

Meeting the challenge of making community and industry engagement core business.

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Abstract

Universities have a long tradition of engaging with industry in order to develop both research opportunities and enriched learning experiences for students. Increasingly both universities and government understand the importance of engagement with the wider community. Although richly rewarding, the establishment of partnerships with industry and the community that enable mutually beneficial engagement takes time and effort. This paper shares the journey of an outer urban campus in coming to terms with what effective engagement means and developing strategies to make this engagement core business for academics and administrators alike.

Introduction

Swinburne University of Technology, Lilydale was established in 1992 specifically charged, by Act of the Victorian Parliament with providing higher education to the three municipalities of Outer Eastern Melbourne. So in one sense engagement with the community of the region has been central to the Division from the beginning. As was hoped by those in the community who had lobbied hard to have the university located in Lilydale, the majority of those first enrolled came from the region.

Relationships with key regional stakeholders were established and the first adjunct professors were local industry leaders – Peter Fergusson as Chair of both the Yarra valley Winegrowers Association and Yarra Valley, Dandenongs and the Ranges Tourism Board was able to contribute to the Advisory board of the Tourism and Enterprise Management degree, for example. Faculty members participated in local associations like the Chamber of Commerce and were very active in working with local secondary schools. Industry Based Learning (IBL) was offered to all undergraduate students and a project based subject, Work Integrated Learning (WIL) was developed where students could apply their learning working in teams on real community or business projects.

Formally signed in 1999, the Growth and Development Partnership with the Shire of Yarra Ranges has encouraged a range of joint projects, the Town and Gown lecture series and a tailored graduate certificate course for Shire staff. Led by the Shire CEO and the Deputy Vice Chancellor, the partnership has fostered collaboration and joint venture exemplified by the Reconciliation Week program, as one example.

The university has strong relationships with regional organisations like the Yarra Valley Dandenongs and the Ranges Tourism Board, and Yarra Valley Winegrowers Association, The Yarra Valley Regional Food Group and has taken a strong role with the Centre for Agribusiness, Yarra Valley, the Regional Agribusiness Forum. A number of major projects have been undertaken on behalf of these organisations – a regional agribusiness audit, the establishment of a regional tourism portal and industry training and a regional branding project, for example.

At first blush, the Division could be seen to be engaging well with the community. However, as the first decade of operation passed, enrolments grew to over 2000 and the Division expanded to offer post graduate courses, the proportion of local students diminished to just over 40% of total enrolments although it should be noted that the actual number has fallen only marginally. With growth and the strong Divisional emphasis on multimedia and innovation in teaching, faculty members had less time to engage with schools or take on projects. Much of the significant engagement work undertaken by the Division was peripheral to the mainstream or the core business of learning and teaching.

The downward trend of local enrolments and an increasing national focus on university community engagement caused the Division to propose a regional engagement strategic initiative which was funded by the Vice Chancellor in 2003.

As part of that initiative, much work has been done in the Division over the past year to understand the role the university plays regionally and to make some assessment of the impact that it is having on the region.

In order to achieve this understanding, some underpinning research was undertaken. This research examined the demographics of the region, industry and employment trends and skill shortages identified by industry. It looked at the wider context of global drivers of change, the future of work and models of university community engagement in Australia and internationally as described briefly in the introduction to this paper. Most importantly it looked at students both the current cohort enrolled at Lilydale and regional VCE graduates and secondary school students.

Within the Division a regional engagement team met regularly to both consider the research findings and to examine the ways that the Division currently engages with the community. This team included the Divisional Manager, the Marketing Manager and the Schools Liaison Officer, the Industry Liaison staff, the Resources Manager, the Alumni Manager, the Education Officer of the Student Union, the Indigenous Unit Manager, and a project manager from the Centre for Regional Development who also works in the office of the Deputy Vice Chancellor. The project was led by the Director of the Centre for Regional Development who was the only academic on the team.

Although all members of the team engaged with the community in various ways and there was a collective sense that the Division was doing well, it became clear that there was not a shared understanding of the terminology around regional or community engagement or what engagement at a high level would mean in practice.

