Welcome to the first edition of a new publication of the Globalism Institute at RMIT University. This edition is the result of a collaboration between members of the Institute who are interested in what is happening to local communities in the context of globalization and people living in the Hamilton region of Victoria who are interested in how their region relates to the world. The collaboration began in June 2004 when a team of researchers from the Globalism Institute established a Critical Reference Group in the Hamilton region to discuss ways of researching and analyzing the nature of relationships between the region and the world. This local-global research project actually builds on work that Yaso Nadarajah began ten years earlier when she first brought international students studying at RMIT in Melbourne into the region for an experience of rural Australian life. Visits by international students turned into rich intercultural and educational exchanges between the students and the locals. The program evolved into a partnership that was underpinned by supportive relationships and sustained work on policies and strategies by RMIT. Nadarajah tells this foundation story of the local-global research project in this publication. The depth of engagement between the university and the community in the Hamilton region provides such a strong foundation for the current research project that it provides a model for how the Institute can conduct similar research in local communities across Victoria and around the world.

University researchers can exploit local communities by using them as ‘case studies’ that are written up in obscure reports or in academic journals. It is the stated intention of the Globalism Institute not only to work in close consultation with community members but to also share the outcomes of the research as we go, and to make it available to a wide range of people in a range of forms. To this end, we are building a special website—at www.communitysustainability.info—to keep interested people informed of what we are doing in local communities across the world and to store the research data as it is collected. There are many people in the Hamilton region who are already keen to hear about the project and the Critical Reference Group recommended that we work quickly towards
the publication of a collection of papers based on our research for local and global circulation.

Perhaps the most exciting thing about Local–Global is that it can help us see the world through a different lens. It is easy to see that much of what we read or hear as daily news emanates from the nation’s biggest cities or its capital, with most of the global news content coming via agencies based in the world’s dominant cities, such as Los Angeles and London. Despatches sent in from around the world are filtered through centralized editorial processes and then disseminated widely and very rapidly through various forms of media. Most of the stories that we consume daily have been selected by a handful of editors or senior journalists. There are, of course, regional news services and the more independent community radio stations, but the regional news services, like televised entertainment, increasingly tend to be franchisees to larger conglomerations repackaging the news for local consumption. People living outside the metropolises of the world have grown accustomed to the idea that they are far from the centres of action where the ‘real’ decisions are made. They have become consumers of news and ideas that arrive from outside. Similarly, the metropolises have dominated the regions in terms of the ways in which the infrastructure of production and exchange, communication and consumption have been organized. So, for example, Melbourne and Sydney, Los Angeles and London, have been very dominant in the economic, political and cultural lives of people living within the states of Victoria and New South Wales. They are also dominant in the lives of people living in Port Moresby or Dili, which are in turn central to the generation of news in communities across Papua New Guinea and East Timor.

At the same time, the complex processes that go under the heading of ‘globalization’ have meant, paradoxically, that while the leading centres of power and influence in the world have been able to further their reach, many of the old hierarchies have been disrupted in the process. In the realm of mass communication, Melbourne, for example, has become peripheral to Sydney. At the same time, some local ‘centres’ have become less dependent on their immediate metropolises for information and exchange. For example, through globalizing connections such as the World Wide Web or global news agencies, communities that were once considered on the periphery can bypass the hold of their old cities to connect to other places.

Nevertheless, the self-perception of marginality is not easily discarded and the possibilities of independence are mostly herded into modes of thought and practice devised by metropolitan elites. The Globalism Institute is interested to find out how differently local communities might respond to the challenges of globalization; the extent to which they can think and act independently in becoming more socially and environmentally sustainable. We are interested in facilitating local, national and global dialogues in which local communities can learn more directly from the experiences and insights of other local communities around the world. For this reason we have collaboratively established a series of ways of communicating more directly across and within communities, including through this journal and the website mentioned above.
To put all of this another way, this first edition of Local–Global begins to explore what happens when we look at the world from the perspective of the Hamilton region rather than from Melbourne. What happens when the ‘margins’ move to centre stage? How might this change the way we think about the challenges of sustainability? What can other local communities learn from the local-global experiences of the Hamilton region?

In the first instance, we have tried to ensure that this edition of Local–Global will be of direct interest to a wide range of people living in the Hamilton region. The editorial group, including a community-based member John Callinan, has worked with that aim in mind while seeking to set the edition within a broader context. We wanted to create an edition that will be of interest to people living in this and other local communities, as well as to people with a professional interest in the many issues surrounding local-global relationships. We have sought to establish a model for future editions of Local–Global that could focus on other local communities and regions around the world. We aim to produce a second edition of Local–Global with a focus on the Hamilton region in 2006. Editions from elsewhere will be produced when they can serve a clear purpose for that locale. Local–Global has general editors who will ensure that each edition relates to the publication’s overall aims (as stated on the title page), but for each separate edition the editors will include at least one community-based person and others with a special interest in the community or communities concerned. This makes the journal a unique publishing venture.

