

Final Report
Collaborative Communities - Resilient Regions Project
September 2003

Centre for Rural Communities Inc.
Regional Solutions Program

The *Collaborative Communities - Resilient Regions* project achieved the goal of being a demonstration project of the important contribution that regional educational institutions can make to regional development through the provision of access to relevant skills, knowledge and resources. Funding from the Regional Solutions Program enabled the Centre for Rural Communities Inc. to develop research in effective community engagement into an accredited Graduate Certificate program in Regional Community Development. This work originating from within Gippsland now provides a professional pathway for regional workers from diverse sectors with a responsibility to engage with community members, an initiative that has received significant regional and national recognition.

Within the one year part-time program regional workers were introduced to a step-by-step approach to community engagement based on sound theoretical principles of collaborative education, guided by the goals of community development that fosters regional development. The program provided regular opportunities for workers to understand key principles of community engagement and become familiar with their application prior to taking the important step of becoming educators within their own communities/workplaces. Through participation in a regional program participants also had access to key resource people both from this University and via video or guest presentations with other Universities and community organisations. This wealth of knowledge inspired and frequently affirmed the importance of local ventures introducing participants to future networks.

The establishment of a study circle or a workplace project within localities was supported through a process similar to field placements for teachers providing an opportunity to integrate theory and practice. By locating learning within communities a multiplier effect is experienced as members of each study group are introduced to facilitation skills and the practice of collaborative engagement towards sustainable outcomes.

The accredited program is now an important component of the program offered from this regional campus and will continue to be available, the multiplier effect of workers becoming educators making available a study program accredited by the TAFE sector will continue alongside the regional network which supports exchanges between communities and sectors.

The outcomes from this project exceeded expectations as ownership became grounded within communities. As can be seen from the case-studies communities have established partnerships with other relevant organizations –both public and private sector in a manageable way beginning the process of initiating ventures from within communities.

Other regional Universities are seeking access to the Graduate Certificate program and are buying the teaching resources developed in Gippsland to utilise in a range of programs.

While acknowledging the benefits to the region of this interactive program regional Universities are currently not in a position to fund more than the teaching component of this work. The supervision, liason and support of communities does not come within their capacity to resource. Other products have been identified which will expand both the knowledge and financial base of the Centre's work. Indications are positive on this account as the work has received the following recognition:

Locally

Participation by staff from 5 of the 6 Gippsland local governments. This group has requested the Centre to co-ordinate a network of Community Development workers and have offered their support on a number of occasions in sourcing other funding. Shires have co-hosted functions and support the work of the Centre.

Regionally

Regional campuses in Victoria, Queensland and Western Australia have sought access to the course and the resources the Centre has developed.

State

The State Government invited the Centre to co-host seminars with Premier and Cabinet on Community Building in 2002. The TAFE sector contributed \$8,000 in the first year towards resourcing learning within communities while providing access to accreditation for community members and access to libraries and ongoing learning.

Nationally

Monash University committed \$30,000 to fund HECS places for community members in this program and to the establishment of the Graduate Certificate in Regional Community Development. This access has been a key component by not placing all financial responsibility on community members.

The Centre for Rural Communities Inc. in partnership with Monash University is named as an example of good practice in the 'Compendium of Good Practice University - Regional Development Engagement Initiative' prepared for the Department of Transport and Regional Services by Dr. Steve Garlick and Geoff Pryor (August 2002).

Success factors include:

- Effective strategies of intervention and engagement (course is offered one day per fortnight with HECS options for community members and full fee paying for organisational staff)
- Ability to maintain relationships over time, thereby proving credibility (Centre has been focusing on rural communities since 1995)
- Integrity of supporting academic work, a valuable resource to isolated workers
- An educational, rather than directional role in working with diverse rural communities,
- Access to Monash University Gippsland for professional course development and other knowledge resources
- Access to funding
- Growing interest from all levels of government and other regional universities.

