Developing and sustaining education programs that matter for remote communities

Much has been made about the sustainability of youth and other educational policy beyond the initial period of government program funding. Problems of sustainability are most at issue in country towns and districts which are “rural and remote”, or distant from coastal cities and regional towns. In this paper we argue that problems of keeping policy and programs alive should be seen in the conditions in which they have to be conceived and set in place. Included here are: the social conditions in which a policy and ways to implement it are accepted as a ‘common wisdom’; and, the match or mismatch they have with the economic and social conditions across urban and rural locations. Brief case studies, based on demographic information about three rural towns, are then used to document difficulties for policy implementation that matters for people in a rural and remote community. Much of the analysis is based on Sher and Sher’s (1994) reference to making policy “as if rural people and communities really mattered”. This is revisited to examine the different relations between the three rural transition programs and the towns they serve.

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Introduction and background
This paper results from an unlikely and ongoing collaboration between a Brisbane-based university researcher and one individual’s insight, analysis and beliefs based on over twenty years as a rural educator in regards to schools and associated policy for rural and remote students. Working together, sometimes in the South West, but often at a distance, has provided the chance to take and to combine different points of view (research and local practice, country and city) on structural disadvantage and policy designed to make some difference in a school, town or community. The intention in this exploratory paper is to point to questions about policy on rural education that require further research and consideration if they are to deal with issues that matter for people in rural and remote communities. Our first aim is to make the conceptual point that structures impact unevenly – seen in the different types of jobs, industries and relations to education and school across towns within the category of ‘rural’. To show the effects this unevenness of conditions has on the capacity to develop and sustain a program in different rural areas is our second, and more concrete aim.

The argument is made over four sections, the first of which briefly describes the policy setting followed by a discussion in section two of the characteristics of rural regions built from Sher and Sher (1994). Case studies of the towns of Goondiwindi, Walgett and Charleville are given in section three, followed by conclusions directed to rural policy and the importance of context in funding and sustaining policy and programs.

Pathways programs as a ‘conventional wisdom’
A peak in Australian policy and research about school to work transitions and pathways was reached around the year 2000. The Düsseldorf Skills Foundation and other groups had large scale initiatives in place (Spierings, 1999, 2001) and a diverse group of researchers, consultants and bureaucrats show cased the latest research, theory and examples of policy in practice at an ACER Conference on Understanding.
Youth Pathways (ACER, 2001). Pathways and related terms were now in use across bureaucracy and cross-referenced in reports and papers from consultants, academics and non-profit organisations to an extent to which a common discourse is now in place. Similarly, a common set of purposes are embodied in most of the research and reports written over the last two or three years about transitions and pathways implementation studies. Contained in the literature is a common agreement where pathways can be formed using three strategies. These are in the:

1. Creation of networks and safety nets linking school with work and training;
2. Development of zones or precincts in which cross-government and whole-of-community resources can be drawn on to meet family and student needs;
3. Reassessment of the relevance of the curriculum of Boards of Secondary Studies for all students and a formation of regional planning groups to seek local relevance and procedures for students and communities with an emphasis on TAFE as a pathway.

These strategies now represent a 'common wisdom' one, which requires some revision if it is to provide rural and remote communities with "what really matters" for them1. Sher and Sher (1994) offer a more than useful summary of the various meanings for the term rural and how they should be used to do what matters for rural communities. Their analysis will be the basis to demonstrate how the term rural ought to be applied in policy.

CHARACTERISTICS OF AUSTRALIAN RURAL REGIONS
In 1994 Sher and Sher outlined a framework for national rural policy that dealt with education and community activity. They begin with two comparisons of population density and the need for it to be considered for Australian policy. The U.K., the U.S. and most OECD countries are places with a spread of large cities and medium sized towns through rural areas. Australia has only 31 places with a population of over 25,000, with a large percentage living in a capital city. It is not hard to see why, they suggest, that policy is built on a "mental model" of a strong urban core orbited by a weak periphery of small rural communities. This in itself poses problems in deriving specific applicable rural direction from OECD policy as accepted in Australia. The strong core and weak periphery view they say predicates a deficit model, one where the challenge is to overcome the "disadvantage" of being rural, rather than urban (1994:7). This is accentuated in political lobbying and media description, where "rural" and "agricultural" are treated as identical and interchangeable. This, they contend, effectively blinds "both the public and policymakers to the extraordinary diversity of Australia's rural economies and communities" (1994:11). Growing sugar cane, apples, wheat or vegetables and grazing cattle are all agricultural and rural activities, but they are done from the outskirts of large capital cities to harsh and dry cattle stations. All of these rural places encompass a real breadth of types of communities, lifestyles. It is when policies accept them as similar and interchangeable that they "miss the mark and are likely to fail". Though not stated by Sher and Sher, this situation stems from programs being judged more on their meeting centralised aims and criteria, than on what differences there are in responding to a new policy in different communities. This is the topic of what follows.