A Context

Since 1906 in the United States of America and arguably earlier in Europe, institutions of learning have been implementing cooperative education or work-based learning schemes in an effort to prepare students for the world of employment (Sovilla, 1998).

The implementation of work placements as a component of higher education programs has become incredibly widespread and for many years Work Based Learning (WBL) programs have been an accepted part of a large number of undergraduate programs in Australia and beyond. Martin (1998) noted that work placements are a component of approximately 60% of Australian bachelor-level programs.

The benefits of engaging with industry in order to provide work related student experience is thus well known. There have been a large number of studies that have shown the positive impact of cooperative education programs on the academic and employability outcomes of student participants. (Martin, 1996)

Employability has become a clear focus of government and education alike. Whilst the Commonwealth has investigated and identified skills required for business and industry in the future (DEST 2002), many universities have articulated desirable graduate attributes with the same end in view.

In the twenty-first century universities are operating in a dynamic environment where globalisation, innovation and sustainability are three drivers of change in contemporary society with which graduates will engage. Literature that focuses on the future of work describes the impact of technology, a trend towards lifelong learning and workplaces that focus on their staff as a source of competitive advantage. The impact of an increasingly deregulated market place, skill shortages as the population ages, the identification of a new creative class – innovative “gold collar” workers is explored. The literature also describes the tension between the need for greater productivity and the resultant downward pressure on costs; a business environment that leaves little space for critical reflection and creative dialogue which is central to sustained organisational development and innovation. (Jenkins and Garvey, 2001).

Whilst the scenarios of the futurists emphasise the need for future workers who are adaptable, attuned to lifelong learning, and innovative, university students are also more time poor, less engaged with their study and more vocationally focused (McInnis 2001)

Regional/Community Engagement

The importance of links with industry can be well explained in the context of preparing students for employment. However, the wider impact of universities upon regions and communities has become increasingly apparent over the last decade. This impact goes beyond development of human capital evidenced in graduates and beyond the economic impact described in The Centre for International Economics (1997) for the then Commonwealth review of Higher Education (West Review) which looked at multiplier effects of university spending, the value of research and development and community service obligations. Further studies by The Institute for Research into International Competitiveness (IRIC) have developed the model in quantifying the significant economic impact of Curtin University (1999) and Edith Cowan University (2000) but fail to fully address the contribution these universities make to regional development.

The recognition of the importance of university community engagement has been driven by an acknowledgement of the role that universities can play in the development of civil society and also by a response to the pressures on communities arising from knowledge based global economy.

For universities, "The agenda has moved on from a desire to simply increase the general education of the population and the output of scientific research; there is now a greater concern to harness university education and research to specific economic and social objectives" (OECD 1999, p9). A new responsive model for higher education is required and central to the development of this new model is the development of partnerships.

The discussion paper "Higher Education at the Crossroads", a review of Higher Education in Australia (2002; pp. 23-24) refers to "*the new compact of mutual obligation involving active partnerships between institutions, their staff, students, government and employers*" (and by implication the wider community).

Once universities might have been involved in outreach which features university extension - experts applying their knowledge to problems they observe or questions they hear from the public. The institution's role in the past has been to use research and educational techniques to identify solutions and then impart that new information to the public. However, the new responsive model requires real and ongoing engagement with a strong emphasis on co-operative development and mutual benefit.

This model acknowledges that the learning institution is doing more than prepare students for employment; it is also preparing them to be fully functioning members of the community. The model could be seen to challenge the traditional view of excellence in universities (research funding, doctoral degree programs, entry scores, scientific discoveries, for example). The new model has an intentional balance between teaching, research and engagement activities. Importance is given to undergraduate learning and there is an emphasis on performance and accountability. Outcomes are articulated for teaching and research that are responsive to emerging issues.