To ensure that this excellent program that overcomes barriers of cost, culture and access for rural people in a manner that has a significant multiplier effect within communities can continue to grow it will be important to seek funding for a further two years. During this time a range of partnerships and resources can be established that build on the transferable model of collaborative engagement. To date energy has primarily been centered on the development of the program.

Milestones

1) Seek Formal Approval for Graduate Certificate

Work began with Monash University in 2001 through the Professional Development Institute to develop a program around the model of 'Collaborative Engagement for Transformation' strategies towards rural sustainability and test the market while introducing this work to the University sector. Following this step accreditation at Graduate Certificate level in the Faculty of Education was sort with approval for the Regional Community Development course at 4th year level was gained in 2002 to commence in 2003.

2) Commence Development of University Curriculum

Subjects developed for the Graduate Certificate program include:

- Facilitating Community Development (6 points)
- Collaborative Engagement in communities (6 points)
- Theory and Practice of Community Development (12 points)

The course brings together knowledge and skills from regional development, community development and collaborative education providing a sound base from which students can be introduced to the theoretical work and practical engagement strategies associated with each of these disciplines.

Each of these subjects was developed and trialed through the Professional Development program before submission to the University Curriculum Committees and to the market place. The strategy to introduce this new course was effective with both the University and regional workers.

The course commenced in 2003 and due to credits from the Professional Development Institute the first group of eight students graduated in October this year. Graduates are from Orbost, Bairnsdale, Sale, Morwell, and Boolarra involved in programs that incorporate environmental development, economic development, cultural development, spiritual development, recreation, tourism, personal wellbeing and indigenous issues.

3) Negotiate with 12 communities

The original target of engaging with 12 communities through the training of facilitators has been exceeded with study circles and projects being facilitated in 17 groups in Gippsland as well as a statewide rural program.

Professional development of regional workers has ensured that the skills, knowledge and resources gained from the accredited program remain within the communities and workplaces. Sectors involved have included: local government, community members, recreation and culture, environmental management, early childhood development, fire recovery, sport and recreation, health, indigenous projects, spiritual, economic, youth and the many initiatives that originate from within communities utilising the study circle process. The bringing together of people from diverse sectors provides a rich pool of experience and knowledge from which to draw as well as creating a dynamic network.

As the workers move from being learners to educators within their communities, community members also have access to the practical implementation of engagement using these collaborative strategies. Personal and community development of those involved consistently exceeded expectations both for facilitators and participants.

4) Establish study circles/workplace projects

As noted students initiated study circles or workplace projects across Gippsland - snapshots of these outcomes are profiled for two communities: Boolarra and Mallacoota.

Snapshots of Outcomes of Community Engagement

Boolarra in La Trobe Shire

*A feeling of community within the group.
A lot of positive feeling about our town.
An energy to go on and achieve something.
(Study circle participant)*

Boolarra is a community of less than 500 people that prior to the commencement of the study group (2002) had been experiencing the fate of many small towns, not one business in the town survived independently of outside income and a number of key business - including the service station had closed. In response to this situation a community member shared his concerns publicly in the local newsletter and as a result people began to meet and talk about their Vision for Boolarra.

One of the people concerned to support the town undertook the course offered in partnership between Centre for Rural Communities Inc. accredited through Monash University that introduced participants to the skills and knowledge of engaging collaboratively within communities. In applying this learning Kate encouraged local people to participate in a study circle that provided a local forum for people to learn to work together and plan for the future of their community. Personal and community change became evident as people began to articulate what they valued in this community and then moved on to ways of supporting these social and environmental qualities. Directions that were embraced by the wider community and through strategies that many people of all ages could participate in.

