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RESEARCH

PLANNING

EVALUATION

**THE GWYDIR LEARNING REGION  
MODEL:  
An independent evaluation**

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## Abbreviations

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACE	Adult and Community Education
ASH	annual student hours
DET	Department of Education and Training
GIELC	Gwydir Industry and Education Links Committee
GLR	Gwydir Learning Region
HSC	Higher School Certificate
LGA	Local Government Association
NSW	New South Wales
TAFE	Technical and Further Education
TVET	TAFE delivered HSC VET courses
UAI	University Admission Index
VET	Vocational Education and Training

## **Key messages**

1. The Gwydir Learning Region is based on the shared goals and visions of a collaborative partnership of stakeholders from education, local council, business and the local community, in the Gwydir Shire, a rural area of NSW.
2. At a surface level, the Gwydir Learning Region is an example of what public and private organisations and committed individuals can achieve through goodwill, passion and determination in an economically depressed, socially disadvantaged and remote area of NSW.
3. At a deeper level, sophisticated concepts underpin the Gwydir Learning Region, including concepts of innovation and collective creativity, lifelong learning, personalised learning, learning communities, inclusive leadership, social capital, social harmony, social infrastructure, social justice, ecological community development and sustainable rural development.
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.

## ***Core elements of the Gwydir Learning Region model***

Among the different stakeholders of the Gwydir Learning Region, there is general agreement about its core elements, as summarised below by a long-standing member of the GLR committee, Max Eastcott (2005c), General Manager of the Gwydir Shire Council.

### **Drivers**

The Gwydir Learning Region was developed as a strategic policy response to the relatively poor educational and economic circumstances of the residents of the Gwydir Shire area.

### **Challenges**

The Gwydir Shire is located on the boundary between the North West and Western Plains Regions of NSW and surrounded by Tamworth, Inverell, Moree and Armidale. Even with its location the Shire is lacking in training agencies locally. This relative remoteness creates challenges for the delivery of the diverse range of courses that we endeavour to promote.

### **Partners**

The current structure is built upon the vocational education programme being delivered by Warialda High School. The strategic partners in this endeavour are the Department of Education and Training (local Schools and TAFE), Adult and Community Education, University of New England and Gwydir Shire Council. Other learning institutions (e.g. Southern Cross University) are co-opted as required to deliver courses.

### **Aim**

The overriding aim of the Region is to tailor an individual learning experience to any member of our community, irrespective of age, who has a particular desire to learn.

### **Role of learning**

Learning is seen as a way to improve the social environment (for older and socially isolated residents) and life chances of individuals and to create a desire for lifelong learning within our community.

### **Co-operative structure**

The unique component of the Region is the close co-operation that exists within the management structure of the controlling Committee. The relationships that exist between the participants are based upon trust and an intense commitment to achieve improvement through action.

## **Executive Summary**

This report documents the development of the Gwydir Learning Region since 2000 and evaluates its activities to date. The Gwydir Learning Region emerges from this independent analysis as a successful partnership between stakeholders from the local council, education, business and community. The achievements of this partnership command attention from people interested in using innovative approaches to education to provide additional opportunities for learners and to revitalise rural communities.

### **Brief description of the Gwydir Learning Region**

The Gwydir Learning Region is a partnership between local government, education, business and community stakeholders in the north west area of New South Wales within the Gwydir Shire Council – a council formed in 2004. The Gwydir Learning Region was initially established in 2000 as a partnership involving three Shire Councils (Yallaroi, Bingara and Barraba), Warialda High School and TAFE NSW New England Institute. The partnership evolved after that, changing its name and organisational structure, but it continues to focus on improving educational, social and economic outcomes for residents of the local community.

The Gwydir Learning Region has strongly positive goals in an area confronting the decline of rural populations and where the income level is lower than in most of the state.

### **Project management and objectives**

The evaluation of the Gwydir Learning Region was undertaken by Dr John Mitchell, from John Mitchell & Associates, from March-April 2006 and was managed by Bernard Ingle from TAFE NSW New England Institute on behalf a steering committee of the Gwydir Learning Region. Funding was provided by the NSW Board of Vocational Education and Training (BVET).

This report is a response to the following project objectives:

- documentation of the Gwydir Learning Region initiative including its (a) social and economic context; (b) conceptual framework; (c) structural and operational characteristics (please see Section A)
- evaluation of the success of the Gwydir Learning Region model and key success factors, including quantitative and qualitative measures (Section B)
- identification of system changes required for application of the model to other regions of NSW (Section C).

A summary of the evaluation requirements is provided in Appendix 1 and a list of the people interviewed or surveyed is provided in Appendix 2. Members of the project steering committee are also cited in Appendix 2.

### **Key points about the nature of the Gwydir Learning Region**

Following are the key points from documenting the initiative.

#### ***Positive perceptions***

While some observers would look at statistics and see the Gwydir Shire Council area as socially disadvantaged and economically fragile, this view is not shared by the stakeholders of the

Gwydir Learning Region (GLR) or by local businesses. The GLR stakeholders predominantly see opportunities to develop improved social harmony and, according to a 2005 survey, the majority of local businesses see the Gwydir area as either a good or excellent place to conduct business.

### ***Conceptual richness***

A rich set of concepts underpin the Gwydir Learning Region. Some of these concepts are drawn from other learning regions and from contemporary literature about lifelong learning and social capital and the roles of education in building social capital in regional areas. One of the key concepts influencing the GLR is the newly promoted concept of personalised learning, which encourages the provision of targeted attention for each student. Another key concept influencing the GLR is that it is possible to develop sustainable rural communities. A further concept driving the GLR is that 'collective creativity' can help to identify local employment training needs and match skills training to those needs.

### ***Structures***

The Gwydir Learning Region is managed by a Co-ordinating Committee of the Gwydir Shire Council that is chaired by the Mayor. The Committee has no delegated power. While public processes and structures of the Gwydir Learning Region are becoming more tangible, the collaborative structure of the GLR is built on the trust, passion and goodwill of stakeholders, not on rules or meeting procedures.

## **Key findings from the evaluation**

Following are the key findings from the evaluation.

### ***User successes***

Profiles of past users of the Gwydir Learning Region include some outstanding cases of graduates being set on the path towards working, sometimes overseas, or establishing businesses locally. Current users of the GLR are almost entirely positive about the GLR and are able to articulate a range of social and economic benefits they have gained from it, providing strong endorsement for the ambitious goals of the GLR to influence both community attitudes and economic development.

### ***Quantifiable successes***

Students at Bingara Central School and Warialda High School have a high level of engagement in VET programs compared with the rest of the state, in line with the aims of the Gwydir Learning Region and due to the collaboration between schools and TAFE and ACE. Warialda High School can verify that every student who completes Year 12 at the school moves on to further study or employment – a 100% success rate. However, longitudinal data is not yet collected, that would show what ex-students are doing, say, three years or five years after completing their schooling.

TAFE annual enrolments from the Gwydir Learning Region have increased by 30% from 2001-2005, from 336 to 435. ACE activity in the Gwydir Learning Region is above the average participation rate in other parts of the state. As an example of the impact of the GLR on local organisations, the amount and breadth of vocational training undertaken by employees of Gwydir Shire Council, one of the major employers in the Shire, is extensive.

### ***External validation***

Senior officers within NSW DET cite a range of achievements of the Gwydir Learning Region, particularly the GLR's catering for the learning needs of individual students and creating study pathways or local employment opportunities.

### ***Future tasks***

The Gwydir Learning Region committee is aware that it has achieved much and that some of its approaches are unique and some of its impacts are substantial. However, the committee is also aware that more can be achieved especially with the 20-60 age group, more quantitative outcomes need to be documented and improved promotion is required.

### ***Exemplar***

The approaches taken to transform the Warialda High School since 2000 into a community learning centre are similar in many cases to approaches adopted by the Gwydir Learning Region – especially the determination to ensure the school or training program fit the needs of the individual, not the other way round. Such radical approaches at both the school and within the GLR have resulted in successes for users. In recent years, Bingara Central School has greatly expanded its involvement in the GLR and local business people are supportive of the flexible approaches taken by the two schools, TAFE and ACE.

### ***Success factors***

The primary success factors for the Gwydir Learning Region are shared values, partnerships and collaboration: all relationship-based factors. Other key success factors for the GLR are commitment, continued stakeholder support, the social benefits of developing a learning region, the ideas informing the learning region, economic imperatives to develop innovative strategies in the region, the user-centric approach, the use of innovative strategies and local community support.

### ***Sustainability***

Using the perspective of appreciative inquiry, which focuses on the positive and sustainable elements of the Gwydir Learning Region, the GLR is an inspirational development that has many lessons to offer other regions. However, to be sustainable the GLR needs to continue to seek new forms of support and funding, use new technologies to deliver education, develop fresh ideas, prepare for the departure of the initial champions and foster others to assume leadership roles.

### ***Model***

From the perspective of model building, the Gwydir Learning Region has developed a sophisticated model of a learning region that contains elements such as shared goals and vision, agreed social and economic imperatives, sophisticated conceptual foundations from the fields of education, community development and regional development, an evolving structure and refined processes and multiple success factors.

### ***Effectiveness***

In terms of the effectiveness of the initiative, the report contains substantial examples of its achievements, from positively influencing attitudes, to assisting skill building, to creating employment opportunities. However, more outcomes data of a longitudinal nature could be collected, for instance data from tracking student destination and data on the economic impact of the GLR.

### ***Value for money***

In terms of the value for money of the Gwydir Learning Region, it is an example of a low-cost, high-return initiative, in that little direct funding has underpinned its success. Ideas and passion have driven the initiative, not external funding. On the other hand, a considerable amount of goodwill and un-costed time and effort have aided its success.

### *Transferability and systemic changes*

One key element of the Gwydir Learning Region model that is transferable is the development in rural areas of a collaborative mechanism between educators, council, employers and local communities – a mechanism based on the belief that communities can have a positive influence on their own futures. Other elements of the model that are transferable are the use of classes composed of mixed ages; negotiating individual pathways for students; and providing transformational leadership. A professional conversation has commenced within NSW DET to consider some systemic changes – particularly with regard to requirements of the Board of Studies – that might enable elements of the Gwydir model to be more easily replicated.

## **SECTION A: DOCUMENTING THE GWYDIR LEARNING REGION**

This section provides background documentation on the Gwydir Learning Region initiative, including a brief introduction and a summary of the following:

- social and economic context
- conceptual framework
- structural and operational characteristics.

This background analysis in Section A provides a foundation for the evaluation reported on in Section B.

# 1. Brief introduction

This chapter provides a brief introduction to the Gwydir Learning Region (GLR), noting its location, origins, partners and key developments. The chapter also provides a number of descriptions of the GLR by various stakeholders and a summary of the GLR's vision.

## Key points

Key points in this chapter include the following:

- Since 2000, the initiative has been called the Learning Region, the Cunningham Learning Region, the Learning Region Cooperative and now the Gwydir Learning Region.
- The initiative has been supported by a core group of key stakeholders over that period, particularly the local councils and education bodies as well as business and community groups.
- The stakeholders' definition of the learning region has remained constant since 2000: it is basically a partnership that promotes learning for the purposes of individual, community, social and economic development.

## Location

The Gwydir Learning Region covers the area inside the council boundaries of the Gwydir Regional Council in north west New South Wales. The Gwydir Regional Council was formed in 2004 and is located within the North West Slopes and Plains region of the state. The Shire covers an area of 9,121.70 square kilometres and has a population of approximately 5,790 people (ABS 2001).

The two main centres of population are at Warialda and Bingara with smaller populations at Warialda Rail, Gravesend, North Star, Croppa Creek, Coolatai and Upper Horton. Warialda and Bingara each have around 1200 people in their townships and both have hospitals, aged care hostels, medical centres, caravan parks, swimming pools, pre-schools, libraries and tourist information centres (Ingle & Walls 2005, p.5).

The Shire has a number of primary schools as well as Bingara Central School (Kindergarten to Year 10) and Warialda High School. There are three adult and community education (ACE) providers in the Shire and no physical campuses of a TAFE or University.

## Origin and partners

The Gwydir Learning Region (GLR) is the name given in 2004 to a partnership that was initially established in 2000 involving representatives from three Shire Councils (Yallaroi, Bingara and Barraba), Warialda High School, TAFE NSW New England Institute, Bingara Central School and Adult and Community Education providers from Bingara, Barraba and Gravesend. At various times the GLR has engaged with the University of New England, Southern Cross University and Hunter New England Area Health.

This partnership evolved over time, with changes to its name and structure. At one stage the partnership was called the Cunningham Learning Region. Following the merger in 2004 of the Yallaroi and Bingara Local Government Areas (LGAs) and part of the Barraba LGA to form the Gwydir Regional Council, the partnership was entitled the Gwydir Learning Region. In

2004 the Gwydir Learning Region formally became a sub-committee of the Gwydir Shire Council, chaired by the Mayor.

### Timeline of key developments

The following table provides a summary of key developments of the Gwydir Learning Region from 2000.

**Table 1: Timeline of key developments**

DATE	KEY DEVELOPMENT
2000-2004	Warialda High School increases vocational education offerings and brokers collaboration between stakeholders from education, council and business: for example, a paper in May 2002 by Martin Bower proposed 'A cooperative of Schools/TAFE and Community'
2002	Report by Professor Tony Vinson – the Vinson Report – predicts an increasing role for Warialda High School and Bingara Central School as “campuses for training as well as education to meet broad community needs”
August/September 2002	Drafting of a proposed strategic plan for the “Cunningham Regional Learning Region Cooperative” and a draft action plan 2002/2004
October 2002	Workshop conducted by the Executive Group of The Learning Region Cooperative, resulting in a draft vision statement and management structure
2002-2003	Series of meetings held in the shire chambers of Yallaroi, Bingara and Barraba with representatives from the various councils, the two high schools, TAFE and other educational providers in an attempt to create a Learning Region
2003-2004	Focus on establishing a partnership with UNE
March 2004	Formation of Gwydir Shire Council
May 2004	Opening of the refurbished Roxy Theatre, Bingara – a focus of the Gwydir Learning Region and a symbol of community collaboration
2004	Formation of the Gwydir Learning Region Co-ordinating Committee as a sub-committee of the full Council, with representatives from the Gwydir Shire Council, the two high schools, New England TAFE, Warialda, Adult and Community Education and the Gwydir Industry and Educational Links Committee
May 2005	Finalising of committee membership and function of the Gwydir Learning Region Co-ordinating Committee
May 2005	Tabling at the Gwydir Learning Region Co-ordinating Committee of the draft Gwydir Learning Region Strategic Plan with visions, aims, goals – a revision of the 2002 Strategic Plan
August 2005	Visit to Gwydir Learning Region by Director General of Education Andrew Cappie-Wood and Deputy Director General of Schools Trevor Fletcher

September 2005	Strategic planning workshop for the Gwydir Learning Region Co-ordinating Committee
October 2005	Development of draft promotions plan by the promotions sub-committee of the Gwydir Learning Region Co-ordinating Committee
November 2005	Finalising of rules for meetings of the Gwydir Learning Region Co-ordinating Committee Confirmation of the Statement of Values for the Gwydir Learning Region Co-ordinating Committee
December 2005	Visit to the Gwydir Learning Region of Regional Directors of Schools and Institute Directors of TAFE, led by Deputy Director General of Schools, NSW DET, Trevor Fletcher
December 2005	Funding provided by the Board of Vocational Education and Training (BVET) for the documenting and evaluation of the Gwydir Learning Region Funding provided by NSW DET for North West Visual Literacy project
March-April 2006	Documenting and evaluation of the Gwydir Learning Region

### **Between the milestones**

The chronology above is unable to convey a full picture of the activities that occurred between each of these historical milestones, including the following:

- negotiations with various stakeholders, including extensive negotiations with the University of New England from 2003-2004, especially around the issue of mental health services
- consideration by the GLR of the experiences of other learning regions, such as Lithgow City as a learning city
- interactions with external stakeholders regarding learning regions, including the Australian Learning Communities Network and Adult Learning Australia
- the support provided by the Gwydir Shire Council, particularly for marketing and as a focal point for meetings and presentations
- the effective and expanded provision of increased vocational education experiences for both youths and adults in the region by Warialda High School and Bingara Central School, with support from TAFE NSW New England TAFE and ACE providers
- activities such as the focus on promoting the local film industry, for instance through the creation and conducting of the North West Film Festival
- the critical support from local businesses in willingly taking trainees.

These types of activities will be discussed during this report.

## Descriptions and definitions of the learning region by stakeholders

There are many descriptions and definitions of the Gwydir Learning Region provided by various stakeholders over time. For instance, the initiative was temporarily called the Learning Region Network in 2002, and the vision of the Learning Region Network in August 2002 was as follows:

The Shires of Barraba, Bingara and Yallaroi will be recognised as a model region of learning that has enriched the lives, well-being and prosperity of its communities, making it an attractive region to live in and enabling it to thrive in the global economy. (The Lifelong Learning Region Network, Draft Action Plan 2002/2004, August 2002, p.1)

In 2005, Martin Bower (2005a), Careers and Community Education Officer, Warialda High School, described the learning region as a partnership that strengthens the social and economic 'mortar' of the region:

One way to describe the Gwydir Learning Region is as a partnership under which govt., semi govt., private, community, educational, health, business development and service groups are unified in their aims to strengthen the social and economic 'mortar' that is vital if a community is to grow and prosper in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. (p.1)

Also in 2005, Peter Cuskelly (2005a), Principal, Warialda High School, described it as a partnership that promotes social cohesion, revitalisation and economic development:

One of the features of the Gwydir Shire is the emergence of a learning community known as the Gwydir Learning Region (GRL).

A learning community is a group of people, whether linked by geography or interest, which addresses the learning needs of its members through proactive partnerships. Learning is used as a way of promoting social cohesion, revitalisation and economic development.

In a presentation slide, Max Eastcott (2004a), General Manager, Gwydir Shire Council, described the learning region in the following context:

Gwydir Shire is a Learning Community

We recognise that education improves everybody's life chances.

We want our children (and older residents) to stay actively and enthusiastically involved in learning both at school and throughout life.

We must co-operate with our preschool services, schools, Adult and Community Learning Centres, New England TAFE and UNE to create the exciting learning environment that we want in the Shire.

A brochure produced by the GLR committee in 2005 provided this definition:

The Gwydir Learning Region is a group which aims to identify the learning needs of all Gwydir Shire residents and help them develop their knowledge and skills. It involves schools, TAFE, university, business and communities to expand opportunities for training and learning throughout life. It is an outstanding example of community and government cooperation.

The brochure continues:

The Gwydir Learning Region recognises that education improves everybody's life chances, and improving the skills available in our community will enable the region to thrive now and into the future.

The descriptions and definitions of the GLR since 2000 have remained consistent, stressing that collaborative partnerships in rural areas can provide increased access to learning to deliver multiple benefits. The concepts underpinning these definitions – such as social and economic

development – are discussed further in chapter three of the report, on the conceptual framework of the learning region.

## Vision

The vision of the Gwydir Learning Region was first stated in 2002 as part of the Cunningham Learning Region Strategic Plan. The current vision for the Gwydir Learning Region was set out in the Draft Strategic Plan that was tabled and accepted at the meeting of the GLR Sub-Committee on 23 May 2005. The 2005 version is set out in Figure 1. It combines the threads alluded to above: individual learning, community engagement, social cohesion and economic improvement.

**Figure 1: Vision of the GLR (GLR Strategic Plan, May 2005)**

**To encourage and assist a cultural change for our region that will occur when each individual fulfils his or her potential through positive social interaction and participation in the community**

The vision of an organisation is the ‘light on the hill’. The organisation should always be walking towards the light. We may never reach the light but, often, the journey itself and what is discovered along the way is worth the attempt.

Our vision is designed to work towards the creation of a better regional community through facilitating and promoting an expansion of the available self development opportunities.

Motivation is very much an individual thing. However we can create and cultivate an environment that accepts continuing self development as a worthwhile pursuit: we can create a learning culture within our region.

Once the community is motivated to succeed as a learning community the benefits that will flow from active engagement will begin to occur. These benefits will include;

- A reduction in the level of community apathy and a more engaged community.
- A general improvement in self esteem both for individuals and collectively as a community.
- The creation of better employment and recreational opportunities for all residents of the region.

This vision aligns with the 2004 statement of the vision of the Gwydir Shire Council for 2004 to 2007 which is “To be the recognised leader in Local Government through continuous learning and sustainability”. The Council’s 2004 – 2007 Management Plan includes the following strategic objective:

That the Gwydir Shire is recognised as a community that encourages lifelong learning and this will lead to a sustainable community through:

- increases in residents’ work and life skills
- providing individual fulfilment
- assisting those in the community who are excluded from the workplace or are isolated from their community
- providing for economic regeneration and community capacity building.

This alignment between the visions of the GLR and the Gwydir Shire Council meant the GLR has the full support of the council – a key success factor discussed throughout this report.

## Summary comments

The Gwydir Learning Region evolved over the period from 2000, changing its name several times but retaining a core membership of education and council representatives. The definition and vision of the GLR also remained largely the same over this time, pursuing a combination of educational, social and economic goals.

## 2. Social and economic context of the Gwydir Learning Region

This chapter provides a summary of the social and economic context of the Gwydir Learning Region.

### Key points

Key points in this chapter include the following:

- Statistically the Gwydir Shire Council region is a socially disadvantaged area, but the Gwydir Learning Region stakeholders insist that this need not be a barrier to innovation.
- A key idea promoted in the Gwydir Shire and by the Gwydir Learning Region over the last few years is the potential for a small, rural community to achieve harmony, cohesion and development through collaboration and improved access to education.
- Despite the challenges for businesses in this remote and thinly populated area of NSW, 42% of a sizable sample of local businesses surveyed recently rate the current location as either a help to conducting business. Interviewees believe there are opportunities for economic growth in niche areas such as aquaculture, ecotourism and recreational fishing.
- Businesses rate very highly the value of education in reducing or delaying the loss of young people from the area.