"The engaged institution is committed to direct interaction with external constituencies and communities through the mutually beneficial exchange, exploration and application of knowledge expertise and information. These interactions enrich and expand the learning and discovery functions of the academic institution while also enhancing community capacity. The work of the engaged institution is responsive to community-identified needs, opportunities and goals in ways that are appropriate to the university's mission and academic strengths. The interaction also builds greater public understanding of the role of the university as a knowledge asset and resource." (Holland, 2001; p.7)

The imperative for universities to engage with their communities is further emphasised by government. In the United Kingdom, significant funding is attached to engagement outcomes. In a report prepared for the Higher Education Funding Council for England, David Charles and Paul Benneworth (2002) take a benchmarking approach to evaluating regional engagement. They identify a framework for assessing regional needs and the contribution of the Higher Education Institution through seven main groups of processes that underpin regional competitiveness:

- Enhancing regional framework conditions (infrastructure regulatory frameworks and quality of environment)

- Human capital development processes (noting that the education of people from outside the region who then leave it does not add to the stock of human capital in the region)
- Business development processes
- Interactive learning and social capital development processes (encouraging co-operation collaboration and partnerships)
- Redistributive processes (ensuring the benefits of enhanced competitiveness are widely shared)
- Cultural development
- Promoting sustainability

In 2003 “Backing Australia’s Future”, a similar trend can be detected with \$35 million committed to the regional development role of universities.

Yet the preparedness of Australian universities to embrace engagement in a planned and systematic way can be challenged. When Garlick and Pryor (2003a) assessed levels of regional engagement, they highlighted the importance of university-regional engagement in terms of developing creative regions where “innovative people come together and pool their ideas to generate non-linear solutions to issues that contribute to their local communities becoming better places” (Garlick and Pryor, 2003a; p.4). Whilst Garlick and Pryor were hard pressed to identify universities that they would assess as fully engaged, they did find a number of good practice initiatives often where graduates provide a bridge between the university and regional business. For example, some universities have sought to retain greater numbers of local university graduates in their local regions by offering job designed degree programs with local employers, graduate entrepreneurship programs designed to foster new business start ups, work experience programs and mentoring initiatives. These initiatives and a range of other good practice are described in two recent reports one on creative regional development through knowledge-based engagement and the other providing a compendium of good practice in regional engagement activities (Garlick and Pryor 2003b).

It is through this work that criteria for an engaged university are identified.

- engagement is reflected in the institution’s mission ;
- the community is involved in the campus in “continuous, purposeful and authentic ways ”;
- the curriculum contains a variety of ways for students to engage in the community;
- the institution has a policy environment that supports engagement;
- individuals throughout the university play leadership roles in engagement;
- the campus approach to scholarship includes interdisciplinary work ;
- the engagement work is publicised and celebrated; and
- engagement activities are “held to a high standard of excellence and are rigorously evaluated (Garlick 2002)

The Scholarship of Engagement

Ernest Boyer (1990) proposed four necessary and interrelated forms of scholarship - the scholarships of discovery, integration, application and teaching. Together they have become known as the scholarship of engagement (Boyer 1996). For many this work underpins all work related learning and includes a sound basis in the literature, application and reflection. It has inspired over a decade of service learning internationally where community service as a scholarly activity is promoted by the

university as a means of teaching social responsibility and a means of shaping future citizens.

The concept of the scholarship of engagement is an important one in the context of making community engagement core business.

The process

The project involved seven stages:

1. Establishment of the cross-departmental team the project team to lead the project and examine levels of current engagement. The team audited current engagement and undertook a futures scenario exercise as a context for the development of the regional engagement strategic plan.
2. Research into the engagement context – initially demographics trends and influences, into university regional/community engagement practice in Australia and internationally as described earlier. Then regional higher education enrolment trends, patterns of student engagement with education regionally were examined. The On Track Data (Polesel, Teese et al 2003) proved very useful here.
3. Round table discussion with key regional stakeholders, interviews with local township business people and interviews with university students which explored perceptions of the University
4. Alignment with other University and Divisional plans
5. Divisional presentation and workshop
6. Articulation of goals strategies and priorities
7. Final approval process with the Division (to be undertaken at the end of May).

Initial Scanning and Research

The initial sharing of information by the project team produced some immediate benefits, to some extent “low hanging fruit”. This involved development of some protocols and systems for event management that ensured that community engagement opportunities were well managed and exploited synergies between areas of responsibility. It resulted also in the development of a centralized database and examination of communication strategies. Most importantly it identified opportunities for collaboration and “working smarter”

The initial research also helped focus on the key characteristics of the region. Some highlights are briefly summarized below to indicate the kinds of challenge faced regionally.

