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*Place Management, Social Capital and Learning Regions*

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*PURE Regional Visit Report (RVR1)*

*DARLING DOWNS, AUSTRALIA*

*22<sup>nd</sup> – 24<sup>th</sup> March, 2009*

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## **Preamble**

The visit of the PURE Consultative Development Group (CDG) to the Darling Downs region of SE Queensland in Australia was arranged at short notice, opportunistically taking advantage of the visit to Australia of European members of another PURE CDG at that time. The CDG is especially appreciative of the efforts of Glen Postle in arranging the schedule at short notice; and to USQ Vice-Chancellor Bill Lovegrove for his hospitality. In these circumstances the CDG could not meet as wide a range of stakeholders as would have been liked.

The annex to this report provides the names of those whom the CDG met. In particular, it was not possible to meet representatives of the recently formed Regional Council arising from Queensland's local government administrative reform, of the region's Technical and Further Education (TAFE) Institute, or, because of the coincidence in time with the State elections, of the State of Queensland. The CDG therefore favours a supplementary visit to make good these deficiencies if the region is now to proceed and take part in the PURE project. Nevertheless, it was possible to gain a strong sense of the region and its challenges, and of the actual and potential contribution of the University of Southern Queensland (USQ) to the region's development.

## **Essential Characteristics of the Darling Downs Region and of USQ**

Darling Downs is unusual in being a significant inland regional centre in the State of Queensland. The State is experiencing general migration away from its vast inland regional, outback, rural and remote areas to the capital city, Brisbane, and to an ever-developing coastal strip north of Brisbane and south to the NSW border. Thus far Toowoomba is however more than holding its own; and big mining developments to the West are creating a skills shortage and leading to some population inflow. USQ is the only non-metropolitan and non-coastal University in the State. It has a small campus with some 1,000 students in Springfield in the greater Brisbane area, but its anchorage and main campus is in the attractive regional City of Toowoomba in cooler and scenically pleasing upland country west of Brisbane. There is also a small coastal campus at Hervey Bay, to the North of the capital city. The majority of its total student population study by self-directed distance learning methods.

Toowoomba is a proudly historic city, with a sense of identity as the regional centre for a rich agricultural region. Agriculture is now changing. It is becoming relatively less significant compared with the existence and prospectively massive growth of extractive industry – coal, gas and water – to the West. Neither old nor newer employment sectors out of Toowoomba are labour intensive. An acute skills shortage for the infrastructure building and development of mining draws people into the region as well as out from Toowoomba. At the same time, young people tend to go away from Toowoomba to study in older universities especially in Brisbane, often not to return. On the other hand Toowoomba continues to serve as a regional centre and focus for people in the smaller towns and rural communities beyond the administrative region. For them USQ has appeal as their local University.



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The region has both hopes and fears for a changing future, characterised to the CDG as approaching the future facing backwards. There is a sense that the city and region must either go forward purposefully or suffer continuing eclipse and economic if not population decline, while growth and prosperity pass it by. It is a priority for those whom the CDG met to exercise leadership and determine a future direction, and to acting purposefully to this end. Recently changed local government arrangements are seen as an as yet unrealised opportunity, with eight local authorities merged into a single regional jurisdiction. There is a perhaps unique opportunity now for the new City governance to provide a clear focus through consultation, discussion and leadership across the wider community, with USQ as a vital partner and technical resource.

USQ is a former College of Advanced Education. It carried into its new regional university a strong reputation for distance learning which it has built on further, but a weak research base. USQ is recognised nationally and internationally as an excellent leading IT-based distance learning university. It was an interesting starting question for CDG members how and in ways this expertise might connect with, or indeed militate against, USQ being an effective resource to enable the region to overcome obstacles and barriers to purposeful economic and social development. The conclusion is that it promises to reinforce rather than undercut the contribution to regional development.

The recent federally commissioned Bradley review of higher education, and the current and ongoing government response, provide little direct help or promise to USQ. Although Bradley commends 'third mission' work, no funding is proposed to support it, on the ground that the mission is best expressed and supported through the teaching and research activities and income streams. As a 'new regional university', USQ has a modest research base and a less diversified income stream than larger and older universities.

Bradley favoured, and the federal Government supports, significant expansion in the numbers of young Australians undertaking higher education, especially in regional and rural areas where participation in HE tends to be below average. On the face of it this plays to USQ's strength as a regional centre with a big sparsely populated and under-qualified hinterland. However, the proposed more competitive free market basis for achieving this means that less prestigious universities like USQ have obvious concerns: expansionist neighbours in the metropolis and on the coast may attack the USQ market, reducing its already-competed-for local intake, and making it still harder to remain viable and to support regional development, something to which the Vice-Chancellor is deeply committed. A sense of urgency if not crisis is thus shared by both University and community leaders. It is a critical time for both Toowoomba City and its University.

