variety of funding bodies or potential partners.

The data reports prepared for this project were well received by the LLOs and their stakeholders. There is an indication that such data sets would be valuable for integrated planning in the future. LLOs would benefit from building skills and capacity in generating such data sets themselves.



However, it is not enough to simply gather data. It must be analysed and interpreted through 'data conversations' with a range of audiences, who must then be assisted to

develop appropriate responses to those areas which the data has identified as less than optimal. In undertaking this work, LLOs and their stakeholder partners will need to prioritise the types of data that they need and the actions they will take as a result of their analysis of that data. Those organisations that try to address everything at once run the risk of spreading themselves too thinly and not achieving anything.

The following case study is an example of where this has been done successfully.

Expanded Pathways, Improved Transitions (EPIT)¹³ – an example of community collaboration that uses data to drive change

Over the past 8 years, the Geelong Region LLEN's **Expanded Pathways, Improved Transitions (EPIT)** Project has supported the broader secondary education, training and employment sector reform to achieve the longer term goals of government policy to increase school retention and improve student outcomes.

Commencing in 2007, EPIT used Action Research to develop a targeted, partnership based initiative specifically focussed on expanding pathways and options for young people to improve their post-school destinations and ultimately lead to lifelong engagement with learning and economic independence.

There are seventeen secondary schools (including two Special Schools)¹⁴ involved in this now self-sustaining initiative which, together with a wide range of partners including Deakin University and industry networks, have undertaken cutting edge reform in their individual workplaces and also in their cross-school collaborations and have been acknowledged through awards and profiled in published case studies¹⁵. Most importantly, the EPIT schools have made considerable progress towards expanding post compulsory pathways particularly in VET and VCAL¹⁶.

The EPIT Project started in a new school with an examination of its **student outcome and destination data, coupled with data analysis of labour market opportunities**.



¹³ To find out more about the EPIT project: grllen.com.au/partnerships/education-training/epit

¹⁴ The participating schools are listed at: grllen.com.au/partnerships/education-training/epit

¹⁵ For example, both EPIT and Real Time Student have been recipients of the SmartGeelong Network's Researcher of the Year (Teaching and Learning) Awards (2008 & 2011).

¹⁶ For example, in 2012, in Years 11-12 the EPIT schools delivered 3.5% more VET in the 6 priority industries than the GRLEN as a whole. They improved Year 12 completion by 8%. This was 3.1% higher than across the GRLEN as a whole (DEECD – 2013 LLEN Data Disk).

As a result of guided discussions about this data, the schools embarked on in-school change projects to address aspects of the data that they wish to improve. The data reports, designed and analysed by skilled facilitators, have been highly effective in engaging school leadership, teachers, students and parents and in building skills and understanding of how to make sense of the data and use it for school improvement.

Examples of these presentations are documented in video case studies at:

<http://youtu.be/Cf46QuIeq5A>

<http://youtu.be/RBkZN4ZxZL8>

2. Promote, develop and support sustainable partnership networks

*'The resources and services are generally available in communities, but they are not necessarily used in the best possible way for the most disadvantaged people'
(Grampians Regional Council meeting, 28 October 2014)*

Despite the best efforts of ACFE and the LLOs¹⁷, the outcomes for the most vulnerable in Victoria's regions are not improving. Something has to change. The LLOs recognise that partnerships and collaborations are vital to ensure that organisations maximise their effectiveness in making training available to the most vulnerable. LLOs are experienced in partnership development and there are numerous project-based partnerships in Grampians, but few examples in the rural areas of the region of strategic, cross-sectoral, community capacity-building collaborations.

In fact, there is evidence that previous such partnerships have fallen into decline. Reasons cited include the cost and time required to participate in such networks and the heightened competitive environment.

The multi-disciplinary, capacity-building, knowledge network model is a significant contemporary approach that builds on the achievements of the past to ensure sustainable solutions to problems that have taken many years to develop. The 'short termism' of many government policies creates quick fixes but is ineffective in creating genuine social change. Short-term solutions do not address big social problems and all they do is teach people how to tackle little problems. Joined up solutions are needed for joined up problems and valuable leadership is developed as people learn that they can deal with the big issues. There is no quick solution to systemic social problems, and these problems cannot be solved by simply scaling or replicating one organisation or program.

On their own, community organisations may not have much influence and cannot create large-scale social and economic change alone. For example, the Collective impact¹⁸ and Shared Value¹⁹ models are founded on the belief that shared leadership and active cooperation and collaboration will be far more effective.

