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Introduction to the JESP Special Issue on Regional Megatrends

Susan Kinnear
CQUniversity Australia

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Introduction to the JESP Special Issue on Regional Megatrends

JESP Special Issue on Regional Megatrends

This Special Issue contains six papers, each providing a very different contribution to the stock of research on regional Australia. As has been the case with the previous Special Issue of JESP, these papers were linked with themes and presentations given at the annual Sustainable Economic Growth for Regional Australia (SEGRA) conference; which, in 2014, was convened at Alice Springs.

The issue opens with Breda McCarthy's examination of organic food consumption trends in China: this a very timely piece given the current focus on regional Australia's role in helping to provide for the burgeoning food and nutrition needs of Asia. This paper describes how Chinese food consumption and food preference (as a looming 'megatrend') is critically important to regionally-based Australian food producers.

The second offering comes in the form of work by Chris McDonald and Vinnie Maharaj, who have studied the decision-making processes in regional Victoria. Questions of policy environment, growth performance and supporting economic infrastructure are considered within the context of the ongoing growth of regional cities as a state-based megatrend. The authors concluded that competitive advantages and endogenous factors are important to regional growth and performance, although the key drivers may be different in different locations. They also demonstrated that both quantitative and qualitative data are important in developing a profile of regional city growth, and should be used to underpin policy development processes at the State level.

Thirdly, Robert Weymouth and Janette Hartz-Karp examine the implications of not one, but two megatrends, in creating a 'governance gap' for regional Australia. The authors contend that the rise of wicked problems and declining trust in governance are both megatrends in regional Australia, and that positive feedback loops between these two problems have resulted in an erosion of trust in government's ability to tackle issues of regional development. Here, a model of Deliberative Collaborative Governance is put forward as a possible reform measure to assist in bridging the 'gap' of trust.

Continuing on the governance theme, Anne Stephens and her veritable army of colleagues make the fourth contribution to the megatrend edition with their paper on tensions in the Development of Northern Australia: Implications for Governance. This too is timely, given that the focus on development of the North is surely one of the more ‘visible’ of megatrends in Australian regional development, helped particularly by a Parliamentary Inquiry on that topic. Stephens *et al.* explore three subset themes within their paper: those of big development, big conservation and Indigenous wellbeing. They conclude that northern development requires not simply an acknowledgement of diversity – of peoples, values and places – but also the introduction of appropriate participatory spaces in governance systems, to allow this diversity to be properly considered.

Gary Misan and Elena Rudnik explore yet another megatrend that has enjoyed a recent focus through Parliamentary Inquiry – that of non-resident workforces in regional Australia. Misan and Rudnik present material on long-distance commuting from the perspective of South Australian resource sector workers. Of note, the sample for this qualitative study included some one-third of participants as women. The authors describe long-distance commuting as a ‘satisfying, challenging and rewarding career choice with a range of personal, lifestyle and family benefits’; although the quality varies with influences such as shiftwork roster duration, accommodation arrangements, and travel conditions. This contrasts somewhat with the bulk of existing literature that instead points to the negative outcomes of non-resident workforces on both employees and the regional sources and sinks of that labour.

Finally, Elizabeth Slottje’s paper explores the definitional and ideological changes that have challenged the community arts sector. The research explores the devolved responsibilities for community arts to local government authorities, and the changing goalposts for regional community arts funding. This research reflects upon the trend for greater liveability and cultural opportunities in regional Australia. It was fitting that the special issue was able to include material on creative arts, which, although being powerful for regional development, appears to be an understudied area within the research literature.

Each of these papers has addressed the ‘megatrend’ theming of the special issue. Notwithstanding this, it is somewhat difficult to draw together the six articles in terms of their commonalities. But this, perhaps, is the real message within the

Special Issues: regional development is a complex space, with a diversity of themes to explore. This certainly provides fertile ground for a strong future for regional development research.

I am pleased to introduce this special issue, which invites you to read the latest regional development research, as well as reflect and further your own research interests on regional Australia.

Associate Professor Susan Kinnear, Guest Editor