



DEVELOPING OURSELVES- DEVELOPING COMMUNITY

FINAL REPORT

**FROM THE CENTRE FOR
RURAL COMMUNITIES INC.**

REPORTING PERIOD DEC 2003 – DEC 2004

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 THE CENTRE FOR RURAL COMMUNITIES INC.

The Centre for Rural Communities (the Centre) is a community-based association that incorporated in 1996. It was established to work with rural communities to enable them to respond to the negative impacts they were experiencing on their social, economic, environmental and cultural well being. Its strategies include (amongst other things) providing education and skills into smaller rural communities. The Centre has formed an active and long-term partnership most particularly with Monash University Gippsland but also with both TAFE colleges in Gippsland. These partnerships benefit the Centre through access to accredited learning and benefit the educational institutions through a closer relationship with community. This linking also gives accreditation and credibility to community people (it creates pathways into further education and also assists people in finding employment).

The Centre has also created partnerships around projects with local governments, government departments, other Universities and community groups.

The Centre developed a regional development strategy based on a study circle model and has produced a Study Circle Kit (Building Rural Futures Through Cooperation, 1997 – philanthropic funding); a Professional Development Manual (Growing and Learning in Rural Communities, 2000) and a *Guide to Celebrating Community* Event Manual (The Other Awards, 2005 – self funded). With funding assistance from the Australian government, the Centre also developed the accredited Graduate Certificate in Regional Community Development (Monash University 2002 – 2005. The Graduate Certificate is be taken up by other regional Universities in 2006).

The Centre currently has 2 part time paid staff (Director and Administration Officer).

1.2 PROJECT CONTEXT

Over a period of 10 years the Centre for Rural Communities has developed both a context and a process for undertaking its work. While the Centre is primarily dependent upon project funding (and consequently is subject to start – stop work with communities as funding comes and goes and is limited in which communities it can work with) it undertakes all of its work within a thoroughly researched and evidenced based context. Thus while this particular project was for a fixed period of time and focussed on a fixed geographic area, the work undertaken has had a cumulative effect upon work previously undertaken.

1.3 SUMMARY OF REPORT

The *Developing Ourselves – Developing Community* project provided learning and skills development for people living in and / or working with rural communities in Gippsland. It was recognised that these communities are increasingly taking on new

responsibilities to support their families and communities socially, economically and environmentally. Most generally there is no support provided to enable these new responsibilities to be undertaken.

Through the extensive networks of the Centre for Rural Communities local and regional, paid and unpaid workers from a diverse variety of backgrounds were enrolled in the Graduate Certificate of Regional Community Development. As part of their education these workers established 15 study circles in local communities. Each study circle involved an average of 8 local people who – through the process of the study circle’s focus of learning from local situations – gained valuable (and TAFE accredited) skills in personal and community development. Strategies to work together, overcome past divisions and facilitate activities that promote community interaction are the fundamental basis of the learning.

The project was structured to enable ‘levels of learning’ to benefit a broad cross section of the community. This strategy ensured that skills remain in the community (and continue to develop) well past the formal end of the project. The levels include the Graduate Certificate, the TAFE level with the study circles, observational learning for those community people who attend ‘events’ that form part of the study circle participants ‘hands on’ learning, participation by committee members and students in the regional affair forum and the opportunity for some to present at a national conference.

This multi levelled strategy provides the broadest possible reach into community. It is expected that some community people will look to participate in a study circle as a result of their involvement in a community event, while some study circle participants will move to undertake the Graduate Certificate.

The project also undertook two evaluations – one of the forum – *A Regional Affair* - and one of the Graduate Certificate.

The Centre believes this to have been a significant and successful project that has touched the lives of a few hundred people across Gippsland.

We have seen a variety of directly attributable outcomes from people who undertook the Graduate Certificate obtaining employment for the first time in years to communities that changed the local government’s child-care policy. More examples are given in the body of this Report.

While the Centre recognises that wonderful achievements have many contributing factors – it is a well justified claim – both from our own observations as part of this project and from the words of participants – that the Developing Ourselves – Developing Our Community strategies played a crucial facilitating and instigating role in creating change and learning in communities.

This project would not have been possible without the commitment, time, enthusiasm and foresight of all those people living and working in rural communities.

2. FINAL REPORT

2.1 REPORTING REQUIREMENTS

2.1.1 Project Outputs

The Developing Ourselves – Developing Our Community contracted to achieve the following outputs –

- Enrolment of 12 Facilitators in the Graduate Certificate of Regional Development
- Development of skills and knowledge to establish 12 study circles or community project groups in Gippsland involving 8 – 10 participants per group. Where possible, the full Study Circle programme will be implemented within the participating communities. The Funding Recipient may elect to use a modified approach where literacy, cultural or other barriers prevent participants from engaging in a structured learning programme. In this case, community groups will be established to develop local capacity building projects using the principles of facilitation and community engagement set out in the Study Circles programme.
- Extension of involvement in public activities of people from diverse backgrounds.
- Initiation of a collaborative self-help project within each participating community.
- Public documentation of the process in local media, video or displays.
- Participation in regional and or state event to showcase activities and broaden awareness of other resources.

2.1.2 Project Objectives

The Developing Ourselves – Developing Community contracted to achieve the following objectives –

- Increase the skill of local people through accredited training and participatory practice to ensure community building skills are accessible within local communities for the long term.
- Strengthen the engagement of people in community life by increasing the number and diversity of people involved in community building activities and community decision making at a local level.
- Strengthen community capacity and build problem solving capability to enable communities to positively overcome issues of local concern.
- Facilitate broader and more cooperative networks between communities to develop stronger support frameworks and alliances across the region.
- Support the establishment of ventures able to re-invest in communities in order to build social, cultural, economic, environmental, political, personal and spiritual capital.

2.1.3 Project Milestones

These have all been reported on in previous project reports.

2.1.4 Further Information Requested

The Centre was also requested to provide the following information:

- The total number of participants in the project,
- The number of participants who responded to feedback mechanisms, and what percentage of those were satisfied with the outcomes of the project,
- The number of people who completed training courses,
- The total number of groups or organisations involved in the project,
- The total number of partnerships developed during the project, including the number of government, business and non-government (sic) partners, and
- The number of networks established.

The Contract also asked that – if applicable, indicate how the results of the Project will be publicly disseminated.

2.2 THE PROJECT

The Developing Ourselves – Developing Community project emerged from previous work undertaken by the Centre for Rural Communities in working with rural communities to increase skills, develop cooperation and create partnerships and dialogue between communities and government.

In this the project was not an isolated period of work with communities but part of an ongoing and clearly defined strategy.

The outcomes and achievements need to be considered within this context – that much previous work had been undertaken and work does need to be ongoing.

The Centre's desire to promote partnerships and to educate government on new ways of working with community enabled the Centre to initiate partnerships with two of Gippsland's local governments (one with funding from FaCS and one with funding from the state government)

These partnerships increased the outcomes for all three projects.

2.2.1 Project Outputs

The Developing Ourselves – Developing Community achieved the following outputs –

- **Enrolment of 12 Facilitators in the Graduate Certificate of Regional Development** – *There were 28 enrolments and 22 graduates. Students came from Lakes Entrance, Swan Reach, Loch, Bruthen, Toongabbie, Buchan, Mirboo North, Traralgon South, Brunswick, Morwell, Boolarra,*

Mallacoota, Yallourn North, Orbost, Stratford, Thorpdale, Churchill, Sale, Bairnsdale, Ensay, Glengarry and Grantville. Sectors represented included Health, Education, Community Development, Environment, Neighbourhood House, unemployed, Employment – and included Local Government, Community Organisations and State Government. (Some of the 6 students who did not complete intend to do so as soon as family commitments allow).

- **Development of skills and knowledge to establish 12 study circles or community project groups in Gippsland involving 8 – 10 participants per group.** – 20 study circles were established (in some instances – eg Lake Tyers Aboriginal Settlement – a number of students worked together on 1 study circle. In other instances – see Case study Stories appendix 1 – some students ran projects). Study Circles averaged 8 participants.
- **Extension of involvement in public activities of people from diverse backgrounds.** *Involvement in public activities includes study circle members becoming involved in a regional advisory committee for the Communities for Children project funded by FaCS in East Gippsland; in the production of a community newspaper; in working with libraries; in producing a community year book detailing the activities of every group in the community; in environmental projects; etc. Many of these people had not previously undertaken such public roles within their communities. See snapshots in appendix 2.*
- **Initiation of a collaborative self-help project within each participating community.** *Examples of collaborative self help projects include the Koorie Arts Group (collaborating with local government, TAFE, local indigenous groups); environmental projects (in collaboration with state government departments); etc. See snapshots in appendix 2.*
- **Public documentation of the process in local media, video or displays.** *Public documentation includes:*
 - Presentation at National Conference*
 - Video / DVD produced by the Centre – ‘The story so far’ (copy in appendix 4)*
 - Publication by East Gippsland Shire (appendix 4)*
 - Publication by Latrobe City (appendix 4)*
 - Publication by Monash University (appendix 4)*
 - Newspaper articles (appendix 4)*
 - The Regional Affair Forum (October 2004)*
 - Presentation at Small Towns Conference 2005*
 - Articles in New Community Quarterly (copy in appendix 4).*
- **Participation in regional and or state event to showcase activities and broaden awareness of other resources.** *Participants (both Graduate Certificate students and community members who participated in the study circles) have participated in regional events – one forum in Traralgon organised by the state Department for Victorian*

Communities (where the Latrobe City project was showcased) and one forum in East Gippsland (organised by the CRC – see attached evaluation – appendix 5). Two Graduate Certificate students also co presented with the CRC Director at a national conference in Sydney. A paper is being presented at the Small Towns Conference (Bendigo 2005).