### Social context: an optimistic view of the potential for community harmony

Director of TAFE NSW New England Institute Gary Pollock provides the following characteristics of Gwydir area, which show that, compared with the rest of NSW, there are lower levels of post-school qualifications, lower incomes, and lower levels of internet usage in the region than in the rest of the state.

**Table 2: Some characteristics of Gwydir area (from Pollock 2005)**

	<b>Gwydir</b>	<b>NSW</b>
<b>Median age</b>	42 years	35 years
<b>Indigenous</b>	1.6%	1.9%
<b>Born overseas</b>	3.9%	23.4%
<b>Internet used at home</b>	27.0%	41.2%
<b>No post-school qualification</b>	78.3%	63.8%
<b>Advanced diploma, diploma or certificate</b>	16%	22.7%
<b>Median income</b>	\$200-299 per week	\$300-\$399

Max Eastcott (2004b) provides insights into poverty and related challenges for many people in Bingara and Warialda, including lack of access to services compared with urban areas, such as government services, public transport and health. For example:

Despite the greater need, people in rural and remote areas use less medical services than those in metropolitan areas, indicating the health access disadvantage. With very tight finances, the greater distances to travel for essential services and the higher costs of fuel, families are restricting their outings and becoming even more isolated from their communities.

The Health status of rural people tends to be poorer than those living in urban areas. This can be seen particularly in the higher mortality rates and higher rates of hospitalisation thus emphasising the disadvantage in terms of access to health services. Rural Australians have mortality rates between 10 and 40% higher than for the nation as a whole.

A most distressing consequence of rural disadvantage is evident in a higher incidence of youth suicide. Youth suicide by males especially in rural and remote areas is at least twice the rate of urban suicides and is thought to be underestimated, with only half of the male and three quarters of the female suicides likely to be officially recorded

Factors contributing to these tragic deaths include high levels of rural unemployment, isolation from educational opportunities, family financial hardship, rising levels of stress, domestic violence, alcohol abuse and greater access to firearms.

Of particular concern is the scarcity of mental health services in rural and remote communities given the prevalence of extreme stress and depression. (pp.4-5)

From a statistical perspective, the Gwydir Shire Council region is characterised by a small, aging, poor, lowly qualified population that declined in the 1980s-1990s, and is distributed over a large, remote and partly inhospitable area of NSW that was ravaged by severe droughts in recent years. However, the members of the Gwydir Learning Region have opposed assiduously such a depressed view of the social context of the Gwydir region, and have instead promoted an optimistic view of the potential of the community to generate opportunities and growth. For example, Max Eastcott, General Manager of the Gwydir Shire Council, has confidence in the ability of the Gwydir Learning Region to address local needs:

Our Council sees that, in the long term, education is an effective strategy to overcome poverty in our communities. The Council works with local schools, TAFE, the University of New England, and Adult Education, which has resulted in the creation of Gwydir Learning Region to deliver education and training to support all people within our community. (Eastcott 2004b, p.8)

As a further example, Martin Bower from the Warialda High School in his 2002 Draft proposal for 'A Cooperative of Schools/TAFE and Community' stated:

...small communities, suffering the effects of the decline in population, can provide an enriching and safe environment for the raising of children and support the cultural and social glue that keeps the people there. (p.1)

Similarly Peter Macbeth, Principal of Bingara Central School, and a fellow member of the Gwydir Learning Region sub-committee, articulated the role of education in supporting the sustainability of country towns:

With so many country towns giving the impression that they are resolute in their belief that nothing can be done to stop rural decline, we cannot just accept rural decline as inevitable but must ensure we do everything in our power to halt the process.

Education and the provision of educational opportunities within a small community play an immensely important role in sustainability in economic, social, political and personal terms. (Macbeth 2006, p.1)

Max Eastcott, in discussing Bingara, continues the theme that economic disadvantage is not a block to innovation:

Bingara is a small town in the New England, North West Region of NSW. The Bingara community consistently rates as a severely disadvantaged community by the objective assessment provided in the socio-economic analysis undertaken by the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

Bingara not only has a low per capita household income (for example, Bingara had the fourth lowest median personal weekly income in NSW in the 1996 Census), it is also disadvantaged in terms of educational achievement which, of course, is one of the tools that can break the poverty

trap.

One would be forgiven for thinking that such damning demographic results should reflect a dysfunctional community.

However, Bingara does not fall into this generalization due to the spirit of co-operative effort that exists and is facilitated by the local Council. (Eastcott 2005a, pp.1-2)

While other rural regions might focus on how their social fabric is being stretched by external forces such as global trade and government legislation, a key idea promoted in the Gwydir Shire Council and by the Gwydir Learning Region over the last few years is that rural communities can achieve harmony, cohesion and development. For instance, Jane Beaumont, until late 2005 the Community Services Manager, Gwydir Shire Council, noted in the *Bingara Shire Council Social Plan 2002-2005* that over the last two decades rural communities have suffered a reduction in services “as the private sector along with the State and Federal Governments have ‘rationalised’ the delivery of its services”(p.8). Jane Beaumont believes that such rationalisation of services, together with governments’ implementation of various legal measures for reconciliation, discrimination and race relations without making them relevant to rural communities “have resulted in a feeling of alienation within these communities and, therefore, add to community disharmony” (p.8). In response, she advocates striving for community harmony, which results from the following:

- The community sharing a common purpose or vision
- The community having positive social cohesion
- The community having confidence in its public structures; and
- The community having confidence in its future. (p.8)

Similarly, the General Manager of the Shire, Max Eastcott (2005a, p.3) recommends that “social infrastructure” be seen as anything that adds to the community’s sense of well being and improves social harmony:

The Council for Social Services of NSW points out that the term *Social Infrastructure* means more than just roads, rail, utilities and capital works. It must also include heritage matters, health services, education facilities for children and adults, police, housing, refuges & homeless services, jobs, banks, community centres, sporting facilities, youth and children’s facilities; indeed anything that contributes to the community’s sense of well being and improves the quality of life – community harmony. (p.3)

As demonstrated by other quotations throughout this report, these principles of community harmony and the concept of valuing social infrastructure influenced Jane Beaumont and Max Eastcott and the local government approach to the Gwydir Learning Region.

Many members of the local Gwydir community including local businesses and students themselves seem to have embraced the view that community cooperation, say in supporting school-based traineeships, can bring about positive results. Ingle and Walls (2005) comment on the leading role the local Gwydir community has taken in the development of the learning community:

One example is the provision for students in their senior years of high school of traineeships in retail, hospitality, business services, information technology, rural and engineering. In 2005 there are over 30 such traineeships involving local businesses and the council as employers. This involvement of community and businesses in provision has resulted in mutual learning and understandings. The students display strong self-esteem and direction. There is very little graffiti in the towns as the young are increasingly are seeing that their community generally supports them. (p.7)

The pursuit and achievement of community cohesion infuses the existing documentation of the Gwydir Learning Region. For instance, Ingle and Walls (2005) record that in 2001 the then new Learning Region suggested that the Roxy Theatre in Bingara, which had fallen into disrepair, could be very effectively play a major role “in delivering cultural and educational programs within its brief of paying its own way” (p.8). The committee of what came to be called the Gwydir Learning Region successfully convinced Council and TAFE to deliver a course in construction skills and so “provide training to local youth in an industry with national skills shortages and at the same time undertake part of the building work required on the Roxy” (p.8). The Learning Region committee then leveraged off the refurbished Roxy Theatre to promote theatre and performing arts:

Recognising the opportunity to provide residents with a career avenue and the community with a local cultural attraction, negotiated the provision of training for community members and school-aged students in theatre and performing arts. From those beginnings the Northwest Theatre Company has emerged and is delivering high quality theatre productions and musicals. (p.8)

According to Ingle and Walls (2005), the Premier of New South Wales, Bob Carr, opened the Roxy Theatre in 2004 with a gala concert drawing on the talents of local artists with a standard of performance that in many ways was better than professional. As a result,

The Roxy is a visual symbol of what is possible – and its sustained strategic development has facilitated a sense of positive direction for the community. (Ingle & Walls 2005, p.8)

### **Economic context: identifying opportunities despite challenges**

Ingle and Walls (2005) provide the following summary of the Gwydir economy:

The Shire's economy relies mostly on the agricultural industry followed by related services, light industrial and retail. Tourism is developing as a larger contributor to the economy. Gwydir area agricultural residents are starting to diversify from their main income source of beef, sheep and cropping and expanding into aquaculture, olives and seed oils such as sunflower and linseed.

As times and demand change, this shire is becoming more focused on manufacturing and tourism. (p.5)

In 2005, Gwydir Shire Council received funding support from the NSW Department of State and Regional Development (DSRD) to conduct a Business Retention and Expansion Survey to identify issues associated with and guide community and economic development within the Shire. Bruce Thomson of C. B. Thomson Consulting was engaged to analyse data and prepare a draft report detailing the results and highlighting development opportunities and actions across the Shire. Following are some findings from his March 2006 draft report.

153 survey responses were received, which was considered an excellent response rate. In terms of coverage of the Shire, of respondents to the main survey:

- 63 nominated Warialda as their address
- 47 nominated Bingara
- 5 each nominated Coolatai and Croppa Creek
- 4 each identified North Star and Gravesend.

Hence the survey report provides a very recent and useful set of insights into the views of local businesses about the economy.

The author of the report stressed that the reality for most rural and regional economies is that businesses cannot rely on population growth as a driver of demand for their products and services. Hence, skill development is needed in the area of business management:

Businesses need to have a range of strategies available to them to grow and sustain themselves. This may include developing markets outside their local area or improving their retention of and yield from existing customers. This suggests a need for business management skill development

opportunities to ensure that businesses are able to identify and exploit opportunities.

The survey found that people or customer service and administrative skills and general qualities such as common sense and dedication are the most common attributes required by respondents. Otherwise, respondents identify a diverse range of specialist skills including, in “rough” order of frequency: trade qualifications, hospitality, professional, machinery operation, and retail.

Additionally, “a significant proportion of respondents require employees to be multi-skilled and/or combines specific technical skills with generic skills and qualities, such as customer service”. This set of skill needs aligns closely with the findings of the Gwydir Shire Skills Audit (2005) and with the focus of the GLR programs.

One issue affecting local business is the age of the population. In particular, the number of retirees in the Bingara area of the Gwydir Council far exceeds the state average:

In 2001, 21.8% of the Bingara LGA population and 12.7% of the Yallaroi population were aged 65 or more, compared to 13.1% of the NSW population. This also reflects information in the Skills Census that Bingara has a higher retiree population. (Gwydir Shire Council 2006)

This ageing population reduces the number of people available to participate in the workforce.

Despite the concern of many members of the Gwydir Learning Region sub-committee about the local economy, as expressed in interviews, survey recipients were asked to rate Gwydir “as a place to do business”. 42% of respondents indicated that their current location is a help to conducting business, while 25% consider it “50/50”. Only 3% consider it a hindrance. Of some note, 56% of respondents consider Gwydir as either good or excellent as a place to conduct business.

The following services were identified as inadequate: telecommunications, particularly poor mobile coverage and unreliable and/or lack of access to broadband internet services; roads, particularly unsealed roads and their effects on maintenance costs of vehicles, street maintenance, and signage.

The report concludes on a positive note:

On the whole, respondents appear quite satisfied with Gwydir as a place to do business. There is also strong support for economic development and population growth (although there are also comments that growth should not be at the expense of the rural nature of the Shire).

Comments on economic development opportunities suggest that priority should be given to the following:

- the development of industrial land
- providing support to the development of affordable housing
- further development of tourism – this has already been addressed in the context of a Tourism Plan
- conducting a retail leakage survey throughout Gwydir
- depending on the results of the survey, seek to improve the retail mix in Gwydir
- identifying opportunities for and promoting value adding of agricultural products and supporting growth of existing businesses such as aquaculture and the feedlot
- identifying and promoting opportunities for linkages between agriculture and tourism. (CB Thomson 2006)

Of particular note for the Gwydir Learning Region, there is a very strong theme in the report about the need to retain more young people in the Shire through provision of:

- more and better educational and training opportunities
- job opportunities
- recreational opportunities.

The report underlines the challenge of retaining young people in the area:

The retention of young people is a challenge for most rural and regional communities and it is probably not realistic to expect that the majority of young people will opt to stay in the Shire. However, it is possible to reduce or delay the loss of young people and minimise any antisocial activity caused by a lack of creative outlets for them, through a concerted and coordinated approach by government, business and the general community to create a more attractive environment.

Interestingly, the businesses surveyed express the same optimism expressed by the Gwydir Learning Region about the potential to create a more attractive environment for young people, “through a concerted and coordinated approach by government, business and the general community”. This indicates that the views of the stakeholders of the Gwydir Learning Region about the potential to improve rural communities are aligned with the views of local business.

### **Summary comments**

While some observers would look at statistics and see the Gwydir Shire Council area as socially disadvantaged and economically challenging, this view is not shared by the stakeholders of the Gwydir Learning Region or by local businesses. The GLR stakeholders see opportunities to develop improved social harmony and the majority of local businesses see the Gwydir area as either a good or excellent place to conduct business.

### 3. Conceptual framework of the Gwydir Learning Region

Since 2000 stakeholders of the Gwydir Learning Region have consciously investigated a range of other learning regions to see which concepts might apply in the Gwydir region. The stakeholders have also injected into the local initiative a range of ideas from their own professional disciplines, including new ideas from the disciplines of education, community development and regional development. This injection of ideas is a deliberate strategy, as explained by Max Eastcott, General Manager of the Gwydir Shire Council and a member of the Gwydir Learning Region sub-committee:

It is extremely important that you have a clear understanding of what you wish to achieve before you embark upon a project – at least at an intellectual level. (Eastcott 2005a, p.3)

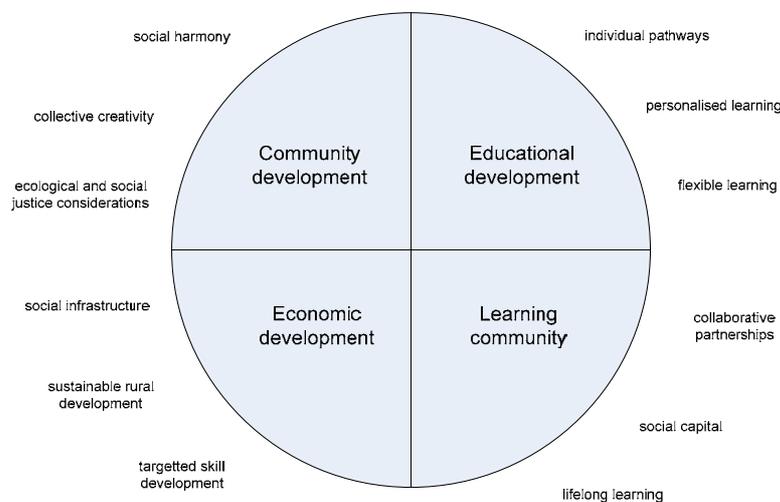
#### Key points

Key points in this chapter include the following:

- A rich set of concepts underpin the Gwydir Learning Region. Some of these concepts are drawn from other learning regions and from contemporary literature about lifelong learning and social capital and the roles of education in building social capital in regional areas.
- One of the key concepts influencing the Gwydir Learning Region is the newly promoted concept of personalised learning, which encourages the provision of targeted attention for each student.
- Another key concept influencing the Gwydir Learning Region is that of sustainable rural communities, the characteristics of which fit well with the GLR.
- A further concept driving the Gwydir Learning Region is that planning and ‘collective creativity’ can identify local employment training needs and that skills training can be developed in response to such planning.

The following diagram cites and organises some of the key concepts in the GLR.

**Diagram 1: Some of the key concepts infusing the Gwydir Learning Region**



## Concepts drawn from other learning regions

From its inception in 2000, stakeholders within the Gwydir Learning Region have examined the ideas emerging from other learning regions. For example, some members of the sub-committee

- tracked the development of Lithgow NSW as a learning city
- assessed the Yarra Ranges VIC learning communities strategy
- monitored the Upper Hunter Beyond 2000 Committee, including the Muswellbrook Upper Hunter Learning Co-operative
- through the Australian Learning Communities Network, followed the development of learning communities in a range of regional and rural locations including Bendigo, Horsham, Wodonga, Kyabram and Ballarat (VIC), Mandurah (WA) and Spencer Gulf SA.

Members established dialogue with key bodies and experts in the field of learning regions and attended appropriate conferences. For example:

- dialogue was created with the Australian Learning Communities Network and its members
- specialist on lifelong learning, Peter Kearns, visited the Gwydir Learning Region in 2005.

Some members of the Gwydir Learning Region sub-committee also monitored new literature on learning regions and adult learning, including:

- *Learning around town: learning communities in Australia* (Adult Learning Australia 2000)
- *Adult Learning in Australia* (Department of Education, Science and Training 2003)
- *Defining Learning Communities* (Kilpatrick et al. 2003)
- *Creativity and Innovation in a Canberra Learning Community* (Kearns 2003).

Bernard Ingle, R/Education Developments Manager from TAFE NSW New England Institute, and a long-standing member of the Gwydir Learning Region, in his paper with Pat Walls on engaging communities through lifelong learning (Ingle & Walls 2005), demonstrated the in-depth knowledge of the Gwydir Learning Region committee of the research into and experiences of learning regions elsewhere in Australia.

## Prevailing concepts about social capital

Members of the Gwydir Learning Region also aware of the range of new publications on the following concepts:

- lifelong learning (e.g. Adult Learning Australia 2005)
- defining learning communities (e.g. Kilpatrick et al. 2003)
- social capital in regional communities (e.g. Falk 2000)
- the role of vocational education and training in regional communities (e.g. Kilpatrick 2003; Kearns 2004).

The influence of ideas about social capital, lifelong learning and empowering communities is very clear in the writings of members of the Gwydir Learning Region, even if these technical terms are not used. For example, in the following statement Martin Bower (2005a) advocates the potential for rural communities to empower themselves:

The Gwydir Learning Region (GLR) is about locals taking control of their futures and building their community the way they want it.

Such gives people a sense of control in their lives and a sense they have something worthwhile to nurture and defend. The GLR is about reversing the slow downward spiral of rural communities and the unbalanced development and marginalisation of people in accessing new technology and

essential skills and culturally and socially enriching resources. (p.1)

Martin Bower believes that if rural communities are provided with access to resources they will take advantage of them and gain self-fulfilment:

If rural communities constantly see in the media and the like that rural and regional structures are going to contract, then it becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy. People don't invest financially, socially or emotionally, leading to an overall breakdown of the community.

Yet the rural community is a good place to live and raise children, grow old and gain self-fulfilment. If these communities are provided with access to these resources, usually seen in larger urban areas, the benefits of both worlds are achieved and the downward trend is reversed. (p.2)

Martin Bower has prepared a range of documents on the Gwydir Learning Region, all characterised by a belief in education as an enabler and a belief in the potential for community self-directedness.

Max Eastcott remembers similar lessons from his university studies in sociology:

I remember from my early university studies in sociology that often communities under stress are socially quite cohesive because they band together as no one else will help them – self help and self reliance becomes very important. (Eastcott 2005a, p.2)

Social capital is defined by Lesser (2000) as the product of a person's networks or connections. Peter Cuskelly (2005a) articulates the potential for building social capital through investing in youth:

Another important strategy is the community support for its youth. The investment of time and training in the young people of Gwydir Shire develops for them a sense of connectedness with the local community and encourages them to continue with their education and in some cases remain working locally. Those who venture away for further training and experience are more likely to return to raise a family or to operate a business or service in the future.

## **Concepts from education**

A number of members of the Gwydir Learning Region Sub-committee bring to the initiative their ideas about new approaches to education in rural areas, particularly the application of ideas about personalised learning and the role of vocational education for secondary school students. Other ideas contributed to the initiative are ideas about flexible learning from the TAFE members of the sub-committee and ideas about adult learning by the ACE members. Perhaps the newest of these ideas is that of personalised learning, so it is emphasised below.

A definition of personalised learning is provided by NSW DET:

Personalised learning means starting with good knowledge of where the students are in order to determine what they should be doing next and how they should be doing it. This information for each student can be represented as a 'Learning Plan'. Previous teaching and learning strategies have targeted students experiencing difficulties or addressed the needs of high achievers. Personalised learning assumes differentiation: all students receive targeted attention and consideration. (Personalised Learning – Background Paper, NSW DET 2004)

The NSW DET paper suggested that personalised learning is a means by which schools and TAFE can deliver education to students that will:

- meet parent and community expectations that educators should give close attention to the individual learning needs of students
- enhance the learning achievement of all students
- capitalise on expanded access and uses of information and communication technology (ICT).

Finally, the Background Paper suggested that “personalised learning/instruction” should not be confused with “learning styles” theory, students determining their own curriculum, or individualised learning. In the model of personalised learning proposed, students still learn in classrooms and in groups. Personalised learning still assumes a common curriculum and a common goal – to achieve the best possible outcome for every student.

Peter Cuskelly (2006) cites a number of features of the Gwydir Learning Region, which he groups under the title of “Personalised Learning”:

Student determined curriculum (relevance) – Curriculum Committee

Student access to courses according to readiness not age

Student access to TAFE delivered courses

Part-time student attendances

Part-time traineeships – Gwydir Industry-Educational Links Committee

School-to-Work Plan for all students Years 9-12 – Martin Bower

Flexible delivery of courses and flexible timetable – Curriculum Committee

Adult learning.

