

Building a culture of improvement through evaluation in university/ regional community engagement

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Building a Culture of Improvement in University - Regional Community Engagement

Abstract

Scholarship-based engagement between the university and regional priorities needs a supportive framework of review to ensure an embodied culture of improvement.

Current benchmarking approaches have been suggested as a tool to assess university - regional development engagement practice against an agreed 'good practice' standard. However such assessment methods sit outside the engagement process and restrict rather than encourage collaboration. They therefore are a tool for reporting on performance and not a tool to assist with improvement.

In a world where attitudes of 'trust me' and 'show me' are increasingly called into question, there are new calls for an 'involve me' approach to improving societal outcomes through the actions of governments, institutions and business. Reinforcing this desire for more connectivity is a growing realisation that 'good practice' achievements at the regional level, in the end, will also translate into better global outcomes.

This paper proposes an approach to the application of benchmarking, consistent with this environment, that facilitates continuous improvement in university - regional engagement outcomes. Underpinning the approach are principles of connectivity and collaboration, learning, and enterprising action that focus on creative outcomes with resonance in a global and knowledge world. The approach is based on the findings of a benchmarking analysis of six universities in the Australian system of higher education.

Five generic steps towards continuous improvement in engagement process and outcome are proposed that can be applied to all university - community engagement circumstances.

The five steps comprise:

- Review and agreement about the existing environment and a process of reflection about areas for improvement;
- Strategic planning;
- A program of improvement implementation that includes the development of performance indicators;
- Commitment of leadership and resource allocation; and
- Ongoing review and continuous improvement.

The paper also highlights some of the on-the-ground issues that arise in implementing university-region engagement processes at the regional level, through the experiences of one of the universities involved in the six university benchmarking project.

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1. Introduction

The growing interest by higher education institutions and regional communities in Australia over the last decade in building relationships of mutual interest has generally resulted from two broad trends.

First, the increasing spatiality of universities and the growing pressure on them by funding agencies to be viable, unique, and competitive in the face of reduced public funding and the internationalisation of higher education. Second, the increasing desire of regional communities to build their globally-relevant persona from below, through the realisation of their endogenous attributes, particularly their knowledge, creativity and enterprising action.

The question now is whether the agenda for a 'third role' for university/ regional community engagement or connectivity can be grown beyond the ontological, and the individual, and sometimes romantic, case study to something more fundamental and widespread in its impact and impetus for both the region and the university. If not, the result may well be that, in a global and knowledge-based environment, higher education is seen as no more than something that "...sets you free, but erodes your commitment to a place, a country and even an organisation". (Handy. 2003. p.146).

Where universities are disconnected from their regions, communities may become more transient and vulnerable places globally because of knowledge outflow and an inability to design creative solutions and implement enterprising initiatives. Increasing regional vulnerability, in the end, also makes for sub-optimal national and global outcomes. Nowhere is this more acute than in the role of the university in increasing our understanding, and how to positively respond at the local and regional level, to the implications of global sustainability.

Connectivity is the basis for accessing disparate sources of knowledge for new ways of thinking ('learning') and acting ('enterprising') to address regional futures. University-region engagement is made all the more important because the processes and the outcomes associated with it are more observable and meaningful at the regional scale and at the individual organization level.

This paper examines how a systematic approach to engagement improvement can occur through an evaluation framework that embraces the idea of connectivity. As part of this, two interrelated human capital concepts are put forward as actions to generate purposeful connections between universities and the communities in which they are located. These concepts are 'learning' and being 'enterprising'. These are discussed in sections five and six.

Two practical approaches to evaluation are reviewed as processes for the university and regional community to build an ongoing culture of improvement in their engagement. These two approaches are the more generally recognised template-based benchmarking assessment (section three) and an approach based around collaborative learning processes

(section four). A comparison of these approaches to evaluation is important as one approach portrays the organization and the community in a reductionist and segmented way, whereas the other portrays them in a connected way.

Section nine shows the issues that arise in the implementation of an evaluation program like this to improve university-regional development outcomes how collaborative learning process may be incorporated to bring about improvement in university-regional community engagement outcomes in this area.

2. Progress in University-regional engagement in Australia and internationally

In Australia, while there has been some progress towards a ‘third role’ for universities engaging with the development of their regional and local communities through teaching and research it has not as yet been:

(a) Explicitly recognised in higher education or regional development policy funding arrangements at a national level.

There have however been a number of recent facilitative actions by government agencies to promote university-regional community connections through the provision of databases (Cumpston et al 2001), holding conferences (DOTARS 2001), showcasing ‘good practice’ examples (DOTARS 2003) and through sponsored research.

Despite early encouragement provided in the working papers of the *Universities at the Crossroads* review of higher education (Nelson 2002) about a ‘third role’ for universities engaging with their communities on efficiency grounds, in the resulting *Our Universities: Backing Australia’s Future* white paper (Nelson 2003) past equity policy toward non-metropolitan universities prevailed. The regional student loading policy is an example of this equity-based approach to university spatiality. There is still no efficiency-oriented funding policy concerning the connectivity between universities and the places in which they are located.

(b) Embraced by university leadership as an investment strategy that can be used equally effectively alongside their strategies for internationalisation, quality improvement, and business partnership building.

Administrators in the university mostly see connections with the region they are located in as one way traffic - a cost to prop-up their civic capital in the community when deemed necessary, a place to mine student enrollment, and a source of research funding for academic priority. Regional action by the academe, in their teaching and research, to improve the places they reside in is somehow seen as being separate and less than their commitment to their discipline and themselves internationally. Although some institutions are committed to practical placement and work-related learning, published research and ‘traditional’ teaching outside of practical applicability takes precedence over contributing to on-the-ground outcomes to improve the future of their communities. Building university connections through the academe is not yet treated as an investment in the same way as they see their international, quality, and business partnership strategies.

Nevertheless, there is certainly much more interest now within universities in building community relationships than there was five years ago (Garlick 1998, 2000, Garlick and Pryor 2002). Several universities have changed their strategic plans and missions to reflect the need to strengthen these connections. Some universities have appointed senior people to take on the responsibility for building their community relationships and there has been some interest in collaborative research into regional engagement and regional benchmarking. There are now many more case study examples of 'good practice' engagement occurring, conferences such as the biennial *Insideout conference* and the annual *Learning and Community Engagement Forum*, and the recently formed *Australian Universities Community Engagement Alliance* (AUCEA), are all indicative of a groundswell in the university sector.