2.2.2 Project Objectives

The Developing Ourselves – Developing Community achieved the following objectives –

- **Increase the skill of local people through accredited training and participatory practice to ensure community building skills are accessible within local communities for the long term.** *22 people from local communities graduated from the Graduate Certificate. Approximately 180 people gained skills in working in community, committees, developing projects, etc through participation in the Study Circles. As well the people on the management committees / advisory groups for the local area facilitators also had their skills increased through seeing different ways of working and having the opportunity to work alongside a skilled facilitator. On top of that many people in the community participated in locally organised events. Because it is local people who have been skilled up and because the study circle model creates on-going activity, these skills will remain in the community and be used*
- **Strengthen the engagement of people in community life by increasing the number and diversity of people involved in community building activities and community decision making at a local level.** *The study circles engaged with a broad cross section of people within each community. Many of the people who attended (and presented) at the Regional Affair forum had not participated at a regional forum before. For these presenters it was the first time their voice had been heard in a public forum. This is an important step for people – to have their voice heard. Many people do not participate in community life because they do not believe their voice will be heard.*
- **Strengthen community capacity and build problem solving capability to enable communities to positively overcome issues of local concern.** *Examples of communities tackling a range of local issues following participation in the study circles are given in appendix 2.*
- **Facilitate broader and more cooperative networks between communities to develop stronger support frameworks and alliances across the region.** *This has been achieved – an example is the holding of a community event called The Other Awards in Boolarra in April 2005. This event, to recognise and celebrate the contribution of community groups to the social, cultural, economic and environmental well being of communities, involves 8 communities celebrating together*

and continuing to support and learn from each other. The Other Awards have previously been held by several communities and were used in class room activities as an example of an innovative way to strengthen networking between communities at a very broad level (not just between a few workers).

- **Support the establishment of ventures able to re-invest in communities in order to build social, cultural, economic, environmental, political, personal and spiritual capital.** *There are examples of ventures beginning to emerge – for example the plan for a Koorie Arts Group in Morwell. In other instances the newly skilled people have taken a more active role in existing ventures – such as the Boolarra Folk Festival. In another example the Township Facilitators from the Latrobe City Project have initiated The Other Awards to be held in Boolarra (April 2005) – bringing 8 communities together to celebrate (and network) the work of local community organisations. (The Other Awards were started in 2001 and have been held in communities as far apart as Nowa Nowa and Corryong – they are an ongoing project of the Centre for Rural Communities). In Toongabbie a community newspaper has been established. In Mallacoota the community is to record the activities of community groups in a year book. In Boolarra a run down and neglected park is being refurbished. Other emerging examples include a community mosaic; a Women and Business project; and involvement in the Communities for Children project in East Gippsland.*

2.2.3 Further Information

The Centre is pleased to provide the following extra information as requested:

- The total number of participants in the project. *It is estimated that over 200 people participated **directly** in the project.*
- The number of participants who responded to feedback mechanisms, and what percentage (of those) were satisfied with the outcomes of the project. *There were two feedback mechanisms available during the project – a survey distributed to attendees at the forum (A Regional Affair) and an interview with the consultant undertaking the project evaluation. 20% of attendees at the forum filled in a survey at the end of the forum. 85% of respondents felt the forum was good value (the other 15% made no comment to this question). In the project evaluation – where interviews were the dominant strategy for information gathering (though focus groups and questionnaires were also used) – Over 60% of students (from 2003 and 2004) were interviewed and “...the overwhelming majority indicated a positive attitude toward the course.”*
- The number of people who completed training courses. *22 students graduated from the Graduate Certificate, 120 participants completed the study circle process.*

- The total number of groups or organisations involved in the project. *It is difficult to accurately estimate the total number of groups or organisations involved in the project. This is for two reasons. Firstly because the Centre does not know every thing that happens within each community. Secondly because activities at a local level do not cease when the project officially ends. Nonetheless the following is a list indicating the range of groups and organisations involved:*
 - *Latrobe City and East Gippsland Shire local governments*
 - *Lakes Entrance Community Health Centre*
 - *Swifts Creek Community Centre*
 - *Paynesville Neighbourhood House*
 - *Two community Op Shops*
 - *Primary School*
 - *Department of Sustainability and Environment*
 - *Catchment Management Authorities*
 - *Lake Tyers Aboriginal Settlement*
 - *Central Gippsland and East Gippsland TAFE Colleges*
 - *Monash University*
 - *Boolarra Community Development Group (and the Township Advisory Groups in the 7 central Gippsland communities)*
 - *Mallacoota Arts Council (and all community groups in Mallacoota)*
 - *Victorian Universities Regional Network*
 - *Adult Day Care*
 - *Hazelwood Power*
 - *State Library of Victoria*
 - *etc*

- The total number of partnerships developed during the project, including the number of government, business and non-government (sic) partners. *A number of partnerships have been established or are emerging:*
 - *The Koorie Arts Group with TAFE and Latrobe City*
 - *The Toongabbie Newspaper with the West Gippsland Catchment Management Authority*
 - *Toongabbie with the Traralgon Neighbourhood House*
 - *Boolarra Community Development Group with the Department of Sustainability and Environment*
 - *The Lake Tyers Aboriginal Settlement with the Lakes Entrance YMCA (Aquatic Centre)*
 - *etc*

- The number of networks established. *Many networks (both informal and more formal) have been established and will continue to grow. An example is the Other Awards celebration where 8 communities came together to share and celebrate their work in environmental, cultural, recreational and enterprise activities.*

2.2.4 Public Dissemination of Information about the Project and its Outcomes.

While there are distinct fields that have been informed many of the strategies do overlap fields – however they have only been noted once under the main field to which they were targeted.

There are a number of layers or levels at which the broader community can be informed of the project and its outcomes. The Centre has and continues to use a range of opportunities for this dissemination.

To the general local communities of Latrobe and East Gippsland – local committees and the local governments both used local media (press and radio) to inform their communities of the project and its outcomes (examples are included in appendix 4).

To community development, capacity building and the broader welfare field – the Centre used the Regional Affair forum, produced a Video / DVD, presented at a National Conference (Sydney) – and is presenting at the National Small Towns Conference in Bendigo in July 2005.

To Universities and the broader academic field – the Centre has informed the Victorian Universities Rural and Regional Network, submitted academic papers for publication

As well the Centre has spent time in a range of networks promoting the project and its outcomes.

Public documentation also includes

- Presentation at National Conference
- Video / DVD produced by the Centre - *The story so far* (copy in appendix 4)
- Publication by East Gippsland Shire (appendix 4)
- Publication by Latrobe City (appendix 4)
- Publication by Monash University (appendix 4)
- Newspaper articles (appendix 4)
- The Regional Affair Forum (October 2004)
- Presentation at Small Towns Conference 2005
- Articles in New Community Quarterly (copy in appendix 4).



Appendix 1 – Case Study Stories

Appendix 1 CASE STUDY STORIES

1. BOOLARRA

Chelsea Stewart's experience (Graduate)

I felt uninvited to be part of any structural process (Stewart 2004)

After living in Melbourne for eight years and spending time overseas, Chelsea had returned to the small community in which she had grown up. Whilst living away she had maintained a commitment to the local environment and to the community where in 2002 her and her parents had been active in initiating a local festival. In returning to the area she would further her commitment to the festival, to other community projects, to the local environment, and to her relationships with family and friends. She sought to reintegrate herself into her community, this time with a more worldly enthusiasm about what can be achieved in rural towns, and also with a need to belong to 'a place'. She did feel welcomed back into the community; however she found the community, including local government and businesses, had remained divided on many environmental issues facing the area. Marie Mies speaks of those who care most potentially being the one's who are the most harmed (Eldridge 1996; Mies 1996) and Chelsea's observation of destruction of the natural environment had a parallel destruction of her trust in government. A quality that Moira Rayner named a political malaise, for people see no way for their opinions to be heard and distance themselves from political processes (Rayner 1997).

The opportunity to facilitate the Boolarra study circle transformed this thinking. As people participated in small group learning, they were supported to set their own agenda for future activities. The group made time to agree about how they wished to work and Chelsea notes this as a significant milestone that 'allowed the group to move beyond questioning how the process could work and begin to focus on what they would choose the content of the session to be. It was the beginning of establishing equal ground and role clarification'. Chelsea felt supported by all the group members, able to make mistakes and to learn in her role as facilitator (Stewart 2004).

Rose notes the significance of relations that give identity and belonging that can not be created in isolation, but only in our relationship with others. The healthier state of these is not defined by class, race or national territory but overcomes these barriers by establishing common ground while respecting diversity (Rose 1997). Study circles foster these relations of equality from which citizens can embark on civic activity in the interests of the common good building the social capital from which they all benefit (Putnam, Leonard et al. 1993; Larsson 2001).

Chelsea was able to appreciate that working with those she may have traditionally opposed created opportunities for new partnerships as relationships improved and understanding of shared goals increased. The Boolarra Study Circle established long term goals of improving local river sites through weed removal and revegetation. In working towards these goals they established partnerships with Latrobe City, Hazelwood Power and the West Gippsland Catchment Management Authority as well as with the Boolarra Community Development Group and other members of the Boolarra community. They found that organizations were responsive and inclusive to their concerns for the environment and hopes for the future. This community voice was recognized as absent in previous planning and welcomed.

