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Differentiate or Perish : the Future for Regional Visual and Performing Arts Schools

Abstract

This paper will examine ways smaller, regional visual and performing arts schools might prosper outside and inside the university this decade. It will survey the past, particularly the late eighties and early nineties, taking lessons from that time that can help the regionals in tackling the new realities of this decade. Some of the big questions about sustainability will be addressed. How will these potentially vulnerable schools adapt to change, remain independent, become flexible and yet not lose depth of teaching in their programs? What measures can be taken to accumulate additional resources in an increasingly deregulated environment, and who will be our real competition in the next few years? The paper will also discuss our role in the regional and rural community, the development of working partnerships, alliances and co-operative arrangements with local government, the VET sector, local business and other arts providers.

The term regional in the context of this paper refers to that special group of visual and performing arts schools situated outside capital cities and major metropolitan centres who, historically, have served a large part of rural Australia.

Biography

Professor Vincent McGrath is Head of School, School of Visual and Performing Arts, Academy of the Arts, University of Tasmania. He heads up the teaching of ceramics at the University, maintains an active studio practice, writes for ceramics journals, coordinates exhibitions and has a deep interest in international cultural exchange. In recent years Vincent McGrath has been heavily involved in the realisation of the Academy of the Arts project. This dual-sector education facility is situated next to the city of Launceston's Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery and other public cultural and sporting amenities on the Inveresk cultural precinct.

Differentiate or Perish : the Future for Regional Visual and Performing Arts Schools

When John Dawkins released his July 1988 White Paper (Higher Education, a policy statement) it produced a massive upheaval in Australian post-secondary education. To the Labor government this was as much a blueprint for social change as an exercise in attempting prudent management of the higher education dollar. While the White Paper sketched out the political education agenda of the decade it was, however, the swiftness of change promulgated through regulatory and deregulatory mechanisms that left a wake of confusion, mistrust and poor morale in the system for years. The White Paper argued that reform was urgently required because 'education is a principal means for individuals to achieve independence, economic advancement and personal growth. But in the past, the benefits of higher education have been enjoyed disproportionately by the more privileged members of our community'¹. Enlarging the higher education system was devised to better serve the 'national interests' and one of the means to achieve this was through a unified national system, a coming together of universities and colleges of advanced education. As a result most CAE higher education visual and performing arts entities entered a period of turbulence where futures were uncertain and identities had to be recast in accordance with dominant university traditions. Unfortunately this meant setting aside some valuable CAE traditions in an effort to make a place in the new university environment.

The college of advanced education cluster was positioned in the space between technical /TAFE colleges and universities. Its role was to provide training and education for the professional sector of the workforce. The dual role ensured that the CAEs would eventually travel outside their home territory and push into the sacred spaces of their neighbours – TAFE and universities. Once established the CAEs moved rapidly to capture the high ground in new professional teaching areas of business and commerce, computing, nursing and some areas of the primary industries including aquaculture and viticulture. Several CAEs were re-badged as institutes of technology in the eighties to better describe their 'applied' missions and their ability to establish cooperative research centres. It could be argued that the rapid success of the CAEs also helped bring on the Dawkins' reform agenda.

The nineteen-seventies and eighties were also important times in the development of professional visual and performing arts education in regional Australia. The CAE embrace of its communities drew young people to arts education who, in previous times, would have needed to leave the home region for a tilt at a metropolitan school. Another group positively touched by the CAE system was the person bound to the region - the individual tied to a job, a family or financial responsibility, or other social circumstances.

Regional visual and performing arts schools quickly shed any history or culture they may have shared with technical schools in a former life. These new schools developed programs in response to the needs of the professional practitioner, teaching focussed on the atelier model and the new government money invested in CAEs meant that facilities and equipment were better than the technical schools. Importantly, most of the regional visual and performing arts schools grew up in CAEs as discrete entities able to create their own tribal characteristics. The down side was that these schools spread their resources too thinly in an effort to be comprehensive. Offerings were uneven in quality because it was usual to have only one or at best, two staff members in a discipline. Therefore the reputation of the discipline was very much driven by the calibre of the individual staff member.