¹⁷ Adult, Community and Further Education Board, *Annual Report 2011-12*

¹⁸ fsg.org/OurApproach/WhatIsCollectiveImpact.aspxCapacity

¹⁹ sharedvalue.org.au/shared-value-project

The resulting capacity-building knowledge networks are different to social networks. They link knowledge with critical processes and investigation which often leads to innovation.²⁰ Furthermore, the lean structure of capacity-building partnership networks and the strategic use of technology enable them to take advantage of ***influence and outreach*** partners to assist in creating an environment in which change can be implemented. A partnership network is not a meeting. Therefore partners need not all be locally based, so members can benefit from thinking that occurs outside the everyday pressures of local circumstances. Contemporary knowledge networks can also sponsor issue-specific ***learning alliances and communities of practice*** which can identify innovators and share good practices in research and development in specific contexts.²¹

The smaller LLOs in particular, have said they require support, assistance and opportunities to develop the necessary capacity-building partnerships of the future with local government and industry. While capacity-building partnership networks are not restricted by time and place, their work can be complemented by place-based partnerships to focus local effort. One of the advantages in taking the place-based approach is that it draws in Local Government, an influential and well-resourced partner with a vested interest in effective planning and the provision of social and economic benefits to its community – and this becomes an important strategy for addressing the risks posed by short term funding.

Many LLOs of all sizes demonstrate that creative and robust partnerships contribute to their capacity to engage learners and deliver positive outcomes. LLOs have the agility and flexibility to work in the spaces between conventional partnership arrangements and thereby take advantage of the opportunities that arise from networking and learning across institutional boundaries. Where these opportunities exist, LLOs are well placed to initiate ‘boundary spanning’, capacity building, cross-sectoral partnerships and collaborations. Such networks in the more remote areas, with strong input from employers, are vital to ensure that training remains relevant and that Grampians LLOs improve the employment outcomes for the most vulnerable learners.

Two exemplars, the City of Melton in Victoria and Gwydir Shire in NSW, have developed internationally acclaimed strategic, capacity-building partnership networks which are rigorously monitored and evaluated and led by local government, recognising the value in taking a whole of life, coordinated approach to learning and education for all residents from preschool through to older residents.

Having commenced this approach in 1998, the City of Melton is a rapidly growing urban community, now in its sixth iteration of a community learning plan.

²⁰ Wang, Rodan, Fruin, and Xu, 2014, *Knowledge Networks, Collaboration Networks and Exploratory Innovation*, Academy of Management Journal, Vol 57, No 2.

²¹ iwmi.cgiar.org/CRP5/PDF/Water_Land_Ecosystems/10-Partnership_and_capacity.pdf

Using the Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government (ACELG) *Learning Community Framework*²² and the *Collective Impact Framework*,²³ Melton's leadership has been recognised by being recently chosen by UNESCO to be the Australian case study in a forthcoming publication highlighting Learning Cities across the world. Of particular interest to UNESCO was the strong stress on the evaluation of learning community activities and among other things its strength in establishing a strong framework for building learning cities. LLOs are represented on the Melton Community Learning Board. The Lifelong Learning Coordinator of the Council works with LLOs and other providers to collect data on adult enrolments, course and program areas. This is used to publish a learning directory of approximately 400 different learning opportunities (formal and non-formal) available for residents in the City of Melton. The Council and LLOs are also working together to track pathways of learners into further education or employment. As part of the Melton Community Learning Board, LLOs are also in a strong position to collaborate on funding opportunities.

The Gwydir Learning Region (GLR) is a strategic partnership consisting of the various local educational providers and the Gwydir Shire Council. Gwydir Shire, in north-west NSW, is sparsely populated and covers an area of 9,000 square kilometres. It consists of a number of small towns and villages. The key challenges were low levels of household income and very low educational attainment.

In 2003, the newly formed Gwydir Shire Council established the Gwydir Learning Region (GLR) as a partnership framework by which key stakeholders from across sectors could work together more effectively. Its mission was 'to do what



is necessary to ensure high quality education and training is available, accessible, affordable, adaptable and acceptable for people of all ages and stages of life who live in, or are associated with, the Gwydir Shire (Gwydir Shire, 2012).'

²² Wheeler L., Wong, S. (2013). *Learning as a Driver for Change: Learning Community Framework*. Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government, University of Technology, Sydney. Available online: acelg.org.au/news/community-learning-and-local-government

²³ Centre for Social Impact (2014). *Convene, Immerse, Learn Workbook*. Collective Impact 2014 Conference. Melbourne.

The achievements of the GLR in lifting educational participation and attainment has been internationally recognised through numerous case studies which have found that there has been significant movement towards building a culture of learning within the Shire; the skill base within organisations and within communities has increased; the involvement of local government is crucial; support for individual learning contributes to community capacity building (pascalobservatory.org/search/node/gwydir).

The GLR demonstrates that networked approaches, led by local government, can have a long-lasting and profound impact.

When the strategies adopted in the past have not achieved the desired outcomes, new approaches are required. Features of effective capacity-building partnership networks aiming to address educational disadvantage include:

- 1) Focused leadership from all sectors - Federal, State and local government, as well as education, including schools, vocational education, adult education and Universities to form regional learning hubs, Learning Communities, or Knowledge Networks
- 2) Planning and innovation are used to harness collective creativity and to identify local employment training opportunities
- 3) Evidence-based planning using data and contemporary literature about lifelong learning and the roles of education in building social capital in regional areas is widely shared
- 4) Personalised learning changes the lives of those embarking on further education and training
- 5) Bridges are built between generations and cohorts of learners.

