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The Northern Corridor Education Precinct: A Space of Engagement for Mutual Benefit.

DeLaforce, W.^{1*}, Adkins, B.², Buckley, J.³

1. QUT, Brisbane, Australia
2. QUT, Brisbane, Australia
3. Education Queensland, Brisbane, Australia

Abstract

A growing emphasis is being placed on the need for the education sector to engage with community in a meaningful and mutually beneficial way. Both in Australia and internationally, governments, the institutions and communities are looking at how the resources and potential of such relationships can be unlocked.

Regional and urban education campuses have a multifaceted role within the community. Not only are they the site of traditional learning and possibly research but they are usually one of the regions major employers, economic drivers, cultural, recreational, infrastructure and resource providers.

The integration of community engagement concepts into educational teaching and learning's is critical to the holistic development of our future society. Through community engagement, this and future generations can gain a broader perspective and deeper understanding for aspects of social thinking and activities that would normally be beyond their immediate life experiences.

This practice presentation explores how the drivers listed above have been integrated into the operations of the Northern Corridor Education Precinct (NCEP) a collaborative education sector initiative in the transport corridor to the north of Brisbane, Australia.

How has the NCEP through collaboration, commitment and the grassroots been able to: weaken traditionally strong boundaries between learning institutions and their communities; create spaces of engagement in which discourse can occur and engage their communities both internal and external in a sustainable and mutually beneficial way.

Introduction

Regional and urban education campuses have a multifaceted role within the community. Not only are they the site of traditional learning and possibly research but they are usually one of the regions major employers, economic drivers, cultural, recreational, infrastructure and resource providers. In line with this, a growing emphasis is being placed on the need for the education sector to engage with community in a meaningful and mutually beneficial way.

Both in Australia and internationally, governments, the institutions and communities are looking at how the resources and potential of such relationships can be unlocked. In Queensland, Australia, Education Sector Community Engagement Policy has emerged with national and state level systemic changes occurring concurrently. The national level “Nelson” Higher Education Reforms (Nelson Reforms) and the state level “*Education Training Reform for the Future*” (ETRF) both evolved from a joint declaration labelled “*Stepping forward – improving pathways for all young people*” signed by all national and state education, employment, training, youth affairs and community service ministers. That declaration details a systemic change initiative as part of the examination of the formal education framework and gives broad direction to education reform. A key component of improving these pathways is identified as education sector community relationships.

In Australia to date, these initiatives are articulated at the level of broad *policy* logics in which university-level strategies are assumed to provide the key mechanisms for this engagement. This raises the question of the nature of university level strategies oriented to achieving these pathways and the way they operate at the level of *program* logic. This paper aims to identify some of the key relationships that need to be considered in facilitating university-community engagement at the level of specific engagement programs. First it outlines the Australian policy framework relevant to university-community engagement initiatives and poses the question of the program level initiatives required with reference to this broader context. The paper then turns to a review of key aspects of strategies employed in the context of similar initiatives in the United States, as a policy framework that articulates program level requirements, strategies and rationales designed to inform practice at the level of implementation. Drawing from these insights, we then propose a framework that assists in systematically identifying the relationships at stake in implementing university-community engagement strategies in Australia.

The Background to Education Sector Community Engagement Policy in Australia: Reform for Transition Pathways for Young People

The Ministerial Council on Education, Training, Youth Affairs and Community Service

In July 2002 ministers from around Australia signed a declaration through the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training, Youth Affairs and Community Service (MCEETYA) committing to principles outlined in “*Stepping forward: improving pathways for all young people*”. From the declaration MCEETYA developed an action plan that specifically “*includes ways of strengthening community support for young people through partnerships across all levels of government and with local communities*”.

The collaborative, cross-jurisdictional and cross-portfolio creation of the declaration represents the underpinning concepts of engagement, partnership and community support articulated in the document. This is evidenced by the signatory coverage of the MCEETYA declaration which includes ministers responsible for all levels of formal education in Australia involving the higher education, vocational, secondary and primary sectors. The MCEETYA action plan identified the following strategies as central to strengthening community support:

- education and training as the foundation leading to pathways for effective transition for all young people;
- access to career and transition support;

- responding to the diverse needs of young people;
- promulgating effective ways to support young people and
- focused Local Partnerships and Strategic Alliances.

