RMIT COMMUNITY AND REGIONAL PARTNERSHIPS: STRATEGY OVERVIEW

INTRODUCTION:

RMIT’s core activities of education and training and research and development share characteristics of being practical and relevant. They are given focus by a concern to make a difference and contribute to the communities that we serve. A key part of our planning is the need to identify those issues to which we want to make a contribution, within both the geographic and industry communities we serve.

Our education and training programs, both award and non-award, prepare people for careers through professional and vocational education, and support enterprises and industries in obtaining the skilled people they need. A focus is on the dysfunction in the labour market, particularly in regional areas, where unemployment rates remain high but enterprises cannot attract sufficient skilled labour.

Our research and development activities emphasise strategic and applied research, using a variety of research traditions and involving interdisciplinary teams where appropriate. The focus is on developing strategic capabilities that mean that RMIT researchers and students can help solve real problems and issues of concern and can contribute to the social and economic development of communities. It also includes the fostering of innovation that leads to new enterprises, products or processes.

It follows that for both of its core activities, RMIT needs to remain actively connected to the communities it serves. It needs to remain open to and involved with these communities, to know their needs and aspirations for futures, and to respond to them. This forms the basis of RMIT's community and regional partnerships approach: that wherever RMIT operates it must be involved with the community, working with the community to address the community-defined needs and aspirations for futures.
RMIT COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS IN REGIONS:

RMIT has resolved to take a strong regional approach to developing its relationships with the community. This reflects a wider understanding that local, regional action is critical to building economic and social development in a global context: to "think global and act local". Local regions are themselves developing in importance relative to states or nations as the key geographic areas in economic development in the context of globalisation. Aspects of this include the development of high technology regions that are connected internationally (for example, Silicon Valley) and the gravitation of resources to some local regions at the expense of others (for example, the impact of irrigation in Australia).

RMIT has established and developing community partnership programs in a number of regions:

- In rural/regional Victoria, major programs have been established in Hamilton and in East Gippsland. Programs have also been initiated in north-east Victoria and in north-west Victoria.
- In Melbourne, major programs include Northern Partnerships in the northern metropolitan region and RMIT in the City in inner Melbourne.
- Internationally, a pilot project has commenced in southern India and a program is being established in association with the development of the Vietnam campus.

The drivers for RMIT undertaking this activity include:

- to ensure that wherever RMIT operates it works from the "outside in"; so that in turn the teaching and learning and the research and development programs of RMIT are driven by the needs and aspirations of the community;
- to foster the development of partnerships; based on the assumption that by working together with others we will achieve more than by working alone; and
- particularly in more remote regions, where participation in tertiary education is low, to find ways of taking learning opportunities to where people live and work.

The University develops regional community partnerships by working together with the local community to determine priorities for action. These priorities are established by answering the following questions:

- What are the needs and aspirations - social, economic, cultural, environmental - current and emerging - of the region? Wherever possible this should be defined by the organisations and people of the region.
- What is the strategic capability of RMIT to respond, through teaching and learning and through research and development, to those articulated local needs and aspirations?
- What teams can be formed of RMIT staff and students and the community to implement solutions?

As we answer these questions at the local regional level, we are also identifying common themes that begin to drive our decisions on where to invest either in courseware or in strategic capability.
REGIONAL PARTNERSHIPS AND TEACHING AND LEARNING:

RMIT's regional partnerships represent a number of innovative collaborations with local (learning) communities and providers and other organisations within those communities to deliver RMIT accredited programs locally in diverse ways. The partnerships are able to combine the resources and expertise of RMIT with local organisations who have in-depth knowledge, understanding and contact with the learning and vocational needs of the local communities and markets. Each learning community is a multi-layered network of organisations and individuals in the local region. The opportunity now exists to develop this further as we link with more regions and connect them to form an international learning community that can successfully operate across geographic boundaries through the establishment of a high quality, flexible, reliable distributed learning system responsive to client needs in defined regional locations.1

This also represents an opportunity to support and implement a new regionality curriculum stream2 that will involve teams formed from across RMIT and the regional communities with whom we work as international communities of practice, facilitating:

- the study of local society including rural and regional society
- an affirmation the worth of community knowledge including rural and regional knowledge
- the application of interdisciplinary applied research and scholarship
- economical, environmental, ecological, demographic, geographical, social, cultural and historical studies as it relates to the regions
- cooperation and exchange with scholars, practitioners and institutions whose work supplies fundamental knowledge and insights into the regions
- special and current interests which include the georegional-historical mechanisms of identity and difference and its deconstruction in the broader context of the new spatial economy3
- development of the students as informed global citizens through a particular interest in the affairs of their own regions, regional scholarship informed by national development, international context and comparative studies, recognition of the cultural diversity and difference that exists within every region, and drawing on the insight of many academic disciplines
- increased understanding by the University of regional life through research on, teaching about and partnership with those regions with whom we work.

1 This concept builds, in particular, on RMIT Regional Learning Networks which has developed initially as a partnership with community education providers in northern and western metropolitan Melbourne, and on the Hamilton Region Learning Community which has grown out of the involvement of RMIT and local community groups through the RMIT International Community Exchange (RICE) program.


