

The Learning Practitioner

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Introduction

The question of the professional development needs of economic development practitioners, arguing for government, higher education providers and practitioners to work together to effect formal recognition of these needs and to implement academic programs to meet them (Collits 1999). Since then, and only recently, the many barriers to achieving this outcome have finally (and happily) been overcome. Now, RMIT University is currently working towards the introduction of award programs in economic development.

While there are already academic programs in regional development, broadly defined, in Australia, the RMIT programs will be the first dedicated specifically to the needs of economic development practitioners. Australia will finally join the United States, Canada and New Zealand in having academic programs available to practitioners.

This paper explains the philosophy behind RMIT University's approach to the development and delivery of the courses and programs, and explores the key issues involved. First, it outlines what I take to be "the great questions of regional development", an understanding of which is central to any academic program for economic developers; second, it formulates an understanding of the economic development practitioner's task(s); third, it wrestles with the important issue of determining what it is that practitioners should be learning in an academic program on economic development. In particular, it attempts to resolve – or, at any rate, address – the key issue of getting the correct balance in a learning program between learning that is about "how to..." as opposed to "why". In this way, the paper attempts to come to grips with the notion of the "learning practitioner". Finally, the paper makes some points about important questions relating to how much difference practitioners can make to their economic development environments.

First, it is important to provide some background on the growth of the economic development profession in Australia.

The Growth of the Economic Development Profession in Australia

The current development of programs is a direct result of the formation of Economic Development Australia (EDA), a national body representing economic development professionals working largely, though not exclusively, in local government. EDA members currently number around 500. In 2007, EDA conducted a survey of its membership and members, who generally saw professional development as a central concern for EDA, came up with a range of core competencies to be delivered through a professional development program. In early 2008, EDA selected RMIT University to develop and deliver the programs, in conjunction with the University of Western Australia.

The development of the profession of local economic development in Australia can be traced back to the 1980s, when Australian governments of all persuasions, in Canberra as well as in the States and territories, began to move away from "top down" regional development policies to "bottom up" approaches (Collits 1997; Beer in McManus and Pritchard 2000; Sorensen 2000; Beer, Maude and Pritchard 2003; Collits 2004a). This policy shift mirrored developments in other countries (Hugonnier 1999), though the development of a "profession" of economic development is older in countries such as the United States.

While local governments (and some regional bodies) have been "doing" economic development for a lot longer than the 1980s policy shifts, and employing resources to attract business and industry, it has been the recent change in approach by central governments, the effective handing over of regional economic development to local and regional bodies, that has provided most of the impetus for creating and skilling the profession (Collits 1997). In particular, the creation and funding of regional development organisations by the Keating Government in the 1990s and their retention by the Howard Government, and an increasing focus on locally engineered projects and strategies, have demanded new skills in strategic thinking and project management among these regional bodies.

The philosophy of “localism” in economic development, reflected in such routine statements by government ministers that “local problems demand local solutions”, is now embedded in the policy approaches of all Australian governments.

Local councils have readily ramped up their own efforts as well, recognising the shift in policy that have occurred and realising that they have a legitimate role in economic development. Now, councils without economic development officers and/or units would probably be the exception rather than the rule.

Underpinning the whole enterprise of local economic development is the conviction that local efforts can make a difference to economic outcomes (Schumacher 1973). While national and global events will always drive local economic development, not every region will do equally well, and those locations best prepared are generally thought to be best placed to reap the rewards. There is considerable ongoing debate over the efficacy of various economic development interventions, and no guarantees that local actions will lead automatically to economic success. However, there is a consensus among regional development theoreticians and practitioners that regional competitive advantage is important, and can be created.

And governments have decided that, by and large, it is local and regional bodies that should do the thinking about how best to drive the local economy, usually funded through a cocktail of (often complex) arrangements. These, of course, can be themselves quite controversial, as witnessed by recent debates over the Howard Government’s Regional Partnerships Program (Collits 2008).

