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AUCEA: An emerging collaborative and strategic approach dedicated to University Community Engagement in Australia

Jan Temple*, Alice Story* & Wayne Delaforce**

*University of Western Sydney, Campbelltown, NSW, Australia

**Queensland University of Technology, Carseldine, Queensland Australia

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Abstract

The issue of University engagement with the community is prominent on the agendas of both national and international forums of higher education. Increasingly, universities are playing an integral role in their regions, contributing to the sustainability, wellbeing and economic vitality of their communities while becoming catalysts for positive change and development.

Recognition of the role of higher education institutions in social, economic and cultural development has led to the formation of the Australian Universities Community Engagement Alliance (AUCEA). AUCEA is auspiced by the University of Western Sydney (UWS) and guided by a Steering Committee made up of 10 Australian University representatives.

With a vision to be the leading inclusive national forum for the discussion and development of university community engagement, encouraging collaboration, innovation, the exchange of knowledge and the scholarship of engagement, AUCEA has undertaken a national leadership role to:

- Raise awareness and disseminate best practice in university community engagement;
- Facilitate collaborative research in university community engagement between AUCEA members and their communities;
- Promote the integration of engagement into curriculum and the student experience;
- Promote the recognition of the scholarship of engagement as a valid pedagogy; and
- Collaboratively develop resources that support university community engagement.

AUCEA enables Australian Universities to both share and create knowledge about community engagement. Ultimately the process, which is developing trust between universities, will create an effective centre for dialogue and research into university community engagement and place the scholarship of engagement on the national agenda.

For this to be achieved AUCEA will need to firmly establish itself as the peak body for university community engagement nationally. The Alliance has already gained endorsement by the Australian Vice Chancellors Committee, but it requires full commitment, through institutional and individual membership, financially and otherwise and essentially by the majority of Australian universities. AUCEA's services and resources will need to be in demand and valued by the clients it seeks to serve. AUCEA's effectiveness will rely on its ability to achieve scholarly recognition for its activities and outputs. Its long-term future will depend on AUCEA's ability to become fully sustainable with both national and international acceptance and recognition

Introduction

The role of university and community engagement is gaining increased attention on the national and international agendas of both government and higher education institutions. This has been driven by an acknowledgement of the role that universities can play in the development of their communities and also by a response to the pressures on communities arising from knowledge based global economy.

“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). An innovative and more responsive model for higher education is required and central to the development of this new model is the development of partnerships.

Partnerships and collaborative approaches of exchanging knowledge and sharing resources with a mutually beneficial outcome is the basis for the establishment of the Australian Universities Community Engagement Alliance (AUCEA). As Brukhardt, Holland, Percy and Simpher (2004 p.9) suggest:

“Partnerships are the currency of engagement – the medium of exchange between university and community and the measurement of an institution’s level of commitment to working collaboratively.”

Universities have been involved in outreach for some time with experts applying their knowledge to problems they see in the community. The university’s role has been to use research to identify solutions and then impart that new information to the community. However, the new responsive model requires real and ongoing engagement with a strong emphasis on co-operative development and mutual benefit. The new model has an intentional balance between teaching, research and engagement activities. Outcomes are articulated for teaching and research that are responsive to emerging issues. However, the new responsive model requires a commitment to ongoing engagement with a strong emphasis on co-operative development and mutual benefit.

This new model acknowledges that the university is doing more than just preparing students for employment, it is also preparing them to be responsible citizens. The new model could be seen to challenge the traditional view of excellence in universities through the undertaking of ground breaking research and scientific discoveries. The new model has an intentional balance between teaching, research and community engagement. Importance is placed on undergraduate learning and there is an emphasis on performance and accountability. Outcomes prescribed for teaching and research are responsive to emerging economic, social, environmental and cultural 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 universities 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)

Garlick (2002) identifies certain criteria for an engaged university:

- 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

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), This work 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 engaged university is seriously committed to interacting with its communities in a meaningful and mutually beneficial way. It is considerate and responsive to community identified needs and works in active partnership with its communities in order to help achieve those needs. Engagement is embedded in its vision and strategic plans and evident in the fabric and output of its teaching, learning, and research. Its students, graduates, staff and governance emulate this embodiment. It sees itself and participates as an integral resource for building citizens and their worlds.

