

Living on edges: Supplementing education in an Australian mining town



Closer to Bali than to the Western Australian state capital of Perth, the township of Karratha is officially 'remote'. It is also booming as never before in its 42 year history. From pastoral station to economic hub, there is a dramatic story to tell, but this article relates a humbler tale, one that begins with an award, a grant gifted to a school that sits in the heart of a 'red dirt' town in the far north of Western Australia. Photo courtesy of flickr (ArtGra).

Inset:
The outback, boomtown mentality is evident in this bumper sticker aimed at the thousands of so-called FiFos, staff who fly in to work almost continuously for a period and then fly out again for an extended period off. Photo by Martin Forsey.

Supplementing education through public-private partnerships is a much lauded government strategy in contemporary Australia. One such partnership in the far north town of Karratha in Western Australia, between a mining conglomerate and secondary schools, has shown some encouraging results. Australia has come through the recent global financial crisis relatively unscathed, thanks in no small part to the resource companies supporting educational improvement such as that in Karratha. Contemplating the decades ahead, which many an economist believes will continue to be bountiful for resource-rich nations, questions arise about the sorts of educational practices and outcomes Australian society wishes to pursue in the still 'lucky country'.

Martin Forsey

AUSTRALIA HAS WITNESSED A SIGNIFICANT SHIFT away from government schooling towards the non-government sector in the past two decades. This trend is especially pronounced when students move to secondary schools, with more than 40 per cent of Australian school students currently enrolled in either Catholic or Independent schools (Forsey 2008). Reflecting these realities in some small ways, Karratha has two secondary schools, a government high school spread across two campuses and St Luke's Catholic College, a school with some 400 enrolments.

It takes a village to raise a child

In its publicity materials, St Luke's proudly declares itself to be the only private school in the region called the Pilbara, and it was this school that won the award at the heart of the story related here. If you were to walk into the staffroom of the school, you may notice on the sprawling noticeboard an A3 poster congratulating the school as a 'Winner of the 2009 Schools First Local Impact Award'.

Schools First is a national awards program focused on enhancing school community partnerships throughout Australia. "You've heard it before: it takes a village to raise a child", they declare on the website –well, "Schools First builds on the increasing recognition that the task of raising young people who are resilient, enquiring, adaptable and well-adjusted, rests on the shoulders of the entire community". The programme aims at increasing student engagement, improving school attendance and retention, and enhancing academic performance. As part of the conditions for eligibility, all prize-winning schools are partnered in some way to a local community group or business. Interestingly, a recent survey conducted by the Australian Education Union indicates that a majority of schools rely upon fundraising of various sorts to pay for classroom and sporting equipment, software and even textbooks (ABC News 2010). A cynical reading of the Schools First Award is that the state is really aiming at encouraging schools into partnerships with private bodies to help defray the cost of education. Supplementing education in various ways now appears to be the order of the day, at least in Australia.

As one of the 68 inaugural recipients of a Schools First 'local impact' award, St Luke's received AU\$50,000. Their partner is The North West Shelf Venture, a conglomerate of companies that constitutes Australia's largest oil and gas resource producer which pumped a significant amount of money into the school in the first year of the project. The partnership, initially named the Karratha Education Initiative (KEI), concentrated on enriching the school's educational program in a variety of ways, improving student retention rates and their academic results. The benchmark set by St Luke's was equivalence with high quality schools in the state's capital in tertiary entrance exam results. Upon receiving the Schools First Award, the principal of St Luke's pledged to use it to further evaluate the partnership and for developing a model of school-community partnerships that could be used in other remote communities. This was my point of entry into the school. I was the happy recipient of the funds given as prize; the one charged with the task of evaluation and model development.

Before going any further, let us first understand a little more of the context, the conditions leading up to the school receiving this award.

Contexts

At the time of writing, the Australian Dollar briefly achieved parity with the US Dollar, the first time it has done so since it was floated in 1983. This is significant to the story told here because it is the commodity-led currencies that are proving strongest against the weakening US currency.

