



# The Oxford Round Table: Maintaining the balance

by Patricia Carroll

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Towards the end of 2000 I received an invitation to attend an international round table of Community College Principals at Oxford University from 1–6 July 2001. With the backing of my College Council I decided to combine this opportunity for professional development with some long service leave and with some of the special lifelong learning opportunities which can be experienced as a European Tourist over an eight-week period.

I decided to take myself even further out of the comfort zone and proposed a paper on one of the major themes of the Round Table, Engaging the Community College in State and Local Economic Development. To my surprise and horror my proposal was accepted. Then began the hard work of researching the legislation and the literature. Somehow I survived the experience, met the deadline, successfully presented the paper and had a marvellous five days in Oxford, residing on site at St Anthony's College.

Following formal presentations from participants and experts, topics discussed at the Round Table included: funding (of further and higher education, the Universality of Learning, and performance); equity; quality assurance; the fundamental purpose of learning; leadership; and governance. It was consoling to see that many of the same challenges and difficulties are experienced around the world.

Often, gatherings like the Round Table highlight good new reading material. *Growth through Development*, by Amartya Sen, was recommended by several participants and is now on my 'must read' list.

I learnt a great deal about the history and workings of Oxford University and had entrée into the holy of holies, which included parts of the Bodleian Library in usage in Shakespeare's time. I also had the opportunity to practise my Latin skills, somewhat dormant since the completion of a Latin Major some years ago. Grace is still said in Latin before formal dinners at Oxford Colleges.

Through the work I did on my paper for the Round Table, I can see how closely aligned the ACE sector is to local and state economic development. This development is supported by our work assisting communities to become learning communities and by attempting to fashion our learning centres into learning organisations. My paper also had a theme of maintaining the balance between economic and spiritual development and how ACE provides courses that also cater to the spiritual needs of our communities. I was grateful to discover Doug Conlon's work on spirituality, which assisted me enormously. I also talked at length about the involvement of ACE in catering for the needs of disadvantaged people who can so readily be forgotten in the economic development agenda and who require extra assistance to take part.

On the personal side, I have again discovered the importance of setting professional development challenges for oneself, which give the impetus to do some significant professional reflection. So many of us operate from day to day and from crisis to crisis in adult education. Taking long service leave, and travelling, are great ways to refresh the mind, spirit and enthusiasm for one's work, family, colleagues, friends, life and country. I have been reminded of the importance of teamwork and of using one's resources and networks. I have also seen the importance of sharing leadership in our organisations so that they survive and thrive. People and teams are enhanced if they are given the experience of responsibility and decision-making when key people are having a much-needed break. Finally, my paper has inspired a new interest in Economics and I have been attending talks about the Australian Economy given by economists such as Dr Chris Caton. I am hoping to get as many other Australians as possible to share my newfound interest so that the Australian dollar improves and so that I do not have to eat so many baguettes when I next travel!