The articulated key areas from the action plan were further supported by a series of principles that were to guide the nature of the strategies to be adopted as focused on partnerships that “*share the load and increase possibilities and opportunities.*” These key areas were identified as follows:

- focus on the interests of young people;
- collaborate and co-operate across sectors;
- communicate, consult and collaborate;
- promote partnerships and networks;
- connect and ensure coherence;
- participate meaningfully and
- evaluate and review.

In the context of these strategies and principles, the action plan proposed a key role for educational sector community engagement. Educational institutions were to actively and meaningfully participate in their communities; collaborate and communicate within and between each other, broader agencies and community; optimise the delivery of learning and learning pathways particularly for young Australians through integration, and facilitate informed decision making. Since the MCEETYA declaration in 2002 significant reforms have been undertaken using a traditional community and stakeholder consultation involving distribution of a discussion paper, public consultation and finishing with legislative endorsement at both national and state levels.

National Level Framework: Nelson Reforms - Higher Education at the Crossroads

Throughout 2002 the Federal Department of Education Science and Technology (DEST) under the direction of the Minister Dr Brendan Nelson published a series of discussion papers.

Four papers in particular set the higher education sector framework for engagement within the sector and with community. These are the:

- “*Higher Education at the Crossroads – An Overview Paper*” April 2002;
- “*Striving for quality – learning, teaching and scholarship*” June 2002;
- “*Varieties of excellence – diversity, specialisation and regional engagement*” July 2002 and
- “*Varieties of learning – the interface between higher education and vocational education and training*” August 2002.

These papers in concert with “*Our Universities Backing Australia’s Future*” released by DEST in May 2003 detailed the national reforms and direction of the higher education sector and articulated the underpinning of community engagement. Specifically in *section 9* of that document under the title “*Enhancing collaboration and structural reform*” a call is made for “*more collaboration between universities and other education providers, industry, business, regions and communities.*”

The initial national priority areas for collaboration detailed were focused on relationships around the following:

- course provision between two or more institutions, such as between vocational education and training provider/s and an institution
- engagements between universities and their communities, particularly, but not exclusively, regional communities and
- engagements between universities and business/industry/employers and or professional associations.

The flavour and language of the MCEETYA declaration principles flow through the Nelson Reforms. The themes of cross-sectoral collaboration and interface, regional grounding, relationships between institutions and the community permeate all the documentation. Community involves businesses, professions and industry, student movement and choice, shared resources and facilities, mutuality of both process and outcome and collaborative research. Analysis and overlay of the above principles and reforms show that at a policy level governments are seeking to create a systemic environment that supports education engagement both within the sector and with the community. This pathway for higher education while clearly flagged at the policy level has not been readily operationalised nor indeed have the links been translated uniformly from the systemic policy level to regional and institutional strategic levels at this time.

Queensland: Education and Training Reforms for the Future

In Queensland under the Smart State banner the *“Education and Training Reforms for the Future A White Paper”* was released in November 2002. This document was also leveraged from the *“Pitman and Gardiner reports”* released by the government in August 2002.

Again the rhetoric, language and timing are similar to both the Nelson Reforms and MCEETYA declaration. In fact a number of references are made to the MCEETYA declaration including a statement that the Queensland government will embed the intent of the declaration into legislation. Queensland has however injected the concepts of life long and work integrated learning more deeply into their framework, and identifying more specifically the importance of local networks. Key objectives in this framework are as follows:

- prepare the students’ learning throughout their lives including the skills and passion to achieve this objective;
- build partnership linkages across the sector;
- build partnerships at the local level;
- build new relationships that draw on the best from across our communities;
- coordinate program and services at the local level and use resources more efficiently across sectors;
- improve collaboration between schools, Technical and Further Education (TAFE) institutes and universities; and
- foster the special roles of industry and business because they can provide work experience and ultimately jobs.

