



THE AUSTRALASIAN JOURNAL OF UNIVERSITY-COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Vol 10, No 2 2015

Published by
Engagement Australia
c/- Southern Cross University
PO Box 157
Lismore NSW 2480

Editors:
Guest Editor – Dr Isabelle Bartkowiak-Théron, University of Tasmania

ISSN 1833-4482

The Australasian Journal of University-Community Engagement. Vol 10, No 2 2015

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Preface

The Australian Journal of University-Community Engagement is a refereed journal published twice a year by Engagement Australia (formerly AUCEA - the Australian Universities Community Engagement Alliance), a not for profit organisation dedicated to enhancing the engagement capabilities of staff and universities by developing expertise, fostering collaboration and building their communities across Australia.

The Engagement Australia E-Journal strives to be inclusive in scope, addressing topics and issues of significance to scholars and practitioners concerned with diverse aspects of university-community engagement.

The Journal aims to publish literature on both research and practice that employ a variety of methods and approaches, address theoretical and philosophical issues pertinent to university-community engagement and finally, provide case studies and reflections about university-community engagement.

The Journal aims to stimulate a critical approach to research and practice in the field and will, at times, devote issues to engaging with particular themes.

All manuscripts will be subject to double-blind peer review by three (3) professionals with expertise in the core area. The three (3) reviewers will include at least one (1) editorial board member.

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Editorial Comment

This special issue of the *Australasian Journal of University-Community Engagement* is one step toward answering international calls for the measurement of university-community engagement. For the past 10 years, Engagement Australia and the *Australasian Journal of University-Community Engagement* have showcased successful stories of university-community engagement that have helped consolidate evaluation work. However, this evaluation was often secondary to the description of the initiative itself.

This issue of the journal gathers contributions about university-community engagement evaluations across Australia. Authors went through a rigorous submission process that not only consisted of responding to a specific call for expressions of interest to participate in this topical issue but also a peer-review process that was specifically tailored to address evaluation and methodology issues. I would like to expressly thank our peer-reviewers for their conscientious effort in

assessing these papers from the point of view of evaluation conceptualisation and methodology.

In looking at how we can evaluate university-community engagement, appropriate indicators of effectiveness across a wide range of disciplines must be identified. It is therefore important to acknowledge that there are likely to be different ways to evaluate the processes within, and the impact of, what we call 'community engagement'. In the past, uncertainty about how to define genuine university-community engagement initiatives, and what could be regarded as evaluation (or 'performance') indicators, hampered evaluations. Significant progress has now been made in both areas, which allows us to make new steps in better documenting and producing university-community engagement evidence.

The first paper in this issue, by Dooley and Gobbett, provides reflexive evaluations on a series of events titled *Fridays at the Library* run

by Flinders University Library. Library staff sought to explore whether other similar community engagement activities are undertaken in university libraries around Australia and the benefits of running such a program for 'engaged outreach'. A survey of the initiative's audience indicated that *Fridays at the Library* encouraged informed discussion within the community about topical and often controversial subjects, fostered exchange and networking between researchers and the community, and provided an accessible and welcoming interface between the university and the surrounding community. The authors address conceptual and evaluation issues. They also discuss various challenges and limitations that include participant bias owing to the existing relationship between research participants and researchers, the limited time available to conduct research in a service-oriented institution, and the limited participation by those who might be aware of the series but do not participate.

The article by Mosse and Bottrell focuses on science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), and the important role an outreach program might play in developing STEM in Australian regional and rural communities. This research indicates that 'to successfully meet outcomes, practitioners and researchers working in the rural space must ensure that their projects and programs recognise and respect the rural context from the planning and implementation phases, through to program evaluation and negotiation of future directions'. This of course raises the overall important issue of constructing projects and evaluations within specific contexts that are respectful of place, culture, and regional idiosyncrasies.

The next paper follows on nicely from this contextualisation of research. Power, Bennet, and Bartleet report on a national arts-based service learning project involving three Australian universities. The authors build on 7 years of practice and research in arts-based service learning with Aboriginal communities. Drawing on the concept of *ubuntu*, or humanness, they analyse how inter-relationships underpinned

members' understandings of self as researchers, educators, learners, and human beings.

The last two papers of this special issue are more conceptual in nature. In the first of these, Burton, Ní Shé, and Olliver discuss the complexities of inserting engaged research in their academic work in the overarching political context of tertiary education changes across Australia (particularly in relation to various budget crises). They present their thoughts on embedding an empowerment evaluation framework at the commencement of an engaged research program.

In the final paper, I discuss the difficulties inherent in measuring a variety of processes and outcomes attached to community engagement within a university context. Existing initiatives that feature elements of university-community engagement allow us to reflect on what is easily measurable, what is more difficult to assess, and what requires downright creativity in evaluation techniques. In this paper I argue that current

debates about the lack of university-community evaluations are misplaced, and I examine the scope and nature of existing evaluations of university-community engagement. The examination of vocal and extended disputes reveals the inherent flaws in the debate and how the debate needs to be fundamentally rethought.

I hope you enjoy reading this special issue of the journal and take the opportunity to think about how we evaluate university-community engagement initiatives. Do not hesitate to reach out to authors if you would like to discuss their research findings further.

If you would like to comment on any of the work in this issue please submit your paper to admin@engagementaustralia.org.au

Dr Isabelle Bartkowiak-Théron

Special Issue Guest Editor

University of Tasmania

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Reflections on an Evaluation Project: Fridays at the Library in the context of the University's Community Engagement program

Gillian Dooley, Flinders University Adelaide

Lauren Gobbett

Abstract

This paper reflects on a research project undertaken in 2013 to evaluate a series of events titled 'Fridays at the Library' run by Flinders University Library. The project was undertaken by a team of library staff, and sought to explore (1) whether other similar community engagement activities are undertaken in university libraries around Australia, and (2) the benefits of running such a program for 'engaged outreach'. A survey of our audience confirms our belief that Fridays at the Library (a) encourages informed discussion in the community of topical and often controversial

subjects, (b) fosters exchange and networking between researchers and the community, (c) provides an accessible and welcoming interface between the university and the surrounding community.

However, there were several challenges and limitations faced by the research team, including participant bias owing to the existing relationship between many of the respondents and the researcher, limited time available to conduct research in a service-oriented institution, and limited participation by those in the broader university and community population who might be aware of the series but do not attend.

