

Innovation in rural Queensland: Why some towns thrive while others languish

All people have mobility choices, to move towards a community that is attractive; to stay in a community that is attractive relative to the cost of moving elsewhere; or to move away from a community that is unattractive. The critical question is: Who moves; who doesn't; and why? Surprisingly, patterns of mobility are not random. Those who move tend to be younger, to have higher levels of education, and to have traveled overseas more frequently and for longer duration.

Research examining the antecedents of innovation in eight Queensland towns found that what made a difference was not necessarily size, prevailing industry, or scenic attractiveness; instead it is mobility of people. Those towns with net inflows tend to have a vitality and energy that other towns lack. Conversely, those with net outflows tend to lose their innovative talent, leaving behind an increasingly conservative monoculture.

It is axiomatic that no community has a 'right' to survive. Almost no Australian town existed 200 years ago. Each town sprang up to address an emerging social or economic need. Towns on railway lines often grew out of the camps of fettler gangs. In wheat growing areas, storage or transport nodes, often determined by the technology of the day, determined town location. For most towns, their original purpose has now altered. Unless a community is able to reinvent itself in a contemporary world, it will join the ranks of ghost towns that already litter rural Australia.

The research distributed 300 surveys to randomly selected residents in each town. People were asked to indicate whether others would regard them as (a) a community leader, (b) somebody with knowledge and expertise that could be called upon if required, or (c) a support person. Surprisingly, the least innovative towns reported the highest number of leaders and support people; the most innovative town reported almost no leaders but had the highest proportion in the second group. Interview evidence seems to suggest that 'leaders', particularly incumbent leaders, are conservative stalwarts whose grip on power chases away the very creative talent that the town says it needs to attract and retain.

Leadership is a two-edged sword. It is an act of civic responsibility. It is also an act of denying someone the opportunity to gain civic experience. The more that leadership responsibility can be experienced and shared, the more innovative is the town.

So where might philanthropic bodies best invest to foster the social capital of rural Australia? The recommendations arising from the research provide some suggestions.

First, mobility should be supported. Mobility alone results in the most able people going to those communities that are more likely to be receptive to the inflow of talent. It also serves to help more capable people move out of environments that are barren.

Second, newcomers should be supported. Newcomers need to establish a sense of place, purpose and social acceptance. It is newcomers who are most willing to invest in the

social and economic fabric of a community. If, on arrival, the more they are made to feel welcome, the more willing they are to invest.

Third, young people should be supported. Young people need to invest in relationships and in career. Unlike their parents, their array of options is vast and they are increasingly citizens of a global village. So communities need to consider how accommodating or otherwise they are of young people, their interests and their careers.

Fourth, invest in diversity. Innovation and creativity are commonly the fortuitous byproduct of the blending of diverse ideas and experience. Diversity has a prerequisite – tolerance. Communities that are intolerant of diversity are destined to die.

Fifth, invest in capacity building. Communities that are dying have incumbent leaders and passive supporters. Communities that are thriving have a constantly evolving dynamic of creative coalitions made of people who roll their sleeves up without being asked and who seek no credit for doing so. Any support given to the willing will provide a handsome return.

Finally, invest in celebration. Communities that celebrate are offering their citizens a sense of unity and identity, characteristics that are essential to underpin the previous five investments.

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