2. MORWELL

Laurie Patton's experience (Graduate)

Plank that we will use to walk our way through our visioning

(Study Circle participant – Morwell Indigenous artists)

The Morwell Study Circle facilitated by Laurie welcomed the planned time to think about how they wished to work. By reflecting on past experiences of their involvement in groups they noted barriers to effective meetings that they wished to avoid. From this knowledge they identified ways they could approach these situations differently. For example with meetings being dominated by individuals the group acknowledged that they would need strong people and a constructive response would be to give responsibilities to this person. Comments from the group indicate the value of this time to work through each of the strategies within the model of Collaborative Engagement.

It's been really good to have time to talk about issues and agree on a concept. If we hadn't created the time to develop the concept we'd still be talking and complaining in 2 years time about nothing being done. We felt happy about the obvious benefits of working together.

Other contributing factors to our performance were being able to record and consolidate ideas, the personal connections we made and the ability for us to be able to work on an idea in a supportive rather than an adversarial atmosphere where people listened to each other and showed respect for each others opinions. The Collaborative Engagement for Transformation Model provided us with a pathway along which the further we walked, the more confident we become (Paton 2004).

Indicators

The study circle members recorded their personal positions using the indicators on social, political, cultural, economic, personal, spiritual and environmental capital (Ife 2002, Sheil 2000). They found the commonly depleted indicator for their group was cultural capital.

Every couple of sessions we would talk about this measure in passing. While the group felt that the measure couldn't change significantly until something concrete occurred, there was a feeling of increased happiness expressed about the fact that our idea was evolving and there was hope of realizing a significant change to local circumstances. It's clear from our work together that we have come a long way as a group during which time we have developed ideas into concrete propositions. We have staged our activities realistically and because of this will be able to carry out the proposal into some form of reality. We are prepared to do that and will continue working together until the dream of an arts center is realized (Paton 2004).

3. EAST GIPPSLAND

- **Creating Stronger Communities in East Gippsland**

It's been great to share my experience with others. Before I started the training I was feeling a bit isolated and stuck. The stimulation of the course has really reinvigorated my thinking. (Rachel Bell, community planner) (Graduate).

The Creating Stronger Communities project complemented the Gippsland Youth Community Alliance and Action Building Project (Youth CAAB) funded by the State Government. The focus was the long-term capacity of East Gippsland communities to respond to change by enhancing the social capacity of their young people. However, the approach extended beyond programs targeted only at young people to support community development workers initiate local solutions to local issues.

Community development workers were enabled to undertake the Graduate Certificate and implement study circles in their communities. Ten workers from seven communities took up this offer (Swifts Creek, Lake Tyers Trust [indigenous community] Mallacoota, Orbost, Buchan, Paynesville and East Bairnsdale). Monash University located the course at Forestech (East Gippsland TAFE's Kalimna campus) to facilitate access for these workers. Bruce Smith, one of the participants, commented that the course boosted both his confidence and skills. "It not only provided the theoretical basis to confirm many of the things I already knew but stimulated new ideas and approaches" (Communities 2004).

4. LATROBE CITY

- **Strengthening Seven Small Communities – Latrobe City Council**

The Strengthening Seven Small Communities project built on previous mapping of services, needs, issues and capacities in the city. From this information a focus on the smaller townships and interest in the employment of facilitators to work in each town was developed. Latrobe City Council worked closely with a reference group comprising community members, township association representatives, council staff, the Centre staff and community based agencies (Sheil, Pugliesie et al. 2004).

Facilitators were employed in each town (Yinnar, Toongabbie, Glengarry, Traralgon South, Yallourn North, Boolarra and Tyers) to strengthen and improve the well-being of the community. The combined population of these seven towns is 5,000. The role of the facilitators was to develop and support local community groups and assist them to meet the needs of their communities. The community development approach was understood to be inclusive of all groups and was to work towards the establishment of new partnerships with government and community organizations in response to community interest.

The funding enabled the facilitators to undertake the first semester of the Graduate Certificate with the second semester being optional. Four facilitators completed the course and facilitated study circles in their communities. They showcased their work at the 'A Regional Affair' forum. Both the commonwealth and the local government respected the right of communities to determine their own directions during the study circles and did not limit the scope of activities. This was a significant factor in ensuring local ownership of activities and is evident as groups continue to initiate projects.

Feedback from the workers indicates their appreciation of the support of the University, plus the regional network. The diverse range of activities reflects the different stages of development of each community, but participants also identified commonalities and collaborative responses have evolved (for example, The Other Awards).



Appendix 2 – Some Snapshots of the Flow-on Effect within Communities

Appendix 2. Some snapshots of the flow on effects within communities

This section provides some snapshots of the actions undertaken by communities following their participation in study circles (and also some examples where no study circle was implemented but the strategies within the study circle model were used in projects.

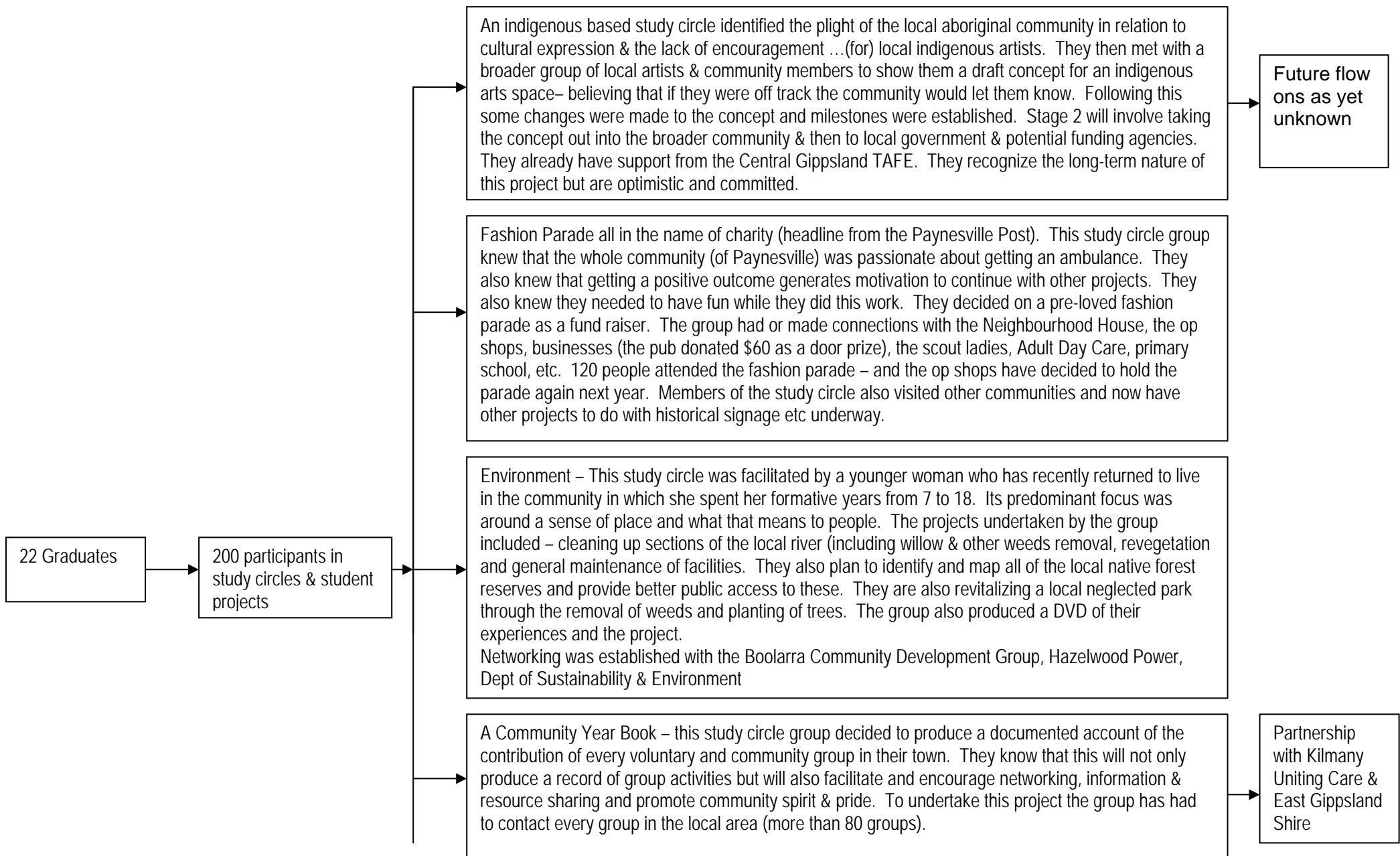
These truly are 'snapshots' taken at a particular point of time and from looking at a particular 'point'. Activity within these communities will continue on into the future perhaps into areas and projects quite different from those described here.

