
Why Some Towns Thrive...

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INVESTIGATING INNOVATION IN RURAL QUEENSLAND TOWNS

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UQ BUSINESS SCHOOL



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A thought...

*The task is not so much to see what no one has yet seen.
It is to think what no one has yet thought of,
About that which everyone has seen.*

Schopenhauer

The Broad Research Question

Why are some rural towns more innovative than others?

Are the people in the more innovative towns different from the people in the less innovative towns?

The Research Methodology

- Eight participating towns, all volunteers; two in South West, two in South East, two in Central, and two in North Queensland.
- Interviews with between six and eleven citizens in each town.
- Surveys sent to 300 randomly selected citizens in each town.
- Analyses of census data, 1991, 1996, 2001, for each town.
- Separate independent innovation rankings of towns based on interview information and on census information

A fundamental truth

- All people have mobility choices – to move towards somewhere that is satisfying, to stay somewhere that is satisfying, or to move away from somewhere that is not satisfying.
- It is the exercise of mobility choices, and the resulting net inflows or net outflows, that determine whether or not a town is innovative.
- The question is: Who moves, who doesn't, and why?

Who moves, who doesn't, and why?

- The more innovative people move into a location that is welcoming and attractive.
- The more innovative people move out of a location that is unwelcoming and unattractive.
- Our responsibility is to create a welcoming and attractive environment.

Who moves, who doesn't, and why?

'The only way I can get out of this job is to leave town or get carried out in a box' (President of Show Society for 15 yrs)

'Everything is working very slowly. There are the same people in Progress Associations, etc, etc. They are still there. They are all worn out of ideas. And I don't think a lot of them want to let go either. Because they don't think the young ones are capable of doing it. People are saying 'we are going to retire' but they won't do it. '

Who moves, who doesn't, and why?

'Leadership is a two edged sword. It is an act of civic responsibility...It is also an act of denying someone else the opportunity to gain civic experience. The more broadly that an understanding of civic experience and responsibility is shared, the healthier and more innovative is the town.'

Recommendations for rural towns

- Encourage the development of a vision for the town and the planning and activity to get there.
- Encourage diversity in every dimension.
- Encourage continuing education, formal and informal, for all residents.
- Encourage that all civic positions be held for a short and fixed period and that leadership be rotated as often as possible.
- Encourage the concept of 'leadership' and discourage the concept of 'leaders'.
- Encourage self-help and discourage dependence upon outside agents or funders.

Recommendations for Councils

- Councils and constituents to clarifying precisely what the role of Council is, and what it is not.
- Council composition to represent the diversity of constituents. Age, gender, domicile and occupational background are areas presently not seen as representative.
- Councils to seek every opportunity for young families to move into and be welcomed by their town.
- Councils to find multiple ways of communicating with constituents.
- Councils to foster every opportunity for investment by outsiders and by locals in the town.

Recommendations for councils (cont)

- Councils to ensure their town is adequately promoted to the outside world and to its own citizens.
- Councils to foster, fund, and reward those private sector businesses that invest in their own continual skill and service development for the benefit of their clients.
- Councils to nurture initiatives, foster capability and reduce dependencies (on them). “Help them grow; then let them go”.
- Councils to explore all avenues to make their towns attractive for young people. Education facilities, recreational facilities and employment opportunities are all vital.

Recommendations for State and Federal Governments

- Use Government agency resources more holistically and strategically for benefit of the town.
- Government employees based in rural towns often have the highest levels of education, the greatest diversity of experience, and the strongest networks. Formally and strategically use this resource for the benefit of the town by making civic responsibility part of every employee's job.
- Government agencies to build employment and service provision in funding cadetships in occupational areas of greatest local need.

Recommendations for State and Federal Governments (cont)

- Government support to communities through multiple entities, not just through Councils [since the latter can be blockers as well as enablers]. [The Council in the most innovative town supported the initiation of several now independent bodies.]
- Governments to consider basing their policies towards rural communities on the best practices of international aid towards developing countries. Do not engage without an exit strategy. Do not engage without the intent of building local capacity to the greatest extent possible.

In conclusion

The most striking difference between the most innovative town, and the other participating towns is the extent to which there is broad-based investment and proactive participation in community life.

The people make the place.

Some Questions

- Whose responsibility is it to act on these findings?
- What are the insights you gain from this research?
- What are the implications of doing nothing?
- What do you believe needs to be done?
- Who needs to be involved?

Questions and Comments Welcome

The full report can be found on:

<http://www2.dpi.qld.gov.au/business/14778.html>

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Innovative towns ...

- Score significantly higher than other towns on the positive trends across all measures.
- Have over 45% of residents who have lived elsewhere compared with only 10% for one of the least innovative towns. The percentage of those moving into town is among the highest across the eight participating towns.
- Score higher than most other towns in the percentage of its residents who work in “creative” [professional] occupations and industries.

Innovative towns ...(cont)

- Show a slight population increase over the last three census periods.
- Have residents who show an increasing tendency to stay, while outsiders show an increasing tendency to move in.
- Have a population that has declined in the pre-40 age groups and increased in the post-40 age group.
- Relative to rental accommodation, has one of the highest owner-occupier percentages across the eight participating towns.
- Has a higher proportion of people who identify as 'having knowledge and expertise' relative to the number who identify as 'leaders' or 'support people'.

Within-town results

- Local authority executives have traveled overseas an average of five times while citizens have averaged less than two.
- 'Leaders' reported an average education level of Year 10; 'people with knowledge and expertise' reported an average level of education between Year 12 and Certificate.
- 'People with knowledge and expertise' report being more 'Open-minded' than 'support people'.

Within-town results (cont)

- Those who came from larger towns report a level of education between Year 12 and Certificate; those who came from the same sized towns report a Year 10 level of education.
- Those who come from larger towns report a greater frequency of overseas travel and a longer duration of stay overseas.
- Those who moved into this town from elsewhere
 - averaged above Year 12 education while those who did not averaged Year 11.
 - travelled more frequently than those who did not.
 - report being more 'Open-minded' than those who did not.