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JESP Special Edition: Research and Policy in Regional Australia

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JESP Special Edition: Research and Policy in Regional Australia

JESP Special Edition: Research, Policy and Practice in Regional Australia

We are delighted to introduce this Special Issue of the Journal of Economic and Social Policy (JESP), with a research focus centred on the communities and economy of Regional Australia. This is the second time that the JESP publishing outlet has been successfully brought together with the SEGRA National Conference, which is now in its 19th year. SEGRA is a community of practitioners, government, business, researchers, regional development organisations, not for profit groups and regional communities. Its members have a shared aspiration of creating a regional Australia that is economically, socially and environmentally sustainable; and that is recognised as being essential to achieving national goals.

In opening a call for submissions to this special edition, our goal was to showcase current, regionally-relevant research by both academics (including early career researchers and students) as well as practitioners. We also hoped to stimulate greater connections between the available research base and the development of policies and practices that drive regional development: this interface is vital in ensuring that good data and ideas are translated, not wasted. Accordingly, this Special Edition comprises seven articles, spanning a range of locations and issues across the country. Individually, each one makes an important contribution to 'regional' literature; but collectively, they also serve to highlight the complexity, diversity and multi-disciplinary nature of regional Australia.

The edition opens with a very timely contribution from Allan Dale, and a wide team of research colleagues, concerning the opportunities and challenges confronting Northern Australia. Following the last Federal election, the development of Northern Australia has emerged as a key policy issue, with a White Paper currently in preparation. Dale et al.'s work examines possible failure points for catchment governance arrangements across the north of our country from the Fitzroy catchment in the Kimberley region of Western Australia, to the Daly catchment area in the top end of the Northern Territory and the Gilbert catchment in north-western Queensland. The authors conclude that governance approaches vary widely, reflecting the diversity of historical, social and biophysical contexts in the North. They call for greater policy leadership, teamed with stronger Indigenous governance and a closer involvement of community-based organisations, particularly in locations under pressure from significant resource development activity.

Still keeping in the North, Andrew Taylor and his co-authors, Lauren Bell and Rolf Gerritson, use their paper to present data on skilled migration patterns in the Northern Territory through the Regional Sponsored Migration and State-Specific Regional Migration schemes. Through the collation of both desktop and survey data, Taylor et al. demonstrate the demographic (population growth) and labour force contributions

of skilled migrants, and pose policy questions about attraction and retention strategies, and catering for inclusiveness, along the way to achieving population stability.

The third paper mixes the Northern Australia agenda with that of the broader issues of food security and sustainability. Here, Breda McCarthy writes on the development of sustainable food systems in Northern Queensland, through the establishment and expansion of organic food cooperatives. The author finds that buy-local support for farmers, a desire to reduce food miles and health benefits were amongst the triggers for the development of local food systems. However, this was contrasted with the challenge of overcoming the logistics of centralised distribution arrangements, and surviving the limitations of short supply chains. McCarthy points out that collaborative networks may be one way of tackling this ‘unforgiving environment’, but in the absence of a formal strategy for alternative food production systems, it is likely that growth will occur only on a haphazard basis.

William Caenegem, Jen Cleary and Peter Drahos continue the regional food theme with research on the role of geographic indicators (GI) as economic development tools in regional, rural and remote areas. Whilst popular in the European Union, Caenegem et al. report that Australia has frowned on GIs due to concerns about trade impacts. However, the authors contend that a specially tailored system, supported by innovative policy, could allow the development of new forms of regional advantage in Australian food production systems.

In the fifth article, Jeff Guy, Alistair McIlgorm and Peter Waterman provide insights into the impacts of imported products on the viability of regional Australian aquaculture. They present a feasibility case study for the use of *finfish mullocky* in diversifying the production base of prawn farming. This research demonstrates a very practical application, as well as providing food for thought (pun unintentional) around appropriate policy settings and incentive schemes for rural industries.

Next, and on an entirely different topic, Paul Plummer, Michael Tonts and Kirsten Martinus engage in an analysis of uneven development patterns in regional Western Australia, using shift-share decomposition. They conclude that both endogenous (local industry mix and competitiveness) and exogenous (broader macro-economic and structural) factors are important in driving development. Place-based (local) competitiveness is acknowledged as having ongoing importance, but this varies by sector and location. Consequently, Plummer et al. advocate for place-based policy interventions that cater for broad needs as well as tailored ones: in short, ‘competitiveness needs to be understood in locational context’.

Lastly, Patrice Braun and her colleagues Jessie Harman and Frank Paton provide an article about the potential role of economic gardening as an endogenous place-based development strategy, through a case study of a recent initiative undertaken in

regional Victoria. Their sentiments echo those of Plummer et al., with the view that ‘regional development interventions should be placed within the local context and culture’. Further, they conclude that whilst economic gardening approaches have value, adopting one-size-fits-all programs are unlikely to deliver strong outcomes.

One of the ongoing challenges of regional development policy is dealing with the heterogeneity of Australian regions. This makes it difficult – indeed, inappropriate – to try and directly replicate successes from one region to another, even where a good base of empirical research exists. Furthermore, as this special edition highlights, regional policy is very much about cultivating an ability to effectively ‘connect the dots’ across a number of different portfolio areas (such as agriculture, water, energy, industry and social outcomes). We thus anticipate that the coming years will see growth in collaborative, intergovernmental and cross-portfolio approaches to managing regional issues, preferably with the flexibility to offer tailored strategies. We also hold hope that an increasingly rich base of case studies can be published in order to strengthen policy development for regions, and perhaps even to encourage cross-regionalism.

In closing, we would like to thank all the contributing authors for their participation in the special issue, and to our reviewer base for helping assess the manuscripts for suitability. We also gratefully acknowledge the tireless work of Assistant Editor Amanda Shoebridge, in coordinating the special issue; and Managing Editor Jeremy Bultjens, for his mentoring.

To you, the readership of JESP, we hope that you enjoy the papers contained herein and – more importantly – that you will be prompted to consider how to make your own contribution to a more prosperous future for regional Australia.

Guest Editors

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