The drive to local delivery of government funded programs has created a complex web of “meso” (middle) level groups and bodies, who interact in complex ways to deliver local outcomes. These are the organizations for whom practitioners typically work. They include Regional Development Boards or Commissions, Regional Development Australia Committees (formerly Area Consultative Committees) and local councils, and these interact with community driven bodies such as Main Street Committees and business organizations such as Chambers of Commerce, not to mention the whole range of bodies (such as Catchment Management Authorities) whose primary role may not be economic development but whose activities impact in important ways on the local economic development effort. In the mix as well are the dynamic (or not) leaders who are often the face of local and regional efforts to attract investment, such as mayors and the chairs of funded regional bodies. Such is the multiplicity and influence of these often unelected meso level bodies that managing local and regional relationships and building coalitions of support and networks among stakeholder groups has become, arguably, one of the most important tasks for the practitioner.

At the same time, a substantial economic development literature has emerged internationally, often linked to practitioner led organizations such as the US based International Economic Development Council. Journals such as Economic Development Quarterly have added an important new dimension to the work of practitioners and the bodies for which they work, providing “science”, rigour and an evidence base that supports this work and give it a sharper professional edge.

All this raises the important question – what knowledge and skills do practitioners need to undertake their roles? First, there is a need for some context relating to what might be termed “the great questions of regional development”.

The Great Questions of Regional Development

Regional development might be defined broadly as:

The deliberate attempt by government (at any level) and/or regional actors to influence regional outcomes, either in relation to the economy, the community or the environment, or all three, with varying objectives that generally relate to some notion of “regional well being”.

Economic development itself has been defined in a number of ways (see Stimson et al 2006), but generally includes the notions of intervention, structural change in the local economy – it is not just a matter of “growth” – and desired outcomes such as increased community wealth measured in terms of income or jobs. While the activities that underpin this are many and varied (Beer, Haughton and Maude 2003), they typically include the attraction of new investment, whether from existing firms or new firms, broadening the economic base of a region, and building local development capacity. Increasingly, notions of “sustainability” have become embedded in the understanding of local economic development, whether this means simply sustaining economic development outcomes over time or building environmental objectives into economic development efforts.

The efforts of practitioners are linked to what might be termed the “great questions” of regional development, the core questions which determine what economic developers do and how they go about their tasks. They are as follows:

- What are we trying to achieve (or how is “success” defined)?
- Who is responsible for regional development?
- What drives success?
- What works in terms of strategy/programs?
- What is the basis for intervening?
- How much intervention is needed?

What are we trying to achieve?

Or, how do we measure success? Or, what is the problem we are trying to solve? Regional development objectives have economic, social, environmental, institutional and cultural dimensions. Of course, we don’t agree on what “success” looks like and there are many measures of success. The need for governments to set specific objectives is critical.

Does regional success mean population growth and decline? Higher employment growth? A lower unemployment rate? Higher family incomes? An improving level of regional income or output? What about composite indicators of well being, such as regional quality of life?

“Success” changes both over time AND across space. Success in one dimension may co-exist with, even cause failure in another dimension. We often define success in terms of growth – this is at best a partial account of well being. Success may mean managing change, positioning for opportunities. Sustainability means capacity for reinvention.

Success is sometimes defined in terms of sustainability, or viability, or resilience, or “high performance communities” or “communities of opportunity”. Standard indicators include communities with stable or growing populations; decreasing unemployment; jobs growth; rising incomes. There are also non-economic indicators such as regional “well-being”; yet it is difficult to be precise about measuring such things as “social capital”.

Regions have many demands of government in relation to regional policy:

- A more highly populated inland
- Less regional out-migration
- Retention of more young people in regions
- A less dominant capital city
- Reducing the country-city divide
- Halting the decline of small towns
- More States
- Sustainable development
- The creation of new industries
- A more favourable regional business climate
- Regional “wellbeing”
- Lower regional unemployment
- Greater regional employment growth
- Greater diversity in the economic base of regions
- Fewer regional disparities
- Better regional services
- Higher regional incomes

There is an enormous breadth and depth of policy demands and no consensus about which should be pursued, how much and in what order. There is a marked lack of agreement among interest groups, For example, which regions to favour? Not all objectives are mutually reinforcing and simultaneously achievable. It is easy to agree on motherhood commitments, yet defining regional well being is problematic. In practice, objectives are multiple, short and long term, political and non-political, and often unstated.

Who is responsible for regional development?

The right sort of governance for regional development is crucial to the success of regional policy. Yet it is not at all clear who exactly is responsible for delivering regional development. Everyone wants a stake in the outcomes. Is it government? (which level?) The community? The market (firms, industries, investors)? Economic development professionals? Regional bodies (the meso level)? Or, is it a combination of these? What is the right scale?