The dream of '*A great big street party with music and laughter*' became the first Boolarra Folk Festival auspiced by the Boolarra Community Development Group and informed by the experience from Mallacoota Arts Council. A wonderful day, with many groups involved where pride in this community was affirmed and celebrated. The beauty of the town and the friendliness of residents was on display and every business participated and worked to capacity. The experience was an extremely positive one that sparked interest from local and state government who are now happy to work in partnership with this constructive community. Grants for a skatepark have been received, upgrading of sound equipment in the local hall, renewed energy and resources for the Boolarra - Mirboo North rail trail, a Christmas in July that again supported the themes of welcoming newcomers, involving children and showcasing local musicians. A video documents the day, a Boolarra song has been developed and poems educate of the directions this community has proudly chosen. New businesses are moving in to town and young people return home to contribute their skills to the public events.

Participants in the study group gained accreditation at Certificate level for their involvement in the study circle with certificates presented by the local Member of Parliament who acknowledged the value of locating learning locally where people are dealing with the issues of change. Individually and collectively the participants have taken on new public responsibilities with confidence clearly guided by the goals they established through the project. The facilitator of the group, Kate Cartwright is now the recipient of a Rural Women's Bursary to support her work/study in community initiatives that she plans to develop around greater involvement by young people in this process.

The steps taken by the Boolarra study group have been initiated from within the community at a manageable rate that has continued to affirm the importance of their contributions and their ability to work in their chosen direction. Skills they have been willing to share with neighbouring communities and to showcase at regional events and a visiting Commonwealth Study Tour keen to learn of initiatives within communities.

Mallacoota in East Gippsland

It was amazing to see such a diverse group of people work so well together and form a trust not often seen in Mallacoota. I hope that I can continue to practice the valuable advice and skills I learnt in this Study Circle. This course not only helped my communications skills in groups, but also made a big difference in my personal relationships.
(Amber)

After 12 weeks of working with the Study Circles in Mallacoota, I am still amazed and inspired by the good intentions, active commitment and creative imaginations of the participants.

Seeing people of diverse (and often diametrically opposing) views sitting in a circle around a table, unanimously expressing their desire to learn to work with each other and the community to create a sustainable community - then following with action and commitment was literally awe inspiring.
(Ruth Hannah - Facilitator)

Increased confidence in their skills resulted in involvement in other community organisations such as:

- becoming involved in the Kindergarten committee
- taking on an office bearing position on the Abalone Co-operative
- becoming involved in the Arts Council
- using the skills on the Mallacoota Community Association
- using the skills in private business - the Mallacoota Hotel
- becoming more involved in art projects within the community

Through the professional development of regional workers and community members in the Graduate Certificate program this scenario of groups moving from fragmentation, isolation, or simply concern about their future to positive and constructive engagement is being repeated in Orbost, Toora, Morwell, Churchill, Glendonald, Gormandale, Rosedale and Nungerner. Community based projects within organisations extend to the Gippsland Aboriginal Health and Housing Co-operative, Anglicare, Wellington Shire: recreation and culture initiatives that have educated local trainers, who in turn educate community members, Early Learning Centres, Environmental programs and Cultural activities, Landcare, as well as in Fire Recovery and Youth programs.

Three members of the Orborst Community participated in the Graduate Certificate program each using their skills and knowledge to initiate relevant ventures.

