

Partnerships for Social Inclusion

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University-Community partnerships: Inclusion and Transformation

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Abstract

Victoria University (VU) is located in Melbourne's West, a culturally rich and diverse, but economically and educationally disadvantaged urban region. VU is the largest education and training provider in the area and the largest single employer in the Western Region. It is strongly identified with its geographic location and its institutional mission includes bringing accessible educational opportunities to the people of the region. Community engagement and partnerships are high on the university's agenda.

Participation in vocational and higher education is a key enabler for social inclusion, building individuals' capacities for future social and economic participation. However, education offers more than this, with its potential for personal and social transformation. It holds the possibility of challenging the potentially conservative aspects of social inclusion. As people's lives and outlooks are transformed by education, they may then in turn transform education and influence how institutions such as schools and universities understand themselves and their work. This kind of interplay of mutual influence and contribution can be seen as a kind of regional partnership, supported and underpinned by a complex network of numerous more specific university-community partnerships played out at a local level.

This paper employs relevant models and frameworks to reflect on how a large multi-faceted university located on multiple sites and including diverse disciplines can engage in partnerships with and within its geographic region. It discusses why a dual sector institution such as Victoria University would locate its mission so strongly in the sphere of geographically specific engagement. It examines emerging findings, based on practice and research conducted within VU, concerning partnership activity and social inclusion outcomes. Finally it examines the extent to which the University's

partnership with its region might be regarded as transformative and sustainable over the long term.

Introduction

Since the release of the Howard Government's Crossroads documents in 2002 with its mandating of diversity, specialisation and regional engagement in higher education, Australian universities have accommodated engagement discourse in their mission plans and institutional statements of intent (Nelson, 2002). Australian universities' commitment to the engagement agenda is reflected in the establishment of the Australian Universities Interest Group (later to become the Australian Universities Community Engagement Alliance) in September 2002 as a loose alliance of committed university representatives interested in the value and scholarship of community engagement (Temple, Story and Delaforce 2005). As in the United States and Europe engagement is emerging as a significant aspect of university work and identity in the new millennium in Australia.

In Australia the trajectory of ideas and activities around engagement has not been straightforward. Early questions about the place and role of community engagement for Australian universities – along with underpinning questions about diversification of the sector – remain contentious, finding most recent expression and airing in the current Bradley review (DEST 2008a). At the same time the emerging discourse of social inclusion offers significant opportunities for universities to revisit community engagement agendas in ways which may usefully promote knowledge generation and social transformation.

In this paper we draw together ideas about social inclusion, partnerships, and Universities' community engagement agenda to explore how universities can contribute in complex and sophisticated ways to the social inclusion agenda. We draw on research findings in relation to some community engagement activities undertaken through university-school-community partnerships through the School of Education at Victoria University.

Social exclusion / inclusion

The concept of social exclusion acknowledges the multi-dimensional nature of poverty, and the dynamics of disadvantage (McClelland & Smyth, 2006). The current Rudd Labor government signalled its commitment to notions of social inclusion as fundamental to its social policies and regard social inclusion as 'an objective and

organizing principle of the nation's social – and therefore economic – policy (with) far reaching implications for the sort of nation we become.' (Gillard, 2007).

Ideas about social inclusion and capacity building provide a way of understanding how to make life better for disadvantaged people and communities. Part of the mission of a University such as VU is to work to ensure that people experiencing various disadvantages in life have the ability to participate in educational opportunities. This may be played out in conventional strategies such as access scholarships to enable disadvantaged individuals to meet the costs of education. However, it may also take the form of community engagement projects that promote a community sense of belonging and ownership of the university and its opportunities.

The risk with a social inclusion framework in education is that those who have benefitted most markedly from past educational environments, the people who have demonstrably been able to take up educational and other opportunities, may well judge the system that served them well to be a good system. They may serve as culture-protectors and as gatekeepers (Bourdieu, 1996). As Edwards et al (2001) put it, this perspective 'supports integrationist approaches, which raises the questions of integration into what and who is being integrated by whom ...' In many ways people who study and work in universities are the culture-protectors. As culture-protectors we risk assuming that what has been good for us will be good for those who are marginalised, if they could just gain access. However, we must acknowledge the dynamics of exclusion – the ways that systems develop characteristics that suit the people who are 'in' and serve to marginalise those who are 'not in'. In other words, we can assume that the status quo is OK. One critique of the idea of social inclusion is that it aims to draw people into participation in what already exists, rather than changing current arrangements to better reflect the needs of diverse learners and communities.

