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Implementing a University Paradigm for Effective Community Engagement

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Community engagement is emerging as a core function of Australian universities and their faculties. The collaboration and development of effective and sustainable partnerships can strengthen the role of the university within the community and influence those who formulate policy. This paper reports on the development and implementation of key principles and processes that are foundational to community engagement: relationship formation; sustainability; forming mutually beneficial goals; mentoring; social justice frameworks; communication; awareness-raising; identifying social injustice issues and inequalities that need to be investigated and addressed; and supportive university structures. These principles and processes are illuminated through two key community engagement projects involving the Faculty of Education. The first is the development of a teacher education program in Bachau, East Timor, and the second is a community based tertiary education program, Clemente, for the poor and marginalised within Australia's society. Through these programs, Australian Catholic University has evolved an understanding of the critical relevance of community engagement in making a difference in peoples' lives. Further, the programs have provided additional insights into the organisational structures required for effective community engagement. These include recognition of the time involved in forming, developing and maintaining relationships, and negotiating and implementing community engagement activities.

Introduction

Australia, in common with the rest of the world, 'is in the midst of a profound economic and social transformation' requiring us to 're-think and re-configure our approach to social support' (McClure 2000, p. 1). It is inappropriate, nor can the country afford, for citizens to be marginalized, poor and disadvantaged. It is critical for Australia to seek ways to connect the unconnected and marginalized citizens among us. Universities, as public sites for education and research, have a pivotal role to play in this regard. The opportunities afforded by community engagement for enabling the learning, teaching and research activities of universities to inform public policy, need to be developed in ways which enable these institutions to be critically involved in shaping Australia's social and economic structures so as to assist people and communities in moving beyond disadvantage.

This paper describes key principles and processes that Australian Catholic University [ACU National] has identified as foundational to effective community engagement. Two community engagement projects involving the Faculty of Education are explored in order to identify additional insights into the organisational structures required for effective community engagement.

Education as a Catalyst for Overcoming Disadvantage

Community engagement has an important role to play in enriching the teaching, learning and research activities associated with education, and in challenging the structures of disadvantage that are sometimes found in education sites.

Theories of social and cultural reproduction, by focusing on the social and pedagogical relations within educational sites, and the unequal power relationships therein, help to explain why education has sometimes reinforced structures of disadvantage rather than challenging such structures. 'Australia is in the midst of a profound economic and social transformation' requiring us to 're-think and re-configure our approach to social support' (McClure 2000, p. 1). However, rather than seeing education as a means of creating such transformation, Butcher, McFadden & McMeniman (2003) found that education appears to maintain rather than change broad social and economic structures.

Education is often viewed as a means through which people can enrich their opportunities within society, but in contrast to this view, reproduction theory suggests that education has contributed to the maintenance of the social *status quo*. Broadly speaking, education has served to produce educational outcomes in which the children of working class parents remained in the working class, and those of the middle class stayed in the same class as their parents. That is education reproduced the existing relationships between social groups and between their cultures.

If educational sites are to be seen as sites for the realisation of liberal democratic ideals where education is constructed in terms of a political struggle for social justice and democratic citizenship (Giroux, 1983), and as possible sites of intercultural understanding or articulation (McFadden & Walker, 1997) then a different approach to education may be necessary.

With this in mind, *service learning* can be seen as a means of providing a context for highlighting liberal democratic ideals and for developing intercultural understanding.

Service Learning: A Catalyst for Change

Service learning, which is "typically distinguished from both community service and traditional civics education by the integration of study with hands-on activity outside the classroom, involves a collaborative effort to address a community problem" (Carpini & Keeter 2000, p. 635). Issues of social justice and notions of citizenship and community are both central to pedagogical strategies, and provide content and challenges for students and staff to see varying learning experiences with differing cultures and situations as educationally valid. At Australian Catholic University, the experience and outcomes of *service learning* programs within the Faculties of Education and Arts and Sciences have provided impetus for shifting our institutional focus from community service to community engagement.