Hence there are problems of both capacity and legitimacy in regional governance. Government influence is only indirect, eg infrastructure provision may lead to good regional outcomes but this is not guaranteed. There are many actors in regional development, and it is a shared enterprise. Hence the rise of the partnership approach in recent years. There has been a recognition that no one single entity can bring home the bacon.

What drives regional success?

This is the one million dollar question for regional policy. It is important to know what drives regional success, for a number of very good reasons. First, competitive advantage can be created. Second, the actors involved want to make a difference. Third, resources are finite, hence poor analysis matters. The capacity to intervene is limited. Finally, understanding the drivers of success is a bulwark against government action driven by the lowest common denominator.

Traditional location theories – cost minimisation, profit maximisation; central place theory; agglomeration; cumulative causation; supply and demand side theories – provide well tested explanations of regional growth and decline (Stimson, Stough and Roberts 2006; Dawkins 2003). Recent thinking challenges old theories. Localism as a recent philosophy has provided a challenge to path dependency. Porter's theory of clusters driving regional development was fashionable in the 1990s (Porter 1998). New growth theories, the new economic geography, the "new regionalism, the global cities literature and the human/creative capital theory pushed by Richard Florida call old theories into question and shed new light on regional success factors (Florida 2002; Collits 2004b). What practitioners tell us – about the importance of the business climate, collaboration, leadership, a triggering crisis, local action – is also helpful.

There is a vast array of candidates among theories of regional development– many ring true. Yet theory and practice do not give us ultimate answers. Unfortunately for governments and regional bodies, there is no single, overarching explanation of regional growth. However, we do know that the complexity of processes driving regions is increasing. This is significant for policy.

All kinds of these have been posited as explanations for regional success:

- Favourable location, biophysical resources
- Access to good infrastructure (transport, communication), labour, skills, markets
- Size/critical mass
- Global connectedness
- Having industries that are growing nationally
- Clusters of industries
- Economic diversity / specialisation
- Institutions, governance, leadership
- Business climate
- Entrepreneurial culture, innovative firms
- Technology take-up
- Collaborative culture, networks, tacit knowledge
- Community activism, passion
- A local development agency/strategy
- Amenity, "people climate", vibrancy, cultural diversity
- Government assistance

There is no one to say that one or other of the above persuasively explains regional growth in all circumstances. Where does this leave governments? Theories do not tell us everything, or nothing.

What works in terms of strategy/programs?

There is unresolved debate over which policy instruments/strategies work best, a debate that is perhaps more the concern of regional bodies than central governments. Yet governments will want to be supporting winning strategies.

There are myriad tools, particularly assistance given directly to firms versus other interventions. There are multiple choices on the ground. Strategic choices are important because resources are finite. Moreover, choices can be mutually exclusive, eg broadening versus deepening the economic base and hunting (chasing outside firms) versus gardening (growing existing local enterprises). There are no easy answers.

Evaluation of actions is critical and governments aren't very good at it typically. It is hard to know what works, but we need to. The accountability imperative is important and evidence based policy is preferable to guesswork. Evaluation is really policy learning and should form a basic part of the regional policy cycle. Yet too often governments settle for second best – for simply accepting the accolades of being seen to care about regions, without coming back later to see if the intervention helped or not.

What is the basis for intervening?

In other words, what triggers intervention, and what kind of problem should trigger intervention? Related questions relate to what sort of places governments should assist, and what the appropriate scale for intervention should be (local, regional, the firm?). Often interventions are triggered by a crisis (the visible problem), such as BHP's closure of the Newcastle steel works in the late 1990s which triggered large funding commitments from both State and Commonwealth governments.

There is sometimes a desire for spatial equality – helping the worst off regions. In some cases, governments wish to help regions that are growing too quickly, as in the case of the Howard Government's promised Growing Regions Program of 2007, never implemented. Intervention that can make a difference is appealing to government, yet often it is the case that interventions reward the most active communities (rewarding grant chasing). Typically, government must be seen to be doing something, and this may give rise to a lowest common denominator approach of "shoot anything that flies, claim anything that falls" (see Rubin in Blair and Reese 1999).

How much intervention is needed?