These new regional visual and performing arts entities aspired to the tradition and reputation of the larger, more robust and much older metropolitan schools. Awards, teaching methods and course outcomes were designed, evaluated and reviewed against the big capital city schools. This approach was based on the assumption that students of the day all wanted the same type of program and if they could get it at a regional institution then they might stay for three or four years. All this was set against the Commonwealth higher education agenda of providing courses of equal standard and similar content no matter whether students lived in the major cities or regional and rural Australia. The mechanism to ensure that outcomes were evaluated and that uniformity occurred was through the external accreditation process, a rolling four-year visit by a team of colleagues, usually chosen from the bigger, more established institutions. Of course it was impossible for the smaller, newer, regional schools to replicate the programs and provide the same service delivery outcomes of their metropolitan counterparts. The capital city institutions possessed far superior infrastructure support, access to extensive culture-related amenities and had well-developed professional arts scenes in their localities. On reflection this was a natural desire on the part of staff in the new regional schools of visual and performing arts because many staff had been educated in the metropolitan colleges, or had come from Britain where a corresponding attitude to training practitioners was in place.

When I talk with graduates of regional visual and performing arts schools from the eighties it is the names of outstanding teachers that dominate discussion about their higher education experiences rather than the course or the service the institution provided. Although teaching practices and student contact time have changed significantly in the last twenty years, I believe the teacher-centred approach to learning will remain crucial to the success of the regional schools in the next decade. However this teaching model will face immense pressure as the deregulation process bites and temps all of us to contemplate a mixture of traditional and new modes of service delivery, the rising cost of face-to-face teaching and the preparedness of our students to pay in a market full of competitors.

The formation of new generation universities in the nineties has been a mixed blessing to many of us who previously worked in regional CAEs. The promises of better funding, improved conditions of work and access to research funding have come at a price. The collapse of the binary divide in favour of the Unified National System brought amalgamations and the streamlining of Commonwealth funding arrangements via the Relative Funding Model. Throughout the nineties universities also had to act as the taxman for the Commonwealth government by collecting the precursor to HECS, the Higher Education Administrative Charge and they had to accommodate the debilitating 3% and then 7% Vanstone cuts. In these lean years regional visual and performing arts schools were large targets for downsizing or excision. On the one hand 'massification' of education was trumpeted by federal governments as a desirable social principle, yet on the other hand there was a perception in Canberra that there was extensive wastage and poor use of resources in the sector. This heralded private enterprise styles of management. Funding was conditional on agreed staff profiles and performance outputs. This meant creating efficiencies in every corner of the system. Government provision of salary supplementation disappeared, 'core' business became a buzz word,

institutional achievements were assessed in numerical terms, enterprise bargaining was a tool used for wider rationalisation and concepts of quality rated poorly in the re-alignment processes.

For our arts areas high-cost laboratory-style classes in music, theatre and art with relatively small student numbers became casualties of the system. This happened in the metropolitan and regional universities, however the smaller campuses had far less capacity to adjust to wholesale changes in program audits and funding shortfalls. Shaving and cutting meant the demise of some subjects and eventually the loss of much that could have continued to make some regional schools of visual and performing arts distinctive. Our students, disciplines and our careers were subjected to the ascendant ideology of economic rationalism.

The latest planned reforms to higher education articulated through *Our Universities: Backing Australia's Future* create immense challenges for regional schools of visual and performing arts. In my mind the first challenge is to accept the fact that we, as teachers and practitioners of the arts, are as much involved in the business of education as we are in the profession of education. For older staff members with long memories this marks quite a departure in the way we now need to apportion time in our work at university. The words 'business' and 'profession' when linked to education can be read as being inclusive and exclusive. The inclusive part is to do with some of our professional outputs and how these are able to accumulate competitive funding through the research quantum and our teaching reputations with international students and fee-paying Australian students. The more speculative, exclusive factor will involve our capacity to garner support from outside agencies and business. There are special difficulties here for the regional visual and performing arts schools and yet if planned and actioned with our communities situated at the 'centre', I maintain that it is possible to diversify income, spread risk and lessen dependency on DEST. The concept of the 'business' and 'profession' of education should not be viewed as selling our souls but rather capitalising on financial opportunities that will put new resources into our schools.