In uncertain times, a framework for collaboration in which all concerns are aired and addressed, might be required as a strategy for enhancing the articulation of programs for vulnerable learners. The ACELG's Learning Community Framework, the Collective Impact Framework and the Partnership Development Model²⁴ are examples of resources that provide the neutral space within which such collaborations could be developed and provide the structure and process for ensuring that all of the key elements for a robust strategic community learning plan are in place.

²⁴ Walker, J 2013, *Improving the Effectiveness of a Regional Development Network*, doctoral thesis, RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia.

3. Expanding service delivery models that support the most vulnerable learners and take thin markets into account

Technology infrastructure is problematic throughout the region, especially in the Wimmera Southern Mallee sub-region. Yet programs that successfully integrate technologies into their training model can be appealing to many disengaged young people. Blended learning is not only good practice in learning delivery, being student centred and flexible, it is a method of providing personalised training in sparsely populated communities where achieving sufficient numbers to conduct viable face-to-face classes is unlikely.



Blended learning uses a range of resources and activities to provide individualised, student-centred learning experiences.

*'The real difference today is the unparalleled access to the internet with its rich sources of information and services and more importantly, the connectivity it offers students and teachers, particularly the ability to create online communities and support networks.'*²⁵

There is a need to increase the capacity and effectiveness of blended learning underpinned by technology in the more rural Grampians LLOs. The *Gippsland Connect Project*²⁶ is an example of a focussed strategy to strengthen the expertise and delivery of blended learning, which is a means of addressing service delivery in thin markets. Some of the elements of the project could be usefully implemented to cover the more remote areas of the region including sourcing suitable technology partners to support LLOs in establishing best practice infrastructure and training. The project involves mentoring, support and professional development for LLOs in developing their business cases for undertaking blended learning, in finding new learners and new learner markets.

However, blended learning requires effective, reliable broadband Internet infrastructure, and this is often not available in the more remote areas. It will be important for the National Broadband Network roll-out program to be used to ensure that those areas are serviced as early as possible.

²⁵ DEECD, 2012:5, *Blended Learning. A synthesis of research findings in Victoria 2006-2011*

²⁶ gippslandlearnlocal.trainingvc.com.au

Technology aside, the literature and the consultations show that a range of intensive supports are clearly required to support the most vulnerable learners address multiple barriers and pathway into employment. These supports should be culturally appropriate and include:

- consistent learner advice; guidance and support (that includes health, mental health and wellbeing support)
 - English language acquisition, literacy and numeracy
 - individualised and locally accessible learning settings
 - individualised managed pathway support
- and
- post placement support in the workforce that is not time limited.

These supports have been shown to be effectively delivered through the flexible application of pre-accredited training by using resources such as digital literacy, work preparation programs, programs in self esteem and confidence building, communication skills and careers advice. Many of these are available through LLOs, Men's Sheds and libraries and partnerships between such organisations could add value to the capacity and impact of the programs offered by smaller LLOs.

Having accessible pathways from pre-accredited training into accredited training before entering the workforce is highly recommended by those who work with vulnerable learners. Too often, employees who enter employment directly from pre-accredited training have insufficiently developed employability skills - the soft skills employers value so highly in the workplace such as communication, team work, problem solving, initiative, planning, self-management and learning.²⁷ The resulting breakdown of the experience from both the employer's and the employee's perspective is damaging. Ensuring learners have the opportunity to develop those skills in further vocational training programs places the onus on the LLO to either become an RTO as well, as many have, or develop the necessary partnerships with RTOs and TAFE so the pathways are relevant and seamless for the learner to navigate. Where potential learner numbers are limited, supporting them individually or in small groups by the delivery of blended learning (including, but not limited to on-line support) can be enhanced through partnerships with agencies such as health and wellbeing services (such as headspace²⁸) which might offer individual support for eligible clients, or by recruiting and training local mentors (such as YouthNow²⁹ and the Nhill community, see story below).

²⁷ Department of Education, Victoria, 2006, *Employability Skills Framework*

²⁸ headspace.org.au

²⁹ youthnow.org.au

The resources available through DHS are often under-recognised and under-used and could be further explored, as has been successfully done by the Ballarat



Next Steps Work and Learning Centre. There is much room for improvement in this aspect of service delivery in the sector.

Mentoring and post-placement support in the workforce is a strategy that has been shown to be very effective in retaining people in employment who are vulnerable in the labour market.

Too often, however, the support that is currently available through incentives and program funding is not sufficiently long-term to ensure that people who face multiple barriers to successful engagement are successfully integrated into the workforce. Routinely 13 weeks is available through support provided by a service such as JSA, but even six months may not be enough for some of the most disadvantaged people to develop the necessary employability skills to be able to maintain their employment independently.

