

Pathways to the possible

As head of the Centre for Rural Communities at Monash's Gippsland campus, Dr Helen Sheil is a passionate advocate for the local area, its people and their potential. She believes the work of the centre is helping rural communities establish their place in a changing landscape.

ROBYN ANNS reports.

Rural communities everywhere are undergoing rapid and continuous change. Residents feel the impact of changes in technology, regionalisation and employment trends very keenly and often feel isolated and disenfranchised.

But Monash University's Gippsland campus has found a way to help local people reach out to each other and form valuable and effective networks through the Centre for Rural Communities (CRC).

Centre director Dr Helen Sheil says the centre was established in 1995 to provide access to educational resources for rural communities of up to 10,000 people who were experiencing rapid and continuous change.

"Our vision is of rural communities that are socially, environmentally and economically sustainable," she says.

"To make this happen, we make available resources, skills and knowledge to support innovative ventures initiated from within those rural communities."

For instance, the centre compiled a study circle kit called *Building Rural Futures Through Cooperation*, a simple booklet costing just \$22. It sets out processes that help people learn to organise and manage local projects collaboratively in their communities. Stories within the kit provide inspiration of what can be achieved if people work together.

"While the kit is a marvelous tool, on its own it's just a book," says Dr Sheil.

"It requires skilled and resourced facilitators who are able to invite people who may not know each other to sit together at a common table and learn to work together."

In 2001, the CRC received Federal Government funding to develop its work on collaborative engagement into the Graduate Certificate in Regional Community Development. The certificate is a 12-month, postgraduate-level course designed for regional people from diverse sectors who have a responsibility to engage with community groups.

"The purpose of the graduate certificate is to skill people in facilitating community engagement," says Dr Sheil. "Many workers from diverse sectors are now expected to engage with community members. This is a very different role from the work they are trained in – often agricultural science, natural resource management, health, administration, accounting and so on."

"The provision of this course by Monash has been the key to recognising the skills and knowledge involved in community engagement."

A requirement of the course is that participants become educators within their own communities or workplaces.

"It's like a teacher placement. They become embedded in their communities as educators, facilitators and agents for sustainable change. It's an example of Monash getting directly involved in community engagement," says Dr Sheil.

The certificate course has been so popular that it is being introduced by universities in the Victorian Universities Regional Research Network (VURRN). RMIT in Hamilton will offer the Monash course next year and negotiations are under way for other VURRN members, including La Trobe University at Bendigo, Ballarat University and Deakin University's Warrnambool campus, to offer the course.

"There is often a view that small towns are less important in the scheme of regional planning – that the big issues happen in the bigger centres," says Dr Sheil.

"But we find that people across Gippsland, like all regional areas, have important local knowledge that can inform opportunities or limitations to ventures and are incredibly passionate – with hopes and dreams and incredible vibrancy." ●

Action

For more information, contact Dr Helen Sheil, +61 3 5122 6755, or email rural.comm@arts.monash.edu.au.



At the table: Centre director Dr Helen Sheil in front of the CRC banner that features a teapot motif to highlight the centre's 'kitchen table' approach to community learning.
Photo: DANIEL CLANCY, CeLTS