

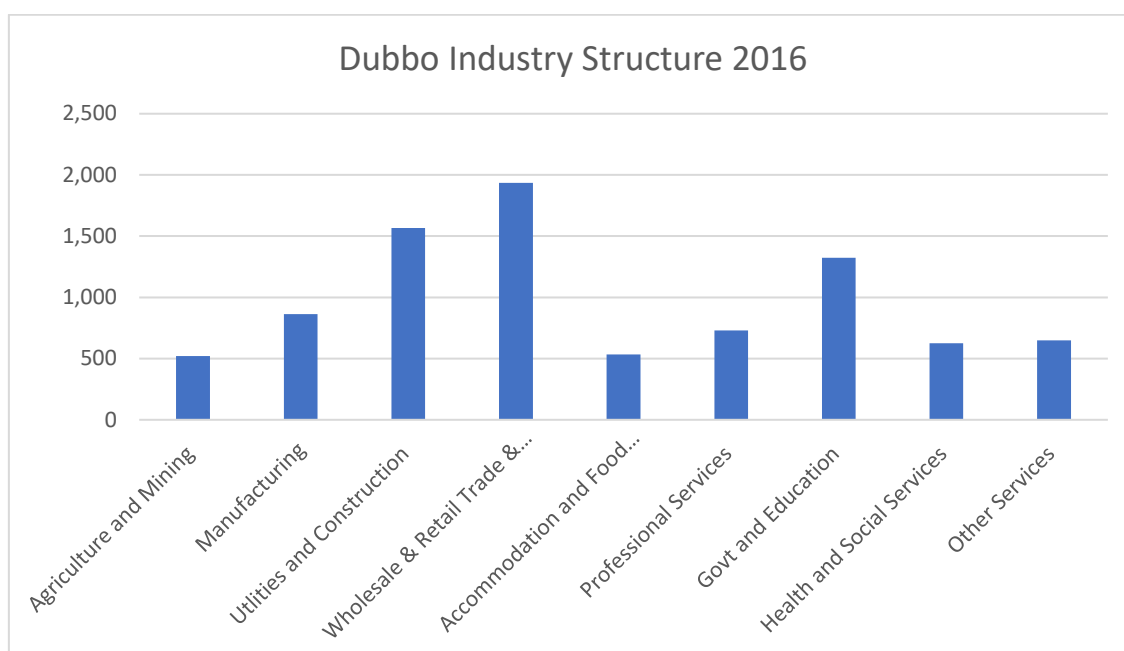
Case study: Dubbo, NSW, Australia

Reinventing a regional centre

Dubbo is a small city of 39,000 persons in the central west of the state of New South Wales, Australia. The city has enjoyed steady population growth rates for the past four decades, expanding its population by 59% over 25 years while many other agricultural centres in the region have been confronted by decline or fragile economies. It has prospered because of its ability to provide a wide range of services to a large region, and while it was originally founded on the crossing point of the Macquarie River, it has been able to grow because of its position at the crossroads of two major highways, the presence of the railway, the prosperity of the grazing and agricultural lands on which it sits and the absence of other major centres to the west.

The Dubbo City Council (DCC) has had a long history of activism in promoting the city's growth: at various times it has operated the gas supply, the livestock saleyards and the abattoir; it has been involved in the development of land; and has operated the local airport. Council policies have consistently encouraged growth, with a long-standing tradition of local leadership emphasising 'government as a business' (Beer et al 1994 p. 151).

The industry structure is largely based around construction, as well as wholesale and retail services, utilities and government employment and education. In large measure the economy has remained unchanged since the early 1990s, and this very conventional – but successful – industry structure reflects Dubbo's significant role as a regional centre and the impact of its sustained population growth. Over the past three decades Dubbo has been able to attract population from surrounding farms and smaller towns, and while this has led to it being labelled a 'sponge' city, Dubbo has also been able to attract population from the state's major metropolis, Sydney (Drozdowski 2014). This twentieth century industry structure is reflected in the skill profile of the labour force, with sixty per cent lacking any post-school qualifications.



Dubbo has been part of major promotional activities aimed at raising the profile of the city and other regional centres across Australia. In 2005 Dubbo was one of seven cities that formed the 'Evocities' alliance, established with the intention of attracting investment and migrants from across Australia. As a group they set out to establish a distinctive, attractive brand that capitalised on the 'liveability' of these places. In addition, the alliance members sought to leverage their combined efforts and engage with government and private sector partners to deliver tangible benefits. Importantly, the alliance was seen to be a success: raising the public profile of these communities, attracting investment and tourists and attracting migrants (Manley 2013).

In many ways, Dubbo is both a conventional regional centre and a twentieth century economy. As such it is typical of many towns across the Australian landscape, but it has been remarkable in its capacity to grow when many other similar places have declined. In part the answer may be its location – it is relatively distant from competitor cities and many public and private enterprises have closed down their presence in smaller nearby towns and refocussed their services on Dubbo. But there is more to this story than simple geography: Dubbo has always worked hard to achieve growth. It attracted the Taronga Western Plains Zoo in the late 1970s as a major tourism asset and its involvement with the 'Evocities' campaign reflects the on-going commitment to exploring new pathways to growth.