- Sr. Helen Barnes initiated the McKillops Bridge on the Snowy River as part of the Year of the Outback attracting involvement from over 7,000 people who willingly contributed to the project co-ordinated and orchestrated from within the Orborst community. This venture taped a spirit of hope, a totally different image to the all too frequent stories of decline, depression and division associated with these communities. Communities of Cann River, Bendoc, Tubbut and Wulgermerang were active contributors to the project and the launching of the Banners of Hope on the 8th August, 2002. A day that continues to generate hope, stories, songs and poems and the return of many people to McKillops Bridge on the Snowy River.
- Ruth Hansen co-ordinated the Orborst contribution to 'The Snow River Journey.' Involvement from the Orborst community was by the Snowy River Arts Network to link and celebrated the spirit of rural communities through the sharing of stories of Snowy River Country and celebrate the return of flowing headwaters to the river. The intention was to bring together leaders from the community who could contribute positively to future outcomes for Snowy River Country. Participants rode in two small buses, visiting local communities where the bus travelers acted as the link between community celebrations and shared in the hopes for the future and the heritage of the people of the Snowy River Country. The project was co-ordinated under the International Year of Mountains 2002 and linked people from three states. Over 200 people participated in Orborst and Marlo with indigenous elders, farmers, water management groups, artists, community members of all ages.
- Mary McDonald Co-ordinator of the Orborst Neighbourhood House facilitated a study circle that established a community structure able to host and respond to initiatives from within the community in an inclusive manner. The community development group has hosted events involving all sectors of the community facilitating interaction and social networking as well as providing the infrastructure for a project 'Wilderness Bike Ride.' The bike ride begins at Bonang, and includes the Errinundra Plateau and Cape Conran. Scheduled for April 2004 involving 300 people this has the potential to become an annual event.
- In Bairnsdale, Josette Nunn the Early Learning Centre co-ordinator developed an Environmental Education Program called Woolly Wombats both to develop a product of relevance to local children and families and to support the financial viability of the Early Learning Centre. The program fosters the understanding that children and the environment are inter-related and comprises activities that relate to current environmental issues and field trips around topics of: recycling, waste management and pollution, water conservation, water cycle, farming and sustainable land usage, Australian rainforests and Australian endangered species. The program has resulted in increased participation from children and families, who develop information into projects they can own and revisit. For example the construction of a 'recycling water fountain' powered by wind and solar energy involved children over a period of 4 days. Children's sense of self-esteem and confidence blossoms as they have a pride in their projects. The Centre attracted a Department of Natural Resources Junior Landcare Grant of \$1300 and a visit by the Minister to look at the children's projects and meet the families. Program size has increased and a new program 'Chatting Cockatoos' Literacy Research Program is also underway. The work has given the Centre a changed identity. Rather than being the kindergarten on the wrong side of the river it now has an identity respected by families, community members, other professionals, Government Departments and as a professional educators the status of the teachers is considerably enhanced.

- Marelene Rickhuss from East Gippsland Shire used the strategies of collaborative engagement in the Fire Recovery program in Far East Gippsland. In the Wulgulmerang staff facilitated community gatherings to share concerns and experiences with residents as they sought to find a way forward after the fires. The gatherings reduced the sense of isolation and linked people who could continue working with these farms and families in identified actions to rebuild their community.
- Across the Wellington Shire the recreation and cultural officer Michael Rowell worked with a range of community groups to establish District Advisory Networks that became a focus for local activity and a useful sounding board for council staff on the impact of changed policy. The District Advisory Networks were locally accessible, skilled at facilitating discussion and prepared to act to improve facilities and services with their communities. New ventures in shared recreational facilities between schools and tennis clubs, construction of skatebowls with local ownership, physical activity program - Movers and Shakers - also involved accreditation of cricket and tennis coaches who took these skills back to involve a wider group in their own communities.

Three workers from the Morwell community established quite different projects while two community members established groups in Glendonald and Churchill. Each group has a different focus demonstrating the transferability of the model and its capacity to tap local energy and issues.

