

‘LEARNING TOWNS’ AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT: KINDRED SPIRITS OR CONSPIRITORS IN STATE- SPONSORED COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT: In 2000 the Victorian Government funded nine ‘Learning Towns’ through the Adult Community and further Education Division of the Department of Education. The aim of the Victorian Learning Town Network (VLTN) was ‘to develop collaborative learning partnerships between education providers, business, local government and community activity and to integrate economic and social development.’ (Wong, 2001) This initiative was based on ALP policy for the 1999 election campaign, ‘as there was a ground swell within rural and regional Victoria’s Adult and Community Education (ACE) providers interested in learning communities.’ (McCullough, *et al.*, 2003). These ‘Learning Towns’ are, to varying degrees, supported by their local government councils. Some councils, for example, include the ‘Learning Town’s’ rationale and objectives as their own incorporating them into their corporate planning documents, recognising that a knowledge-based society is one which will bring a range of cultural and economic rewards to their community. Most councils however provide minimal in-kind support and do not formally acknowledge the role of the ‘Learning Town’ in the wider community. This paper reports on research into the relationship between Victorian State Government funded ‘Learning Towns’ and their local government. It reveals that local governments are largely ambivalent to engagement with the ‘Learning Towns’ and discusses why. It questions whether this is a missed opportunity for both levels of government, or whether it is a political ploy that has limited outcomes for its sponsors.

1. INTRODUCTION

Increasingly the knowledge and ability of people in regional Australian communities is seen as a key driver in the success of these places (Dore and Woodhill, 1999, Beer *et al.*, 2003). The collective competence of people working together in networks and associations is seen as an important component in the social capital of a region (Putnam, 1993, 2000; Gray and Lawrence, 2001). This relationship is well recognised in other developed nations dealing with the issues of regional change and community development (Kretzman and McKnight, 1996; Almas, 1999; Bryden and Hart 2001; Bryden 2003; Putnam *et al.*, 2003; Reimer, B. 2002). Dore and Woodhill in their Commonwealth Government funded report (1999, p.13) on sustainable regional development in Australia concluded that there were six critical issues to be addressed:

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- Understanding the implications of sustainable development;
- Developing and maintaining supportive institutional arrangements;
- Devolving responsibility and power;
- Enhancing the capacity of regional organisations;
- Improving coordination
- Enabling participation;
- Improving knowledge systems;
- Improving processes of adaptive management and social learning.

In order to ensure the future of regional communities state governments make significant investments in education and training services across a wide range of sectors in order to build and maintain their competence and address these issues. These educational investments range from child care through primary, secondary and tertiary education and training and make up a considerable proportion of government expenditure. This paper examines a small component of this investment; the Victorian Government's funding of 'Learning Towns', in terms of their relationship with the local level of government in these places. These Learning Towns constitute the Victorian Learning Towns Network (VLTN), providers of a range of community-based adult and continuing education courses. They were funded by the State government for a two year period and local governments' engagement is indicative of the likelihood that each Learning Town will continue on, and that the network will prevail.

Consistent with recent explanations of community success (Putnam, 1993, 2000) the Victorian government has developed a range of local 'capacity building' programs which recognise the importance of locally developed initiatives across a range of community settings including business (Street Life funding), health (Primary Care Partnerships) and education and training (LLEN, Community Capacity Building Facilitators, and the VLTN).

These initiatives are not without their critics who claim that, in Victoria, the "*Community Building/Strengthening program of the State government is well short of maximising this opportunity. On current indications, it is simply unsustainable ... because it is:*

- *Not strategically coherent (but still a series of loosely linked pilot programs carried out at different levels);*
- *Seen and funded as an add-on special program and when funds run out and fashions change, it will fade away;*
- *Not sufficiently understood and supported in the government;*
- *Not built into government where it matters: across departments, into government culture, into the budget;*
- *Currently lacking in wider community support (though potentially it could have much more);*
- *Perhaps most importantly, it has no sufficiently strong and legitimate, ongoing vehicle in the Victorian community to operationalise and carry it forward as a long term, state-wide strategy. (Salvaris, 2004, p.56)"*

Salvaris suggests that:

"there is one obvious and immediate solution, again under the government's nose. This is the potential role of an enhanced local government sector as the prime vehicle to carry community building throughout the State." (2004, p.56).

