

RAPlink Incorporated
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APS Annual Conference, RRIG forum, Sydney – 30.9.04
Script to accompany PowerPoint slideshow (narrative version)
Presenter: Elizabeth M Murphy Assisted by: John H Champness

Good morning:

I'm the Secretary of RAPlink Incorporated, and John Champness is our immediate past President, and, as you know, is a member of this interest group. Thank you to Ailsa Drent and your committee, for inviting me to tell you a bit about RAPlink. It's nice to meet in person. John Champness will join in later.

RAPlink is a voluntary group and we offer a helping hand (which we call a LINK) to rural and other communities.

RAPlink stands for Regional Action Partnership Link – regional includes rural, remote, urban, anywhere in Australia; action means our activities with communities in urban and country areas; and we work in partnership with those communities, to try to help them improve their lifestyles; 'link' means what we do – we link communities with resources and information. When a link is achieved, that's normally the end of RAPlink's involvement

In our outline for this session, we wrote: *Investing in 'futures' on the stock exchange can be risky, but investing in '**rural** futures' is essential.* If we don't, we all lose. RAPlink is there to help rural communities to achieve a brighter future. How? We LINK a community with resources or information they ask for. We are a conduit. We don't run projects ourselves. Who do we call on for help? First, our own members. Our skills database can usually produce a member with the qualifications and expertise to help – from all walks of life. Failing that, we search, including appealing through our newsletter.

Why do people come to RAPlink? Because we are totally independent. People in small rural communities are often reluctant to approach big business or government agencies. A pre-RAPlink survey we did in rural communities in 1999, with John's structural input, showed a tendency for mistrust of local government – but they will talk to us.

What kinds of links do we make? community with community; groups with training resources; community representatives with professional advice, such as legal, financial, personal counselling; facilitating meetings to talk through community needs; and general information in our newsletter and on our website. I'll look briefly at each of these.

Community with community

Forbes in NSW was losing specialist medical facilities and this was impacting severely on the town, including their aged care facility. Families were removing their elderly members, and themselves, to another town, with disastrous flow-on consequences for Forbes.

Broken Hill's mainstay mining industry was being wound down. But they had developed strategies, through community roundtable conferences, to address the problem and try to make the town viable through new industries and activities.

Our solution was to link the two communities, to exchange ideas.

The outcome has been very positive:

A Broken Hill development officer eventually went to Forbes to help the local Council put strategies in place.

And Broken Hill has gained from the contact, keeping in touch with Forbes on a number of levels.

Links with training resources

Isolated communities often lack access to training, so we try to help with links to online and in-person training providers.

There have been some good outcomes:

A Launceston group received training by email in writing funding applications.

Two groups in Broken Hill participated in training workshops that targeted the writing skills needed by small voluntary groups.

We have other training providers on our database, including one offering distance training in community project management.

Links with professional consultants

We have put communities in touch with professional advice unavailable locally. The volunteer consultant assesses the situation, and then provides the appropriate advice or mentoring

Some examples are:

Legal advice was provided for a Queensland group of small farmers, unsure how to approach government and other authorities.

A social worker voluntarily helped boost morale during a trying time for that community.

Researchers in Tasmania needed guidance on funding – we put them in touch with a Commonwealth Government agency.

I personally helped out in Broken Hill running seminars in effective writing.

And also for Broken Hill Community Inc, our IT experts are currently helping them set up a website to give them more voice.

Facilitating community meetings

Sometimes when communities ask us to help, we find that they haven't yet talked the issues through among themselves. So we work with local leaders to organise a community meeting. This has resulted in better community discussion, a start to project planning, and even sometimes the problem has been resolved in the meeting.

Examples include:

Mt Lacom and Yarwun in Queensland, about dealing with industrial activities that were impacting severely on their pig and mango farms

Forbes, Dubbo and Broken Hill where we helped get concerned people from disparate sections of their own communities together to talk about overall community needs

A heart-warming occasion when the residents of a street devastated in last year's Canberra bushfires asked us if we could help with their 'bonding' gathering. We provided a pocket reference to emergency and recovery services and a link to professional post trauma counselling if required

and we have excellent links with Area Consultative Committees in most states through personal contacts.

We also have an email newsletter and a website. Why? They are effective and cheap ways to bridge the communication gap.

We have a free monthly email newsletter, and the website has recently undergone a major design and navigation facelift

We're quietly pleased with our efforts: increasing hit rate on the website; newsletter 'diary dates' seem to be popular; contributions from readers help with the 'community' feel of the newsletter,

As a result, we're gradually becoming better known..

As I said, RAPLink does not have projects of its own. However, we do get pretty close to some projects. I'll outline just one that I believe is of interest to rural and remote psychologists and those in the educational and social areas:

The RuStiC project (Rural Students in the Community)

The objectives are:

- to attract rural students to university and other tertiary education
- to help facilitate their tertiary education
- to help graduates return to or migrate to rural communities

This project, initiated and chaired by a RAPLink member, Dr Elisabeth Patz, an academic in Canberra, is a real investment in the rural future – through rural youth.

Briefly, we know that there are communities where tertiary education just isn't a priority, or isn't available. We also know that graduates in a number of fields would

like to return to their rural communities if conditions were right. RuStiC is looking at ways of addressing these issues, with the community as the driver.

The stages in the project are:

- First, researching existing initiatives around Australia. RAPlink has helped by contacting all 56 Area Consultative Committees around Australia to find out what is happening in their areas.
- The next step is to conduct a compact online survey around Australia to analyse community needs and attitudes to tertiary education and employment of graduates – RAPlink is facilitating this. Some of the broad issues likely to be addressed in this survey are:
 - the degree of encouragement of, and access to, tertiary study in the community
 - whether young graduates are expected to return, and do they?
 - areas of study that young people pursue or are encouraged to pursue
 - in what areas, other than agriculture, could the community benefit from well educated and professionally trained young people? (commerce, tourism, journalism, health, education etc)

We welcome suggestions.

- The next stage will be to define the degree of community encouragement that there really is, and then
- to develop strategies to facilitate the objectives

Why do this? Because what's happening at the moment is scattered, uncoordinated or non-existent. Pathways need to be developed for both students and community support.

There ARE other schemes out there, but this one is different. It aims to be Australia-wide and coordinated; supportive of communities, students and accessible education; community driven and ongoing.

RAPlink's involvement is largely in linking with ACCs and other interested groups; such as this one (RRIG) and the APS in general; and helping with research, survey structuring, evaluation etc.

RuStiC is an ambitious project. It's in its infancy as yet. We welcome your interest as it particularly addresses the social and educational problems facing would-be university students from rural and remote areas of Australia, and their communities. There's a brochure about RuStiC (handed out).

If you would like to know more, or would like to participate in the survey, please talk to John or me later, or send off the request form in the brochure.

That's very nearly all. Here are our contact details:

Web <http://users.tpg.com.au/raplink>
Email raplink@ozemail.com.au
Phone 0428 866 722

(also on the brochures and cards that we have for you – both RAPlink and RuStiC brochures). We welcome all enquiries and any level of involvement. If you give us your card, we'll put you on the mailing list for our email newsletter.

Thanks to John Champness initially, and your whole committee, RAPlink has a long-standing relationship with rural and remote psychologists. We value your continuing support.

Presenter: Elizabeth M Murphy, Secretary, RAPlink Inc

Assisted by: Dr John H Champness, Immediate Past President, RAPlink Inc

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