Nevertheless, where long-term support is available, it has been shown to be very effective. The Goolum Goolum Aboriginal Cooperative³⁰ in Horsham collaborates with the LLO (The Wimmera Hub)³¹ to deliver pre-accredited training and pathways into accredited training and employment.

Long-term, culturally appropriate support has been provided on-the-job for as long as it takes, which may be a year (or even longer), but the strategy has excellent outcomes. Similarly, Axis Worx³² in Horsham provides long-term support in the workplace for people with disabilities with good results, but resources are stretched and the service is unable to support all its clients in the way in which it would like.



³⁰ goolumgoolum.org.au

³¹ hub.edu.au

³² communityaxis.com.au

'We don't need a lot of extra money, but a bit would make a difference.'
(Focus Group member, Horsham, October 2014)

(It costs more) 'to keep people on income support over a lifetime versus the cheaper cost of an upfront investment to ensure they (find) proper pathways and real jobs'
(McClure Review of Australia's Welfare System, 29 June 2014, reported in *The Australian*, 9 October 2014)

Unfortunately, the funding for such long-term support has ceased or is diminishing in these organisations and the cutting back of programs such as the Workplace Learning Coordinators Programs (WLCPs) will only exacerbate the situation. The focus groups for this project introduced some community agencies to each other for the first time and showed that there is potential for new cross-sectoral partnerships that may build capacity in this area. The post-placement support in the workplace may only need to be available in some cases on an 'as needs' basis or scaled back to visits by the mentor every two or three weeks, but the ability to provide timely interventions where necessary and to provide ongoing support for employee and employer is more cost-effective and socially responsible than seeing a person return to unemployment and disengagement.

As Gwydir Shire has shown, a whole-of-community approach can lift participation and attainment in learning, seemingly against the odds. An asset based approach to community building, focusing on the positive aspects in communities, is a more profoundly effective starting point for developing the skills of the people in disadvantaged communities than focussing on needs and deficits. Such an approach, especially in the more rural communities, might then present opportunities to build training pathways by innovatively partnering with organisations that might have previously been considered threats or off-limits. One idea would be to provide language and literacy support for learners undertaking accredited training in private RTOs and in internal industry training programs.

An example that integrates a best practice asset-based whole-of-community approach that supports employment pathways for vulnerable learners in rural communities is the story of Luv-a-Duck, a poultry manufacturer in Nhill, featured in *The Age* on 23 March 2013.³³ The Wimmera town of Nhill is halfway between Melbourne and Adelaide.

³³ To read more: theage.com.au/victoria/no-halfway-steps-as-nhill-welcomes-its-newest-citizens-from-myanmar-20130322-2glhf.html#ixzz3A3bApzrM

Luv-a-Duck and the Karen people in Nhill

The Karen hill-tribe people have been persecuted by the Myanmar government since 1949 and have been arriving as refugees in Australia since 2007, originally settling in Werribee but now moving further west to the Wimmera.

Many work at the Luv-a-Duck poultry manufacturer, which recently won a Migration Council of Australia award for its part in helping with settlement. Company Executive Officer John Millington, OAM, says: "They are part of our community's history now. It's about us accepting other people. They are not a burden, they are a blessing."

Mr Millington was faced with moving the company out of town a few years back because he could not find enough workers for tasks including the killing, boning and plucking of the ducks. By supporting the Karen refugees to settle in Nhill, it is now one of the town's major employers.

The assimilation required here from both sides is huge. Nhill is deeply conservative and predominantly white Anglo-Saxon. The local sports club, for example, had to change its constitution to allow a soccer team to be formed. "There's no soccer round here," says Hindmarsh Shire Mayor Rob Gersch. "Or there never used to be."

The influx of 120 Karen people - who often dress traditionally - has changed the entire fabric of Nhill. The town's Karens are mentored by locals, befriending families and helping them integrate into the community. There are 20 new Karen children at Nhill College. The school canteen now offers traditional Karen dishes prepared by the students.

Karen people are undertaking training programs and have been employed as aides at the school. They also work in the supermarket and a cafe. This initiative is a clear demonstration of the cumulative ripple effect of an asset-based approach to building community capacity.

In the Grampians Region, there are opportunities to engage with men who are unemployed, under-employed or who have been retrenched. This includes the use of Men's Sheds as an entry point. Men's Sheds have been identified as one of the fastest growing community groups in the country and provide training opportunities as well as social networking for individuals who often become socially isolated when they lose their employment. Unemployed, mature aged males have been identified as having the highest suicide rate in Australia and are 4.62 times as likely to commit suicide as employed males in the same age cohort.³⁴ LLOs will therefore need to partner with agencies with which these men feel comfortable and deliver programs that are tailored to their needs. The Geelong Region LLEN is currently involved in such a program, working with retrenched workers from Avalon, Ford and Alcoa.

4. Build ongoing professional development into the fabric of Learn Local operations

Professional development is a key strategy for building the capacity of LLO Executive Officers and Boards to respond to constantly changing social and labour market circumstances.

