Workers for Chevron’s S29 billion Wheatstone LNG project and BHP Billiton’s onshore gas plant have flooded Onslow. As the country town is transformed into a bustling hub, Edith Cowan University has joined the hubbub.

Every six months, ECU media students and staff are recording, documenting and publishing online stories about the huge physical and social changes in the community, where numbers are predicted to swell from 500 to 5000 by 2016.

The three-year ‘Tracking Onslow’ project began in July 2012, with funding from ECU and the Shire of Ashburton.

It is a rare chance for the University to engage closely with the local community and council.

Project leader and ECU senior journalism lecturer Kayt Davies said the experience had been a great opportunity for students to see the real Australia and meet people most affected by the resource industry.

“The resource companies have committed a huge amount of money and this is clearly changing the fabric of the town. It’s changing the population, the shape of the roads and buildings; it’s bringing in air travel if a commercial airline decides to use the facilities that are now available,” Dr Davies said.

“This is history happening. They say journalism is the first draft of history and this is creating that first draft by actually being there at the time and observing what is happening.”

Dr Davies said the university had revealed a town experiencing deep divisions between its winners and losers. There are jobs but a lack of water resources, while property, rental and petrol prices have gone through the roof.

“Some people have made a lot of money by selling property; others have found that their lives have become more expensive,” Dr Davies said.

“There are some people we have found who are concerned that the changes and benefits they have been promised haven’t been as they expected and there are some very tangible things that are slowing down progress.”

Dr Davies said the university hoped that the project would help Onslow residents see how the changes are affecting different people in different ways, enabling the community to pull together. It also provides a clear picture to people from other places on how major resource projects impact on host communities. In turn, this allows for better informed decisions to be made about whether increased royalty for regions support is required and if the resource companies should be asked to do more for the communities.

If you would like to find out more about the project then take a look at www.trackingonslow.net