

**PATHWAYS
THROUGH
PARTNERSHIPS**

**THE GWYDIR LEARNING REGION
INITIATIVE**



DRAFT 2
1 October 2008

“John Abbott, author of a new book “Over-schooled and Under-educated” argues that teenagers should be challenged, coaxed into apprenticeships, and lured out of the classroom.”

The Spectator, September 20, 2008

In some circles this view may not be politically correct. But Abbott wants the schools of the future to include the community.

The Gwydir community obviously believes in this dictum, and, to date, has been achieving some surprising outcomes.

1. Preamble

A small shire in North West NSW has created a Learning Region (GLR) built around its two towns, Warialda and Bingara. The partners are the Gwydir Shire Council, Warialda and Bingara High Schools, ACE, TAFE, University of New England and employers from the public and private sectors. The partnership has evolved over the last five years. Whilst all can take credit for its progress, the leadership provided by Gwydir Shire Council is one of its more unique aspects.

This partnership has created an environment where nearly all students in Years 11 and 12 are “case managed”, a recognition that each student has a different aptitude and interest. Case Management means personalised learning including pastoral care. The program is being extended to Years 9 and 10. Mature aged community members are also included in the learning experience.

It works because the community wants it to. A number of passionate individuals make it happen, every day. The initiative has won several awards.

GLR has accomplished all this from a standing start in 2002.

It’s worth replicating.

2. Political Framework

(i) Australian Federal Government

(a) DEEWR (www.deewr.gov.au)

In its Application Guide for Trade Training Centres, DEEWR, on page 24, states that it would take into account “whether the proposal meets the Program’s priorities”. These include:

- Establishing regional skills hubs whereby secondary schools in rural and regional locations develop partnerships for improved trade training delivery;

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- Establishing joint facilities in urban areas that can be utilised by secondary schools in reasonable proximity to each other from government and non-government school sectors;
 - Involving local industry and taking into account local employment opportunities and regional skills needs; and
 - Building on and complementing other Commonwealth and State or Territory programs which are aimed at improving training pathways and transitions from school to work and increasing Year 12 or equivalent achievement.”

The GLR is already doing all of the above and is ready to evolve to the next stage of leadership.

(b) Career Advice Australia (www.careeradvice.gov.au)

An Australian Government Initiative that assists Local Community Partnerships established to support Australians aged 13-19 gain skills, experience, and professional advice for their careers.

(c) The National Centre for Vocation Education & Research (NCVER)

In a 2008 publication “Career Development and VET” NCVER had the following to say in respect of career development for school age students:

- *“Over the last ten years, the changing landscape of society, work and education has led to a significant transformation in career development services.”*
- *“‘Career Development’ is the term that captures the idea that people are likely to make several career choices during their working lives.”*
- *“Factors inhibiting promotion of VET also exist: a conservative university trained teacher background; unclear or inadequate funding arrangements for VET in Schools; inflexible school curricula and timetable structures; and the distance between schools and VET providers. What is required is dedicated career staff familiar with the VET system”*

In The Australian, 21 August 2008, The University of Western Sydney Education Professor, Margaret Vickers from NCVER, says

- *“that high schools must offer flexible timetables allowing students to study part time and allowing them more than two years to finish their Year 12 studies, thus helping students juggling work and study.*
- *In NSW, Bankstown Senior College started a trial this year of a four day week, Monday to Thursday with extended school hours from 8.30 am to 4.30 pm.*
- *that South Australia allowed senior students three to four years to complete Years 11 and 12.”*

(ii) *NSW State Government*

The Director General of Education, Michael Coutts-Trotter, and the Assistant DG TAFE, Marie Persson, believe the Gwydir Learning Region Partnership is “the exemplar” in NSW.