AUCEA, through its vision and mission, is committed to the new responsive model for university community engagement as detailed above, including the specific criteria identified by Garlick (2002). Most importantly,

AUCEA is committed to the scholarship of engagement as Boyer (1990) defines it and will endeavour to incorporate this where possible into the strategies it develops, implements and evaluates as identified in Table 1

AUCEA was originally established as Australia's Engaged Universities Interest Group (AEUIG) in September 2002. At this embryonic stage, the Interest Group was a loose network of committed university representatives interested in the value and scholarship of community engagement. Over time, the Interest Group, led by a steering committee with sponsorship from the University of Western Sydney, saw the need to formalise its structure into a not for profit national association. This formalisation of the national Alliance, currently underway, will provide drive, focus and mechanisms to maximise opportunity, build capacity, develop expertise, produce collaboration, quality partnerships and shared vision between universities and their communities within the Australian context.

AUCEA will be a driver in "The facilitation of a national network for institutions,which maximises opportunities to build capacity and expertise in focused areas," (Commonwealth Department of Education Science and Training 2002 p.1), and particularly in university community engagement. AUCEA will be promoted as a centre for dialogue for best practice of university community engagement aligning with the following values and ideals.

"Mutual engagement between the university and its community occurs where there is active engagement and learning for the partners in both process and outcome. It is built on demonstrable and on-going commitment, clear expectations, trust and has tangible quantitative or qualitative outcomes for the community and the university." (Commonwealth Department of Education Science and Training 2002 p.51).

Thus enabling the mergence of *"a reconceptualisation of the relationships between Australian higher education institutions as strategic national and regional networks.....for closer collaboration between institutions."* (Commonwealth Department of Education Science and Training 2002 p.68)

Although AUCEA is essentially a university alliance, it is determined to provide a focus and strong voice for the community in all its activities. Community involvement will be key to the Alliance's success, reputation and longevity. AUCEA acknowledges that *"The relationship between a university and its community needs to be much more responsive and interconnected if there are to be benefits of substance that flow locally, institutionally and nationally."* (Garlick 2000 p.14)

There is an increasing need for universities to be more conscious of the community's interest in them and for universities to develop and sustain that interest. Following on from this, universities and communities need to develop a common language of mutual relevance and respect for each others needs. This is not an easy endeavour as universities traditionally have not shared a common language with their communities. The language of academic life and in particular disciplines has been one of specificity, technicality, and jargon. This form of language has served to alienate and disenfranchise the community and has not been conducive to the development of mutually beneficial partnerships. AUCEA's challenge is to raise the awareness of principles and best practices in partnership to encourage the need to understand how better to communicate respectfully and work in productive partnership.

AUCEA aims to foster and develop this communication within a forum of critical debate, trust and collaboration resulting in mutual benefit and learning, for long term partnerships that deliver real outcomes for Australian society.

"Developing a mutual understanding takes an investment of time and a strategic approach by all parties." (Commonwealth Department of Education Science and Training 2002 p.54). AUCEA is committed to investing the time and to a strategic and collaborative approach to community engagement at a national level and by all parties involved. The promise of engagement lies in its potential to connect and rejuvenate the academy and involve the community in a productive conversation that's understood by all.

An Emerging Collaborative Initiative

"Recognition by higher education institutions of their role in social, economic and cultural development should lead to a focus on enhanced community engagement." (Commonwealth Department of Education Science and Training 2002 p.47),

At the first University of Western Sydney (UWS) National Forum in 2002 titled "University and Community Engagement", participants became increasingly aware of the major issues and challenges related to community engagement facing Australian universities.