In this paper we report on research enquiring into the relationship between the Victorian State government sponsored community building initiative; the funding of the Victorian Learning Towns Network in selected towns and regional centres in non-metropolitan Victoria and their relationship with their local government.. The research asked members of the VLTN to identify the nature of the relationship with their local government and the likelihood that the council will continue supporting their learning town projects after the State government funding ceases. Before outlining their responses we will describe the VLTN; ask why governments sponsor such programs; discuss how local government could use such a program to strengthen their community; describe our research strategy and findings; before concluding with a discussion about what this relationship suggests about the nature of State government and local government relations in Victoria and the likelihood of local governments taking up the Salvaris challenge.

2. WHAT IS THE VLTN?

In 1999-2000 nine learning towns were funded across Victoria:

"to form local partnerships between businesses, community-based adult education organisations, other education and training providers, community organisations and government agencies, including local government." (Kosky, 2004, p.7).

McCullough *et al.*, (2003) noted that a number of ACE centres across Victoria:

were [prior to 1999] engaged in discussions of community capacity, community learning and economic sustainability.

Individuals from these ACE centres had attended conferences and visited learning towns and communities in Europe where the concept of Learning Cities was in vogue (see Wong, 2001 for an example). The Australian Labour Party had recognised the need to address 'a growing fragmentation of service providers covering the spectrum of adult, training and labour market assistance'² as part of its 1999 election campaign. Curiously they implemented this policy by calling for expressions of interest for ACE providers in non-metropolitan communities to become Learning Towns (McCullough *et al.*, 2003). Why nine towns were chosen and the basis for their selection as State government funded Learning Towns has not been published.

The way in which the State government established the VLTN raises many questions about their motives for doing so. Was calling for expressions of interest to fund a limited number of non-metropolitan Learning Towns going to address real needs in order of priority in communities where the fragmentation of

² www.vic.alp.org.au/policy/education/ed_pathways; cited in McCullough *et al* (2003)

education, training and labour market assistance service provision was the greatest? Or were there other motives at play, more to do with funding local employment programs as part of wider concerns to reduce unemployment in some non-metropolitan communities? The rationale for their approach to implementing this aspect of Party policy on education pathways is not clear.

The Learning Towns network had nine ambitious objectives:

1. develop community-wide *coalitions* which bring together relevant partners from the public and private sectors with the common goals of supporting lifelong learning, and promoting social and economic regeneration;
2. promote and support the *value* of learning, and play an active role in encouraging individuals, employers and a range of organisations to involve themselves in learning throughout their lives;
3. create and maintain *strategic linkages* between ACE organisations, education and training providers, local government and industry, and use those linkages to create *cross-sectoral educational opportunities* for students in rural and regional areas;
4. improve *access* to good quality education, training and learning opportunities through those sectoral linkages;
5. enhance the *portability* of learning and knowledge and facilitate learner transition from one sector to another;
6. provide learners in rural and regional areas with *broad education, training and employment options* and support achieving those options through a network of linked education and training providers;
7. *engage industry as a partner* in education and training in ways which facilitate employment options which benefit both employers and job-seekers;
8. *reinforce the role of local government* as a supporter of local communities and encourage local council involvement in community-based education and training innovation; and
9. improve the *coordination and integration* of educational, social and economic planning in rural and regional areas. (ACFE Board, 2000)

3. WHY DO GOVERNMENT SPONSOR SUCH PROGRAMS?

The Victorian Government supports processes and programs which strengthen and build community capacity (Thwaites, 2003; Department of Victorian Communities (DVC), 2004). The DVC has developed survey questions based on Bullen and Onyx's (1998) identification of social capital from a study of five communities in New South Wales. Bullen and Onyx concluded that the size of a person's social network and their amount of social contact can be used as a proxy measure of their social capital (DVC, 2004, p.8). The DVC's

“objectives and strategies are largely related to building and bridging and linking forms of social capital through mentoring, volunteering and partnerships between governments, businesses and communities” (DVC, 2004, p.8)

The State government through the Adult Community and Further Education Board, in the Department of Education and Training, is attempting through the

VLTN and other departmental sponsored programs to enhance the capacity of local communities from within (endogenous). The dilemma appears to be that they are applying the strategies from without (exogenous) by appointing facilitators for a fixed period, who report to departmental officers in head office (ultimately located in Melbourne), and who are seen by local communities as being part of programs that are sporadic and adhoc (as Savaris, 2004 notes) lacking genuine longer term commitment to that community. Nevertheless the State Government's strategy does have some intellectual currency. If sufficient numbers of local people 'adopt' the idea and make it their own it will become part of an ongoing process of change and ultimately become the norm in that community.

Minister Kosky in her Statement on Future Directions for Adult and Community Education in Victoria notes that:

"social capital (networks, communications, civic society) is built through a participative and community-based approach to social learning (citing Robertson and Cummings, 2002)".