This, of course, is a matter of philosophy and of one's views about the efficacy of government interventions. It is also a question of pragmatic politics. Of course, what government should do is shaped by what government can do (ie the likely effectiveness of the intervention). Equally, what regions should do is equally shaped by what they can do. The size of the intervention also reflects the seriousness of the problem.

Summing Up

Summing Up, it is important that policy makers understand what they are up against, and understand the big picture. Regional development is both art and science. Local action can make a difference, but will not guarantee success. Regional development actions must be grounded in reality. Regional development is a shared enterprise, with responsibility shared among a wide range of players. Understanding the big questions helps government to clarify its thinking and place some context around how it deals with what are often pressing political issues.

Providing answers to these questions might clarify the bounds and content of economic development activity. However, the answers are not straightforward, and are highly controversial. For example, there is no agreed definition of "success", debates rage over the respective roles in economic development of central governments and local institutions, views of the efficacy of government intervention generally, and particular forms of intervention, vary considerably according to philosophy and views of the limits and effectiveness of government action, and, perhaps above all else, there is no single theory that explains why some locations grow economically while others decline. Hence governments and practitioners may not know whether, and how much, their activities individually or as a whole are "making a difference". Addressing these questions is important, not just for academics but for practitioners as well, because resources are finite and expectations are high.

However, defining the great questions that practitioners face, questions that define their role, is ultimately necessary if they and the organizations they represent are to get beyond what might be termed the "shooting everything that flies and claiming everything that falls" approach to economic development, picking the "low hanging fruit", or "lowest common denominator" economic development.

Taking these questions seriously and considering their implications for practice are therefore important issues for the professional economic developer. Doing economic development is far more than lots of colour and movement, lots of activity. Yet becoming mired in analysis is not the way of the busy, results oriented, can-do practitioner. Getting the balance right between thinking academic analysis is everything, and thinking it is nothing, is of critical importance in determining the focus of professional development programs.

Defining the Practitioner's Task

Being clear about the economic development practitioner's task(s) and understanding both the opportunities and the limitations of their roles are the foundations of success, and the foundations of a successful learning program. They also form the basis of building the right kind of professional development for practitioners.

The tasks undertaken by practitioners are almost limitless (Beer 1996; Beer, Haughton and Maude 2003; Beer's study identified over one hundred different types of economic development activity). They also vary according to the funding body's objectives, which, while all bodies might all seek to do economic development in some form, might reflect more specific goals, for example delivering government services to business. Activities and emphases have also shifted over time, and have become far more complex. In earlier times, the main task was to recruit outside firms to the region. Now this is generally of lesser relative importance, and tends to be merely one among a number of strategies pursued. Some practitioners might be focused on a particular kind of economic development strategy, for example building industry clusters or growing entrepreneurship, rather than pursuing a strategy containing a "bit of everything".

Economic development practitioners face diverse and daunting challenges. They often work in isolation, in a relatively new and still emerging field, with a lack of support, funding uncertainty, lack of tenure, political instability, and the need to possess an extremely broad range of skills.

They routinely work with many stakeholders in the community, and not all players work to make their tasks easier. They are spread very thinly across a broad range of projects. They can only influence outcomes indirectly. They must balance long term, strategic actions with pursuit of "runs on the board" to satisfy both their masters and their critics. They must be in command of many skills, from major project management to community consultation to putting together finance packages to lobbying politicians.

They must understand the theory of local economic growth and be up-to-date with the latest thinking but, at the same time, employ a practical, results-oriented approach to their task. They must be implementers. They must know how government works and use government programs to assist their communities, without losing sight of the key roles local dynamism and entrepreneurship play in driving development. Indeed, they need to be able to help create a dynamic culture in their regions. Especially, they must understand the drivers of local growth and decline as a prelude to determining how to use their finite resources. They need to know the power of strategic planning and its context. They must know their local economies, without needing to be econometricians themselves. They must be able to understand and to measure their communities' assets, while also leveraging outside resources. They need to be able to define success and to measure success. They must understand what works, and why it works.

Equally, practitioners can and must learn from other practitioners. In such a fluid profession, learning from how others have, for example, addressed commonly experienced impediments to effectiveness is enormously valuable. This type of learning must not be excluded in the pursuit of textbook purity. Professional development programs have an important role in recording case studies, "war stories", good practice and learning from mistakes. It is noteworthy that some of the major contributors to recent thinking about what drives regional success have been practitioners (Collits 2004b). A consultant's list of the characteristics of successful communities may be based on gut instinct and lack rigour, but it should nonetheless form part of the consideration of what drives regional performance, though tempered by the fact that the notion of "what works" itself requires unpacking and thoughtful consideration. The best practitioners are those with a thirst for the academic yet aware of both the academy's interests and its limitations.

