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Institute for Culture
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Reconfiguring the enterprise: shifting manufacturing culture in Australia

The project

Professor Katherine Gibson, Dr Stephen Healy, Associate Professor Jenny Cameron and Joanne McNeill are examining what manufacturing could look like in Australia in the 21st century, with a particular focus on the business practices that contribute directly to community and national wellbeing. The project is funded for three years by the Australian Research Council through its Discovery Projects grant scheme.

The research is based on case studies of manufacturers that are 'doing business' in interesting and innovative ways – around issues such as environmental responsibility, employee participation and/or social inclusion. The case studies are drawn from a range of industry sectors (e.g. food production, metal-working and materials reuse), and from a range of business types in terms of size and organisational structure (including social enterprises, cooperatives and regular firms).

Working with the case study manufacturers, the research team will generate indicators of practice that help to capture: i) the multiple contributions that the manufacturers make to the nation and specific communities; and ii) the decision-making processes and practices that lie behind these contributions. The indicators of practice will allow for cross industry discussion and guide policy development.

The research will help expand the terms of the debate about the future of manufacturing in Australia, by highlighting how these manufacturers contribute broadly to wellbeing, purposeful work, ecological care and (in some cases) wealth sharing.

'Currently, the discussion tends to present either a bleak future of hollowing out, or a skewed focus on hi-tech start-ups,' says Professor Gibson. 'As well, manufacturing is often talked about narrowly in terms of its economic dimensions, such as contribution to GDP or contribution to employment numbers. What this project will add is a recognition of the broader dimensions of business practices that can generate substantial and long-lasting value for Australian communities.'

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