Peter Macbeth (paper, 2006) also views personalised learning as fundamental to the GLR:

The GLR is also built on the notion that we must personalise learning and that everyone should have the opportunity to learn. (p.5)

The Gwydir Learning Region demonstrates that the approach called personalised learning can reach across both the school and VET environment. In the school environment, personalised learning can entail collaborative development by teachers, students and parents, and in the VET environment personalised learning can entail collaboration by learners, VET providers and enterprises. In both domains personalised learning can incorporate assessment information and provide a means of setting targets for the student based on an understanding of the student’s current achievement and capacity.

A Board of Vocational Education and Training (BVET) proposal in 2004 for a research project on personalised learning noted that an holistic approach to a student’s needs is at the centre of strategies called personalised learning:

In the Australian context, similar strategies have been pursued under different labels such as student-centred learning, flexible learning, individualised or customised learning. These strategies may include initial diagnosis, customised support plans, and the use of information technology applications to supply specific learning resources and support services to match students’ needs and plans. An holistic approach to a student’s needs is at the centre of these types of strategies. (Proposal to BVET for a Demonstration Project, NSW DET 2004)

This holistic approach to a student’s needs is reiterated in the following statement in which Peter Cuskelly (2005b) describes his beliefs which underpinned changes he made at Warialda High School following his appointment there as Principal in 2000:

Everyone can learn

All learning should be valued

Differences should be encouraged and celebrated

Everyone should have access to school irrespective of age

School is about more than the acquisition of a HSC or UAI score

Courses should be linked to students' interests and needs, with students determining the senior curriculum

Students should be able to access courses according to readiness not age

School and TAFE need to be more flexible in the ways that they operate

Student life chances are not likely to improve without collective action by the school and the community

School should genuinely encourage lifelong learning

School has an important role to play in the renewal of isolated rural communities. (p.2)

Peter Cuskelly's beliefs push the boundaries of personalised learning but these beliefs sit comfortably with the GLR's goal and desired outcomes regarding education and training, as set out in Figure 2 below.

**Figure 2: GLR goal and desired outcomes regarding education and training**

**Goal**

To enhance the existing education and training provision within our communities.

**Desired outcomes**

- Increased education and training opportunities and participation within our communities
- To provide learning opportunities which meet personal and vocational needs
- To encourage a cultural change in our communities which values education and training
- To be recognised as a community which has 'talented, innovative, creative' people
- To identify projects and programs, both short term and ongoing, which will be of personal and vocational interest to our communities
- To ensure those programs are available either directly from a local education and training provider or brokered into our region from an outside education and training providers.

**Concepts from sustainable community development**

Interviews with stakeholders of the Gwydir Learning Region revealed that individual members brought additional perspectives to the initiative from the fields of sustainable management and community development. For example:

- as discussed in the previous chapter, Jane Beaumont, formerly the Community Services Manager, Gwydir Shire Council, brought to the initiative her views about community harmony
- the General Manager of the Shire, Max Eastcott recently completed a Masters Degree in Sustainable Management which influenced his approach
- Director of TAFE NSW New England Institute Gary Pollock has a background in community development which he said influenced his approach to the Gwydir.

Peter Cuskelly (2005a) was clear about the community development aims of the Gwydir initiative:

The developers of the Gwydir Learning Region are attempting to change the mindset of small rural communities to have them focus more on what can be done rather than what can't.

The Gwydir Learning Region enables individuals and communities to regain control of their futures, to build confidence and maintain a sense of pride and achievement.

Peter Macbeth (paper, Feb. 2006) recommends the valuing of the passion for long-term sustainability:

The passion and the spirit that exists within the Gwydir Shire are unmatched and is unique to our communities. It is that passion and enthusiasm for long-term sustainability that we must grab hold of and use so that we can continue to enjoy and appreciate the wonderful lifestyle that we have living in the Gwydir Shire. (p.8)

In a public presentation (2004a), Max Eastcott, General Manager, Gwydir Shire Council, linked the Gwydir Learning Region to the key characteristics of sustainable rural communities developed by the Strengthening Communities Unit, Premier's Department NSW. The list is set out in Figure 3 below. Max Eastcott noted in particular that to achieve the characteristic of 'The community develops plans that merge social and economic goals and build local capacity' there are three important requirements:

1. Level of Social Capital
2. Level of Creative Capital
3. Degree of acceptance about the Community's Vision. (Eastcott 2004a)

Linking learning and sustainability, he emphasised that the Gwydir Shire Council wants to become "the recognised leader in Local Government through continuous learning and sustainability" and that the Council's objectives were to:

- Improve participation and achievement in education and training
- Provide better links between schools, Universities, TAFE, business and communities
- Expand opportunities for training and learning all through life. (Eastcott 2004a)

He was clear about the vision:

What an opportunity! We will create a new identity and community culture built around our vision. (Eastcott 2004a)

**Figure 3: Key Characteristics of sustainable rural communities (Strengthening Communities Unit, Premier's Department 2006)**

- What characteristics make a community strong and resilient? A suggested list from the Strengthening Rural Communities Project, Premier's Department.
1. The community takes a multi-functional approach to create a sustainable (economically, environmentally, socially and politically) development system;
  2. The community maximises the use of its limited time and resources in areas that will yield the greatest strategic benefits;
  3. The community develops plans that merge social and economic goals and build local capacity;
  4. The community is able to mobilise sectors of the community around priorities;
  5. The Community is able to focus its energies on mobilising internal assets while leveraging outside resources to achieve its goals;
  6. The community has established a critical mass of cooperating organisations through which locally based initiatives are implemented and evaluated;
  7. The community has strong, inclusive and visionary leadership - both formal and informal.
  8. The community promotes the well being of all members of the community by encouraging participation, consultation and involvement in community life.
  9. The community values investment in education, training and lifelong learning.
  10. The community has access to positive accurate and information with which it can evaluate its progress in achieving its goals.

Ife (2002) argues that community development can accommodate two sets of ideas – ideas about social justice and ideas about ecology:

The ecological and social justice perspectives, taken together, form the basis of a vision for a future

society. The social justice perspective provides a vision of what is socially desirable: a society based on equity, empowerment, the overcoming of structural disadvantage, freedom to define needs and have them met, the definition and guaranteeing of rights and so on. The ecological perspective provides a vision of what is feasible, and outlines the sort of society that will be viable in the long term, namely a society based on the principles of holism, sustainability, diversity and balance. Taken together, they represent a powerful vision of the future. (p.79)

There are elements of the social justice perspective and the ecological perspective in the quotes set out above from GLR stakeholders and in the GLR's goals and desired outcomes regarding community development, as set out in Figure 4 below.

**Figure 4: GLR's goal and desired outcomes regarding community involvement**

<p><b>Goal</b></p> <p>To encourage each member of our community to fully participate in our learning community.</p> <p><b>Desired outcomes</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop in our students the appreciation that their Communities have an interest in their welfare.</li> <li>• Determine the potential vocational activities that either exist or have the potential to be developed in our region.</li> <li>• Introduce the general public to the concept that social activities that have no apparent direct relationship to learning lead to the development of self esteem and self worth.</li> <li>• Present role models to our communities that illustrate how education, training and social interaction are all part of personal development.</li> <li>• Engage the Community in the idea that learning is a life long process.</li> </ul>
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Max Eastcott articulates a social justice dimension to the Gwydir Learning Region:

Truly powerful communities are those that can identify the gifts of those people at the margin of society and pull them into community life.

Gwydir Learning Region is about achieving this outcome. (Eastcott 2006)

The following statement reflects both social justice (equity and empowerment) and ecological perspectives (diversity and balance):

Learning is seen as a way to improve the social environment (for older and socially isolated residents) and life chances of individuals and to create a desire for life long learning within our community. (Eastcott 2005c)

## Concepts about economic and regional development

Some of the quotations cited earlier in this report from stakeholders of the Gwydir Learning Region demonstrated their belief that collaborative planning and improved educational provision could not only assist community development but could also improve economic development. For example, confidence that education and training can deliver both economic revival and community pride is expressed by Peter Cuskelly (2005a):

Distance, financial restraints and the nature of rural life are deterrents for residents to pursue further education and training. In order to improve access, it is crucial that the delivery of education be local, affordable and flexible.

Declining businesses and services have eroded rural town pride and confidence in many parts of country Australia. Vocational education can be the catalyst for confidence building and revitalization of the community.

The Gwydir Learning Region through cooperative effort facilitates the re-skilling of the community, the completion of community projects, and the development of new business opportunities and services.

Max Eastcott (2005a) is confident that “collective creativity” can redress low educational achievement levels, drawing parallels between the creative classes in cities and the innovators in the Gwydir Learning Region:

In a recent article in *The New Scientist* Professor Richard Florida made the observation that ‘when talented people come together, their collective creativity is not just additive; rather, interactions multiply and enhance their individual productivity’. He was talking particularly about much larger centres such as San Francisco but the underlying truth is just as applicable to towns like Bingara and others that are attacking their problems with innovative solutions.

The Gwydir Learning Region, of which UNE is a part, is just one example of the community’s response to issues such as poor educational levels. (p.5)

Related concepts driving the Gwydir Learning Region are that employment training needs can be identified through planning and that skills training can be provided. These concepts are expressed in the GLR’s goal and desired outcomes regarding employment, following.

**Figure 5: GLR’s goal and desired outcomes regarding employment**

<p><b>Goal</b></p> <p>To ensure that the region’s future employment training needs are being met through competent planning</p> <p><b>Desired outcomes</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Documented strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) within the region</li> <li>• Document outlining level of employee skills across all employment categories in the region</li> <li>• Document outlining preferred employee skill requirements through consultation with regional employers</li> <li>• Targeted skills training</li> </ul>
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### Summary comments

A mix of concepts infuses the planning for and approach of the Gwydir Learning Region sub-committee. Some of this mix is expressed in the GLR statement of values, particularly in the focus section, which traverses the following ideas: lifelong learning, a ‘can-do’ attitude, sustainable communities and inclusive leadership.

**Figure 6: Gwydir Learning Region statement of values (in the minutes of the GLR Sub-committee 28 Nov 2005)**

<p><b>FOCUS</b></p> <p>The Gwydir Learning Region has a commitment to achieve our primary goal of</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• promoting lifelong learning by having a bias for action.</li> <li>• We overcome the barriers presented as obstacles to our success by having a ‘can-do’, innovative and flexible attitude.</li> <li>• Our success is extremely important to ensure the sustainability of our community.</li> <li>• We will be true to our mission and vision and display inclusive leadership to our community!</li> </ul> <p><b>RELATIONSHIPS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We recognise that our strength is the result of the diversity of our constituent members and that the external commitment of members to their respective organisations may result in differing points of view.</li> <li>• At all times we will seek to contribute in a positive and collaborative manner.</li> <li>• Individually we will be ethical in our dealings with other members and display integrity in overall commitment to the Gwydir Learning Region.</li> <li>• During discussion all interactions will be respectful, honest and open with ideas challenged, rather than people. We will actively listen to the contributions from other members.</li> <li>• We will all ‘own’ the resolved position adopted at our meetings and ‘sell’ the outcome to our respective organisations and the community in general.</li> </ul>
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- We will not 'white-ant', externally criticise or work against the best interests of the Gwydir Learning Region within our organisations or the community.
- Members may be assertive in expressing constructive criticism at our meetings.
- We will support each other and recognise our 'champions'.

## 4. Structural and operational characteristics of the Gwydir Learning Region

This chapter describes the structure and operation of the Gwydir Learning Region, noting its movement towards increased formality in 2005.

### Key points

Key points in this chapter include the following:

- The Gwydir Learning Region is managed by a Co-ordinating Committee of the Gwydir Shire Council that is chaired by the Mayor. This enables the Council to provide significant support to the Learning Region, including a 0.6 equivalent full-time administrative officer. However, the Committee has no delegated power, which enables it to focus on collaborating, not exercising power.
- While public processes and structures are becoming more tangible, the collaborative structure of the Gwydir Learning Region is built on the trust, passion and goodwill of stakeholders, not on rules or meeting procedures. This trust and goodwill and the relationships that underpin the Gwydir Learning Region need occasional renewal, if the initiative is to continue to flourish.

### Evolution of structure

Peter Cuskelly (2005b) describes the early attempts to form a learning region with three local councils:

Over 2002 and 2003, a series of meetings were held in the shire chambers of Yallaroi, Bingara and Barraba consisting of representatives from the various councils, the two high schools, TAFE and other educational providers in an attempt to create a Learning Region.

He explains the transition from working with this coalition of three councils to collaborating with the Gwydir Shire Council after its formation in 2004:

One of the first actions of the new Council was to forge a memorandum of understanding between the local government body and the two High Schools. Next in 2004, the natural development was the creation of the Gwydir Learning Region Committee as a sub-committee of the full Council. It is made up of representatives from the Gwydir Shire Council, the two high schools, New England TAFE, Warialda, Bingara, Barraba and Gravesend Adult and Community Education (ACE) and the Gwydir Industry and Educational Links Committee (GIELC). The Gwydir Learning Region has developed further links with the University of New England and Southern Cross University. (p.11)

Peter Cuskelly (2005a) then describes the role played by the Warialda High School, which is now performed by the Gwydir Learning Region Committee:

From 2000 to May 2005, Warialda High School has acted as a kind of brokerage, identifying what students and community members want to be taught, who could best deliver it, where and how. The creation of the Gwydir Learning Region Committee as a sub-committee of the Gwydir Shire Council would see a transference of the role to that committee.

According to Peter Cuskelly (2005a), the Gwydir Learning Region Committee “seeks to identify the learning needs of all Gwydir Shire residents and to facilitate the delivery of the appropriate knowledge and skills development”.

With the simpler framework of one council, not three, it was possible to finalise a structure for the Gwydir Learning Region in May 2005, with the adoption of the following framework.

**Figure 7: Structure of the GLR (GLR Strategic Plan 2005)**

**GOAL: To create a management structure that will support the organisation in its pursuit of its vision.**

**DESIRED OUTCOMES:**

A sustainable and workable structure that has broadly based community support.

An achievable strategic plan supported by the community of the region.

The strong support of the identified stakeholder groups.

**STRATEGY:**

The creation of a Gwydir Learning Region Coordinating Committee with representation from all the other major Stakeholder groups including:

- TAFE
- Adult Learning and other similar organisation
- All the local schools
- New England University
- Gwydir Shire Council

At its meeting in May 2005, the Gwydir Learning Region committee considered the document entitled 'Guidelines for the operation of the Gwydir Learning Region Co-ordinating Committee (section 355 LGA Committee)'. The recommendation in the document was accepted. The membership and function of the committee are set out in Figure 8 below.

**Figure 8: Committee membership and function**

Recommendation to Council: That the Gwydir Learning Region Co-ordinating Committee (section 355 LGA Committee) be formed with the following remit and membership:

The membership consists of representatives from the following various stakeholder groups;

- Bingara Central School
- Warialda High School
- Barraba Central School (If it elects to participate)
- Gwydir School/Industry Links organisations
- New England TAFE
- New England University
- Gwydir Shire Council
- Bingara Adult and Community Education
- Barraba/Warialda Adult and Community Education
- Warialda CTC (Possible future membership)
- Relevant NSW Government Representative.

The quorum is 5.

The actual numbers' composition is determined by negotiation between the Principals of the Bingara Central School, Warialda High School and the General Manager of Gwydir Shire Council

Committee Chairman and Deputy Chairman

The Chair will be the Mayor of Gwydir Shire Council and Deputy Chair will be the General Manager Gwydir Shire Council.

The Committee's Secretary will be an employee of Gwydir Shire Council.

Whenever the voting on a motion put to this Committee is equal, the Chairperson is to have a casting vote as well as an original vote.

#### Committee Delegation

This Committee has no delegated power.

#### Committee Function

The role of the Committee is the co-ordination of the activities of the Learning Region.

The Committee will achieve this through performing the following functions;

- Prepare and submit to the Council for approval a short, medium and long term management plan for the activities of the Committee.
- Submit to the Council for its approval, prior to the end of April each year, the estimated budget for the next financial year.
- Submit an Annual Report before the end of September each year for the preceding financial year outlining the performance of the Committee against the adopted strategic plan and budget.

It is important to note from the above that “This Committee has no delegated power”. Hence, the committee enjoys the patronage, practical support and public profile offered by the Council, but has no power to influence the Council. Basically, the arrangement is based on shared goals and goodwill.

Operationally, the relationship with the Council provides the committee with useful resources. As of 2006, the Council has allocated 0.6 of an administrative officer, to support the Gwydir Learning Region. Additionally, the Council’s Training Manager provides further support. “Effectively that is 1.2 equivalent full time staff,” said Max Eastcott, General Manager of the Shire Council.

Max Eastcott is clear that trust and commitment are the keys to the Gwydir Learning Region, not formal structure:

The unique component of the Region is the close co-operation that exists within the management structure of the controlling Committee. The relationships that exist between the participants are based upon trust and an intense commitment to achieve improvement through action. (Eastcott 2005c)

### **Links to other committees**

The GLR Co-ordinating Committee collaborates closely with other committees, particularly the Gwydir Industry and Educational Links Committee (GIELC). Peter Cuskelly (2005a) describes the GIELC as follows:

The Gwydir Industry and Educational Links Committee (GIELC) is made up of student, teacher, parent and employer representatives from Warialda and Bingara whose role it is to facilitate part-time traineeships for Gwydir youth.

### **Rules for meetings**

One action agreed to at the planning workshop of the Gwydir Learning Region on 19 September 2005 was that rules would be developed for the GLR meetings. In developing the rules, it was agreed that the following issues would be addressed:

- Frequency of meetings
- Length of meetings
- Location of meeting – alternate between Bingara and Warialda
- Agenda items to chairperson one week before meeting
- Course planning to be an agenda item

- Guest speakers to be addressed by the chairperson
- Meetings to be outcomes focussed
- Is the GLR a decision making group or a coordination group or a strategic planning or promotional
- General business
- Secretarial role
- Video-conferencing usage for meetings
- Who else should be at the meetings.

### **Summary points**

In 2005 increased structure and formality was brought to the core committee coordinating the Gwydir Learning Region, reflecting a need to manage the increasingly ambitious and complex goals and desired outcomes of the initiative. However, the stakeholders are concerned that they continue to be driven by shared goals, not rules. Max Eastcott (2006) has ably captured this spirit:

The strength of the GLR is in the personal relationships that have developed between its major participants over the last 4 years. Continuing membership to any association must be underpinned by a belief that you get more out of something than you are called to put in – this is only logical. The passage of time has seen a change in the membership, and the consistent renewal of our internal relationships in a positive way is a challenge that we must all address.

## **SECTION B: EVALUATING THE GWYDIR LEARNING REGION**

This section sets out data and findings from the evaluation of the Gwydir Learning Region. In particular, the following questions are addressed:

- How successful is the Gwydir Learning Region, against a range of qualitative and quantitative indicators?
- What are the key success factors for the Gwydir Learning Region?

## 5. Success of the Gwydir Learning Region model – user perspective

This chapter analyses the success of the Gwydir Learning Region, based on evidence gained from or about its users. Users are defined as current or past students – either youths or adults – who have undertaken educational programs provided by the GLR.

### Key points

Key points in this chapter include the following:

- Profiles of past users of the Gwydir Learning Region include some outstanding cases of graduates being set on the path towards working, sometimes overseas, or establishing businesses locally.
- Current users of the GLR are almost entirely positive about the GLR and are able to articulate a range of social and economic benefits they are gaining from it, providing strong endorsement for the ambitious goals of the GLR to influence both community and economic development.

### Methods

To ascertain the views and experiences of users, four research methods were used: a scan of the literature from the GLR, interviews with individuals, a user survey and interviews with groups of current users. The names of users interviewed and surveyed are set out in Appendix 2.

### Evidence in the literature

In recent years, Peter Cuskelly and Martin Bower from Warialda High School in particular have profiled a range of different graduates from the Gwydir Learning Region. For example, Martin Bower (2005a, pp.5-7) provides the following snapshots of successful graduates:

Daniel Duncan expressed a desire to have a career working with tigers and big cats when he was in Year 9. Warialda High School organised with TAFE for him to do his Vet Nursing Training within his HSC years. He completed his Vet Nurse credential as well as full HSC in 2 years. He was accepted into Zoo Keeping in QLD TAFE. He went overseas and gained employment with the Paradise Wildlife Park in Britain and is now working between Britain and Africa rehabilitating big cats back to the wild. Daniel is 22 years old (in 2005). (p.5)

Jenny Nolan is a parent of children at Warialda High. She decided that she needed to develop her skills in Information Technology. She graduated from Year 12 as the top IT student. Jenny is now the IT coordinator at Warialda High and also runs her own business. (pp. 5-6).

Shaun Stevenson is now the Deputy Store Manager at the Scone Big W Store. Shaun did an academic HSC combined with Voc Ed Retail at school. His UAI got him Newcastle Uni and he already had gained work with Big W via his Year 12 Voc Ed performance. (p.6)

The above experiences are samples only: many other users have had positive experiences following their accessing of the Gwydir Learning Region programs.

## Interviews with individual users

A number of individual users of the Gwydir Learning Region were interviewed, all of whom spoke positively of the learning region.

**Carisa Riley** is a Year 12 student at Warialda High School undertaking a Certificate 111 in Retail. As part of the retail program, she works for three hours a day as a trainee at Boutique Capri in Bingara. Carisa had lost interest in school in Year 10 and with the support of the proprietor of Boutique Capri, Susanne Hughes, and the Vocational Education Officer at Warialda High, Wayne Squires, she commenced a traineeship. She says of her work at Boutique Capri: "I love doing my work, I love everything about it." The benefits for her of undertaking the vocational education program with the traineeship component are many: "I can stay at school and get a certificate out of it. I am interacting with customers and my self-esteem is up."