Keywords: *Community engagement, Academic Libraries, Cultural events, Topical events*

Background and context

Since 2000, Flinders University Library has run a series of cultural, artistic and topical events called 'Fridays at the Library' (FatL). This program links with Flinders University's Key Strategic Priority no. 1:

Building supportive communities: by being outwardly engaged, with strong links to our stakeholders and serving the communities in which we operate. (Flinders University, 2013, p. 7)

At the beginning of each year we schedule a program of about six FatL events – three per semester – and during the year other ideas, opportunities and offers often arise, so that the events take place up to nine times per year. They encompass a variety of topics across the range of disciplines taught at Flinders University, in a variety of formats. They are, as the name implies, almost always on a Friday, in the afternoon, and include single speakers (often members of University academic staff) speaking about their research on a topic of

general interest, or authors discussing a recent book; panels, often drawn from different disciplines of the University, discussing subjects of mutual interest; and larger events usually on a literary theme and often with a musical or performative aspect. Several yearly events have been included in the series for a period, such as Bloomsday (2000-2004), a celebration of James Joyce's *Ulysses* and History at the Movies (2008-2014), at which several short 16mm documentary films from our archive were screened with commentary from experts during the reel changes. The latter events were usually repeated, running once in the Central Library at the Bedford Park campus and once in partnership with an external organisation at a location in the Adelaide CBD. Although most other events take place in the Central Library, we have attempted to extend the reach of our engagement with the broader community by presenting at least one event per year in a city location later in the afternoon. The events in the city location are chosen on the basis that they are likely to have a broader appeal – perhaps they might feature an unusually high-profile speaker, or a

particularly topical subject. For example, several times we have presented a talk in the lead up to the US elections by our Professor of American Studies, Don DeBats, and in October 2015 the Melbourne novelist Andrea Goldsmith presented the National Library of Australia Ray Mathew Lecture. Another reason for using the city location is to reach a slightly different audience, including people who work in the CBD and find it difficult to come to Flinders University.

The Library often partners with academic departments of the University, and with other organisations, in running these events. Perhaps the most important function of these collaborations is to increase our public profile and reputation in the community, as the partner organisations do not always provide substantial financial or organisational assistance, beyond publicising events to their networks. The series is sponsored by Unibooks and the Flinders Branch of the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU).

What these events all have in common is a component beyond pure entertainment: one or more speakers will always be invited to

share their expertise and research findings, and time for discussion with the audience is built in to the programs. The events are promoted in the community and are deliberately kept welcoming and informal, with free entry, no bookings required, and light refreshments offered.

From time to time the Library has considered the idea of forming a 'Friends of the Library' group to enhance our community engagement activities, but it has been decided not to proceed because of the ongoing resource implications and doubtful cost efficiency of doing so. In any case, the mailing list for FatL could be considered as a de facto 'Friends of the Library', without a joining fee or any expectation of donations.

We believe that the FatL series

- encourages informed discussion in the community of topical and often controversial subjects,
- fosters exchange and networking between researchers, particularly those based at Flinders, and the community, and
- provides an accessible and welcoming interface between the University and the surrounding community.

The Research Project

In 2013, it was decided to undertake a research project to investigate whether these beliefs are justified and to explore the costs and benefits of running such a program for ‘engaged outreach’. Before this research was undertaken, the Library maintained a presumption of the value of the event in promoting community engagement. The Flinders University Library Research Working Group (RWG) decided to analyse the value of the ongoing investment of Library resources in the series.

This article will examine the challenges and limitations of running such a research project in a university library. Challenges include the fact that the typical skill set of Australian academic librarians does not necessarily include quantitative research skills, and the difficulties posed by conducting research within a dynamic staffing structure which emphasises multiskilling, with the management imperatives oriented towards service. There were also difficulties inherent in the project itself, especially in relation to the

size and composition of the survey participant group and their awareness of and relationship with the leader of the research team.

Literature Review

Four aspects of the literature were reviewed to provide background for our research. These were:

- Event management – the FatL series is run by the Library. Examining event management literature allowed us to look beyond the library sector to a field specifically focused on events.
- Community engagement – the objective of the Library conducting FatL events is to support community engagement as a strategic priority of Flinders University.
- Academic library in the context of the parent institution – FatL is the most publicly visible way in which the Library contributes to the University’s strategic priority of community engagement.
- Research Methodology – as this topic is the most relevant to the

concerns of this article, we will provide a summary of our review of this literature.

According to Meyrick (2012), assessment of ‘cultural experiences is one of the most difficult things we do’ (p. 4). As Yin (2011) writes, ‘every research study has a design, whether explicit or implicit’, and research designs are essentially ‘logical blueprints’ (p. 75). We need to understand the potential for ‘unexamined biases and prejudices’ (Clandinin, 2007, p. 555). Our research methodology attempted to provide the framework for this objective assessment process as we aimed to collect relevant and usable data to address our hypotheses, at the same time minimising participant and researcher bias as much as possible, while recognising that absolute objectivity would be virtually impossible in a study of this kind, which canvasses opinions among a relatively small, self-selecting group.

As Packer-Muti (2010) warns, it was ‘quickly apparent that there were many decisions and questions to be answered prior to actually engaging in the data collection process’ (p. 1023). As our

goal was to ‘collect sufficiently rich data so that your study will fully appreciate and better understand the context for the events you are studying’ (Yin, 2011, p. 284) the research team decided to conduct its survey as a ‘mixed methods research, which combines qualitative and quantitative methods’ (Yin, 2011, p. 281).

Evaluation Method

The decision to carry out a survey of FatL was taken in the context of the RWG program. The RWG was established in 2010 with three broad goals:

to develop the professional staff’s skills with regard to research engagement; to encourage analysis and investigation of the Library’s services and resources; and to engage more widely with the profession and wider higher education community through presentation and publication of research results. (Hall and McBain 2014, p. 130)

The RWG acts as an umbrella and peer advisory group supporting various research projects within the Library. This has been helpful for our particular project as, although members of the team are experienced researchers in other fields, the quantitative aspect of the mixed methods research required for this project was a new departure for us and it was most useful to share experiences with colleagues who had designed survey instruments and submitted ethics applications. We were also able to take advantage of the advice of the University's Statistical Consultant when formulating our research design and analysing the survey results.

During 2013, we conducted a survey of our audience for FatL. A questionnaire was designed and tested with the help of colleagues in the Library. We submitted our research design to the University's Social and Behavioural Ethics Committee and it was approved in May 2013. The survey was subsequently made available both in print and online through Survey Monkey so as to reach as many potential respondents as possible. The print copy with a cover

letter inviting responses either in writing or online was distributed to the audience at three consecutive FatL events in order to attract the maximum number of responses within the survey period. These three events included one off-campus event, History at the Movies at the State Library of South Australia on 29 May, and two events on campus, History at the Movies at Flinders University Library on 31 May and 'Radical Stories: *Empire Times*' on 30 August. The History at the Movies events were hosted in partnership with the South Australian Film Corporation and registered as part of History SA's 'About Time History Festival'. These 'About Time' events were promoted by History SA and the South Australian Film Corporation. *Empire Times* is Flinders University's student newspaper, and this commemorative event was expected to attract a rather different audience to History at the Movies, including present and former students as well as staff and community, so we thought it would be a particularly suitable time to run the survey. The print copy was also sent along with the publicity for the 30 August event in early August.