Attracting suitable Board members is an issue across the region, but is exacerbated in small communities. Competent governance and leadership is critical to ensure an LLO plans and delivers relevant services through appropriate partnerships in order to meet its obligations. Effective and capable LLO governance was identified as the top issue for organisational capability. Board members need to have a balanced skill mix that reflects the diverse roles of an LLO, maintaining financial viability while building community capacity.

Futures-focussed, customised professional development that builds leadership capacity and skills in partnership development needs to be available and ongoing. It is in the interests of all stakeholders (including communities) that LLOs continue to deliver relevant, responsive services to the people who do not engage with any other form of learning, so funds to build the ongoing capability of LLOs must be directed to this end.

The Victorian LLO Network is well regarded for both information-sharing and professional development. It is an example of a single-interest or homogenous, network in which members know each other well, have similar values and have a clear task and shared vision. However, not all LLO Executive Officers attend Network meetings, citing distance and the impost of time away from the workplace.

³⁴ ABS, *Causes of Death* 2012.

The risk of homogenous networks is that they become insular and resistant to change if they are not exposed to external points of view and alternative ways of working. Board members and Executive Officers of thriving LLOs say that they get more out of cross-sectoral, multi-disciplinary 'knowledge' networks and their resulting critical analysis, professional development and opportunities for business development and exploratory innovation. These networks need not be costly to organise. Geelong's *Expansive Learning Network* and *Commerce Ballarat* are examples which could be used as models for new regional capacity-building networks.

The **Expansive Learning Network (ELN)** was created in April 2012 through a partnership between the Geelong Region Local Learning and Employment Network (GRLEN), the Victorian Government Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, Deakin University and the University of Winchester, UK. Expansive learning is a boundary-spanning strategy that starts with real world problems and contexts and sees contradictions as powerful opportunities for learning. It can result in deep learning for individuals and cultural change in communities.³⁵ The ELN conducts several major 'Events' each year in which members are exposed to highly credentialed 'thought leaders' who present provocative propositions relating to key issues facing the region.



Events have included taking a 'futures' perspective about how the region might evolve, which one member described as 'making us more open-minded about possible futures and actively working to realise a preferred future'; the changing nature of work; and learning for the 'real world'. Members then work together to explore ways in which the desired futures might be turned into a practical reality.

Designed to be driven by the membership, one outcome of the ELN, in common with best-practice knowledge networks, has been the creation of sub-networks³⁶ – in this case, professional learning communities - which investigate particular issues in depth, such as innovative learning approaches designed to better prepare young people for the future.

³⁵ Blake, D, *What is expansive learning?* Presentation at ELN launch, 4 May 2012, Geelong: expansivelearning.com.au

³⁶ Harmaakorpi and Niukkanen, op cit, p 86

ELN members are also becoming more sophisticated with regard to the practice of evidence-based research, action learning and practitioner focused skill development and they actively contribute to shaping the Events program. The ELN is a low-cost, organic model for community-led, cross-sectoral problem solving which brings together all the best-practice elements of sustainable capacity-building partnership networks and is therefore futures-focussed and highly responsive to changes in the external environment.³⁷

Professional development strategies such as leadership training, shadowing, mentoring, coaching, self-assessment, networking, personal research and professional reading need to be driven by users, be exposed to best practice and be systematic. Business mentoring alone is not sufficient but needs to be part of an integrated professional development program.

As well as leadership-related professional development, Executive Officers also need development in the 'hard' skills required to successfully manage a community business. These include financial management, strategic planning, marketing and partnership development.

However, as stated, this development needs to be driven by the Executive Officer and Board, rather than ACFE, with the professional development suite of programs specifically designed to meet the needs of that LLO, rather than a 'one size fits all' program which is rolled out for the entire LLO network. Nevertheless, there is a role for Regional Council to ensure the systematic induction of new Executive Officers and Board members to ensure the maintenance of good practice in governance and management.

There is also a case for professional development in competent use of data for planning that includes educational participation and attainment data-targeted course provision aligned to labour market opportunities. The professional development should be delivered in such a way that it develops the skills and competence of LLOs so that they become independent users themselves.

Each LLO Board must ensure that professional development, including its own, is built in, and budgeted for, across all levels of the organisation. A professional development plan for the LLO Executive Officer is critical to ensure organisational viability. Best practice professional development for the LLO Executive Officer sees a plan being negotiated and linked to performance indicators at an annual performance appraisal, which needs to be conducted by trained personnel and proportional with the scale of the organisation.