(c) Incorporated into strategies and leadership at the community level.

There is not yet an appreciation of the role of creativity, knowledge and enterprising action of human capital at the regional community level. There is an unfortunate narrow view that regional development is simply about building business productivity through firm agglomeration networks and partnerships (Porter 1998, Porter and Kretals 2003). There is also a view that regional development can be simply facilitated by top-down institutional thickness provided in the form of business support business agencies (Amin 1999).

The reality is that these approaches fall far short of an approach that seeks to build connected and creative outcomes by harnessing endogenous human capital (local knowledge, skill, and enterprising action) regionally across the full spectrum of the economic, social, cultural and natural attributes (Garlick 2001, Taylor 2001, Plummer and Taylor 2001, Garlick 2003, Taylor 2003).

Overall, the university-regional development engagement field in Australia still remains project and discipline-specific, small scale, and university dominated.

Internationally, there has also been positive developments in the area of universities engaging with their regions to facilitate knowledge-based community identified outcomes. The OECD is currently developing a multi-country evaluation research program over the next two years to follow up its 1999 report *The Response of Higher Education to Regional Needs*. The objective of the investigation is to review progress in the way universities are responding to the needs of their communities and how there might be learning to improve the relationships

In South Africa, the Community-Higher Education Service Partnerships Initiative (CHESP), established in 1998, aims to contribute to the reconstruction and development of South African civil society through socially responsible 'models' of higher education (Lazarus 2001). Lazarus identifies 10 indicators to assess the civic engagement of higher in South Africa, including the role of scholarship and its local relevance, multi-disciplinary responsiveness, service learning of staff, institutional leadership, staff reward and recognition, resource allocation, and institutional governance and strategies.

In the USA, the Campus Compact organization of colleges and universities has a strong focus on service learning courses that link academic course content to services in the community. This has involved building a number of partnerships with business,

community and government leaders and more recently the dissemination of good practice examples of university-community engagement based on 13 indicators of engagement (Hollander et al 2002)

Also in the USA, the *Stepping Forward as Stewards of Place: A guide for leading public engagement at State Colleges and Universities* report of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU, 2002) made a number of recommendations for government, universities and the AASCU designed to shift engagement between universities and their communities from a cost to a revenue measure. The report lists six characteristics of an engaged institution.

In the UK, the recently released white paper on higher education has as one of its objectives to make sustainable improvements in the economic performance of all English regions and over the long term reduce the persistent gap in growth rates between the regions. In making a permanent commitment to third stream funding, the specific objective is

“To support all institutions in making a significant and measurable contribution, through knowledge transfer and related activities, to economic development and the strength of communities”.

Two programs have resulted from this, the Higher Education Innovation Fund and the Aimhigher program. The first is designed to foster entrepreneurship education, facilitate university spin-out enterprises and build community links. The second is designed to target the sub-region to enhance student participation and outcome through summer schools, work-based learning, mentoring, etc

In Korea the new higher education white paper, "The Plan for Strengthening Competitiveness of Higher Education" (November 2003), and the Government's commitment to bottom-up regional development through the Presidential Committee for Nationally Balanced Development, now puts the higher education institution in a key position in responding to regional needs. An important initiative in this new framework is the delivery of the "New University for Regional Innovation (NURI) project, which promotes regional innovation in the 16 provinces outside the major metropolitan centres. Announced in January 2004, NURI encourages provinces to form their own regional innovation committee with membership from HEIs, government agencies, business, local government, and NGOs and to identify innovation initiatives that will generate 'balanced development'. The Ministry of Education is the lead agency at a government level, where all portfolios are required to have a regional development focus to their activities.

3. Evaluation and trust

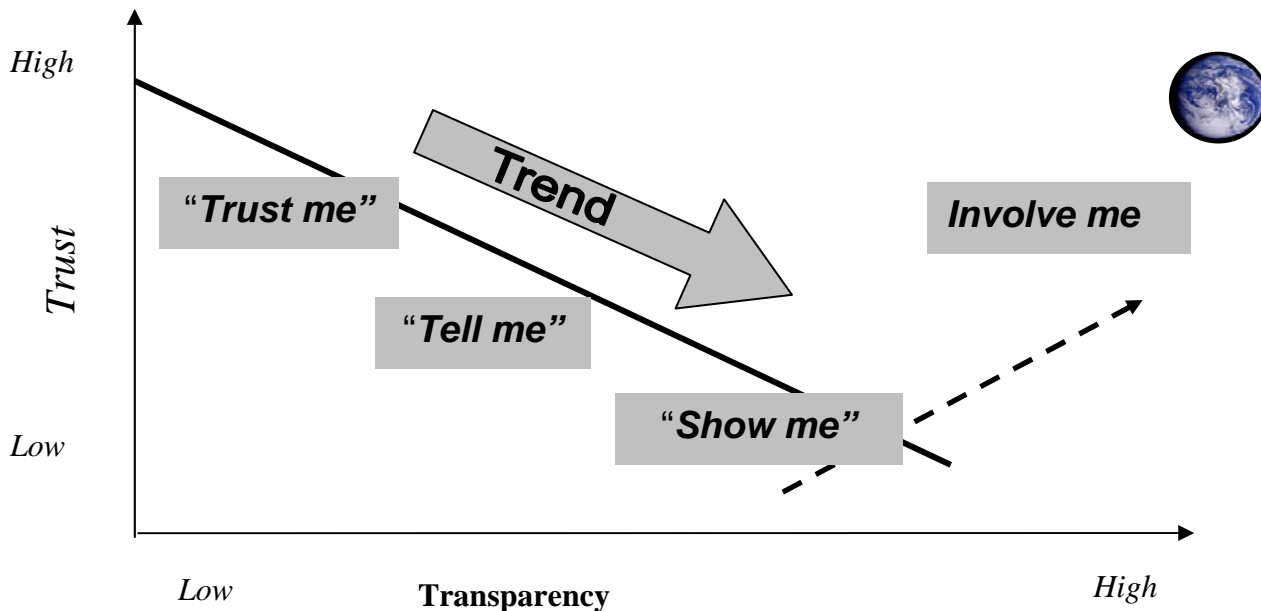
The complexity of globalization, shifts in power relationships, loss of control by many and the increasing advent of a range of significant environmental, cultural, business, community, social and other 'disasters' has reduced trust and increased the call for accountability and transparency in decision making. The result has been a shift from a 'trust me' world to a 'show me world' as Figure 1 shows.