Following this forum, a small group of interested university representatives met at a roundtable to consider ideas, strategies and experiences of community engagement in higher education. They also acknowledged the critical need to share such experiences in order to learn more about mutually beneficial engagement between universities and their communities. This led to the formation of the AEUIG.

Since September 2002, the UWS Office of Regional Development has provided the lead and accepted the responsibility for administration of the Alliance including managing the website, communicating with the interested parties, convening the AUCEA Steering Committee and organising the annual national community engagement forum in collaboration with the Steering Committee.

At the second UWS National Forum titled "Bringing Knowledge to Life - Learning & Community Engagement" held on 16th July 2003, UWS Vice Chancellor, Professor Janice Reid AM announced that other Australian universities shared a commitment to community engagement and interest in the topic had grown. She also announced the planning of a launch of a new membership association for university community engagement and to further the aims of the new organisation, UWS would provide initial resources, infrastructure and coordinating services for the first three years of the Group's operation.

The purpose of this new Group was to provide an ongoing venue for cross-institutional learning on key aspects of community engagement such as community-based research, service-learning, partnerships, professional staff development and other organisational issues.

Professor Reid also announced that "the nation's commitment to community and regional engagement will be greatly advanced through this collaborative effort."

Following these announcements, a roundtable meeting of the AEUIG was held on 17th July 2003. Due to the level of interest, the attendance of the group had doubled from the first meeting in September 2002. The outcomes of this meeting included: the establishment of a Steering Committee to formalise the Interest Group over the next three years, the provision of financial resources by UWS to administer all aspects of the Group throughout the formalisation process and the in-kind support of the other Steering Committee representatives.

A New Identity

Australia's Engaged Universities Interest Group (AEUIG) was formally identified as the Australian Universities Community Engagement Alliance (AUCEA) in September 2003 following a strategic planning meeting of interested parties at UWS' Parramatta Campus. At this meeting the primary decision was to progress a national university community engagement agenda through the formalisation of the Alliance.

Developing the Foundations

The AUCEA Steering Committee was established by a self-nomination process from the interested parties to action the agreed outcomes. The Committee agreed the Chair of the inaugural AUCEA Steering Committee would be from the host institution, UWS, with the inaugural AUCEA Steering Committee including representation from the following universities:

- Australian Catholic University
- Charles Sturt University
- Curtin University of Technology
- James Cook University (representative was formally employed at the University of South Australia)
- La Trobe University
- Queensland University of Technology
- Swinburne University of Technology
- University of Ballarat

- University of Western Sydney – Chair

Since July 2003, AUCEA has grown into a strong network with representation currently from 30 Australian, and four international universities, as well as, 10 government and community organisations. All are committed to the value and scholarship of community engagement in contributing to the advancement of knowledge, development of human and social capital, and economic progress.

The AUCEA network and Steering Committee considers

“collaboration is essential between institutions and a range of other stakeholders with interests in linking with a national network of higher education, including other educational institutions, industry and business, professional associations, government funded research agencies and communities”
(Commonwealth Department of Education Science and Training 2002 p.47)

to discuss, share resources, and exchange knowledge on how to successfully engage with communities and collaborate. This consideration was the foundation for creating the vision, mission and objectives of AUCEA.

The primary tasks for the inaugural Steering Committee in the formation of AUCEA were to establish the foundations and develop the vision, mission and objectives for AUCEA. The Committee agreed the vision for AUCEA was to *“be the leading inclusive national forum for the discussion and development of university-community engagement, encouraging collaboration, innovation, the exchange of knowledge and the scholarship of engagement”*.

AUCEA’s vision will be used to encourage Australian universities to collaborate and understand that *“excellence in the creation and sustenance of partnerships should be the goal of every higher education institution”* (Commonwealth Department of Education Science and Training 2002 p.47). University collaboration and the formation of partnerships with external constituencies and communities have the potential to be the central forum for 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. Creating a central forum such as AUCEA encourages the exchange of knowledge and also builds trust between universities and community. Therefore, the development of an Alliance specialising in the area of university community engagement for Australian higher education institutions will enhance the communication and create a greater understanding of the role of the university campus as a knowledge asset and resource for the community and the higher education sector in general.