- There is a significant population; one that is homogenous, demonstrates negligible growth, is ageing, and features pockets of socio-economic disadvantage.
- Sustainability is a priority for each of the three Councils (Maroondah, Knox and Yarra Ranges).
- Community Houses are and have always been significant (the movement began in the region).
- The region faces issues more in common with regional rural Australia than the city centre.

- There are few very large employers. The region can be seen to be characterised by small and micro business. Residents travel out of the region to work.
- Manufacturing and retail are still significant sectors in terms of employment and there is 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.
- Labour force participation rates are stagnant.
- Jobs East, the regional Area Consultative Council, 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.

Student Participation

Whilst there has been a slight increase in residents with Bachelor degree or higher (6.5% of regional residents with Bachelor degree in 2001), this proportion is lower than Eastern Melbourne, Melbourne and Victoria on average.

In addition to the increase in the number of residents with completed higher education qualifications, between the census periods 1996 and 2001, there has been a 14% increase in regional residents attending university and a 6% increase in those attending TAFE.

Retention is an issue for secondary schools. More students apply for than are offered tertiary positions and fewer students take up these tertiary positions. Many regional jobs do not require tertiary education. The On Track Data demonstrates that a significant proportion of secondary school graduates leave school for employment but the type of work with which these students engage is a concern. The Outer Eastern Learning and Employment Network (OELLEN) notes that whilst 49% of VCE graduates are reported as being “employed”, that it is likely that the employment is a continuation of the part time jobs that many students have whilst they are undertaking their VCE.

Examination of the regional VTAC first preferences for 2002 (6339 applications) demonstrated that Swinburne University had 1355 regional first preferences (21%) followed by Deakin with 1181, RMIT with 951 and Monash with 890.

A significant proportion of those applying through VTAC are mature aged.

Thirty-five percent of eligible 2002 school VCE graduates are enrolled in higher education.

6339 regional students enrolled in university courses through VTAC in 2003. Broadly categorized courses preferred by regional students applying in 2002 for 2003 study were in order of preference: Business (956); Education (560); Arts (409); Nursing (390); Social and Behavioural Science (380); Medicine and related fields (366); Computing /Info Tech (344); Media and Multimedia (286); and Engineering (204).

Broad enrolment trends for the Division demonstrate an increasing overall demand, an increasing demand for Business Courses and Social Science Courses and a declining demand for eCommerce Courses

Ethics approval was obtained for Sociology Research Methods students to undertake some qualitative research into current student engagement. Sixty-six students were interviewed during second semester 2003. Most students interviewed were full time and aged between 17 and 26 years, travelled 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. Identified areas of student satisfaction include the disciplines and choice available in their courses, the environment and people, access to teachers, flexible hours, online facilities, their ability to control their own learning and IBL. Areas of dissatisfaction included the lack of student and recreation facilities, parking, not enough computers, inadequate library facilities, timetabling, exams, workload, no cultural life for students and public transport

The interviews explored with students the impact of work on their studies, perceived levels of pressure and levels of involvement with university life. The responses confirmed the work of McInnis (2001) in terms of the lower priority given to studies in relation to work and social life. It also demonstrated a lack of engagement in broader university life and campus activity.

The project has been incorporated into coursework for the next three years with the aim of enriching the data and confirming trends.

Community Feedback

Roundtable Discussions were held with business representatives, school principals, local government CEOs and community house representatives.

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. Businesses noted a need for development and training but not necessarily a degree. It was felt that there were opportunities for collaboration and partnership but that cultural change needed to occur for the community to embrace education. It was felt that universities needed to be more accessible and that perceived barriers needed to be removed. Suggested strategies included: student competitions, short courses tailored to mature aged students, more research articles and information in local papers and a long term communication strategy with the aim of developing a sense that the community "owns" the university.

Local government expressed concern 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 was very attractive to Local Government and the idea of the university providing educational opportunities open to staff from the three Councils was discussed in addition to the university facilitating regional collaboration around strategic projects.

There was some discussion around “Melbourne’s second Economy” – the eleven Councils connecting the basin to the bay – along the new freeway. The concept of leadership and strategic direction in terms of regional development was seen as desirable.