This also reflects Rothman's (2001) three approaches to community organisation designed to build community: locality development, social planning and social action. Locality development defines specific areas and is regarded as community development. Rothman makes the point that these three models are not mutually exclusive, but that efforts at community engagement will tend towards one of these approaches. Rothman's notion of social action appears to be the framework in which the VLTN initiative is best reflected. In this model projects which reflect both a concern for processes and build community capacity with the aim of achieving measurable change in a community in favour of those most disadvantaged are found.

Rogers (1983) diffusion of innovation theory is also a plausible rationale for the VLTN type programs. Rogers asserts that innovation diffusion

"is the process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among certain members of a social system" (1983).

His theory was developed out of observations made about the way in which agricultural innovation was adopted in developed and developing countries. Given the location of the VLTN in, primarily rural regions of Victoria, it seems an appropriate explanatory framework with which to ask why local government councils have not embraced the State governments initiative of creating learning towns. Importantly, Rogers advises, it is the relative newness of the idea to an individual regardless of when it was actually discovered or first used that makes it innovative. He identifies five general factors that influence the speed and success with which new ideas are adopted in communities. They are: the characteristics of the potential adopters; the rate of adoption; the nature of the social system; the characteristics of the innovation; and, the characteristics of the change agents (Rogers, 1983). In every respect the objectives of the Learning Towns network address these factors. Cavaye's (2003) evaluation report reveals modest achievement against these objectives.

In consideration of the lack of engagement by local government with the State government sponsored learning towns initiative, Rogers (1983) identified

five characteristics of innovations that have been consistently associated with successful adoption:

- the compatibility with the prevailing socio-economic and cultural values of the adopter;
- the clarity of the relative advantage of the innovation compared with current practices including perceived value for money, usefulness, convenience and status;
- the simplicity and flexibility of the innovation itself;
- the reversibility and perceived risk of adoption; and
- observability of the results of adopting an innovation to others who might be contemplating change.

These characteristics suggest why the State government has bypassed local government with the VLTN.

4. COMMUNITY STRENGTHENING THROUGH LEARNING TOWNS: WHAT ROLE FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT?

Local government provides a range of services and plans, develops and manages the physical infrastructure of town and city communities throughout the state. While not recognised as a legitimate arm of government in the Australian Constitution, local government is an important level of government in each state. This is especially so for rural and non-metro regional communities as elected representatives come from these communities and they have an appreciation and affinity for the needs of their local community (Martin and Simons 2002).

Cavaye (2003, p.39) also notes in his draft report outlining an evaluation framework for the VLTN that “A key priority is engaging with local government.” In concluding on how Learning Towns can be enhanced he notes that

“Some Learning Towns work closely with local government and their local councils are embracing a learning approach in the community. However, other local government’s may not see supporting community learning as their role nor understand the concept or benefits of learning communities. Local government is a crucial potential facilitator and supporter of the objectives of Learning Towns and the community benefits of a learning culture relate very closely to local government’s objectives for economic, social and environmental improvement.” (Cavaye, 2003, p.39)

Cavaye presents an evaluation framework consisting of a hierarchy of four tiers with the functions of the ACE sector (Learning Communities, ACE providers, and the overall structure of the adult, continuing and further education system) as the first tier. This provides the structure of Learning Delivery, the second tier. Lifelong Learning is the third tier, and, of interest to this paper, Community Capacity, which Cavaye (2004) says

“includes the ACE sectors’ contribution to the social, economic, environmental and cultural condition of communities”

is the final tier to which all of the preceding leads to. What then is the role for local government which has a primary concern for these outcomes?

There is a developing view in government that they should encourage the development of 'strong' communities which have characteristics that make them resilient to the vagaries and shocks of the world beyond. A strong community is 'globally oriented' - aware of its place in its region, state, nation and the world. A strong community is also more knowing and aware and therefore understanding and tolerant of different cultures and religious views. Creating learning opportunities is one way in which people can enhance their knowledge and understanding, their social networks and degree of interaction with others. All of which adds to their stock of social capital, makes them more resilient, active and confident in their community. (See the Appendix for the DVC (2004) outcomes framework which attempts to capture these processes and characteristics).