Through emphasising the interrelatedness of knowledge and phenomena, service learning can lead to moments of transformation, leading to personal and social change. Indeed, the outcome of service learning is often a personal commitment to working towards overcoming disadvantage. The selection of community service as a valid learning context also conveys 'powerful' messages to students about what their particular institution considers important and worthwhile knowledge. Not only does it profile the importance of community as an essential context for learning and research, but it also implies a more 'open', as opposed to narrow, 'content' focused approach to teaching and learning (Butcher, McFadden & McMeniman, 2003).

Service learning constructed within a social justice framework and one of open inquiry uses curriculum and pedagogy to challenge explicitly ways of thinking, stereotypes and institutionalised assumptions about society and culture (McFadden, 1996). It challenges students to look for solutions to the problems they perceive from outside the resources of their own cultural experience and group.

According to Prentice and Garcia (2000) service learning also offers beneficial aspects such as flexibility and creativity, as this approach can fit into any academic area within a tertiary institution. It can also be an enriching and enlivening teaching tool in that it enables both students and faculty members to recognise the interrelated aspects of all learning and life experiences, while encouraging faculty members to objectively assess their course objectives and methods of assessment to better cater to the learning needs of the students. Important benefits for the students include:

- an enhancement in their self-concept, in their knowledge about issues in their community and in their willingness to become lifelong volunteers within the community;
- an opportunity to engage in career exploration;
- improved interpersonal and human relations skills which are viewed by employers as being increasingly important in the professional and personal spheres;
- the opportunity to make a real contribution to the community and see social participation and actions making a difference to people's lives.

At the core of service learning programs are concepts of social and structural justice, diversity, human rights, and social inclusion (Butcher, McFadden & McFadden, 2005). Further, the relationships and partnerships formed with the community through service learning enable institutions to address these issues, inform public policy and bring about change to counter disadvantage. This is what community engagement is about.

At an institutional level, service learning has challenged ACU National to move from viewing its involvement with the community as community service to that of community engagement. For example, in two programs where ACU National students and staff engage with the East Timorese and homeless people they promote the role of educators in the development of a just and diverse Australian society in which the cultural, economic and political rights of all are recognized and where *inclusion* is a declared goal. In any framework of justice and inclusion, there must be a consideration of the dynamics of power that lead to exclusion. Participation in society must be critical participation. Encouraging non-critical 'participation' within societies whose structures lead to exclusion, will perpetuate the exclusion and marginalisation that we identify in Australian society today. A critical goal of education should be the transformation of unjust systems and the building of a better world and more just society, through critical analysis and action (Howard & Butcher, 2007). Community engagement is a means of achieving this goal.

ACU National and Community Engagement

The Mission Statement of Australian Catholic University (ACU, 1998) compels it to make a specific contribution to its local, national and international communities guided by a fundamental concern for justice and equity, for the dignity of all human beings, and a commitment to serving the common good. Thus, community engagement is seen as a core function of ACU National needing to be supported through appropriate policies, planning, structures and personnel to ensure

effectiveness. ACU National recognises that through community engagement, we have the potential to contribute to the common good, promote engaged citizenship and enrich our learning, teaching and research endeavours.

Case study investigation of community engagement within targeted campuses of ACU National found that community engagement is embedded as a core function of the university and is embedded in the institution's key documents and policies. ACU National has in place structures to support and acknowledge community engagement, including a Pro Vice Chancellor with responsibilities for community engagement, a Community Engagement Advisory Committee, a newly formed Institute for Advancing Community Engagement and an annual Community Engagement Award to celebrate community engagement initiatives. Further, the first 2005 issue of *ACUnique* was devoted to describing ACU National community engagement activities.

Enhancing ACU National's Community Engagement Effectiveness

The effectiveness of community engagement is dependent upon a shared understanding of the meaning, principles and processes involved. An exploration of key ACU National's documentation indicates that effective community engagement requires:

- formation of rich, authentic and sustainable university-community relationships and partnerships built on trust;
- mutually beneficial goals that contribute to the common good, engaged citizenship, and are underpinned by a social justice framework;
- structures that support sustainability of the engagement; and
- acknowledgement and celebration of achievements by both the university and communities.

Across ACU National the following principles and processes have been found to contribute to successful community engagement (Gervasoni, 2005, pp 34-35).