As pointed out already, Karratha is a 'red dirt town', a colour indicative of an iron-laden soil. Framed by a low range of hills to the South, it sits on a mud flat that reaches out into the turquoise Indian Ocean. If one looks hard, it is possible to imagine the giant platforms sitting nearly 125 km away on the North West Shelf pumping up the masses of oil and gas that are heating the houses and firing the furnaces of Western Australian and parts of Asia. There is a constant movement of ships as they gather the iron and the gas, the salt and the fertilizer waiting for them in the custom built vats near the ports of Dampier, some 20 kilometres to the east of the township. Twelve-hour shifts are the order of the day; it truly is a town that never sleeps.

Living on edges *continued*

Karratha is essentially a processing centre for the iron and gas industries. It is also the administrative centre for the Shire of Roebourne, which is one of four local government provinces in the Pilbara region, which covers an area of some 400,000 km². If you go to the Roebourne Council website, you will find banner statements circulating through it declaring the Pilbara to be the nation's most productive region, contributing AU\$7.1 Billion to Commonwealth taxes and royalties, 45 percent of Western Australia's export income and 23 percent of the State's gross product. According to the latest national census conducted in 2006, labour force participation in Karratha was higher than the national average by a massive 17 percentage points (82 percent compared to 65 percent). Median wages were 34 percent higher than the national figure in this period, while unemployment was less than half the national average. The level of unemployment has risen in the town over the past four years, but is still below the state and national averages. An interesting measure of economic wealth, evoked by locals quite frequently, is the number of recreational boats in the town. Walking around the streets of the Karratha it does appear as though there is a boat in every second driveway, a striking feature of which is their large size.

As the biggest town in the region, Karratha sits in the midst of a resources boom that is feeding the steel mills of China, Korea, Japan and India with iron ore and energy. The Global Financial Crisis of 2008 certainly affected the town, the ships stopped coming and many a miner was laid-off in the aftermath of the 'meltdown', but going there today, you would find little, if any, evidence of the depression. Total resource output from Karratha-Dampier increased by 16 percent per annum from 2004 to 2009 (Lawrie, Tonts & Plummer in press). Investment in the energy industries associated with the township remains strong, with newly constructed gas projects costing a combined AU\$55 billion (Department of Mines and Petroleum & Department of State Development 2010). One of the strongest indicators of the financial buoyancy of the town is its property prices. Unlike townships in most other parts of the state, where housing prices have stayed relatively flat, in Karratha from the first quarter of 2007 to the corresponding period in 2010, average property prices increased by 45 percent.

Australia has emerged from the global financial crisis relatively unscathed, or so government politicians and many an economist, like to tell us. While a 'system of prudential regulation' of financial institutions has been a key component of this (Garret 2009), the economic activity centred around Karratha is emblematic of Australia's 'great escape'. But while the town as a whole is doing well—and let us not forget that economic booms never touch all people in equally beneficial ways—this does not mean that people want to stay in Karratha indefinitely. Many factors call them away—the heat, the pull of family, boredom to name but three—but education is an important factor, especially in families with aspirations of a university education for their teenaged children.

Sustaining a workforce

— *Karratha is not the sort of town you can arrive in and think, 'oh this is a lovely town, I could live here for the rest of my life'. I don't think so.* Parent of two, currently living in Perth.

Current estimations posit the resident population in Karratha to be around 13,000 persons. There is a significant number of non-resident workers in the town at any one time due to the practice of 'fly-in, fly-out' employment that sees workers, invariably associated with the mining industry, contracted to work for a set period in the town and to then fly home for an extended break, before resuming again. These 'fly-in, fly-out' workers, known colloquially as FiFos, are housed in small rectangular units, called dongas, that are erected in temporary camps on the borders of the township. Official estimates as to how many persons are accommodated in these camps vary quite wildly from 2,000 to 6,000, and in casual conversations with various people it was not unusual to hear estimates of up to 10,000 FiFos working around Karratha at any one time.