## Provisional Main Findings and Advice of the CDG

The University has recently created a Regional Advisory Group which displays vigour, and a sense of purpose and urgency. It appears, if the Regional Advisory Group sustains confident purpose, and overcomes some scepticism, to have the potential to influence significantly directions of regional development, with the active contribution of the University to this. The Group's membership appears appropriately open-minded, critical and questioning, with a clear sense that the future was to be influenced and made, rather than passively awaited.

The University was seen as well led and open to strong engagement. Its limitations in terms of an academic profile which does not well match some of the region's needs are also acknowledged, along with a variety of attitudes from department to department, and an inevitable time-lag in terms of tooling up to meet new regional community needs. Only one person with whom the CDG met threw serious doubt on the University's prospects to evolve in a third mission direction, or indeed to survive hard times.



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The general view was that USQ has enjoyed a strong recent upswing: it is good at adapting, despite the misalignments referred to above. It needs the new Regional Council to become active and purposeful as a strong key 'engagement partner'; to develop foresighting capability; and to be able to draw down State support that is in principle available for such work. The new Council does have an allocation of several million dollars to managing the post-merger transition.

The CDG saw the region as struggling to reconcile a well liked past and present in a pleasing environment, with the reality of change driven by global forces. Toowoomba itself has the benefits of small scale, a strong sense of identity and civic commitment, and a wealth of social capital. The downside is an instinct to hope rather than to act, in relation to massive developments in extractive industry in and beyond the Surat Basin, going well outside the immediate region but away from the coast and into the 'no-man's' interior.

The full impact of the Surat development is still 5-10 years away. Our view is that these forces cannot but impact on the future of the immediate Darling Downs region itself. The Toowoomba-based leadership needs to be ambitiously inclusive in its forward planning. It would be wiser where possible to bring these new development forces 'inside the planning tent' than to draw a tightly exclusive formal boundary. The choice is between sustained beneficial change and fly-in-fly-out disruption, leaving no long-term gain to the region. The local initiative and bottom-up drive in which it is clear that Toowoomba is strong and rich should be mobilised to shape the impact of the new larger-region economy. This a task that the new regional authority and USQ can tackle, strategically and together.

There is a tendency to say that there are too few people in the ever smaller communities 'out there' to justify dissipating planning effort beyond greater Toowoomba. As in other PURE regions however, it is evident that 'region' must have more than one meaning. Effective development means living with plural meanings and levels of 'region'. So far, thinking extends from head-in-the-sand, to plans for a road by-pass to protect to the City, to making the City a transport hub, thus turning change to advantage. The CDG suggests that it is advisable to go out a step further beyond this.

The University under its current leadership (and from what we can judge strong followership) is committed to living in, with, and for the region. This is from a sense of both mission and self-interest. It does not in any way detract from USQ's strength as a leading distance learning university. In this respect, those involved in both this and the subsequent (greater) Melbourne CDG visit were struck by the University of Deakin's somewhat similar identity, strengths and aspirations – to the point where a nationally oriented strategic alliance between the two universities could be worth exploring. However, it was not clear to the CDG in the time available to them, that commitment has yet led to articulating the University's sense of commitment to and engagement with the region at a strategic level. Does it yet have a clear engagement story to tell, that shows how the elements contribute to cohering purpose and link to one another? The CDG had sensed a need for greater confidence in moving to develop a third mission strategy; distinct scepticism, as expressed by one influential former member of the senior administration, about the business viability of any third kind of mission development must be confronted and set aside.

At this time of 'crossroads' change for the City and the region, as well as for the Australian HE sector, USQ might boldly develop a more explicit and formal strategy. to make and build on links between its different 'communities', connecting with the strategic focus now required of the newly amalgamated authority for good regional governance.

The CDG would therefore encourage both University and private sector leaders to sustain, intensify and speed up their efforts to work together with and on the new Regional Council at this formative time. The new Council would benefit from both the direct involvement and the technical support that USQ has to offer. It may be possible to create a critical mass that will assist the region to steer



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though fast-changing times in a balanced and sustainable way. It would help to have the new regional level of governance directly represented on the University's own governing body, and to build on the clearly helpful interaction that already exists between some parts of the University, and some economic/industry sectors.