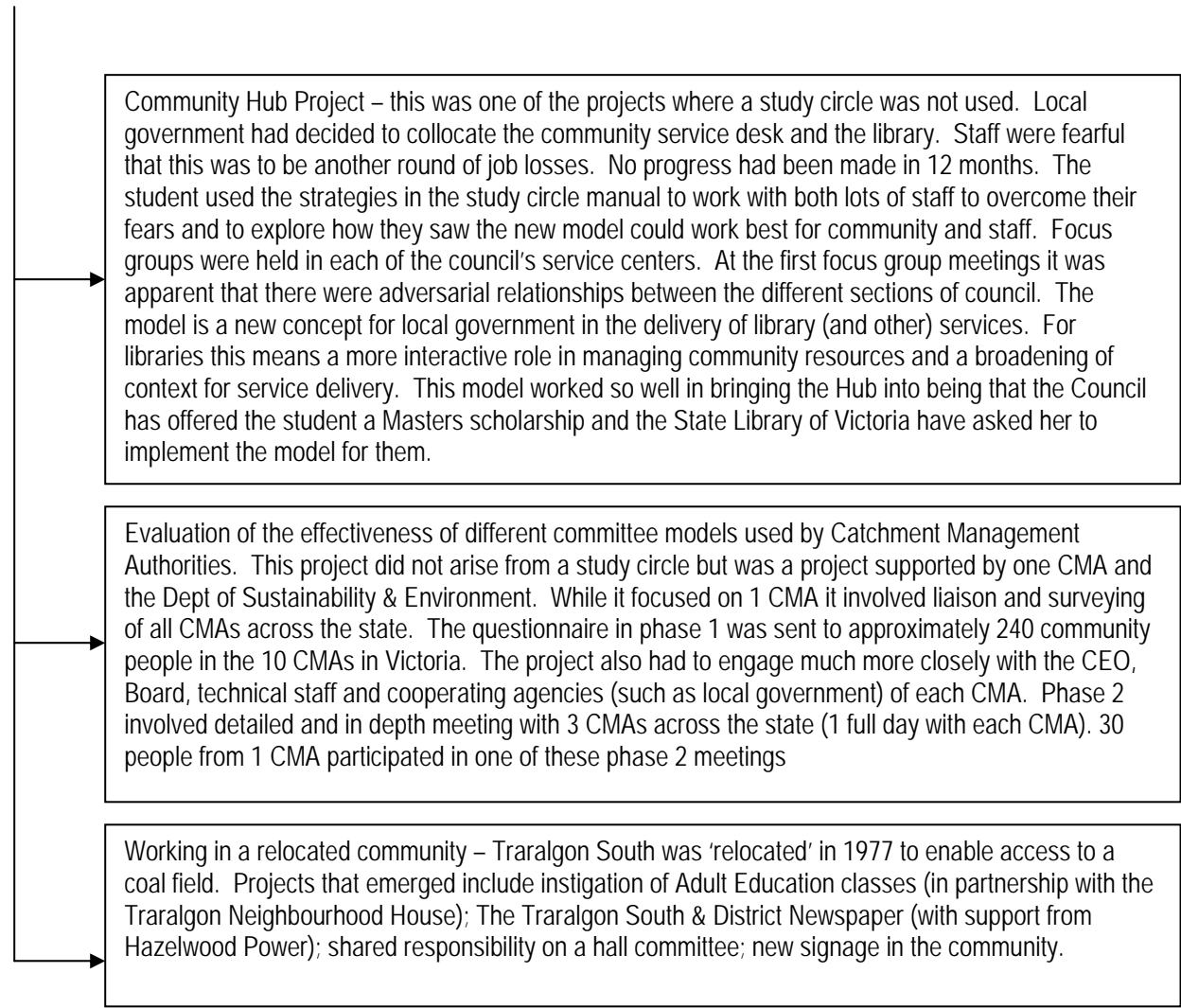
It also only captures 'the story' from the viewpoint of a few people – while it possibly has had an impact (albeit a lesser impact) on a broader range of community people.

The following table shows that the 22 graduates involved around 200 further people in training through the study circle process and the projects undertaken following the study circles involved many more people. For example 120 people attended the Op Shop Fashion Parade, the CMA project involved 240 people through a survey and around 100 people in workshops, The Other Awards dinner will include 130 people from 8 communities. The community newsletter started in another community is distributed to every household in the district.

Five graduates of the Certificate in Regional Community Development will be employed as local researchers in East Gippsland as part of the Communities for Children Project being auspiced by Kilmany Family Care.

The student undertaking the CMA project has taken the study circle material to a project in Africa, while a previous graduate has been employed in a senior management position with Parks Victoria.







Appendix 3 – Examples of Presentations



Appendix 4 – Copies of Printed Materials



Appendix 5 – Evaluation of *A Regional Affair*

Appendix 5

Centre for Rural Communities

“A Regional Affair” Conference October 14 - 15, 2004

Evaluation (conducted by Carolyn Aitken)

1. Background

This 2004 “A Regional Affair” was the first conference undertaken by the Centre for Rural Communities (CRC) through its own efforts. Previous conferences were hosted with a rural health consortium of organisations with a similar interest in the advancement of rural communities.

The Conference was undertaken as part of the Developing Ourselves – Developing Our Community project funded by the Stronger Families and Communities program of the Department of Family and Community Services.

Sponsorship was received from the East Gippsland Shire Council and the Institute for Regional Studies. Ninety six delegates attended the conference, 30 CRC members and students, 34 community members, and 32 government/corporate representatives.

The venue was Forestech in Kalimna, a campus of East Gippsland Institute of TAFE. A sensory delight situated amongst bushland and itself a testament to regional collaboration through learning and understanding. Conference delegates were accommodated at nearby venues and taken in a bus to and from the conference dinner at Lake Tyers.

The conference theme

The vision of the Centre for Rural Communities is of “rural communities that are socially, environmentally, and economically sustainable” and its mission is to “increase the knowledge, expertise, and skill levels of rural communities through collaborative and partnership approaches.” The 2004 conference was planned and structured with the aim to reflect these values in all aspects of the event.

The title “A Regional Affair” was adopted in order to convey that the goal and practice of strengthening relationships and opportunities for networking was to be laced throughout the program in recognition of the fundamental and sustaining role that meeting and communicating has in regional development.

2. This evaluation

Previous conferences have not been formally conducted although planning for the 2004 conference reflected on the past experience of undertaking conferences in collaboration with the Small Rural Communities Health Consortium (which is currently not operational). The significance of this evaluation is that it coincides with the commissioned evaluation of the Graduate Certificate in Community Development

being undertaken by Heather O'Connor. It is expected that this report will be helpful to both the CRC and to Heather in her wider evaluation.

Evaluation tools

A four question questionnaire placed in conference showbags, informal comments, observations, and letters.

3. The feedback

Questionnaire

As is often the case at conferences, completion and lodgement of evaluation forms was low (20 out of 96) just 20%. While statistical validity and reliability of results would be technically doubtful, the comments have been analysed thematically and listed in order of the most comments.

Question 1. What was most enjoyable about the Forum?

Networking (9)
Local stories and experiences (6)
Openness, relaxed, and friendly atmosphere (4)
Keynote speaker (4)
Dinner (4)
Panel (3)
Venue (2)
Study circles (1)
The video (1)

Comments: "Meeting other community members"
"Being given a choice to listen and be heard."

Question 2. What would you change about the Forum?

Overcrowded timetable (12)
Stricter time-keeping (4)
More time to network between sessions (4)
Reduce the focus on CRC, as indicated by "A Regional Affair" (2)
Improved communication to presenters (1)
Improved conference documentation (1)
Better organisation of refreshments (1)
Temperature in auditorium (1)
Consideration of people with disabilities (eg hearing) by ensuring speakers use microphones (2)

Comments: "Don't fix what ain't broken."

Question 3. Did the Forum represent value for money to you? Yes/No

Yes	17 (85%)
No answer	3 (15%)
No	Nil

Comments: "No doubt about that."
"Definitely, best deal around!"

Question 4. Are you? Community member, CRC Graduate, Government/Corporate

Community member 14 (70%)
CRC Graduate 4 (20%)
Government/Corporate 2 (10%)

Carolyn's Observations

This is the second conference I have evaluated. The first was a technical media preservation conference in Brisbane in 1995 and was published in the primary refereed academic journal for archivists, *Archives and Manuscripts*. My review considered the range of topics featured at the conference. I recall that it was styled as a critique of what was included and the impact of what was not included and the wider professional implications of these exclusions.

I was prepared for a different approach with a conference of the Centre for Rural Communities but was not prepared for the central role my own participation and responses would be. In my experience and opinion, this fundamental difference is key to what is special and valuable about the study circles and the CRC.

I'd planned to circulate in the breaks as I would normally do and ask people's impressions of how the conference was proceeding. The first session ran over-time and lunch was spent discussing the session I was facilitating for Meredith Fletcher and it was clear that this plan wouldn't happen. Instead I have written about my observations, discussions that I was a part of and how I personally responded to the conference. It is hoped that this aligned with some comments and anecdotes and the feedback slips might provide a useful range of for the CRC to build on.

I heard in my discussions:

"I was so happy after the singing, I found it hard to get to sleep."

"There is acceptance, honesty, and trust in Loch."

"Of course organisations do not simply materialise out of nothing. It is encouraging to see that the Centre for Rural Communities was once tiny, fuelled on the conviction and hard work of less than a handful of people."

My own feeling about the conference is acceptance and growth. I was among many others doing things for the first time, sometimes with considerable apprehension. And this is an important point not only about the conference, but also the ethos and way things occur in the CRC. In a conversation at afternoon tea we said:

“You are encouraged supported where you are, but with a view to where you can develop to next. You are not criticised when doing things and this is makes all the difference when confidence is fluctuating and times get hard.”

Letters

Helen Sheil received two letters about the conference. Comments include:

“I wear my T shirt with pride.”

“This is social and spiritual change at its absolute best.”

4. Conclusion

Recommendations

For any future conference it is recommended that:

1. A more realistic program schedule be developed. The rushed schedule and inadequate time-keeping actually impeded networking activity, which is the central goal of the conference. If stretching items over two days is too expensive, do not overload the one day.
2. Conference goals be made more explicit.
3. Timetables, written information, and assistance in knowing where to go and when be clearer.
4. Presenters be provided with clearer instructions.
5. Confirmation of conference registrations and conference information be circulated more than two weeks prior to the conference.
6. Consideration be given to how networking could be better facilitated at the conference dinner. (The conference dinner was exceptionally enjoyable, the food delicious and entertainment uplifting). Suggestions include serving finger food away from tables so that people can circulate more easily. It is acknowledged that this would have occurred had the double-booking not occurred and the weather been better so that the verandas could be utilised.