There is no simple answer to ascertaining where to draw the line in the sand between theoretically informed content and practically determined knowledge. The best professional development programs will contain both perspectives and seek to integrate them in a way that is meaningful to practitioners.

The "How" and the "Why" Questions: Theory and Practice

The development of a professional development philosophy and program is beset by a number of questions:

- Is economic development practice “art” or “science” (see Beer 1996)?
- And in what proportions (assuming that the answer to the first question is “both”) should professional development direct its attention to the practitioner’s art versus the science of economic development? This is an especially important question since conditions vary enormously, and since the “science” of economic development is far from settled.
- Then there is the question of how much theory, how much practice?
- What should the balance be between learning skills and acquiring knowledge?
- Is there a “right way” of doing economic development?
- Can this be taught?
- Do practitioners learn more from textbooks or from good practice by other practitioners?
- How much attention should be paid to acquiring generic skills (management, people skills, writing, project management, etc) as opposed to skills specific to economic development?

The modern university is, in many ways, a battleground between the traditional imperative to understand the world by studying the best that has been thought and written (in a particular discipline), and the vocational imperative to grant certification and to train professionals for practice. There is an ongoing tension between the vocational demands of the profession and the need for academic excellence.

In the case of economic development, there is also the fact that its study is inherently cross-disciplinary, drawing on knowledge from regional science, geography, planning, economics, sociology and public policy (at least).

Academic programs for economic development professionals must provide the right mix of knowledge and skills, and deliver a balance between “how to” courses and courses that help practitioners to understand “why”. Faced with a bewildering array of potential policy instruments yet limited resources, practitioners must respond to local circumstances and make difficult strategic choices, for example between growing local businesses and pursuing new, outside industries, and between diversifying the local economic base or sticking to the region’s traditional economic strengths. Making key strategic choices of this kind demands education about the “why” of economic development. Implementing effective plans requires that practitioners also know the “how to’s”. The ideal professional development program will do both, in the right proportions.

The case for bringing the textbooks to bear on economic development practice is, essentially, that they try to make sense of the great questions outlined above, and that these questions inform good practice. For example, understanding the drivers of regional economic success is important since most forms of intervention rest on one or other theory of regional performance. Choosing the key elements of an economic development strategy, such as whether to invest in infrastructure, what kind of infrastructure to invest in, whether to chase investment from outside the region, what sort of industries to target, what “targeting” means in practice, whether to attract people to the region, and with what kinds of skills or characteristics, to grow entrepreneurship, to work with existing businesses, how much effort to put into encouraging local businesses to export, what sort of grants to pursue, whether to diversify the local economy or to build greater depth in existing top performing industries, how to improve the business culture and business climate – all these choices facing practitioners each day should be informed by the body of knowledge that exists among the economic development disciplines.

The very act of evaluating one’s strategy and actions demands certain skills and certain knowledge about how the local economy works. Understanding the secondary job creating impacts of creating jobs in basic (export) industries helps the practitioner to know the impact of bringing certain kinds of industries to town.

Understanding these issues is important because competitive advantage can be created (or lost), the stakeholders want to make a difference, resources are finite, poor analysis matters, and one’s capacity to intervene is limited.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to outline the thinking behind programs currently being developed by RMIT University for the learning economic development practitioner. These programs will seek to make sense of the complex and flexible environment that economic developers encounter, to make sense of their “task”, and to allow them to deal more effectively with their unwieldy challenges, based on an understanding of the best and latest thinking on economic development and a judicious mix of theory and good practice.

As I suggested at the outset, the foundation of local economic development is the conviction that, whatever the precise contribution of local activity to economic development outcomes, it can make a difference, and regions

should be in the business of actively trying to create competitive advantage. This suggests that local councils are regions are wise to invest in economic development. But this confidence in the efficacy of local economic development, of itself, provides little hint as to how localities should go about doing economic development, or how much of it they should do.