³⁷ For more information on the Expansive Learning Network, see: expansivelearning.com.au

There are useful examples of professional development plan templates which can be adapted at:

cipd.co.uk/cpd/guidance/examples-templates.aspx³⁸

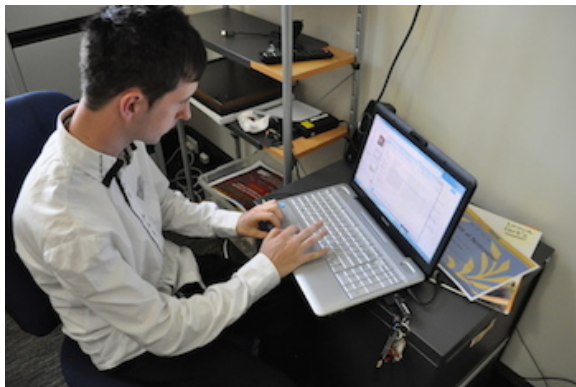
cancerlearning.gov.au/docs/pd_plan_template.doc³⁹

duncansutherland.com.au/index.php/tools/39-professional-development-plan-template

5. Stabilise the funding environment

Effective strategies to engage vulnerable people in vocational training and employment requires system-wide, stable finance models that are integrated with agreed educational values and policy, grounded in available research, and accessible to all stakeholders. Low-skill, disengaged learners require a range of intensive supports for effective engagement in education and training programs, and these costs are not factored into the Student Contact Hour rate. These more intensive supports have been identified in *Strategy 3* and they require additional funding for LLOs - the providers who deal with larger numbers of disengaged adult learners - to implement and maintain effective partnerships and programs to improve outcomes. The *Engagement Point* project for redundant workers being developed at Rosewall Neighbourhood Centre, with the assistance of a CAIF grant, will provide a relevant model of learner guidance and support for consideration by LLOs.

Other sources of funding have been sought by some LLOs over the years, but this activity needs to be more consistently and strategically developed to diversify the funding base and reduce the reliance on changeable government funding. Potential sources include sponsorship and philanthropy and examples abound in



rural communities around Australia⁴⁰. YouthNow received a grant to work with the Social Traders 'The Crunch' in 2014 to develop the business plan for its innovative in-house workplace training program, the BizE Centre, for disadvantaged young job-seekers⁴¹.

³⁸ www.cipd.co.uk CIPD is the professional body for those involved in the management and development of people.

³⁹ This template can be used as long as the guidelines for using Cancer Learning material are followed. You can find more information on this at http://www.cancerlearning.gov.au/about/copyright_disclaimer.php. Please note the 'Commercial and Other Use' section – if your use falls into this category, then you will need written permission from Cancer Australia.

⁴⁰ For some examples, see bankofideas.com.au

⁴¹ For more information on YouthNow's BizE Centre see: youthnow.org.au

The Crunch is a highly successful initiative for early stage social enterprises aiming to receive investment and start trading within 12 months.

Finally, each LLO requires a full-time funded Executive Officer position, already recognised as essential in aligned initiatives such as the LLENs and WLCPs. It is not possible to lead and manage an organisation, develop its business and maintain currency with best practice on a part-time allocation. DHS funds part-time Neighbourhood House Coordination that is a resource that can be built on where those organisations also include an LLO function.

ACFE itself has conducted considerable professional development over the years in building organisational capacity but there is evidence that the requirement to demonstrate improvement (using tools such as Measuring Impact) is either applied inconsistently or not at all.

The commitment by the newly elected Labor Government in Victoria to sustainable funding to enable ACE providers to meet local learning needs, including the needs of disadvantaged and vulnerable learners is welcome. Whether it will address the inequities experienced by the LLOs since the introduction of the competitive training environment by Skills Victoria is unknown at this time. It will however, need to address the inequitable burden experienced by rural LLOs of both less capacity to generate income and smaller numbers of learners.⁴² Project-based funding may, indeed, present yet an additional drain on resources by conducting more projects that do not have all the real costs built in. Some of the funds should be allocated to developing strong leaders for the sector. Business development and financial mentors and data analysts who understand the nature of community businesses should be assigned to Grampians LLOs. Delivery of mentoring should be considered innovatively in line with best practice including online consultations, thereby expanding the range of mentoring support available, including international expertise.

⁴² Victorian Labor Platform 2014:34

7. In Summary

While many LLOs have good outcomes with vulnerable learners with whom they have engaged, there are many potential learners who have not engaged. Furthermore, pathways to employment for the most vulnerable learners must continue to be developed and strengthened in the more isolated communities. Best practice strategies to reach and support these potential learners generated both through the recommendations of the current LLOs and from the Literature Review should continue to be developed. This might be (as suggested by the consultations) through a comprehensive program or project that includes:

- awareness-raising of LLO offerings
- exploration of new collaborations to develop and maintain viable programs in thin markets
- consideration of alternative models of governance to ensure high quality strategic planning
- establishment of appropriate professional networks
- access to mentors and professional development
- acquisition and maintenance of adequate basic infrastructure resources
- collaborations to improve access to capable trainers
- up-to-date use of technologies
- support for ongoing development of negotiation skills with industry partners.

Recommendations for Action

Implement the Regional Strategy as recommended by the report:

Improve the outcomes for the most vulnerable learners by strengthening the connections of LLOs with industry through:

1. Building the understanding of the local labour market
2. Promoting, developing and supporting sustainable partnership networks
3. Expanding service delivery models that support the most vulnerable learners and take thin markets into account
4. Building ongoing professional development into the fabric of LLO operations
5. Stabilising the funding environment.