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 (Mountain District Women’s Co-op has 25-33% young people undertaking VCE) 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. Ideas explored included: extension studies; non-standard VCE and alternative pathways; RPL; community capacity building and the need to consider education as distinct from vocational training.

School principals noted that the discussions the Division is having about student engagement and participation rates are the same discussions being held in secondary schools. Year 9 appears to be the critical year for schools. The idea of closer collaboration was very appealing to principals. Seven local schools are collaborating in a leading schools initiative (an innovative approach to student engagement which includes an off site campus) and have welcomed Swinburne as a partner. Ideas discussed included: developing pathways and engaging parent bodies; adding a research component to the leading schools 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 (4-10 week program suggested in the Minister’s Blueprint for Education); linking VCAL to a foundation year and career teacher education.

A cohort of second year Sociology and Statistics Research Methods students undertook research into community perceptions of the university. Fourteen in depth interviews with Lilydale township business proprietors were conducted and analysed by the students. As` with the student engagement research, all transcripts and reflections have been given to the Centre for Regional Development for further analysis. This project will also continue for three years, broadening its scope to reach other members of the regional community.

Most interviewees lived locally or in the region (one from Caulfield) and over half had been working in local business for 10 years or more. Although one retail businessperson recognized the importance of the university to the retail businesses of Lilydale, in general there was limited awareness of staff and students as customers, a low level of awareness of the university and university activity and low levels of expectation. It should be noted that with the exception of a pharmacist, none of the business people interviewed had a tertiary education.

Although there was a lack of awareness of existing engagement including the Town and Gown lecture series, there was an expectation that universities would research and contribute to the community (especially in relation to student voluntary work and projects). Interviewees identified a need for formal communication, an identifiable

presence in the town, student community service, links with clubs and an increase in the number of international students.

Regional Engagement and the Academic Program

It has become apparent that regional community engagement must be embedded in the mainstream course offering of the university. In this way the student experience can be enriched, the principles of applied learning can be used and the scholarship of engagement fostered whilst real projects of benefit to the community can be undertaken.

There are however, significant barriers to overcome if this course of action is to be pursued. The issue of academic workload has been mentioned earlier. The use of real project work in courses must allow for ethics approval processes, student supervision (a trend away from the massification of education), some sort of quality assurance process, academic year time constraints and management of community expectations. There are resource implications.

Despite these barriers, the significant benefits to student learning are recognised by academics. Links to the articulated graduate attributes are apparent. Pilot activities in the Sociology subjects have demonstrated the quality of student outcomes both in the results of the research and in the students' perception of their learning.

Other pilot activities include the development of a regional writers festival in conjunction with the local writers cooperative, Woorilla, the Shire of Yarra Ranges, Eastern Regional Libraries, The Yarra Valley Winegrowers Association, the Yarra Valley Regional Food Group, the regional brand and the Swinburne Masters in Writing program and participation in a regional problem gambling project. It is fair to say that the work has also strongly influenced a regional research project on indicators of community sustainability run by the Centre for Regional Development with staff from the three regional municipalities. A sister subject to Work Integrated Learning, one that focuses on community service, will be developed during 2004.

The goodwill of staff was demonstrated at the Divisional Conference held in early February this year. Staff endorsed the draft regional engagement goals and contributed to both the development of and prioritizing of regional engagement strategies. Benefits our students and the community and enriches the learning environment.

Regional Engagement Draft Goals

The following draft regional engagement goals provide the framework for regional engagement strategy at Swinburne Lilydale:

- To develop a university wide understanding of the imperative to engage regionally;
- To increase regional community understanding of, connection to and ownership of the University;
- To increase regional participation without lowering entrance standards;
- To partner with regional schools, businesses and community organisations to provide benefit to the community and meaningful learning experiences for our students; and

- To contribute to regional leadership and the development of regional strategic direction

Conclusion

The initiative has provided the Division with the opportunity to reflect on existing engagement, to analyse student and regional need, to have focused conversations with the community in a variety of ways and to reach an understanding of potential new directions, partnerships and collaboration. Despite clear understanding of barriers and impediments, there is a commitment to sharing the journey of embedding engagement in Divisional core business.

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