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2014 Digital Rural Futures Conference Special Edition in association with the Regional Universities Network (RUN)

Guest Editors: Shirley Reushle and Helen Farley

Introduction

In June, 2014, the Digital Rural Futures Conference, an initiative of the Regional Universities Network (RUN), was held at the University of Southern Queensland's Toowoomba campus. RUN, a network of six universities with headquarters in regional Australia, was established in October 2011. The foundation members are CQUniversity, Southern Cross University, Federation University Australia, University of New England, University of Southern Queensland and University of the Sunshine Coast. The RUN member universities play an important and distinctive role in advancing Australia's national prosperity, productivity and identity through their educational and research contributions to regional economic, social, cultural and environmental development.

The Conference provided an interface between researchers and primary producers, educators, communities, government agencies, industry and others and opportunities for discussions relevant to the regional agenda. The Conference themes were regional futures, agricultural futures and digital futures. Following the conference, presenters were invited to submit papers for review and this special edition represents those accepted papers.

Kelly and Fogarty consider the economic, social and cultural concerns of bringing teachers to rural and remote locations in Australia. They propose a novel representation of the interconnected problems of attracting and retaining teachers in those areas, describe possible system-wide support programs for beginning teachers and propose policy development to support such initiatives.

In Townsend's paper, he discusses his PhD research which focuses on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tertiary students, namely pre-service teachers in remote communities studying Initial Teacher Education through Community Based Programs. Townsend's research examines the use of digital communities to support students' cultural philosophies and their learning through the use of mobile devices.

Further work in Indigenous higher education is presented by Fredericks, Mann, Skinner, CroftWarcon, McFarlane and Creamer who examine the Indigenous support program available at Central Queensland University in Rockhampton (regional Queensland). The authors describe the Tertiary Entrance Program (TEP) established to provide an alternative entrance pathway for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Successes, shortfalls and adaptations of the program to meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and improve access to higher education regardless of geographic location and social barriers are described.

The importance of having creative and innovative approaches to the teaching of high school mathematics, science and technology is explored by Whannell and Tobias in their quest to address the challenge of having a suitably qualified workforce in the Australian agricultural industry. The initiatives described in this paper include student outreach programs in science and agriculture and the development of an interactive digital classroom to engage junior secondary mathematics and science students.

Bultjens, Kozlowski and Tucker's paper spans health and education by illustrating how digital technologies are being used to deliver health and support services, expertise and information and address distance, geographic, time, social and cultural barriers. Those affected by asbestos-related disease, their carers and families, provide a case study within which this research is located. The paper presents details and findings from a pilot project that involved the creation of the Dusted Community, a peer- to- peer online community for men and women affected both directly and indirectly by an asbestos-related diagnosis.

Fundamental principles and guidelines that can maximise the chances of success for small businesses are the basis for the paper by Wardner, Hefferan and Paddenburg. The paper summarises the evolution of the Innovation Centre Sunshine Coast (ICSC) as a successful vehicle in addressing the interface between a regional university (University of the Sunshine Coast) and high growth firms within a knowledge-based economy. Alignment between the ICSC and the strategic priorities of the University illustrates that innovation needs to deeply penetrate into a region's business structure and not be limited to education and infrastructure development alone.

We move to the agricultural theme through Reardon-Smith and colleagues' paper which reviews current agricultural extension approaches to providing climate

information to farmers. The authors report on stakeholder views of web-based virtual world discussion-support tools developed for the Australian sugar cane farming industry. An innovative application of the web-based virtual world Second Life platform is used for improved on-farm climate risk decision making. Decision making is also the focus of Noble's paper but this research is located within the beef industry. Noble describes a project investigating the relationship between information acquisition, generation, accessibility, transfer and use by small and medium beef cattle producers in a rural community in New South Wales, Australia. The role of interaction to convert information to producer knowledge, and the innovation those producers undertook within their enterprises is discussed.

An-Vo, Mushtaq and Reardon-Smith's paper addresses the uncertainty and shortages of surface water supplies as a result of global climate change. The authors propose a nonlinear programming model for the optimisation of profitability and productivity in an irrigation command area with conjunctive water use options.

We trust you enjoy this special edition that has a significant focus on the impact of digital technologies on regional Australia's educational, economic, social, cultural and environmental development and sustainability. We thank all the contributors and reviewers for this special edition, particularly Amanda Shoebridge for the wonderful assistance in facilitating the development of this issue.

Sincerely,

Shirley Reushle and Helen Farley