3 “Regionality” as opposed to “regional” defines not only a location but also a way of being in a “location” – and this sets up the possibility of interrogating the local/global nexus.
REGIONAL PARTNERSHIPS AND RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT:

As RMIT responds to regional communities, research and development has become a major focus. This has developed differently in each region in response to different local needs and aspirations, different priorities, different people and organisations, different economies, and different physical and human geographies.

- In East Gippsland, the community defined research and development on how to achieve ecological sustainability as being critical for the future of the region. This led to the establishment of the RMIT East Gippsland Environmental Research scholarship program and then to our joint proposal with East Gippsland Institute of TAFE to establish a Research and Education Centre at Lakes Entrance. The Centre will have a particular focus on environmental issues impacting on the Gippsland Lakes and the broader region, the fishing and maritime industries and eco-tourism.

- In northern metropolitan Melbourne, the emphasis has been on developing relationships and networks between RMIT, community organisations, local government, industry, schools and others to create opportunities for RMIT students and staff to undertake research projects in local regional settings. For example, this has led to research projects with Parks Victoria, Bundoora Primary School, the Australian Multicultural Foundation, Whittlesea City Council, Ford, etc.

- In Hamilton, our partnership with Western District Health Service has led to collaborative research in health and community services, and the community has defined environmental research as a major priority with issues including water systems, land degradation and salinity, Landcare and waste treatment.

However many of the issues encountered are common across regions. This is particularly true for rural regions where many of the challenges are shared by communities across Australia and internationally. These issues include globalisation of the economy, the slump in commodity prices making traditional farming enterprises uneconomical, aspirations to restructure and diversify the local economy based on different land use such as horticulture or building new sectors such as tourism, an aging workforce particularly of farmers, significant unemployment, identified skill gaps for the current economy but also to attract new enterprises to the region, mismatch (or absence) of local education and training relative to the local economy, low participation rates in tertiary education, a desire for life-long education and training, including professional development opportunities for the whole community, loss of young people from the region and dislocation of those remaining, community health including ability to attract and retain health professionals, variable telecommunications infrastructure and access, environmental degradation of water systems and of the land and the need for sustainable management, a wish for increased cultural diversity, and a desire to sustain educational links with indigenous people's heritage.

The identification of common themes is beginning to drive, in part, our decisions on where to invest in strategic capability. In particular, it is the driver for the establishment of the RMIT Centre for Regional and Rural Development to "build on RMIT's expertise and experience in working with regional and rural communities to create solutions which are sustainable locally and transferable internationally". The Centre is commencing in Hamilton, including the appointment of the Director and Innovation Leader, but will be strongly linked to RMIT's partnership programs across Victoria and beyond. It will develop as a distributed program across locations where RMIT is active and, over time, will have nodes in a number of locations.

RMIT is also addressing the common theme of innovation - the advocacy of regional communities that there is a need to ensure that technology development and transfer are actively applied to productivity improvement and enterprise creation, and hence to economic and social development in the regions. Beginning in Hamilton, RMIT is developing a distributed program to influence and add value to community culture to embrace innovation, local skills and mindsets of the people who will provide innovation leadership, the capacity locally to recognise opportunities for innovation, capacity to design new products, processes and services, and investment regimes to foster take-up and experimentation.
In its community and regional partnerships program, RMIT makes no distinction between regions on the basis of whether they are in Australia or in another country. The approach is to develop sustainable relationships with communities, based on the concept of partnership of mutual value, which meets the needs and aspirations of the regional community wherever it is, and is within the capability of RMIT to respond. A critical factor is the desire of the community to have RMIT as a constituent part.

In particular, in any region where RMIT works it wishes, indeed needs, to be involved with the community of that region. This has been the basis of RMIT in the City for our City campus and of Northern Partnerships for our Bundoora and Brunswick campuses, and why a community partnerships strategy is being developed as an integral part of RMIT’s involvement in Vietnam.

The Vietnam approach includes an emphasis on developing community and research and development programs that match the needs and aspirations of the local community as well as the capacity of RMIT Vietnam. Work has commenced on the development of relationships with organisations and networks on which sustainable programs can be based, and the identification of immediate opportunities for research and community partnerships/ development projects with local people and groups. Two major foci, responding to community concern, will be the environment as an area of research collaboration to be developed with local partners, and social science based action research to address the needs of local communities.

In India, the relationships have been initiated through building links to RMIT alumni and understanding that when we interact with alumni, we also be interacting with the associated communities and professional networks. This is now being extended beyond the alumni networks to include partnerships with Indian universities and other institutions.

An important aspect is to consider synergies between regions and/or how relationships between regions can add value, for example through sharing learning projects or transferring research solutions or building larger research teams. This will be an important factor as we continue to develop the Vietnam and India community partnerships, link them to one another, and link them to Australian regions particularly Hamilton and East Gippsland.