(iii) *Local Government*

The Gwydir Shire is a leading example of a Local Government entity providing leadership to its community in the field of skill development and learning. It believes (correctly) that both contribute to the sustainability of the Shire. The underlying philosophy is contained in its Social Plan 2007-2111, developed in response to the Local Government (General) Amendment (Community & Social Plans) Regulation 1998. This Regulation requires all councils in NSW to develop a Social & Community Plan every five years.

3. Gwydir Shire

According to the Bureau of Statistics in 2006, the Shire had a population of some 5,311 people. The average weekly household income was \$612, compared with an Australian average of \$1171. Only 10% of the population has a degree or advanced diploma (State average 20%) in 2001. There are two significant towns, Warialda and Bingara. In 2006 each had some 1800 and 1400 residents respectively.

In respect of learning, the Shire “walks the talk”. It is a Registered Training Provider. 93% of employees have a National Qualification at Level III (Cert III), up from 23% four years ago. The Council has now signed up its 100th Trainee and/or Apprentice. Its financial contribution to the Gwydir Learning Initiative in the 2005-2008 period is \$1.3m. This is a substantial commitment from a Shire with a relatively small number of ratepayers, but a relatively large area to service. The funding includes capital outlays, training costs (the Council has a full time Training Executive), and operational expenditure.

In addition, the Shire has a wide array of programs for children under 12 (some 17% of the population), women, older people, people with disabilities and the indigenous population.

See the Gwydir Social Plan at
<http://gwydir.local-e.nsw.gov.au/files/3262/File/GwydirShireCouncilSocialPlanfinal.pdf>

4. The Gwydir Learning Region (GLR) Partnership

This is a classic example of the robustness of partnership endeavours, where several individuals take the lead, but their passion, energy, and direction is supported by the community and the institutions they work for.

In simple terms, the GLR partnership is a working example of the “Trade School” concept generally being promoted by both sides of government, now being developed and funded by the Federal Government. The initiative works

because of the enthusiastic support of the various partners, the leadership and funding provided by the Council and NSW Government, the “federation” of facilities available for skill development in both towns, and the program’s availability to both school students and mature age people.

The diagram over the page (GLR) illustrates what it looks like. The subsequent pie diagrams in Section 5 highlight that most of the potential career paths are available, whether leading to a job, further vocational education, or university.

The initiative is governed by a committee of Council. It is chaired by the Mayor, and its members include the Council General Manager, the two school principals, and senior representatives of the various stakeholders such as TAFE, ACE, and employers.

Its principle characteristics could be summarised as follows:

- Coalition of stakeholders
- Enthusiastic support by the two school principals and in the main their teachers
- Students at the centre (ie case managed)
- Individual career pathways in a variety of industries
- Commitment/involvement/leadership/funding by Gwydir Council
- Involves mature age students
- Relies on a small number of passionate people
- Funding the way forward should have greater certainty to allow the program to develop further
- Promoted as exemplar, but because it’s “different”, systemic support is difficult to obtain, as explained earlier in the NCVET report.
- University of New England could play a greater role

Some of these are positive, some negative. For example:

- It is not clear why there is virtually no funding to schools that offer TVET. This apparently leads to a reduction in resources including teachers.
- The rules governing free travel eligibility are inconsistent as between TAFE and schools.

That said, the Shire is keen to progress the initiative. In recent correspondence it discussed the opportunity for Cert III and IV in Outdoor Recreation (to help promote the growing tourism market) and Cert III in Early Learning (to commence in 2009, and to address the shortage of trained Child Care workers in the area). It would like to see an MOU with TAFE to strengthen programs such as the Heavy Vehicle Driver Training School, the Bingara Living Classroom, the Visual Literacy Project, and the North West Film Festival.