There is a clear alignment in the way goals and strategies are articulated at a national and state level in relation to creating effective pathways and transitions for young people. However, while the state framework is a little more specific about the nature of some of the relationships involved, it is clear that both state and federal strategies are formulated at a policy level that does not provide for implementation strategies at the level of specific universities and regions. This is illustrated in the following table which summarises the articulated policy framework.

Articulated Policy Framework

	Policy	Mechanism	Outcomes
MCEETYA	Action plan, education & training, interests of young people, collaboration, cooperation, communication, consultation, partnerships, networks, coherence		Pathways, transitions, career support, diverse needs, focused local partnerships, strategic alliances, collaborate & cooperate across sector, participate meaningfully, evaluate & review
Nelson	Collaboration and structural reform, course provision, regional communities	Funding Model	Multi institutional course provision & collaboration, universities engage communities, regional communities, business/industry, professional assoc
ETRF	Partnerships, coordinated programs, resource efficiency across sector and locally, role for business and industry	Funding Model, District Youth Achievement Plan	Lifelong skills & passion for learning, partnership linkages across sector and locally, draw on community skills and resources, coordinate program services, improve collaboration
QUT Blueprint	Engage, regenerate and experiment in learning and teaching, research and innovation and people and culture	Review best practice model, benchmark results	Active partnerships and collaboration across internal/external boundaries, integration, transitions, sustainability, international, capacity, thematic, responsive, culture of partnership & engagement, flexibility

The summary clearly outlines policies and outcomes but also shows that if any mechanisms are identified with respect to the achievement of these outcomes, they refer to strategies at the level of funding models.

The paper now turns to a brief overview of the context in which QUT is seeking to implement engagement strategies that are consistent with this framework followed by an overview of programme theory as a means of systematically informing implementation strategies.

Institutional Planning - QUT and the need for a program level framework

Programme Theory emerged about thirty years ago from the evaluation discipline and has gained wide acceptance as an important framework for understanding programme workings and assessing their effectiveness (Friedman, 2001). Rogers (2000) describes Programme Theory as “an explicit representation of the ‘mechanism’ by which programme activities are understood to contribute to the intended outcomes.” Chen and Rossi (1992) see this kind of framework as a systematic guide to practice, providing “a specification of what must be done to achieve the desired goal, what other important impacts may be anticipated and how these goals and impacts could be generated.”

An important component of the analysis involved in the application of programme theory is the establishment of links between what programmes assume their activities are accomplishing and what is actually happening. Baldwin et al (2004) proclaim these frameworks are more than just flowcharts because they explain, "...how programme activities are understood to lead to intended outcomes" and "...convey what it is about the programmes that help to bring about the goals".

These links can then provide a guiding framework for systematic programme evaluation. Another key aspect of programme theory that assists in guiding practice is the recognition that some contexts are more hospitable to certain programme mechanisms than others (Dahler-Larsen, 2001). Thus this approach allows for systematic identification of important programme mechanisms for the achievement of goals and also the contingent conditions that may enable or block the achievement of desired outcomes.

The requirement for community engagement strategies at university level that are framed in terms of the logic of a specific program results from a current policy framework that articulates principles pertaining to collaboration etc but also reflects an extremely 'light touch' approach at the level of individual universities and regions. In this context Australian universities fund community engagement activities at the point where they have already been framed usually at the level of individual schools, faculties and campuses. This often means that the engagement strategies are not explicitly articulated as following program logic and as such miss opportunities for these strategies to systematically inform program level knowledge about the processes and outcomes involved in 'successful' community engagement. This, in turn, means that organisational entities within universities continue to try to develop the knowledge and practices required for engagement in isolation with no specific points for comparison and benchmarking. This issue is currently being addressed in a Community Engagement strategy at QUT