The CDG was told that the local government merger put on hold in 2008 some promising community mobilisation initiatives. It is important now to restart these. There are many promising if somewhat disparate bases for joined-up development energy. The CDG can see a real possibility that the region could offer itself as a laboratory for the State of Queensland, which is reputedly well inclined to support regional development. Its confidence would be based on the evidence of community energy, such as the several voluntary-driven initiatives which the CDG were shown – especially TOMNet, the Flexi Group and Flexi-School, and GraniteNet (see below). It could include the discerning and well-channelled use of new IT to bridge the digital and remote rural-metro divides.

A successful proposal to the State might attract significant development and support funds. Its potential application to other Australian regional centres might also make it attractive to federal government support. In this way 'third mission' development might come to represent also an income stream to USQ. The case would probably win stronger support if it extended to include a wider region to the West where, the CDG was told, the State would prefer to see Toowoomba facing and engaging, rather than towards the magnet City and coastland East.

In summary we propose two particular things. The first is that the new Darling Downs administrative region and the University, in thinking about their regional identity and role, recognise the needs of the thinly populated region to the West, North and South for which they are the de facto local City and University. Thus it was made very clear to the CDG that Stanthorpe, 135 kilometres to the South, does consider itself to be part of USQ's region. Given the certain major impact on Toowoomba of what is happening out West, it would be better to have those interests 'inside the planning tent'.

Secondly, the region, with a boldly developed strategic plan first worked up together, could propose itself unashamedly as a pilot study and model, now that the election is over, at State and possibly also at federal level. By stressing the potential for much wider interest and scaling up through other parts of regional Queensland and Australia, this might attract support and financial resources from both levels of government. At a time when regional innovation systems are seen as crucial, and rural and regional Australia as particularly vulnerable and politically sensitive, a strong and persuasive case could be made.

## Different Aspects of Regional Development

The PURE project is about all dimensions of development, including but not only the economic. This report briefly touches on each of several main arenas.

### Civic and citizenship

Civic and citizenship issues featured little as such, directly and explicitly, in CDG meetings and discussion. On the other hand, the sense of Toowoomba and region as active and purposeful implied a positive view of active citizenship and commitment to it, based on the experienced benefits. This was reinforced by several absorbing and indeed exhilarating discussions and case studies. One called TOMNet concerns older men at risk. Another was the Flexi-School supported by Flexi Group, which works to bring alienated 'drop-out' youth back into social connection, including TAFE and now higher education.

The CDG also considered smaller communities distant from Toowoomba, in the case of Stanthorpe 135 km to the South. Here the GraniteNet Project pioneers different approaches to using a community portal to connect and empower; it is meeting with success, and recognition in terms of

# Observatory PASCAL

*Place Management, Social Capital and Learning Regions*

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grant support. This too is community- rather than local authority -based and driven. TOMNet is spreading by emulation to a range of nearby but more remote rural centres, and to places far distant, inter-State as well as within Queensland. It is this kind of community-based development that suggests the wealth of social capital available, and prompts the CDG to make ambitious suggestions for how the region thinks about its identity, strength and future. USQ has the experience and the authority to help the region to recognise and build on the wealth of social capital available for its development – so long as USQ itself determines a clear engagement strategy and focus itself. Its unusually distinguished distance learning capability chimes with rather than pulling against this.

## Cultural

The CDG had little discussion about cultural issues, other than in the deeper and less familiar sense of the whole traditional and non-metropolitan way of life. The role of the University as a culturally enriching factor in encouraging people to come and stay was certainly referred to, but the CDG heard nothing to suggest that culture and creative industries represented the kind of significant potential for economic growth that some regions see.

## Economic

The larger part of CDG discussion about the future of the whole region including the City was unsurprisingly about its economic prospects, particularly the needs and effects of an already changing regional economy, in which broad-acre farming supports ever fewer people, and the Surat Basin mining developments are but the beginning of massive further growth and change. Toowoomba's historic role as the centre of a rich agricultural region is thus weakened.

Relevant dimensions to the new economy include immediate skills shortages for infrastructure and other building relating to mining developments, and the time-lag before the University (and perhaps the TAFE Institute) can adapt its resource base and offerings to match these new needs. There was praise for the University's efforts in the direction of work-related and integrated learning, student placements, etc.; and a generally optimistic sense, based on individual cases, of the potential for more parts of the University to engage more in regional development, not only in the health, welfare and education areas but also across technology, business and management in the diverse, largely small and medium enterprise, business sectors of greater Toowoomba which includes both manufacturing and retail services.

The growing volume of transport, with regional economic development, has led to the idea of Toowoomba prospering as a transport hub. It was unclear to the CDG how far this idea has been taken, or what its practical implementation might mean. It does appear evident however that if the development of the Surat Basin is inevitable, then the current transport arrangements which are dependent on a poor rail system, one 4 lane highway to the East and an uncertain future for air transport simply cannot cope. This gives both State and local government issues which they must confront: to do nothing is surely not an option.