A recent government report considering land supply issues in the township, commented that Karratha had a higher than usual 'resident churn factor', reflecting the fact that the number of people staying in the town for less than five years is more pronounced than in many other parts of Western Australia. The report states that at the time of the 2006 national census "approximately 56 and 24 per cent of Karratha residents lived at their current address one and five years ago respectively, compared to 75 per cent and 48 per cent for the State" (Government of Western Australia 2010).

One of the factors driving the earlier mentioned Karratha Education Initiative (KEI) was a concern identified by the partners of the North West Shelf Venture (NWSV) regarding

The supplementary education plan developed with the North West Shelf Venture was a grand plan for anywhere, but for a town like Karratha on the edge of nowhere, to push it to the edge of greatness like this was inconceivable to many. A budget of AU\$1m per year was requested, and in the first year St Luke's received more than this.



Photo by Claire Malavaux-Forsej.

their high staff turnover, which in the late 2000s was thought to be costing up to AU\$15m annually. Company surveys conducted at the time indicated quality of education to be a major cause of this 'employee churn', with key issues identified as teacher quality, student academic performance and curriculum choice, particularly in upper school (Years 11 and 12) when students begin their preparation for university entrance examinations.

Apprenticeship or tertiary education?

The transition to high school is a touchstone time for parents deciding whether to stay or leave the town. Significant numbers apparently choose to exit because they didn't trust the secondary schools, although it is difficult to locate any exact figures assessing the validity of this local piece of commonsense. For these reasons, the town's two secondary schools do not necessarily feel the same population pressures as the primary schools, although a number of parents with primary school children expressed concerns to me about the waiting list at St Luke's.

Many of the parents and teachers I have spoken with readily acknowledge that Karratha offers extraordinary opportunities to students seeking to take up a trade when they leave school. The apprenticeship system available through organisations such as the NWSV is of high quality and many a person I spoke with mentioned how easy it is for young people, in tones that go something like this: "you do the apprenticeship for three years and then you can earn big bucks working for a mining company".

One parent I spoke with describes what she calls 'the Karratha mentality', where "basically everything's provided on a plate if you are an industry family... a lot of these kids have gone through their whole schooling at Karratha and get an apprenticeship with one of the big companies. They think

everybody earns \$100,000 a year". A former student of St Luke's, who is currently studying medicine in Perth, spoke in similar ways, describing how his peers "all get into the same kind of mentality – they work in the day and are in the pub at night and they get into this routine. They've got a lot of money, but they are spending it as well, they go and spend four week's pay on a week in Bali or something like that".

The general feeling seems to be that these apprenticeships are readily available, but as one parent commented, the desirable apprenticeships with the NWSV are highly competitive. "They are readily available for a select few", she argued, suggesting that it had as much to do with personal networks as academic results. According to this particular woman, "the big businesses only want the cream of the crop" and the 'average child' struggles to find anything suitable.

Whatever the realities of the apprenticeship opportunities, the popular belief that it is relatively easy to access an apprenticeship in Karratha impacts significantly on the sorts of educational decisions parents make, particularly if they are part of the 'professional class', the 9.3 per cent of the population who have a tertiary degree. They are more concerned than most about the range of educational opportunities available to their children in the 'boomtown'.

"This is what parents want to know about"

As may be apparent by now, the research I am currently conducting, whilst field based, is constructed mainly around interviews; interviews with parents, teachers, students and former students of the high schools in Karratha. One group of parents I have been meeting with lately are those who have lived in Karratha and have recently moved to Perth. In seeking to find out why they left, concerns about high school education keep emerging as a key theme. As a mother of two primary school children argued, whilst reflecting on

the ways in which Karratha attracts people looking to earn a lot of money in a short period of time, “without a doubt the well educated people coming up for a stint in the town, come up while the kids are young. And that’s before they’ve seen the high schools”.

The same woman also expressed the opinion that the secondary schools are not going to attract the children of these ‘well educated people’ as long as they are not able to guarantee a critical mass of able students completing school and sitting the Tertiary Entrance Examinations at the end of Year 12. As she put it, “you are not going to get TEE (Tertiary Entrance Examination) results unless you have got students sitting Year 11 and 12. And you are not going to get students sitting Year 11 and 12 unless their parents who are tertiary educated feel encouraged and reassured that what’s on offer is good enough”. It is a view shared by all of the tertiary educated parents I have interviewed to this point.

