

Intentional Innovation Communities: strengthening innovation performance in the Northern Inland Region of NSW

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Abstract. In order to overcome the challenges and make best use of the emerging opportunities in regional Australia, it is important that the adaptive potential of the region is identified, tapped and deployed with purpose. The goal of creating a prosperous and sustainable future for regional Australia requires sustained leadership, creativity, and motivation and determination, combined within a concerted effort to identify, develop and implement ideas to support and benefit regional communities. Creating and implementing a strategy and framework to support and stimulate innovation is necessary to achieve that goal. This paper re-introduces the concept of an Intentional Innovation Community and focuses on a current strategic community based development promoting innovation in the Northern Inland Region of NSW Australia.

Keywords: Regional Australia; Leadership; Ideas; Adaptive Potential.

Introduction

Innovation is the process of creating and using new and existing knowledge to develop useful things that work, and generate value in society. Acknowledging that the source of innovation resided across our communities, industry and research institutions (Von Hippel 2005), Intentional Innovation Communities (IICs) look to create “spaces” or “communities” that further the assembling of a critical mass of knowledge and expertise, build on the creative strengths of participants, and identify opportunities within the context of place and region – resulting in the stimulation of localised, innovative action. The IIC model (Evans and Thomas 2010) is based on 3 propositions:

1. The existence of untapped resource, able to produce innovations within largely unorganised cohorts of individuals who have latent skills, aptitude and ability to produce innovations.
2. The expertise making up this resource is, in the main but not exclusively, found outside universities and research institutes.
3. Improving our innovation performance there needs to be less emphasis on it being a private process and more on it being a social process

It is well recognised that innovation is a real force for change that can enable the forging of a sustainable and prosperous future (Venturous Australia 2008; Powering Ideas 2009). However, despite the recognition of the importance of innovation, there has been little support available for the development of systems that can enable innovation. In order to take advantage of opportunities that present in a range of within and across geographical locations and a range of socio-economic contexts, a different approach to encouraging and stimulating innovation is a worthy challenge. The approach proposed by Evans and Thomas(2010) aimed at taking best advantage of our current opportunities to utilise the strength of our communities tacit expertise knowledge and creativity in order to develop and maintain locally contextualised and productive Intentional Innovation Communities. As a core principal of IICs is the recognised need for an operating system where the governance structure and processes need to be determined by the participants themselves. To achieve this goal, the potential for local citizens, entrepreneurs and representatives of institutions to participate within an Intentional Innovation System had to be identified and a clear consensus on what the system would look like, needed to be investigated. This paper reports on the activities of a current project: Regional Innovation: Strategic Development Community Based Innovation in the Northern Inland Region of NSW and the directions that are emerging from that project.

Project overview

On 5th September and following the completion of eight weeks of field work within a project exploring the potential for improving innovation within the Northern Inland Region of NSW, Dr Philip Thomas Principal Research Fellow with BEPP and Professor Ted Alter PENN State University presented a debrief seminar for invited guests from Government and the community at the MLC Centre, in Martin Place, Sydney (Plate 1).

Within the project, nine workshops, seven seminars and six interviews were carried out in towns across the Northern Inland Region of NSW within July, August and the beginning of September 2011. As part of this project, Professor Alter and his PSU colleague Dr Michael Fortunato travelled to UNE to assist in the workshops. This also enabled their direct involvement in a program of research projects involving innovation and engaged scholarship within the newly-formed Ideas to Action Centre, based at UNE.

The approach taken within the Innovation Strategic Development Project was based on a philosophy of engaging directly with individuals from the communities of the region so as to allow direct participation of individuals in the co-creation of community agency and to stimulate the development of an “innovation culture” across the region. In this way, the project focused on investigating opportunity for strategic development for improved innovation and intentional innovation communities in Northern Inland Region of NSW. As IICs are comprised of individuals that form places or “Communities” created specifically to achieve innovation, (Evans & Thomas, 2010) the current project team engaged with groups (including over one hundred individuals) from Armidale (Plate 2), Tamworth, Moree, Narrabri and Bingara.

The aims of the project were to capture emergent ideas and opportunities and identify barriers for innovation. Within the investigation the potential for innovation within the communities was examined and a regional network of “innovators” created across the region. From this network, the aim is to develop a community innovation action potential within and across communities of the region.

Some of the ideas for innovation that emerged from the workshops included linking with the National Broadband Network (NBN) to develop business opportunities, capturing opportunities arising from mining activity and agriculture, developing a regional approach to waste management, and developing and promoting “cultural hubs” with a focus on the music and creative arts strengths of the region – (particularly Armidale and Tamworth). There was also a recognised focus on addressing social issues such as the engagement of the young, the ageing, and the Indigenous members of regional communities.

The future

The ongoing aim of this project is to catalyse the development of the innovative ideas that have emerged to date and assist in enabling the harnessing of the wealth of knowledge and experience available within communities of the region in a cost effective manner. The IIC initiative is seen as cost effective strategy, relative to the alternative community development methods such as industrial recruitment, tax abatement schemes or traditional business incubators. The final meeting under the current project has a regional focus and is planned for October this year, in Bingara NSW. The aim here is to identify ideas and opportunities for innovation that have most potential, and particularly those that are relevant to communities across the region. The potential for creating a structure and process around the innovation network that has formed will be explored so as to create support for innovative activity within virtual and physical spaces. The intention is to create a sustainable, ongoing system capable of improving innovation performance for the communities of the region and the institutions that support them.

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Plate 1: Professor Ted Alter presenting with Dr Philip Thomas at the Community Innovation Project de-brief at the MLC Building in Sydney



Attendees included: Peter Gregory (AusIndustry); Ross MacLennan (TRaMS – Training Resource and Multimedia Studio); Jason Scattolin Innovation Council -DTI); Andrew Stead (ATP Innovations); David Mac Smith (Commercialisation Australia).

Plate 2: Michael Fortunato and Dr Philip Thomas facilitating one of the Innovation Workshop held at Armidale NSW in July 2011