The flow-on from this has been an increasing demand for evaluative mechanisms that demonstrate societal standards are being maintained and improved through the practices of institutions, business and governments. At their best these mechanisms reflect new

business models and new governance models that embed connections with a wide range of stakeholders and come to terms with the complex issue of sustainability.

A range of auditing benchmarks and indicators are now being widely used, however the risk is the extent to which these measures simply cover up performance by responding to reporting requirements. More important than reporting against external requirements however is the extent to which processes of improvement are an intrinsic part of the evaluation process and the extent to which involvement is encouraged across a wide spectrum of stakeholders with the knowledge, experience and skills to add to creative and enterprising outcomes.

Figure 1: The emerging “Show Me” world (adapted from Delfgaauw 2000)



**As trust diminishes, the demand for transparency
in the form of assurances mechanisms increases**

4. Assessment and learning for improvement

This paper considers two practical evaluation approaches to more broadly improve university-regional community engagement outcomes: the more common template-based benchmarking assessment, and processes of collaborative learning. This section discusses where we have come with the former and the following section discusses the second as a suggested better way for achieving sustained improvement in engagement through learning and enterprising human capital regionally.

Previous HEI evaluation studies focusing on community connections do not provide a framework that might form a basis for a future program of improvement in the engagement relationship of the university and the region. This can be seen in the evaluations undertaken under the auspices of the Finnish Higher Education Council, such as at the universities of Oulu (Davies et al 1999), Joensuu (Dahloff et al 1998) and Turku (Goddard et al 2000), and the Association of European Universities

4.1. Benchmarking in higher education

Benchmarking has come to the university sector from business in response to the increasing culture in higher education for management auditing and accountability. Benchmarking was originally put forward as being a tool that would assist the university with its improvement agenda through collaborative learning and the adoption of ‘good practice’ as described by Jackson and Lund (2003).

“Benchmarking is, first and foremost, a learning process structured so to enable those engaging in the process to compare their services/ activities/ products in order to identify their comparative strengths and weaknesses as a basis for self-improvement and/ or self-regulation”. (p.6).

Unfortunately, as the auditing agenda has gained momentum in higher education benchmarking has become anything but a collaborative learning process for improvement. Rather, it has descended into a top-down ‘tick-a-box’ template for simply assessing performance levels for regulators, senior management, and management consultants. A result of this unwillingness to focus on overall improvement has been a culture of suspicion about the intent of such tools, and their implementing agents.

The recent university benchmarking manual by McKinnon et al (2000) has reinforced this view of benchmarking as a template-driven approach to assess, rather than to improve, performance in the university.

In the name of consistency, McKinnon et al reduce a complex and diverse organisation to a template of 65 functional categories, five levels of performance activity, and a ‘one size fits all’ definition of ‘good practice’, all wrapped up in a language that is far from user-friendly. It is no wonder we found in a survey of 27 universities (DEST, forthcoming) that it is not used as an improvement tool and only superficially used for other purposes. The *Manual* appears only to have had some application as a performance assessment tool in such areas of the university as library services (Massaro 1998, Robertson and Tran 1998, Wilson et al 2000) and facilities management (Massaro 1998), where physical objects rather than human resources are an important focus.

While the template approach of McKinnon et al has raised the profile of management tools like benchmarking among managers and regulators in the university sector, its failure as a tool for improvement highlights the need for more appropriate approaches to be developed and used.

An interesting extension of the McKinnon et al (2000) template approach to incorporate collaborative learning in the university has been in the area of technical service management (Urquhart et al 2002 and 2003). In this approach the basic McKinnon et al template is accepted as the starting point and categories for review are determined by in-house staff ‘brainstorming’ as well as input from third party upstream and down stream suppliers and users of services. The review process is fundamentally bottom-up and based on consensus, thereby gaining ‘ownership’ by workgroups. Urquhart et al (2003) argue: “A key outcome... was in the area of team building and improved working relationships...”. (p.3).

The benchmarking process put in place by Urquhart et al (2002) provides more guidance for universities for the implementation of benchmarking through learning and collaboration than does McKinnon et al. However, it still retains the functionally divisive template-based framework approach and therefore divides and segments rather than joins-up relevant functions targeted for improvement. It thus puts limits on the learning and enterprising outcomes that can occur through connections and the coalitions of mutual and reinforcing interests that might be formed throughout the university and with external stakeholder interests.

4.2. Challenges in university-regional community engagement

Establishing effective university engagement is a complex task. The barriers can be significant. The OECD (1999) report identifies 24 major barriers within and without the organization.

Considering an approach to improvement in university-regional community engagement using benchmarking-type methodologies brings challenges particularly on two fronts that need to be taken into account. These are, what we really mean by the term ‘engagement’, and what to do about the incongruity inherent in the intersection of space and organisation.

4.3 The meaning of engagement

Even in organizations like the Campus Compact in the USA and with HEFCE in the UK, the conversation about the meaning of engagement has continued for some time without full clarity. The same may also be said of higher education policy in this country. Different degrees of emphasis such as community service learning, civic engagement and regional development are a feature of its implementation as a ‘third role’ in different countries.

There is a need to be clear about what is meant by an engagement relationship between universities and the development priorities of the communities in which they are located. It is a special kind of connectivity that is much more than the usual restrictive and exclusive relationships that a network or a partnership might connote.