Appendix 6 – Evaluation of the Graduate Certificate

Appendix 6.

Framework for Evaluation, "Developing Ourselves – Developing communities"

Final Report

December 6th 2004

Executive Summary

Developing Ourselves – Developing Communities was funded by the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services to provide access to facilitators from rural communities to participate in the Graduate Certificate in Regional Community Development and in turn become educators of these facilitation skills to community groups within Gippsland.

An evaluation of the project was commissioned in October 2004. This evaluation considers the value of access to the Certificate, primarily for the students, but also for the partners involved, including local government and community based organisations with whom the students have been engaged as part of the requirements of the course.

The Graduate Certificate represents a departure from more traditional University offerings, as it is based heavily on the experience of students working within community and has a strong emphasis on skills development necessary for effective community engagement. The Certificate offers a theoretical basis within which community development and adult education approaches can be tested in practice.

The "mix" of academic and experiential learning opportunities, the labour intensive nature of course delivery and the acceptance of students without prior tertiary education experience all raise issues of concern which are addressed in the evaluation.

The delivery of the Certificate has taken place over a period of intense interest by government (at all levels) in supporting community capacity building. Ironically, at this time of heightened interest in community, traditional courses in community development through the TAFE system have virtually disappeared from the post-secondary sector, to be replaced with a plethora of short courses, seminars, conferences, and web-based skills and information dissemination.

The Graduate Certificate under review fills an educational need for community workers, (paid and unpaid), and for people working within government departments and agencies dealing with community. However, the sustainability of the Certificate in its present format is open to question, given the need for additional funds to those already provided by Monash to support teaching staff.

The results of extensive interviews with past and present students indicate strong support for the course, which is seen to have multiple layers of value to them – as students, as community workers (paid and unpaid) and government agency workers. The value of the Certificate is also evidenced in the interest shown in its "roll out" to other regional Universities in Victoria. The fact that the course was able to be delivered in East Gippsland in 2004 provided easy access for some of Victoria's most isolated community workers and was a significant feature of a Demonstration Project funded by the Victorian government.

The evaluation also indicates that the communities within which the Certificate students worked gained value from the Study Circles and other projects which were conducted. However, it is the view of the evaluator that more extensive analysis of the Study Circle model needs to be undertaken, preferably on a comparative basis with other models of community development to assess its real impact, and particularly, its applicability outside Gippsland and Victoria. Recommendations from the students

themselves for improving the effectiveness of the Study Circle process are highlighted in the following report.

The consultant acknowledges with thanks the time and thoughtful contributions made to this evaluation by all stakeholders, and particularly to the past and current students.

Section 1 Background and context for the evaluation

Brief

1.1 Research agenda

The research will:

- document the **impact on regional workers and rural communities** of involvement in collaborative engagement giving consideration to the traditional barriers of distance, culture and cost in accessing accredited education,
- document and analyse the **contribution to community strengthening** through access to a systematic approach to community engagement by local facilitators,
- assess the **relevance of the model** of collaborative engagement to promoting local community agendas,
- analyse the **relevance of partnerships** established between local organizations, local government and a regional University campus,
- identify the **key characteristics of the local facilitator model** employed by local government with the support of community based committees and assess its **applicability to larger communities**,
- assess the impact in rural communities of responsive **relationships with regional institutions** facilitated by local workers,
- determine the **transferability of this model** and the accredited program to other sectors and regions, paying attention to the relevance for young people,
- explore **relevant policy frameworks** to mainstream this initiative,
- to showcase through publications and conference participation innovative work from within communities and **document the emergence of new partnerships and networks**.

Agreed stages in the evaluation:

Stage 1: Familiarisation with the scope and direction of the evaluation proposal, establishment of workplan and timelines including contacts. Accessing of materials to date and understanding of the current political and educational framework of the Graduate Certificate at this time.

Stage 2. Collation of this material into thematic areas using qualitative and quantitative material (questionnaires, focus groups discussions, interviews, presentations and video as well as reflective journals and student work as agreed to)

Stage 3. In consultation with Centre for Rural Communities and key partners discuss final scope and direction of the research material in the interests of further development, potential partners for future involvement, accountability to funding bodies and participants.

2 Methodology

2.1 Structured evaluation/consultation opportunities

Forum

An opportunity for study circle members, township associations and Council staff to meet with other groups across Gippsland, funding bodies and key resource groups, October 14th and 15th.

Focus Group and questionnaires (for LG officers, reference/management groups and township associations)

Devised, distributed by the CRC, still to be made available to the consultant for analysis

Other strategies

A range of strategies were employed to assess the value of access to the Graduate Certificate, including:

- material documented by participants in the course (journals, written assignments)
- questionnaires (administered and distributed through CRC, made available to the consultant)
- phone and personal interviews
- documentation supplied by the CRC, including funding submissions and internal reports
- personal visits to Gippsland

Extent of personal and phone interviews

Conducted during the Forum and in the first three weeks of November. From a total of 50 students:
11 were interviewed face to face
18 were interviewed by phone
1 provided written comments.

The consultant attended "A Regional Affair" Forum in Lakes Entrance, which enabled her to meet many of the students, government representatives, and Monash staff. A second trip was undertaken to Gippsland where face to face interviews were conducted with students, Council representatives, community workers and Monash staff. A third visit to Gippsland included participation in a Planning Day for the CRC.

Regular up-dates on the Project have been provided, with an Interim Report of the results of interviews tabled for discussion at the Planning Day. A Draft Final Report was made available for the CRC on November 26th, with the Final Report being delivered to CRC by the 10th December as per project brief.

In assessing the value of access to the Graduate Certificate, the major stakeholders identified as key people to consult were:

- The students (past and present)
- Community members with whom they work and relate
- The two local Shires (Latrobe and East Gippsland)
- The two local TAFE Colleges (Central Gippsland and East Gippsland)
- Other local planning and education agencies (ACC, Adult Education providers)

- Department of Commonwealth Family and Community Services (Commonwealth) – as the funders of “Developing Ourselves – Developing Communities”
- University staff

Context of the Evaluation

The Political Context

Commonwealth government

Support from the Commonwealth government with the program under evaluation has come from two Departments – Department of Transport and Regional Development (DoRARS) and Family and Community Services (FaCS), both of which have supported the development of resources and the support provided for the community engagement involved in the delivery of the Certificate.

State Government

Over the last four years, the Victorian State government has focused on a number of statewide initiatives trialling approaches to working in communities, within a policy framework of Community Building Initiatives. These have included 10 Demonstrations Projects, one of which is in East Gippsland (see below). A review of the training and other needs of the participants of a wide range of initiatives indicates, amongst other things, that there is a “dearth of skilled community project workers (and) unrealistic expectations of project co-ordinators who are expected to be skilled at both grass roots community development and strategic planning”.

Given the stated commitment by the State government to support community capacity building through a wide range of Departments, including the Department of Victorian Communities (DVC), potential exists for the Certificate to fulfill the professional development needs of both State government employees and those working within communities in receipt of government grants.

At this stage, no State funding has been provided for the support or delivery of the Certificate through the University or the CRC, but funding for community development projects in Gippsland have added value through support for students (as Township Facilitators and community workers) in both Central and East Gippsland. In addition, several students have been/are employed by State government departments and agencies and received assistance with fees and/or time for their professional development through the course.

Funding applications are currently before (DVC) to assist with the TAFE component of the program – ie, to fund people involved in Study Circles being eligible to receive TAFE accreditation for their participation.

Local government

“Local government is increasingly being viewed by many sections of the community as pivotal to clarifying and driving the community strengthening agenda. Local government’s focus on locality, its closeness to citizens and its interactions with many different levels of government, community and private sector interests, places it in a unique position to inform the direction of future policy.” Candy Broad, MLC, Minister for Local Government.

A Paper commissioned by the Minister (Considine, 2004) states that "... Community strengthening involves both individual and institutional development at the local level. Not only must public agencies become enrolled, but citizens and any excluded groups need to be brought into the process for determining priorities and co-ordinating services." (P12)

Snelling (2003) argues that although few Local Councils refer to "education" in their Plans or Annual Reports, they nonetheless play a critical role in education through their role as information providers, employers, advocates and facilitators, providers (pre-schools, child care) and as community capacity builders. (P8) In the latter role, Local Government is proving to be critical in forming partnerships with industry, education providers and communities through the Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENS) whose main aim is to improve education, training and employment for young people. A further example of Local Government's potential as a key education partner is the Learning Towns program, sponsored and co-ordinated through Adult and Community Education organisations. (P17)

Both these cited reports urge further support for Local Government to assume its key role in community capacity building. It is in this context that the value to Local Government of access to the Graduate Certificate should be considered.

Latrobe City Shire (Central Gippsland)

In 2001 the Latrobe City Shire entered into negotiations with the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services (FaCs) to strengthen local communities. The process included a mapping of community services, needs and capacities, a process supported by input from Township Associations and the CRC. In early 2003, Latrobe City identified the needs of 7 smaller townships; subsequently 7 part-time Township Facilitators were employed, with their professional development being supported by the Shire. This began with a six day introductory program, (conducted by CRC) and then enrolment in the Graduate Certificate of Regional Community Development, with on going practical support for the community engagement and use of the Study Circles. Four of the Facilitators completed the Certificate in 2004.

East Gippsland Shire.