A link to the electronic version was sent to the email list on 4 June, and was also made available on the Fridays at the Library website. The survey period was explicitly specified in the cover letter which informed respondents that the survey would close on 13 September, and a reminder of this was sent on 12 September. Thus respondents were effectively made aware of how long they had to complete the survey. The survey period, being the time between opening and closing the survey, was chosen after careful research to encourage the most effective response rate.

The questionnaire asked for information in three broad categories:

1. Questions about awareness and attendance;
2. Questions about preferences for venue, event types and topics, and attitudes and opinions about the program;
3. Demographic information, including connection with the University as well as age, postcode and sex.

Census of University Libraries

In order to put this information into a broader context, we conducted a Census of University Libraries in Australia and New Zealand to see what similar events are run by other institutions. This involved initially visiting the websites of 39 institutions to locate publicly available information. This initial survey was followed up by individual queries where warranted, and then by contacting the institutions via the Dalianz network of deputy university librarians in Australia and New Zealand.

Ten libraries either advertise events on their website, or answered the question ‘Does your university library organise and present events open to the public?’ in the affirmative. Seven of these libraries have ‘Friends of the Library’ groups most of which are involved in the organisation of these events. We were able to establish that no university library in Australia or New Zealand runs events which are similar in every way to FatL. They are either run by ‘Friends of the Library’ organisations, and thus initiated and

organised by a group outside the Library staff, or they are more narrowly focused on the Library's resources or displays.¹

Survey Findings

As the survey was made available in various ways, including a link on the Special Collections web page, it is difficult to quantify the potential pool of respondents. However, we estimated that the survey was offered to about 600 people. We received 112 completed surveys.

There were several potential problems with the survey group, from the point of view of anonymity, representativeness and participant bias.

We provided all the usual mechanisms for maintaining anonymity, including those recommended by the Ethics Committee,

but occasionally participants would undermine these efforts by writing personal messages or changes of address on the survey forms.

Although it would have been useful to canvas the opinion of University staff, students and the community who are aware of the FatL series but do not attend, either from choice or for practical reasons, with the particular methodology we employed it was not possible to reach a significant number of these people. This was partly an issue of resources: it was a relatively simple matter to conduct the survey through the usual publicity channels for the events, but to go beyond our mailing list and regular attendees would have required significantly more time, a budget for advertising, and possibly the use of a third party market research organisation.

A possible participant bias was evident in many of the completed surveys. FatL was initiated and has been run since the

¹ This data and the findings of survey questions in the following section are available in tabular form from the authors.

beginning in 2000 by Gillian Dooley, the Special Collections Librarian, who is also the lead researcher on this project. In several of the free text responses Gillian was mentioned by name. Given Gillian's long association with the organisation of these events, it seems that many of the regular attendees identify the events with her. However, it is because of this long association that she was committed to evaluating the series. These personal responses could be viewed as creating bias in the data as the anonymity was removed when people identified themselves and referred to Gillian. However, in the context of this survey and the qualitative nature of the results, this personal connection enriched the responses. The fact that respondents identified with FatL and felt a personal connection to the series through Gillian highlights the fact that FatLs are successful in engaging with the community. Attempts were made to add balance to the research team, but as discussed later, it was not possible to maintain the participation of all the other researchers, owing to staff moves, resignations and other commitments.

Publicity and attendance

The first group of questions concerned the ways in which people found out about the FatL series, and the frequency with which they attend. Questions about the communication channels were useful for us to know what methods of publicity were the most effective for this particular group, but once again there was something of a self-selection bias here, as by definition we did not reach the people who preferred methods of communication we did not use. We did establish that although we use social media in our marketing campaigns, they do not play a large part in attracting attention to our events, and that direct mail and email are the most effective means of communicating with our audience.

FatL is held up to nine times each year and during the previous couple of years 20% of respondents attended more than four events per year, while 45% attended between two and four events per year, with 25% only attending one or none per year. This result could be partly explained by the fact that the FatL attended by almost 15% of

the survey participants was the first one they had been to. 44% of respondents have been attending FatLs for two to five years, 27% for six to ten years, and 15% have been attending for more than ten years.

We asked the respondents to what extent various factors influenced their decision to attend events. 99% of respondents were either somewhat or strongly influenced by the topic, and 97% by the speaker. The timing strongly influenced 51% and somewhat influenced 41%, while the venue was a factor for 76%. Only 14% were strongly influenced by the refreshments on offer – usually a generous afternoon tea, with wine, tea and coffee – but they somewhat influenced another 30%. Several of the free-text comments focussed on the venue, e.g. ‘Even if fascinated by the speaker and topic, I find the city venue impractical for me’, and, on the other hand, ‘The venue influence is negative! Flinders is a long way away’.

We also asked respondents to specify their preferred venue. The Noel Stockdale Room at Flinders University Library, Bedford Park in the southern suburbs of Adelaide is the usual venue, and most

respondents (63%) strongly prefer it, with the Flinders University Victoria Square campus being the second most strongly preferred (29%). Our research has found that changing the regular location of FatL is not popular with the regular attendees who are comfortable and familiar with the afternoon timeslots at the Bedford Park campus. A typical comment was,

Flinders Uni is good for us as we live nearby and attending is easy. The city location requires a deal of arranging, plus parking issues.

However, a more central location such as the Adelaide central business district is an attractive prospect for people who prefer not to attend FatL at the Flinders Library due to the perceived remoteness, limited parking, and inaccessibility of the Bedford Park campus. Comments included ‘work full time in the city: not able to go to the central library’ and ‘Flinders Uni is too far away’.

Subject and format

The subjects covered by FatL tend towards the arts and social sciences, but we make a point of programming speakers from sciences and health each year. We asked respondents to indicate their degree of interest in various topic areas.

The topics that the respondents found ‘very interesting’ were History (74%) and Arts

and Literature (71%), and adding ‘interesting’ takes the scores to 94% and 88% respectively. The topic of Current Affairs was ‘very interesting’ to 40% and ‘interesting’ to 46%. Similarly, the Science and Environment category was ‘very interesting’ to 37% of respondents, but 45% were ‘interested’ in those topics. None of the specified topics scored lower than 63%, when ‘interested’ and ‘very interested’ were aggregated, and Health had the highest ‘neutral’ and ‘uninterested’ scores, at 31% and 7% respectively.

The FatL series includes several different events formats and the results of the survey reveal that although 42% strongly prefer, and

another 42% prefer, attending an event with a single speaker, ‘History at the Movies’ and Musical-Literary events were each ‘strongly preferred’ by 32%, and ‘preferred’ by 42% and 38% respectively. The highest ‘neutral’ score was for Launches (42%), but a substantial minority was neutral in each category about their preferred type of event. A typical comment was ‘it depends on the topic – all could be interesting’.