1. Relationship formation.

Authentic relationships form the basis of community engagement. Such relationships are based on openness and trust, and are formed at both personal and institutional levels. Relationships require time and 'nourishment' to form and develop. This must be acknowledged by the University and supported by appropriate work structures and practices.

2. Sustainability.

Successful community engagement requires relationships, partnerships and activities that must be sustainable over the long term. This requires planning and supportive structures on the part of the university, including communication strategies, particularly when partners are separated by distance.

3. Mutually Beneficial Goals.

Community engagement must be purposeful and based on articulated goals that are mutually beneficial for all parties. This is a significant shift from the earlier commitment to *service*, which is paternalistic and one-sided in nature. Mutuality implies that together, communities and the University seek to identify inequalities and injustices, to understand the nature of these, and to explore and implement possible solutions.

4. Mentoring and Supportive Structures.

Those involved in community engagement activities may benefit from mentoring and supportive structures. This is particularly important for those

new to community engagement or those seeking to transform their activities from *service* to *engagement*.

5. *Social Justice Framework.*

It is important for community engagement activities to be underpinned by a social justice framework so that they contribute to engaged citizenship and the development of 'the common good'. For ACU National, this framework is based upon Catholic social teaching.

6. *Communication.*

Communication strategies are essential to support relationship/partnership formation, ensure sustainability and to enhance awareness of initiatives amongst communities.

7. *Raising awareness.*

It is essential for university staff and students to be proactive about raising awareness in communities of their willingness and commitment to forming partnerships to identify and tackle injustices, inequalities and related community problems. This requires a clearly identifiable point of contact at the University—and personnel to service this point of contact. It is important for universities to use media and local networks to raise awareness of its activities and commitment to community engagement.

8. *Community engagement committees.*

Universities should institute community engagement committees that actively seek representation from communities for identifying issues of social injustice and inequalities which need to be investigated and addressed through university-community partnerships.

9. *University Structures.*

Universities in relating with community agencies need to implement supportive structures that enable community engagement initiatives to be easily established. This involves recognition of the time involved in forming, developing and maintaining relationships, and negotiating and implementing community engagement activities.

Transition from Community Service to Engagement: 'From Policy to Practice'

Although appropriate ACU National policy documents have been developed to embed community engagement in the activities and structures of the University, an important goal for the University is the continuing to further integration of community engagement with teaching, learning and research activities. Key to attaining this goal is facilitating the shift from a community service paradigm to one of community engagement. A case study analysis of ACU National campuses, as sites of community engagement, proposed the following strategies to influence the transition from community service to community engagement (Gervasoni, 2005; Gervasoni, Howard & Butcher, 2005).

- providing professional learning activities for staff to extend and re-conceptualise community service/service learning activities as community engagement;
- appointing mentors who can support staff in establishing and implementing community engagement activities;
- providing opportunities for staff to develop leadership in community engagement;

- adjusting work structures and time allocation for staff to support ACU National's targeted community engagement activities and community relationship formation;
- establishing seeding grants for community engagement initiatives that promote the University's mission;
- funding a research program emphasising the principles and implementation of effective community engagement processes and activities and highlighting the nexus between community engagement, learning, teaching and research;
- organising an ACU National annual community engagement conference;
- encouraging university staff [Flagships; Faculties; Research Centres; work units] to be proactive in forming community relationships and partnerships that reflect the university's mission-focus; and
- acknowledging, promoting and celebrating the community engagement activities of staff and students.

Insights From Community Engagement Programs

Two programs that are helping ACU National in defining and implementing strategies for effective and purposeful community engagement are the work of Faculty and administrative staff with East Timor and homeless people. These two programs, implemented through the University's Institute for Advancing Community Engagement are described below.

East Timor and the Instituto Catolica para Formacao de Professores

East Timor was invaded by Indonesia in 1975 and regained independence in 1999 after a referendum was held. A campaign of destruction was launched by Indonesian-trained and equipped militias in the aftermath of the referendum in which 78% of the population voted for independence. In the ensuing violence, most of the infrastructure of the country was destroyed, particularly what was provided by Indonesia in health and education. The political situation remains unstable, with an estimated 100 000 Internally Displaced Persons (10% of the population) living in camps and with host families in the districts.