The "Creating Stronger Communities in East Gippsland Project" is also supported by FaCs, with additional funding from DVC with the East Gippsland Shire Council through the Youth CAAB Project ("Community Alliance and Action Building.") Youth CAAB is one of 10 Community Building Demonstration Projects across Victoria. The Project has engaged 10 local community development workers from 7 communities who are also enrolled in the Graduate Certificate which is delivered locally through the TAFE facility in Lakes Entrance.

Both these initiatives are examples of partnerships between the three levels of government in conjunction with their regional University. Monash not only provides professional development through the graduate Certificate, but also builds in "on ground support" for the community workers through visits to their communities and by providing structured opportunities for networking and information exchange in the form of regional forums.

The Educational Context

Education for community development in Victoria

University Sector

The development of the Graduate Certificate at Monash University should be seen within the context of a burgeoning field of study and skills development under the broad heading of community capacity building. Provision can be through private providers, consultants, one off seminars and conferences, web-based training materials, and in house government department and business professional development.

In addition to these types of educational delivery, there has also been a growth in the number of Universities engaged in rural and regional research (Robyn Eversole 1993). The Victorian Universities Regional Research Network (VURRN) has been formed consisting of research centres from RMIT, University of Ballarat, Latrobe University, Deakin University and Monash University. (Research centres are also operating in NSW, Qld, SA, WA, and Tasmania.)

Through the VURRN network, the Graduate Certificate has the potential to be "rolled out" across the State; delivery through the Hamilton campus of RMIT is planned for 2005.

TAFE Sector

Community Development courses are restricted to a few Victorian TAFE Colleges; access to community development training is now virtually limited to offerings within broader social welfare courses. Central Gippsland Institute of TAFE however is providing accreditation for community members participating in the study circle to gain recognition for their learning by providing credit for the Communications Unit at Certificate 3 level. A submission to secure further funding to support this TAFE component is currently before DVC.

Skills development and information

The Community Building Resource Service (CBRS)

The role of the service is to "provide community building practitioners with the necessary skills, knowledge and resources to effectively pursue their community building goals." The Unit is the central contact point for the Department of Victorian Communities, as well as other government agencies and community groups. Services provided include a web-site, local data support, an electronic library, information practices review, skills development and a Leadership and Mentoring Program. A review was conducted by the Service into the training needs of people involved in the DVC Demonstration projects. Participants listed both short and longer term skill development needs, with their preference for delivery being through interactive workshops, seminars and information sessions (ie, not on-line delivery), incorporating "real" project issues and not through accredited courses.

The evaluation will return to this point in the concluding section.

It is within the above political and educational context that the Graduate Certificate has been delivered over the past two years.

Monash University, Graduate Certificate in Regional Development, Churchill Campus

The Centre for Rural Communities Inc.

Established in 1995, the Centre is an alliance of adult education, TAFE sector and Universities in partnership with rural communities of up to 10,000 people. The Centre is situated at the Churchill (Gippsland) Campus of Monash University within the School of Humanities, Communications and Social Sciences.

The Centre grew (in part) out of the "Building Rural Futures through Cooperation " project which was funded by a range of Victorian philanthropic trusts and foundations. This project was based on the development of Study Circles resourced by a Study Circles Resource Kit ("Growing and Learning in Rural Communities").

Funding was accessed from the Commonwealth Government to support the accreditation of this work at University and within the TAFE system. The resulting Graduate Certificate was first offered in 2003 at Monash and delivered through both the (Central) Gippsland campus and in Bairnsdale (East Gippsland), with 8 people graduating at the end of the year. The second intake of Graduate Certificate students was 29 in 2004 (three carrying over from 2003.) The course is delivered in both Central and East Gippsland.

While Monash University's Gippsland Campus has supported the work of the Centre for Rural Communities Inc. the community engagement component of the course across Gippsland is not covered under University funding. For this reason partnerships with local government have been particularly important in gaining project based funding from the Commonwealth government to support the establishment of study circles or projects within Gippsland communities by local facilitators.

As outlined above, the CRC coordinated a successful funding application with Gippsland Local Governments to the Commonwealth Government (FACS), and in addition, Monash received funds through the Regional Solutions Programme to support the community engagement component of the Certificate.

Both Gippsland Councils chose to enroll facilitators (employed and voluntary) in the Graduate Certificate program. The range of academic qualification was significantly varied, with only two people having tertiary qualifications. Some had significant practical experience while others had enthusiasm but little previous knowledge. Originally all participants were full fee paying positions, two of these have been transferred to HECS funded places for second semester.

To the knowledge of the consultant, the partnership between Monash University's regional campus and sponsorship from local government is unique in Victoria's plethora of community building initiatives.

The Graduate Certificate is a one year course, comprising 4 units: Facilitating Community Development, Theory and Practice of community development (1 and 2) and Collaborative engagement in communities. A practical component is included which requires students to undertake community facilitation and planning roles at a local level.

Entrance requirements require either a 3 years Bachelors Degree or demonstrable experience in community development or a field of adult education.

Pathways in community Development from certificate level through to Masters are being proposed as an initiative with the Gippsland Education Precinct. Under this proposal Certificate and diplomas in Community work – community Development would be offered by TAFE, a third year of a Degree program through Monash, followed by the Graduate Certificate and the proposed Sustainable Futures Masters program, then PHD by research.

In 2004, the Centre comprises .5 academic staff supported by .8 administration and one day per fortnight of part time teaching.

The Centre is an incorporated community association, managed by a Board with a membership drawn from faculty members, students and community representatives.

The funding history of the Centre appears as Appendix 2

Section 2

Outcomes of the Evaluation process.

As stated in the Brief for the evaluation, the core issue to be addressed is the impact of access to of the Graduate Certificate by a range of stakeholders (as listed below). Results of the evaluation are listed according to each of the stakeholder groups.

Contact with students from the 2003 and 2004 intake is as follows (as at 26th November):

Of the 50 students whose contact details are available, 11 have been interviewed face to face, 18 have been interviewed by phone, 1 submitted his thoughts in writing.

The following information therefore reflects the views of over 60% of the students.

Value of the Certificate to students:

The questions asked in interviews aimed to gauge the value of the Certificate to the students both personally and professionally. The following is the range of responses (direct quotes from students in italics):

Positives

The overwhelming majority of students interviewed indicated a positive attitude towards the course, and in particular, to the style of teaching and support offered by all University staff. The suggestions for improvements to the course and/or criticisms of some aspects of its delivery should be seen in this light.

"The "style" of the course values each individual as students and as volunteers."

"The chance to the Course was a real gift for me – I was able to do my community project because I felt confidence in the support I would receive... it was a wonderful experience – being with like minded rural people and seeing the results of the Study Circles."

"Great value – provided me with a solid framework for volunteering, and a real understanding of the principles of community development and adult education"

"Invaluable – its given me lots of confidence and helped crystalise what I'm doing."

"I learnt lots of research skills – how to properly reference – Monash staff were exceedingly helpful with essay writing."

"The professional development offered in Central Gippsland (before the course started) was incredibly fruitful and could be the basis for a more structured orientation for all students, especially those without tertiary qualifications"

"Great course in relation to the work being done with communities – keeps people informed of latest research and best practice."

"The tutoring and the support were great – doing two units inspired me to take up another degree (at Monash)"

"Completing the Certificate enabled me to get my current position – I was pleased to do it because it gave me the theoretical background for the practice (of community development."

"(Community development) is a whole new subject area for me, so the learning curve was immense I have developed in ways I could never have imagined..... the course was great."

"Wonderful support from everyone involved – staff and other students – formed really strong friendships."

"(the course) has given me the theory to validate my actions (re community engagement) ... and had added to my status/legitimacy within my organisation".

"It was very rewarding sharing knowledge within my organisation; what I learnt was very practical and able to be applied to my job."

"The certificate offers credible information about what is actually happening in communities (cf other community development short courses that are being offered to, for example, government employees.)

"Generally I think the course is a great initiative and the region would be much poorer without it ...Helen is a really valuable resource (who) is pioneering a very powerful and significant shift in the culture that our community has been operating within." (Council employee)

Other Issues

- Good links between students, University, government/agency staff; the connection with Monash was especially appreciated.
- Local delivery in East Gippsland was seen as extremely positive – students from the isolated communities in East Gippsland would not have enrolled otherwise; few opportunities for professional development for isolated workers.
- Professional development/orientation offered in Central Gippsland was seen as very helpful; great introduction to working with communities.
- Development of networks within each and across both areas of Gippsland
- Good opportunity to learn about what others are doing, and gain a sense of professional solidarity. The diversity of people and their projects was commented upon favourably.
- Re-inforced confidence and pride in community work, and confirms practice (**mentioned by several students.**)
- Directly related to paid work (**frequently mentioned.**)
- Local communities gain value from the links/networks made by the students
- Payment of fees/travel and other expenses, plus local delivery removes huge barriers to further study (especially for the East Gippsland students.)
- Help received from the University with essay writing and other academic requirements was much appreciated.
- Exposure of Council employees to other perspectives appreciated.

Issues raised by students re increasing the value of the course.

The Study Circle Process

This was the issue most raised by the students.

Positives:

(The SC process) – *“Shows what people can do together and provides a sound system for engaging communities, especially when its added to what is already happening within communities”*

“My community has really benefited from the SC – more volunteers, people feel confident to become involved – they feel really valued.”

“Invaluable for my volunteer work; the study circle really worked and lots of local activity has grown from it.”

“I didn’t do a Study Circle – but I saw the terrific effects in some of the local communities.”

“I didn’t use the SC, but applied the same principles to my project.”

“(Study Circles are).. really useful, especially for learning facilitation skills, networking and for the voting system.”