Social inclusion can of course be much more than this. Harnessing the transformational potential of education would include the possibility of two-way change – the idea that as marginalised people participate in education they will change the system as well changing themselves.

Universities and community engagement

The democratisation of higher education in past decades has brought more than expanding student intakes and increased focus on connecting courses to future workplaces. Higher education workers have been asked to re-evaluate some fundamentals of their professional assumptions about their work – especially the time honoured relationships between research and teaching. When Boyer pointed out in 1990 that ‘at no time in our history has the need been greater for connecting the work of the academy to the social and environmental challenges beyond the campus.’
page reference? he highlighted factors that would disrupt conventional understandings of the role and responsibilities of the university and its workers. Boyer identified these challenges as opportunities, arguing that the intellectual and ethical climate of the university could be enhanced by an engaged focus with emphasis on interdisciplinarity and application of research for positive social ends (Boyer 1990: 17). Ultimately, he argued, engaged scholarship would allow the academy ‘to break out of the tired old teaching versus research debate and define, in more creative ways, what it means to be a scholar’(Boyer, xii)

Such an ‘engaged’ approach sees an exemplar in the well-documented work of the University of Pennsylvania. Harkavy makes specific connections between local and immediate social need and the service work of the university. He regards this as an evolutionary transition from the platonic, elite, aristocratic model of a university to a democratic model where Universities are seen as primarily in the service of the democratic community (Harkavy, 1998: 67) Effectively Harkavy is outlining a blueprint for the non-elite and ‘democratic’ university: locally focussed with strong connections to communities and to the role of building strong and engaged citizens.

As the recent Bradley discussion paper notes, this engagement discourse has become stronger in the past decade in Australia, reflecting trends evident in North America and Europe (DEST 2008b: 52) ‘Third stream activities’ defined as interactions between universities and the rest of society, have been promoted in recent years as a necessary aspect of the work of universities. Third stream activities span industry and community engagement. The Australian Vice Chancellors Committee (AVCC) issued a statement in 2006 indicating firm support for ‘continued and strengthened efforts to strengthen university-industry linkages, networks and relationships’ arguing that such relationships would promote a knowledge transfer relationship and benefit the Australian economy as a whole. (AVCC 2006: 1) The support has been reinforced by the formation of the Australian Universities

Community Engagement Alliance 'to promote the social, environmental and economic and cultural development of communities' (AUCEA 2006: 4)

Despite these antecedents and the general endorsement of engagement, universities remain at odds about its practicability and application. Some of this tension lies in the continuing and unresolved question of definitions. Engagement means different things to different people and institutions. One of the most common areas of confusion, for example – and important for later discussion – lies in the conflation of models of university-initiated outreach and those of engagement. Judith Ramaley notes that outreach is a model developed for targeted application of 'expert' university-derived knowledge applied to 'problems' brought to them by people in a community. It involves 'the transfer of knowledge from a university agent to a client' and is 'primarily one-way rather than a shared enterprise' (Ramaley, 2006: 1) Engagement on the other hand draws on the strengths of both parties and success depends on shared goals, a shared agenda, agreed upon definitions of success that are meaningful both to the university and to the community participants, and some pooling or leveraging of university resources and public and private funds provided by other participants. There must be reasonable complementarity of what each can contribute to the overall goals of the collaboration (Ramaley, 2006:1).

Ramaley's distinctions are echoed in other models of university-community engagement and partnerships. Barbara Holland has connected universities' actively 'engaged' mode with the evolving demands of an increasingly complex learning society 'where discovery, learning and engagement are integrated activities that involve many sources of knowledge, generated in diverse settings by a variety of contributors.' (Holland, 2006: 2) Holland notes Michael Gibbons' distinctions between universities' traditional modes of research and knowledge generation (Mode I) and an 'emerging and increasingly important new research (Mode II) taking hold in higher education. Such knowledge generation is described as 'applied, problem centred, trans disciplinary, heterogeneous, hybrid, demand driven, entrepreneurial, network-embedded and not necessarily led by universities.' This knowledge is socially located – essentially the university has moved in such contexts from sole owner and manipulator of knowledge to a partner in the learning and research endeavour.