As indicated earlier, this edition of Local-Global begins with the story of how and why the Globalism Institute is conducting research on local-global experiences in the Hamilton region. This ‘foundation story’ of the partnership that has emerged between university-based researchers and interested residents in the Hamilton region was written by the person who initiated this partnership, Yaso Nadarajah. The first section also includes a wonderful account of what we can all learn about sustainability from the ancient practices of the indigenous people who conducted eel cultivation in and around Lake Condah and it tells the story of an experiment in sustainable farming on a property called ‘Lanark’ that has been sustained for nearly half a century. Olive McVicker traces the evolution in community arts that has taken place in the Hamilton region since she arrived as a migrant from Ireland in 1961 and Keith Warne discusses the 2004 celebration of the 150th anniversary of the naming of the town of Dunkeld, where many of the early settlers had arrived from Scotland. The Local Perspectives section also includes an article on research into the sustainability of local communities in southern India being conducted by Dr Thangavelu Vasantha Kumaran of the University of Madras, who visited the Hamilton region in 2004 at the invitation of the Globalism Institute.

Papers published in the Research Papers section of the journal have been well-researched and subjected to a process of review by academics with relevant expertise. They can only be published here if two academics with appropriate expertise certify that they make an original contribution to a field of research. Papers published here may relate to themes discussed within contributions to the Local Perspectives section of the journal and in this case, Yaso Nadarajah has extended her analysis of what community engagement can mean, and Peter
Phipps has explored the serious challenges involved in conducting research on community sustainability. Peter is Deputy Director of the Globalism Institute and manager of the Institute’s program for researching community sustainability internationally.

Of course, many of the most pressing challenges facing local communities relate to economic restructuring processes that can determine which local industries and enterprises are likely to survive and prosper. Australian farmers are accustomed to planning for drought years and fluctuations in market prices for their products. However, they can be driven to desperation by prolonged droughts or long-term price declines. The story of ‘Lanark’ (as recounted in this edition) shows how hard it is for individual farmers to reduce their reliance on specific markets or the ‘rain gods’. It takes long-term planning and plenty of persistence. Not surprisingly, many farmers who are sliding deeper into debt want to jump on the next ‘sure thing’ that comes along. So, for example, when international prices for wool fell and stayed low in the early 1990s, many sheep farmers in the Hamilton region realized that the days of ‘riding on the sheep’s back’ were over and they cleared their debts by selling or leasing land to corporations establishing broad-acre blue gum plantations. The sudden shift to a new dominant monoculture raises many questions about its long-term impacts on water resources, biodiversity and soil fertility and it creates a new dependency on export markets that may be more fickle than anticipated. The ‘sure thing’ might not go the distance. Similarly, the local economy has received an immediate boost with the start-up of the Iluka mineral sands mining and processing operation. Yet, as Robyn Eversole demonstrates in her paper, experiences elsewhere demonstrate that the local benefits of nationally important industries (such as sand-mining) are commonly exaggerated in the process of neutralizing the diverse concerns of complex local communities.

All too often, local and regional economies want to jump on bandwagons heading for El Dorado. More flexible, globalized, economies do create opportunities to tap into global markets but there are many regions in the world wanting to become the next Silicon Valley or the next Bangalore (where the advantage is low wages) and the shift is often from one form of vulnerability to another. The road to El Dorado can take us away from the need to broaden the base of local economies and ensure that they meet local needs before responding the fickle distant markets. And the rush to jump on board means that little serious work is done on the long-term social and environmental sustainability of the new industries. In this edition, we publish a sharp critique of prevailing policies for regional development in Australia that are geared towards export markets written by Ken Mansell, an independent social researcher based in Daylesford. Ken’s paper is based on research he has been conducting for a period of ten years and it presents his overall critique of the policies and some of their ramifications for the area centred on Ballarat. In the 2006 edition of Local-Global (Hamilton region) Ken will extend his analysis of what the policies mean for both Daylesford and Ballarat.

In the Books and Ideas section, the Globalism Institute’s Christopher Scanlon presents a critique of the work of the US academic Richard Florida on the emergence in economically successful companies, cities and regions of what he
calls the ‘creative class’. While Florida’s emphasis on the need to foster creativity and reward creative thinkers may be an advance on the promotion of proven recipes for success, his conception of what constitutes creativity and success has been warmly embraced by those who are pushing the kind of strategies that Ken Mansell has so strongly criticized. Books and Ideas also includes a column by Dunkeld bookshop proprietor Roz Greenwood about new and old books circulating locally.

The aim of this journal is to establish a forum for discussion about how to make local communities more resilient and more congenial in the context of globalization. The editors will not always agree with views expressed by individual contributors; rather our aim is to publish articles and research papers that might serve to broaden and deepen such discussions. Whereas Florida concentrates on forms of creativity that increase economic output, we are interested in forms of creativity that can make us think more deeply about who we are and what can make our lives more sustainable. Judy Warne does this by drawing a parallel between European settlement of the western districts of Victoria and the experience of the white rabbit in Alice in Wonderland who falls through a hole in the earth to arrive in a place that is strange, disorienting, sometimes violent and yet with positive possibilities to be negotiated. It is an unsettling adventure that continues. It provokes the question, ‘What shall we take forward, and how should we live more sustainably?’

Martin Mulligan is a senior research fellow in the Globalism Institute at RMIT University and a co-editor of Local–Global.

Paul James is Director of the Globalism Institute at RMIT University and the General Editor of Local–Global.