QUT throughout 2003 and 2004 has developed a series of interrelated strategic and operational plans designed to guide the university for the next five years. Embedded in them is the vision articulated in the university's strategic plan "*The Blueprint 2004*" for QUT to be a university "*engaged with our communities*". Engagement with our Northern Corridor community emerges in the broadest sense with the top-level university plans embedded under the strategic plan. In particular the "*Learning and Teaching and Research and Innovation Plans*" adopt and articulate the ideas of active partnership and collaboration, internal and external engagement, capacity building, shared facilities and research benefit to the community and more. To support those words QUT in its "*People and Culture Plan*" states, "*QUT will develop a culture of partnership and engagement*" part of which will be the review of best practice models for community engagement. In this context, QUT, and specifically the Northern Corridor initiative, is confronted with reconciling the principles articulated at National and State levels with the need to develop specific strategies for organisational operationalisation. The Northern Corridor is a rapidly growing region with a projected 50% population increase by 2021. This statistic raises issues about future infrastructure and resource needs for education and service provision in the corridor.

In order to investigate the feasibility of creating an Education Precinct in the Northern Corridor region of South-East Queensland, Dr Marguerite Nolan conducted a research project, initiated by the then North Point Institute of TAFE (NPIT) and the Queensland University of Technology (QUT). The research found that the corridor included areas that exhibit high youth unemployment, low education retention rates, a large number of families from low socio-economic backgrounds, a significant numbers of 'at risk' students and families where no member has accessed tertiary education.

This research resulted in the formation of the Northern Corridor Education Precinct (NCEP) which is an association between Queensland University of Technology (QUT), Brisbane North Institute of TAFE (BNIT) and Education Queensland (Nolan, 2000). This association represented a coordinated and systematic attempt to address these issues in the Northern corridor through strategies aimed at:

- decreasing attrition/drop out rates
- enhancing regional retention
- maximising cross-sectoral programs and processes
- better utilising human, physical and virtual infrastructure
- increasing youth employment and
- decreasing overall unemployment.

The process of designing a community engagement that effectively addressed these issues raised questions about appropriate logics and strategies to be employed at a program level to inform implementation, and to provide for evaluation and subsequent program refinement.

This situation formed the context in which QUT attempted to develop a specific engagement strategy in the Northern Corridor through a program theory approach that embeds them within the NCEP objectives and the emerging articulated systemic policy framework.

To support this and meet the wider QUT strategy of reviewing best practice and benchmarking results, the study of other university community engagement that had a history and framework focused on engagement processes at a program level was undertaken. It was proposed that this was central to understanding the mechanisms and strategies to be adopted at an organisational level. In order to address this question, we turned to an analysis of a policy context for community engagement that had also operationalised programme level strategies. The strategies employed in specific centres in the United States were selected as appropriate case studies.

USA and Community Engagement approaches: The case of Portland Oregon and Washington State

The selection of Portland Oregon and Washington State in the U.S. as cases that could inform the development of specific program level engagement strategies in Australia was based on a history of engagement in these centres that emphasised regional level approaches. In the U.S., engagement does not occur in the context of explicit national level policy direction.

Rather, it has developed as a result of universities' need for engagement within and between the diverse characteristics of their communities. Given this historical focus, the engagement approaches adopted by metropolitan universities are of particular interest to the Australian context given their program level focus and the fact that these strategies have evolved over time.

Current approaches to Community Engagement by the education sectors in the US have been developed over a fifteen year period. All sectors of the education system – from K-12 schools, colleges and universities have and are embracing community engagement as a key strategy to assist in the holistic development of youth, the engendering of civic responsibility and to ensure learning experiences are connected to real life. In early 2004, the granting of a Fulbright Scholarship provided the opportunity for research to be conducted into the United State's model of Community Engagement. The research reviewed the engagement initiatives and the background to engagement by universities, colleges and schools predominantly in the Portland, Oregon area but also extending to Massachusetts on the East Coast. This review of community engagement processes revealed some key insights that can inform the design of strategic engagement initiatives in Australia.