Recommended action

Investigate more deeply the potential for projects in the Grampians Region that arise out of the recommended Regional Strategy and includes these best-practice aspects:

1. A contemporary approach to professional development (see *Strategy 4 above*)
2. Alignment with ACFE and Grampians Regional Council strategic priorities
3. Stand-alone projects so Grampians LLOs and their stakeholders can determine which ones are relevant to them

4. Allocation of time, funding and technological infrastructure to support participation.

Potential projects

Regional Council should investigate the potential for projects to address the major findings in this report. One strategy might be to model best practice by trialling at least one capacity-building partnership network focussed on, but not limited to the Wimmera Southern Mallee sub-region, using best-practice models (such as the Expansive Learning Network⁴³) with these features:

- input into the network design by LLOs
- mentoring for individual LLOs provided by appropriately skilled experts
- cross-sectoral participation
- a commonly accepted goal to improve employment outcomes for vulnerable learners
- a futures focus with workshop discussions stimulated by thought-leaders presenting provocative propositions
- blended and interactive learning with action outcomes
- sub-networks of action research-based communities of practice
- a built-in comprehensive evaluation strategy that includes LLOs and
- a paid convenor

Such a project would have the flexibility and regional reach to encompass all the aspects of the recommended Regional Strategy.

In particular, the new network should build Regional Council, LLO and community capacity by delivering sessions, conducting projects or developing communities of practice on:

- leadership
- strategic foresight and use of labour market data analysis to identify growth industries
- innovative service delivery models including skilled use of technology
- developing niche markets
- contemporary partnership skills
- frameworks for collaboration
- alternative governance models
- marketing skills, especially in employer engagement.

The trial of the network would be enhanced by supplementary funding (such as a CAIF grant) to pay for a project officer to implement and deliver the evaluation strategy⁴⁴, prepare a business case and source ongoing funding to maintain the network.

⁴³ expansivelearning.com.au

⁴⁴ Useful resources for impact assessment tools developed for Australian communities include the Melton Collective Impact Assessment Tool (City of Melton) or Measuring Impact (ACFE). For further information contact the report authors at: ian_shanti@bigpond.com

Policy Table

Many of the recommended strategies and actions described in Appendix A of this report align with the ACFE Board's priorities described in *Learn Local Focusing on the Future*, DEECD 2013 and with other key policies and plans as follows:

Grampians Regional Strategy

Improve the outcomes for the most vulnerable learners by strengthening the connections of LLOs with industry through:

	Building the capacity of Grampians LLOs	Aligns with or connects to:
1.	Building the understanding of the local labour market;	Provide support for initiatives that are focused ... on the industry skill needs of a particular region ⁴⁵ 'Four year strategy -Strengthening leadership and professional practice across all services' ⁴⁶ Strategic Direction 3: Building the learn local sector's capability to deliver high-quality education services ⁴⁷ Learn Local CoM capability framework and supporting competencies ⁴⁸
2.	Promoting, developing and supporting sustainable partnership networks;	Strategic Direction 2: Promoting durable networks and co-location of services to improve pathways and sustainability ⁴⁷ Strengthen linkages between ACE providers and their local communities ⁴⁵
3.	Expanding service delivery models that support the most vulnerable learners and take thin markets into account	Strategic Direction 1: Refocusing and refining the role of Learn Local ⁴⁷ Ensure that ACE centres provide a diverse range of educational programs to the broad community ⁴⁵
4.	Building ongoing professional development into the fabric of LLO operations	'Relentlessly focusing our services on the needs of learners, communities and businesses' ⁴⁶ Strategic Direction 1: Refocusing and refining the role of Learn Local ⁴⁷ Strategic Direction 3: Building the learn local sector's capability to deliver high-quality education services ⁴⁷
5.	Stabilising the funding environment	Commit to sustainable funding to enable ACE providers to meet local learning needs, including the needs of disadvantaged and vulnerable learners ⁴⁶ Ensure funding structures allow Learn Local organisations to frame and delivering relevant pre-accredited offerings in small and rural communities in the region ⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Victorian Labor Platform 2014

⁴⁶ DEECD: Strategic Plan 2013-17

⁴⁷ Learn Local Focusing on the Future, DEECD, August 2013

⁴⁸ Learn Local Committee of Management (CoM) capability framework, DEECD, March 2012

⁴⁹ ACFE Regional Council Plan 2014 - Grampians

Appendix A – Issues summary and recommended actions

Appendix B - Literature Review

Appendix C – Analysis of the labour market data

Appendix D – Stakeholder Interviews Briefing Paper

Appendix E - Summary of the Survey

A video case study – http://youtu.be/K_0iqab8h4I

Appendix A - Issues summary and recommended actions

These tables synthesise the issues raised in this report, along with Major and Supporting Strategies, Recommended Actions and the suggested Regional Council Response.