AUCEA’s objectives and related strategies (see Table 1 below) focus on scholarly practice and community driven engagement that at its core has reciprocity and mutual benefit as an articulated outcome predicated on the exchange of knowledge.

Table 1

Objective 1	Raise awareness and disseminate best practice in university community engagement
Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - publish an electronic journal specific to university community engagement that will showcase the work in Australia and internationally of practitioners and highlight the emergence and growing importance of community engagement - continue to host an annual conference that provides a focus and point of contact for engaged universities and collaborators - through a detailed mapping process begin to understand the gaps in the knowledge and skills required and conduct workshops to address this need and further the discourse
Objective 2	Promote the recognition of the scholarship of engagement as a valid pedagogy
Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - introduce a recognition and rewards program for practitioners and universities aligned to the national conference - further and leverage international partnerships, alliances and collaborations - identify, disseminate and champion engagement outcomes exploring the potential for scholarship and grant opportunities

Objective 3	Facilitate collaborative research between AUCEA members and their communities
Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - develop a national benchmarking program available to all Australian universities and potentially linked to international benchmarking programs - create a central avenue for project initiation through opportunity identification, and dissemination of grant information via the AUCEA website - initiate national projects and partnerships
Objective 4	Promote the integration of engagement into the curriculum and the student experience
Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - introduce a recognition and rewards program for practitioners and universities aligned to the national conference - develop and provide information kits which include: sample ethics applications, sample agreements with partner organisations, insurance details, risk management, and a management checklist - through a detailed mapping process begin to understand the gaps in the knowledge and skills required and conduct workshops to address this need and further the discourse
Objective 5	Collaboratively develop resources that support university community engagement
Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - lobby for government sponsored resources development - collect feedback from community partners through an evaluation process - create a common meaning document, glossary of terms for community engagement in an Australian context

AUCEA aims to improve and enhance Australia's knowledge base and research capabilities by sharing experiences and generating new ideas for connecting universities with their communities in local, regional and international contexts.

Kitagawa states

"universities play an important role by "regionalising" global knowledge flows.....from universities into business and society linking global and local players. Those relationships growing between universities and their regions are an important strategic and policy issue for universities, industry, communities and for governments alike in order to construct "advantage" within the multi-level governance structure of knowledge economies." (2004 p.66)

AUCEA will benefit higher education institutions, government organisations, community organisations and business groups by creating a formal collaborative network for the exchange of innovative ideas, discussion of related policy issues and the facilitation of programs and activities focusing on university community engagement.

An alignment has emerged between the ideas detailed above by Kitagawa and the objectives and strategies articulated by AUCEA. In effect taking on the conduit role, linking local and global initiatives, knowledge and discourse between higher education and our multi layered communities and jurisdictional boundaries. This will potentially facilitate the development of a common shared language embedded within the various systems and mutually beneficial to all participants.

Securing Commitment from Commonwealth Government and Australian Vice Chancellors Committee (AVCC)

In 2004, AUCEA was successful in securing funding of \$200,000 from the Australian Government's Higher Education Innovation Programme (HEIP) for 2005-2006 in order to support the formal establishment of the Alliance into a not for profit national incorporated association and as the leading inclusive national forum for the discussion and development of university community engagement. The formalisation of the Alliance will provide the mechanism to develop sustainability and maximise opportunity, build capacity, expertise, productive collaboration, quality partnerships and shared vision between universities and their communities

with respect to community engagement. The Alliance aims to be a self-sustaining, formal national network by 2007 through the commitment of all Australian Universities.