**Ben O'Brien** is a Year 11 student at Warialda High School who is also enrolled in a Certificate 11 in electro-technology as he is seeking an apprenticeship as an electrician at the end of the year. The electro-technology program is not offered locally, so the High School staff made arrangements with TAFE New England. Ben now travels once per week to the TAFE campus at Tamworth, approximately 160km away from his home at Bingara. Such is his determination to undertake the electro-technology program, he leaves by bus for Tamworth each Wednesday at 10.30am and undertakes the program from 1.30-6.30pm. He then departs from Tamworth in the early hours of the next day to arrive back in Bingara at 6am on Thursday, ready to catch the school bus at 7.30am for the trip to Warialda High School.

**Bronwyn Sargeant** is an adult residing in Warialda who has undertaken a raft of vocational programs since first undertaking a program with the Gwydir Learning Region in 2003, leading directly to the creation of her own successful business. In 2004 she completed Certificate 111 in Aged Care, organised by the High School and delivered by TAFE. This gave her the confidence to undertake further study and open her own business. Key milestones for her are set out below.

**Figure 9: Milestones for Gwydir Learning Region graduate, Bronwyn Sargeant, Warialda**

2004:	Certificate 111 Aged Care, through Warialda High School/TAFE New England
2004:	Commenced offering in-home care
2004:	Completed Owner-Builder Course-correspondence Moree TAFE
2005:	Certificate IV Aged Care, undertaken by correspondence with TAFE at Tamworth
2005:	Certificate 111 Home and Community Care, undertaken by correspondence with TAFE at Tamworth
2005:	Commenced Bachelor's degree in Health Science, UNE, by correspondence
2005:	Opened own business in family day care, Warialda
2005:	Opened a respite care centre for children with a disability
2005:	Completed a foster care course with DOCS-Inverell
2006:	Certificate 111 Disabilities, by correspondence from Tamworth
2006:	Certificate 111 Childcare, to June, by correspondence from Newtrain, Narrabri
2006:	Diploma Childcare, from June, by correspondence from Armidale TAFE
2006:	Continuing Bachelor's degree in Health Science, UNE, by correspondence

In 2006 Bronwyn Sargeant is providing in-home care, as well as Family Day Care for 53 children and respite care for a number of others. She employs eight local people for around 6-8 hours per week each and she requires her staff to undertake the Certificate 111 in Aged Care or Child Care or Disabilities, offered through the Gwydir Learning Region.

One of the people she employs was previously unemployed for six years, following a car accident and the loss of confidence. "She previously undertook Certificate 11, Childcare and is now undertaking a Certificate 111 Child Care and a Certificate 111 Aged Care." This person has been assisted by Bronwyn to open her own In-Home Care business, and according to

Bronwyn “she is doing a marvellous job”. Bronwyn Sargeant recently assisted two other people in the area to set up their own businesses in the field of in-home child care. In 2005 Bronwyn purchased a second home in Warialda to cope with her expanding business and is currently negotiating access to a third premise.

Another employee of Bronwyn’s business, the Warialda Respite Centre, was encouraged by Bronwyn to begin her Certificate 111 Aged Care. She is thirty eight years old and had only ever undertaken seasonal work. Bronwyn was able to assist her with applying for a job with the Aged Care Packages (EACH) that recently started in Warialda. Bronwyn was also able to give her a good reference due to the work that she had undertaken with her. Her application was successful and she is now employed as a part-time permanent with McLean Retirement Village of Inverell.

Bronwyn Sargeant sees her success flowing directly from the confidence she gained from undertaking the initial Certificate 111 in Aged Care and is full of praise for the Gwydir Learning Region:

It’s wonderful: it has provided me with heaps of support, for example they encouraged me to undertake the Certificate IV with TAFE Tamworth. I needed the qualifications to run my business.

Some of the aspects of the Gwydir Learning Region she likes most are ease of access (“It is wonderful due to Martin Bower”); the “flexible delivery of courses”; and the self-confidence she and her staff gained from the programs. She concludes:

As you can see from my story, education is making huge differences to people’s lives in our small country town. Education plus confidence equals power to achieve goals. A huge thank you to the people that are making this happen.

## **Interviews with groups of current users**

Interviews were conducted with nine groups of students – both youths and adults – as listed in Appendix 2. Comments by these groups supported those made by individuals who completed the user survey, as set out below. These verbal comments conveyed the unanimous appreciation the users felt towards the people behind the Gwydir Learning Region. There were also frequent comments about how the users appreciated the cooperation between the different stakeholders (e.g. “It’s good that the organisations have got together”) and that the whole community can access the programs (e.g. “It’s great that it’s open to all ages”). Comments were made about the fact that the stakeholders had done all that they could to create opportunities and now it was up to the individual users to take advantage of the offerings (“You have to want to do it. It’s up to us now”). A number of people said of the Gwydir Learning Region “it’s the best thing that’s come to the region.”

## **Results from user survey**

A user survey was completed by 55 users from nine different programs, as listed in Appendix 2. The seven questions in the user survey are repeated below, with their responses.

The responses below are clustered into groups: each ‘paragraph’ represents a different group. Full stops separate the comments of different group members. This style of layout was chosen to ensure – as far as possible – that the identity of the respondents was not disclosed.

Many of the responses were the same – e.g. Martin Bower was named continuously as the main source of information – so much of this repetition was removed from the comments below.

### ***Information***

Users were asked: *How do you find out about the services of the Gwydir Learning Region?*

Their responses included:

Mail drops and face-to-face with Martin Bower. Through school. Careers adviser Mr Bower. Mr Bower. Newspaper. Schools career adviser.

Careers teacher. Mr Bower. Careers teacher told us about it. Careers teacher offered me an opportunity in a VET course.

Through the school. Phone call from Martin Bower high school teacher. Through the careers teacher and newspaper, bulletins. Through my daughter at Warialda High School.

Local newspaper. Adult learning coordinator. Robyn Gassner. Adult Learning Association. Newspaper. Jane Beaumont. Martin Bower from Warialda High School. The Cert 111 course was advertised in the local paper, and through the Gwydir Shire. Council. Through Jane Beaumont. Suzanne Fuelling.

Mr Bower. Through school, Mr Bower, word-of-mouth. Friend, Mr Bower, mother.

Bingara Advocate, school newsletter. Information from Warialda High School. School newsletter, Bob Johnston.

Mr Johnston tells us about all our courses. Teachers/Mr Johnston. Through the school, Mr Johnston or Mr Macbeth. Via notes sent home with my child, a (school) student, there was a meeting scheduled for all interested.

Clearly, users find out about the services of the Gwydir Learning Region from a range of sources. The GLR is advised to always use these multiple channels, to ensure the information is disseminated widely.

### *Use*

Users were asked: *What is the main use you have made of the Gwydir Learning Region?*

Their responses included:

Additional training. Welding and building at TAFE. Welding.

Business Studies Certificate 11, Childcare Certificate 11. Aged Care Certificate 111. Fitness Certificate 11.

Access to different courses. Access to a variety of courses. To obtain a certificate to work in aged care facilities. To acquire more resources to better myself in my purpose to reach certain goals in my life. It has furthered my education. Attending Cert 111 Aged Care course. Certificate 111 Aged Care – this has also given me confidence to gain a driver's licence. To better my opportunities in the workforce and being a sole parent its something for me, to benefit myself and kids too. It has great social interaction and gives opportunities to work. Class activities, use of computers, tutoring, access to careers advisers from Warialda High School.

Screen (course). Business studies course 2005; Screen 2004-2005; Gwydir Jazz Band. Office studies. Journalism. Child Care.

Aged Care.

Hospitality, Computer Studies, Animal Care. None before, as new to the area.

Beauty therapy, Equine Studies. Hospitality. Retail. Business Studies. Hairdressing. To expand knowledge of equine study. To complete modules necessary for me to better my qualification and employability. As a mature aged single parent student, it's incredibly convenient. I'm doing a case (study) to learn more about animals.

Users have a variety of uses they want to make of the Gwydir Learning Region and implicitly appreciate that such a wide range of interests is catered for by the GLR.

## **Access**

Users were asked: *How easy have you found it to access the services of the Gwydir Learning Region?*

Their responses included:

Access is easy. Local courses are easier to access due to time factors and travelling distances. Access is good and location is no problem. Good. Holding courses at high school is central.

Straightforward. Yes, careers teacher advises you about these. Our teacher keeps us informed of available courses. We have easy access to them through school.

It's a bit difficult because I live on a farm so there's transport issues.

Very easy. Approachable. Fairly easy – travel 40 kms. Very - the newspaper is a very great source of information relating to various courses and information. Very – information is always easy to access. Very easy – it's a widely used community venue. I can use the computers (at the Bingara Learning Centre). Very easy information is always available through David Maddigan and Warialda High School.

It has been made easy through the school and Mr Bower. Very easy, mixing with people. Has been easy to do at school. Very close to having to travel.

Easy. Being available in Bingara makes a difference due to the fact that there is no cost and we don't have to travel. Easy as it is in the local area.

Going to Tamworth for Beauty Therapy and Equine Studies. Really easy, it's great. Easy because I am a student at Bingara Central. Quite easy. Easy except when we have to go to Tamworth (320km return) and we have to work out transport. All of my TAFE courses have been at the school. Yes, very practical – it works in with my children's schedule. Pretty easy.

In brief, users are very appreciative that programs are offered in Warialda and Bingara, wherever possible.

## **Social benefits**

Users were asked: *What social benefits have you gained from using the Gwydir Learning Region (e.g. learning; self-confidence; social skills; new networks)?*

Their responses included:

Could help to get a job. Help get a job. Social interaction.

Extra learning, different people and goes for longer. Learning. You are with different people, I find I learn more. Extra learning, longer time, different people – students/adults. We interact with different aged students and adults.

Gives extra knowledge; gives me discipline to manage time; mixing with adults. Self-confidence; social skills, with other students and parents. New networks and learning new courses and discipline. Yes I see it as a help to myself and looking for work later on. Learning to understand others. Self-discipline.

All of the above. A huge leap in confidence in everyone in the class. All of the above examples. Knowledge, increased general knowledge. I believe that I have grown as a person – I'm more confident within myself. I have gained self confidence in myself and have found new skills that will be rewarding after I have finished my course. More self confidence, group learning skills makes learning easier, treated as an adult – not a child, new founded friendships within the class. All of the above, and making new friends. Extreme self-confidence, driver's licence and wanting to learn more. Self confidence has boosted and in class its always a laugh as well as learning too – a sense of achievement and moving forward. It gives me a lot of confidence, learning etc. All of the above and career skills.

All of the above, widened my horizons. Self-confidence, social skills, new networks. New networks, communication-on-screen skills. Learning with others, social skills. Help learning – chances to go places for the course or things. Helped learning. Self-confidence, meet new people who are interested in the same thing; helped with school. Learning new skills; more confident about abilities. Learning, refresher, social skills.

I've learned a bit and have more self-confidence. Knowledge collecting, meeting new people. Met new people, have learnt about the town's facility.

It has helped me learn more about horses and make up. Its helped my learning with horses. Helped my confidence, makes me more independent.

Learning, social skills. Social skills, knowledge, experience. Learning, self confidence, new networks. Learning; to have self confidence. Social skills, more knowledge. Confidence. Established an excellent relationship with staff which has been of great benefit as my children are (school) students.

This is a significant set of comments, as there was extensive commentary earlier in this report about the idealism of the stakeholders of the Gwydir Learning Region in seeking to bring about social and community benefits through learning programs. The above comments demonstrate that the Gwydir Learning Region can and does bring about social benefits for the region. The comments also prove that the social and community goals of the GLR are both realistic and are being achieved.

### **Economic benefits**

Users were asked: *What economic benefits have you gained from using the Gwydir Learning Region (e.g. information about employment; job skills)?*

Their responses included:

Skills will help – due to isolation it is difficult to obtain the services of tradesmen. Ability to perform jobs previously unable to. Saving by doing things (construction jobs) myself.

Giving advantages for job skills. Yes, otherwise I wouldn't be doing it. Yes, giving me job skills. Yes, this course gives us advantages in future jobs. We gain many skills for the future.

I'm finding out about different job options. Finding out about different jobs. New job skills and different career path. Finding out about jobs that I never knew about. Learning more about sewing and making patterns.

I have gained employment in an area associated with Aged Care - this course has made me more employable. I have learnt a lot and I hope it will open new avenues for me. Job skills and the ability to be employed as an Aged Care professional. The Aged Care course that I have been doing has helped me to be a better person with the understanding and empathy that I need to have to fulfil my role as an assistant in nursing. Hopefully with the skills I gain I am able to find employment that will benefit me and the work I do. As I am already employed as a hospital assistant, it will benefit my work greatly as we look forward to moving to the multipurpose centre and long-term ageing placements. Being able to stay within the town and not have to travel and have saved on travel costs. I have been a volunteer at the local hospital for five years and I believe that I will now be able to get paid work for what I have loved to do! There are more job opportunities than you would think in and out of town. It has created information about work experiences. Job skills and plenty of information.

Job skills. Doing the Screen and Business courses has given me more opportunities for employment in the future, through attaining new skills. Job skills. Skills – what you need; how to get there; where to look. Skills need for job; found out about industry; employment options. Gaining skills for the industry. I know how hard I need to work to get into certain industries and what they expect of me. Radio announcement

I have obtained information about employment and job skills. Computer skills, as most jobs today are associated with technology. Job skills that are required for jobs in this area.

Helped me with my job skills. Its helped me realize that there is heaps of jobs I could do. It made me realize that there are a variety of jobs to do. Helped me develop job skills and responsibility, opened doors for the future.

Information about employment. Helped develop job skills. Self confidence. Social skills. Hygiene, cooking skills which have helped me with my casual job; new opportunities. Excellent help to communicate with teachers who are up to date with industry happenings.

This also is a significant set of comments, as they demonstrate that the Gwydir Learning Region can and does bring about economic benefits for the region. The comments also prove that the economic goals of the GLR are both realistic and are being achieved.

### **Promotion**

Users were asked: *How do you think the Gwydir Learning Region could be promoted better?*

Their responses included:

I think they do well. Better (mail) 'drops' throughout the district. Newspaper and ads on TV. More ads in papers and TV. Local publicity is fine.

Newspapers and ads on TV. In newspapers, TV ads, radio, newsletters, flyers, posters. Mostly at school, could be promoted more, e.g. newspaper, advertisements etc. Brochures. We only hear about the courses at school.

On TV, in newspapers. Maybe more advertisements. More pamphlets and more in newspapers. Talked more about in the newspapers. A section in the Sydney newspapers maybe.

By specifying exactly how the GLR operates and the courses available to everyone, whether they are mature aged students or high school students. More news in papers of how well we are going. Through adult community groups. By recognising the achievements that students have accomplished by doing the courses that they have set. More advertising. Maybe through the NorthWest Magazine (have a weekly newsletter about what is happening in the class and what benefits it can offer.) A broader network of promoting this centre would benefit as we have other high schools and surrounding towns that don't have access to this centre (Bingara Learning Centre). I think information should be spread far and wide in TV, newspapers, because it has to be shown as something positive that anyone can do. I think its promoted well due to word of mouth but more advertising would be good. By encouraging a lot of people as adults to come and learn. Maybe more flyers and advertisements.

Ads, information in books, papers. Learning groups. Advertising available services, making a film. More awareness in and outside of local community. Advertise on TV, place posters on boards. Local paper, school newsletter, town flyers, make an ad for TV. Mr Bower does fairly well by himself; pay people who promote it. School is doing a great job promoting these courses.

TV and radio commercials. Put information in Centrelink offices and on TV. Flyers, mail, town notices, street posters. TV, radio.

On TV. Put it on TV. You could put it on TV so everyone will see it. Be promoted better on TV. More in school newsletter, more in newspaper. Promoted in the Bingara Advocate. Tell more people. Put more in newsletters and newspapers. More knowledge in community and rest of school: unless you have done it before or are involved you don't really know about it. More publications and 'public meetings' within the school for parents.

The number and helpful tone of these comments suggest that the users want to ensure the Gwydir Learning Region is promoted effectively. These comments now can inform the promotion strategy to be developed by the GLR in 2006.

### ***Other aspects***

Users were asked to make any further comments, as follows: *Please comment on any other aspect of the Gwydir Learning Region.*

Their responses included:

Easily accessible to all.

It's great that TAFE can be accessed. It's all OK as far as I am concerned.

I personally have found it very satisfying to be part of the GLR. It is the best thing that has come to Bingara. Adult learning shouldn't be promoted through schools as it detracts away from students and their HSC. I think that the Gwydir Learning Region is doing a really good job. The classrooms at the Gwydir Learning Region are most suitable offering fans, heating comfort, computers etc. The Gwydir Learning Region is an easily accessible venue/centre for all adult learners/ students/ community members. The unique group of passionate people who have set this up. Keep teachers around like David Maddigan. Have more expert people like David Maddigan. Be able to get access to the internet on a daily basis.

Easy to access, great networking. Loss of singular identities, Warialda & Bingara. Losing the identity of the town – good to meet new people. It provides many opportunities.

It is well run/managed. Great that the school is involved with TAFE courses and Gwydir Learning for Year 9/10 students and adults.

Last year I did three courses and two were great and one we did nothing. Bingara School has better TAFE courses than most country towns. Fun. It's all good. It's all good because we get these skills and learning and it costs nothing. It's good because you get to do it at the school.

It doesn't cost anything. It's available. For some courses you don't have to travel. Incredibly convenient, practical, cost effective, excellent well facilitated work environment.

The majority of these comments are affirming and supportive of the current approach by the Gwydir Learning Region. However, one respondent was concerned about high school students being distracted by "adult learning" and two were concerned that the identities of the two towns were being lost. Another complained about one of the three programs undertaken last year.

### **Summary points**

The data in this chapter provides very strong endorsement for the goals and approaches of the Gwydir Learning Region. Past and current users are almost entirely positive about every aspect of the initiative.

## 6. Success of the Gwydir Learning Region model – local stakeholder perspective

This chapter analyses the success of the Gwydir Learning Region, based on feedback from stakeholders. Stakeholders are defined as personnel that influence the ideas or planning of the GLR.

### Key points

Key points in this chapter include the following:

- The comments from participants at the stakeholder focus group illustrate that the Gwydir Learning Region committee is aware that it has achieved much and that some of its approaches are unique and some of its impacts are substantial. However, the committee is aware that more can be achieved especially with the 20-60 age group, more quantitative outcomes need to be documented and improved promotion is required.
- Tangible successes of the Gwydir Learning Region include tailored programs for individuals, an expanded student demographic, increased involvement of the community, an enlarged range of providers and the refurbishment and use of the iconic Roxy Theatre in Bingara.
- The approaches taken to transform the Warialda High School since 2000 are similar in many cases to approaches adopted by the Gwydir Learning Region – especially the determination to ensure the school or training program fit the needs of the individual, not the other way round. Such radical approaches at both the school and within the GLR resulted in successes in both domains.

### Research methods

To ascertain the views of stakeholders, four research methods were used: a scan of the literature from the GLR, interviews with individuals, a stakeholder survey and a focus group with stakeholders. The names of stakeholders who were interviewed or surveyed or who participated in a focus group are set out in Appendix 2.

In addition to this focus on stakeholders, discussions were conducted during the site visit to the region with a range of other personnel who have some involvement with the GLR, particularly teachers who conduct vocational education programs, prominent local business people, and members of community groups who have some engagement with the GLR. The names of these personnel are also set out in Appendix 2.

### Comments from the focus group

A focus group was conducted with stakeholders of the Gwydir Learning Region on 15 March 2006. Some of the data generated by the focus group is set out below and some is used elsewhere in this report. The data set out below mostly relates to the issue of the successes of the GLR.

A set of eleven propositions was put to the stakeholders. Following are paraphrased and direct comments in response to a number of the propositions.

**Alignment.** Proposition: *That the aims of the Gwydir Learning Region align closely with the*

*social needs of the region.*

Paraphrased comments included:

- The (conceptual) boundaries of the GLR need to stretch to meet more needs.
- The GLR meets the social needs of the 0-20 aged group better than the 20-60 aged group.
- We tried to engage the over 50 year old males but didn't succeed.
- Those aged 28-35 are a 'lost generation' with negative attitudes to education and need to be re-engaged.
- Impediments to engagement include poverty and negative attitudes to past schooling.

Direct comments included:

- "We're still in the development stage."
- "We do get in and do it."
- "We have a country sense of supporting the local community."
- "We are unique because we take risks and we are caring."
- "We will make people connect with the community."

**Essential.** Proposition: *That it is essential for the future economic prosperity of the region that the Gwydir Learning Region achieves its goals.*

Paraphrased comments included:

- The Gwydir Shire is one of the most impoverished in the state.
- We have to create an atmosphere where the self-employed flourish; we have to help the self-employed
- The GLR is hoping to attract more small businesses in fields of potential growth such as outdoor guiding, eco-tourism, aged care – especially as each new job has a multiplier effect
- 67,000 international visitors come to the region annually, so that provides hope.

Direct comments included:

- The GLR and the Shire Council support economic development: "it is about creating jobs"; "vocational education has to be focused on jobs".
- "What is great about the GLR is this heavy involvement of the Shire."
- "The main street of Bingara is now busy, there is a vibrancy now."
- "The Shire needs many more tradespeople: builders, electricians, plumbers."
- "We need to look to grow local businesses, not bring in an Arnott's-type factory."
- "We need to create a serviced office environment."
- "Don't ever say you can't do it."

**Concepts.** Proposition: *That the Gwydir Learning Region is underpinned by powerful concepts (e.g. social capital, lifelong learning, sustainable communities) but in emphasising all of them, messages are blurred about the benefits of the Learning Regions.*

Direct comments included:

- "We use the written word mostly, but many in the community don't read."
- "We have successes but we have not yet achieved a 'community movement'."
- "We want to avoid developing a hard shell based on rules: we want to be driven by ideas."
- "We are all responsible for community education. We have to provide what people don't

know they need. We need to help our people to learn more.”

- “We need to provide leadership in the community.”
- “We can live with ambiguity.”
- “We have created a new alignment between rules and flexibility”.