Human activities, while anchored in specific regions and locales, are linked to other places and levels via complex political, economic, social and cultural networks of communication and action. The local, international and global are all implicated in this complex system which is termed “globalisation” – and situate within this complex system are the multi-layered interactions of different and diverse ways of thinking and doing. These interactions involve the quality of our thoughts and how we respond to and help shape the communities in which we operate.
The community and regional partnerships program has offered a vehicle for addressing inequity of access and participation in RMIT:

- The Act establishing RMIT as a University in 1992 calls for RMIT to work for the development and provision of educational, professional, technical and vocational services to the community and in particular, the fostering of participation as a university of technology of persons living or working in the northern metropolitan region of Melbourne. RMIT addresses this through its Northern Partnerships program including through provision at its northern campuses of disciplines, courses, and research which respond to the needs and aspirations of the communities of the northern metropolitan region of Melbourne.

- A range of programs have been developed by NIECAP working with schools in northern metropolitan Melbourne aimed at increasing participation rates through schooling and on to tertiary education. Recently the Whittlesea Youth Commitment has been developed as a collaborative approach to development of an early intervention strategy to enhance opportunities for youth. Subsequently RMIT is providing strong support for the establishment of Local Learning and Employment Networks.

- RMIT Learning Partnerships (LearnLinks) is an innovative collaboration with seven adult and community education providers to deliver a range of RMIT accredited courses in local access points to socially marginalized and disadvantaged learners. It also plays an important role in building the capacity of the community providers by developing a professional development network. This enables teachers and learners in the network to link to the online systems at RMIT. LearnLinks is also strongly supported by the Northern Metropolitan Regional Council of Adult, Community and Further Education (ACFE).

- A key driver for our involvement in rural regions is to increase access to our education and training programs. About 30% of Australians live in rural and isolated areas, yet less than 20% of Australia's higher education enrolments are people from rural and isolated areas - for RMIT the figure is about 10%. Our efforts are already bearing fruit: in Hamilton the Nursing program has attracted students who without the program being offered locally would be unable to access higher education; the ELCS research by project program has attracted large enrolments from rural centres as it allows participants to undertake their research locally from their workplace.

- In Melbourne’s Central Business District and environs RMIT is working with a range of organisations on the Melbourne Youth Learning Opportunities (MYLO) project to develop and implement a strategy for access to learning by marginalised young people. The project seeks to reach both transient and resident populations of young people, particularly those not currently engaged in employment or education. It aims to present learning opportunities that are not limited to the current physical facilities of the university including technology-facilitated access.

- The whereveruni project, in partnership with the Salvation Army in the City and the Maremont Recovery Centre at Korumburra, seeks to demonstrate that effective learning experiences can be made available to socially disadvantaged and excluded individuals such as recovering alcoholics and drug addicts.
"Think global and act local" means for RMIT, in the confines of its particular mission (preparing people for professional practice; meeting the needs of enterprises and industries to support their development), offering a range of services and programs that address the needs and aspirations of particular communities. Therefore the starting point is always: what are their needs and aspirations (individuals, community groups, enterprises, industries)? At the same time the pressure continues to deliver services and programs in a cost-effective manner. Together these two apparently contradictory pressures (tailoring to meet needs and drives to economies of scale) imply the need to follow moves in other sectors to "mass customisation". What this means in our sector is that, especially in the education and training activity, we modularise, allowing different programs to be designed to meet needs as they arise. Each "module" needs to be at the highest quality, encompass multiple delivery modes, and to be updated regularly. By extracting the greatest use from common material, effort can be put into contextualising and tailoring for specific settings. In other words we should concentrate on adding value for each enterprise, industry or individual by focusing on the differences that matter and seeking economies of scale around the commonalities. This means that the critical issue is one of design and understanding what we are good at and what we should leave to or acquire from others. In this, one of the things we will need to stay good at is the analysis of community needs and aspirations and building partnership responses against them.

We need also to learn how to follow the trend of new international higher education providers who are working at a distance using learning centres to provide quality access to education and training programs with lower capital investment and without the high overheads associated with traditional campuses. The development of the RMIT Flexible Learning Centre at Hamilton offers an opportunity for us to learn how to do this with minimal risk.

Capital investment and overheads can also be reduced by taking advantage of (or at least not duplicating) existing infrastructure, physical and human, within regional communities. Often the existing physical infrastructure in regional centres is under-utilised. Similarly, communities include people with high skills who can be used to support our programs from the locality rather than taking Melbourne people to the locality. A number of examples have emerged through our regional partnerships of how to do this effectively. Generally this involves identification of an effective key partner (with low overheads) locally. For example, in East Gippsland this is achieved through our strong partnership with East Gippsland Institute of TAFE; in Hamilton our Nursing degree is supported by Western District Health Service, and in Mt Gambier the local TAFE Institute has developed partnerships with a range of universities, including RMIT, to provide a range of degree programs locally at low cost. The costs are much lower when we use existing facilities and people, avoiding capital investment and minimising additional direct and indirect costs imposed by travel and duplication of service. And commonly the outcomes are enhanced.

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