We know that former governments always espoused support for diversity in the university sector, but in actuality their regulatory mechanisms of accountability (external accreditation panels, corporate-style benchmarking systems, negotiated profiles and funded load places) encouraged uniformity and sameness. The opportunity for distinctiveness was mostly masked by universality. The word 'diverse' was used extensively by John Dawkins and then by almost all the succeeding ministers for education. In 2003 the term 'diverse' has also entered Minister Nelson's rhetoric on higher education policy. The intention of the new policy is 'to create a more diverse, equitable and high quality sector'². If Nelson's word is taken to mean promoting genuine difference and distinctiveness then we do not need a re-run of the often punitive and restraining policy instruments that fostered sameness.

I think another fact that we must eventually come to acknowledge is that all of us will be considered as being individual employees of our institutions. It could be argued that we were individual employees in the past but in this latter-day context there is going to be close scrutiny on exactly what each of us can contribute to the enterprise against what can be afforded. Therefore quality staff will be rewarded with better salaries, sometimes well in excess of what the going rates are today. While this is not necessarily destructive it will, however, make it even more difficult than before for regional visual and performing arts schools to attract and then retain high quality teaching and research staff. The ability to pay will be contingent on generating a large part of the salary commitment from non-government sources, including the students themselves.

A lesson that today's regional visual and performing arts schools must take into the next decade is that strength, respect, reputation and viability is as much earned from the external community it serves as it is from our masters within the university. My instinctive response is to protect the integrity of the visual and performing arts disciplines within the university by ensuring that we refrain from putting up a grab bag of electives as popular 'come-ons' for students in other faculties of the university to maintain viability and protect a small pool of serious students. In this instance viability and success are mutually exclusive.

The external community, including other government and private education providers, will be a powerful ally and partner in the future success of the regional schools of visual and performing arts. In a recent book chapter on regional universities Mal Nairn, former Vice Chancellor of the Northern Territory University,

said 'a regional university has a broad impact on its own locality and is often seen by people of the region as belonging to them, of being 'their' university'³. The emotional, political and lifestyle connection between regional schools of visual and performing arts and their local communities demands a substantial investment of energy, patience and commonsense so that a two-way, balanced engagement occurs. The new era will be remarkable in that it promises great scope for innovative partnerships between a range of providers. Through partnering we can bring the special regional cultural and social attributes together with our own natural professional abilities in shaping teaching and learning experiences that are distinctive and marketable.

Optimising regional attributes also means building social capital in a close partnership with and between commercial and cultural entities. This means local government, small business, the media, service clubs, regional museums and galleries, local pro-am theatre companies, influential individuals such as the State and federal politicians, city managers and mayors and local entrepreneurs. In a former time the regional CAE excelled in bringing its community into the campus, however the next period of our evolution will be just as much about taking our regional university into the domains of others where engagement takes place in different settings. This will involve local instrumentalities, however opportunities also exist for alliances with other entities completely outside our regions where like-minded attitudes exist and where new markets can be tapped. For example, my school is working closely with a leading Sydney-based personnel company in establishing a centre for performance in business. This will use the special skills of theatre staff, exploit the ambience of the Academy and the natural attributes of Tasmania in the presentation of coaching programs for national and international executives. The spin-off from these consultancies will be considerable. What I am saying here is that in this decade none of us can afford to be islands of enterprise set apart from the broader dynamic of our region and the professions generally.