THE GWYDIR LEARNING REGION (GLR)



5. The Employers/The Industries/Careers in the Making

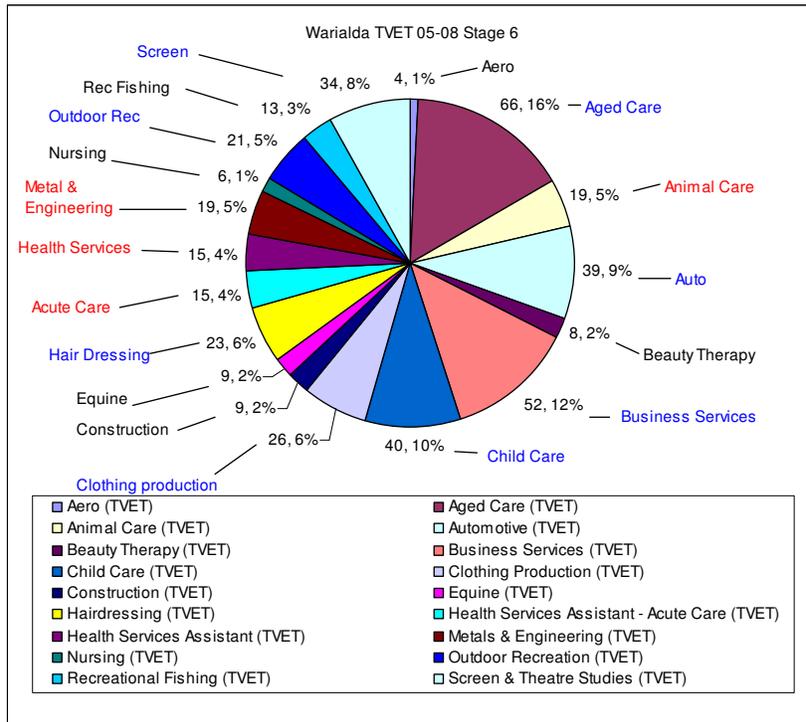
Here's a snapshot of what they did for work experience in 2008:

- Number of participating employer organisations over 100

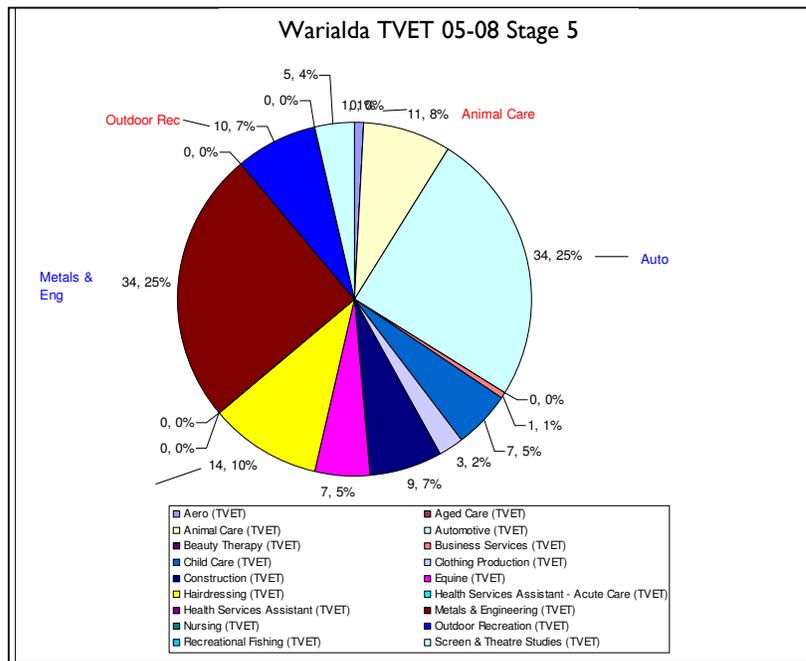
- A cross section
 - Tamworth Mitsubishi Automotive
 - Quality Hotel Powerhouse Cookery
 - Bingara Veterinary Clinic Office Admin
 - Jurd Steel Engineering
 - Ausstar Homes Building
 - Michael Anderson Land & Animal Systems
 - Gwydir Shire Council IT
 - Annie Brown Family Day Care Early Childhood Studies
 - Stahmann Farms Enterprise Horticulture
 - WOW Fitness Recreation Studies
 - Scolarest – Tamworth Airport Hospitality/Cookery
 - Fays of Bingara Retail

- Number of Year 11 and 12 placements from Bingara and Warialda Over 100

The pie chart below shows the full extent of the industries accessed by some 420 Year 11 and 12 students at Warialda High School (Stage 6) and mature aged student in the period 2005-2008.