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1 These terms are drawn from Sher and Sher (1993) in their Commonwealth Report, Beyond Conventional Wisdom: Rural Development as if Australia's Rural People and Communities Really Mattered, subsequently published with the same title (1994) in The Journal of Research in Rural Education.
Rural Differences and Similarities – For Sher and Sher (1994:12), the economic base across rural communities is usually narrow, centred on one or two industries, sometimes a single employer. Employment possibilities are shallow, a higher proportion of rural than urban people own a small business or work as owner/operators. Contrary to expectation, employment across all spheres is not tied to rural industries. In fact, the economy in most rural communities is "uncoupled" from and not dependent on rural (farm) industries. Rural businesses and individuals are dependent on government income for a "surprisingly large" part of their income from the public sector – even those who would see themselves free from this source of income. Sher and Sher (1994: 18-19) break the category of government reliance into four parts:

1. Recipients of government payments – individuals who depend on unemployment benefits, workers' compensation, family/child support payments, AUSTUDY, assistance to the physically or mentally disabled, the Farm Household Scheme, special Aboriginal grants/subsidies, or any other form of public welfare.

2. All retired people getting a major portion of their total income from government pensions.

3. All rural Australians who are on the public payroll. These range from "military personnel to Aboriginals working under the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) Scheme, from health care workers to young people employed through the Australian Traineeship System, from university/TAFE staff to unemployed people taking advantage of the New Enterprise Incentive Scheme, and from government bureaucrats to police officers and park rangers."

4. All the small business owner/operators and workers whose livelihoods are dependent upon the three aforementioned groups.

This list shows that a significant percentage of rural residents rely on direct and indirect public support for their incomes, as do those businesses that appear to be independent from them. Some might portray themselves as supporting a rural industry independent from government, but such businesses would not survive without the custom from those reliant on the public purse. This point is crucial in understanding the situation of young people entering the workforce in rural communities. The public sector will differentiate the community across a number of lines. Jobs in public services will be sedimented into the structure of the workforce, with a division between public servants in transfer positions and those filled by local community members. There is little movement in and out of public service positions that are safe (full-time and tenured). These are held on to by local community members in the same way that small business and owner/operators maintain their positions. Possibilities for job creation will be constrained. Within a town, only so many residents require haircuts, shop for food, need repairs on houses, cars and appliances and seek other personal services. In conclusion, job creation depends on industry expansion and increased public services. The potential for this has to be seen in relations between an industry and the rural community.

Community and Industry Relationships

Revenue from public funding is vital to the employment patterns and paths in rural communities. Central to this is the fact that 'rural' communities do not need to be
dependent on an industry; something that is less likely to be the case the further a town is from the coast\textsuperscript{2}. Both national and state policy has historically operated on a “dual-track rural development strategy” aimed at strengthening primary industries and relying on social policies to deal with community problems (Sher and Sher, 1994: 20). This approach has been put under scrutiny in that rural maintenance, let alone development, has been a difficult task:

The struggle in the countryside today is for rural communities to hold on to what they have in the face of intensifying pressures to retrench and ration the governmental services and benefits upon which rural Australians have come to depend. Many state and national social policies have served rural Australia well within the limits of their remit... [These] social policies [now lack] the mandate, the capability, and the resources to do more than help rural Australians avoid the most debilitating consequences of the economic, employment, health, and welfare problems besetting them. (Sher and Sher, 1994:25)

The resulting pressure is for finding alternative forms of funding and an expectation of active participation within and by communities to put funds to their most effective use in solving economic and employment problems. For this to eventuate, policy needs to deal “positively and appropriately with rural people and places as communities” (Sher and Sher, 1994:26). While recommendations can be framed as being of benefit to a community, programs are most often designed and implemented to promote individual advancement. Examples are found in programs that “target” groups of individuals. Rarely are they designed with the aim of helping “people suffering common setbacks to work together to effectively come to grips with the underlying social/economic problems afflicting them and their community”. One unintended consequence of policy addressed to targeted individuals and “at risk” groups can be an increased dependence on government assistance, to 'sort problems out'. The second is the manner in which the person and their problem are separated from the problems of the community, which results in a lack of community cohesiveness. Sher and Sher (1994:26) suggest “in this way, government social programs tend to perpetuate the belief that people's problems are strictly their own (and the government's) concern and that the only sensible responses to these problems are individualistic ones. This set of beliefs and behaviours effectively undermines any sense that people are “all in this together.”