With the establishment of a formal, incorporated, vigorous and appropriately resourced Alliance, the intended outcomes of the HEIP funding grant will not only benefit the higher education system as a whole, but the community as well by:

- endorsing the scholarship of engagement and integration of community engagement in the core business of higher education institutions;
- promulgating and disseminating knowledge on Australian issues of community engagement through scholarship, publishing and research;
- advocating community engagement to governments, politicians and the community; and
- promoting innovation, collaboration, reciprocity, and sustainability of community engagement through the networking and sharing of information.

It was imperative for AUCEA to gain the commitment from the AVCC in order to strengthen and give credibility to its charter. John Mullarvey, Chief Executive Officer of the AVCC suggested submitting an information paper to the AVCC about AUCEA and the potential for the AVCC's involvement with the Alliance. The information paper was submitted to the AVCC Board of Directors meeting on 1st February 2005 resulting in the paper being considered at the Plenary Meeting on 8th March 2005. The outcome of which was that the AVCC endorsed AUCEA in principle. Endorsement of AUCEA from the AVCC will enhance AUCEA's profile, give credibility to AUCEA and strengthen the scholarship of engagement as a high priority on the national higher education agenda.

Strategic Collaboration and Dissemination

As detailed in *DeLaforce (2004)* regional and urban education campuses have a multifaceted role within the community. Not only are they the site of traditional learning and research but they are usually one of the regions major employers, economic drivers, cultural, recreational, infrastructure and resource providers. In line with this, the growing emphasis 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 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) layered with for example the state level "*Education Training Reform for the Future*" (ETRF) in Queensland have 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. This 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.

Prior to these reform initiatives practitioners across Australia had been undertaking higher education engagement within their institutions. AUCEA and its predecessor AEUIG has emerged from the alignment of higher education staff from around the country coming together to support, learn and disseminate best practice both nationally and internationally. These practitioners represented a cross sectoral and layered snap shot of staff, roles and strategic alignments but were linked by the belief in the benefit of higher education community engagement.

The Alliance in turn created the opportunity for peer and community discussion and engagement including the promotion of social, environmental, economic and cultural development of communities across Australia. This will continue to be achieved by showcasing examples of best practice and theory through AUCEA's, Visiting Scholars Program, annual National Conference, Workshop Program and Website.

The AUCEA Visiting Scholars Program is a result of collaboration between institutions whereby one institution is willing to share their particular national and international contacts through a broader network of programs and events. This Program will enable AUCEA to build on the existing commitment to collaboration to develop other relevant engagement endeavours.

Other strategies for collaboration and dissemination include the AUCEA annual National Conference and Workshop Program. One of the AUCEA objectives is to raise awareness and disseminate best practice in university-community engagement. The AUCEA annual National Conference and Workshops facilitate this

objective by enabling a network of national and international universities, government and community organisations to meet and creates an opportunity to showcase best practice examples and theories of university-community engagement with international and national experts in the field. The Conferences and Workshops are held at venues around Australia and enhance the sharing of information on a regional, national and international scale. Participation and presentations from community organisations and individuals are encouraged within these Conferences and Workshop Programs.

Development of Relevant and Innovative Resources

Resulting from the sharing of experiences, reflections, practice and knowledge has emerged a repository of information both from Australia and our international collaborators that is beginning to create a robust practitioner driven network.

In the United States there has been a long history of commitment to community engagement by many universities and in particular by the large land grant universities that see this as an integral part of their mission. More recently, there has been strong advocacy for community engagement by the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities (CUMU) particularly through their journal, of which the July 2003 Volume was dedicated entirely to telling the 'Australian Story' through publishing papers from the 2003 UWS National Forum "Bringing Knowledge to Life - Learning & Community Engagement". Dr Barbara Holland, Executive Editor of the CUMU Journal and adjunct professor at UWS was instrumental in enabling this.