**Sustainability.** Proposition: *That the support by major stakeholders for the Gwydir Learning provides the main basis for the Gwydir Learning Region’s sustainability.*

A paraphrased comment was:

- The GLR committee needs to consider looking at leadership training for the members.

Direct comments included:

- “Many movements in history are an accidental combination of people like us: we have built up a critical mass of people who want change.”
- “The GLR has an important confluence of people and relationships.”
- “If an individual member of the GLR committee left we might need to adjust our focus.”
- “We need to become even more sophisticated. The education system wants us to develop a stronger critical mass of people.”

**Opportunities and threats.** Proposition: That more opportunities than threats await the Gwydir Learning Region.

Comments included:

- “We have an obligation to do even more.”
- “We are less vulnerable than we were four years ago.”
- One threat is that council ratepayers do not value community development as highly as roads, rates and rubbish collection.

**Strength and weakness.** Proposition: *That the strength of the Gwydir Learning Region is its achievement of intangible outcomes, but this characteristic also weakens its case for government support.*

Paraphrased comments included:

- We need to do more to monitor retention rates and to track student destinations.
- We need to be more outcomes focused.
- NCVER is interested in assisting with the capturing of data. We should work with them.

Direct comments included:

- “TAFE has seen a 300% increase in ASH.”
- “We need to know what percentage of our community is involved in study.”
- “There is a tolerance for ambiguity in the group (the GLR committee).”

**Value for money.** Proposition: *That the Gwydir Learning Region has achieved much with very little direct funding, but significant un-costed investment of time and energy.*

Paraphrased comments included:

- We have had very little extra, external funding until 2005.
- The Roxy Theatre refurbishment was one of the few activities that received additional funding.
- We learnt that the learning regions sponsored by ANTA mostly failed after the funding ceased.

- The Council now provides secretarial/clerical support for the Committee.

Direct comments included:

- “We don’t need a large injection of external funding.”
- “The best use of funds is to subsidise courses.”

**Quantitative impacts.** Proposition: *That to win additional support from Government, the Gwydir Learning Region needs to highlight and promote its quantitative impacts.*

Paraphrased comments included:

- If we want to grow we need to keep doing what we are doing but promote it more.
- We could be more opportunistic in identifying funding, which Jane Beaumont was good at.
- We can promote better the health benefits of country life, for the ‘tree changers’.
- Every family that leaves Sydney saves the government money: we need to promote that.

In brief, the focus group provided frank and valuable critiques of the achievements and weaknesses of the Gwydir Learning Region. The key stakeholders believe that the weaknesses of the GLR are, in the main, aspects of the initiative that the committee can rectify, such as improved data collection and improved promotion strategies. The committee is aware that the GLR is a work in progress, not a finished product.

### Comments in other documents

Many of the views of the stakeholders – including the views of Max Eastcott, Martin Bower, Peter Cuskelly, Peter Macbeth, Bernard Ingle, Bronwyn Clinch, Gary Pollock and Jane Beaumont – derived from both documentation and interviews, were set out in Section A of this report and are not repeated here.

According to Ingle and Walls (2004), there are many successful outcomes of the Gwydir Learning Region to date, including:

- Tailoring delivery to primarily meet the demands of individuals, and through this approach improve the responsiveness and flexibility of educational providers.
- Broadening the student demographic – for example the provision of training in aged care and nursing at Certificate III level to school and community students.
- Involving the community - the community has taken a leading role in the development of the learning community, including planning, provision and evaluation of the outcomes.
- Targeting the enhancement of mental health as a major factor in revitalising rural communities.
- Increasing the range of providers – the collaborative dialogue among providers has enabled the first provision by Adult and Community Education of accredited Certificate III level training in Aged Care.
- Using the Roxy Theatre in Bingara in delivering cultural and educational programs while paying its way.

Peter Cuskelly (2005a) agrees that the restored Roxy Theatre is important for the culture of the region:

The Roxy Theatre has become an invaluable facility which stimulates the cultural life of the community and generates significant economic activity within the town.

Peter Cuskelly (2005a) also notes the emergence of a learning culture in the Shire:

There is evidence of the beginning of a learning culture in Gwydir Shire with growing appreciation of the importance of lifelong learning and the value of all learning. Employees, unemployed

residents and mature aged women are increasingly seeking opportunities for learning and reskilling. Local access and support, along with flexible delivery are contributing to this trend.

### **Related approaches and successes of Warialda High School**

Given the leading role performed by Warialda High School in the Gwydir Learning Region since the region's inception in 2000, it is informative to consider the positive changes that have occurred at the school since 2000, as many of them reflect the development of the GLR. Many of the same principles applied at Warialda High School over this period were also applied within the Gwydir Learning Region.

Warialda High School is a small isolated rural school located 600kms from Sydney in the north west of New South Wales. The school caters for 270 students aged from 13 years to 18 years drawn from an area of 10,000 square kilometres (Cuskelly 2005b, p.1).

Peter Cuskelly (2005b) describes Warialda High School at the end of the 1990s:

- Traditional small comprehensive high school
- Staff focus predominantly on academic performance
- Subject patterns and lesson times organised to accommodate elite level students
- Introduction of some vocational courses and training
- School focus on discipline rather than welfare
- Success measured by Higher School Certificate (HSC) marks and University Admission Index (UAI) scores
- Student behaviour issues linked to failure of the curriculum to meet the needs of all students
- Low tolerance by staff of retention of students not maintaining high levels of application and academic achievement. (p.1)

Peter Cuskelly (2005b) describes problems facing both the students of Warialda High School and the community when he commenced as principal:

- Lack of confidence
- Lack of employability skills
- Lack of choice – a sense of having a future
- Lack of connectedness with the community (p.1).

His conclusions were:

- The school needed to take a pro-active role in bringing about optimism and creating real opportunities for both students and the community.
- The school needed to change significantly. (p.2)

Peter Cuskelly (2005b) depicts a very different Warialda High School in 2005:

- A place of learning for all residents in Gwydir Shire
- Staff focus on quality teaching and learning
- Personalised learning
- Flexibility in organisation and delivery

School focus on welfare and student self-discipline

Effective learning partnerships with the community and other educational providers

School focus on retention of students

Success measured in terms other than marks and rankings. (p.3)

According to Peter Cuskelly (2005b), the school has been transformed from a traditional rural school to a community learning centre catering for the needs of all community residents, promoting life-long learning:

The change has emerged from a number of diverse developments outlined here and the preparedness of those committed to change “to think and act outside the square”. (p.14)

This attitude of changing the school to suit the community is an attitude that has pervaded the Gwydir Learning Region initiative since 2000.

### **Related approaches and successes of Bingara Central School**

Under Principal Peter Macbeth in the last few years, Bingara Central School took more active role in the Gwydir Learning Region. Peter Macbeth is a member of the GLR Committee and actively supports the initiative in his local community and school. For instance, the school brochure includes the following information:

One of the key strengths of the Bingara Central School is our vocational courses – students can choose from a wide range of programs that are relevant to them and to their career aspirations.

We also receive excellent support from parents, community members and local businesses, enabling strong and effective partnerships for the benefit of our students.

Our school is part of the Gwydir Learning Region, a strong partnership between educators and community organisations in order to provide a quality future for our young people while assisting in the long-term sustainability of our community.

Peter Macbeth is passionate about making options available to every student in the Gwydir region:

We must have options available that suit the needs and educational wishes of all students in the Gwydir Learning Region. Their retention in the education system will ensure their continued growth as people but also will provide them with employable skills and pathways that will ensure greater economic, social and community growth within the Gwydir Learning Region. (Macbeth, paper February 2006, p.5)

Bingara Central School has increased its participation in the GLR:

In 2005 Bingara Central School has played an expansive role in the development of the Gwydir Learning Region (GLR). The expansion of this learning community in 2006 sees a massive increase in the nature and type of TVET courses that are available for students to study and the development of mature enrolments into these courses. (Macbeth, paper February 2006, p.5)

A practical step taken recently at Bingara Central School to support the Gwydir Learning Region is the installation of additional computing equipment that includes PC-based videoconferencing equipment, for linking to TAFE teachers in locations such as Tamworth. TAFE NSW New England Institute assisted with the computer cabling. Bingara Central School also has a high-quality, dedicated videoconferencing facility, for linking to other centres.

### **Supportive comments from prominent business people**

A number of prominent business people were interviewed or contacted for this study, who

confirmed the assessment by the key stakeholders of the GLR's successes. For example, Susanne Hughes, proprietor of Boutique Capri, a women's fashion business in Bingara, and Chair of the Gwydir Education and Industry Links Committee, and an employer of a trainee, wrote to the evaluator the following endorsement of the GLR:

There are many advantages in living in a small country town however this warm fuzzy lifestyle does not put food on the table nor does it keep our youth at home.

The citizens and councils soon came to the realisation that if something wasn't done our towns would soon disappear. We had to put away our differences, join forces and make a difference.

Words cannot express how important I feel this programme is to our community. We have no graffiti and no crime, that's because our kids are too busy working and have pride in themselves and their town. They know they have the support of our parents, teachers, employers, the Gwydir Shire Council and the Gwydir Learning Region.

Rick Hutton, proprietor of Fay's of Bingara including IGA supermarket, which he has just refurbished, and an employer of up to eight trainees at any one time, is supportive of the GLR because it links trainees to the real world of work and to the local economy. He believes that education needs to be flexible and relevant to contemporary society and business. He also believes that education should respond to the directions of the local economy, and in the case of the Gwydir, that means linking to economic opportunities in tourism, recreation, national parks. "Education should be interesting, practical and relevant to the environment. Education has to open itself up to the community." He supports the way teachers get out of the classroom with the students: "Teachers need to be mobile and not act in an institutional way." He supports the GLR because it is innovative:

We're breaking new ground. I actively want to support and promote education. Institutional education was for too long imposed on us. We have to educate people to value education: and make it more enjoyable, accessible, achievable.

Nancy Capel is the publisher of the Bingara Advocate and an employer of a school-based trainee, and a supporter of traineeships and the GLR:

I've seen kids go through traineeships and it gives kids more than an edge: kids who do it are employable. I've seen them grow and we know what a traineeship does to them. If you don't have school-based traineeships, more kids would be on the dole. Traineeships provide that opportunity for kids to see over the horizon.

Nancy Capel sees value in people in the local community participating in different levels of education and becoming clearer that they are part of the Gwydir Learning Region:

People are part of it but sometimes don't realise it. People enrol and later realise that Thai cooking classes with ACE are all part of the Gwydir Learning Region. Its important people know they are part of the Gwydir Learning Region.

### **Exemplary developments – GLR band and gym**

A development that exemplifies the collaboration between the GLR stakeholders is the formation of the Gwydir Learning Region Band, which includes students from both schools, who practice on Monday afternoons in Warialda. Local adults are also invited to practice with the band. The quality of the sixty-strong band is reflected by the selection of ten members in the Country School Band Tour in 2004-2005 and fifteen in 2006.

Peter Cuskelly sees the band as an illustration of the breadth of the GLR philosophy: "The band shows that the philosophy of the GLR extends far beyond the provision of vocational education: the GLR is not simply about expanding VET in schools."

Another development that exemplifies the collaboration between the GLR stakeholders is the

creation of a gymnasium in Warialda. Max Eastcott reports:

The Council, at its last meeting (April 2006), agreed to form a specific partnership with TAFE and Warialda High School to open a gymnasium at Warialda to act as a training venue for the Recreation Studies TAFE course. This facility will be open to the public and allow training for mature age and Voc Ed students. Hopefully, it will grow into a business for one of the students. The Council is underwriting the insurance and rent for the first twelve months.

### **Summary comments**

The focus group produced wide-ranging and balanced comments about the successes and current shortcomings of the Gwydir Learning Region. These shortcomings include the paucity of quantifiable data about 'graduate' destinations and the limited success in attracting some age groups within the local community. Through this report these shortcomings are now on the public record, and can be addressed progressively by the committee in the near future.

On the other hand, the past successes of the GLR are substantial and impressive and provide a foundation for future growth and development of the initiative. One of the key successes is the role played by and the achievements of the Warialda High School. The transformation of the Warialda High School into a community learning centre not only reflects well on the school principal and staff but is also a key success within the broader Gwydir Learning Region. In recent years, Bingara Central School has greatly expanded its involvement in the GLR and local business people are supportive of the flexible approaches taken by the two schools, TAFE and ACE.

## 7. Success of the Gwydir Learning Region model – systemic perspective

This chapter analyses the success of the Gwydir Learning Region, based on feedback from personnel from the Department of Education and Training's (DET) Schools division or Technical and Further Education (TAFE) division who provide a systemic perspective, that is, a whole of organisation perspective.

### Key points

Key points in this chapter include the following:

- Senior officers within NSW DET cite a range of achievements of the Gwydir Learning Region, particularly the catering for the learning needs of individual students that are related to study pathways or to local employment opportunities. Des Gorman described the GLR's positive response to an individual's study interests: "They (GLR key players) basically take the approach that 'that is a fantastic learning program you are asking for, we'll get it from somewhere'."
- Senior officers stress the important achievement of a coalition between local council personnel and educators with other community representatives.
- While some quantitative data is available that demonstrates the positive impact of the Gwydir Learning Region, more quantifiable data could be collected and disseminated.

### Research methods

To ascertain systemic perspectives from both Schools and TAFE, interviews or discussions were conducted with the following personnel:

- Trevor Fletcher, Deputy Director General, Schools, NSW DET
- Des Gorman, Regional Director, Schools, New England Region
- Marie Persson, Deputy Director General, TAFE and ACE, NSW DET
- Gary Pollock, Director, TAFE NSW New England Institute; and at the time of interview, Project Officer, TAFE and Community Education NSW DET.
- David Michaels, Senior Manager, Skills Strategy, NSW DET.

Instead of an interview following the set questions, a discussion was conducted with Marie Persson about systemic issues related to the Gwydir Learning Region, such as flexible learning and other innovative strategies of TAFE. The discussions with David Michaels focused on statistical data and this data is discussed in Chapter 8.

### Achievements

Interviewees were asked: *What achievements of the Gwydir Learning Region have you noted?* Their responses included the following comments.

Trevor Fletcher highlighted the coalition of stakeholders and the Council's involvement:

The most significant achievement to me is the way they have got together the coalition of stakeholders. While others have done similar things, I don't think they have done it quite as

successfully. I have not seen too many networks involve local government in the way that Gwydir has: the Gwydir Council absolutely see the learning community as a central plank of their agenda and their links to local employers and to community representatives have really helped to drive some achievements of the learning community. It is not a unique network but I think it is one that is more fully developed than others have.

Des Gorman also underlined the collaboration between the key players:

The number one achievement has got to be the involvement of key players - driven by schools, but clearly facilitating and working as catalysts are the TAFE people. I think the partnership there between the schools sector and the TAFE sector has been very productive. The involvement of local government I see as a huge achievement: I think that many governments around the state can learn from that in that some seem to think that local community learning is not their role. The Gwydir Local Council has accepted it as their role. The involvement of the employers and their willingness and ability to speak up about it is a huge bonus and clearly they've got their hearts in it. They know that the future of their community rests on these young people and they're more than willing to bend over backwards to assist them in their workplace training.

Des Gorman emphasised the focus on meeting the needs of individual students:

Clearly other benefits are that it is an example of one size does not fit all, in that the schools in the area, with their supporting partners, will do anything to ensure that a student learns what they want to learn. Whether it's on offer or not, they'll make it available and I think that's a huge achievement by those people. Peter Cuskelly in particular and Martin Bower are not willing to say "sorry we don't offer that". They basically take the approach that "that is a fantastic learning program you are asking for, we'll get it from somewhere".

The process of catering for every student's needs starts with a conversation at the school, said Des Gorman:

It starts through conversation, through good practices at the school level. The kids feel very welcome to come in and talk about their wants and also welcome to come in and say this is not working for me and I am going to look elsewhere and to move on. There's been an embracing of those kids by the community, to say "hang in there, we've got something for you".

In response to the question of whether this approach to each school student's needs was exceptional, Des Gorman remarked:

It is exceptional that every young person is being catered for. Often students are forced into particular learning paths by timetables, by what competencies or interests or qualifications particular teachers have in that area and what the school has traditionally offered. I think that across the state there are communities that still think that way: the student has to fit in with the school rather than the school fit in with the student.

Gary Pollock saw a cluster of achievements by the Gwydir Learning Region. First, the GLR has engaged several sectors of education:

There is greater awareness of VET learning opportunities within the schools – people are aware of what's available, what could be available – and I do think that extends to some extent across the wider community. It is not as extensive as it could be in the wider community. It is largely focused on the school communities and those who are associated with the school communities, and that's been the focus in this point of time. The engagement of several sectors of education is an achievement. There is some way to go in that area still but it has been possible for the school and TAFE to come together and ACE to some extent and that is a really positive thing and it doesn't happen often enough in other communities. There is open dialogue between stakeholders: it is quite strong in terms of meetings and some structure – not overly structured, but enough structure to generate open dialogue.

Second, said Gary Pollock, the GLR has focused on lifelong learning and pathways:

The other achievement is that it is focusing on lifelong learning, but predominantly for 15-19 year

old group at this point in time. People are being introduced to the concept that there are pathways that people progress along, they can add to their skills and qualifications and that is an important message to get across. To a large extent much of the training is linked to local opportunities: they have been very conscious about engagement of the local employment sector. There is no doubt that a number of younger and older people have been able to transfer into local employment, so there has been a positive achievement in that area.

Third, said Gary Pollock, the GLR has engaged with the local community, especially employers:

The engagement of the community, especially local employers, has been strong and I think that has been a strong feature and an achievement. There is also a prevailing spirit in the community that there is something happening and that they have an opportunity to play a part in the future of that community. There was a realisation early on that Bingara and Warialda were losing population due to a whole range of changes that were going on around. I think that there is now a realisation in the Gwydir region that if anything is going to happen then the community has to take charge of that. It is very much in local hands: this is a major achievement and a positive one.

Fourth, the GLR acknowledges success of students and programs, said Gary Pollock:

The other thing that people have done well is acknowledge the achievements of individual students and of programs or the concept of the region: they have promoted that in a positive and proactive way. That is reinforcing not only for the individuals but for the community at large: these things are happening, people are achieving, they are able to gain skills and qualifications, they are able to move on. The classic is the zoo keeper story. Those things are wonderful. From a TAFE perspective too many of these stories normally go unheralded and they have been very active in promoting them. The other achievement is that people are starting to articulate what it is they want, what they want to achieve, where they want to be, and that is very positive.

Fifth, the learning activities include a mix of people, commented Gary Pollock:

The other thing that has been very positive is the tailoring of learning programs to suit the individual and that's a customised student-centred approach is a positive achievement and a step in the right direction. There is no doubt that there has been a broadening of the curriculum in a school which doesn't have a large number of students; I believe they have retained more students in the school system; and there has been a re-engagement of adults in the wider community, with some adults coming back into the system. The learning activities include a mix of people, young people and old people, people who have worked and people who are looking for work, people who are in work. That mix of people engaged in a common endeavour is really a very healthy thing: it is very important for younger people to rub shoulders in a learning environment with different people, more mature people, people with different life experiences.

Finally, the involvement of the Council and other agencies is an achievement, said Gary Pollock:

The other achievement has been the engagement of significant local agencies like the local council, which has been a foundation stone of the development, and the local hospital, which is very willing to get involved, and a range of other employers. It is not just their tacit support: it's really quite tangible, they are committed and they do make things happen and that's really positive.

## **Strengths**

Interviewees were asked: *What do you see as the current strengths of the Gwydir Learning Region?* Their responses included the following comments.

Trevor Fletcher saw as a strength the provision of pathways that are related to employment opportunities:

I think their strength is their absolute focus on coming up with pathways for young people. In other words, looking at the needs of young people and marrying those with emerging opportunities,

employment opportunities and business opportunities in the community. I think that is a great strength. In order to do that they've been prepared to think outside the square and bend some of the rules as far as they possibly can. I support them doing that because they are doing it for all the right reasons.

Des Gorman saw the small group of drivers as a strength and a potential weakness:

What is its strength could be its weakness, in that there is a small group of drivers who are enthusiastic, knowledgeable, committed and they're making sure it happens. What they have to do is make sure there are significant others who have the same vision and can carry on when and if they leave the scene or move on to something else within the region. They happen to have a group of employers in the region who have great foresight, which is a strength. They use technology, to overcome any sense of remoteness. Clearly that is a strength. They have great contacts, both within and outside the region and they have been able to attract talented people into the region because of the vibe or hum that is going on. That is a strength. Clearly having the support of people like the Mayor of Gwydir and the General Manager is a huge strength; and they are not just standing on the sidelines and supporting the program, they are in to it, and they are supporting it both verbally and with their actions. That is a strength.

Des Gorman was then asked: When you say that others have to have the same vision, are you thinking beyond education or within?

Within. Are all teachers in those schools on board? Is there a star in the wings waiting to take over if need be? Beyond. Local governments are flinty things in that they are based on elections, so if someone gets in next are they going to have the same commitment? The depth of commitment to the vision of the program at the moment is a strength because there is a significant number of people all with that same vision, but if you pop the black hat on at the moment, we have to make sure that is sustainable.

Gary Pollock saw as a strength the clarity of purpose of the Gwydir Learning Region:

I think there is a quite a unity and clarity of purpose. There is a clear indication of what the purposes are and what they want to achieve. Certainly it is one that is accepted by all the stakeholders. While we might differ on the means to achieve the end point, certainly knowing what it is we want to set out to achieve is strongly understood, certainly amongst stakeholders and increasingly in the community.

