Ipswich is a city of 200,000 people, some 40 kilometres southwest of Brisbane central. It is my hometown, where my parents, my sister and I were born.

Living there through the fifties, sixties and seventies means that it will always trigger feelings of belonging and pride in its history.

Once it was the biggest provincial city in Queensland. Once it was to be the capital of Queensland.

Ipswich forged an identity of which we were proud as we grew up. School excursions took us to the railway workshops, the milk factory, coalmines and woollen mills. The Swanbank Power Station was ‘a must do’ drive for the family on a Sunday; just to marvel at those tall, cream, concrete stacks, reaching up to the sky like a ladder to future prosperity. Pride in our new industrial enterprise was soon tempered by tragedy. The Box Flat Mine that supplied Swanbank with coal had an explosion just four years after opening. Over thirty died, seventeen underground. The tunnels were sealed for fear of further explosions, the bodies of the lost miners never retrieved. The worst mine accident in Ipswich’s history seared on our consciousness the price of adapting, surviving and growing economically. All of these places were important to us, the events close to us. They were where our future employment lay, or so we were led to believe.

Unbeknown to us as children, Ipswich was to experience massive changes to its economy in the second half of the twentieth century – not unlike other industrial cities such as Newcastle, and not unlike the challenges currently facing Whyalla and Morwell. Ipswich’s big industries closed in consecutive waves: in the 1970s the woollen mills closed, in the 1990s the Ipswich Railway Workshops, and in 2010 the Jacaranda Milk Factory closed its doors. Swanbank adapted and changed from coal to gas.

TAFE gives people identity and communities new hope

Competencies are only part of the story
In 2002 Swanbank E commissioned a state of the art combined cycle gas turbine. Needless to say, coal mining faded as the backbone industry of the city. On the outskirts of Ipswich, Amberley expanded to become Australia’s largest operational Air Force base and Wacol prison became Brisbane’s largest correctional centre with roughly a thousand men, women and youth incarcerated within its perimeter.

Adapting an economy, attracting new industry, and holding onto local businesses is without doubt the prime preoccupation of politicians at every level of government in the post-industrialisation era. But as politicians steadfastly attend to the hopes of business leaders, the hopes of communities become non-distinctive and secondary. The logic of our politicians is one we know well. Attract business and everything else will fall into place. People will adjust to new livelihoods, they will settle and buy houses and have families, commerce will flourish, towns will thrive and we will all be happy.

Politicians and business leaders alike quickly forget the human dimension of industry closure. Maybe they just count on the fact that humans are adaptable and surprisingly compliant when faced with dictums from employers and government. That does not mean, however, that adjustment comes easy. Adjustment is a social process. Shared fears, hopes and identities define communities. Fears, hopes and identities need to be expressed and redefined when industries close. Allowing this process to flow in the best way possible requires effort and resources. It is not as simple as individuals pulling themselves together and struggling on. Our unacceptably high rates of mental illness, suicide, homelessness, youth unemployment and family breakdown attest to the fact that shifting industrial landscapes create unmet human needs and that the consequences are non-trivial for society when help is not at hand to support communities through change.

Adapting successfully requires a social infrastructure that guides and supports us as we redefine who we are and reassess our prospects for the future. When our direction in life changes, we use social infrastructure to derive new settings. Hope may be automatic for humans, but hoping well is not. We need to hope with realistic goals, confidence in ourselves, and pathways for achieving these goals. Others are an important part of our doing this well, of hoping well. They are also vital to our sustaining momentum, of coming to terms with mistakes, trying again, and feeling we have social worth. Social worth is provided through the affirmation and encouragement of others, it is not something we do by ourselves. Social infrastructure that regulates our hopes and sustains our sense of social worth is every bit as important as the material infrastructure that we assume will be there for our communities, enduring and solid, infrastructure that we can rely on and plan by.

Social infrastructure in some quarters is assumed to be the province of civil society not the concern of government. Government is right in some circumstances in thinking that social infrastructure is informal and need not be duplicated. Certainly it should not be crushed by heavy-handed government interference. As we know, families can help shape our dreams into realistic hopes, but sometimes the load can be too heavy for families to bear. Whole families, indeed whole communities can be weighed down emotionally and cognitively, all their energies spent because they too have been adversely affected by mass closures of industries and loss of livelihoods.