Respondents were also asked whether they attend similar events at other institutions. 40% responded ‘no’, while 36% attended State Library events and 33% attended events at the Barr Smith Library, Adelaide University. 29% attended events at The University of South Australia, and 21% at RiAus (Royal Institution Australia) in Adelaide city. Other organisations mentioned in the comments included historical societies, the South Australian Writers Centre and University of the Third Age.

Opinions of events

The next two questions were open-ended, with no multiple choice options. Firstly, we asked ‘what do you like most about Fridays at the Library?’. Analysis of the answers shows that most people most find the topics and the speakers interesting, while the atmosphere, the refreshments and the opportunities for networking were also appreciated. The variety of topics was mentioned quite frequently, and respondents liked the opportunity for discussion.

Typical comments include,

The opportunity to receive information and views from informed sources. This information is delivered at the level of the intelligent layperson. Networking over light refreshments is enjoyable.’

And

The opportunity to be brought up to date with advances in learning and current affairs. The opportunity in sharing the various researchers’ data. The sharing afterwards over a drink

of opinions and thoughts with others of a wide range of backgrounds.

And

The range of activities and the pleasant atmosphere in the room.

Secondly, we asked what we could do to improve the series.

The most common answer by far (27 out of a total of 71 responses) was ‘nothing’. The obvious problem with this is that the people who might suggest improvements might not be attending, or not be interested enough in the events in their current format to respond to the survey.

Other comments related to improving publicity and changing the timing and the venue, although the respondents were split between wanting to have all the events at Bedford Park and wanting to have them all in the city. There were also some comments about improving technical aspects such as amplification and sight-lines.

The next question offered a series of words and phrases, and asked respondents to rate how well they described the FatL series. 100% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the events were ‘informed’, while 90% agreed they were ‘stimulating’. 79% agreed that they were ‘topical’, though only 22% strongly agreed. 69% thought they were ‘good for socialising’, though once again only 22% strongly agreed with this. 45% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that they were ‘good for networking’, and the description most commonly disagreed with was ‘controversial’, with 17% disagreeing and 60% neutral.

Question 13 asked respondents what aspects of FatL are most important to them. By far the most important aspect was ‘provides an opportunity to hear interesting speakers on a variety of subjects’, with 83.5% marking this as ‘very important’ and 16.5% ‘important’. Interestingly, another statement which many thought ‘very important’ (53%) or ‘important’ (31%) was ‘raises the profile of the University in the community’. Other responses showed that

respondents thought highly of the opportunity to exchange information with academics, to keep in touch with former colleagues at the University, and the informed discussion of topical subjects. Many respondents thought that FatL are important in that ‘they provide an accessible and welcoming interface between the University and the community’. Another aspect which was thought important was more specific to the Library: to ‘introduce the Library’s collections and services to the broader community’. There were only two comments on this question. One was ‘I appreciate the opportunity to get “unbiased” factual information about “controversial” topics which are often “clouded” by populist media reporting’, and the other was

I have an opportunity to hear live music from professional musicians and other experts in different fields. I enjoy meeting people who share their dream.

Demographics

The final questions were chiefly demographic. We asked respondents to describe their connection with Flinders University. 22% were former students and 21% were former staff, but 28% described themselves as 'visitors'. 16% were current staff, while only 9% were current students. 8% were members of University of the Third Age. 9% put themselves into the 'other' category and gave various explanations, including 'previous professional connections', 'live close by', 'children went to Flinders'.

The majority of respondents (52%) were over the age of 65 years, and another 31% between 55 and 64. Less than 4% were under 35. This is what might be expected from our observations of those who attend our events. It is a common pattern for newly-retired staff to ask to be added to the mailing list and start attending events more regularly in retirement, often bringing partners and friends along.

The sex breakdown was 60% female, 40% male.

From the postcodes provided, we can see that most respondents are from the hills and southern suburbs near Flinders Bedford Park campus, or from the Adelaide CBD and the area immediately surrounding it. This is not surprising, since we collected data at one event held in the city in addition to the Flinders-based events and through our usual publicity network. We correlated the postcodes provided by respondents with their Australia-wide Socio-economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) ranking from the 2011 Census (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). We found that the median SEIFA percentile was 76, with rankings ranging from 12 to 98. The socio-economic spread of respondents is hard to gauge with great confidence, as numbers within each postcode are small, with 47 different postcodes provided by 107 respondents, and many postcode areas are not particularly homogenous in themselves. However, we note that while 47% of postcodes provided by respondents were in the top 20 SEIFA percentile, while 17% were below the 40 SEIFA percentile category.

Limitations of the study

As this survey was targeted at the current audience, and only approximately 10% of respondents had not attended any events in the last two years, there is limited data regarding reasons people do not attend events and the attitudes of non-attendees to the events. There is an opportunity for further study in the social capital created by the FatL series for the Library and the University among the wider community.

Also as noted, there was an apparent bias among the participants in favour of the series and the staff involved. In one way, from the point of view of dispassionate and unbiased research, it may indicate a flaw in research design. However, this is obviously an excellent thing for the Library and for the University, as it shows that over the years during which these events have been run, a significant amount of goodwill has been created among this particular group. It remains to be seen how this level of goodwill will survive the inevitable changes in personnel and evolution of the series, although

we would hope that a study such as this would help identify future directions.

Challenges and limitations

More generally, there is a difficulty in running a project such as this within the Library. The RWG has been established to foster a research culture in the Library, but there is no getting away from the fact that the Library's chief focus remains that of serving the University community in the very practical sense of providing services and resources to support research and teaching.

It is regrettable that almost two years elapsed between the collection of the data, which was completed in September 2013, and the production of any research outputs. The authors of this paper have both been with the project from the beginning, but the research team has undergone several changes of membership due to staff moves and resignations and other changes in circumstances, and even the

remaining members have found it difficult to fit work on the research project into busy professional lives.

It was noted by one of the respondents to the survey of RWG participants undertaken by Hall and McBain that ‘more support from managers [is needed] ... there isn’t enough opportunity to be involved if you are not part of the core research team’ (2014, p. 136). This points to a systemic weakness which is likely to undermine any efforts to encourage disinterested research in an environment such as the Library. On the one hand, research should ideally be conducted at arm’s length from the research subject, but on the other hand, practitioner research in a professional context is likely to be motivated by a wish to investigate or evaluate a program in which the practitioner has a direct interest. This tendency is only amplified by the difficulties managers find in allowing their staff to take time away from their duties to work on research projects, especially when they are in roles which are not easily transferable to casual staff, such as trainee positions or responsible operational roles. Therefore the

members of the team who were not part of the Special Collections team, and who were chosen to provide a more objective outlook on the project, were not able to stay with the project to the end.