Garlick and Pryor (2002) identified a continuum of these relationships from the *fully engaged*, through to being *partially engaged*, to being *non-engaged* depending on the relative degree to which a university-regional community partnership meets six criteria of mutuality or reciprocity:

- Having a clear and agreed purpose to the relationship;
- Having a demonstrated commitment of resource and leadership;
- Evidence of trust;
- Results-oriented to meet agreed priority areas identified in the community;
- Sustainable over the long run; and
- Enshrined in a written agreement such as an MOU.

Garlick and Pryor found, using these principles of engagement, that only a few Australian universities and their regions showed any evidence of being fully engaged – even then they were only in the early stages of such engagement with few outcome results to demonstrate.

Many other instances of university-regional partnership around initiatives of significance in the community where described as being partially engaged – reflecting more of a project-specific rather than whole-of-organisation and whole-of-region approach. Generally the engagement activities here were incidental and sporadic to mainstream institutional operation (vision, strategy and operational plans, etc) in teaching and research and agreed community priorities and relied on a few well-meaning individuals and interest groups. Relationships between the university and the community limited to satisfying immediate and short-term civic capital concerns (ie. ‘looking good’ in the community) where also plentiful but reflected non-engaged behavior.

The important aspect of connectivity, rather than more restrictive processes like networking and partnerships, is that it is a way of thinking about solutions through coalitions of reinforcing knowledge and skill. It is a process embedded in the core business of the institution, not a structural solution, which can generate creative outcomes from complex relationships.

4.4 Incongruity of space and organisation

The second challenge to improving university–regional community engagement involves the attempt to bring together four otherwise divergent and potentially incongruous forces: the local and the global, and the community and the organisation (Figure 2).

As institutions, universities are complex organisations comprising a loose collection of semi-private, discipline-oriented individuals operating at an international level. Communities, as places, have as their binding agent a belongingness (or ‘sense of place’) that comprises a complex interplay of economic, social, cultural, political, historical, environmental, and spiritual attributes and priorities of local relevance.

It is incongruous as to why institutions of all kinds are prepared to generate non-optimum returns to their investment by not venturing beyond their sectoral framework to take advantage of the cross-sectoral benefits that can come from a closer engagement with community and the geography of place (Garlick 1996). Institutional culture, power relationships, overt and covert institutional rules have all been given as explanations for a lack of connectivity here (Granovetter 1985, Zukin and Dimaggio 1990, Curran and Blackburn 1994, Clegg 1989). Can there be a point of useful arbitrage where:

“...institutional ‘imprinting’ of the regional economy, and the sought after objectives of the upstream power authority, can be balanced by the collective community itself according to its own economic aspirations...or is the community forever held as an economic captive to institutional power arrangements.”(Garlick 1996. p.13)?

Globalisation generates transaction flows that have an uneven impact on regional spatiality. Those with direct access to market-based knowledge benefit, while those yet to realize their attributes in this area are being left behind.

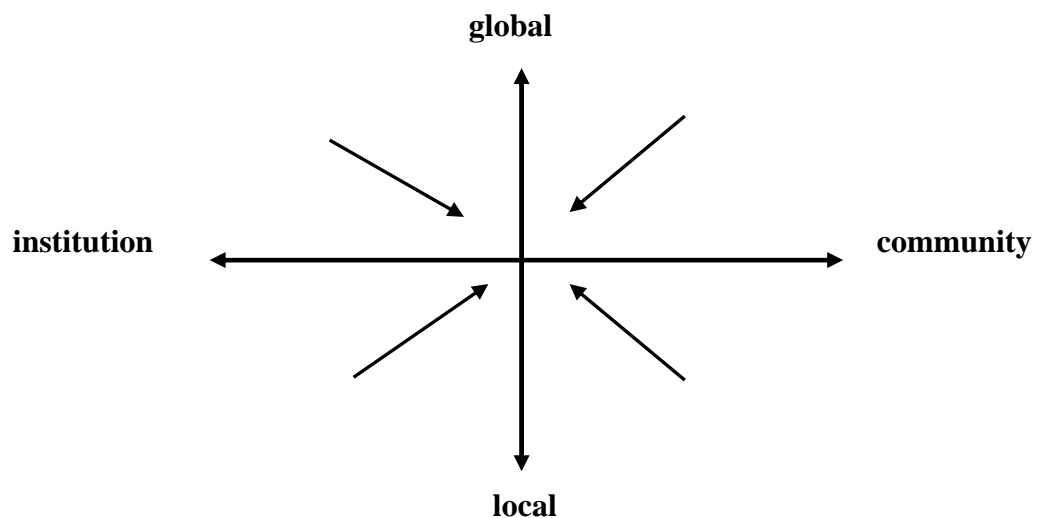
“...there is a growing disjuncture between the globalization of knowledge and the knowledge of globalization”. (Appadurai, 2003. p.4).

On the one hand is the impact of so-called *space-time compression* on places (Harvey 1993). More importantly however, the role of place should be seen not only as a place for nurturing in a chaotic global world of space-time compression (Harvey 1993), but as a

platform for meaningful connectivity to the global, a so-called *progressive place* (Massey 1993). In these circumstances ‘place’ is more appropriately seen as a series of processes, or social interactions, history, conflicts, etc. rather than a geographic thing with boundaries

For those regions unable to comprehend how they can engage with global knowledge there are problems of viability. Knowledge is the bridge between the local and global. This is why the role of the university is important in making knowledge-based connections to assist the regional community with blue-sky possibilities as well as providing insights into solutions for immediate problems.

Figure 2. Incongruity of space and organisation



4.5 Benchmarking university regional development engagement

The McKinnon et al *Manual* on university benchmarking is not particularly helpful in guiding the university in its external relations with its community. Despite saying it was designed to identify “...the most important aspects of contemporary university life in changing times...” (p.1) for benchmarking, the *Manual* lists only two indicators for the community connections a university may have and they are designed from a university rather than from a university-community engagement partnership perspective. Butcher, Howard, McMeniman and Thom (2003), who focussed on benchmarking the service role of the university in the community with particular reference to teacher education programs, also noted this and suggested a new set of four benchmarks be added to the McKinnon framework.

Charles and Benneworth (2001), using the McKinnon et al *Manual* framework, have developed a benchmarking approach for the evaluation of the regional connection of the higher education institution. The tool was developed as part of the “Regional Mission” series of projects for HEFCE in the nine designated English regions (HEFCE 2001).