To conclude this far, Sher and Sher (1994) have proposed some characteristics of Australia's rural development. Policies are usually framed within a context where rural communities are seen in a relationship of disadvantage when compared with urban populations. Working and living conditions vary across areas in the category "rural" to the extent that the term is not useful until these differences are brought into the analysis. One factor, which holds across rural areas, is the extent to which there is a reliance on direct and indirect income from the public sector. Contrary to what might be expected though, rural communities and their industries are not dependent on each other, nor do they sit within the same policy frames. Policies about economic effectiveness and profit are directed towards the primary industries, social policies to problems within communities. Both have provided forms of equity between rural and urban areas, but they struggle within current economic approaches to maintain what exists, let alone lend themselves to rural development.

\footnote{Some caution is required here. A number of jobs are obviously reliant on the primary industries. In Charleville, for example, many people are directly and indirectly dependent on the grazing industries for their livelihood. Apart from this, the industry is not directly dependent on rural towns and communities for its economic future, but rather on factors relating to efficiency and profitability through animals and crops.}
In this climate, they conclude that the down side of social policy seeking to 'fix' problems is its focus on individual problems, and that this 'undermines' a sense that the community should work on problems common to it. Their main claim for rural policy is for it to approach rural people and places as communities dealing with common struggles and not as being made up of individuals targeted and sought out by government because of their problems.

CASE STUDIES – GOONDIWINDI, CHARLEVILLE AND WALGETT
Three case studies of transition programs in Goondiwindi and Charleville in South East and South West Queensland and Walgett in North Western New South Wales are described in this section. Each case was taken from national examples of transitions in “rural and remote education” and was said to exemplify responsiveness to local community needs, to national goals and purposes of schooling3. The reports were designed to showcase the national goals. This is something that foregrounds the policy and blurs the place of each town in the rural and remote continuum described by Sher and Sher. Influences of rural and remote conditions on a capacity to build and maintain a transition program are now described.

Goondiwindi is a “junction town” at the intersection of five highways, which provides passing business and tourism. Its industries are in agriculture, wheat, wool, cotton, beef and pork. Goondiwindi is close to the regional town Warwick and the provincial city of Toowoomba. The population of the town is 4000 and with a State High School enrolment of 400, it is statistically close in numbers to Charleville’s 3360 town population and 275 high school students. The numbers of industries close to the town of Goondiwindi means that there is a greater scope for work placements and industry partnerships, than for Charleville. It is in the interests of industry to support such links when the industry is itself based in or near a town. There is no TAFE campus in the town.

Charleville (population 3360) is the second largest town in South West Queensland. Much of the region, which stretches from Roma to the borders of South Australia and New South Wales, is referred to as ‘rural’ and often as ‘remote’. Grazing of livestock (sheep and cattle) and wool production are the essential. As large properties are needed for grazing in sometimes semi-arid country, there is a relationship of distance between the industry and the town of Charleville. The fact that the industry is located outside of, and distant from, the town means the population cannot draw nearly as much work from it than if the industry were situated within or close to it, such as with manufacturing, mining and crop farming. Added to distance is the case that grazing is not labour intensive – it does not require large numbers of workers for production. Consequently, there is little call for property work from within the town. Shearing, a labour-intensive part of the industry is mainly seasonal and calls on a workforce contracted to a property on demand. Apart from this link between shearing and properties, can be said to be ‘uncoupled’ its industry, with its main role as being that of service. Charleville provides government and privately owned services required for the industry and for the livelihood, health, education and recreation of the townspeople. The patterns of employment within the town are governed by this relationship, as are the employment options and choices for young people when they leave school.

Walgett is a town in of 1960 persons located in the Walgett Shire in North Western New South Wales. The town is a railhead and stock transport centre for the wool, beef cattle, lambs and wheat that are produced in the surrounding district. The area attracts tourists for fishing of Murray cod. Accommodation is also provided for travellers and fossickers at Lightning Ridge (76 kilometres away) and three other local gem fields. The extent of tourism can perhaps be seen in the Shire servicing three airports. Walgett is 700 kilometres from both Sydney and Brisbane, with its nearest Queensland town being St George. Twenty-one percent of the population of Walgett Shire (8310) are Indigenous Australian people, making it the town with the largest population of the three being reviewed. An Aboriginal mission was once situated ten kilometres outside of Walgett. There is a TAFE campus in the town with a section for Aboriginal students, offering, among others, business and other vocational courses.