It is interesting to reflect on the possible ramifications of the differing nature of academic librarianship in countries such as the USA, where tenure is often an incentive for publication, and Australia, where, ‘unlike many of their US or Canadian counterparts, the majority of academic librarians in Australia are not employed as faculty’ (McBain, Culshaw and Walkley-Hall, 2013, p. 449). Hall and McBain quote studies in their literature review which show that ‘tenure was not the only motivator in conducting research’ (2014, p. 131). However, a structural incentive such as tenure would be likely to influence the institutional culture and encourage management to embed research more readily into staff workloads.

Conclusion

We believe that this research project has been useful and interesting for a variety of reasons, even if the direct results of the survey may not stand up to the most rigorous examination. Those of us who have been involved have gained valuable research skills, including survey design and interpretation of results, whether or not they have been able to stay with the project to completion. Our research has largely confirmed the beliefs about the FatL series that we had formed from anecdotal evidence, and has allowed us to collect demographic information about our audience, which likewise contained few surprises but is useful to have quantified. It has also given our audience an opportunity to provide feedback about the FatL series, which is important in itself as it demonstrates the value we place on their opinions. And despite its limitations, the study has confirmed our belief that the series makes a positive contribution to the University's community engagement objectives, and has provided ideas for developing and improving the series. We believe that it has

been a worthwhile exercise to reflect on a long-running Library program and that provided we regard the results with the proper amount of caution, it is still possible to use the results of this research in planning for the future of this unique and successful Library initiative.

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The importance of place in evaluation of STEM partnerships between Universities and Schools in rural, remote and regional Australia

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Abstract

While investment in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) enterprises is viewed as essential for sustainable economic growth, STEM awareness and skills are sometimes lacking in regional and rural communities. University Outreach programs, developed in partnership with Schools, can play an important role in regional, rural and remote areas by building, supporting and maintaining STEM capability. This paper discusses the complexities of Australian University-School Outreach partnerships in rural and regional settings, with a particular emphasis on partnerships designed to increase teacher capacity and student engagement in STEM fields. Complexities arise due to the very different life experiences of those living in metropolitan, rural and remote settings, and

become even more apparent when the partnership involves different education sectors. For impact, and to successfully meet outcomes, practitioners and researchers working in the rural space must ensure that their projects and programs recognise and respect the rural context from the planning and implementation phases, through to program evaluation and negotiation of future directions.

Dialogue around a shared vision and sense of purpose, supported by clear communication, with consistent and manageable methods of evaluation, is required for the development of resilient and sustainable partnerships. Once established, such partnerships have the potential to positively impact the goals and aspirations of rural students, to aid the growth of strong, viable rural communities and to contribute to strategic, scholastic and social learnings of the university.

Introduction

Many reports highlight the need for a STEM skilled workforce to drive the Australian economy and a STEM literate community to understand and engage with the global challenges associated with world population growth and climate change (Australian Industry group, March 2015; Office of the Chief Scientist, 2014, p. 20; Office of the Chief Scientist, 2013). These outcomes can only be achieved by exposure to inspirational and engaging learning and teaching in both formal and informal education settings, however a rich STEM educational environment cannot be established, maintained or sustained without attention to resourcing.

In rural areas access to social, economic and human resources is limited. This has negative impacts on attracting and retaining personnel across many services in regional Australian economies; the difficulties associated with filling STEM associated roles, in particular, across rural communities is well documented (Lyons,

Cooksey, Panizzon, Parnell, & Pegg, 2006; Marginson, Tytler, Freeman, & Roberts, 2013). Finding and retaining quality candidates to teach in STEM disciplines within schools, particularly in rural and regional areas, is also difficult (Green & Nolan, 2011).

Australian students living outside metropolitan areas are less likely to complete secondary school and, therefore, are under-represented in university student populations compared with their metropolitan counterparts; this discrepancy is especially apparent in STEM areas of study (Gale, Hattam, Parker, Comber, Bills, & Tranter, 2010; Lyons, Cooksey, Panizzon, Parnell, & Pegg, 2006; Sheehan & Mosse, 2011). A number of partnerships in STEM are already in place to address inequity in rural and regional Australia; situations where there is a demand for and/ or lack of specific STEM-based content in rural education centres. There is growing evidence that authentic partnerships spark student engagement and expand

teacher capacity (Redman, Anderson, Cooper, & Bottrell, 2014; Sheehan & Mosse, 2011).

This paper considers the constraints on rural education, particularly in STEM fields, and investigates the role of STEM University-School Outreach partnerships in rural and regional Australia. The impact of the rural space on the potential success of such initiatives is explored. The importance of planning, action, and holistically developed evaluation; and the value of embedding place values and qualities in the program design process, are explored.

Rural Australia

In the context of this paper, the term ‘rural’ encompasses the concepts associated with a social system located outside of Australian capital cities (Ashwood, 2010; Woods, 2005). Further distinction is made that ‘rural’ may include isolation - distance from metropolitan

areas, space between individuals, and smaller community populations (Jessop, Brenner, & Jones, 2008).

The term ‘rural’ is a descriptor that combines social and geographical elements (Lawson, 2007). Australia includes diverse geographic and community contexts; coastal, riverine and desert; tropical and arid; agriculture, industry tourism and mining. When researching in rural space it is necessary to use geographic divisions for bureaucratic management purposes, but an understanding of social perspectives, as well as the impact of geography on communities in rural areas, suggests a more socially inclusive approach may be of assistance in securing rural futures (Hardre, Sullivan, & Crowson, 2009; Marchant, 2013). Some individual and communal features are unique to each rural community, while other broad characteristics may be similar across rural communities. Categorising and sifting characteristics of individual rural communities can be of descriptive value, and can assist in identifying systemic influences. Formative

program evaluation can gather responsive feedback for future delivery of University-School partnerships at a particular site, and also contributes to a consistent national approach to the development of sustainable partnerships.

From a social and geographic perspective, the attributes of rural & regional communities, the way in which these features interrelate, and their subsequent impact on the lives of young people living in rural communities, are regularly underestimated. Physical elements such as transport, technology, human and economic resources, and the concomitant limited access, paucities and shortages, are strongly related to the achievement and aspirations of young people in regional and rural places (Alloway, Gilbert, Gilbert, & Muspratt, 2004; Hardre, 2012; Spielhofer, Golden, & Evans, 2011;). University-School Outreach partnerships can provide the infrastructure to address the diverse needs of individual rural schools, but a flexible model of practice that accommodates unique community

environments is required. An evaluation model that gathers data on individual partnerships, yet contributes to describing the bigger picture of university partnerships, facilitates meaningful engagement of the university sector across rural and regional communities.

Evaluation throughout the establishment, engagement, building and collaborative phases of outreach partnerships can be used to inform program development and to involve educators from universities and schools, experts and community members in experiences to expand the horizons of rural and regional students. An evaluation model that can be applied consistently across different partnerships and settings, thereby providing valuable comparative data for all levels of decision making, is required.