The government of East Timor is heavily dependent on international aid, which will decrease as oil revenue becomes available. There is a lack of skills among government employees because most of them were only permitted to occupy low-level jobs under Indonesian rule. There is a critical need for infrastructure reconstruction, provision of employment and better health and education services. In 2006, less than 10% of teachers have formal qualifications. Life expectancy is on average 56 years and is combined with an infant mortality rate of 52 per 1000 live births. Maternal mortality in 2000 was at a rate of 660 per 100 000 live births.

ACU National has sustained its commitment to capacity building in East Timor since 2000. The institutional focus for the University's work has been with *Instituto Catolica para Formacao de Professores* (ICFP), Baucau: the first teacher education institute in East Timor. This collaborative work has contributed significantly to ICFP becoming an educational lighthouse and source of hope for East Timor nationally and internationally. The aim of the collaborative program is promotion of the development of East Timorese personnel at ICFP, financial and other resource development for ICFP, institutional sustainability, and international recognition of both ICFP as a tertiary institution and of their academic awards.

The focus of the collaborative work with ICFP has included:

- sustaining a supply of internationally qualified beginning teachers who are capable of assuming leadership roles in schools and communities;
- having the teacher education course recognised nationally and internationally;
- meeting quality assurance requirements for its educational, financial and management accountabilities;
- being a provider of quality professional development courses to the education and other sectors;
- implementing evidence-based reporting, which informs the research and publication agenda.

ICFP's capacity building achievements, sustained through ongoing periods of civil unrest since 2000, include:

- the establishment, in partnership with Australian Catholic University, of the first internationally recognised degree course for primary teacher education in East Timor since independence;
- 150 students enrolled in the Bachelor of Teaching course;
- the first graduation of 48 primary school teachers in November 2006;
- graduates currently involved as teachers throughout the different districts of East Timor;
- extremely high retention rate (more than 96 percent) and overall satisfaction of the teacher education students;
- academic staff trained in current student-centred methods of teaching providing a strong and positive model for classroom instruction. The lecture/tutorial approach is regarded as a significant innovation by other higher education institutions in the country. These institutions have benefited from employment of ICFP staff who provide leadership in quality teaching and learning;
- East Timor Ministry of Education involving ICFP in developing higher education policies.

These achievements are sources of hope in overcoming disadvantage in East Timor and demonstrate the power of collaboration and engagement in making a difference.

Clemente and Homeless People

An education program, for homeless people, called *Clemente* was trialled by Australian Catholic University in East Sydney during 2003-2004 (Yashin-Shaw, Howard & Butcher, 2005). Since this trial the program has been established in three sites (Sydney, Brisbane, Canberra) and now has involved more than 100 marginalised people in the study of Humanities subjects with the purpose of re-engaging them with learning and the community. The *Clemente* program was conceptualised by Shorris (2000) on the premise that education in the humanities would help move socially disenfranchised people out of the cycle of poverty and homelessness. The program is therefore different from 'life skills' or 'vocational' courses. It does not seek to train people directly for specific kinds of work, because work on its own is not seen as the "structural solution to poverty, particularly multigenerational poverty" (Shorris, 2000, p.63). Rather it is premised on the belief that studying the humanities through courses such as philosophy and ethics serves to engage and empower people to think about

and reflect on the world in which they live, so that they might become less likely to react simply to contexts and events and more likely to examine, question and contemplate. In doing so, learners would engage in “activity with other people at every level” (Shorris, 2000, p.127) and become engaged ‘public’ citizens.

The *Clemente* program assumes that social isolation and the disadvantage that stems from that can, to some extent, be addressed through education that helps people to understand the inherent benefits of engaged citizenship (Butcher, Howard & McFadden 2003). Unfortunately such an education is often inaccessible to the very people who would benefit most. Because of the circumstances of homeless people, the *Clemente* program advocates that university level humanities courses with appropriately qualified university lecturers be taught in a community setting. Participants are supported between lectures with a volunteer learning partner, recruited from businesses and government; and also, where necessary, by welfare staff. It was expected that there would be substantial associated benefits in delivering the course in this way, and this was indeed found to be the case, e.g., participants formed supportive relationships among themselves and with others (such as lecturers and learning partners); achieved personal responsibility; and experienced success and changing perceptions (Snapshot, 2007). Students involved in *Clemente* have re-engaged with community, undertaken transformational learning processes and moved on to further tertiary studies and connectedness with others in their communities.