Campus Compact is a national body that provides for collection and dissemination of such resources throughout the United States. As yet, there is no such resource or repository for community engagement relevant information and resources in Australia. AUCEA will undertake this role in establishing, collecting, developing and distributing such resources, both national and international, across Australia for interested parties in universities and the community at large. It is also envisaged that AUCEA will develop a suite of 'How To' workshops and information kits based on best practice, knowledge and expertise.

The emergence of AUCEA as a national repository for information and resources relating to community engagement will encourage greater collaboration and communication between universities and provide a focus within the Australian context for such resources. The AUCEA Resources Committee has been established to guide the development of the repository for such resources.

Critical to AUCEA's commitment to the scholarship of engagement will be the Alliance identifying and establishing an Expert Advisory Panel for community engagement. The Panel will be peer selected, based on their expert and professional experience in community engagement and higher education. The primary role of the Panel will be as a credible resource for valued comment on ideas, theories and research on working papers or grant proposals pertaining to community engagement and higher education. The Panel members will further act as referees for academics and others seeking to advance through the scholarship of community engagement. The initial challenge in this endeavour will be how to identify what experience and skills are required and who should be on the Panel for community engagement.

A National Benchmarking Program

According to Garlick "an increasing demand for evaluative mechanisms that demonstrate societal standards are being maintained and improved through the practices of institutions, business and governments" (2004, p. 2-3) interactions and collaborative approaches. There is a need for the development and implementation of a national benchmarking program specific to university community engagement as suggested by Harman.

"Engagement has not yet been successfully measured or benchmarked except perhaps in the broad terms of regional economic impact and cost benefit analyses. Just as we are recognising the need for validated measures of teaching, there are the beginnings of a move to develop validated and reliable measures of engagement through groups like AUCEA and international consortia." (Harman 2005, p.7)

University community engagement is an emerging area of interest and endeavour. The rulebooks and benchmarks have not yet been written or acknowledged on a national scale. AUCEA will develop and endeavour to implement a national benchmarking programme for community engagement over the next two years as part of the HEIP grant.

Consultation and collaboration between universities and communities will enable AUCEA to facilitate an innovative national strategy on benchmarking university community engagement as benchmarking "needs to incorporate collaboration and connectivity across stakeholder interests, learning and knowledge exchange,

leadership commitment” according to Garlick (2004, pg viii). It is envisaged this benchmarking strategy will inform, maintain and enhance the quality of higher education in Australia specific to university community engagement.

This benchmarking strategy will not be done in isolation, AUCEA is looking to understanding and incorporating benchmarking strategies on the international front including those of the Association of Commonwealth Universities and the Campus Compact models to maintain the Australian model.

Challenges Ahead

Universities are continually engaging with the wider community in order to recognise mutually beneficial outcomes by sharing resources and expertise. Universities are forming relationships with business and industry, community groups, and other educational institutions however; recognition within the higher education sector is still minimal. *“The demands on universities and the campuses in Australia are onerous and increasing. Meeting the social, economic and cultural expectations of the communities which they service is not always recognised”* (Commonwealth Department of Education Science and Training 2002 p.vi)

Universities face challenges to expand their engagement. The pressures to increase income generation due to decreasing levels of federal government funding are growing. Pressures from external groups for more community participation are also growing. Universities are now being asked to justify their investment. When community leaders increasingly see engagement as a valid part of higher education's mission it will raise expectations for university contributions.

Business is looking to universities to supply skilled workers, government are looking similarly for universities to help with economic development and students, in a market driven economy are demanding more flexibility and choice.

“With all industries and businesses increasingly dependent on human resources in a knowledge-based economy, business will need to increasingly rely on universities which remain world class and diverse. Universities and business will need to cultivate mutually beneficial and lasting relationships with one another.” (Fischer, Belcher, Cairney, English and Harding, 2002 p.3)

It is imperative that Australia's commitment to university community engagement occurs across the broad spectrum of diverse communities by developing and sustaining long term partnerships in order to meet market demands.