At a local weekend festival held annually in Karratha, which draws a high proportion of the town’s population, there is a pavilion accommodating stalls promoting the vast majority of boarding schools located in the State’s capital some 1,500 km south of Karratha. In the recent past, the North West Shelf Venture (NWSV) has financed the stalls set up by the two local secondary schools, Karratha Senior High School (SHS) and St Luke’s Catholic College. They were there to remind the people of Karratha that they had local schooling options and to assure them that these offered a quality education.

In 2010 St Luke’s placed two small posters on their pin-up-board. The first made a pointed comparison between the fees they charged (AU\$4,450 p.a.) and those charged by some of the 13 schools represented in the pavilion (between AU\$18,000 and AU\$40,083). The second poster reported various measures of academic improvement achieved by the school in the past four years – graduation rates were up, and final-year exam results were looking stronger. The posters started the weekend in an obscure corner of the overall display. When one of the teachers noticed this he moved them to the front of the kiosk, muttering as he did so that, “this is what parents want to know about; this is *the* important message”. The message was very much one of reassurance for the parents of the town. The school is keen to let the potential clientele know that things are getting better and that aspirations for a university education could be, and are being, met, at St Luke’s.

The Karratha Education Initiative –encouraging and reassuring the educated classes?

The improvements in academic results reported by St Luke’s with such pride coincide with the implementation of the Karratha Education Initiative (KEI), which began in the school in 2008. For various administrative reasons it was not available to Karratha SHS until 2009, but one of the reasons why it was launched at St Luke’s was that the Principal at that time was intimately and vigorously involved in the development of the project.

A business case for what became the KEI was developed in 2007. With the assistance of a consultant with experience in strategic planning in a broad range of educational settings, an Education Model was developed that focused on enhancing and developing five key strategic areas:

1. Academic standards and subject choice
2. Co-curricular enrichment and choice
3. Personal growth and development
4. International specialisation
5. Excellence in teaching and learning

The Model advocated the development of a range of initiatives to address these needs. A cornerstone was the setting up of a Centre for Online Learning. Requiring a significant enhancement of the school’s computer facilities,

Right: Home away from home – here, the phrase refers to school, but it could just as easily be applied to the town of Karratha itself, which is a temporary home for most of those living and working there. Photo by Martin Forsey.



the Centre would provide leading-edge interactive learning modules for all students in the town, including those at the government high school. Extension and revision classes for students preparing for the TEE examinations were also proposed, as was support for after-hours tutoring provided by the teachers in the school. Acknowledging the lack of ‘cultural activities’ such as music, theatre and visual arts and the requisite experts in these arenas, it was proposed that St Luke’s become a centre for music education, for the performing arts and the visual arts in the township. The proposal also included visits to Perth to take part in significant cultural and sporting activities for all of the school’s students.

Other initiatives linked to the proposed KEI included strengthening the professional development offerings for teachers, and addressing teacher accommodation shortages faced by the school since its inception. Eight houses were proposed, two of which were to accommodate expert musicians to be employed in the school as part of the plan to enrich the cultural life of the school and the town.

The consultant to the project was particularly keen for the school to take the lead from some of the prestigious schools in Perth in differentiating itself in the education marketplace by establishing St Luke’s as a Centre for International Studies. Mindful of Karratha’s position on the edge of Asia (or closer to the boundaries than Perth at least), the argument was put to the NWSV, given their status as some of the major players on the world stage, that an international outlook is essential for the resource companies and their staff. The proposal included initiatives such as language courses, public lectures from acknowledged experts, films, performances, even culinary events, utilising the expertise available in the partner companies of the NWSV. It was an ambitious plan indeed.