Evaluating Community Engagement Activities at ACU National

Evaluation of the effectiveness of the East Timor and *Clemente* community engagement activities highlighted the importance of the following principles and strategies for developing mutually beneficial, relevant and sustainable community engagement activities. At ACU National:

1. An explicit social justice framework underpins the community engagement activities.
2. Partners are able to explain how the community engagement activity contributes to the ‘common good’.
3. Partners acknowledge that relationships are authentic, trusting and sustainable.
4. Goals are purposeful, articulated and mutually beneficial for all partners.
5. Strategies exist to ensure communication and sustainability.
6. Activities, processes and outcomes are acknowledged and celebrated by communities and the university.
7. The university provides appropriate structures to support the activity.
8. The processes and outcomes of community engagement activities contribute to and enrich the learning, teaching and research activities of the university.
9. Outcomes of community engagement research are used to inform and critique public policy.

Embedding Community Engagement

The work undertaken in East Timor and with homeless people has had significant impact at personal and societal levels. The personal impact is apparent for those who have formed the relationships and partnerships necessary for the programs to be implemented. The personal commitment to overcoming the disadvantage is striking. Further, these projects are having an impact at the societal level in that they are impacting on public policy formation and changing the fortunes of homeless people and the East Timorese. Indeed, through these programs, Australian Catholic

University has evolved an understanding of the critical relevance of community engagement in making a difference in peoples' lives.

As indicated above, the evaluations of these programs have shown the importance of appropriate organisational structures for effective community engagement. These structures include recognition of the time involved in forming, developing and maintaining relationships, and negotiating and implementing community engagement activities. Central to community engagement are relationship formation, maintenance and negotiation. Without structural commitment to the time involved in these processes, university-community engagement may not be sustainable.

Community engagement, an institutional priority for ACU National, can be further advanced through:

1. the strategic action plan for community engagement being linked to the issues and principles of the overall university strategic plan;
2. building university wide ownership of current ACU National community engagement priorities and activities;
3. being proactive with communities and agencies in forming relationships that may lead to mutually beneficial partnerships (including schools, hospitals, legal institutions, parishes, and social welfare agencies);
4. an ACU National community engagement communication plan, particularly for the health, education, social welfare and legal sectors;
5. communication processes for communities to present issues and perspectives to the University;
6. a multi-disciplinary, cross-faculty research focus to investigate university-community partnership solutions for community issues and social injustices; and
7. the University's *Institute for Advancing Community Engagement* promoting, implementing and evaluating the University's community engagement action plan.

Conclusion

There are many examples of communities engaging with Australian Catholic University to address issues of inequity and injustice. Indeed, community engagement is now a core function of ACU National. Embedding community engagement in the policies, strategic planning and core functions of the University has meant transforming the University's previous commitment to *community service* to one of *community engagement*. This transformational process is well underway, but involves important conceptual shifts on the part of the University, its staff and students. It is recognised that there is 'some distance to travel' before Australian Catholic University's previous orientation to community service finds its expression in true community engagement, and before it attains its potential for informing the learning, teaching and research activities of the University.

The experience of service learning programs has provided impetus for this change in orientation. Further, our work with the East Timorese and homeless people has shown that collaboration and development of effective and sustainable partnerships can strengthen the role of the university within the national and international community and influence those who formulate policy. Through these programs, Australian Catholic University has evolved an understanding of the critical relevance of community engagement in making a difference in peoples' lives. Further, these programs have provided additional insights into the organisational structures required

for effective community engagement. These include recognition of the time involved in forming, developing and maintaining relationships, and negotiating and implementing community engagement activities. It is critical for universities to provide the necessary structures and policies that can enable community engagement to fully reach its potential for overcoming disadvantage and transforming Australian society.

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