Goondiwindi and Walgett both rate higher than Charleville in indicators for rural and regional development when compared across ABS statistics, even though all three are said to be "service towns". Goondiwindi has a growing population and a much higher public sector employment than Charleville. Goondiwindi has a large agricultural community close to the town, as does Walgett, which is also the gateway for tourism in the area. A brief description is provided for each, followed by a discussion comparing the three transition projects.

Goondiwindi In Goondiwindi conditions are available for direct contact with a good range of employers and industry groups. On these grounds they can promote their program as being "School at the Centre of the Rural Community through Industry Partnerships." The approach has been reached by building on a number of school-industry programs such as TRAC (Training in Retail and Commerce) in 1993, Structured Workplace Learning (SWL) in 1997 and school-based traineeships in 1998. In that same year, a District Rural Work Placement Committee was initiated for partnerships between education, rural-industry and the community. From the experience in these partnerships, the Skills, Industry Links Outreach (SILO) project was built on a partnership in association with Rural Skills Australia, National Farmers' Federation and funding from the Australian Student Trainee Foundation (ASTF). The school also has an alliance with Cotton Australia.

Nearly one hundred employers provided training opportunities in seventeen industry areas⁴. Coordination for this was funded by the ASTF and continued, with that body becoming the Enterprise and Career Education Foundation (ECEF). Finally, a Goondiwindi Rural Technology Skills Centre has been built through a partnership between the Department of Employment and Training, Education Queensland, the local rural industry and the community⁵.

The Goondiwindi project was selected by the Department of Employment, Science and Training (2000) as a model for schools seeking more effective management of community relationships.

The Walgett Community of Schools, Inter-Agency project began with an immediate aim of "attempting to assist schools in Walgett with children who for one reason or another are not fulfilling their educational potential" (Human Rights and

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⁴ Only two students in Structured Workplace Learning were in rural industry in 1998, where the set target was 24 students. The target was exceeded in 1999 and 45 students participated in 2000.

⁵ Targeted students come from Goondiwindi State High School and Boggabilla Central School (NSW). Cross-cultural (Indigenous) issues have been addressed in gaining work placements for students from Boggabilla.
Equal Opportunity Commission, 2000). There are three longer-term objectives. The first is to facilitate relationships between the community of Walgett and the educational institutions at all levels, from primary school through to TAFE and beyond. The second is to assist young teachers who come to town in making contact with the community and in developing and implementing curriculum that are appropriate to all the children in Walgett. The third and most pressing important long-term aim is to facilitate a whole-of-government response to the educational needs of the town. The project's philosophy falls within a Full Service School and an inter-agency, approach.

It would appear from the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's report (2000) that some prior formal or informal community involvement process had been undertaken. How broad this was and the time required has not been made clear. The project's Senior Officer speaks of it as "a very much community driven project", where there is a high "degree of involvement and good will" by people of the town, who want their agencies to work together in the best interests of children and families. The agencies mentioned are school, police, the courts, Centrelink, state housing and community services departments, ATSIC and the Aboriginal Legal Service. According to the co-ordinator:

The project has a management committee representing most sectors in the town, including the Indigenous community and representative organisations such as the local ASSPA committees, the non-Indigenous community, the government sector including the police and the community services department and all educational institutions, including TAFE (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2000).

The approach taken suggests the project is developmental and aimed at intervention at different points where risk factors are dealt with on a pathway. In 1998, the Walgett Cultural and Education Centre was established to "assist with the delivery of culturally appropriate programs and to provide additional assistance for students exhibiting learning or behavioural problems". The centre staff comprises a principal education officer with a background in special education and two classroom teachers. They work with parents who are consulted about the program and who are involved in assessments of their child's "risk" factors. Staff work with teachers in developing individual education programs for some students.

There has been an increase in community involvement in addressing educational needs, an increase in opportunities for participation in vocational education and training and improvement in school attendance. As such, there is not a direct community involvement by business as in Goondiwindi, but more by services (mainly educational) to achieve improved educational outcomes for ‘at-risk’ students and families.