(The Study Circle is) “a powerful process” BUT it needs another name; the word “study” can be very off-putting”

“Invaluable – I’m now applying the principles to my teaching role; (Study Circles) would be great for young people (16 – 25)

Issues of Concern:

“It was hard to get people interested; community members are more interested in projects/outcomes than in processes”

“Huge hole” in face to face contact during SC/project time” (several students)

“Narrows down the broader picture”

“Study Circles can seem “artificial” in the sense that the idea didn’t come from the community”

“The indigenous women I worked with wouldn’t have a bar of it – too structured.”

“I felt I was encroaching on other people’s lives” (especially those who are already heavily committed)”

“I had to rely on friends to help me – but they had no real commitment (to the process), (study circles) need more direction and focus.” (Note: The same student suggested starting the SC in the first semester to relieve the pressure of finishing within a set time frame.)

“SC Kit need upgrading, and needs to employ different language, (from several students), especially when dealing with people who are not confident with the language used, and/or without much formal education”

“I only ran it because it was part of the course”

“The Kit is too prescriptive”

“I’m not clear how it helps with career options”

*“It’s very difficult to sell the idea of a **Study** circle - some people are nervous about the idea of studying”*

“I feel there is a moral dilemma in coercing community members (into Study Circles) for my own benefit ... this has real implications when you live in small communities...what if it had all fallen apart?”

“No one has ever come to observe my facilitation skills with the Study Circle”

Other issues:

- SC skills and processes are not covered in class time (three students)
- No time to reflect or properly prepare final assignment when SC have only just finished.
- Some students are “floundering” with the process which they find “overwhelming”, especially the issue of handing over facilitation, (a frequent comment in the student journals cited.)
- Don’t call SC a “project”, because it presumes an outcome.

- Needed more information on how to use the Kit
- Some concern expressed that students are being “steered” into SCs – not seen as having much choice.
- Two students from outside Gippsland commented that the Certificate was heavily focused on the region, and would benefit from a broader consideration of other areas/examples of community development.

Unclear course requirements and planning for the delivery of the course over the year

This issue was raised by a number of students, and especially applied to people who are working and with family commitments – people need to know earlier what are the time commitments
 Assignments badly spaced/structured – eg, assignment on SC due just as its finishing
 More detailed work on SC process required in class

Re level of academic content

“Just right” (person with previous tertiary study experience)

“Too much talk and not enough academic learning” (3 students with no previous tertiary study experience)

“The level was good – but (because of travel and work commitments) I didn’t get the most out of the academic side- by the time I got to Churchill, I didn’t have time to use the library and other facilities.”

“Level was fine – but I struggled with the readings in terms of the time I could devote (because of work commitments.)” (Note: This was frequently mentioned by students)

Level was right for me (previous tertiary experience), but others would benefit from a process to “bring them up to speed” with University requirements.

“The effort to get to class was really great for me – sometimes I felt like we just sat around and talked – it was a bit unstructured.”

“Towards the end of the semester I felt like some of the course became a little unstructured, but this was also part of the benefit of the style!”

7 face to face interviews expressed concern about the lack of “academic” discussion in class time, particularly the lack of discussion about the set readings.

Other students commented on “time wasting” in class (*“discussions go on and on”*), especially in light of limited contact/face to face time.

Re need for more orientation/support for non-tertiary students

During 8 face to face interviews the issue of more structured orientation was raised, particularly for those who have no previous experience of tertiary education. This issue was also raised during phone interviews.

Suggestions for improvement

- “Model” SC in class in early part of the year – people might have a clearer idea of the value and of the point of it, and overcome the issue of “time wasting” in class
- A related suggestions was that Study Circles could be formed amongst the students themselves, thereby overcoming the issue of “coercing” friends and neighbours.
- Organise times for students to meet together (with or without staff) during SC time
- Adapt the 2 week orientation process used in central Gippsland to benefit new students, especially those without previous tertiary experience.
- SC should be offered to organised groups who request it (Note: This was mentioned by a number of students.)
- Institute a process whereby the direct benefits to employers can be clearly demonstrated (value for money)

- More time spent visiting other people's work places (although one student considered excursions a "waste" of valuable class time).
- More class contact time (**mentioned by several students, with particular reference to the long break during the Study Circle process.**)
- Broaden discussion of community development to include other Australian and international examples, rather than just Gippsland.

Summary of student comments:

Overall, the reaction of the students to the Certificate was positive:

- the support and flexibility of the staff was highly appreciated,
- the relevance of the content to workplace and community engagement was frequently mentioned,
- access to the University, to enhanced networks of colleagues, and forums for showcasing community work were perceived as adding additional value to the Certificate itself.

Suggestions for improvement of the course included:

- More structured orientation program
- More structured planning and clarification of course requirements
- Update of the Study Circle Kit material, and
- More assistance with understanding the value of Study Circle formation, and more support during the conducting of Study Circles.
- More face to face contact.

Recommendation 1

That consideration be given to a review of the course structure to take into account the concerns of past students

Recommendation 2

That funding be sought urgently for a review and up-date of the Study Circle Kit.

Value to the Communities within which the students worked

The following information covers reports available to the consultant on the direct benefits arising from Study Circle groups

The comments about the Study Circle process above indicate the urgent need for an update of the Kit and consideration of how information and training relating to facilitating Study Circles could be improved to ensure even greater benefit for both students and communities.

Information made available to the consultant about the Study Circles and workplace projects was somewhat limited and can no way be seen as a definitive evaluation of either the process or the outcomes. That being said, when combined with a number of interviews, a "snapshot" is provided here to indicate the range of activities and the types of projects conducted during the life of the "Developing Ourselves – Developing our Communities" Project (ie 2004 student intake.)

Morwell Koori Arts Group concept plan

Working with local TAFE teachers, the Monash student led a Study Circle group whose aim was to explore the concept of a Koori Arts project. The concept is about creating studio space for indigenous artists inside the framework of an independent community organisation. In addition to the space, the project will involve research on local indigenous culture. By the completion of the Study Circle process, the group was ready to move into the stage of forming an organisation which will carry through with the planned concept. Further spin offs from the Study Circle have included an offer by two government

departments to lease art works, the local prison authorities approaching the group to include talented Koori prisoners in the project by providing support for their work, while two other institutions have offered to pay for the services of indigenous artists to develop artworks and murals.

Paynesville – fund raiser for local ambulance service – fashion parade from Op Shops

As a direct result of the Study Circle conducted in Paynesville (East Gippsland), nearly \$700 was raised for the local Ambulance Auxiliary through an Op Shop Fashion parade. However, a reading of the history of the Study Circle shows that the process of organising this community event involved many layers of learning for the people involved, including organised action around other agreed priorities for the community arising from the discussions, and a decision to continuing to meet beyond the life of the Study Circle.

Malacootta – year book for community organisations

This Study Circle group decided to publish a Year Book of the activities of local community groups, as one way of recognising and valuing the work of local volunteers, and of celebrating the value of living in Mallacootta. Discussions within the group explored a wide range of issues relating to volunteering, including the need to properly value the work done by volunteers (including seeking payment for some volunteer efforts), the importance of the role of Local Government, and development of a regional arts policy which acknowledges the economic as well as cultural benefits of the arts. Another important feature of this project has been negotiations with the Mallacootta P-12 College multi-media classes for the eventual layout and production of the Yearbook.

An issue identified by one of the students involved was the strain under which many committees of management are operating at the moment, and the importance of tackling difficult governance issues.

When asked to list the new skills or ways of thinking that members of the group have acquired, the following were listed:

- Compassion for others in the community
- Learning to listen
- Appropriate ways of communicating and sharing knowledge
- Respecting diversity
- Use of conceptual tools in identifying community well being and needs
- How to make decisions better
- The importance of the process and planning of projects.

Melbourne – Exhibition of refugee photography

This Study Circle focused on support for refugees, and included organising a film night and an exhibition featuring photos taken by the refugees themselves.

Koori Swim Program:

This project arose from the desire of the Lakes Entrance Community Health Centre to assist in a capacity building project which would increase the health and well-being of the Koori community in Lake Tyers and Lakes Entrance. Issues arose due to intermittent attendance of local Koori people at the Study Circle; however, discussions with community members identified the needs of young children as a major priority, with sport and recreation being identified as a successful strategy for ensuring broad community involvement. The result has been a greater use of local YMCA facilities, the training of local people in emergency procedures and a successful implementation of a swimming program for young Koori children.

Morwell – relocation of library services:

This work place project adopted the Study Circle principles to address the need for staff involvement and commitment to a relocation of services. The use of a community development approach to problem solving involved exploring processes for the engagement of staff and community in change management. This should be seen in contrast to change which comes about from management driven (or consultant driven) impositions from “above” or “outside.”

One student interviewed explained that while her Study Circle did not proceed to the project stage, the young mothers involved had gained from the friendships they formed, and that they decided to continue to meet for mutual support. Her comment was that *“The Group itself has become the project.”*

Another student whose Circle also did not undertake a project felt it was, in part, because the participants were long time activists who had *“flogged themselves to death”* (with community work), but that everyone involved *“was pleased with the process.”*

These two examples indicate that forming Study Circle groups as part of a University requirement may not necessarily lead to tangible projects, but that the contacts and friendships made may be equally important to isolated community members, and that more tangible outcomes may only become apparent years down the track.

As a final contribution to this “snap shot”, one of the students was inspired by discussion at the Regional Forum organised to commence work on a Rural Policy for Australia, a project that has gained the support of the CRC and one which could address the need for the Centre to become more strongly engaged in the policy debates surrounding regional sustainability.

Recommendation 3:

That further funds be sought to continue support for the community engagement component of the Certificate.