Other theorists have developed comparable typologies – Dominquez Foray for example documented key changes in research paradigms driven by the pace of new

knowledge creation and the expansion of access to data across societies. Here three models of knowledge production are posited: Model 1, which represents conventional research advanced by universities or research centres; Model 2 which sees knowledge production responding to user needs and Model 3. 'integrative knowledge' that requires collaboration across organisations and creates the capacity to solve increasingly complex problems through exchange and diffusion of expertise. Holland makes the point that engaged scholarship draws on characteristics of both Gibbons transdisciplinary approach and Foray's Model 3 research both in its methodologies, with focus on collaborative and participatory work, and in their subject matter, which tend to deal with 'difficult, evolving questions that require long term effort' (Holland: 5).

In Australia higher education institutions have drawn on these debates and distinctions in developing ways of working with 'engagement' imperatives which have been part of their mandated role in recent years. Scott and Jackson (2006) for example have acknowledged difficulties universities have in documenting and evaluating engagement activity and have developed a typology of university-community engagement where activity can take place at a number of levels:

1. Activities associated with standard research and teaching
2. Service activities undertaken on a voluntary basis by some interested staff and students
3. Embedded community engagement and service activities which are integral to the university's work
4. Community engagement expressed as a partnership where values and aspirations are shared by the university and community.

While Level 1 engagement occurs largely through the university undertaking its normal core activities with no change to structures or processes Level 4 involves 'a genuine two way interaction between the university and community where the university not only contributes to its communities but the communities' aspirations are reflected in and change the university.' (Scott and Jackson, 2006: 1)

Education and policy analysts have attempted to use this evolved understanding of the level 4 engaged university (as described above) to bring some coherence to the increasingly fraught sphere of higher education work.

In noting the disturbing tendency within the sector to polarise teaching/learning and research functions, for example, Krause (2006) also identified the importance of 'third stream' or engagement activities and their potential for unifying academic work in ways which reflected contemporary needs and demands. (Krause, 2006: 2) She notes the significance of this unifying force at a time when other imperatives – such as research quotas, teaching audits and other performance measures – align to fragment work in higher education. For Krause engagement underwrites 'the notion of public scholarship that represents an important opportunity to foster an integrative approach to academic enquiry in higher education'. (Krause: 4)

Notwithstanding the power and attraction of this model commentators have noted that engagement has proved a difficult area for bureaucratic structures like universities to manage effectively. Considine and Hart for example identify factors contributing to the difficulty in building engagement and partnerships activity into core activities of bodies whose accountability requirements demand not only documentation but a mapping and matching of activities and outcomes against objectives (Considine and Hart, 2007). Factors such as university compacts, the development of niche roles for universities, the increased focus on the access of non-traditional learners to higher education and higher demands for accountability have raised the profile of management of this emerging sphere of activity. Linked so inextricably with relationships and partnerships, however, engagement activities have often proved ad hoc and difficult to monitor or evaluate. After reviewing engagement activities across many countries the OECD recently concluded that more active engagement around community development and cultural issues was constrained in many countries by virtue of the policy, funding and regulatory environments in which the universities operated. The OECD found furthermore that there was often insufficient resourcing or support provided to staff to effectively undertake third stream activities. Australian universities when surveyed for this project indicated that funding levels and other supports were not at a level to support appropriate knowledge transfer activities. (OECD 2007, Phillips KPA 2006)

Engagement and the Social Inclusion Agenda

It might be expected that significant connections would exist between social inclusion policies and the emerging emphasis on 'engaged; scholarly practice', especially in

universities located in communities that reflect changed student demographics in a policy environment that aspires to promote universal access.

However, the role of higher education/universities in addressing social inclusion issues remains largely unaddressed and undeveloped in policy to date. Despite the initiation of a major review into the sector there has been little effort made to date to connect the sector to the agenda. The Bradley Review's background paper has been cautious on issues of engagement and universities' roles, citing particularly constraints and difficulties due to policy, funding and regulatory environments (DEST 2008b: 52) . It takes a limited view of how universities might contribute to social inclusion – deepening an understanding of health and social issues and providing access to diverse learners are examples offered. (DEST 2008b:1)

In Federal Labor policy, social inclusion was early identified as encompassing all Australians' opportunities to secure a job, access services, connect with others in life through family, friends, work, personal interest, local issues, deal with personal crises in effective ways and have voices heard. Since then education-related social inclusion strategies have focussed on universal pre-school education, assisting parents in disadvantaged communities in preparing children for school and closing the digital divide through the 'education revolution'. Higher education in particular does not figure explicitly here except as a 'service' although we might assume its role is implied in factors such as dealing effectively with crises and developing an effective civic voice. The engagement agenda can assist in providing a more powerful and robust model for universities' contribution to social inclusion strategies, building as it does on connections to and relationships with regions and communities through partnerships.