More confident, clearer and sharper was the recognition of school and higher education together as a significant economic and potential further growth sector. Along with this goes the recognition that the excellent provision of good secondary education could be built on, and that Toowoomba could market itself overseas and grow this strength, if trust was high, partnership was confident, and the City got its act firmly together. This was not the only sense in which the CDG felt that Toowoomba had the potential, with clarity and firmness of purpose, to box in a higher league.

Another comment was that the SME sector needed 'decomposing', and considering more accurately, in terms of differences of both sector and scale. The fact of Toowoomba's maturity as a regional centre means that there is great diversity of economic activity and employment, for example in the retail and service sectors, alongside the obvious, and for some threatening, major out-of-town



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*Place Management, Social Capital and Learning Regions*

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developments. By implication, and with the progressive addition of new well-chosen areas of expertise, the University along with TAFE has much potentially to offer across a wide spectrum.

## Environmental

As elsewhere in the dry continent of Australia, environmental considerations, and especially the national shortage of and competition for water, is a concern. They loom as large here as elsewhere. For the region and the city, deficiencies in rail and road infrastructure are also a preoccupation to which no solution seems obvious within the region's own powers and resources, and to which the University can perhaps make no direct contribution. It could however join the City and region in lobbying State Government to invest in improving the poor transport infrastructure. This could be done within the framework and purposes of involvement in the PURE project. It is acknowledged that (like it or not) the region's economic future lies with the extraction and sale of energy resources (mainly to China), and that this has an environmental cost. Efficient road and rail links especially to the East are important on both economic and environmental grounds.

## Social including health

Whereas many regions consider regional development almost entirely in economic terms, those in leadership positions whom we met in the private and education sectors take a broad view of development, with attention to quality of life, sustainability, and the social underpinnings of economic success. This may be sharpened by the sense of brain drain towards the metropolis and the coast, an ageing population profile, and the possibly destabilising cultural differences that new immigrants may bring.

Some of the most impressive work that the University is supporting has to do with the healthy life and social reintegration of both old and young. The relationship of these now well developed initiatives to sustainable good quality regional life and development may be of interest to other regions in the PURE project as well as to other parts of Australia. They also suggest a practical means of promoting active civic life, and confidence in the future of the community and its region, as an anchor for healthy progress.

## How the Region Perceives and is Responding to the New Global Crisis

The CDG did not actively pursue questions about the fiscal and economic crisis that had swept the world by the time this visit occurred, nor explicitly about environmental concerns, notably global warming. However, the view was volunteered, by the Chair of the Regional Advisory Group which the Vice-Chancellor had recently initiated, and which constitutes a key partner for engagement, that the region and its industries were so far relatively well insulated, with a sound basis for optimism in the medium and longer term. Whereas this upbeat note may have a practical benefit in how the region weathers the immediate fiscal and economic storm, longer term issues to do with resource degradation and management remain a deep shared concern. There was no evidence of any developed view as to how as a region to address this.

Nor, in the absence of meetings with regional and State representatives, was the CDG able to test this at these policy levels. However, keen interest in issues of global warming; water shortage, and the consequences for agriculture in particular, can be confidently assumed.

## Possible Specialist Sub-group Clusters and Partner Regions

This can be taken up after further reflection, in the proposed supplementary visit. Certainly there are other regions in the first PURE cohort of regions that share similar challenges of geography and development, notably in Scandinavia. There would be obvious benefit in Darling Downs linking or twinning with these, perhaps around issues of remote rural economic and social development in relation to regional centres. We would hope that a cluster on short-cycle (TAFE-university) higher education such as the Melbourne region and others in PURE will develop might also interest this region. A possible link with Deakin and the Geelong region has been mentioned above.



# Observatory PASCAL

*Place Management, Social Capital and Learning Regions*

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The social and civic dimensions of regional engagement may be the basis for special interest focus, as may be the use of new media technologies for engagement and development. Darling Downs has much to offer in these areas.

## Possible Examples of Good Practice

The grassroots community projects referred to above appear to be natural candidates for consideration.

## Benchmarking Tools

It would seem natural to concentrate on the main Toowoomba campus for the HEI tool, while considering also the use of Distance Learning approaches. Before the regional tool can be tested a decision is required as to whether this is of the new regional jurisdiction, or some wider understanding of region.