Gary Pollock also saw as a strength the commitment of the Council and other key people:

The Shire Council's commitment and support and involvement and a willingness to set a direction is a real strength. Another strength is the learning region making good uses of local resources, so you don't have an engineering workshop or a hospitality kitchen, but in the Gwydir Learning Region there is always a way round that – people will find other resources to achieve the same outcomes. It's not a concept that is based on bricks and mortar. Another strength is the dedication and commitment of the key people: a strength and a potential weakness. I often worry if Peter Cuskelly or Martin Bower got run over by a bus or Max Eastcott moved on or whatever, but there is no question about the dedication of the key people. Another strength is the level of community support: I've seen it growing. Another strength is the willingness of agencies to get involved, although there is some way to go there.

Another strength identified by Gary Pollock was the willingness of the Gwydir Learning Region to push the boundaries:

Another strength is that all the parties are willing to push the boundaries. I wouldn't go so far as to say break the rules but we have certainly done some things that are not common practice in other areas and I think that's driven by an acceptance by everybody that what we are doing is the best for the individual and the community.

## Potential benefits

Interviewees were asked: *What potential do you believe the Gwydir Learning Region has to deliver more benefits?* Their responses included the following comments.

Trevor Fletcher identified the platform the Gwydir Learning Region has built as a basis for further growth:

They've built a platform on which they can grow. When I was up there last they were talking about some emerging industry and employment opportunities they see there. I think that what they've got there is that the people in the community fully understand what's on offer, and so it's gathering its own momentum. I think some people who have benefited – students in the last few years – not too far down the track themselves will open their own businesses and employ other people. So I think there is potential snowballing effect.

One of the great benefits is that they are not only growing the economy and employment in the community but they're keeping their young people there as well and the towns of Warialda and Bingara have that real sense of forward momentum and optimism and there is a real sense of something going on, with wins all over the place.

Des Gorman noted the potential value of the Gwydir Learning Region as a lighthouse:

One potential is to share the knowledge, to make it a lighthouse across the state. Clearly with their approaches through the Deputy Director General Schools Trevor Fletcher, who you will be talking to, his willingness to fly all the regional directors and institute directors up, and further discussions about how can we use this as a seed spread out across the state. The potential for people to visit the area and see what's happening and what's possible and for people in the game to move out and to talk to other groups, as Peter Cuskelly is doing at the 15-19 Year Old Conference in Sydney in April. So that rippling effect has huge potential.

There is potential to involve a wider range of employers, said Des Gorman:

The potential to pick up a broader range of employers or industries involved. At the moment the involvement is probably a little restricted, with aged care, hospitality, manufacturing and engineering and retail and some agriculture studies: there is a potential in time to get across all industries, in the Warialda or Bingara area or beyond. There are logistics involved in that, but I think it's still possible.

Gary Pollock noted a range of new opportunities:

There is potential for greater engagement of the ACE sector and the Uni sector. There is more potential to use ICT, in particular videoconferencing, which provides the opportunity to link smaller numbers of students. There is an opportunity to offer a wider range of school-centric initiatives as well as initiatives for the mature aged.

## Quantitative impacts

Interviewees were asked: *To win additional support from Government does the Learning Region need to highlight and promote its quantitative impacts?* Their responses included the following comments.

Trevor Fletcher believed that quantitative impacts had already been promoted:

I think its already done that, to the extent that they can, for instance from an education perspective, point out that a fair percentage of their students, I think close to 40% in fact, go on to university. The most compelling thing is the success with pathways and the engagement of not just young people but we've got a lot of adult re-entry programs and you can measure those. The measure for any school is not just how many people are going on to university but what is the exit destination data saying about the pathways? Have young people gone on to further education, employment or training or combinations thereof. In the case of the Gwydir community that is well and truly demonstrated. From my perspective, I see both the qualitative and the quantitative impacts.

Des Gorman suggested that the Gwydir Learning Region needed to promote more the quantitative benefits:

I believe it does both in the traditional stream of the HSC and in the vocational education stream. What we see is a lot of anecdotal. What we need to see are things like tracking students over time: some longitudinal studies about where have they gone from school and where are they three years later, I think would be important data. We can say we have provided the programs but what has it done for those kids. The other important quantitative data if you look at the vision of the place is the community renewal: how many of those students are coming back to the area is also an important fact. And what is happening with businesses in the area around their workforce and diversification because what you would hope is that with these young people coming back into employment within the area would help those businesses to diversify, because if they don't over time the businesses will close again. I note that in that area the Department store in Bingara and the supermarket in Warialda do great things with diversity, but not all businesses are that way and I guess we have to see whether the fresh ideas of the young coming back into the area lead to that.

Gary Pollock believed that the Gwydir Learning Region needed to do more to quantify benefits:

They have to be clear about desired outcomes and actual outcomes and measure them, to see what's changed, for instance for the health and welfare of the community. They need to articulate what education and training levels are attained; what pathways to university are created; and what employment is gained by their ex-students. They could look at benchmarks over a period of time and compare themselves with another learning region.

### **Summary points**

The achievements of the Gwydir Learning Region are high order, particularly the formation of a working coalition between disparate parties and the united focus on meeting the needs of individual learners. For the GLR, educational institutions exist to serve the needs of students. To win further support, the GLR could collect more quantitative data and better promote its achievements, particularly results about student destinations.

## 8. Success of the Gwydir Learning Region – quantitative data

The three previous chapters provided qualitative data that highlighted various successes of the Gwydir Learning Region, as well as some quantitative data about the attitudes of local business and of stakeholders.

This chapter provides quantitative data on the GLR in relation to Schools, Adult and Community Education (ACE), Technical and Further Education (TAFE) and the Gwydir Shire Council.

### Key points

Key points in this chapter include the following:

- Students at Bingara Central School and Warialda High School have a high level of engagement in VET programs compared with the rest of the state, in line with the aims of the Gwydir Learning Region and due to the collaboration between schools and TAFE and ACE.
- Warialda High School can verify that every student who completes Year 12 at the school moves on to further study or employment – a 100% success rate. However, longitudinal data is not yet collected, that would show what ex-students are doing, say, three years or five years after completing their schooling.
- Current data records a major achievement of the Gwydir Learning Region: the increased retention of students in VET programs who would otherwise have left school and dropped out of formal study programs.
- New quantitative performance indicators could be used to measure the success of the GLR, including the VET in Schools participation rate for each year from Year 9-12, and the percentage of students who progress to Year 11 and 12 who normally might have left school.
- TAFE annual enrolments from the Gwydir Learning Region have increased by 30% from 2001-2005, from 336 to 435.
- ACE activity in the Gwydir Learning Region is above the average participation rate in other parts of the state.
- The amount and breadth of vocational training undertaken by employees of Gwydir Shire Council, one of the major employers in the Shire, is extensive in size and impressive in terms of offering different employees the opportunity to undertake programs that suit them individually – an example of personalised learning that is a feature of the GLR.

### Available data

The following relevant data is available from the Gwydir Learning Region.

For schools and TAFE, data is available on the following:

- the number of enrolments in Industry Curriculum Framework programs and in TAFE delivered HSC VET courses (TVET) programs;
- progression rates of students at Warialda High School and Bingara Central School (supplied by NSW DET);

- the percentage of students in Year 11 who normally would not have proceeded to senior high school (Years 11-12) but stayed on at school, presumably because of the options provided by the GLR;
- the relative performance of VET in Schools students compared with students who did not undertake VET programs.

For Adult and Community Education (ACE), data is available that summarises enrolments in ACE programs in the region.

For the Gwydir Shire Council, as a major employer in the region, data is available recording employee enrolments in training.

The above data is analysed and discussed below.

### **VET in Schools participation rates at both schools**

The following table summarises Year 9-10 VET in Schools enrolments in the two schools in the region. The Gwydir Learning Region places a strong emphasis on Year 9-10 engagement with VET in Schools, as a positive way to encourage students to begin thinking about a career and other future options. The GLR also emphasises VET in Schools for Year 9-10 students to promote the notion that there are many different pathways available to each student in Year 11-12. Some of the pathways available are, for example:

- full-time enrolment in VET in Schools programs;
- part-time enrolment in VET in Schools and part-time enrolment in Higher School Certificate (HCS) programs;
- or other variations, such as enrolment in some VET in Schools in Year 11, followed by a sole focus on the HCS in Year 12.

The enrolment figures in the following table were provided by Alan Potter, VET in Schools Coordinator, New England Institute.

**Table 3: Year 9-10 VET in Schools enrolments at Bingara Central School and Warialda High School 2005**

<b>Home school</b>	<b>Teaching school (a)</b>	<b>BOS (b) course name</b>	<b>2005 enrolments (c)</b>	<b>"ICF" courses (d)</b>
Bingara Central School	TAFE Inverell	Automotive	17	-
		Business Services	19	19
	TAFE Armidale	Children's Services	1	-
	TAFE Tamworth	Hairdressing	8	-
		Aged Care Work	1	-
		Hospitality Operations	20	20
		<b>BINGARA TOTAL</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>39</b>
Warialda High School	TAFE Inverell	Business Services	18	18
		Metal and Engineering (100 hours TAFE course)	17	17
		Automotive	11	-
	TAFE Moree	Screen	11	-
	Warialda High School	Metal and Engineering (ICF course)	11	11
		<b>WARIALDA TOTAL</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>46</b>

NOTES:

(a) Teaching School = the provider. In most of the above cases, the provider is TAFE NSW New England Institute, through staff based at campuses at Inverell, Tamworth or Moree. Normally, the teacher travels to the school.

(b) BOS = Board of Studies

(c) Enrolments: figures are enrolments not individual students. Some students undertook more than one course.

(d) ICF = Industry Curriculum Framework courses. These courses satisfy the requirements of the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF) and the Higher School Certificate (HSC) and, if an optional exam is taken, can also be used in a student's Universities Admission Index (UAI).

Some other noteworthy aspects of the above statistics are as follows:

- the provision of programs in both towns, Bingara and Warialda
- the active involvement of staff from campuses of TAFE NSW New England Institute.

The next table provides enrolment data for Year 11-12 students at Warialda High School only, as Year 10 is the highest-level class offered at Bingara Central School.

**Table 4: Year 11-12 VET in Schools enrolments Warialda High School 2005**

Home school	Teaching school	BOS course name	2005 enrolments	"ICF" courses
Warialda High School	Inverell TAFE	Child Studies	6	
		Children's Services	2	
	Moree TAFE	Screen	4	
	Tamworth TAFE	Aeroskills	2	
		Animal care	5	
		Automotive	2	
		Hairdressing	3	
		Nursing (1)	42	
	Warialda High School	Accounting	2	
		Business Services	18	18
			7	7
		Construction	5	5
			1	1
		Hospitality	7	7
			5	5
		Information Technology	8	8
			2	2
		Primary Industries	3	3
			4	4
		Retail Operations	9	9
			6	6
		Retail Operations	1	1
		Retail Operations Ext	7	7
		TOTAL	151	83

Note: (1) ACE delivered one of the two classes in aged care in 2005.

Some noteworthy aspects of the above statistics are as follows:

- the breadth of programs, to satisfy multiple interests – a demonstrable commitment to personalised learning
- the support of TAFE NSW New England Institute.

### Progression data from both schools

Combined grade progression rates for Warialda High School and Bingara Central School are presented below. However, as pointed out by David Michaels, Senior Manager, Skills Strategy, NSW DET, the data needs to be interpreted carefully:

grade progression rates are not always well behaved or pure indicators of real retention - particularly when calculated for a small number of schools with small student numbers, where a few exceptions – for example, increased migration out or transfers to other schools, training or employment – will have a disproportionate effect.

Table 5 below shows a positive trend for Years 7-8 and Years 10-11, steady for Years 8-9 and 9-10 and variable for Years 11-12.

**Table 5: Combined grade progression rates for Warialda High School and Bingara Central School**

	2000-2001	2001-2002	2002-2003	2003-2004	2004-2005
<b>Grade 7-8</b>	91.2%	92.8%	100.0%	100.0%	101.5%
<b>Grade 8-9</b>	98.6%	98.4%	100.0%	87.2%	91.4%
<b>Grade 9-10</b>	95.3%	100.0%	93.4%	92.2%	93.3%
<b>Grade 10-11</b>	56.3%	59.3%	60.3%	59.6%	64.4%
<b>Grade 11-12</b>	80.0%	85.1%	90.6%	67.8%	71.2%

The fluctuation in Year 11 and 12 may indicate a range of positive pathways for students and employment trends in the region, which was subsequently confirmed in discussions with the principal of Warialda High School, Peter Cuskelly.

The percentage of students in Year 11 at Warialda High School who would not have proceeded to senior high school following Board of Studies Higher School Certificate requirements but who stayed on at the High School are summarised in Table 4 below. The figures were provided by Jack Dolby Head Teacher, Gwydir Learning Region, Warialda High School.

**Table 6: Percentage of students in Year 11 at Warialda High School who normally would not have proceeded to senior high school but who stayed on at school**

Year	Percentage
2003	22%
2004	10%
2005	36%
2006	25%

While there is some fluctuation in these percentages, the figures for 2005-2006 are significant and demonstrate the value of the GLR in retaining students' engagement in learning.

Jack Dolby used the 'Smart Data Analysis' program at Warialda High School to examine the relative performance of VET in Schools students from that school. Several of his findings are as follows:

- The overall number of Warialda High School students attempting vocational Framework programs fluctuates each year, but "it is approximately 50% of student numbers" each year.
- The school's highest performers in the HSC tend not to enrol in VET courses, but the students that do enrol in VET courses "perform at a high level in most cases".

## **Alternative ways of measuring success of the GLR at the schools**

Peter Cuskelly (2005b) describes how Warialda High School measures success in the context of post-school destination:

- Confidence and a sense of self-worth
- Employable skills
- A sense of having a future
- A sense of connectedness with the community. (p.3)

A proud boast over the past five years has been that every student leaving Warialda High School does so to go to university, TAFE, an apprenticeship/traineeship or a job (Cuskelly 2005b, p.12). Peter Macbeth, principal of Bingara Central School, adds: “Vocational education took off in 2005 and we met our target of 100% of kids in Year 9 and 10 completing vocational education courses in 2005 and 2006.”

Peter Macbeth is also clear about the importance of retaining students in the system:

What is the Issue? This issue is undeniably about students and offering them the opportunities to make a success of their lives. It is about retaining ALL students in the education system, providing them with opportunities to learn, to get students to love learning and to get them to see the success and relevance that learning brings. These are the central and key ideals of what has made the Gwydir Learning Region so successful. (Paper, 21 Feb 2006, p.2)

Peter Cuskelly (2005a) provides other indicators of the successes of the Gwydir Learning Region:

Each year, over 30 students are involved in diverse traineeships which include retail, business services, information technology, horticulture, beef cattle production, and childcare.

The vocational education program for Gwydir youth has been recognised through a number of state and national awards. Warialda High School was NSW Vocational Education School of 2000 and finalist in the Hobart National Awards. Casey Cobcroft was gold medallist in the National Workskills (Retail) 2001, Rebecca Heal, NSW Vocational Education School Student of 2001, Holly-Jo King was finalist in NSW Vocational Education School Student of 2003, and Jared Welch was bronze medallist in the National Workskills (Business Services) in 2004.

Peter Cuskelly (2005a) also points out some tangible benefits of mature age residents being able to access learning programs:

Through the Gwydir Learning Region, mature age residents have been able to access HSC courses, theatre skills, heritage building skills, film and video production skills and aged care nursery. As a result of this training, the North West Theatre Company was formed, the Roxy Theatre in Bingara was restored, a state short film festival was conducted in Bingara and a respite care service established in Warialda.

The above discussion indicates that alternative ways are needed to measure the success of the Gwydir Learning Region, in relation to school-aged students. New performance indicators could include:

- the VET in Schools participation rate, for each year from Year 9-12
- the percentage of students who progress to Year 11 and 12 who normally might have left school
- community projects or initiatives that stem from the involvement in learning of mature aged residents.

## Other data related to TAFE

TAFE's extensive involvement in the VET in Schools activity is indicated above. This involvement is pivotal to the Gwydir Learning Region, as is TAFE's partnership with the schools, Council, ACE, community and businesses. The positive support and views of the Director of TAFE NSW New England Institute were set out in the previous chapter.

Bernard Ingle from TAFE NSW New England TAFE provided the following data about TAFE activity in the Gwydir Learning Region:

In 2001 there were 336 enrolments and in 2005 there are 435 – an increase of 30%. Courses have included automotive, animal care, aged care, engineering, IT, nursing, business services and horticulture.

In 2001 there were 31,260 Annual Student Hours (ASH) and in 2005 62,007 ASH.

Module Completion Rates in 2001 were 80.50% and in 2004 (latest available data) 87.3%.

According to Bernard Ingle, the source of funds accessed by TAFE to provide the training included 'Existing Worker Trainees' (for 6,500 ASH); New Entrant Trainees (2,300 ASH); Contracted Training Provision ("minimal but used to restore Roxy Theatre"); Enrolled Nurses; TVET (23,000 ASH); TAFEPlus (3,000 ASH); and Fund 1 (27,000 ASH).

Enrolment figures for 2005 TAFE VET in Schools (TVET) programs at Bingara Central School and Warialda High School were provided by Alan Potter, VET in Schools Co-ordinator from the New England Institute. There are some differences between his records and those in the official NSW DET spreadsheets, due to different ways the data is collected by each party.

Alan Potter described the TAFE delivery strategies:

These ranged from TAFE teachers visiting the schools on a weekly or fortnightly basis, students attending Inverell TAFE on a weekly basis either during school hours or after hours or flexible delivery using teleconferencing and distance learning materials. In response to local requests TAFE has been able to supplement school delivery by providing courses the schools are unable to deliver. Specific examples include Children's Services, Aged Care Work, Hairdressing and Automotive.

Alan Potter believes that factors contributing to the successful TVET delivery include "the willingness of the schools and TAFE teaching sections to be flexible about timetabling, and the assistance of the GLR in identifying and supporting potential local TAFE teachers".

## Data related to Adult and Community Education

Bronwyn Clinch, Executive Officer, Barraba Community Learning Association Inc, provided the following data about 2005 enrolments for ACE activity in the Gwydir Shire/Learning Region. The population perceived by ACE of 4404 is based on census figures from 2001 for Bingara and Yallaroi Shires plus 300 people from northern/western part of Barraba which was added to the new Gwydir Shire in 2004, 15 years and older. From this population,

- 33% of the population participated in an ACE course in 2005
- 18% of population (all over 15 years of age) participated in vocational training provided by ACE, in 2005.

Bronwyn Clinch notes that this figure of 18% of the adult population participating in ACE is "well above the state average for 15+ years of age participation rate", which was 6% across the state for all ACE programs and 4% for VET enrolments via ACE.

A summary of the ACE enrolments data for 2005 is provided below.

**Table 7: ACE enrolment data, Gwydir region, 2005**

Item	Results
Courses/units of competence	141 courses actually ran, of which 70 were vocational
Enrolments	1,446 total, including 797 in vocational courses
Student Contact hours	28,577 total, including 19619 in vocational courses

### Data related to Gwydir Shire Council employee training

Data is available regarding the training of Council employees. The data was provided by the Council's Training Officer Rod Smith and indicates the areas of training undertaken by Gwydir Shire employees in 2005-2006. Rod Smith commented:

These are courses which our staff have had access to during 2005 and 2006. The formal TAFE courses which give employees an AQF qualification usually last over 18 months to 2 years.

The Shire offers training to its employees in the areas set out in Table 6 below. The commitment by the Shire to staff learning is a clear example of the Shire to the Gwydir Learning Region. The following training is all the more impressive given the very high levels of illiteracy in the staff in 2003 and the low level of attainment of qualifications in 2003.

**Table 8: Areas of training undertaken by Gwydir Shire employees and numbers participating, 2005-2006**

Area of Training: mandatory, professional, vocational	Number
<b>Mandatory Training</b>	
Every employee receives training in the following mandated areas as it relates to his/her job:	All outdoor staff
Construction Induction (Green Card)	3
Occupational Health and Safety - Consultation	55
Traffic Control - Introduction	14
Traffic Control – Worksite Planning	3
Traffic Plans – Design and Audit	36
Equal Opportunities	36
Code of Conduct	All staff
Senior First Aid	4
Advanced Resuscitation	18
Safe Food Handling	6
Responsible Service of Alcohol	
<b>Professional Training</b>	
PhD studies in Sustainability	1
Masters degree in Engineering	1
Masters Degree in Environmental Studies	1
Bachelor of Teaching (Early Childhood)	1
Bachelor of Business	1
Bachelor of Civil Engineering	1
Diploma in Engineering	1
Diploma in Building and Environmental Surveying	2
<b>Vocational Training</b>	
Diploma in IT	1
Certificate IV in Business Studies (Frontline Management)	12

Certificate IV in Business Studies (HR)	2
Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training	3
Certificate IV in Community Services	2
Certificate IV in Aged Care	1
Certificate IV in Building Studies	1
Certificate III in Home and Community Care	1
Certificate III in Business Studies	2
Certificate III in Local Government	2
Certificate III in Horticulture	1
Certificate III in Heavy Vehicle Maintenance	1
Certificate III in Children's Services	1
Certificate III in Water Operations	2
Certificate III in Civil Construction	40
Certificate III in Aged Care Nursing	8
Certificate II in Business Studies (IT)	2
RTA Heavy Vehicle Driver Instructor	1

One observation on the above data is the role played by TAFE in providing the accredited training.

Rod Smith also provided the figures for Table 7, regarding other one-off courses undertaken by Shire staff in 2005-2006. These courses are usually 1-5 days duration. Rod Smith added: "This one-off list is not exhaustive – there are other courses which our employees have attended."