- In Morwell Jodi Merlo a worker with Anglicare established a study circle with women previously supported in a program by Anglicare as sufferers of anxiety. These women worked through the study circle process slowly taking ownership for the organisation of the activities, developing social and emotional networks and initiating activities. This worker also used skills from the course to support a partnership between Anglicare, Sport and Recreation and Local Primary Schools in the introduction of Indigenous Games and holding a carnival that brought together the five schools involved.
- Teresa Puglies from Latrobe Shire established a group at the Morwell Neighbourhood House supporting involvement from residents involved in the Neighbourhood Renewal program with State Government but extending participation to members of the Walking Group operating from the Neighbourhood House. Each of the participants expressed their pleasure at being involved in a program that continued their skill development and their ability to work on issues of local importance. The group invited the regional Sport and Recreation worker as a guest presenter and have applied for funding for 2004 to run 3 activities that complement active involvement in the community with diverse groups of people. The group also met with the Mayor of Latrobe Shire to register their concerns over a proposed liquor license at the local milkbar. Members of this group have become members of the Committee of Management of the Morwell Neighbourhood house and have successfully completed the accredited TAFE program.
- Lola Gay, bookkeeper with Ninde Darne Quaranoock the Central Gippsland Aboriginal Health and Housing Co-operative Ltd applied her skills to the organization of the 25th Anniversary of the co-operative. The directors of the co-operative wanted the anniversary to record the stories of the origins of the co-operative, to publicly acknowledge those who began this work and to celebrate the achievements. A weekend of activities beginning with a dinner and presentation of life memberships acknowledged on the honour board began the celebrations held at the Childcare Centre that had been an important part of many people's lives. This memorable beginning was followed by a dinner and ball with further presentation of life memberships – a grand ceremony for many who had often been excluded. The following evening Indigenous musicians played and sang songs of local histories, while elders shared stories. The final event was a

family day on the Morwell common involved indigenous games, face painting and numerous other activities along with a bar-b-que and much catching up.

The celebrations welcomed back members of the community who had in past times not felt appreciated, honoured their involvement and publicly shared stories of the difficulties encountered along with creative responses from the community.

- In Churchill, Margaret Guthrie facilitated a study circle that ran into difficulties with the printed material through issues of literacy and poor visibility. In tackling this issue they made contact with the Disability Resource Centre and the LaTrobe Shires disability policy. Both assisted the group take public steps to access big print information and circulated this to other community organizations. A further project involved taking steps to ensure local groups were more welcoming and information on their existence more accessible.
- In Glendonald, Susan Connor met with members of the community at the Glendonald maternal and child health center. Discussion in this group focused on issues of communication and the importance of having support to speak up both personally and within organizations. A number of the group have felt intimidated in the past at being involved publicly and are taking steps to access support to take up further studies and support for their children to ensure this is not a continuing experience.
- At Stratford, Ruth Haggard a community member established a study group that focused on the cultural and environmental benefits of the community that exist within the community and ways these could be supported. A rare orchid found in the area is now featured on 'shopping bags' raising awareness of this flower as a local feature that could be adopted by the school and traders in the town. The work has been supported by the Wellington Shire and Environment Victoria. A range of short and long term activities that raise awareness of the many groups within the town as well as extending these through the establishment of a community garden and meeting place are also under discussion. The interaction between people who were previously not known to each other indicates the wealth of skills and knowledge within the community that can support local development.
- At Nungurner, the Coast Care Co-ordinator Catherine Clancy established a study group that brought together previously separate landcare and coast care groups with "Friends Of" groups from quite small communities. Plans to share resources and working bees has already inspired new energy and enthusiasm for the work undertaken by these groups.
- At Toora the study group facilitated by the Community Building worker of the South Gippsland Shire, Sally Paeke focused on holding a writer's festival to showcase the local stories and histories of this active but not always united community.
- In Yarram, Tony Colley, the worker with the Youth Enterprise Project worked with young people and community members interested in supporting young people to identify potential areas of common interest for a local enterprise. Initial strategies of engagement with the young people involved the production of a video featuring the Yarram area and what people valued. Due to changing workers this project has had a checkered history but is currently opening a shop retailing skateboards and bicycles.
- The statewide program involved Kerry Murphy community program manager with Parks Victoria. Skills and knowledge accessed in this program were introduced to regional managers and rural staff in their planning of 'rural forums' with both community and

business sectors in regional areas. The work affirmed many of the experiences of this state government department with workers located within regions.