Second, there is a science to local and regional economic development. You do not simply try everything and hope for the best, or simply follow the latest fad, or copy what the next region is doing. It follows, therefore, that practitioners need to understand how and why economic development occurs, and what their own limitations are. This requires an understanding of context and of how regional economies work. It means that professional development is important, and suggests some of the content of a focused professional development program.

There is a balance to be achieved between understanding the theory and developing models and principles of good practice. While there may not be one best strategic template for every region – one size decidedly does not fit all – nonetheless there are principles of economic development to be discerned and applied in practice. While no one theory explains regional success, each theory offers valuable insights for practitioners.

What makes economic development a unique profession is the huge range of potential activities that can be undertaken, the breadth of (often mutually contradictory) strategic choices, the high expectations of stakeholders relative to the limited capacity to determine outcomes, the fluidity of the game, the uncertainty about what drives success, and the highly politicised environment. There is no one, agreed, “best” way of doing economic development. This makes developing and delivering a comprehensive program of learning for practitioners a uniquely complex and highly challenging task.

The learning practitioner is an essential player in local and regional attempts to develop their economies. The increasing professionalism of local economic development, demonstrated in the establishment of EDA and in its focus on academic programs in professional development, is a welcome trend that places Australia on a par with our international competitors.

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Theory and Practice of Economic Development

This is an overview/introductory course that will cover the basics for a Graduate Certificate student and will set up the rest of the course for students proceeding further. The great questions of economic development will be addressed – What is economic development? How do we define success? Who is responsible for economic development? What drives economic performance at the local and regional scale? Where and how should practitioners intervene or try to influence outcomes? What works in terms of strategies? There are many theories of economic growth and decline, and these will be explored as foundational knowledge for economic developers. For example, what drives location decisions? Why do businesses cluster? Why do cities keep growing? Is skilled labour more important to businesses than transport costs? What about the theory of human capital? Does the so-called “creative class” drive regional development? Are local factors more important than national or global trends? Can the local strategy really make a difference? The latest thinking on economic development will be outlined assessed, as well as more traditional theories. The module will also explore the economic development practitioner’s “art”, how an economic developer operates effectively and the skills required to be successful. The focus of the course will cover both urban and rural economic development, and will outline the constraints on effective action, the local regional and national context, and the strategies and options available to practitioners.

The Policy Environment

Understanding the policy process and the local, state and national political environment provides elementary context for the work of the economic developer. Policies made outside the region play a major role in shaping what can be achieved at the local level and it is essential for practitioners to know how the political systems operate. The course is about both process and the content and purpose of regional policies. There is perspective provided on how policy is developed in government, and how regional policies have changed over time in Australia and comparable countries like the USA, Canada and Europe. Different kinds of interventions will be assessed and analysed. Economic development is a complex process and some of the complexities will be unpacked to make sense of the context in which practitioners operate.

Business Attraction, Retention and Expansion

Traditionally, economic development has sought to attract new businesses and industry to the local area, to provide employment and wealth and to develop skills in the community. While now derided in some areas as yesterday’s strategy (“smokestack chasing”), business attraction will always be in the practitioner’s kitbag, and must be. New industries bring indirect jobs and create the need for new support services. They also buy goods and services from local suppliers. They create new export opportunities and can underpin the wealth of the community. Practitioners need to know which industries to chase and how to attract them, either drawing upon the region’s own asset base and/or outside (government support). Equally, growing the capacity of existing businesses, while more difficult and complex, is just as important. Finally, getting existing businesses to grow (finding the “gazelles”) is a core part of the economic developer’s strategy. Understanding the local economy is vital to these activities. However, this course will focus on the core skills and knowledge required to make these strategies mutually reinforcing and effective.

Tools and Techniques 1

The first of two courses on tools and techniques outlines the basic ways of measuring local and regional economies and measuring growth and decline. The economic developer must know the local economy, its key industry sectors, most important businesses, exporters, supply chains, and the mix of local and exogenous influences on growth. The course will explain the key tools and how they can be used to best effect by practitioners, including basic statistical data on the local economy, demographic data, key economic and social indicators, regional accounts, input-output tables, export base multipliers, market area analysis, labour market analysis and the use of location quotients. What are these tools used for? How can they be accessed? How do they help the practitioner to understand the local economy and therefore develop appropriate and supportable strategies? How can they be explained to the layperson? The course will identify the tools available, place them in a practical context and allow the busy practitioner to at least understand their use, if not use them directly. It will help the economic developer to answer the question: Why is Strategy A more likely to be effective than Strategy B? It provides robust and time tested techniques that show how “science” can augment the “art” of economic development.