National and International research over the past two decades has identified significant factors that impact on the educational experience and outcomes for regional, rural and remote students (Sellar, Robert Hattam, Bills, Comber, Tranter, & Gale, 2010). These

are: socioeconomic status (SES), student background, geographic isolation and school related experience. While social capital can provide a strong base for student aspiration in rural communities, the positive impact of relationships cannot completely address the inequity that arises due to geographic location, and which impacts directly on the school related experience: the distance a school is from a major urban centre; the distance travelled to school each day or week; the additional economic burden resources including staffing and physical environment of schools impose; and the nature of policy around infrastructure.

The Space – social, systemic & geographic

The levels of connectedness individuals and groups have to ‘place’ can impact on their level of engagement. For different groups in rural Australia there are different histories, and levels of commitment, to a particular place. In some contexts this is financial, and about ownership, in others the connection is spiritual and bound

with heritage. A disconnection between the sense of place students hold and the manner in which curriculum is imposed, such as described by Yunkaporta & McGinty (2009), can lead to disengagement, diminished attendance at school and generally poor prospects for employment and life.

Disconnection can also arise for young people who have been relocated, often because families are seeking employment, seeking reduced costs of living, or have been affected by the impact of globalisation and technology on traditional industries. Counter-urbanisation, the migration of people from large urban centres to smaller rural communities as described by Gurran & Blakely (2007), may also impact on communities in rural locations. Whatever the reasons for relocation, this population shift can contribute to a region that is characterised by low incomes, significant strain on community services and high unemployment (Baum, O'Connor, & Stimson,

2005), which can result in the creation of situations where individuals have little opportunity to experience a sense of place.

Size matters in rural communities. Trust, or bonding social capital, between community members is higher when fewer inhabitants maintain the community (Onyx & Bullen, 2000; Stone & Hughes, 2001), but this trust may be established at the expense of bridging social capital, or trust of ‘outsiders’, or others. Essentially, bonding networks can be described as connecting ‘people who are like one another in important respects’, supporting long held beliefs and norms that perpetuate established community social arrangements (Marchant, 2013, p. 4), while bridging networks link ‘people who are unlike one another’ (Geys & Murdoch, 2010). Depending on the evolution and initial approach for University-School collaborations, partners from higher education or Industry can be considered as ‘other’. Real engagement in partnerships can, therefore, be disrupted by an imbalance of bonding social capital and bridging capital. The

resulting resistance to innovation and collaboration has implications for the development of University-School partnerships in regional areas. Additionally lack of consideration of the rural space in the subsequent development of partnerships may pose engagement and governance challenges for partnerships offered across several communities. The introduction of a model for rural University-School partnerships that can be used nationally; is flexible and responsive to place, collates consistent data across sites, and in which formative evaluation is embedded; provides a foundation for action by participants at all levels of the partnership initiatives - developers, educators, administrators, presenters, funders and policy makers.

Reasons for living and working in the more remote regions include cultural connections to place, especially among Indigenous people, and opportunities for employment, such as tourism, mining, pastoralism, and service activities. Social capital, both bridging and bonding, is often in short supply due to the highly mobile and,

sometimes, extremely divided populations in remote areas (Stafford Smith, Moran, & Seemann, 2008). Policy, mobility and change across non-urban areas contribute to a situation where social and professional networks are limited, technology and transport infrastructure is tenuous and access to service providers for health care, education, and employment can be dependent on travelling long distances.

There is a demonstrated need, and demand for, personal and community connection in rural communities and schools are often the hub for this. Green & Nolan (2011) describe how, in Australia, the tendency is to map education systems as states and territories with a focus on standardised measurement of populations, job placements, outcomes and policy targets. This results in what Donehower, Hogg, & Schell (2007) describe as accountability regimes that “constrain the possibilities of place-sensitive work”. To be a true partner in rural education contexts relies not only on discipline knowledge and provision of learning platforms, but on understandings of place.

Engaging with identified strengths of place, while addressing recognised barriers, enables partnerships to ‘build a picture’ for future practice related to learning & development, engagement and resourcing. Partnerships with embedded constructive evaluation, and which use nuanced understandings of rural space, have the capability to maximise impact, to be economical, and to become sustainable.

The research of White, Lock, Hastings, Cooper, & Reid (2011) balances “people, profit and place” in the Rural Social Space and provides a theoretical structure that describes the elements of rurality, connectedness and their inherent complexity. The model of Rural Social Space (*Figure one*) illustrates the relationships that contribute to the ‘lifeworld’ of people in rural communities. All are interactive and, while economy, geography and demography may remain stable over time, small changes in any one element have the potential to impact on the sustainability of a rural community.

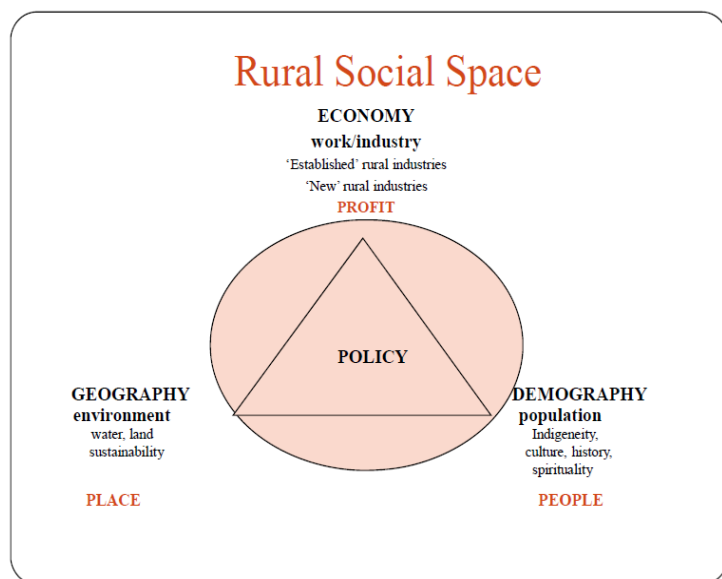


Figure one: *Rural Social Space* White, Lock, Hastings, Cooper, Reid, & Green (2011)

The importance of the Rural Social Space model, where attention is focused on perceptions of place and how space is utilised by certain groups, is becoming more visible in social science and education literature. These perspectives and understandings challenge us to consider a more contemporary view of rural education and assist

us to rethink implications for resource allocation, pre-service teacher education, professional learning and academic partnerships.

Rethinking associations offers us the opportunity to consider the culturally complex nature of the personal, space and place; where competing and complementary behaviours are enacted by different social groups (Green & Nolan, 2011). The manner in which stakeholders interrelate throughout the development and implementation of University-School Outreach programs in rural locations will impact on program effectiveness. It is therefore crucial to embed an efficient strategy for the identification and measurement of interaction into an evaluation format. *Figure two* illustrates the basis of a model for evaluation derived from research into existing University-School partnerships in rural Australia. Categories considered as being of most importance to contemporary developers, implementers, presenters and administrators of University-School Outreach partnerships throughout the Assemble/Engage/Build/Collaborate phases have been determined

through analysis of survey and case study data gathered 2014-15 Mosse, Bottrell, Lyons & Skourdoumbis, in preparation. These categories are: resources, communication, organisation and relationships.