This project was attempting the following things; mainly it would seem for the Indigenous Australian population, through:

- Tackling the need for early childhood education with a pre-school for 20 children;
- Supporting students in transition between primary and secondary school;
- Building closer links between TAFE and the schools in the town;
- Providing an education with a strong Aboriginal cultural base for students who are having difficulties in the mainstream system;
- Training local teachers in Aboriginal culture, history and heritage;
Developing strategies to attract teachers to the community who are well-prepared for their role and who understand the community they will be serving, for example, by negotiating with teacher training institutions on the placement of trainee teachers in Walgett.

Further outcomes have been that students learn Kamilaroi, the local Aboriginal language, which they use to greet visitors to Walgett schools. Individual Education Programs from Year 10 to Year 12 "can include some work on literacy, some work with adults on local CDEP projects such as the nursery and pottery and learning about Bush Tucker from a local Elder". Several trainee teachers have completed four weeks’ teaching practice in Walgett and have been introduced to the local Aboriginal history and culture and visited significant sites as well as meeting many local Aboriginal people. Adult Aboriginal students who live close to the town are provided transport once a week to their literacy course at TAFE followed by afternoon tea at the Cultural and Education Centre.

Charleville high school’s Woolshed Project has been acknowledged as a case of best practice as a Rural Industries Student Placement Program. The approach taken in Charleville was similar to those at Walgett and Goondiwindi in that it was to address ‘at risk’ students, those who were experiencing problems with school routine, the behaviour management program and modes of learning.

Charleville does not have a 'local' industry as the term usually indicates. As such, the town does not have at hand access to the machinery and facilities used in the grazing and wool industries. With properties distant from the town, structured work placements are much more difficult to find and arrange than in the areas such as Goondiwindi where they are within direct reach. These were some of factors to be considered when the Woolshed project was established in 1999 as a "Shed Hand and Shearing" program utilising VEGAS funding. Like the projects at Walgett and Goondiwindi, the aims were to address problems experienced by those students who were disengaging from school and facing poor employment prospects. The initial course provided knowledge and relevant skills and basic experience for young people to use in finding employment, in shearing and in property work in general.

Partnership agreements and sponsorships were sought as interest in the program grew. These included the local abattoir – which supplied up to 6000 sheep for the wool handling and shearing program. Funding and resources were gained from AGFORCE, who initially supplied the training providers for wool handling and shearsers and Sunbeam, who supplied shearing gear, and the Regional Assistance Program (RAP). Community-donated resources included a fridge, furniture, cooking utensils and museum relics (such as old shearing machinery).

The first aim of the Woolshed has been to provide male and female students with a learning environment that simulates working life in the shearing industry. Tied to this is the desire to set in place an inexpensive pathway into shearing and wool handling that benefits both the student and the employer. The main skills learnt ranged from wool handling, shearing, crutching and wool processing to basic cooking.

The course is recognised as filling in a gap in skills training by employers and shearing contractors. Generally, rural skilling programs are either ad hoc or

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expensive. Private training providers are not targeting these types of courses because of distance and other related costs. The infrastructure (a shearing shed and equipment) was initially temporarily loaned. The Woolshed committee has since secured funding through the Regional Assistance Program for community capacity building. This has brought infrastructure, including building of a shearing board and securing “dongas”, transportable shearers’ quarters. This allowed the Woolshed to offer the course beyond Charleville to schools across the district. This was achieved in four stages. The first involved the construction of a Six-Stand International Standard Shearing Board and the appointment of a local experienced shearer as trainer and facility caretaker. In the second stage transportable facilities were erected, including those for accommodation, kitchen and classroom and an ablution block. An interactive baby animal nursery was established in stage three. The Woolshed facility was officially opened in June 2001 in stage four.

Conclusions
The three cases presented show variations in response to pathways policy in rural and remote towns. Viewed within the policy perspective, there is a similarity across each of the projects. Each project has to be framed within the common wisdom to meet centralised criteria for funding of each submission. In form, content and direction, they mirror initiatives for working with “at risk” students in cities, towns and suburbs across the country. Taking these towns as instances of best practice within the common policy wisdom tends to set them up for, often subconscious, city/country comparisons. Herein lies the difficulty for sustaining what has been achieved. For policy makers the question is one of whether, in descending order, what ‘works’ in overseas countries can be implemented in Australian urban and regional areas and, can it then be made to work in rural and remote areas. Once again, this is what Sher and Sher refer to as the mental model of a strong urban core and a weaker rural periphery. The rural factors that can be built on for later policy are absorbed into the conventional wisdom of the present policy issue. To limit this effect, it is of course necessary to hold up various programs as exemplars for policy implementation – but in such a way that the achievement be seen in (and often in spite of) the existing rural conditions. Otherwise the programs become “similar and interchangeable” examples of what is “rural” and continue to fall short of being written, “as if rural people really mattered” (as much as the common policy wisdom).