Whereas McKinnon et al virtually ignored the external relations between the university and its regional community, Charles and Benneworth (2001) identified seven broad categories and 34 sub-categories of regional development outcomes from a university’s partnership performance with its regional community. The categories were regional governance,

human capital development, economic competitiveness, social development, sustainable development, cultural development, and equity issues.

While the Charles and Benneworth approach to benchmarking may simply add more relevance to the existing McKinnon et al tool through the addition of new categories relating to regional development, it goes further on process by suggesting dialogue and consensus-based assessment through workshops and information dissemination. However, as with McKinnon and other benchmarking that uses template-based approaches (including Butcher et al 2002), it does not address learning for improvement that is inclusive of all university, community and other relevant stakeholders working together in a collaborative way (ie connectivity). By relying on the McKinnon et al framework it continues the practice of separating, rather than joining-up, functions where there are creative connections that can be made for achieving improved outcomes.

In the following section a different approach based on learning to improve through collaboration is suggested as a way forward for universities and their regional communities to generate outcomes through engagement strategies. The approach was explored in a recent study of six universities across six different functional areas including engaging with the regional community (DEST forthcoming).

5. Collaborative learning for improvement

5.1. Background

Six universities volunteered to be part of a study to explore benchmarking as a tool for improvement across six functional areas with which they believed they required some assistance. These were:

- Student admission processes (four universities);
- Student complaint processes (four universities);
- Community engagement relationships (three universities);
- Teaching and learning (two universities);
- Research services (one university); and
- Student examination and assessments (one university).

The project in each university lasted a period of around four months, covered four phases of activity, and included a wide range of relevant stakeholders from both within and outside the institution at all levels of responsibility with an interest in improving the function. The four phases were:

- An initial facilitated workshop of stakeholders to share experiences and explore and agree on concepts, definitions, issues, goals, impediments and processes about benchmarking in the university, and to agree the approach and next steps in the study. In all cases the McKinnon et al benchmarking *Manual* was rejected as being unhelpful.
- A period of self-initiated discussion and information collection within each university to explore ways forward in benchmarking for improvement in the organisation, and to identify potential impediments to its effective application. This period lasted four to six weeks and was assisted by a discussion kit framed around the issues raised at the first workshop and wider literature and experiences.

- A second workshop of all stakeholders to consider the findings from the discussion group and agree on the detail for a program of improvement and how to overcome impediments.
- A final workshop comprising representatives across the six participating universities designed to identify sector-wide issues associated with benchmarking for improvement.

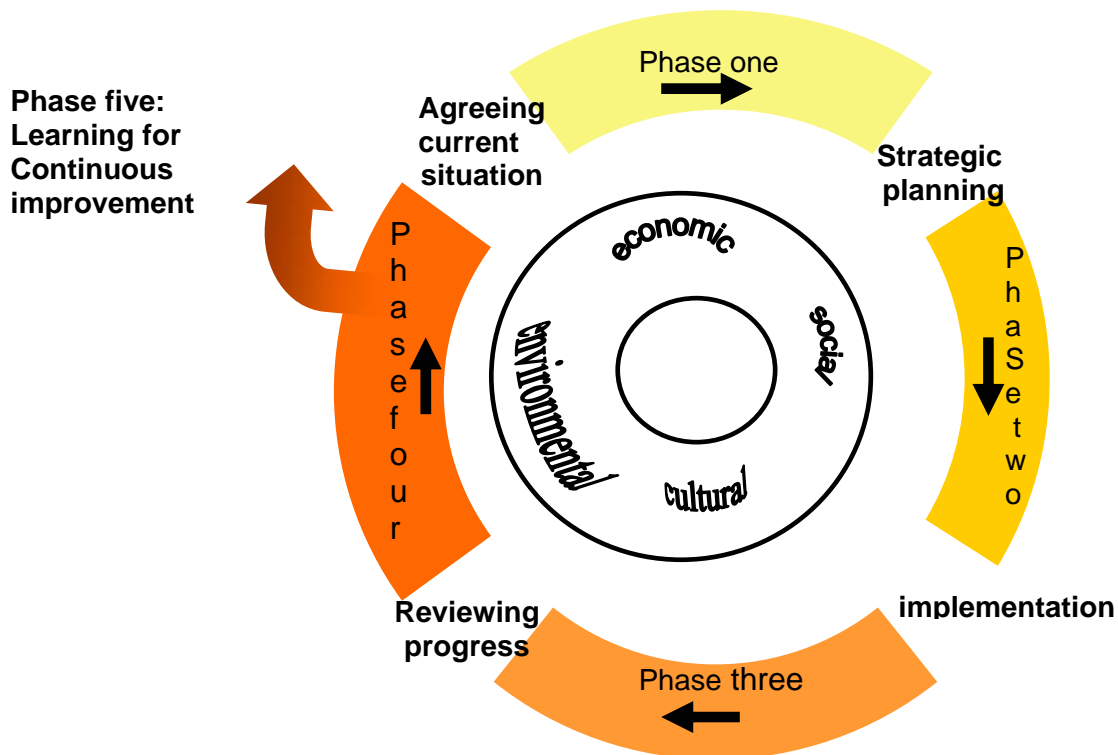
5.2. Principles and phases for an improvement program

The study identified the following principles that could underpin an approach to improving the process of university-region engagement.

- Comprehensive dialogue and collaboration across a broad range of relevant stakeholder interests both within and outside the organisation.
- A process of learning about improvement based on reflection, exchange of information, and sharing understandings and experiences.
- Leadership and resource commitment.
- Continuous improvement over the long run.

Five phases of activity are identified around these principles (refer Fig 3).

Figure: 3. Phases of collaboration and learning for improvement



Phase one: Agreeing the current situation:

In this phase, agreement is reached across all stakeholders through dialogue, about the current internal and external environment as it impacts on the function being targeted for

improvement. As a baseline it will include an assessment of relevant policies, regulations, guidelines, budget considerations, practice, social, economic and cultural impediments and drivers, demand, infrastructure and so on, based on the experience of the stakeholders involved and other relevant data obtained from various sources.