Many academics today struggle with their workload of teaching and research activities. The third layer of community engagement activity places an increasing strain on university staff to meet the engagement challenge. In many situations, community engagement activities are sidelined, not recognised and not rewarded appropriately. Traditionally academics are rewarded and promoted through their teaching, research and publication activity, capability and quality and not through community engagement. There are well established and accepted national and international measures and benchmarks in these areas.

AUCEA is well placed to facilitate the national discussion and propose direction for policy in university community engagement. AUCEA will also advocate for greater commitment and resources from government to support this critical area. However, to facilitate the national discussion on the broadest scale, there needs to be a common language.

“One of the signs of a dying civilisation is that its language breaks down into exclusive dialects which prevent communication. A growing, healthy civilisation uses language as a daily tool to keep the machinery of society moving” (Saul 1992, p.110)

AUCEA aims to develop and support a common language, one built on inclusiveness, so that all communities can understand and participate in the development of such policy.

University community engagement has constantly been challenged by a lack of definition and legislative framework support. Questions such as: What is community engagement? Why would we become involved? How can it be measured? How can this form part of the curriculum and how does this benefit the individual, institution, sector, community and society?

These questions and more have been posed in relation to university community engagement both in Australia and internationally. Now that a national dialogue is possible through the establishment of AUCEA, those seemingly simple yet highly complex questions need to be systematically debated and addressed.

In response to the lack of definition and a legislative framework it seems both in Australia and internationally, governments, the institutions and communities are looking at how the resources and potential of university community relationships can be unlocked. Now a growing emphasis is being placed on the need for the education sector to engage with community in a meaningful and mutually beneficial way.

The articulated university community engagement policy framework reforms of recent years emerging from the Ministerial Council for Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) Declaration of 2002 represent a modern generational systemic attempt to align the higher education sector at all levels with community, business and each other. This *“building of relationship networks, partnerships, mapping, understanding and actively becoming members of their community, sharing and resource usage maximisation are all part of a new language”* as Delaforce (2004 p. 7) suggests.

However, most powerfully of all it has given the impetus to create the AUCEA and facilitate the discourse around community engagement and universities. With respect to the definition of community engagement a task AUCEA has spent significant time and resources on considering, one of the authors has offered a general definition that has allowed the process of engagement to proceed.

“Many definitions of both community and engagement exist but in this work; Community Engagement is simply the process by which the articulated outcomes specific to identified communities are achieved. In other words Community Engagement is the mechanism.” (Delaforce 2004, p.3)

The AUCEA seeks with the support of its members and the sector to take a leadership role in the continued discussion and dissemination of university community engagement as both a valid learning style and method for continued engagement with our varied identified communities.

Conclusion

In a unique way the AUCEA has taken on an amalgam of roles that suit the needs of this Australian model but that have been undertaken by various diverse groups in other jurisdictions. For example the collegiate discourse role of Campus Compact, the information and practice dissemination role of the Metropolitan Universities Journal and the sector community interactions from the United Kingdom’s Learning Communities models. This may seem overly ambitious but AUCEA has the opportunity to draw upon the experience and best practice of others.

AUCEA will require broad ongoing support from all Australian Universities, particularly if it is to affect the governance and policy making framework of community engagement in Australia, its resourcing and its acknowledgment as a legitimate pedagogy and scholarly pursuit.

As Brukhardt, Holland, Percy and Simpher suggest:

“Creating sustainable engagement will not be easy for it faces considerable resistance by institutional inertia, traditional definitions of scholarship and pressures from a market-based economy. The promise of engagement, however, lies in its potential to rejuvenate the academy, redefine scholarship and involve society in a productive conversation about the role of education in a new century.” (2004, p.19)

A great deal has been achieved thus far by a small energetic and passionate Steering Committee. The value and success of AUCEA in achieving its objectives will rely heavily on the next stage of development. The next stage being the formal commitment from all Australian universities and partners to follow up the AVCC’s endorsement, and the continued collaborative development and sustainability of the Alliance both at a national and international level.

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