## A Regional Action Plan

An Action Plan was discussed only implicitly, pending commitment to full participation in PURE. Central to this must be developing an effective – tested and trusted – partnership between the University and the new public sector authority at regional level, centrally involving also the private and third sectors. Means exist, actual and embryonic, for taking this on. Prior to this the new regional authority needs to develop its own sense of identity, purpose and direction. Nurturing this, and involving USQ in the process, might be the spine of the Plan. Along with this vital process-and-capability aspect might go a number of tangible and sought-after development outcomes, a clear direction and strategy for the next 10-20 years, and movement to put the region forward as a lighthouse pilot sponsored at least by the State of Queensland.



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## ANNEX

Schedule of Consultative Development Group Meetings 22<sup>nd</sup> – 24<sup>th</sup> March 2009

### Welcome Dinner Meeting

- Professor Bill Lovegrove, Vice Chancellor, USQ.
- John Russell –Chair, Regional Advisory Group.
- Professor Jim Taylor- previous Deputy Vice Chancellor – Global Learning Services, USQ.
- Di Paez, Manager, Community Engagement Office.
- Professor Glen Postle, Honorary Professor, USQ.

### Regional Advisory Group

- John Russell-Chair, Regional Advisory Group.
- Professor Graham Baker, Deputy Vice Chancellor (Scholarship).
- Gary Brady, Manager, USQ Business Link.
- Di Paez, Manager, Community Engagement Office.
- Shane Charles, Managing Partner, Charles Condon Lawyers.
- John Minz, CEO, Heritage Building Society.

### Community members representing Flexi School and TOMNet

- Maryanne Walsh- Principal, Centenary Heights High School (Flexi School is an annex of this school).
- Jo Brennan, Coordinator, Toowoomba Flexi School.
- Associate Professor Lorelle Burton, Associate Dean Learning and Teaching, Faculty of Sciences, USQ.
- Dr Marian Lewis, Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Education, USQ.
- David Bull, Director of University Preparatory Programs, Open Access College, USQ.
- Don Christmas, Bob Cheesman (Friends of Flexi representing the Rotary Club of Toowoomba East).
- Darryl Bates (Toowoomba Regional Council representative- Youth Officer for Darling Downs Region).
- Carole McGowan, Manager, The Older Men's Network (TOMNet).
- Lloyd Enkelmann, Training and Development Coordinator, The Older Men's Network (TOMNet).
- Leanne Kuhn, Volunteer Support Officer, The Older Men's Network (TOMNet).
- Keith Jordan, The Older Men's Network (TOMNet).

### USQ staff involved in current or past community initiatives

- Kevin Stapleton, Manager and Executive Officer, Student Guild, USQ.
- Harry Spencer, Faculty Manager, Faculty of Sciences, USQ (Chair, Maths and Science Schools Challenge Program).
- Steve Ivey, Group Manager, Sustainable Business Management and Improvement, USQ.
- Rebecca Scollen, Head, Artsworx, USQ (Coordinator of community projects such as Shakespeare in the Park, Summer School for Creative/Performing Arts).

### Australian Digital Futures Institute and ICT personnel

- Prof Alan Smith, Executive Director, Division of Academic Information Services, USQ.
- Dr Shirley Reushle, Senior Lecturer and Manager, Technology Enhanced Learning Projects, USQ.
- Dr Peter Sefton, Manager, Software Research and Development Laboratory, USQ.
- Prof Mark Toleman, Head of School, Information Systems, Chair of Academic Board, USQ.





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## Local business and industry representatives

- Les Louis, Previous General Manager, Darling Downs Regional Main Roads Office.
- Robyn Grundon, Previous Sales/Business Manager of provincial newspaper (Toowoomba Chronicle); now owner of a CBD bookstore.
- John Liley, Principal of Real Estate business and licensed valuer.
- Henry Campey, Business Manager of Glennie School, a local private secondary school for girls.
- Ross Watt, CEO of Buchanan Composites, a local fibre composites business.
- Col Davidson, local architect.
- Graham King, retired solicitor, now manager of Darling Downs Aero Club.
- Don Christmas, past manager of Grain Growers Association and business partner in financial services business.
- Bob Cheesman, retired accountant /a partner in a local accountancy firm (Cheesman / Applegarth accountants).

## Representatives of local ICT project GraniteNet

- Catherine Arden, Lecturer, Teaching & Learning in Vocational Education and Training/Senior Schooling, USQ.
- Trevor Cooper, past member of Stanthorpe Shire Council.
- Brian Kissell, Chief Technology Officer, USQ.

## Neil Peach

- Until the end of 2008 Mr Peach had been the General Manager for USQ for four years, and coordinator of a major review of USQ Realising Our Potential.