Partnerships: formalised and voluntaristic

A partnership is 'a commitment that is formalised to some extent' (Glasbergen & Biermann 2008). Glasbergen and Biermann (2008) suggest that in recent years partnership commitments have become more formalised and less voluntaristic. They link this trend with new forms of governance in partnerships across government, market and civil society. Within this environment, the partnership between a university and its community could be seen as vague, symbolic, and un-formalised at the big picture level of engagement between the university and its community. Some

would question whether the ideal of community engagement deserves the tag of 'partnership' at all, being understood rather as a mission statement.

In partnering with a region a university takes a particular position on its relationship with research, learning and service. The partnership between Victoria University and its community, the Western Region of Melbourne, lacks formalised agreements in most cases. However, within this big picture that is largely symbolic, many small stories play out in ways that are often quite formalised. It seems that once the symbolic partnership is to be expressed through particular action, the relationship is negotiated and documented. However the university does not act as a monolithic entity in such negotiations. Rather, smaller organisational units within the university act semi-autonomously to develop relationships with relevant organisations in the community. Such relationships have the effects of changing people's lives and outlooks which may then in turn influence how individuals within the institution understand themselves and their work. This kind of interplay is what Ramaley envisaged when she described engagement as mutually beneficial to university and community (Ramaley, 2006:7).

VU partnership activity and social inclusion outcomes: examples from teacher education

Victoria University has a strong history of innovative partnership arrangements that seek to support and underpin learner responsive preservice teacher education courses.

Teacher education programs in the School of Education at Victoria University are underpinned by collaborative partnerships. Project Partnerships involve innovative partnership arrangements with a range of stakeholders including local schools, university colleagues, mentor teachers and preservice teachers. Entwined within the partnership framework is the belief that all stakeholders should have the opportunity to develop, explore and grapple with issues and challenges that are ordinarily faced in an educational setting. First hand knowledge therefore becomes the prism through which teaching and learning takes on an enlightened approach.

The School of Education at Victoria University initiated a 2 year research project (commencing in 2006) with over 45 schools and other educational sites. The Researching Innovative Partnerships in Education (RIPE) project aimed to identify

the features of Project Partnerships that contributed to the learning of school students, preservice teachers, teachers and teacher educators. The project focussed on collaborative research investigations in which teams of teachers, preservice teachers and teacher educators plan, implement and evaluate innovative extensions of Project Partnerships. The intended outcome of the research was to establish the conditions for strengthened partnership-based teacher education.

The RIPE project at Exford Primary School provides an example of the collaborative efforts of preservice teachers, teachers and university staff in supporting student numeracy development. In addition to enhancing student learning, the project focussed on improving the pedagogical practices of teacher mentors and preservice teachers through a process of shared professional discourse and experience. Preservice teachers participated in one-hour teaching commitments each week (using the Victorian Department of Education and Training's Early Years model) with mentor teachers and students. Initial outcomes have indicated that the preservice teacher participation has had a positive impact on student engagement and learning. In the Exford PS final report for 2006, it was noted that the preservice teachers added value to the learning process. They worked in smaller groups and were able to address individual students' needs. While working with mentor teachers, they were able to share ideas, new approaches and resources. It is envisaged that collaborative research outcomes of RIPE will play an important role in building a sustainable Project Partnerships program for the future.

The development of school-university partnerships provides opportunities for VU students, teachers and university teacher educators to work together (in professional learning teams) to support school student learning. Over the past decade, Project Partnerships at Victoria University has been a critical component of preservice teacher education programs. Project Partnerships provides a forum whereby teachers, school students, preservice teachers and university colleagues can work together to establish links into quality teaching and learning practices. Hierarchical levels are dispelled when complex issues tied to curriculum and pedagogy are dealt with in a unified and collaborative way. Partnerships established between preservice teachers, school teachers and university colleagues therefore offer an integrated approach to the exploration of teaching and learning practices; experience and intellectual knowledge is assimilated into a culture of educational practices whereby the axis of learning originates from the school outwards.