Phase two: Strategic Planning process

Once there is agreement amongst participating stakeholders on the state of the current operating environment as it relates to the function, a strategic plan targeting areas for improvement can be developed and agreed so all participants know the direction they will collectively head. At this point there needs to be agreement among participants about what practice is 'good practice' to aim for. This may result from learning about practice from elsewhere, or it may be an amalgam of the various experiences of the various participants. The plan will include areas of action, responsibilities, indicators of success and an implementation timetable.

Phase three: Implementing action

A commitment of resources and leadership is required to endorse the plan identified in phase two and to support the implementation actions identified to improve current practice. There may be an impact on resources in the form of additional training, time, capital expenditure, etc. This process should include both qualitative and quantitative indicators that can be reviewed on a regular basis

Phase four: Reviewing progress

This phase involves a regular review and reporting of the changed environment to that identified in phase one to see whether there are new determinants that need to be factored into the improvement process and that improvement is actually taking place.

Phase five: Learning for continuous improvement

A key element in the total process is that there is a point where the experiences gained in reviewing and reforming existing practices generate new and better understandings that need to be fed back to ensure continuous improvements occur.

In the following section, the concept of the 'learner' is discussed as a means of overcoming organisation barriers to collaboration for regional engagement. In section six, the concept of 'enterprising action' is discussed to enable meaningful outcomes to flow from the process of collaboration.

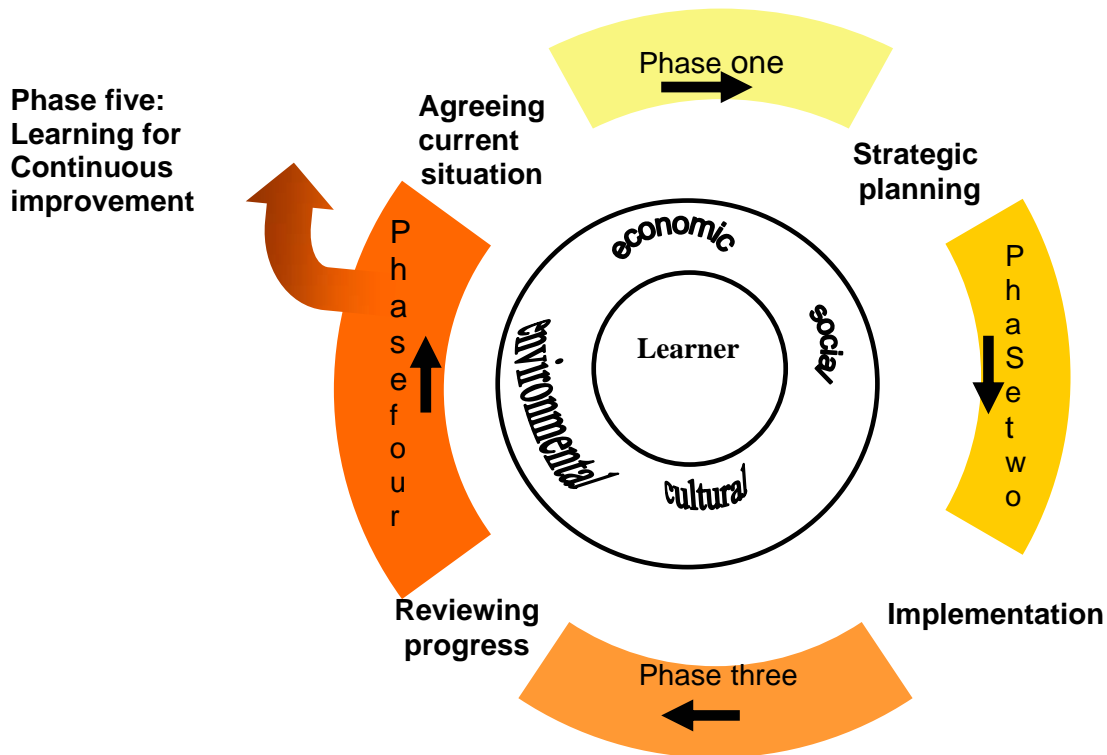
6. The learner as an engagement facilitator

As indicated in section three, university-region engagement throws up potential incongruities between organizations and communities and between the global and the local. Regarding all participants in an engagement process as learners in a learning situation, all bringing a different set of skill and experiences, is a way of minimizing impediments to dialogue and enterprising action that can result from the cultures and norms of different organization involvement.

Understanding and responding to the needs of learners is important in the process of generating creative regional development outcomes that respond to aspirations.

Figure 4 shows how this relates to the process of improvement outlined in section four.

Figure 4. Phases of collaboration and learning for improvement from a learner perspective