The new Academy of the Arts in Launceston serves a city population of 90,000 with an estimated outlying rural community of a further 90,000 people. This is not a large demographic by any standard and yet the Academy has over 500 EFTSU in a partnership between the University of Tasmania and the Technical and Further Education institute. The portent of university and TAFE alliances was clearly articulated way back in the 1988 White Paper when Minister Dawkins explained that it was appropriate to 'recognise and expand the legitimate role of TAFE in providing higher education courses on its own account, and that selected TAFE facilities could be used in assisting students take courses offered by higher education institutions'⁴. Prior to the Dawkins' reforms TAFE was rarely mentioned in the national context and even in regional centres where technical and further education colleges existed they were hardly visible in community and professional life. In coping with the White Paper reforms new universities have been so pre-occupied with creating stability while going forward to notice that the whole vocational education and training (VET) sector has risen up to fill the gap left by the CAEs.

In 2003 TAFE institutes and private provider operators in the VET system have become formidable opposition and will seriously challenge the newer universities for student business⁵. They now offer convenient, inexpensive options to students in the same way as junior colleges in the USA. It makes good financial sense for a student from a lower socioeconomic background to go to TAFE first and then gain credit transfer into the degree stream at university. Tuition fees remain almost non-existent compared to HECS and even up-front degree fees are modest compared to universities. Therefore, in regional Australia, this new reality will loom as a major threat to the viability of university visual and performing arts schools unless sector ambitions are coordinated.

Twelve years ago at the University of Tasmania in Launceston we decided that the best way to advance the visual arts was to form a partnership with TAFE in providing a full range of programs on the same site sharing all facilities. Like a new marriage the imperative was to leave behind the old house and take up residence in a brand-new, dual-sector campus. Vertical integration of courses and cross-teaching was deemed to work against the potential of the partnership given each sector's work agreements and productivity arrangements. We did, however, agree to a horizontal arrangement where there was recognition of awards, modules and units taught by each sector and that the principle of cooperation would provide an uncompromising up, down and across articulation path for students of the University and TAFE. In the Academy's case both sectors agreed on complementarity rather than duplication and ownership of existing territorial areas of involvement in the belief that this was the only way to secure a long-term,

successful cross-sectoral future. Already our coherent, straightforward strategic partnership has yielded solid outcomes for each sector and especially the wider regional community. For example, our strategy of staircasing awards from non-award tasters (Adult Education), certificates through to PhD under the one roof optimises resources and conveys a unified arts face to the community. Furthermore, our growing association with the Australian School of Fine Furniture, a nearby private VET provider, and collaborative mentorship projects and research arrangements with our immediate neighbour the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery were nothing more than pipe-dreams five years ago.

The Academy of the Arts is a downtown University focus for the visual and performing arts in Launceston. The arts and city synergies have already brought us unexpected support from the community – trusts, small and large businesses, and individuals who previously had little or no interest in the University have now become our ‘investment’ partners by putting their product and reputations alongside our credibility. For us this has been an unequivocal expression of how the arts are good for business.

This paper has attempted to draw lessons from the past, identify threats that face the regional visual and performing arts schools in the university sector and put the spotlight on some of the lifelong learning opportunities that will drive regional schools into a period of durability and prosperity. By seizing these opportunities small schools can grow uniformly rather than unevenly as they did in the eighties, and they will create a significant point of difference that will catapult their reputations for courses, teaching and arts experiences well beyond the local communities they serve. The key to future prosperity is to leverage off existing strengths in teaching and integrate these with our regional attributes through product extension in traditional and non-traditional ways. In a sense we need to be modern day ‘boundary riders’ working all sides – the university, our professions, community and business, possessing the skill to interpret each environment to the other⁶.

¹ Dawkins J.S and others, *Higher Education, A Policy Statement*, Australian Government Publishing Service, July 1988, p6

² Conversation with Laurie Oakes on the Sunday program, Channel 9/WIN Television, Tasmania, March 2002

³ Nairn, M. *The Role of Regional Universities in Australia, Australia’s Future Universities*, University of New England Press, 1997, p200

⁴ Dawkins, J.S. *Higher Education, A Policy Statement*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1988, p64

⁵ Elsen-Green, J. *Campus Review*, ‘VET could benefit’, May 21, 2003, p4

⁶ Pearman, G. *Review of Professional and Continuing Education*, University of Tasmania, 2003, p8