5) Commence development of Multi-media Resources

The stories documented by video, print, song and poem that have resulted from projects undertaken in community continue to inform values and perspectives from within community's identifying further opportunities for engagement. Video's include: *Unveiling Hope* on McKillops Bridge (Year of the Outback 2002), *Snowy River Journey* (International Year of the Mountains 2002) NSW Premiers Department, *Folk and Drum Festival* at Boolarra each adding to understanding of the transformative power of collaborative engagement. A further resource on events associated with the course and interaction with communities is in the process of being produced.

6) Change within the communities

Participants within the course have completed written papers on changes as well as events within communities being recorded through a range of media. Documentation includes videos, posters, songs and poems - the public celebration of moving from despair to optimism has initiated activities within some communities that have now become annual events. The Boolarra Folk and Drum Festival is one such example, the launching of the 'Unfolding Hope' Banners from McKillops Bridge on the Snowy River has achieved national fame and involved directly 7,000 people. The multiplier effect of the 'Movers and Shakers Program' in the Wellington Shire has resulted in the initial skilling of 12 trainers in physical fitness with the aim of whole communities participating.

Personal development within the program for community members is also a significant step as individuals gain confidence in taking on public positions within committees and industry groups. These all contribute to a changed understanding of what can be achieved from within communities. The impact on communication within family life is also a change that participants regularly comment on.

The geographic spread of involvement came from Mallacoota, Orbost, Bairnsdale, Nungerner, Stratford, Gormindale, Sale, Rosedale, Wulgumerang, Omeo, Toora, Korumburra, Morwell, Glendonald, Churchill, Mirboo North and Yarram -

6) Organise Regional Forum

Moving from being an isolated worker to presenting at regional forums and conferences marks significant development from uncertainty to confidence in work initiated in partnership with community groups. The opportunity to gain public feedback that affirms the importance of this work beyond peers within the university introduces participants to a broader network of colleagues and policy people.

Forums and conferences with which the Centre has collaborated include:

- *Growing Together* - Office of Community Building, Victorian Government forums at Churchill, Melbourne and Bendigo 2002
- *Our Community - Answers from Within*, Small Rural Communities Health Conference - Daylesford 2002
- *Policy, Partnerships and Principles: Building for the Future*, Anglicare Forum, Gippsland 2003
- *Our People, Our Town, Our Place*, Small Rural Communities Health Conference - Omeo 2003

Presentation of the development of the Graduate Certificate in Regional Community Development at statewide forums and conferences has attracted interest from other regional universities and

the texts developed for the training of facilitators are being used by other regional Universities across Australia who welcome content on rural and regional initiatives.

6) Negotiate with TAFE for ongoing course

The Centre for Rural Communities Inc. has established a partnership with Central Gippsland Tafe and is undertaking discussions with East Gippsland Institute of TAFE to accredit participants in the study circles with a unit in the Certificate of Community Services - Community Development. The unit is Specialist Communication Skills - a 50 hour subject. In 2002 Central Gippsland Institute of TAFE employed participants in the Graduate Certificate as sessional teachers providing financial support and professional status for the study circles. Participants were enrolled with TAFE and had access to TAFE facilities of libraries and computers in those communities where there is resources.

In 2003 the cutbacks to the TAFE sector no longer allow the employment of these sessional staff.

At this stage there remains no delivery of Community Development at Certificate or Diploma or Degree level in Gippsland despite the continued demand for these skills by employers.

7) Establish and Maintain Regional Network

Past and present participants in the course as well as community members comprise an active a peer and professional regional network that contributes significantly to learning within the program. Four regional events with guest presenters and/or opportunities to present work form within communities or workplaces have been organised over the past 12 months. These have included the Small Rural Communities Health Conference in Daylesford, a regional session on skills and structures for co-operative endeavours, hosting of a regional seminar with the Office of Community Building in Churchill, and an annual celebration of work within communities known as the "Other Awards".

8) Engage with other regional educational institutions re. partnership in course delivery.