The chart for Warialda High School Stage 5 students (Years 9 & 10) is equally impressive with over 200 students participating.



6. Outcomes

Having spoken to a cross section of students, the overwhelming impression is that the personalised learning program has had a significant positive impact on their self esteem, and their confidence. Perhaps even more important is their acknowledgement that “they’ve had a say in their education”, whilst recognising the role played by parents and teachers.

The statistics are impressive. Of the 184 students who emerged from Year 12 between 2002 and 2006, 22% went on to university, 29% to further training, and 37% to a job, a total success rate of 88%. During the same period, 92% of the 38 mature aged students gained employment (68%) or went on to further education (24%).

Every student’s progress is documented. For example, one student did Advanced English History, Extension English, Modern History, Legal Studies, Film/TV and Business Studies. He’s studying Film at Newcastle University. A large proportion of the mature age cohort undertook the Nationally Accredited Aged Care Program, and either obtained employment or went on to further training.

As a further illustration of mature age engagement, some 18% of the population participated in ACE promoted VET (State average only 4%).

And despite having no physical presence in Gwydir Shire, Annual School Contact Hours for TAFE rose from 31,000 in 2001 to 62,000 in 2005. Its module completion rate was 87% in 2004.

There are many nice anecdotal stories, but for example, three female students now in Years 11 and 12 completed Cert III in Aged Care, Cert III in Disability, and Cert II in Hospitality while completing Year 10.

7. Key Messages

According to a 2006 report by John Mitchell and Associates, there are a number of key messages from the Gwydir Learning Region initiative. Here are four of them:

- “4. *From the point of view of individual development, the Gwydir Learning Region provides individuals with opportunities to extend their learning, develop new skills, achieve social and economic goals, and pursue pathways that might not have been available to them previously.*
5. *From the point of view of education, the Gwydir Learning Region represents new levels of cooperation between schools and TAFE and ACE, new ways of relating learning to local businesses and communities and new ways of implementing personalised learning – an approach to learning which involves the provision of targeted attention for each student.*

6. *From the point of view of local government, the Gwydir Learning Region demonstrates the importance and value of Council involvement in new partnerships and Council involvement with the social infrastructure of rural and remote communities, where those communities want to build social capital and create their own positive options for the future.*
7. *From the point of view of economic and regional development, the Gwydir Learning Region represents an innovative approach to aligning skill development with local employment needs, to create a sustainable future in rural NSW.”*

8. Next Steps

- Identify GLR as a Special Pilot Project for Regional Australia that is underwritten by the NSW Department of Education and Gwydir Shire for a period of (4) years. Conditions would apply, such as encouraging GLR to continue experimenting with its personalised approach to individual learning in the broadest possible sense. Participant stakeholders such as TAFE would be permitted to experiment with approaches outside traditional guidelines. The four year joint underwriting would cover sufficient operating resources to fulfill the various obligations inherent in the four year plan. These obligations would be outlined in a Business Plan produced by the Forum Governing Body, on which the funding would be predicated. The plan would contain a draft MOU.
- The funding implicit in such an arrangement would cover the various “non typical” items, such as TAFE programs that don’t reach their numbers, people like Jack Dolby and Martin Bower who provide the case management, funding for additional teaching loads etc. It could be held “in escrow” by Gwydir Shire Council and administered by the governing body.
- Without diluting the GLR endeavour, consider widening the geographic coverage (eg Bundara, Inverell, even Moree) and deepen the educational coverage by co-opting a greater involvement by the New England University.