Why Rural Futures Matter

Excerpt from Keynote on Wednesday 21 September by Professor John Halsey

Sustainable rural communities matter because without them, there will be no future. Not immediately I admit, but certainly using a geological timeframe, in the blink of an eye. I recognise this is a big call but I believe the evidence is very clear in light of population growth and the enormity of moving to living on our planet, sustainably.

Jared Diamond argues that the “past offers us a rich database from which we can learn, in that we may keep on succeeding” (2005, p.3). So too does our best thinking and research about the future. Out of these rich databases comes a myriad of things. Some are more important and more potent than others, and we ignore them at our peril, literally. I believe the databases tell us that in order to continue to prosper as a society we must focus upon the fundamentals that sustain life and that imbue it with purpose and meaning.

Globally, 3.5 billion people currently live in the urban and city scapes of our planet and the trend is for more and bigger cities. As well, there are “nearly two hundred metropolitan areas with more than two million people” (Brugmann, 2009, p.4). In our ‘home’, Australia, we have 2 cities of more than 2 million and we have already exceeded the trend that will see an estimated two thirds of the world’s people living in cities by 2040 (Brugmann, 2009, p.15).

The enormous reach and power of cities with their “four basic elements—‘raw stuff’—of urban advantage...density, scale, association and extension” could, as we go forward, distract us as a nation from paying sufficient attention to the role that rural places and spaces, rural communities, will need to play if Australia, projecting forward to 2050 and a population of 35 million, is to be a vibrant, sustainable, productive, secure, civil and inclusive society.

Rural Educational Leadership: An Investment in Our Future

A national rural educational leadership program which builds capacities from strengths rather than from trying to ‘fix problems’ and is focused on Australia’s sustainability, has been developed by Flinders University and Principals Australia. Attracting and retaining school leaders, especially for rural, regional and remote schools, is becoming increasingly difficult. Research, discussions with principals and reports from departments of education and professional associations, all confirm this.

The reasons for the problem are many and varied and include little or no preparation for leadership in a rural context, negative media images, workload intensification, remuneration and a sense of leaders’ work not being valued by employers.

Sidney Myer Chair research - see http://www.flinders.edu.au/education/rural/ - and other sources have been used to develop the post graduate educational leadership program. There are three levels of awards – graduate certificate, masters and doctoral qualifications – as well as short duration courses which can be used toward an award.

The design of each level builds upon the National Standard for Australian Principals. Up to 50% of study for the awards may be provided by academics, institutions and leadership experts outside the Flinders School of Education.

Topics will be delivered in mixed media mode including hard copies of materials, online Moodle learning software, ICT technologies such as SKYPE and eportfolios, and intensive sessions.

For further information about the initiative contact john.halsey@flinders.edu.au. For specific topic/course details contact Associate Professor David Giles at david.giles@flinders.edu.au.

Professor John Halsey
HIGHER EDUCATION.

Choice than more life-limiting, easier, lesser and vocational education with an equating the 21st century is workforces for urban and rural nation's growing the project of increasing the division in our society. A major brake on the primary policy shaper of our workforce is not a cop-out from the realities of market-based competition for labour. Neither is it an attempt to socially engineer the statistics about trades compared to degree incomes and life opportunities, or the complexities and the apparent competing pathway interests.

As stated in the Longitudinal Survey of Australian Youth Research Report 57, for males an apprenticeship after completing Year 12 offers the best pay at age 25; pathways involving apprenticeships or traineeships lead to greater levels of satisfaction with life than does university study; and university study leads to jobs with high occupational status. For females, the research found the best pathway was completion of Year 12 followed by university study. This is true for those with a relatively low academic orientation as well as high achievers. Parity of esteem is the antithesis of the divisive idea that there are those who work with their heads and there are those who work with their hands. In other words, it is in our national interest to value higher and vocational education post school pathways. A focus on parity of esteem would also challenge, indeed probably assist, workforce policymakers and educators to focus on the complementarities of the skills and knowledge Australia needs to become deeply sustainable. It could also underpin efforts to stimulate fresh public debate about reducing the salary-wage pension income differentials that continue to grow and have the potential to generate serious divisions in the fabric of our society.

A worrying trend in the Australia I see emerging is that value as a citizen is inextricably linked to income and wealth. I would like to be howled down here but ... Vibrant, productive rural communities are integral to Australia's sustainability and indeed, globally. Realising this vision requires a diversity of skills and knowledge delivered by a diversity of high quality institutions and post-school pathways, each valued for their contribution to nation building. Crops need to be sown and reaped, machinery serviced, legal documents written, the sick healed, children need to be educated, bread has to be baked, houses need to be built.

Professor John Halsey
The Wisdom of Youth

One of the Sidney Myer Chair’s areas of interest is the role youth might play in revitalising rural Australia. The Sidney Myer Chair has several ongoing youth projects. Of particular note are the Extended Rural Professional Placement, the Youth Mentoring project (in conjunction with Peer Inspire Mentors) and the Youth Perceptions of rural areas.

At the Rural Futures Matter Summit held at Flinders University, I had the opportunity to interview two youth who were extremely passionate about the future of rural communities. Both Rachel and Nathan are pre-service teachers living in rural areas, and both are committed to the continued success of rural areas. Nathan in particular noted that the rural areas in Queensland were hit hard by the floods, and that the most important factor was rebuilding the community through co-operation, hinting that this was a particular strength of rural communities. Rachel was similarly passionate about the advantages of living and working in rural areas. Both students indicated that they strongly felt that services of equivalent quality to urban areas were required in rural Australia.