.Involvement in Victorian Universities Regional Research Network has promoted the work of the Centre and interest has been expressed by other regional Universities to access the program. This includes RMIT in their work with Catchment Management Authority staff. Material developed for this course is now being incorporated into programs at James Cook University and other regional campuses who welcome relevant material on regional Australia. It is of interest that this work has inter-disciplinary appeal affirming the transferability of the model.

Section 2. Outcomes and Benefits

Through access to the Graduate Certificate in Regional Community Development community members took the step of inviting interested local people to participate in local study circles using the 'Building Rural Futures through Co-operation' kit. The Centre was able to support the establishment of these groups by travelling to the communities for information sessions and to support the new facilitator. A process maintained throughout the study circle finalising with a graduation celebration. Central Gippsland Institute of TAFE employed students as sessional teachers providing resources into the community and access to a professional support. This has future potential for continuing skill development and reintroduction to post compulsory education within rural communities. A number of Gippsland Shires are keen to utilise this work to develop community plans that have solid local ownership.

It is important to note that in all cases the multiplier effect of locating learning within communities with skilled facilitators supported by a central resource and knowledge base consistently results in outcomes that exceed expectations of the co-ordinator, the facilitator and the community. It is within communities that people experience challenges on a daily basis and motivation for engagement with a program that places local interests at the centre of learning is high.

Feedback as incorporated into the local snapshots indicates the dramatic impact both personally and within the community of the study circles. At \$22.00 per person the study circle kits are affordable, location of the learning is local and accessible and groups do not work in isolation but are linked to a growing network of other communities and local educational program. Support of the worker in establishing these groups and throughout the development of local skills and knowledge is a key component of the course. Each community is at a different stage of development, and has varied access to resources and skills. Some have long histories of working in partnerships with other groups and others have experienced bitter division for generations.

As communities identify common concerns over social or environmental issues and begin to take action new energy is generated, partnerships are established, new networks created and new economic development results. The work of the Centre in partnership with Monash University has been acknowledged as one of 6 best practice model by Dr. Steve Garlick as discussed earlier in the report. In this regard the partnership has ongoing relevance. It is not a short term program and the ability to create a resource that is responsive to requests for involvement from communities when they are initiating ventures is a constructive and productive way of engaging.

The model of Collaborative Engagement is transferable to other sectors and other regions in Australia and internationally. With the accreditation of the course continued access beyond the life of the Regional Solutions funding has been established. Other regional universities have expressed interest and are keen to access this program. Partnerships with other educational providers, local government, state government departments and civil sector organisation, community and industry groups have raised the profile of the systematic approach developed from research in Gippsland that has sound foundations in academia and experience.

Participants in the course have engaged with people from rural communities, isolated women, rural young people in enterprise development, rural and regional people in recreation programs, accreditation and development of facilities and networks, community members initiating social activities such as festivals, markets and gatherings to benefit their community socially and economically. People from border communities in rural areas concerned about their future and the severe environmental conditions of drought, flood and fire that have been recently experienced. Communities that have experienced changing economic conditions due to relocation of industry such as processing o milk and meat products with the closure of Bonlac and abattoirs in South Gippsland or the closure of financial services. Personal development is dramatic both for regional workers and for the community members with whom they engage.

Past experience from pilot initiatives has demonstrated that when local people are provided with access to skills, knowledge and resources to work together creatively, effectively and cooperatively as new opportunities for ventures become evident. Local self-reliance is increased and confidence to network and become actively involved in ventures that will invest or reinvest in their futures changes awareness of what is possible to achieve. Local capability, unlike infrastructure cannot be brought into a community - it must originate from within. Study circles and the step-by-step approach of engaging collaboratively with communities recognises the importance of local people having access to the foundational skills of being able to work together to establish shared goals.

The process of engagement within this approach encourages community's to begin with small manageable projects to reinforce awareness of working collaboratively without taking undue risks. As confidence and experience increases, communities quickly become aware of further projects that can enhance opportunities for their future development such as in the following examples.