Figure two: Model for evaluation of STEM Outreach partnerships (Mosse, Bottrell, Lyons & Skourdoumbis, in prep)

Awareness of, and detailed attention to, these categories within the unique nature of space, population and place in individual

regional communities during the planning through to evaluation phases provides opportunities to build responsiveness into partnerships (Goos, Lowrie, & Jolly, 2007; Kruger, Davies, Eckersley, Newell, & Cherednichenko, 2009). In league with a sound methodology, this openness can inform aspirations, expand capacity, enhance outcomes and contribute to program sustainability.

Aspirations

Aspirations are personal, yet can also be communal. Research indicates that place; family, peers and community members, including teachers, all have a significant impact on the aspirations of young rural Australians (Redman, Anderson, Cooper, & Bottrell, 2014). Experience, achievement, motivation and aspiration are interconnected for young people, and opportunity is different in rural areas. The term aspiration is also sometimes prefixed with the qualifiers *low*, *realistic* and *high*. The use of such qualifiers illustrates the complexity of perceptions surrounding aspirations. Despite

widespread use of the term, a recent and ongoing investigation into the aspirations of young people in UK schools highlighted “the lack of rigorous thought about what exactly aspirations are, where they come from, what affects them and whether they actually make a difference to educational and occupational outcomes” (St.Clair & Benjamin, 2010, p.2). The complexities involved in the development and incorporation of program evaluation that is both sensitive to the personal and communal, but also delivers reliable systemic data, creates challenges.

The aspirations of rural young people cannot be viewed as personal attributes entirely within that individual’s control. Rather, they are situated within and affected by particular opportunities, constraints and circumstances; students cannot aspire to what they don’t know (Appadurai, 1996). Each young person in rural and regional Australia has core personal attributes, which are impacted to varying degrees by social, systemic and geographic factors. Research

indicates that the impact of these factors on the aspirations of young rural Australians can vary significantly from the aspirations of those living in urban areas (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008; Hardre, 2012; Perry & McConney, 2013). Equity issues around the accessibility of existing technology, internet and mobile coverage, compounded by geography, economics and policy anomalies, limit the ability of rural young people to imagine where they would like to be (Appadurai, 1996).

Advancements in communication and transport have provided more flexibility and choice, opening rural areas to become more diverse. However, the lure of greater opportunities and access to services and facilities can encourage population migration to cities and major urban centres, while at the same time some regional and rural areas of Australia are attracting people from cities (Anwar McHenry, 2011). The expanded accessibility and mobility of rural populations provides exposure to a knowledge base of experts,

activists and educators which, when interwoven with local context and expertise, can impact positively on teacher capacity and student aspirations, competence and confidence.

Aspirations are not necessarily static and may change over a young person's lifetime. St Clair & Benjamin (2010) developed The Dynamic Aspirations Loop (*Figure three*) which illustrates the cyclical nature of future thinking and decision making by a young person, who may be considering more than one goal at any given time. The difference between information and perception must be made and recognised, as aspirations cannot be met if a young person lacks a full understanding of the requirements and opportunities for meeting their potential. Information and perceptions have been shown to be connected to experiences at school, within the community and, to varying degrees, the opinions of family, friends, peers, sports coaches and teachers (Spielhofer, Golden, & Evans, 2011; St Clair & Benjamin, 2010). There are many ways to increase the flow of

information to young people in rural locations, in and out of school.

University-School partnerships can provide a strategy to increase this flow of information. The scholarly activity around partnerships should be based on quality research and conducted as part of, not apart from, the community. This approach can contribute to relationship building, increased participation rates in higher education, community cohesion and sustainable approaches to lifelong learning (Gale, Hattam, Parker, Comber, Bills, & Tranter, 2010; Halsey, 2006).

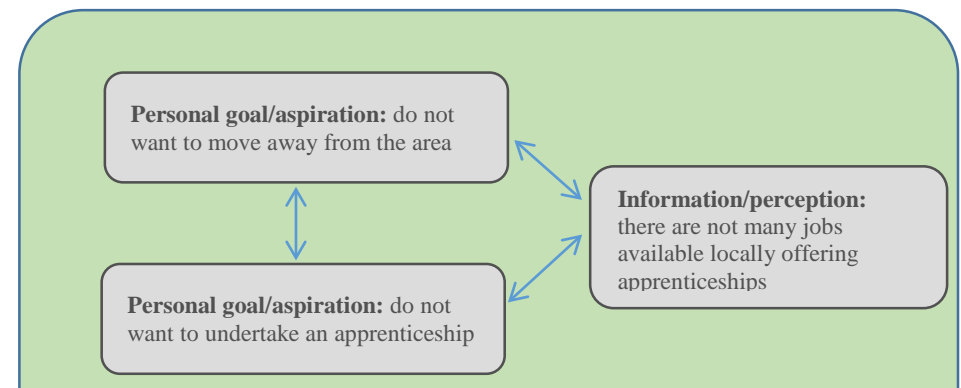


Figure three: Dynamic Aspirations Loop (St Clair & Benjamin, 2010, p. 1)

Thoughtful, place based scholarship suggests that there are aspects of the lifeworld of rural young people that consistently affect their life, career motivations and aspirations. What is beginning to become more obvious, through education and health research in rural communities, is that there may be a huge difference in the way that the same factors shape the aspirations of a young person in Rockingham, Western Australia, and a similarly aged young person from a rural community in Northern Queensland. While not easily simplified, the expectations of students held by teachers are influential. Studies internationally, and in the Australian context, have shown that the relationships between students and their teachers in rural locations can significantly impact educational and career outcomes (Barley & Beesley, 2007; Hardre, 2012; Yunkaporta & McGinty, 2009).

While economic and social aspects of regional contexts may vary in rural communities, school communities accommodate many

students whose aspirations and expectations are firmly targeted at furthering their education and training. For the most part, the desire to continue learning after completing school appears to be the norm amongst rural students. Talk about transitions from school to work and the necessity for further education and training appears to be “naturalised in student discourse about their futures” (Alloway, Gilbert, Gilbert, & Muspratt, 2004, p. 119). Depending on academic, economic and personal attributes, these expectations may be far removed from the possibilities available to rural young people.