The creation of a unified set of goals is essential in any partnership program (Furlong *et al* 2000). Underpinning powerful synergies that are created in the establishment of a successful Project Partnership program is the need for specific commonalities. The creation of 'mutual respect' (Graham & Thornley 2000:237) between preservice teachers and mentor teachers is an essential beginning step to pre-empting the construction of professional boundaries. Recognising the important role that educational stakeholders play is another key factor tied to the establishment of authentic partnerships (Langdon 1998). Gore (1995:19-20) suggested that the following points need to be considered if one wishes to establish a 'genuine partnership':

- A democratic approach should be evident
- All stake holders should be involved in Partnership framework planning
- The interests of all participants should be acknowledged and considered
- Theory at the university level needs to be integrated into the Partnership process
- Stakeholders should identify a set of common goals
- Reforms that lead to positive change should be encouraged at both the school and university.

It is Project Partnerships at Victoria University that provides the participants with the learning opportunities to create, implement and sustain authentic partnerships. Cherednichenko and Kruger (2005:6) argue that 'the answer to the question 'what is authentic in teacher education?' needs to be the collective agreement of the participants in teacher education: of student [preservice] teachers, teachers and teacher educators'. It is this collaboration that ultimately focuses on the enhancement of school student learning that is the major priority for Project Partnerships and a major plank in any social inclusion plan for the region .

Access and Success (A & S) is another Victoria University initiative – this time more broadly based -- that is focussed on enhancing the educational opportunities and outcomes of young people in the western region of Melbourne. It began as a 5 year research and engagement project in late 2006 and is part of a broader University commitment to resource new initiatives aimed at improving life in the western region. But it is part of a long and rich heritage of engagement and connection to the region

that significantly predates recent emphases. The mission of Victoria University in 2005 was to 'transform the lives of individuals and develop the capacities of industry and communities within the western Melbourne region and beyond through the power of vocational and higher education' (Engagement Plan 2005-8).

The project grew out of research that identified serious concerns for students in Melbourne's west concerning aspirations, attendance academic achievement, and completion rates together with higher unemployment and crime rates, compared with other regions. Factors such as low socio-economic status, high languages other than English speaking backgrounds and limited family experience in higher education present significant challenges for many of these students. Research has recognised the significance of schools and of school achievement in developing connections between such young people with post compulsory pathways.

The project has emphasised in both its program development and research the significance of partnerships and locally appropriate responses and has developed a multi-pronged approach to the complex and diverse issues faced by young people in the regions' schools. There are four main areas of Access and Success work:

1. Learning and Enrichment
2. Youth Access
3. Schools Plus Provision
4. Teacher Leadership

There is a research framework which supports this engagement work and provides a context for university staff and students together with school and community partners to share in the generation of research based knowledge.

Since the establishment of the Access and Success project in mid-2006, some outcomes are already evident in these school-university-community partnerships.

They include

- Enhanced relationship between schools and VU, with the establishment of over 25 specifically focussed 3-5 year school projects and many more under multiple site delivery.
- Enrolment of over 40 teachers in postgraduate leadership programs
- The engagement of VU students and staff in school professional learning teams that establish cultures of teachers (and preservice teachers) as

researchers in partnership schools, with demonstrated enhancement of pedagogical outcomes

- Stronger engagement and richer experiences of VU students in partnership schools with the development of a significant research component in their project work
- Enhanced understanding of the role of respectful partnerships in developing sustainable models for university-school collaborations
- More teachers and preservice teachers working as researchers in schools

Conclusion

Participation in vocational and higher education is a key enabler for social inclusion, building individuals' capacities for future social and economic participation. However, education offers more than this, with its potential for personal and social transformation. It holds the possibility of challenging the potentially conservative aspects of social inclusion. Genuine partnerships mean that the social inclusion outcomes may have a transformational impact rather than reproducing existing social conditions. As people's lives and outlooks are transformed by education, they may then in turn transform education and influence how institutions such as schools and universities understand themselves and their work. This kind of interplay of mutual influence and contribution can be seen as a kind of regional partnership, supported and underpinned by a complex network of numerous more specific university-community partnerships played out at a more local level.

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Victoria University Engagement Plan 2004-2008

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