**Table 9: One-Off Courses directly linked to job competencies, undertaken by Shire staff, 2005-2006**

Area of Training	Number
<b>One-Off Courses directly linked to job competencies</b>	
<i>These courses vary from 1-day to 5-day courses. They invariably require travel by car for up to 1000 km round trip or by air.</i>	
Safe handling of chemicals	6
Award Interpretation and Implementation – Local Government Employees	2
Award Interpretation and Implementation – Aged Care Employees	2
Aromatherapy for Aged Care Residents	2
Employment Law	2
Risk Management	2
Programming and Planning for Pre Schools	4
Aspects of Financial Management	
Payroll	5
Rates	4
FBT	4
Taxation	4
Microsoft Office Suite	
Word	11
Excel	11
Access	11

Auto Air Conditioning	2
Local Government Leadership	3
Crane and Plant Electrical Safety	3
Evacuation Management	2
Contract Supervision for Works Supervisors	1
Building Small Bridges	1
Cost/Benefit Analysis of Engineering Projects	1
Rural and Strategic Planning	1
Documentation Procedures – DOCS	2
Planning for Water Quality Management	1
Violence Protection	10
Infection Control	8
Community capacity building	2

Some further observations on Tables 6 and 7 – and taking on board comments by interviewees regarding the training undertaken by the Gwydir Shire Council staff – are as follows:

- this data provides an the exemplary model of an employer providing training for a whole staff, despite the staff being distributed across a region and across many different fields of learning
- the breadth of programs undertaken illustrates the Council’s commitment to personalised learning in the sense of catering for individual learning needs.
- the Council strives to assist any employee who has a genuine desire to undertake any relevant work related or personal development course.

The Council has several employees who are about to embark upon the Certificate IV Training and Assessment, which will allow them to become the internal instructors for many of the future training courses.

### Summary points

The statistics provided in this chapter indicate that the Gwydir Learning Region has had a positive influence in helping school-aged students stay at school, adults undertake TAFE or ACE programs, and employees from the Council participate in wide range of different training programs. The discussion suggested that more data could be collected, especially longitudinal data about what school students are doing 3-5 years after leaving school. The discussion also suggested that new performance indicators could be used to measure the success of the GLR.

## 9. Key success factors identified by stakeholders

The four previous chapters examined the successes of the Gwydir Learning Region. This chapter addresses the question ‘What are the key success factors for the Gwydir Learning Region?’

### Key points

Key points in this chapter include the following:

- The primary success factors for the Gwydir Learning Region are shared values, partnerships and collaboration: all relationship-based factors.
- Other key success factors for the Gwydir Learning Region are commitment, continued stakeholder support, the social benefits of developing a learning region, the ideas informing the learning region, economic imperatives to develop innovative strategies in the region, the user-centric approach, the use of innovative strategies and local community support.
- Those wishing to imitate the Gwydir Learning Region are well advised to attend to the strong beliefs, innovative ideas and enduring relationships that are needed for a successful learning region.

### Research method

Many comments in previous chapters relate to this question about success factors, and those comments are not repeated here. This chapter uses evidence captured by a survey of stakeholders which provided both quantitative and qualitative data. Part of the survey was completed at the focus group and part was completed at other times by each respondent.

The stakeholders who completed the survey forms are listed in Appendix 2.

### Written responses to questions in the survey of stakeholders

Stakeholders were invited to type or write responses to the questions set out below. Their responses could be as short or long as they wished.

Stakeholders were asked: *Which local institutions have most assisted the Learning Region to succeed?* The most commonly mentioned, in descending order, were:

- Warialda High School
- Gwydir Shire Council
- Bingara Central School
- Gwydir Industry and Education Links Committee (GIELC)
- Local businesses (one respondent specifically cited Deans Superstore Warialda and Fays IGA Store Bingara)
- TAFE NSW New England Institute
- Adult and Community Education
- University of New England.

One commented: “It would be hard to pin point a group that stands out from the rest. I think

quite clearly it is a group effort!”

Stakeholders were asked: *Which ideas have most assisted the Learning Region to succeed?*  
Their responses were:

- School has an important role to play in the renewal of isolated rural communities
- Student life chances are not likely to improve without collective action by school and community
- Everyone should have access to school irrespective of age
- School is about much more than the acquisition of a HSC or AUI score
- Students should be able to access courses according to readiness not age
- Schools don't have a monopoly on knowledge and skills training
- Success is measured differently (not exam scores)
- A willingness to see education as a lifelong learning process.
- The schools seeing students as clients.
- The schools being proactive in the concept of community schooling
- That all residents can benefit from training.
- Meeting the needs of learners – youth and adults. Social benefits have flowed from this.
- That education is for all the community and must be tailored to meet people's needs and lifestyles and economic situation
- That what we do now will affect the community for generations
- A common belief that we can create a better future
- The idea that schools are there for students and not the other way around!
- The power of the individual student/staff member to achieve change through challenging.

Stakeholders were asked: *Which partnerships have most assisted the Learning Region to succeed?* Their responses were:

- Warialda High School – Bingara Central School
- School – New England TAFE and Bingara, Barraba, Warialda, Gravesend ACE
- School – employers in Warialda and Bingara
- Gwydir Industry and Education Links Committee
- School – Gwydir Shire Council
- The Council/School/TAFE/ACE (partnership) is vital
- However the groundwork was laid by the GIELC (formerly GWBIELC) in proving that cooperation could work between the two main centres.
- TAFE/Schools partnerships.
- TAFE...School...Shire...some business
- The people (mature and school age) feeling they are being listened to

School ... and TAFE...and Council

Gwydir Shire Council – Department of Education and Training

Partnership among educational providers

Partnership of business and Gwydir Learning Region

The collaborative partnerships between each other. The fact that we have a shared vision towards the personalised learning of all students.

School and TAFE.

Stakeholders were asked: *Which local initiatives have most assisted the Learning Region to succeed?* Their responses were:

School curriculum genuinely geared for student interests and needs (student determined)

Composite youth/mature age classes

Students accessing courses according to readiness not age

Emphasis on part-time traineeships

Involvement of the community in the education of youth

Aged care nursing training

Roxy Theatre restoration project

The formation of WBIELC to GIELC.

GLR becoming a sub-committee of Council.

Aged Care training with Health Service

Involvement of Shire Council, adult learning, school-based part-time traineeships

Gwydir Learning Region Committee – Visual Literacy; Roxy Theatre restoration; Aged Care initiative; part-time traineeships

School-to-work interview structure

Voc Ed program Warialda High School

Part-time traineeship uptake by employers reflects importance of to students of pathways and employability skills

The development and expansion of part time traineeships

Support from students for participation in VET and other education

Commitment from Shire to concept

Stakeholders were asked: *What other factors have most assisted the Learning Region to succeed?* Their responses were:

The vision and commitment of key personnel

Ability of key personnel to “think outside the square”

Genuine desire by the communities to support youth

Persistence and determination of key personnel – “never give up!”

Support of the two local newspapers – weekly focus

Outstanding student successes – success leading to further success

New facilities/services created for the community

The commitment/dedication/passion at the GLR Committee. This has led to the GLR being accepted by the general populace – they may not know exactly what it is but they support the outcomes.

Goodwill

Commitment

Drive of central coordinating committee

Beliefs of stakeholders

High quality leadership

The personal relationship between the main stakeholders such as TAFE, Council, School, ACE etc that have arisen out of a mutual belief that small communities can come up with the answers to grow a sustainable entity that can deliver to all community members a high degree of recurrent educational programs and educational equity

Financial assistance and administrative support from the Gwydir Shire Council

Individual commitment of Committee members

Openness and honesty of stakeholders

Desire to see local community strengthened

Support by Council General Manager and Mayor

Challenge of “process”/”policy” of system to make achievements possible

Co-operation, co-operation and lots of goodwill!!!!!!!!!!!!

Organisations and their representatives’ willingness to participate in meetings, planning and discussions to further the local

Some brief observations on the above responses are as follows:

- a key success factor of the Gwydir Learning Region is the partnership component
- another key success factor is the belief that “we can create a better future” by taking a more flexible approach to meeting the needs of individual learners
- local initiatives and foci like the refurbishment of the Roxy Theatre have helped the GLR succeed
- passion and shared values have contributed significantly to the success of the GLR
- people wishing to learn from the Gwydir initiative are advised to attend to multiple domains such as agreeing on a shared goals, building local partnerships, generating new ideas and aligning learning with local needs.

## Identification of the top five factors influencing the Learning Region's achievements

To identify the top success factors, stakeholders were provided with a list of twenty possible success factors, drawn from the literature about the Gwydir Learning Region. The stakeholders were then asked to identify from the list of factors, the five most important factors that have influenced the Learning Region's achievements (with 1 indicating the most important factor).

**Table 10: Top success factors**

Factor	No. people who selected this factor (n =9)	Total votes	Ranking ( from 1 = most votes)
1. The shared values of the stakeholders in the Learning Region	6	22	1
2. The partnerships fostered by the Learning Region	6	16	2
3. The collaboration between stakeholders	5	14	Equal 3
4. The stakeholders' commitment to the concept of a Learning Region	4	14	Equal 3
5. The continued support from the stakeholders	4	14	Equal 3
6. The social benefits of developing a Learning Region	4	10	Equal 6
7. The ideas behind the Learning Region	2	10	Equal 6
8. Economic imperatives to develop innovative strategies in the region	4	8	Equal 8
9. The user-centric nature of the Learning Region	2	8	Equal 8
10. The use of innovative strategies by the Learning Region	4	7	10
11. The local community's support for the Learning Region	1	3	11

The following factors did not receive votes:

- The cooperative culture of the local community
- The structure and management of the Learning Region
- The use of strategies that encourage self-development by learners
- Users' positive responses to the Learning Region
- Stakeholders learning from other Learning Regions
- The management processes used to support the Learning Region
- Self-evaluation strategies used by the Learning Region
- The support for the Learning Region from external parties
- Other (please specify).

Some observations about the above results are as follows:

- The most important success factor – in terms of the total number of votes – is the shared values of the stakeholders.
- The top three success factors – in terms of the number of voters who selected this factor –

“the shared values of the stakeholders in the Learning Region”, “the partnerships fostered by the Learning Region” and “the collaboration between stakeholders” – could be seen as having the same core component, collaboration.

- If other rural and remote regions wish to emulate the Gwydir Learning Region, they would be advised to focus their efforts on shared values, partnerships and collaboration.

### The impact of each different factor on the achievement of objectives

To assess the impact of each different factor in influencing the achievements of the Gwydir Learning Region, the stakeholders at the focus group in March 2006 were asked to please tick ✓ one option from each row, to indicate the importance of each factor. Seven of the participants completed the survey – as two of the group had to leave before the end of the session.

<b>FACTOR</b>	<i>1. Very unimportant</i>	<i>2.</i>	<i>3. Neither important nor unimportant</i>	<i>4.</i>	<i>5. Very important</i>
1. The local community's support for the Learning Region	1 (vote)		1 (vote)	3 (votes)	2 (votes)
2. Economic imperatives to develop innovative strategies in the region			1	4	2
3. Stakeholders' appreciation of the social benefits of developing a Learning Region			1	1	5
4. Stakeholders' commitment to the concept of a Learning Region				2	5
5. The ideas behind the Learning Region				5	2
6. The continued support from the stakeholders				1	6
7. The collaboration between stakeholders				4	3
8. The cooperative culture of the local community			2	4	1
9. The partnerships fostered by the Learning Region			1	2	4
10. The shared values of the stakeholders in the Learning Region		1		3	3
11. The structure and management of the Learning Region			3	4	
12. The use of innovative strategies by the Learning Region				3	4
13. The use of strategies that encourage self-development by learners			1	2	4
14. The user-centric nature of the Learning Region			1	2	4
15. Users' positive responses to the Learning Region			1	5	1
16. Stakeholders learning from other pilot projects		1	1	4	1
17. The management processes used to support the Learning Region			4	3	
18. Self-evaluation strategies used			2	3	2

by the Learning Region					
19. The support for the Learning Region from external parties			3	2	2
20. Other (please specify):					

This exercise of determining the importance of each of twenty different factors counters the impression of the previous exercise that only eleven of the twenty factors tabled had influenced the success of the Gwydir Learning Region. The responses to this exercise show that the stakeholders believed that almost every factor except “other” had some importance. This result indicates that there are many different success factors of the Gwydir Learning Region.

Two brief observations about this result are as follows:

- the GLR is a complex undertaking, and its successes are the result of very many factors
- if other rural and remote regions want to emulate the success of the GLR, they will need to attend to multiple factors.

### Summary points

Each of the stakeholders of the Gwydir Learning Region would use slightly different words to explain the success factors behind the initiative, but given the consistency of the ideas summarised in this chapter, most could be expected to concur with sentiments expressed by Peter Cuskelly (2005a):

The keys to success (of the GLR) are the valuing of all learning, the engagement of participants in their learning, an emphasis on youth being valued, alertness to opportunities and possibilities, flexibility, strong partnerships and effective communications.

## 10. Final comments on the evaluation

This chapter provides some additional comments on the evaluation, through a number of different lenses, such as appreciative inquiry, model building and value for money.

### Key points

Key points in this chapter include the following:

- using the perspective of appreciative inquiry, which focuses on the positive and sustainable elements of the Gwydir Learning Region, the GLR is an inspirational development that has many lessons to offer other regions. However, to be sustainable the GLR needs to continue to seek new forms of support and funding, use new technologies to deliver education, develop fresh ideas, prepare for the departure of the initial champions and foster others to take leadership roles.
- from the perspective of model building, the Gwydir Learning Region has developed a sophisticated model of a learning region that contains elements such as the following: shared goals and vision; social and economic imperatives; sophisticated conceptual foundations from the fields of education, community development, regional development and learning communities; an evolving structure and refined processes; and multiple success factors.
- in terms of the effectiveness of the initiative, the report contains substantial examples of the GLR's achievements, from positively influencing attitudes, to assisting skill building, to creating employment opportunities. However, more outcomes data of a longitudinal nature needs to be collected, for instance data from tracking student destination and data on the economic impact of the GLR.
- in terms of the value for money, the Gwydir Learning Region is an example of a low cost, high return initiative, in that little direct funding has underpinned its success. On the other hand, a considerable amount of goodwill and un-costed time and effort has aided its success.

### Appreciative inquiry

The evaluation incorporated ideas from the 'appreciative inquiry' methodology, in that interviewees and survey respondents were encouraged to focus on the positive and sustainable elements of the Gwydir Learning Region initiative and how other regions can build on the positive aspects of the Gwydir model.

Appreciative inquiry is an emerging approach to organisational development that focuses on what is working or succeeding in a program. Traditionally, "accountancy" evaluation focused mostly on the negatives: concerns, hurdles and problems. Appreciative inquiry offers evaluators a participative, collaborative and systematic method for discovering and building on the positive aspects of a program. The appreciative inquiry perspective enriched the evaluation, capturing data which might be missed using the narrow "accountant perspective" commonly used for such evaluations. However, this appreciative inquiry approach did not preclude the evaluator from identifying barriers and obstacles.

From the perspective of appreciative inquiry, this report shows in a resounding way that the Gwydir Learning Region has not only achieved much in the local area but has much to offer,

indeed inspire, other regions. Des Gorman believes the GLR is doing all the right things at the moment to increase its support:

I think they are doing all the right things at the moment. They are being loud. They are being very professional. They are approaching the right people. They are talking it up at the right conferences. I know it is a huge impost on their time but the more they do that (presenting at conferences), the more possibility of extra funding. The paper on 15-19 year olds is something they can use in submission writing. I think what remains untapped is Commonwealth money through initiative funding.

There is some concern that the initiators or drivers of the GLR may become overwhelmed, but on the other hand there are other resources yet to be tapped, commented Des Gorman:

I worry that the key drivers are overwhelmed from time to time, so clearly some extra resourcing would be ideal, to ensure that sustainability. I think the onset of further technologies will ensure its sustainability: that will break down another barrier of distance. The more we can get into videoconferencing lessons via the internet, blended delivery of both school study and workbased training, interactive whiteboards, that will continue to assist sustainability. I guess the other thing is ensuring the needs of students can be met so that if it is not available within the local area, that there are systems in place to seek it out as Peter has done, enrolling students in TAFE courses in South Australia. That takes a lot of time, so to ensure sustainability we have to streamline those mechanisms so that searches can be made quite easily for programs that students have indicated they would like to be involved with.

Ideally other players will take up some of the slack. My observation is that there probably are some teachers in both schools who see it as an impediment to their work. I know Peter Cuskelly is doing great things to bring people on board, but the more slack that can be done up by the whole team the better.

Nancy Capel, publisher of the Bingara Advocate, added: "If Max (Eastcott), Wayne (Squires) and Martin (Bower) fell out of the same tree, and something bad happened, the GLR would fall over. If one or two fell out of the tree, the GLR would go on, wounded."

Max Eastcott (2005a) has a similar concern that the 'creative class' of stakeholders who have driven the GLR to date may leave the region, in which case he hopes others will take up the baton:

a renewal based solely on the 'creative class' ... may not be sustainable. Often the members of this class are transitory and any change in the conditions that attracted them to an area in the first place may see them move on.

The task is to somehow transfer their enthusiasm and commitment to the broader community. Hopefully the old say 'nothing succeeds like successes' will result in inculcating the current energy levels throughout the general community. I hope it does!

The Gwydir Learning Region is an example of this process – it is driven, at the moment, largely by 'blow-ins' but its support base is spreading. (p.7)

Max Eastcott has voiced a view that is representative of the views of members of the GLR Committee that the selection processes for key positions such as the position of Principal at the two schools and his own position as General Manager of the Council include special considerations:

The Gwydir Learning Region is successful largely due to the dedicated individual efforts of the participants. The commitment of each School Principal is of fundamental and absolute importance and genuinely can not be understated.

If possible negotiations should commence to make Bingara Central School and Warialda High School classed as *Special Fitness Schools* in order to make sure that the most appropriate person is appointed to the position of Principal on merit. Further there has been an argument presented that the GLR should be represented in the selection process.

This level of cross organisational commitment could also be replicated with other appointments to significant positions within the GLR, such as the General Manager's position with the Council.

A number of interviewees noted that some members of staff at the Warialda High School held concerns about the Gwydir Learning Region. These concerns included the following: that the vocational classes and activities sometimes disrupted attendance numbers at other classes; and that some students placed a higher priority on engagement and performance in vocational courses, compared to the academic courses, in their pattern of school subjects. Personalised learning was perceived by some teachers as contributing to an increase in teachers' workload. A level of stress was reported, for some teachers, as a result of falling numbers of enrolments in some academic subjects, and some experienced teachers were finding it difficult to adapt to a new educational philosophy and environment, based on personalised learning.

## **Model building**

To clarify and articulate the model developed by the Gwydir Learning Region, techniques advocated by Yin (2003) were used in this evaluation study, following this sequence of activities:

- designing (research questions)
- conducting (preparation for data collection; undertaking of site visits; conducting of interviews)
- analysis of data/evidence (using an explanation-building technique of theoretical framework, refinement, revision of proposition)
- development of written summary.

The elements of the Gwydir Learning Region model are laid out in this report in some detail. For instance:

- the collaborative origins including the iterative process of agreeing on a name, goals and a vision are set out in Chapter 1
- the social and economic factors driving the stakeholders are set out in Chapter 2
- the rich conceptual framework – traversing education, community development and regional development – is set out in Chapter 3
- the evolving structure and refinement to processes are set out in Chapter 4
- the successes are set out in Chapters 5-8
- the success factors are detailed in Chapter 9.

One stakeholder's summary of the key elements of the Gwydir Learning Region is set out on a single page at the front of this report, before the Executive Summary.

## **Evaluating effectiveness**

This report includes in Section B an evaluation of the effectiveness of the Gwydir Learning Region. This evaluation, particularly as recorded in chapters 5-9, examined outcomes as well as factors affecting the achievement of those outcomes. Some of the many outcomes of the GLR – verified by earlier sections of this report – are succinctly summarised by Max Eastcott (2005c) in the following statement, in which he also suggests measures that can validate these achievements:

Increased value of and support for learning (measure numbers in pre-school, ACE, schools and TAFE programs; measure numbers using library)

Offering an increased range and amount of courses in the communities of Warialda and Bingara

through using TAFE programs offered through local schools (Measures: no. of courses each year/ no. of student in courses/ no. of adults in school based courses)

Increasing the social capital in the region, through developing productive partnerships and (measure: community confidence)

Local students receiving high level training that wouldn't normally be available in small communities (measure: GLR DVD; no. of Workskills awards)

Businesses seeing that the voc ed program meets their needs and has increased the business confidence (no. of trainees in Shire, relative to larger centres)

Seeing learning as a strategy to address community needs as well as individual needs; -

- Mental Health      lack of professional assistance
- Aged care nursing    aging community and lack of skilled staff
- Theatre skills        North West theatre company and the Roxy

University support for school/TAFE programs articulating local programs (no. of students progressing on to further tertiary study).

Because of the ambitious breadth of goals pursued by the GLR, the learning region needs this wide range of performance indicators suggested by Max Eastcott. But because of the increasing profile of the GLR, more data needs to be collected of a longitudinal nature tracking student destination and the impact of GLR graduates on the local business.

## **Value for money**

The value of the Gwydir Learning Region was identified in the study through a range of methodologies, one of which was the use of the concept of value for money. The Australian National Audit Office (ANAO 2002) defines value for money as a judgement of the worth of funds expended in the light of the benefits received (p.84).

This report confirms the value of the Gwydir Learning Region against various economic and social performance indicators, such as ones identified by Ingle and Walls (2004), including:

- increases in residents' work and life skills
- success of assistance for those excluded from the workplace or isolated from the community
- degree of economic regeneration
- scale of community capacity building
- amount and types of employment growth
- extent of the development of social capital.

The high value but low cost of the Gwydir Learning Region was commented upon by Trevor Fletcher:

The success of it is that they have grown themselves without too much external funding. I think sometimes the mistake is made that people wait with almost a cargo cult mentality that we can't do anything until money arrives. What Gwydir has said is look, let's use our thinking to drive the change and any extra funding we get will be almost icing on the cake. I think it is important that we as an education department can look at changing some of the restrictions that exist for 15-19 year olds and that can help, but the thing they most need to hang on is that which they used to create the community itself, that is harnessing new thinking and energy of all the people in the community.

