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Creative Clustering: Where Do Design Students Fit In?

April 23, 2018

By Associate Professor Katja Fleischmann

As a long-time advocate of the economic value of creative industries, I have been interested in researching if creative clusters can drive regional economic development.

Government policy throughout the world has supported the idea of developing creative clusters in large cities as a driver of a creative sector that can be tapped into by surrounding businesses that are open to design-led innovation.

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Can that same model be applied to regional economies? This was the question I explored with my colleagues, Riccardo Welters, Associate Professor of Economics, and Ryan Daniel, Professor of Creative Arts at James Cook University, in a wide-ranging survey of creative

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practitioners and businesses that use their services.

We focused our research on the creative sector in Townsville, Australia, the largest regional city in northern Australia with a population of approximately 172,000 and the unofficial title of 'the capital of tropical North Queensland'.

Townsville has a large regional university and an economy in transition with Health Care, Public Administration, Education, Retail Trade and Construction currently being the sectors with the largest employment.

We identified 212 mainly small- and medium-sized businesses and asked owners if they would be open to implementing design thinking and design-led innovation. The majority of the business owners we surveyed supported the idea of adopting design approaches to growing their businesses, but few knew what was meant by design-led innovation or design thinking. Design Thinking is a human-centered innovation process that facilitates the creation of radical ideas by overturning the traditional problem solving process. Design Thinking is about developing breakthrough ideas by building empathy, fast learning, bringing more than one idea forward, rapid prototyping and iteration of solutions through user feedback. Design Thinking is successful in discovering the unexpected and is foremost a solution finding or problem framing process.

The survey also revealed that the creative community in Townsville is fragmented, feels at times isolated, does not network, and works independently largely as contractors and freelancers. Creatives in Townsville also suffer from a remoteness and perception from local businesses that for bigger jobs, Australia's major metro centres such as Brisbane, Melbourne and Sydney, offer a wider selection of creative talent. We also found that Townsville lacked centralized, physical spaces (such as a warehouse district) where creative clustering can coalesce.

Another mitigating factor to developing a regional creative cluster is that there is also no concerted government support for setting up centres of designers as a resource for local businesses. This contrasts with the support for design precincts in major metropolitan areas which provide a much greater opportunity to collaborate on larger scale projects.

Our research, published in the *Australasian*

Journal of Regional Studies, showed that Townsville can build a more vibrant culture of collaboration by strategically supporting its creative industries. The city's creative industries growth could initially come from facilitating idea sharing and fostering networking because creative industries tend to support a culture of interdisciplinary working already.

It is clear from our research that more networking events between the creative community in

Townsville and businesses could create new synergies that would help both in growing Townsville's economy and regional influence.

In a recent report, *Growing Creative Industries in Townsville*, funded by the Townsville City Council we recommended:

- The formation of a creative industries advocacy group to promote creative industries;
- The pursuit of strategic partnerships among creative industries; and
- The development of a centralised e-hub or physical site that brands and promotes specialist creative services.

This report resulted in the creation of the Creative Industries Cluster group and the spinoff, DesignNQ, an idea-swapping social networking group that encourages participation from professional and student designers.

Higher education, particularly in the design discipline, is becoming increasingly important to bridging this gap between creative talent and Townsville's business community. Design students can play a key role in participating in the growth of the creative community by showcasing innovative ways of approaching business problems. Design students can link with existing creative industries through work-integrated learning opportunities such as industry internships, regional galleries hosting creative arts graduates' final year exhibition, and participating in volunteering opportunities across other sectors.

After they graduate, students drive the development of a stronger understanding and use of key contemporary innovation processes which can help local businesses to maintain or develop their

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competitive advantages. Entrepreneurial risk-taking design graduates help companies re-think their approach to solving problems with collaborative practices. At the end of the day, design graduates can push the future of regional economic growth particularly if they are grounded in design-led innovation. This innovation is boosted by creative clusters that support networking, creative collaboration and exchange of innovative ideas.

References

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Associate Professor Katja Fleischmann is a senior researcher at James Cook University and has authored over 50 peer reviewed publications. Her international work in the UK, USA, Germany and Australia brings a global perspective to her research interests which include the future of design education, economic development through innovation and the creative industries, and design as a driver for economic, public and social innovation. Her research publications can all be found at the following research portfolio site: <https://research.jcu.edu.au/portfolio/katja.fleischmann/>