Key Issue	Major Strategy	Recommended Actions	Regional Council Response
Despite the best efforts of LLOs, particularly those in small rural communities, outcomes from strategies to assist disadvantaged learners into vocational training and employment are not improving.	Improve the outcomes for the most vulnerable learners by strengthening the connections of LLOs with industry.	Consider capacity-building projects that arise out of these recommendations – for instance: Model best practice by trialling a capacity-building partnership network in the Wimmera Southern Mallee sub-region.	Once projects are agreed by Regional Council, request funds from ACFE Board (or allocate funds already negotiated). Scope, design and deliver the projects.
		Clarify the role of Regional Councils in relation to LLOs regarding authority and process for intervening and providing directed support or advice to LLOs where concerns arise. Clarify the role of Regional Council in relation to the ACFE Board.	Notify ACFE Board of the urgency of this in the light of the research project findings. Consider developing a regional strategy to reinvigorate the relationship between the Regional Council and individual LLOs that might include allocation of portfolios, participation in networks, membership of LLO project steering groups, invitations to attend and contribute to Regional Council meetings.

Contributing Issues	Supporting Strategies	Recommended actions	Regional Council Response
<p>Competent governance and leadership is critical to ensure an LLO plans and delivers relevant services and professional development is a key strategy for building that capacity.</p>	<p>Build ongoing professional development into the fabric of LLO operations.</p>	<p>Consider developing a plan for offering contemporary professional development opportunities in leadership for sector leaders and aspiring leaders that might include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scholarships or discounted fees for LLO leaders toward meeting the cost of formal and strategic professional development in leadership, business development and innovation such as that offered by the Committee for Geelong and Ballarat. • Using the model of <i>Principal for a Day</i> program as a leadership development strategy. • Sponsoring a study trip to Gwydir Shire to explore the Gwydir Learning Region model. <p>Connecting with national and international developments in lifelong learning and seeking opportunities for professional development such as those presented by the European Commission</p>	<p>Investigate what would be required to prepare a range of regional professional development opportunities for LLO leaders which have 'reach' and are aligned with Regional Council priorities.</p> <p>Research opportunities for Regional Council to demonstrate best practice in capacity-building strategies by connecting more strongly with national and international developments and exploring potential alliances for Regional Council. This could be conducted as a small research project.</p>

		(find out more at: eaea.org/en/policy-advocacy/european-agenda-for-adult-learning.html)	
		Ensure annual professional development in governance and performance management is available for new Board members and LLO Executive Officers.	Communicate the requirement for LLOs to report to Regional Council on their professional development and how it is helping LLOs and Regional Council achieve outcomes.
		Develop a process for ensuring Executive Officers and Boards are formally recruited (and that Boards are properly constituted), have the requisite skill sets including strong financial oversight and have performance management and professional development plans. LLO capacity to be demonstrated by best practice reporting that includes financial viability, program outcomes and community impact.	Convey the urgency to ACFE for streamlined reporting requirements to ease the compliance burden on LLOs and overcome unnecessary duplication. Monitor LLO reports and develop a clear position on the triggers and process for direct intervention where concerns are raised.
LLO technology infrastructure and access to capable trainers is inadequate in rural communities, limiting capacity to deliver viable programs.	Expand service delivery models in thin markets	Support LLOs in best-practice blended learning delivery by building technology capability – both infrastructure and quality training.	Consider adapting elements of <i>Gippsland Connect</i> and source potential partners to support LLOs on technology projects. This process could be initiated by commissioning a report that covers these suggestions. Monitor progress in improving LLO technology capability.

<p>The competitive and constantly changing funding environment places LLOs, particularly the smaller ones that operate on very small margins, in a precarious position.</p>	<p>Stabilise the funding environment</p>	<p>Advocate for ongoing differential funding for infrastructure and technology to 'rural-proof' the smaller and more rural LLOs.</p>	<p>Develop a position paper for ACFE on the issues and actions raised in this report related to stabilising the funding environment – in particular, the case for some (but not major) differential funding to account for the fact that LLOs do not have the infrastructure of TAFE and RTOs yet deal with people who have the most need for intensive support.</p>
		<p>Ensure each LLO has an EFT Executive Officer position so there are sufficient human resources to develop and maintain effective organisations. This could be by topping up the DHS funded Neighbourhood House Coordinator positions.</p>	
		<p>Advocate for more frequent and more dependable funding cycles for Grampians LLOs that include funds to meet the cost of compliance.</p>	
		<p>Advocate for an ongoing increase in the Student Contact Hour rate to adequately cover the costs of course preparation, review, moderation, session planning and professional development.</p>	
		<p>Advocate for simplification and cost reduction of VET compliance requirements.</p>	

		Maintain and enhance the overall marketing of LLOs.	Provide advice to ACFE, as this was an issue affecting market share and partnership potential that was prominent in the consultations.
		Advocate for tighter regulation of private RTOs that engage in poor practice.	In addition to the position paper recommended above, meet with the relevant government department.
		Advocate for changes in Centrelink restrictions on referring to LLOs.	In addition to the position paper recommended above, meet with the relevant government department.