While this report shows that a considerable amount of goodwill and uncosted time and effort has aided the success of the Gwydir Learning Region, Trevor Fletcher emphasises that the stakeholders have first sought to create a success before seeking funding. The initiative has certainly not been provided with easy funding, at the front end. Ideas and passion have driven the initiative, not external funding.

### **Summary comments**

When examined from the perspectives of appreciative inquiry, model building, effectiveness and value for money, the Gwydir Learning Region is an impressive initiative with many achievements to date.

## **SECTION C: APPLYING THE GWYDIR LEARNING REGION MODEL TO OTHER REGIONS**

This section addresses the issue of identifying system changes required for application of the model to other regions of NSW.

## 11. System changes required for application of the model to other regions of NSW

This chapter identifies elements of the Gwydir Learning Region model that might be transferable. The chapter also discusses a number of the system changes that might be required if it is to be transferred to other sections of NSW, particularly by educators. The term “system changes” is taken broadly to mean changes to the approaches of NSW DET.

### Key points

Key points in this chapter include the following:

- One key element of the Gwydir Learning Region model being promoted by senior education officials is the development in rural areas of a collaborative mechanism between local communities, employers, councils and educators – a mechanism based on the belief that communities can have a positive influence on their own futures.
- Other elements of the model that are transferable are the use of classes composed of mixed ages; negotiating individual pathways for students; and providing transformational leadership.
- A professional conversation has commenced within NSW DET to consider some systemic changes – particularly with regard to requirements of the Board of Studies – that might enable elements of the Gwydir model to be more easily replicated.

### Transferability

Senior officers of NSW DET were asked: *Which aspects of the Gwydir Learning Community model do you think are transferable to other settings?* Their responses included the following comments.

Trevor Fletcher articulated what he likes about the Gwydir Learning Region, particularly that the initiative is embraced by the community:

What I particularly like about it is how well it is understood and embraced by everyone in the community. When I've been up there twice now I've been struck by the extent by which everybody, right across the towns, the young people, old people, the employers and so on, really understand what is going on and the young people themselves really understand what's happening and how special it is and there is enormous pride. And I think in a country town, they're sort of going against the trend. You've got other country towns that are in decline, and who kind feel like it is a self-fulfilling prophecy, that “oh well, employment and population will continue to decline and our young people will go away to the big cities for education and training and work”. Well, they're going against the trends and I think that's fantastic.

For all the above reasons, Trevor Fletcher is deliberately using the Gwydir Learning Region as a showcase:

We're using it to showcase what can be done and I unashamedly have drawn upon the lessons. I am certainly looking to use the success of Gwydir to demonstrate to other people across the state what's possible, and that is a huge benefit for us.

Trevor Fletcher is clear in his own mind about which elements of the Gwydir model might be transferable to other regions:

It's who participating – that's the critical lesson from Gwydir – and the way that they've gone about their business and the new thinking: they're the things that most struck me. That's why I took all the regional directors and institute directors up there last year – just to have a close up look at it. And already there have been some discussions occurring across the other nine regions about how else we can replicate this. And again I am not saying they have to be exactly the same as Gwydir, but it is a very good model.

Des Gorman commented that elements of the model such as the mixed composition of classes and the negotiation of individual pathways are transferable to other settings:

I think that class make-up is transferable: if they haven't got enough young people to make up a class they source the target learners from the community. I think that's instantly transferable and probably is happening elsewhere but not to the same extent. I think what is transferable is the individual pathways that are negotiated with each student. I can't see any reason with careers advisers in schools why we can't do that. I've seen that work in Victoria where through what is called the Managing Individual Pathways Program, which was funded by the government: I think that is crucial.

Des Gorman also believed that the Warialda High School principal's transformational leadership is transferable, as are other aspects, if the Board of Studies "lightens its view a bit":

I think the transformational leadership that has been evidenced by Peter Cuskelly in particular is transferable. The notion of the principal taking a hands-on active role and also bringing along his or her team, is clearly transferable. Other aspects are transferable as long as the Board of Studies lightens its view a bit and I think that is happening.

The involvement of local government and community organisations is another element of the Gwydir Learning Region model that is transferable, said Des Gorman:

I think the involvement of local government is transferable: but I don't see it elsewhere. Local councils don't get involved elsewhere but chambers of commerce do. I think that the notion of the learning region is transferable: I've seen it work and I've seen it work in my past jurisdiction in Geelong in Victoria where community organisations worked together as partner learners, whether you've got the local government or not. It does help to have local government however.

New England Institute's Gary Pollock noted further elements of the Gwydir Learning Region model that are transferable:

The concepts and principles are readily transferable. The fundamental principles are very clear and can be replicated, although the structures and how they are operationalised may vary. The stakeholder attitudes within the Gwydir Learning Region have been very open and supportive and can be replicated. Community champions are needed, as you can't legislate or dictate: a learning region has to be organic and grow out of activities like workshops and forums.

## **Reducing other system barriers**

The interviewees above mentioned a number of changes that might be needed, in order to transfer of the Gwydir Learning Region model, such as embracing collaboration between the community, employers and educators, encouraging mixed composition classes, and negotiating individual pathways with each student. Mention was also made of the Board of Studies modifying its view. Des Gorman saw potential to reduce current barriers about curriculum requirements:

Other potential is to take further advantage of that younger age group and I know that both schools have done that very well but they have come up against some barriers around Board of Studies requirements. There is an appetite now statewide to blur those boundaries. That potential has come from people like the Director General Andrew Cappie-Wood seeing what it is all about and seeing what the barriers are doing, and Trevor Fletcher also who is on the Board of Studies. So those conversations I know are taking place.

A forthcoming NSW DET paper on the 15-19 year old student cohort which points to the Gwydir model may help to reduce systemic barriers and encourage more innovation around the state, noted Des Gorman:

There is a paper being worked on at the moment around the 15-19 year old stage and some of the characteristics you see in the Gwydir Learning Region are being promoted as possible policies across the state in relation to boundary fuzziness. I still need more potential for TAFE: I know they are heavily involved. There is further potential for employers to be involved and the potential available through communications technology is being explored and will be explored further.

Marie Persson is conscious that TAFE receives one third of its funding from the Commonwealth which is tied to specific targets. For instance, to meet Commonwealth targets TAFE NSW needs to increase its delivery to the mature-aged. So to further support initiatives like the Gwydir Learning Region, TAFE needs to partner with others and to be innovative:

It is important for us to be in partnerships. And we have to find creative solutions, joint solutions. For example, we can offer a combination of OTEN (Open Training and Education Network) approaches with local tutoring and mentoring.

On the other hand, said Marie Persson, TAFE NSW has many existing examples of innovative delivery in rural areas – normally called ‘flexible learning’ in TAFE – that are similar to the TAFE approaches within the Gwydir region. Hence, TAFE is well placed to assist other regions seeking to imitate the Gwydir model.

While agreeing that TAFE can point to many examples of responsiveness in rural NSW, Gary Pollock added that TAFE needs to continue to align vocational education with community engagement and need:

The whole issue of community engagement is critical to community development: if we can’t engage the community we will be second guessing what they need. We need to support community capability and capacity building. We need to offer more customisation and tailoring of training. TAFE is very good at offering programs to classes of fifteen, but the future will be about being much more flexible and responsive, where we meet people’s learning needs anywhere, at any time. The Gwydir Learning Region has given us a very good experience in that regard. It has particularly shown us how people are able to link skills acquisition to vocations.

## **Summary points**

The Gwydir Learning Region initiative has impressed senior officials in education who are now considering systemic changes that might facilitate the adoption in other parts of the state of some elements of the GLR model. While system changes understandably take time to negotiate, the Gwydir model can continue to inspire other regions.

## APPENDICES

## **Appendix 1: Evaluation framework for the project**

Set out below is an excerpt from the evaluation framework for the 2006 project, to document and evaluate the Gwydir Learning Region Initiative.

The framework was prepared by evaluator Dr John Mitchell after consultation with the project manager Bernard Ingle, R/Educational Developments Manager, TAFE NSW New England Institute.

### **Stakeholders**

The primary stakeholders and audience for this evaluation framework and for the evaluation findings are:

- BVET as funding body for the project
- The project steering committee and the various reference groups, including representatives from TAFE NSW, Schools, Adult and Community Education, local government authorities and community bodies.

### **Deliverables**

The deliverables from this initial project are:

- Documentation of the model
- Evaluation of the model using quantitative and qualitative methodologies.

The specific deliverables are the draft and final report.

The final report will include appendices, among which will be:

- a draft article based on the full report, of around 2,500-3,000 words, which the Steering Committee can 'cut and paste', modify and adapt for use in a variety of settings for presentation purposes. The draft article will use the conventional academic structure of abstract, introduction, literature review, methodology, findings and discussion (supplied separately to the GLR sub-committee).
- a draft set of initial suggestions regarding promotion and dissemination and possible tools, as background for the next stage of the project. These suggestions will be based on ideas that emerge during the research, particularly during the site visits (Appendix 3).

### **Evaluation questions**

The key questions for the evaluation are:

- (1) What is the context for, conceptual framework for and structural and operational characteristics of the Gwydir Learning Region?
- (2) How successful is the Gwydir Region, against a range of qualitative and quantitative indicators
- (3) What are the key success factors?
- (4) What system changes are needed to apply the model to other regions of NSW?

Many other questions that relate to these two major questions will be asked in the survey and the interviews and focus group, and will underpin observations of the projects.

## **Proposed methodology**

The following notes summarise the proposed methodology for this assignment.

As the foundation for the evaluation and documentation, a pragmatist mixed methods approach (Cresswell 2003) will be used, complemented by the following specific methodologies:

- appreciative inquiry (Ludema et al. 2003)
- case study model building (Yin 2003)
- evaluating effectiveness (Dept Finance 1994)
- value for money analysis (ANAO 2002).

Each of these methodologies is described in more detail in the Evaluation Framework for this project.

## **Data collection methods**

The main data collection methods will be a survey, interviews, observations and a focus group.

## **References**

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Department of Finance 1994, *Doing evaluations. A practical guide*, Dept of Finance, Canberra.

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Ludema, J.D., Whitney, D., Mohr, B.J. & Griffin, T. 2003, *The Appreciative Inquiry Summit: A practitioner's guide for leading large-group change*, Berrett-Koehler Publishers Inc, San Francisco.

Yin, R.K. 2003, *Case study research. Design and methods*, Third edition, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks.

## Appendix 2: List of interviewees and survey respondents

The following persons generously completed surveys, attended interviews or participated in a focus group or discussions for this evaluation.

### Stakeholder interviewees

Alan Potter, VET in Schools Coordinator, TAFE NSW New England Institute  
Bernard Ingle, R/Educational Development Manager, TAFE NSW New England Institute (\*)  
Bob Johnston, Deputy Principal, Bingara Central School  
Bronwyn Clinch, Executive Officer, Barraba Community Learning Association Inc (\*)  
David Michaels, Senior Manager, Skills Strategy, NSW DET  
Des Gorman, Regional Director, Schools, New England Region  
Di Quinn, Co-ordinator, Gravesend Adult Learning Association Inc  
Gary Pollock, Director, TAFE NSW New England Institute; at the time of interview, Project Officer, TAFE and Community Education  
Jack Dolby, Head Teacher, Gwydir Learning Region, Warialda High School  
Jane Beaumont, formerly Community Services Manager, Gwydir Shire Council, 2001-2005; currently Regional Services Division, Department of Transport and Regional Services, Canberra  
Marie Persson, Deputy Director General, TAFE and ACE, NSW DET  
Martin Bower, Careers and Community Education Officer, Warialda High School (\*)  
Max Eastcott, General Manager, Gwydir Shire Council (\*)  
Nancy Capel, publisher, The Bingara Advocate; employer of trainee  
Peter Cuskelly, Principal, Warialda High School  
Peter Macbeth, Principal, Bingara Central School (\*)  
Rick Hutton, proprietor of Fay's of Bingara including IGA supermarket; employer of trainees  
Robyn Gasson, Co-ordinator, Bingara Adult Learning Association Inc  
Rod Smith, Training Co-ordinator, Gwydir Shire Council  
Toni Moody, President, Bingara Adult Learning Association Inc  
Trevor Fletcher, Deputy Director General, Schools, NSW DET  
Wayne Squires, Vocational Education Officer, Warialda High School

(\*) This symbol denotes members of the steering group for this project from the Gwydir Learning Region Coordinating Committee are marked by an.

### Stakeholder focus group participants

Alan Potter, Jack Dolby, Max Eastcott, Bernard Ingle, Bronwyn Clinch, Peter Cuskelly, Wayne Squires, Martin Bower, Peter Macbeth

## **Stakeholder survey respondents**

Jack Dolby, Max Eastcott, Bernard Ingle, Bronwyn Clinch, Peter Cuskelly, Alan Potter, Wayne Squires, Martin Bower, Peter Macbeth

## **Other people with whom discussions were held**

Chris Moore, Records Officer, Gwydir Shire, Bingara office

Glen Wade, butcher, Wade's Best Butchery, Bingara – employer of trainee and parent of trainee

Jamie Marshall, Committee member, North West Film Festival

Lenore Kennedy, Committee member, North West Film Festival; parent of trainee

Mark Coulton, Mayor, Gwydir Shire Council, and Chair of the Gwydir Learning Region Committee

Rachel Thompson, Economic Development & Tourism Manager, Gwydir Shire Council

Sandy McNaughton, Committee member, North West Film Festival; Manager, Roxy Cinema

Stephanie Leach, Committee member, North West Film Festival (and TVET teacher)

Susanne Hughes, proprietor, Boutique Capri, Bingara; Chair of Gwydir Education and Industry Links Committee; employer of trainee (correspondence handed to evaluator)

Suzanne Fuelling, Youth Services Coordinator, Gwydir Shire Council

## **Participating teachers interviewed**

Anthony Vaccaro (from TAFE Inverell) teacher for TVET Automotive Certificate I, Warialda High School

David Maddigan, Director and Principal Consultant, DTCM Consultants, teacher for HSC VET Certificate 111 Aged Care Work, interviewed at Gwydir Learning Centre, Bingara

Jim Belford (from TAFE Inverell), TVET Business Studies Certificate 11, Warialda High School

Kate Lockhart (from TAFE Inverell), TVET Certificate 11, Community Services (Children's Services), Warialda High School

Kath McLean (from TAFE Tamworth), Aged Care Certificate 111, Warialda High School

Katherine Nicholson, Head Teacher General Education and Equity Services, TAFE Inverell

Sharon Gilmour, teacher Warialda High School (employed by TAFE Moree), TVET Visual Arts (Ceramics), Warialda High School

Stephanie Leach (Inverell TAFE), TVET Screen, Warialda High School

## **User (individuals and groups) interviewees**

Ben O'Brien, Year 11 student at Warialda High School

Bronwyn Sergeant, formerly student Certificate 111, Aged Care, Warialda High School

Carisa Riley, Year 12, student at Warialda High School and Certificate 111 Retail trainee Boutique Capri, Bingara

Group interviews were conducted with the following class groups:

- TVET Fashion Fundamentals, Warialda High School
- TVET Business Studies Certificate 11, Warialda High School

- TVET Construction/Renovation, Warialda High School
- TVET Screen, Warialda High School
- ACE HSC VET Courses: Aged Care Certificate 111, Bingara Learning Centre (2 groups)
- TVET Equine Studies/Animal Care, Bingara Central School
- TVET Beauty Therapy, Bingara Central School
- TVET Food Technology, Bingara Central School

### **User survey respondents**

TVET Fashion Fundamentals, Warialda High School, 14 March 2006

- Caitlyn Boland
- Jessica Hollow
- Julie Griese
- Kate Lindner
- Sue Lindner

TVET Business Studies Certificate 11, Warialda High School, 14 March 2006

- Steffi Duff
- Attara Bannister
- Bree Ellison
- Alicia Bussell
- Alexandra Stones

TVET Construction/Renovation, Warialda High School, 14 March 2006

- Caroline Hollow
- Phillip Butler
- Mac Densley
- Steven Butler
- Tom Powell
- Tim Smith

TVET Screen, Warialda High School, 15 March 2006

- Ken Cambell
- Matthew Adams
- Sara Marle
- Daniel Davie
- Sally Gill
- Rachel Conway
- Sally Nichols
- Katie Small
- Anonymous

Private or Community RTO (ACE) providing HSC VET Courses: Aged Care Certificate 111, Bingara Learning Centre, 15 March 2006

- Judi Peterson
- Anne-Marie Fletcher
- Grace Rawlinson
- Rachel Bonarius
- Janelle Fletcher
- Candida Marle
- Carole McCosker
- Michelle Reece-Houben
- Jitoko (Toby) O'Rourke
- Colleen Walton
- Anonymous

Private or Community RTO (ACE) providing HSC VET Courses: Aged Care Certificate 111, Bingara Learning Centre, 17 March 2006

- Julieanne Hall
- Jason Storer
- Marion Wright
- Martin Weber
- Ingrid Tuendemann

TVET Equine Studies/Animal Care, Bingara Central School, 17 March 2006

- Jane O'Brien
- Eloise Brown
- Kirsty Coombes
- Kelly Welsh
- Rohan Northey
- Danielle Riley
- Geoffrey Picton

TVET Beauty Therapy, Bingara Central School, 17 March 2006

- Leticia Anderson
- Brittany Thomas
- Gillian Matthews
- Megan Apthorpe
- Jenna Samson
- Carly Lanagan

TVET Food Technology, Bingara Central School, 17 March 2006

- Brittany Chester



## Appendix 3: Initial suggestions regarding promotion and dissemination

This appendix contains a draft set of initial suggestions regarding promotion and dissemination and possible tools, as background for the next stage of the project. These suggestions are based on ideas that emerge during the research, particularly during the site visits. The suggestions are only incidental ones that arose from discussions, and are not a thorough set.

### Suggestions regarding promotion and dissemination

The following proposition was put to the stakeholders in the focus group: *That to win additional support from Government, the Gwydir Learning Region needs to highlight and promote its quantitative impacts.* Their responses included:

If we want to grow we need to keep doing what we are doing but promote it more.

We could be more opportunistic in identifying funding, which Jane Beaumont was good at.

We can promote better the health benefits of country life, for the ‘tree changers’.

Every family that leaves Sydney saves the government money: we need to promote that.

**Suggestions.** The Gywdir Learning Region committee would do well to consider some of the main issues asked by marketers:

- What is/are the message(s) the GLR wants to convey?
- Why does this message need to be conveyed?
- Who are the audiences for the message(s)?
- How can the message(s) be conveyed? When? Where? How often?
- What response is sought?
- What is our budget? Timeline?
- How will we measure our impact?

### Suggestions regarding promotional tools

Users were asked: *How do you think the Gwydir Learning Region could be promoted better?*

Their responses included:

I think they do well. Better (mail) ‘drops’ throughout the district. Newspaper and ads on TV. More ads in papers and TV. Local publicity is fine.

Newspapers and ads on TV. In newspapers, TV ads, radio, newsletters, flyers, posters. Mostly at school, could be promoted more, e.g. newspaper, advertisements etc. Brochures. We only hear about the courses at school.

On TV, in newspapers. Maybe more advertisements. More pamphlets and more in newspapers. Talked more about in the newspapers. A section in the Sydney newspapers maybe.

By specifying exactly how the GLR operates and the courses available to everyone, whether they

are mature aged students or high school students. More news in papers of how well we are going. Through adult community groups. By recognising the achievements that students have accomplished by doing the courses that they have set. More advertising. Maybe through the NorthWest Magazine (have a weekly newsletter about what is happening in the class and what benefits it can offer.) A broader network of promoting this centre would benefit as we have other high schools and surrounding towns that don't have access to this centre (Bingara Learning Centre). I think information should be spread far and wide in TV, newspapers, because it has to be shown as something positive that anyone can do. I think its promoted well due to word of mouth but more advertising would be good. By encouraging a lot of people as adults to come and learn. Maybe more flyers and advertisements.

Ads, information in books, papers. Learning groups. Advertising available services, making a film. More awareness in and outside of local community. Advertise on TV, place posters on boards. Local paper, school newsletter, town flyers, make an ad for TV. Mr Bower does fairly well by himself; pay people who promote it. School is doing a great job promoting these courses.

TV and radio commercials. Put information in Centrelink offices and on TV. Flyers, mail, town notices, street posters. TV, radio.

On TV. Put it on TV. You could put it on TV so everyone will see it. Be promoted better on TV. More in school newsletter, more in newspaper. Promoted in the Bingara Advocate. Tell more people. Put more in newsletters and newspapers. More knowledge in community and rest of school: unless you have done it before or are involved you don't really know about it. More publications and 'public meetings' within the school for parents.

The number and helpful tone of these comments suggest that the users want to ensure the Gwydir Learning Region is promoted effectively.

**Suggestions.** For this local market, the Gwydir Learning Region committee would do well to use a number of different tools and monitor through user surveys which tools have the most impact. To influence future promotions, the committee could then make a judgement call based on value for money, about which methods have the most impact for what cost.

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### Sample evaluations in 2005

Evaluated BVET-funded project on personalised learning: 'Creating Personalised Learning', Nov 2005

Lead author of *New Ways of Working in VET* (ANTA, Melb), based on an analysis of good practice exemplars from the 181 projects funded by Reframing the Future in 2004

Completed an evaluation study of Centrelink's leadership program, June 2005

Evaluated Centrelink's Learning and Development staff on the evaluation of learning, June 2005

Evaluated new approaches to teaching, learning and assessment in VET sector (included conducting a national focus group in Armidale, October 2005) for NCVET project, Dec 2005

Prepared 11 of the 15 case studies, as project leader, for NCVET project, 'Demonstrating Quality. Fifteen case studies of good practice in VET', Dec 2005, available at

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