

## Regional Engagement

Let me make it clear that I do not purport to know the expectations of the regional community. I have been on the losing side of too many campaigns to claim that I know how my community thinks.

The best I can do is indicate what this community's expectations *might* be, based on past behaviours. I shall use those past behaviours as evidence for my propositions, which are three-fold.

The first is that we expect Higher Education to innovate as much as we need to do in order to overcome our unique disadvantages. The second expectation is that Higher Education should be prepared to engage in ways that are relevant to the needs of the regional community. The third is that the engagement be meaningful, rather than token.

Let me tell you a story that helps illustrate all three. Ten years ago my colleague Peter Ryan, who will speak to you later, convened a group to stage a Clever Food Conference in Shepparton. The region was emerging rather battered from the recession we had to have; Mr Keating's deregulation was starting to bite in the bush; the family farm was dying, the smaller towns in the Valley were shrinking, our industries were feeling the heat of global competition.

We bought Edward De Bono here and he put on his six thinking hats with 700 people in this very room. Over a few days we workshopped and came up with strategies to tackle a range of regional issues, from salinity and nutrient pollution to transport, power and telecommunications infrastructure; from local government and urban water reform to education, health and strengthening the social fabric. The results of those strategies are very much in evidence today and the ripples continue. But of all of these strategies, education was by far the most difficult on which to make progress.

The group which had volunteered to make things happen in the education sector was totally dysfunctional. Although Peter was at the time principal of Dookie College, we couldn't get the local TAFE college to participate. They had their own dance going with Deakin, then LaTrobe, and didn't want to share. At secondary level the turf wars were worse.

For example, the business and wider community all agreed a senior secondary college was an excellent idea. With four government secondary schools within an 8-km radius it was obvious that we could offer year 11 and 12 students a far richer choice and superior teaching by combining forces.

When I say we all agreed, the teachers didn't agree. And I have to say they were extremely effective in their obstructionism. Despite

all the efforts by our Clever Food Group, by the business community and our industry group at the highest political levels – the teachers won. Ten years later, still no change.

We set up the Northern Industry Education Board to improve liaison between the industry and education sectors, in particular to initiate VET programmes including some highly innovative Certificate Four programs in food technology and engineering. The teachers didn't like that, either.

Again we beat a path to the minister and the director-general, both of whom pledged their support. Again the teachers won, by attrition.

Business people get tired of beating their heads against brick walls. In the end the education sector dominated the board and we ended up with lots of bland Certificate One and Two courses in secretarial and hospitality.

All is not lost, however; the NIEB was an antecedent of the Local Learning and Employment Networks, which are now state-wide, and are making some progress. The main lesson, I suppose, was to never underestimate the education sector. The word "Recalcitrant" comes to mind. That word also came from Paul Keating in another context but it's a good word.

I recount this story to illustrate that the local business community has been prepared to innovate and work more closely with the education sector in a variety of ways. The story also informs other propositions: that local government and the business community here has had a long history of working together for common objectives.

We have been able to pull these resources together to achieve positive outcomes for the region – we did so during the local government amalgamations, the reforms to the water industry, on campaigns of regional significance such as keeping out fireblight on imported fruit, as well as dairy deregulation and improving road and telecommunications infrastructure.

That capacity to quickly and effectively bring the key players together is perhaps one of the primary benefits of being in a region – particularly one with a strong private enterprise base.

Indeed, one of the reasons we in this region have had to innovate is precisely because of that complexion. Shepparton has never been a swinging seat like Bendigo and Ballarat. We have never had the government departments, the publicly-owned or supported industry and the profligate election promises that go with it. The Shepparton region has generally had to make do on its own, without counting on much outside help, and that often means we make do with less.

Hence the multi-provider model for higher education in this region. We've been through enough to know that rafts of magnificent university buildings in this city are an unrealistic expectation. We understand that if every Higher Education provider wants its own infrastructure we'll be waiting another 50 years, but if they are prepared to pool their resources with us, we can make some real and rapid progress. The idea of sharing resources might go against the grain for some, but to us it is recognition of the realities Shepparton faces: we are not, and may never be, a number one priority for any government. Let's work around that – as we have found, we can often come up with a better result.

The concept of a shared resource centre, for example, which I hope may evolve into a facility including those senior secondary students I spoke about, is an attractive one on all these criteria. It is first of all cost-efficient; it is certainly innovative; it is a model appropriate to this particular region for reasons I've outlined and, most importantly, it has a real prospect of getting up fairly quickly.

As I said before, we don't underestimate the capacity of the education sector to stall, undermine or even directly sabotage something it doesn't like. This shared resource idea might also be still-born because of that. But it seems to me that the world is changing for HE too; there is pressure on you for meaningful regional engagement; there is pressure on you to continually increase non-government income.

In the same way business has learnt to outsource, we have in this region learned to focus on our intrinsic competitive advantages. For HE, presumably, these include your brand – and what it means in terms of quality education. They might include a reputation for excellence in particular disciplines, or for research of certain kinds. We wouldn't expect you to compromise those things. But where it doesn't matter, where it's not a core branding issue for you, we want you to innovate to meet *our* needs.

There is a further observation I would make regarding *engagement in a way that is locally relevant*. The reality is that young people who live in a region want to leave it. The metropolis and the world beyond beckons. But having been reared up in a region they generally feel comfortable in a region. The chances are good that they will *study* in another region or end up *living* in a region, particularly once they have a family. All regional employers understand and take advantage of those tendencies.

So we don't expect you to educate *our* young people so much as young people from other regions, both in Australia and around the world, who have an interest in some regionally specific issues or some specialty for which we have become known. We have seen Melbourne University do that to some extent with nursing, more specifically with Rural Health, particularly in the Koori Community, and of course with irrigated agriculture.

There are other regional issues that have global significance. Water is one of them. Salinity. Biodiversity. Sustainability of rural and regional communities. One example: we have a retired soil scientist here working on developing super soils – using novel organic ways of restructuring our ancient Australian soils and presently achieving astonishing productivity gains – up to 500% in controlled tests. He’s supervising several PhDs from the University of Adelaide. We should be leveraging that knowledge here.

Finally, a comment about meaningful engagement. I see from the two previous forums on this subject - at Monash Churchill in February and Canberra in March - there has emerged a conversation about engagement in regional communities and what the rules of that engagement might be. The Dept of Transport and Regional Services has even produced a brochure on it, offering tips for communities on how to engage with higher education. But I haven’t seen any tips on how HE should engage with regional communities.

Let me give you just one. Please avoid turf protection. I mentioned earlier how the University of Melbourne was tackling some locally relevant issues, both through Dookie, which has courses ranging from viticulture and winemaking to rural business, food technology and horticulture, as well as through the clinical school and Rural Health. I understand they are also developing a centre for water and landscape management as well as an academy of sport, health and education specifically focussing on our substantial Koori community.

By next year, I am told, they’ll have 530 students in Shepparton, 120 staff and residential units for 66.

There appears to me to be a fair bit of engagement going on here – indeed, the kind of innovative, regionally specific engagement the ministers are talking about – **what this roundtable is talking about** – but they’re not on the program. Nor were they on the program at Churchill or Canberra. Why would that be, do you think?

If it’s an oversight, it seems to me a curious one. Of the sort that means today’s event could set this community’s aspirations back a step, instead of taking it three steps forward. And that’s a waste of everyone’s time.

Which brings me back to our expectations:

- Meaningful engagement
- Being locally relevant
- Being prepared to innovate with us.

If you are willing to meet those expectations, we will move heaven and earth to help you, in any way we can.