All levels of government play a role in strengthening local communities with these outcomes. Suffice to say here that the federal government with its external powers and the states with their responsibility for major service provision they have a significant and overriding influence in strengthening local communities. That is not to say that local government does not. Our view is that local government plays a different role, one central to the development of characteristics now being recognised as indicative of strong communities. Yet local government's mandate goes primarily to 'place management' (after Kaye Rundle, CEO Geelong City Council at the LGPro Conference Chirnside Park, 12 August 2004) and its functions and responsibilities are highly prescribed by state government with revenue constraints from both state and the federal government. Given the primary focus on land use planning and development, infrastructure development and maintenance and provision of basic community services (aged care in particular) the question is how oriented is local government to facilitating the development of characteristics of community strengthening, such as the extension of individual social networks and interaction? State (and Federal, to a lesser degree) governments are responsible for local planning and arbitration through VCAT and service provision which includes the major services of policing, health and education. Assisting communities develop a broader view is a concern to all levels of government. Local government because of its closeness to communities has as great an opportunity as either Federal or state governments to assist in this important community survival function.

If governments are making communities 'strong' they are making them resilient to change by enabling people within these communities to be more informed, knowledgeable, understanding, accepting of difference, religious and racially tolerant, making them more cosmopolitan. Paradoxically communities are 'inoculated' when they are exposed to the vagaries of the world beyond their immediate locale. They become resistant to the outside world by their exposure to it. A cosmopolitan society, one capable of dealing with external change, is a society which is knowledgeable and understands the nature of these externalities.

5. THE RESEARCH STRATEGY AND FINDINGS

Each of the nine executive officers from the State government funded Victorian Learning Towns were contacted introducing them to the research into the way in which their local council supports and works with their local Learning Town organisation. Each Learning Town executive officer was asked to nominate a contact person in their local council who would be the best person to outline the relationship. I subsequently met with all Learning Town executive officers at one of their planned meetings to discuss my research and receive collective feedback from them about the relationship with their local council.

The initial email responses from each Learning Town executive officer were interesting in their own right. Only five of the eight replied. As requested they nominated a person in their council with whom they interacted. Only one elected councillor was identified, the rest were all middle managers from the human resources or community development departments. No CEOs or Directors were identified. Several of the executive officers email responses were indicative of the relationship. For example:

'whilst the City of ... supports the philosophy of {the learning town} there is no funding agreement in place (however we have applied for funding in the next budget round so are keeping our fingers crossed?). ... City of ... have sponsored events from time to time such as {example of an event}. ... City of ... have sponsored the development of the {name of city} Learning City banners which hang from the light poles throughout the city during learning week and other appropriate times of the year. ... {name of city} Learning City has been included in the Municipal Strategic Statement and in the Economic Development Strategy. The City of ... is represented on the {name of city} Learning City Advisory Board'.

and

'My problem is in identifying the contact person there! Although we do have a representative of Council on our Steering Committee who is good value, I feel his input stems solely from a personal perspective, rather than being there to represent the Council or the Executive. ... We have rarely enjoyed the involvement of anyone else at Council in our activities, nor even contact with others. Part of this is my/our fault as I find it difficult to "go around" {name of contact} to approach other personnel.

At the meeting with all (but one) of the VLTN executive officers they were asked to describe their relationship with their local council. The general response was 'what relationship!' While they had varying degrees of formal representation on advisory committees there was little else after this. It was clear in the discussion that the Learning Towns were largely autonomous State government funded and managed projects and in regard to their local council they work independently from them paying more attention to the wishes of their funders. Clearly this response from the VLTN executive officers tells us that local government is not actively engaged with this State Government initiative.

This response from local government to the VLTN initiative is not surprising, given the commonly held view held by local government CEOs; that local

government is primarily responsible for place management and the State Government is primarily responsible for the provision of services in health, education, safety and so on. This may not be a sufficient explanation of this position and we suggest local governments' lack of commitment to the State government funded VLTN reflects other issues between these two levels of government. This includes the recent history of local state government relations in Victoria, in terms of roles and responsibilities, and views local government hold in relation to resourcing such projects and the perception they have of the propensity for the State government to 'cost shift' in relations to programs like the VLTN. Essentially this involves federal and state governments funding the start-up of programs and withdrawing this funding at a latter date leaving local government to fund the program (see Martin, 2003a, 2003b for a broader discussion of this phenomena).

Clearly there has been a mixed level of engagement between the Victorian government funded Learning Towns and their local government council. The research to date has had minimal formal feedback from local government about their role ala the Learning Town organisation set up in their community. The typical response is that it is a good idea, but respondents contacted by phone (both council officers and elected councillors), universally, are unable to explain why the concept and practice of a learning community has not been embedded into the council's strategic plans and resourced along with other community based strategies. I suspect that situation is as Salvaris reflected at the outset to this paper. These State government initiatives, funded for relatively short time frames and tightly controlled by State government bureaucracies, are seen as ephemeral by local governments who are also coping with issues of cost shifting in their traditional areas of service delivery (aged care, and so on).