The notion that better services are required in rural areas is one supported by the chair. Recently, a survey of rural South Australians revealed significant interest in, and support for, increased university presence in the Riverland. Further, experimental work continues to reveal that the presence of university facilities in rural areas serve as an indicator of town vibrancy. A report written by Professor Halsey underlines the importance of other human services, such as the Keith Hospital, which was recently threatened with closure. For rural areas to survive, prosper, and to continue to provide the country with food security, essential human services are a must. More must be done to ensure that rural residents are afforded the same opportunities as urban ones.

Dr Aaron Drummond

Area Schools: What Goes Around, Comes Around

The introduction of schools that catered for primary and secondary students was a seminal event in the evolution of rural education. It provided students with access to secondary education ‘locally’, which hitherto had been confined to those who could afford to attend a metropolitan or regional city boarding school, and the few who could attend a higher primary school.

In South Australia for example, the first ‘all age’ rural school was established at Karoonda in the Murray Mallee. By 1944 eight more area schools had opened, such was the popularity of the innovation.

The impetus for establishing combined primary and secondary schools was essentially four fold in nature- declining enrolments in 1 and 2 teacher rural schools, the comprehensive secondary movement informed by developments overseas in places like the UK and New Zealand, improved rural roads and transport, and a view that young people ought to be prepared for life and work in their rural communities. There was also the pressure, as my research shows, to improve rural education ‘without great cost to the state’ (see http://www.emeraldinsight.com/journals.htm?articleid=1955974).

The post WW2 era set in train public education in rural areas (and elsewhere) that sponsored and facilitated social and geographical mobility far more than retaining and engaging young people in the long term futures of their communities and regions.

The exodus of youth in search of ‘greener pastures’, with some exceptions, has seen many combined rural schools which once had enrolments of many hundreds, reduced to the point where future viability is never far from serious consideration, especially by education systems looking to deploy finite dollars for maximum return on outlays.

A way to describe education- schooling- in rural Australia is the continuing story of consolidation and closures. It may be tempting to think that the youth decline occurring in many rural locations should be the signal for another chapter in this story.

I believe there is another, more pro-active and optimistic story to be written- the rural schools and national sustainability story.

If the big challenge of the 20th century was building the modern world, the really big challenge for the 21st century is building a sustainable world.

Professor John Halsey
Incorporating Effect into Research

Often in quantitative research, it is nice to know not only whether two numbers are significantly different, but also how big this difference is. The most common answer to this question is in raw terms – for example, the difference between a low pass and a low credit is about 15 points in our current marking system. In a world of research where things can be measured in different ways though, there needs to be a standardised measure of effect size.

Indulge me with an example: perhaps you want to know whether a nutrition intervention increases healthy eating behaviour. Suppose in one study an intervention increases healthy eating, whereas in another study an intervention increases healthy eating behaviour. Suppose in one study an intervention increased the amount of apples eaten by 1 per child (on average). In the second study, research shows that children ate 3 oranges (on average) before the intervention and 5 on average after. Which is the bigger increase? Well, obviously, since these are not standardised units of measurement, a raw comparison is nonsensical – it’s comparing apples and oranges! However, we can use Cohen’s d, a standardised measure of effect size, to weigh up how big these differences are.

Cohen’s d expresses differences in terms of the variance of the sample – and this allows a more sensible comparison of effect size. Cohen’s d ranges from 0 upward, with larger numbers representing a bigger difference between the groups (in aforementioned case before and after the intervention). Typically, 0.2 is considered a small difference, 0.5 is considered moderate and 0.8 or larger is considered large. Importantly, the size of the difference is not linked to its significance – an effect can be significant but small, or non-significant but large (although in the latter case, it’s likely your sample is too small to detect statistical differences). So in the previous example if an effect size of 0.2 was observed in one study, and an effect size of 1.0 was observed in the second, a relatively strong case could be made that the second study showed the stronger intervention for healthy eating.

**Fact Sheet**
Cohen’s d measures differences between groups in terms of the standard deviation (or variance) of the groups.

Cohen’s d can be calculated easily using calculators on the Internet, or a simple formula.

Cohen’s d does have a within-subjects form if you are comparing the difference between a number of conditions within-subjects (most commonly a before/after design). The only additional piece of information required for calculation in this case is a correlation coefficient (r). 0.2 is Small, 0.5 is Moderate, 0.8 is Strong.

Until Next Time,
Strength in Numbers

Dr. A
Dr Aaron Drummond

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Rural Futures Matter Outcomes

The Rural Futures Matter summit at Flinders University 21-23 September, generated draft recommendations across six fields. 80 delegates from around Australia took part in group sessions to produce the list, responding to material from the keynote presentations and drawing on the participants’ large pool of knowledge and research.

The list of recommendations is to be fine-tuned and cover six fields of activity:
- teacher and leadership preparation;
- development of rural alliances of relevant bodies to enhance co-ordinated impact around rural issues;
- community participation and capacity-building;
- enhancing rural voice, to give the needs and aspirations of rural community greater prominence in public debate and national policy;
- policy development at all levels of government;
- schools, learning and futures of rural community.

It is planned to forward recommendations to businesses, rural industries, NGOs and peak bodies, as well as tiers of government.

**Vision and Mission**

- Vibrant, productive rural communities are integral to the long-term sustainability of Australia.
- It is critical that people who live and work in rural and remote Australia have access to high quality, relevant and affordable education, training and care at all ages and stages of life.
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