7. Enterprising education and regional action

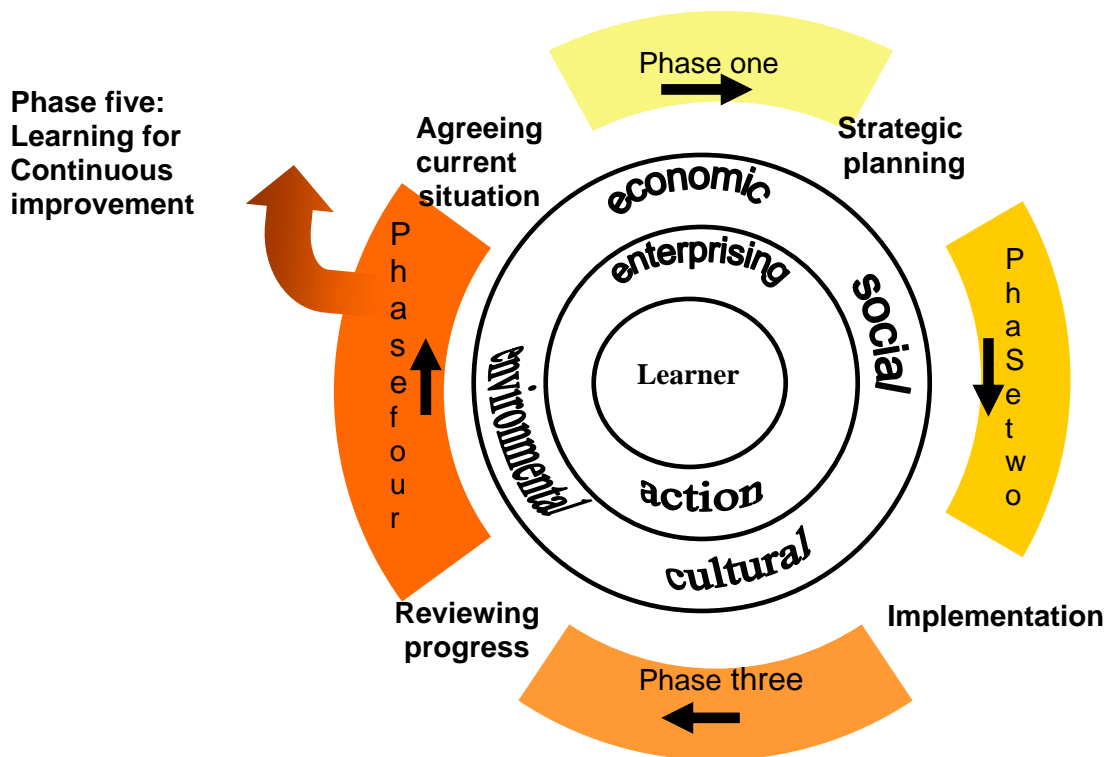
The greatest determining influence on a regional community's viability comes from the creative and enterprising behavior of its endogenous human capital, not from its structures or the behavior of its institutions. (Garlick 2001, 2003, Plummer and Taylor 2003, Taylor 2003). This includes the experience, skills, expertise, knowledge and innovativeness of its people, a preparedness to work together in the community in coalitions for shared objectives (social capital), and an ability to get things done in a way that generates sustainable returns ('enterprising' action). Enterprising regions are those that work together to build connectivity, to unleash local knowledge, to be strategic, and to translate new ideas into outcomes.

Enhancing human capital outcomes, contributing to social capital and developing the skills to translate new ideas into meaningful outcomes ('enterprising') is core business for higher education institutions, as well as for vocational education, and schools. There should therefore be a very close link between the university and the community.

There are few programs in universities however that aim to facilitate the enterprising ability of human capital to enable them to apply their ideas, through teaching and research, in the local region to bring about change. Enterprising capacity will include skills and knowledge in strategic, financial, human resource and business planning, marketing, capital raising, negotiation, event planning and operation, and so on.

Figure 5 shows the way enterprising action can be incorporated into the cycle of improvement.

Figure 5. Phases of collaboration and learning for improvement from a learner and enterprising action perspective.



8. Practical issues of implementation: the case of Swinburne University Lilydale campus

8.1. The local situation

The Act of Parliament that established Swinburne as a university specifically outlined a regional role for the campus at Lilydale. Thus in the seven years that the campus has been operating the concept of serving the region has been in the forefront. During the past year much work has been done to understand the role the university plays regionally and to make some assessment of the impact that it is having on the region. Competition for Government funding is making it clear that engagement with the regional community is imperative for not only success but survival.

Outer urban in nature, the region does face the challenge of losing its knowledge workers. Characteristics include:

- Significant population – homogenous, negligible growth, ageing, pockets of socio-economic disadvantage
- Sustainability a priority for each of the three Councils (Maroondah, Knox and Yarra Ranges)
- Community Houses have always been significant (movement began in the region)
- The region faces issues more in common with regional rural Australia than the city centre
- Small and micro business- residents travel out of the region to work
- Manufacturing and retail still significant – large scale growth in middle level occupations and service industries
- Unemployment rates average 5% but 56% of the unemployed are long term unemployed. Youth participation rates have improved but remain at approximately 69%. There is some evidence to suggest that there are “hidden” unemployment groups.
- Stagnant labour force participation rates
- Jobs East identifies skill shortages in the areas of manufacturing, ICT, building and construction, hospitality, automotive, health and community service industries
- Noticeable growth of single person households
- Retention is an issue for secondary schools. More students apply for than are offered tertiary positions and fewer students take up these tertiary positions.
- There is a 14% increase in regional residents attending university and a 6% increase in those attending TAFE (1996-2001)
- There is a slight increase in residents with Bachelor degree or higher (6.5% of regional residents with Bachelor degree in 2001- lower than Eastern Melbourne, Melbourne and Victoria on average)
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During the year the university sought to engage the community about the challenges facing the region and posed the question about whether there was an opportunity to work together.

8.2 What the Community told us

Business:

Businesses noted that much regional employment did not require tertiary qualifications although accountancy businesses noted that the complexity of modern legislation and the business environment meant that a degree is now a necessity. Both accountancy businesses stressed the value of IBL. Although the value of development and training was acknowledged, credentials were not necessarily seen as important; cultural change needs to occur for the community to embrace education. It was felt that universities needed to be more accessible, that perceived barriers need to be removed and a long-term strategy developed with the aim of developing a sense that the community “owns” the university.

Local Government CEOs:

Local government is concerned about trades, industry leadership, availability of courses desired by local students, mature aged students, changes in the workforce, business training the 45 plus “at risk” group, the economy of the region and upskilling of the workforce. It was noted that it was difficult to quantify the value of lifelong learning and the need for ongoing personal development. The concept of collaboration between the three Councils and the idea of the university providing educational opportunities to staff was discussed in addition to the university facilitating regional collaboration around strategic projects. Leadership and strategic direction in terms of regional development was seen as desirable.

Community Houses:

Community houses are providing education for young people disaffected by school – some are entering into VCAL and collaboration with schools. The number of home-schooled students in the region was noted. Although the traditional community house preserve of mature aged education and re-entry into study is still dominant, it was noted that young people and employed people upskilling are significant participants. The issue of cost of education was discussed and it was felt that cost was a significant disincentive to regional participation in higher education.

Principals:

Issues of student engagement and aspirations are as much a concern to secondary school staff as university staff and thus the idea of closer collaboration was very appealing to principals. Seven local schools are collaborating in a leading schools initiative and would welcome Swinburne as a partner. Opportunities for this collaboration include a research component to the new initiative; cross-fertilisation with university subjects taught at night in schools; involving business to clarify skills needed; promotion of extension studies; hosting VCE teachers’/first year lecturers’ dinner; teacher professional development program; linking VCAL to a foundation year; and career teacher education.