Recommendation 4:

That consideration be given to compiling evidence of the value of community engagement, based on written work submitted by students for use in an up-graded Study Circle Kit.

Recommendation 5:

That partnerships be sought with local organisations which would agree to participate in Study Circles, including the possibility of “contracting out” past and present students to organisations that are need of their skills.

Recommendation 6:

That a network of alumni be formed to become “community consultants” and/or “associates” of the CRC, and supported to engage in community capacity building for local communities, government agencies and other organisations.

Applicability/potential markets

- LG and other government departments/agencies, especially those engaged in community development – BUT would need a management skills component
- Potential to look at the whole region – who’s doing this sort of research and planning? CRC could develop into a research and policy centre for the Gippsland region
- Local government needs the skills to engage with community and to include their ideas in all planning processes – the course (and the Centre) have the potential to fulfill this need.

- Delivery of the skills components of the Certificate could be delivered through the ACE sector
- Follow up weekends for past students to test the application of principles to their work places (not big groups) – would be willing to pay if not too expensive
- In terms of career development, people are looking for more than a Graduate Certificate.
- One past student stressed the need for all government departments to deliver practical professional development re community engagement and different styles of community consultation. She suggested the Department of Victorian Communities could be approached with an offer to either enroll their employees, and/or the Certificate could be re-packaged to deliver short professional development courses.

Value to Local Government

The most obvious value to the two Local Government authorities, (Latrobe City and East Gippsland) is that the Certificate offered **local** delivery of professional development for their community workers. This was particularly important in East Gippsland where students were able to attend the course in Lakes Entrance. All these students interviewed said they would not have undertaken the course if it had meant driving to Churchill.

In addition, the course also provided the opportunity for the workers across the two Shires to network and exchange ideas with each other and to participate in a public Forum where their work could be showcased to (amongst others) funders and policy makers.

The professional development offered to the Township Facilitators in Latrobe has been very favorably commented upon by both students themselves and Council staff. It has been suggested as the model for future orientation for new students, especially those with no previous tertiary experience.

One Council officer commented that the *“exposure to other perspectives”* was particularly useful for the community workers. She also commented that the Study Circle was a *“powerful tool”* for community building. Another one, however, felt that the students were being “steered” into Study Circles.

During two separate interviews, the issue was raised of documenting “value for money” to local Councils if they continue to provide access to the Certificate for their employees, especially given their limited professional development budgets. Future negotiations with Local Government to expand the partnership with the University would need to be conducted with senior management, and could include offers to become the provider of targeted professional/skills development courses, particularly for officers working in smaller communities around such issues as community plans. A related issue which was raised in one interview was the suggestion that graduates could be used as community contacts/consultants in future planning processes. This issue was also raised by one of the students interviewed, and reinforced during the Planning Day at Monash.

Suggestions for improving the partnership with Local Government included:

- Entering into a Memorandum of Understanding with the University to clarify a more formal relationship between the two partners, to be negotiated with senior management.
- Exploring ways that the partnership and the learnings arising from the Certificate can better inform social and other planning processes within local and State government decision making bodies. One person interviewed felt that governments (including local Councils) were not taking enough advantage of the local knowledge and networks created through the course.
- That the CRC could consider involving a Council officer and/or more “high profile” people on its Board. This suggestion was offered as a positive way of showing support for the CRC (and the

University) and arose from a discussion about the sustainability of the Certificate beyond the life of the good personal relationships already existing between Council and University staff.

- The link with Monash University was seen as positive both for Councils and for the communities they serve.
- As stated above, the issue of professional and skills development for a broad range of Council employees (ie, not just those involved in social planning) and for elected Councillors was raised. This was seen as a potential role the CRC could play through delivery of short, tailored courses and/or seminars. However, it was stressed that management skills would need to be included in any expanded educationally opportunities offered by the Centre.

Recommendation 7:

That negotiations begin with Local Councils in relation to the delivery of professional development courses and other aspects of partnerships with the University and/or CRC, and that consideration be given to developing more formal Memorandums of Understanding.

Value to the University

"University rural and regional engagement is no longer simply about being situated in a regional area and taking on students and staff from the region. It is about understanding the needs of communities in local, regional and national and international capacity to ensure Universities are truly engaged by actively contributing towards the expansion of opportunities and the sustainable development of regions." (Australian Universities Community Alliance, National Conference Proceedings, 2004, P4)

AUQA audit processes include the need for Universities to institute quality systems in (amongst other things) Community Engagement. Promoting knowledge between Universities and communities, strengthening incentives for educational growth and taking part in community, social and cultural development have become core business for Australian Universities.

Regional communities benefit directly from University's educational programs, expertise, facilities and presence as an employer, while the University gains from the partnerships it forms with local authorities, businesses and voluntary organisations, plus the employment opportunities it creates for its graduates

The Graduate Certificate in Regional Community Development directly addresses all the issues involved in Community Engagement, and in the view of the consultant, has the potential to become the basis for broader professional development to serve the needs of regional workers, government and business organisations. (This issue will be addressed in the Conclusion and Recommendations).

It should be noted that the CRC Inc was included in a research conducted by Garlick and Pryor (2003) documenting best practice of Community Engagement by Universities, the criteria applied for the selection being:

- Evidence of commitment of time and resources by both community and campus
- Evidence of clear purpose and clear expectations about roles of partners
- Existence of mutual trust
- Being results oriented: generating tangible outcomes both qualitatively (in processes undertaken) and quantitatively (in things done) for the benefit of the regional community as well as the University
- Being involved in the long term, and
- Specifying goals and responsibilities (in written agreement.)

This is an important acknowledgement for Monash in a major national review of community engagement.

Interviews conducted with Monash staff at the Gippsland campus revealed a high level of support for the CRC and for the Graduate Certificate, while acknowledging that it fell outside the traditional offerings of “mainstream” University courses. The practical issue of attracting local students is an obvious advantage, as are the partnerships with the two local Shires and TAFE providers. These factors are seen as positive steps in lifting the regional profile of the University, and contributing to the processes of community engagement.

The University is able to offer units of study within the Certificate to its students on other campuses, either through cross-referencing with other Degrees or as electives, and is currently investigating the possibility of articulation from the certificate through to a Masters Degree. Such articulation would necessitate a more structured orientation program to cater for the diversity of students coming into the Certificate, while at the same time instituting a more rigorous gradings system to ensure that people advancing to the Diploma and Masters stages were qualified and able to do so. It would also in the view of three of the academics interviewed, require a broadening of the academic content to include additional models of community development to “*encourage more critical inquiry*”.

As an incorporated community based organisation, the CRC has been able to attract considerable government and philanthropic funding not otherwise available to the University, and has the flexibility and potential to offer short professional and skills development courses. As a member of the VURRN Network, the CRC has been able to negotiate the roll out of the Certificate to other Universities which adds further legitimacy to Monash as a University engaged in regional development.

Recommendation 8:

That Monash University continue its support for the CRC and the Graduate Certificate, including pursuing articulated pathways towards a Masters Degree and exploration of tailored professional development offerings based on the Certificate.

Other issues raised from interviews

Sustainability of the Certificate (and the CRC)

The reliance on grant money is acknowledged as a serious issue for the long term sustainability of the Certificate and for the CRC. Currently, there are no submissions in for grants of a similar nature to those which have sustained the course over the past two years.

Government departments and other agencies are the most obvious employers potentially able to support current employees enrolling in the Certificate.

The issues to be considered here include:

- How is “value for money” clearly demonstrated to potential employers/partners?
- The lack of any management skills being included in the current Certificate.
- The lack of pathways within the University which would be attractive in terms of career development.

Preliminary recommendations

To address some of the issues in relation to the content of the Certificate, consideration should be given to the following:

Instituting a “Buddy system” as part of the orientation and support for new students (recommendation from a current student).

“Unpackaging” the course with a view to offering subjects in other degrees and offering skills development through the ACE sector.

Upgrading and reviewing the language used in the Study Circle Kit.

In preparation for further articulation of the Certificate into a Master’s Degree, institute a more structured orientation or “bridging” process for students without previous tertiary qualifications, and clarify the academic achievements required from those wishing to proceed to Diploma and Masters level.

Clarify organisational arrangements for the course at the beginning of the year, or at least, at the beginning of each semester.

The barriers which it has identified to be able to take up some or all of these opportunities identified by the include:

The non-funded nature of many time-consuming activities of the staff. For example, staff participate in a number of events, conferences, reference committees and community events which do not constitute part of their mainstream teaching/research duties. However, it is essential for both professional development and promotional reasons for The Centre to be actively engaged in such activities to raise its profile and to ensure that it plays a prominent role in the burgeoning educational and political debate surrounding community building in regional Australia. Similarly, inclusion in local and regional networks is critical to the long term success of The Centre, but again is time consuming, and often involves out of hours work which is not accounted for in the Centre’s budget.

The lack of financial resources to support local activities, (including Study Circles) in communities which are already feeling the strain on volunteers. The contrast of the Central Gippsland partnership where facilitators are paid for their local work through the Council (with Commonwealth FACs funding) indicates the importance of recognising the value of on-ground support in the task of community building.

The nature of current funding allocations within universities does not recognise the demands of action based research and teaching, particularly in regional areas. For example, funding and consequent employment for local facilitators is critical for community building; reliance on volunteers is neither economically nor educationally viable in the long term if communities are to remain (or become) sustainable. This reality was obvious in the initial evaluations (Sheil1998, O’Connor 1998), and remains just as pertinent in 2004.

Partnerships such as that in Central Gippsland which involve the university, local government and TAFE, reliant on multiple funders, require strong local leadership at local government level.



Appendix 7 – Audited Financial Statement