Sometimes our support base, like ourselves, can find it difficult to lift their sights above the despair that engulfs us. Governments have a role to play here in recharging a community’s batteries and lifting spirits so that collectively a community can hope well and re-design future goals.

Education is an important institution in this regard and one that is strategic for governments to support to manage economic upheaval and avoid its socially disastrous consequences. In a civilised society, education is an institution for starting over, for expressing loss and grief over a past life, and moving on to reinvent oneself and build a new

This is the story of how vocational education and TAFE in particular is critical to this reinvention, repeated across rural, regional and urban communities across Australia.
life. Education is not just about acquiring sets of skills and competencies. It presents an opportunity to be someone else who also happens to have a set of skills and competencies that others will value.

It is in the context of human reinvention that Australia’s TAFE system has so often come to the rescue. The purpose of vocational education is not just to provide people with competencies and skill sets. Just as important is the way in which it can give people a sense of social worth and capacity to develop and adapt. This gift applies to both individuals and communities. TAFEs can’t be fairly evaluated through templates that benchmark them against universities or other training organizations. The value of TAFEs lies in how their communities see them and use them, in the relationships that they forge and the opportunities they create for members of their communities.

Among the most impressive heritage-listed buildings in Ipswich is the 1901 Queen Victoria Silver Jubilee Memorial Technical College, a forerunner of the modern day TAFE. As the first of the technical colleges established outside Brisbane, it had its own independent board with oversight of a set of courses to develop learning capacities (eg history, geography, algebra and geometry, Latin and English) and meet the needs of the community (eg coal mining, book-keeping, cookery, dressmaking). Like Ipswich, the Tech College has changed its form, governance structure and name many times. It even changed its location, handing over its central position and symbolic architecture of stability and dignity to a brewery no less. Yet the building has symbolic value still. It housed hope for those who had lost their jobs. It housed hope for youth who were lost in the transition to adulthood. It housed hope for women from families that had lost their breadwinner. The Tech College through its teaching staff and student body offered knowledge, encouragement, human connection and shared pathways to a new life for those who wished to take advantage of the opportunity to retrain and start again. The symbolic value of the Tech College building to Ipswich dwellers was an open invitation to come downtown and take the first step: Enrol in a new beginning and relegate crushed identities and lost souls to history.

Sentimental attachment aside, the Tech College in Ipswich is nothing special in the bigger scheme of national vocational education policy. Its special quality is quite simply that it was ours, it was part of our community and we knew it was there to help us. The reality of this aspect of TAFE is evident at a number of levels. TAFE teachers across the country who reflect on their professional contribution with pride do not do so in terms of the training packages that they taught for Australian industry groups. Rather they reflect on the people whose lives they touched and changed for the better. Students similarly do not reflect on the specific bits of knowledge they gleaned, no doubt obsolete after several years in the workforce. Rather they reflect on those who taught them and gave them a life changing opportunity, on a place where they learnt the value of social infrastructure, developed friendships and networks of support, and confidence to learn new skills and start again. Parents and families too express gratitude to the TAFE system, not so much in terms of adequacy of training packages, but rather in terms of giving their family member a new lease of life, an opportunity to learn, permission to make mistakes, a social network that offers support, and guidance to get their lives back on track.

Any discussion of TAFE and vocational education more generally is incomplete without open recognition of how communities suffer psychologically and socially in times of economic upheaval, and how important tertiary education is for re-igniting hope for a better future. Some individuals may be privileged with financial resources to enrol in boutique college courses. For others it is just about getting started on something: to put one step in front of the other, to manage anxiety and depression, to find meaningful activity and to think positively about the future. A caring TAFE sector with well trained, committed and appropriately remunerated teaching professionals meets this need. It always has. Supporting communities through a well-resourced, local TAFE is a smart government investment when economic and social turmoil strikes regional towns and cities.

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