Abundant funds and initiatives

The supplementary education plan developed with the North West Shelf Venture was a grand plan for anywhere, but for a town like Karratha on the edge of nowhere, to push it to the edge of greatness like this was inconceivable to many. A budget of AU\$1m per year was requested, and in the first year St Luke’s received more than this. The money paid for the installation of a school-wide WiFi system, 250 laptop computers, a total refurbishment of science laboratories, and electronic whiteboards installed in every classroom. Various national and international trips were organised for groups of students, including one trip to Costa Rica. The school also purchased canoes and trailers for outdoor education activities, and teachers attended a variety of in-service activities.

Improving the university entrance exam results of final year students was a key focus of the KEI in its first year; this was always going to form the main means of measuring the success of the programme. The various measures funded for by the KEI included paying teachers to tutor students in core subjects outside of normal classroom times, access to a programme called My Tutor allowing students in all years to access online assistance with their schoolwork from registered tutors.

In addition, during the first semester holidays the KEI funded trips to Perth for any final year student who wished to attend exam revision courses held at a Perth university. Interviews I conducted with students who had attended these seminars attested to their success. Not only did they benefit from the exposure to teachers and teaching methods beyond their normal experiences, being around a university for a week further inspired them to aspire to go to university. A little later in the year, tutors were brought up to Karratha to run weekend ‘cramming sessions’ just before the students sat the TEE. “They flew up a bunch of teachers and ex-TEE markers every second weekend”, commented one of the former students I interviewed. “They just crammed everything into one day. Like we did physics one day and over eight hours they taught us everything that we needed to know.”

The results were impressive. In 2008 for the first time in the school’s history, they achieved a 100 per cent graduation rate. Overall grades increased by an average of 3.5 percent over the previous year and the proportion of students achieving TEE scores in the top 10 percent of the state doubled from the previous year. Similar results were achieved in 2009, with four students achieving grades good enough for acceptance into medicine, the most competitive university course in the State. These results could be random variations of course, time will tell, but as was probably the case with the results achieved so far, much will depend upon who is persuaded to stay in the town over the next few years and who chooses to leave. There is something circular in the reasoning at play here, but schools clearly play a part in the outcomes of such decision making.

Supplementing education in the far north

The supplementary education program developed in Karratha over the past three years reflects much broader concerns in the national community regarding educational standards and the choices available to parents. As I have argued elsewhere (Forsey 2008), parents in contemporary Australia often feel like they have ‘no choice but to choose’ and are anxious to ensure that their child gets the right sort of opportunities to succeed as they should in and through their schooling. In a remote town like Karratha, these anxieties are magnified for many, particularly those who have ambitions of tertiary education for their child.

The KEI was developed in order to assuage these concerns and as the students who benefited from this programme were keen to point out to me, it was appropriate that they received the sorts of support they did as they did not receive the sorts of benefits brought by fine libraries, a wide range of courses, classes large enough to be run in their own right rather than by correspondence, a more competitive atmosphere, and so on. But in a boomtown it is of course much more likely that money is made available in useful proportions through industry partnerships than might be the case in a farming town, or in a dwindling coal mining village.

The broad ambitions of the original proposal are languishing. Predictably, the focus has shifted to ‘the pointy end’ of the education process, to the measurable final results that most people pay attention to, especially anxious parents. The idea of St Luke’s becoming a Centre for International Studies has not been seriously broached and it seems unlikely that it ever will. For one thing, the money made available to all schools this year diminished and it is unclear if the KEI will continue into the near future.

In a world of ‘proposal economies’ (Stern & Hall 2010) that are part of the reality of the sorts of public-private partnerships demanded by the Schools First project, there is little incentive or ability to build long-term, ambitious and perhaps ultimately more effective programmes when all too often they depend upon the energy of charismatic, energetic individuals. And, like so many enterprises dependent upon the vagaries of monies granted to them on a proposal-by-proposal basis, rather than through guaranteed, adequate budgets, St Luke’s is ultimately more likely to sit on the edge of nothingness than on the edge of the sort of greatness promised by the Karratha Education Initiative. Yet, it is an ambition I am sure many would hope that all schools could strive for, or at least something approximating it.

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Left: One of the stalls set up by Perth boarding schools to promote their offerings in the boomtown. Photo by Martin Forsey.