The township:

Sociology and Statistical Research Methods undergraduate students interviewed local township businesses. Full analysis of results is still to be completed but the township interviews indicate that there is a low level of awareness of the university and university activity and low levels of expectation.

The students:

Sociology students also interviewed students at the Lilydale Campus. Most students interviewed were full time and aged between 17 and 26 years, traveled to the campus by car, taking between 15 and 43 minutes to reach Lilydale. For most of the students interviewed, financial support came from part-time work. Although 18% of students interviewed did not work, the majority reported that they worked between 10 and 20 hours per week with two full time students reporting that they worked over 30 hours a week. All students interviewed have a computer at home with only one not connected to the internet. Over 60% of students were the first generation in their family to study at university. The interviews explored with students the impact of work on their studies, perceived levels of pressure and levels of involvement with university life.

In 2002, 42.5% (1018) students lived in Shire of Yarra Ranges and the Cities of Knox and Maroondah – 40.7% (953) in 2003 (figures represent total headcount). The issue of student aspiration is significant – many regional secondary school students do not aspire to further education. Wider regional research has also demonstrated that the issue of student engagement in education at all levels presents challenges.

An examination of regional VTAC preferences showed that 35% of eligible 2002 school VCE graduates were enrolled in higher education in 2003. Those who entered employment after VCE tended to be engaged in low-level and often part-time work.

Swinburne does enroll the most regional university participants and offers courses that meet demand (In order of preference: Business (1), Social and Behavioural Science(5), Computing (6), and Multimedia (7) and Media(8) but not Education (2) Nursing(3) and Arts (4)) The relationship of student demand to regional need and the role of these courses in developing a sustainable regional community are yet to be fully explored.

Existing Engagement Initiatives:

Regional engagement initiatives have characterized campus activity since establishment. The partnership with the Shire of Yarra Ranges has been a focal point since 1999 both with the Town and Gown lecture series and with a number of regional projects and associations. Marketing strategies have been largely targeted to the region with the current marketing plan identifying priority schools and specific discipline based strategies in the areas of sociology and technology. The Centre for Regional Development has undertaken a range of regionally significant projects over recent years. However, many of these activities could be seen as peripheral to the development of engagement activities in the mainstream curriculum. Within mainstream curriculum a number of existing or potential initiatives include:

- Potential project to link Psychology and/or Sociology students with a Year 9 "survivor program" at a local Secondary College. Feedback from secondary school principals is that Year Nine is the risk year.
- Potential for Tourism students (Marketing, Enterprise Management) to be involved in a Swinburne team managing Gulf Station
- Social Science- Regional Engagement research projects (community expectations and student engagement). Three-year projects commenced 2003.
- 2004 Writers Festival linked to Masters in Writing, the Shire, the regional libraries and Woorilla writers' group
- Further development of the Industry Based Learning Program and Work Integrated Learning Project subject
- Development of a Community Service Project Subject

8.3 Lesson learnt

Developing meaningful regional relationships and embedding engagement activities into the core business of the university is a challenging task. The fact that regional engagement is a key goal in the strategic plan provides a focus and ensures that there is a level of accountability although the potential for the “tick box” approach is always a risk. The quality of objectives and the measures of these objectives is key to good integration of the plan with the reality.

It is clear that relationship building takes time. Although regional development pundits may be critical of fragmented, project-focused approaches, it is easier to establish the relationship in incremental steps and prove value in smaller and less risky endeavours. However this must be done with a connected, holistic endpoint in view. Once the value of the relationship is proven, regional participants are more likely to come to the table to address the big picture regional issues and it is possible to establish the process necessary to develop true engagement. The round table discussions held at Swinburne were a successful exercise but it should be noted that participants came either because they already had a relationship with the university or, in the case of those who had not been associated with the university before, because the regional issues identified in the letter of invitation resonated.

Apart from work related subjects or placements and some research activity which have traditionally involved partnerships outside the university, embedding engagement in the core business of the university is challenging. Academics are not rewarded or recognized for their efforts in this area and building, maintaining and managing relationships takes time. To balance these structural constraints, most university staff are committed citizens themselves so the merit of engagement is readily apparent. Helping staff to understand regional needs, mapping participation and making some assessment of the regional contribution of the institution helps to build the case for making the connections. Supporting staff with establishing and maintaining the relationships is essential. Once this is done, the Swinburne experience shows that the biggest incentive is in the teaching and learning outcomes. Real projects and applied learning brings a richer and more rewarding student experience. It is also believed, but not substantiated by research as yet, that better academic results are an outcome.

It is seven years since the campus was established, the partnership with the Shire celebrates its fifth anniversary this year and other relationships have years of experience. It is only now that crucial issues of regional sustainability are beginning to be addressed in any depth. It is only now that members of the community and community organizations approach the university with ideas about collaboration. It is only now that the university can begin to address a deeper understanding of the dynamic of engagement and begin to articulate objectives and measures in a meaningful way.

9. Conclusion

Developing an evaluation process for building more purposeful connections between universities and the communities in which they do business is more important than ticking off boxes on a template-based report card. It may give an assessment record of sorts, but it does nothing to build in a continuous process of commitment to improvement.

A five phase approach to improvement that embraces collaboration, reflection, leadership commitment and ongoing review has been suggested as a way forward. Important in ensuring success in this area, given the incongruities of institution and community interaction and global and local relationships, is seeing participants as learners and the engagement process as fostering enterprising and creative solutions to local priorities. Underlying a learning-based approach to improvement in university-regional engagement situations through creativity and enterprising outcomes is the idea of connectivity.

Unfortunately, current template based approaches to evaluation do not enable the joining up of knowledge sources across a broad spectrum and therefore provide a limitation to fostering improvement in engagement arrangements.

It is recognized that in relation to implementation, resources are limited and existing structures and beliefs can be a barrier to effectively undertaking the process. However, the results of the work we have carried out with the six universities, as the case study of Swinburne Lilydale suggests, it is possible to make progress incrementally. However leadership and wholehearted commitment from at least some of the participants is required.

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