Building Partnerships and Advocacy

Understanding networks and collaborating with potential partners among key local and regional stakeholder groups is core business for a successful economic developer. These groups include business and industry, community groups, council, regional bodies, infrastructure companies, service providers, health and education bodies, universities and environmental organisations. Equally, it is important for practitioners to be able to access the political system at local and other levels of government. The course will develop the skills and knowledge necessary to build effective partnerships in ways that deliver the greatest benefit for the community and which build skills in the community. The local environment in which practitioners operate is typically crowded with advocates for development, different community factions, different views about development, “enablers and blockers”, and people in positions of formal and informal power. Mastering this environment and using local and regional networks to achieve effective economic development is basic to the practitioner’s art. The course will also develop the knowledge and skills required to write successful grant applications and winning project bids, and interpersonal and team building skills that will help create common ownership of problems and solutions and unite the various economic development efforts in the community behind agreed strategies and actions.

Strategic Planning for Economic Development

Why should economic developers do strategic planning? Developing successful local strategies and implementing them through effective actions owned by the community is fundamental to the work of economic development. Successful economic development depends on many variables, including luck, but equally it is about far more than “shooting anything that flies and claiming anything that falls”. It is the result of deliberative and deliberate action. Practitioners have a wide range of strategic options and tools available to use, but finite resources and high community expectations. Hence strategy and good choices are vital to success. This course will unpack the strategic planning process and set out best practice principles to be followed in building a strategy that will work and can be implemented and evaluated. It will examine the core elements of good strategic planning in a way that is directly relevant to local economic developers and their constantly changing environments. The course will also relate economic development planning processes to local government planning so that the two processes can better talk to one another.

Leadership and Management of Economic Development Organisations

Economic development bodies are unique in terms of the range of their activities, their often limited local mandate and the expectations they generate. The immediate organisation context for most practitioners is the economic development corporation, the local council development unit, the regional development board, the Area Consultative Committee, the Mainstreet Committee or chamber of commerce. There are a variety of organisations with different structures, formal responsibilities, core objectives, sources of funding and stakeholders. The practitioner is typically responsible to a board and/or to a chief executive and often responsible for staff. Getting the relationships right with boards, staff and executives is the starting point for achieving the practitioner’s “deliverables”. Expectations are high and resources are few. Managing internal expectations is critical and prudent. The economic developer must build effective relationships with internal stakeholders in order to be successful, and this course outlines key strategies for achieving this, within the context of organisational theory.

Tools and Techniques 2 - Evaluation of Economic Development

The best form of policy is “evidence based policy”. Similarly with local economic development strategies, the best strategies are those based on “what works”. Hence it is important that practitioners know how to assess “what works”, what doesn’t work, and why. Evaluation tools are an essential ingredient to the economic developer’s toolkit and evaluation techniques for the central component of this second module relating to tools and techniques. The course will cover the utility of economic and other evaluation methodologies, for example cost-benefit analysis, survey techniques and economic impact analysis, and will allow practitioners to measure in a robust fashion the success or otherwise of the many strategies and actions they use. As with the earlier tools and techniques course, a practical outcome of studying the course is that it will allow practitioners to make a more powerful case for the council or community or government to support a particular activity or strategy because they will be able to demonstrate its impact. Indeed, many funding agencies will demand that proposals for funding projects contain analyses of their likely impacts and evaluation when the project is complete. Even if practitioners do not do the evaluation themselves, they need to understand how they can be used as powerful tools to further the economic development effort.

Financing Local Economic Development

Managing local economic development is often about financing projects. This course will examine the key strategies and tools available locally and nationally, and from both the public and private sectors, to source capital for economic development projects. Building and maintaining key local economic development infrastructure will form a core component of the course. Equally, students will learn about putting together often complex “cocktail” funding arrangements for projects with multiple stakeholders. The role of venture capital will be unpacked, as will credit financing, start up financing for small firms and entrepreneurs, the bundling of infrastructure projects and public-private partnerships. The course will also address the question of financial sustainability and how to make economic development projects which typically have finite funding viable over the long term. Overseas case studies, for example tools such as community block grants, tax credits and enterprise zones, will be assessed. Sources of philanthropic funding such as community foundations will be explained.