Funding for community engagement in the U.S. context is generally targeted at the program level and oriented to resourcing the formation and maintenance of partnerships with continued funding predicated on the development of successful relationships and ongoing collaborations. In this context, community engagement strategies need to be made explicit at the stage of project development outlined as 'a plausible and sensible model' of how the program is supposed to function (Dahler-Larsen, 2001: 331).

This can then form the basis of ongoing evaluation, refinement and benchmarking of the engagement strategy. A key component of the program logic is the university's awareness of its role in its own community, deliberately identifying its role in terms of the level and nature of integration with the community. Following from this, if an integration model was chosen it was seen as critical to identify the kinds of relationships that would achieve the level and nature of engagement required by all parties.

These were identified and made explicit as part of a program theory developed prior to specific interventions and then refined according to action research logic. Represented in this are principles such as accessibility, connectivity, responsibility and accountability as value adding members of their community and captured by the Portland State University philosophy etched in stone 'Let knowledge serve the city'. Another important factor to be considered in the development of programs was the acknowledgement that engagement occurred at different organisational levels, often involving different strategies and rationales designed to support the diverse kinds of relationships and mutual benefit. It is essential that there is identification and understanding of the differing levels of Community Engagement. To engage with the community, the point of connection needs to be identified to ensure endurance and longevity.

Discussion with Community Partners illustrated the importance of the universities becoming a meaningful and contributing community partner of equal standing to all other partners. Initiatives led and dominated by universities met with distrust from those who lived, worked and socialised in communities.

The community wanted a voice, they wanted to be recognised and respected, they wanted to tell their history and for it to be understood and become a foundation on which to develop new partnerships and achieve revitalisation. It was important for the University to 'go to the table' with an open mind, to understand the background of the community and its members, to listen and to relinquish the 'power' that was associated with the financial control. This suggests that strategies need to be specifically oriented to a constructivist approach to program logic in which:

“...the very constitution of actors, including target groups of particular programs, are crucial. Not only do institutions provide fundamental roles for customers, clients, users, patients, etc., as well as labels for normality and deviation, but institutions also fundamentally equip human subjects with the cultural tools to determine what counts as 'good taste', 'appropriate preferences' and legitimate interests...Different roles and identities sensitize subjects in different ways to the 'A' that is expected to lead to 'B' in a given program context” (Dahler-Larsen, 2001: 335).

From the research, it was identified that the above were key issues salient to the implementation of Community Engagement programs. Possibly the most significant of these findings was that Community Engagement was occurring strategically across the nation, within regions and within institutions, but there were varying ranges of levels of engagement.

Whilst much was occurring strategically, it was driven by institutions or networks rather than a system level policy framework as in Australia. Still however some were occurring through serendipity and some ad hoc. It is important to understand these varying levels.

Conclusion

As outlined in the abstract section this paper proposes that a gap exists around the process of engagement specifically pertaining to the nature of the mechanism of engagement and how the process occurs. In Australia the systemic education policy framework has been evolving since the middle of 2002 and is now filtering into the operational rhetoric, strategic planning and directions of education providers.

No longer can it be claimed that being engaged with your diverse communities is anything other than a mainstream objective for the education sector and in particular universities. As with QUT the articulated strategic direction of the university closely aligns to the systemic policy framework.

This paper begins to construct the contextual basis for the activities and intended outcomes and starts to shed new light on what the policy makers have articulated system wide is needed to occur if universities and the education sector more generally are to engage with their constituent communities.

The commencement of construction of the programme theory and logic model has shown that a systemic context for higher education community engagement exists and that the rhetoric, language and policy impetus is in place to implement the intended outcomes.

A process mechanism that leads to rewards for mutually beneficial cross-sectoral and community collaboration, co-operation and resource sharing is a necessity. A necessity because the various co-operative aspects that now form part of the policy landscape and have both programme benefits on delivery like access to additional funding pools as well as tacit long term outcomes must be measured and evaluated. Emerging from the reflection on the NCEP processes involving QUT is one way to fill the process gap and transcend the strategic operational divide and present a best practice operational mechanism.

Keywords: Higher Education, Regional Engagement, Engagement Framework, Collaboration and Program Theory.

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