

Post-graduates-ILWS scholarships

Sue Blyth

Once upon a time people knew how to make their own clothes, cook a meal from scratch and could clean a house without the help of a vacuum cleaner. These days, more and more so, we are substituting skills with products (consumption).

But, according to PhD student Sue Blyth, going back to our grand-parents days may not be a choice for many in the future. "The need for research in this area is strengthening with climate change," says Sue, a Distance Education student based at Medlow Bath, near Katoomba in the Blue Mountains. "We will be forced to retreat from our consumption simply because, as well as not being environmentally sustainable, we won't be able to afford it. And when true carbon pricing comes into the market place, consumption is going to be a much more expensive option. There will be a rebalancing with the need to do a lot more things ourselves. The question is what is our position around the skills base we need to be able to do that."

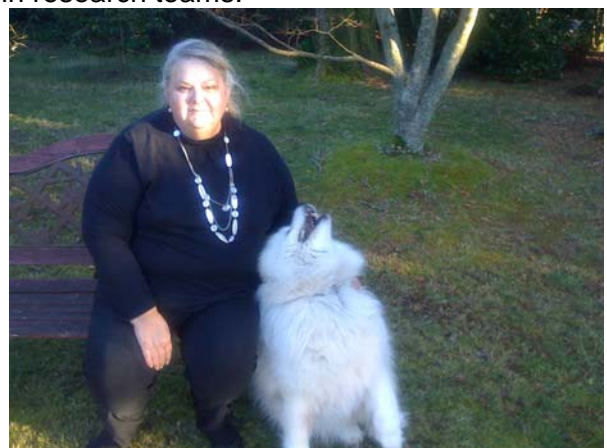
Sue began her PhD in April 2009 with supervisors Dr Helen Masterman-Smith and A/Prof Ian Gray. Her topic is "Increased Consumption and Decreased Domestic Skills: Clues to more sustainable lifestyles?" The topic stems from her previous role as Manager, research, Policy and Evaluation for TAFE NSW's Western Sydney Institute. In that capacity, she led the Professional Development Strategy and Unit and found that for the TAFEs many trade teachers professional development was about using new products and not about developing new skills.

"Broadly, socially, we do a process called substitution, whereby we use products or

consumption to replace skills we previously had. For example, at a household level we use so-called labor saving devices, pre-packaged products and manufactured clothing rather than produce what we might have done previously. This has led to a whole lot of deskilling of people."

Sue, whose background as an undergraduate is in history and English, is taking a social history approach to her research. She will use 'snap shots' for every 50 years since the 1800s looking at the development of substitution in Australian life "...of how we have traded products for skills progressively over that time."

After an extensive career in the TAFE system, Sue, 59, who has four grown up children, retired in 2008. Her retirement gave her the opportunity to do a PhD, something she has always wanted to do. "When you talk about PhD students, you talk about Early Career Researchers...I suppose I'm early in my next career," says Sue. "As my background is in management, writing and analysis, after I finish my PhD I would like to work in research teams."



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