The Victorian government has also chosen to work through local government on a number of programs, most noticeably the Regional Infrastructure Development Fund. Applications can only be made in association with the local government council and all funds are administered through the council organisation. Given that the Victorian government has chosen not to work through local government in the development and administration of the Learning Towns program it is not surprising that local governments would see that this is not a program that they should be involved with, at least in the eyes of the State government. The way in which the State government conceived and administered these two programs (RIDF and VLTN) can be seen as creating confusion in the minds of local government councillors and managers challenged to maintain their basic levels of service within a continuing challenging fiscal regime (see Martin, 2004).

6. LEARNING TOWNS AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT: KINDRED SPIRITS OR CONSPIRITORS IN STATE GOVERNMENT SPONSORED COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT?

The apparent mismatch between the State government's attempt to build learning towns and the lack of local government involvement in each place suggests that these two levels of government are not talking to each other about

the importance of educating, training and creating employment opportunities in regional Victorian communities. Local government does not deny the importance of doing this. They are simply not engaged in the process set up by State government. This does not augur well for the continuation of the program beyond State government funding. Ideally this resource should have had sustainability criteria beyond the State government's initial commitment. Had this been the case they would have considered strategies which engaged local government from the outset. It would be too generous to say they were kindred spirits in this process, possibly ships passing in the night is a more accurate metaphor. Nor can it be seen as part of a political conspiracy to provide employment funding to specific Victorian communities, although these types of fears may have been allayed had the selection process been more transparent. A high priority of the Learning Towns is a focus on those people who have missed out on the opportunity afforded by the established, formal education system. This can only be seen as a positive outcome enhancing the lives of individuals in these communities. So what is the likelihood of the State government taking up the Salvaris challenge? Could local government in Victoria play a greater role in developing and leading a culture of innovation and change based on education and learning? We can see no reason why local government cannot do this independently of the State Government. One excellent example is the 'Hume Global Learning Village'³. The Hume City Council has created a structure for people to come together across a range of local learning programs. Hume Council 'believes that learning is the key to personal, economic and community growth' stating this on its web site.

The Victorian Government's VLTN program can be seen as part of a wider decentralisation strategy aimed at devolving authority and responsibility to local communities each grappling with similar generic problems, in this case the development of human capital, with unique local circumstances that requires a customised approach.

Clearly, there is much more the State Government can do to engage local government in the process of community strengthening through processes of education and learning. Local government generally is missing out on creating long term sustainable options for their community by not adopting approaches such as those implemented by Hume City Council. To claim its legitimate place in Australia's federal system of government local government needs to invest in strengthening its community by creating opportunity for people to realise their potential, and for the community as a whole to do likewise. State governments must take the leadership by enabling and funding local government to do this over the long term.

³ www.hume.vic.gov.au/

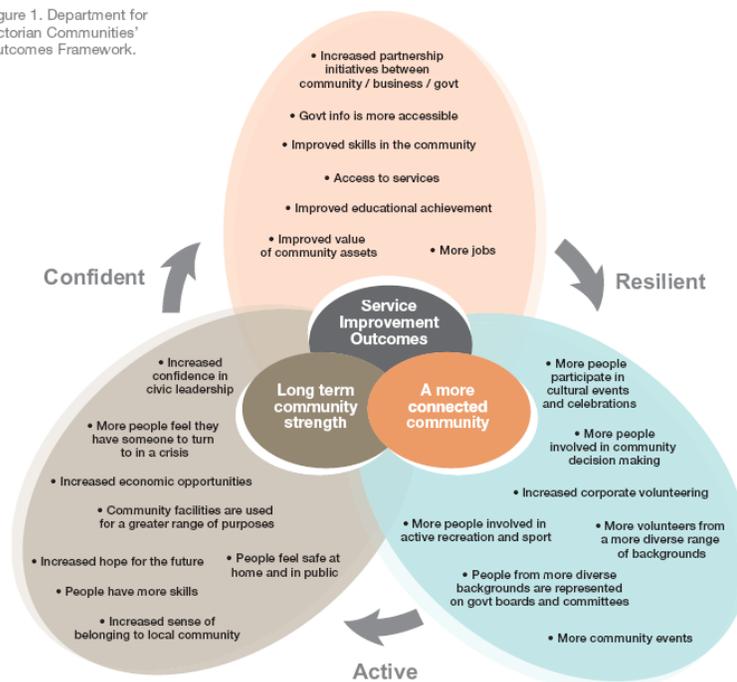
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APPENDIX: OUTCOMES FRAMEWORK USED BY DEPARTMENT OF VICTORIAN COMMUNITIES

Figure 1. Department for Victorian Communities' Outcomes Framework.



Source: Department of Victorian Communities (2004).