Our working hypothesis is that it is the relations between a policy and rural conditions that is central to the issue of developing and keeping the intentions behind a policy alive. Some conclusions are made on this point with further questions being raised about directions for rural research and policy.

Some factors that differentiate between the three towns are within Figure 4.1 below.

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7 Public service jobs held in rural communities are not necessarily held by those with an in depth understanding and appreciation of what rural “looks or feels like”. Too often, intentions are well meaning and the approach is to “fix” a problem in the hope that it goes away. This weakens a community’s ability to deal with problems common to it. These same people are managed by supervising officers often located up to 600 – 800 kilometres away with no real understanding of the issues faced by communities at the local level.
Figure 1. Factors and resources that place each town as “rural” and “isolated”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>High school population</th>
<th>Industries</th>
<th>Distance from capital city</th>
<th>Distance from nearest regional town</th>
<th>Distance major Town</th>
<th>Proximity to a University</th>
<th>TAFE access</th>
<th>Conditions for school/industry programs</th>
<th>Pathways Facilities</th>
<th>Reliance on the Public service as employer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Goondiwindi</td>
<td>4000</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>360</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>245</td>
<td>245</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Strong</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charleville</td>
<td>3300</td>
<td>260</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>900</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>700</td>
<td>700</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High++</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walgett</td>
<td>1960</td>
<td>190</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>700</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>680</td>
<td>430</td>
<td>Med</td>
<td>Med</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All three schools have been presented in the literature as good examples of the development of pathways models. The Woolshed project is the first such initiative in the Charleville community for students in Years 10 to 12; a fact that is due to its rural and isolated situation. The following factors indicate why this is so in comparison with Walgett and Goondiwindi. The one industry in the district, grazing, is at a distance from Charleville; as such it is difficult to access employers for work experience and facilities. The opposite is the case for Walgett with six industries close at hand and Goondiwindi with seven. Employers in Goondiwindi have a direct interest in pathways being articulated from school to their businesses. Use and the seen importance of TAFE and university study also grow with geographic proximity to institutions of further study, with the number of industries and with the degree of reliance on public service employment in the town. Walgett has a population below 2000 residents. It would appear that its program is to create safety nets for the Indigenous population and to induct new teachers into the country way of life, especially with Aboriginal culture. Walgett and Charleville are in similar remote locations in terms of in distance from the capital city and the nearest major town, but Walgett has a TAFE campus in the town and it is much closer to a university. As well, the more remote the town, the more public service jobs are filled by people in transfer mode (e.g. teachers, health workers) or occupied by older residents who remain in the job. It is here that Goondiwindi’s relationship to being rural differs in comparison with the other two towns. Goondiwindi is close to the large provincial city of Toowoomba and the university and TAFE institutions there and in Brisbane. The population is growing, with a high percentage of young people. In comparison with other rural and regional towns, the value of housing has increased, as has the cost of renting a residence. The number of professional, associate professional, management and administration jobs is on par with and sometimes above the state average. Against the current trend there are 2.25 full-time jobs to every one part-time job. Tourism is strong with an average occupancy room rate of 60% per year. Given these and other factors, there is much more possibility for a range of rural and other learning pathways in Goondiwindi than in the more remote areas of Walgett and Charleville. Yet even here, the number of industries and its proximity to high interest tourist venues places Walgett in a different remote situation to Charleville.

In conclusion, rural communities are increasingly reliant on the public sector purse governed by policy makers and board members located on the eastern seaboard and major cities. The struggle within current economic processes to maintain what already exists is contrary to rural development. Concern and response to problems are affecting social cohesiveness to an extent that the concept of “community” is disabled. This results in communities attempting to access government funds for growth, by attempting to meet centralised funding aims, criteria and guidelines, rather than communities accessing funding in response to specific local needs. The
Charleville Woolshed project exemplifies what has to be done within an isolated community to establish structured training when industry is not close to and in sufficient numbers that work placements and equipment are readily available. As will be the case here with Charleville, Walgett, Goondiwindi, and other towns classified as rural, the conventional wisdom of policy will shift, as will the accumulated memory and expertise of the program participants. How well established are the pathways and, despite their exemplary status, are they the ones that really matter for rural and remote communities?

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