

## **Why do some towns thrive while others languish?**

New ARC-funded research conducted by a partnership of UQ Business School, the University of Queensland and the Queensland Department of Primary Industries has suggested some surprising answers to this question. Eight Queensland country towns, ranging in size from 600 to 10,000, participated. Though their identities remain confidential, two of these were from the South West, two from the South East, two from Central Queensland and two from North Queensland. It is suggested that the findings have universal relevance.

Conducted by Senior Research Fellow, Ian Plowman, a community and organizational psychologist, the research takes a psychological and biographical perspective. The research was both quantitative and qualitative, involving structured interviews, surveys and census data. Results reveal some ideas that add to or even challenge conventional thinking. For example, size, a sound economic base, or natural geographic attributes did not necessarily make a difference.

It is the people that make a difference, the attributes of those people, and the critical mass of those attributes. For example, net inflows bring diversity of ideas and experiences. The least innovative towns have net outflows, and it is the most innovative people that leave. Evolutionary psychology explains why. The more innovative towns are also differentiated by younger average age, higher levels of education and greater frequency of overseas travel, all sources for new ideas.

Also differentiating the more innovative towns are higher proportions of home ownership, signalling a willingness to invest in that town. The least innovative town has the highest proportion of its residents renting, despite average occupancy of 30 years! Contrary to popular wisdom, the least innovative town has the highest proportion of leaders while the most innovative town has the lowest. Yet the most innovative town has a much higher level of distributed leadership and civic responsibility broadly shared. Also surprising is that the most innovative town showed the lowest inclination towards pursuit of funding.

The research report contains recommendations for communities, for Councils, and for State and Federal Governments. Many of these are implementable immediately without cost. One that is likely to generate debate is the suggestion that no person should hold any civic position, be it President of the Show Society, Secretary of the Sports Association, or local Mayor, for more than one term. Leadership is a two edged sword. It is an act of civic responsibility; it is also an act of denying someone else the opportunity to gain civic experience. The more broadly that understanding of civic experience and responsibility is shared, the healthier and more innovative is the town.

As an outcome of the research, a process has been developed that can help any community or group become more innovative.

The full report can be found on <http://www.dpi.qld.gov.au/business/14778.html>. For further information, contact: Ian Plowman 07 3870 2231 or e-mail: [ian@plowman.com.au](mailto:ian@plowman.com.au)