Project Management

Project management skills are central to the work of the economic development practitioner. A characteristic of the economic development profession is the sheer breadth of projects being driven at any one time. The course will develop generic project management skills but with a strong focus on the unique nature of local economic development projects and on major projects. The themes will centre on the complexity of local economic development, putting together project teams, managing stakeholder expectations, developing leadership skills, linking projects to overall strategy, fulfilling legal and reporting requirements, particularly in relation to government grants and public-private partnerships, and project evaluation.

Electives

Community Development

Australia and other similar countries have recognised and encouraged over the past twenty years “bottom up” or “do-it-yourself” economic development. There is a conviction that local people can make a difference to the future of their economies, and that community ownership is fundamental to the success of local actions and strategies. While more traditional methods of economic development, such as the attraction of new industry, continue to be important, many local economic developers must operate now in more inclusive ways that involve wide community participation in developing and implementing strategies. The course will unpack the concept of community economic development and outlines the techniques for building community involvement and achieving the outcomes that are desired while building local ownership. This course will be a companion course to the building partnerships and advocacy course and the strategic planning course, and will build on these in a more focused way for practitioners working specifically in the community sector.

Marketing

Economic developers have to sell their locations to investors, businesses, governments and funding bodies, and proven marketing strategies and techniques are a critical part of the practitioner’s armoury. Every strategic plan also doubles as a selling document for the region. Often, too, the economic developer, for example if working in the tourism and event management area, is involved in or responsible for selling the region directly. The course will introduce the key principles of marketing with a focus on marketing locations, on branding and re-branding cities, towns and regions and improving the world’s perceptions of one’s location. It will explain how to measure community assets such as location, amenity access to transport nodes and markets, linkages to the global economy, a favourable business climate, education assets, human skills, cultural assets, infrastructure and services, in order to sell them to the outside world. It will assist practitioners to market local assets in an integrated

way both to businesses and to people considering relocating. The course will also allow students to develop partnerships on a regional scale and to access government assistance in the marketing of regions.

Entrepreneurship

Local economies are generally agreed to be powered by basic industries but also by innovation, creativity, risk taking and the entrepreneurship and dynamism of their businesses. Discovering and unlocking the innovation systems contained within the local economy is vital to economic development success, and much of the practitioner's focus must be on working with businesses. Understanding how innovative businesses work is crucial here. What is entrepreneurship? How can it be encouraged? How best can interventions by economic development agencies assist processes of innovation? What role can key educational institutions play? What is the role of knowledge spillovers in encouraging economic development? The course will explore innovation systems in local economies and develop the knowledge and skills needed to understand and support these. The developer's twin aims are to grow entrepreneurial businesses and industries and to grow an entrepreneurial culture in the community more broadly.

Tourism

Tourism is increasingly becoming a core part of many economic development strategies for communities, regions and cities. As a key basic industry that brings export dollars to a community, tourism provides economic developers with opportunities to grow the local economy and create jobs. Rural regions in particular have increasingly looked to festivals and other events as a vehicle for bringing new income to the economy. Cities have sought to become magnets for overseas tourists and hosts of major events. Hence, assessing the benefits of tourism to the local economy and understanding the business opportunities that tourism provides is an important part of the practitioner's toolkit in many regions. The course will outline the principal drivers of tourism development, the nature of tourism businesses, how places can best market themselves to the outside world, and how regions can leverage long term economic benefits from tourism development and benefits across other sectors of the economy.

Sustainability

The economic development game is constantly evolving and the last decade has seen concerns over environmental sustainability increasingly becoming central to the economic concerns of local councils and other regional organisations, particularly in rural areas. Every economic development body must take account of sustainability issues as part of its strategic planning processes, especially those based within local councils. For example, sustainability issues include attracting and developing green businesses and green industries, the new challenges for agriculture, responding to issues such as climate change through adaptation strategies, supporting local government's own efforts in developing best practice in sustainability, and forming strategic alliances with regional bodies which have sustainability as their core business (eg catchment management authorities). The course will explore different notions and contexts of sustainability, such as achieving the triple bottom line in economic development, build sustainability indicators, outline the key emerging green technologies and industries, and hone practitioner skills in driving a sustainable development agenda.