Studies over the past decade have reflected similar narratives and identify the potential for unrealistic expectations around higher education and career aspirations of rural young people, not matched to their educational choices and achievement (Redman, Anderson, Cooper, & Bottrell, 2014). Results of a longitudinal study involving 315 young people suggest that the relationship between expectations and aspirations are potentially very important; that the influence of

adolescents' future-oriented thinking on their behaviour at school and their future attainment equates with achievement (Beal & Crockett, 2010). Idealised aspirations and realistic expectations play out in subject choices and achievements in school. This is particularly relevant in STEM, where subject choices at school and subsequent career pathways can have positive and negative impacts on future participation. In response to the 2015 Federal Budget, the Australian Labour Party outlined a plan to create jobs by promoting STEM education and training (Australian Financial Review, 2015; Australian Labour Party, 2015; Stollman, Startupsmart, 2015). Stollman (2015) sees the lack of detail in the proposal as a valid criticism. Alternately the proposed curriculum changes, alongside the financial and scholarship incentives planned to propel students into careers in STEM, including teaching, have the ability to (re)shape the public perception of (STEM) industries, thereby boosting the economy and creating jobs. The positives are obvious, but measures to ensure equity of access to educational and personnel resources need to be

examined closely in relation to connection with aspirations, place and partnerships.

So what are the specific factors that have the potential to impact on student aspirations in rural areas? Information or perceptions about opportunities, educational or work, can shape young people's aspirations, yet many reports have identified the potential for incongruity between aspirations and actions (Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004; Kirk, Lewis, Scotta, Nilson, & Colvin, 2011). A recent study, conducted in a region of the USA sharing qualities of rural space with rural and regional Australia, presents a contemporary profile of the educational and vocational aspirations of rural youth. Meece, Hutchins, Byun, Farmer, Irvin, & Weiss, (2013) examined the educational alignment of the reported aspirations of rural students. Using multinomial regression procedures, the study also examined the role of multiple contexts of family, individual, and school in explaining variations in the aspirations of rural youth. Findings

indicated that a majority of rural youth in this USA study wanted to obtain a two- or four-year college degree, and aspired to adulthood occupations requiring college degrees. Results showed that while 40% of participants had aligned educational and occupational aspirations, 46% overestimated the level of education needed to meet their career goals and 24% had under-aligned aspirations (p.183). Together with previous research findings (Meece, Hutchins, Byun, Farmer, Irvin, & Weiss, 2013), more recent findings highlight the need for ongoing research to investigate the complex interactions between aspects of students' lives and environments within the context of place (Perry & McConney, 2013; Redman, Anderson, Cooper, & Bottrell, 2014; Sheehan & Mosse, 2011).

Research and evaluation contextualised in rural space can better prepare rural youth for the transition to adulthood, enabling them to fulfil informed social and occupational aspirations and, potentially, to impact on the sustainability of regional areas.

Partnerships between universities and schools, or teams of schools, have the potential to examine the rural space and work towards convergence. To be inclusive and responsive, evaluation of University-School partnerships in rural Australia must include place based traits, qualities and barriers. For success partnerships must be supported, evaluation conducted and appropriate parameters measured consistently.

While the current climate within education may be one of accountability, often with a focus that is individualistic rather than collective, government policy underlies expectations for the formation of partnerships. Bloomfield (2009) describes growing pressure for the formation of relationships between universities and education sectors, schools, students and teachers that extend to community building. While the rhetoric around the role of partnerships and community is glowing, the realities associated with both forming and sustaining partnerships that aspire to inform and strengthen communities are

complex and continue to create challenges for both academics and teachers.

Partnerships

Partnerships are collaborations which can involve multiple stakeholders working together for a specific purpose, best described as a social practice achieved through and characterised by trust, mutuality and reciprocity (Kruger, Davies, Eckersley, Newell, & Cherednichenko, 2009). Diminishing resources, and the potential of collective impact to positively affect outcomes, naturally highlight the role of partnerships in addressing issues of inequity and effective management of funds and assets. Critical to the issue of resourcing is assessment of learning outcomes and evaluation of broader partnership outcomes. Research into University-School STEM outreach partnerships in rural Australia has been conducted over the past 18 months in all states and territories. All Universities offering rural outreach STEM partnerships were involved and findings indicate

that more than 30 % of programs do not involve formal evaluation (Mosse, Bottrell, Lyons, Skourdoumbis & John, in preparation). On a much larger scale, in the European context, Kudenko, Simarto, & Pinto Casuulleras (2015) have investigated collaborations between schools and industry involving 1500 classrooms between 2011-2014. In total, 79 STEM education partnerships developed by European industry were sampled. Of these, 73% were considered to be 'not properly evaluated' (p.3).

Globally, university administrators are being forced to reconsider the roles that universities play, and to re-evaluate relationships within the various constituencies, with increasing emphasis on engagement of industrial and regional partners (AIG, 2013; Jongbloed, Enders, & Salerno, 2008). Internationally successful partnership initiatives, supporting creative, contemporary learning and teaching in school mathematics, technology and science, have been identified in a number of STEM-strong countries including

Korea, the UK and Canada (Marginson, Tytler, Freeman, & Roberts, 2013).

Partnerships in education can be initiated in response to a problem, can be developed to meet the needs of different individuals or groups, be the result of a group-think approach to limited resources, or part of a move to advocate for change. The complexities of rural space make it difficult to develop, let alone impose, a responsive implementation model with embedded evaluation for partnerships involving rural schools and universities. The uniqueness of these two education systems, together with diverse local characteristics of place, means that there are a number of distinct as well as interconnected aspects to be considered: different reasons for the project being proposed and initiated; diverse perspectives of stakeholders; varied educational and management practices, ways of responding to cultural diversity and, particularly for more remote communities, degrees of

isolation and access. These characteristics may be considered as barriers to success, but also as creating unique breeding grounds for inspiration around problem posing, creative conversations, problem solving and truly connected cross system enterprises.

When partnerships occur across different educational systems, or are what Gray (1989) terms ‘intersystemic partnerships’, the factors motivating the parties to collaborate and the outcomes expected need to be clearly communicated (p.11). Individuals and groups positioned in different systems should have an understanding of the possibilities, limitations, and procedures relevant to each organisation. Clarity of communication in partnerships is an imperative, from ‘big picture’ thinking to the detail for daily practice. It is important that the purpose and communication between systems forming partnerships is made clear, with all stakeholders informed and on board. While partnerships may have evolved for different reasons, the purpose of both formal and informal structures within the partnership must be

agreed on and reached through some form of consensus to maximise potential, and allow for strong evaluation (Kruger, Davies, Eckersley, Newell, & Cherednichenko, 2009) .

Suggestions from outside an organisation can often contest the views of those within the organisation, thereby creating tensions, but may also add richness and allow dialogue around a range of options that may have previously been considered untenable (Moriarty & Gray, 2003). Although distance can create barriers, dependent on access, technology provides the opportunity for formal and informal conversations between stakeholders in rural partnerships to take place regularly; the value of these conversations cannot be underestimated (Goodrum & Rennie, 2007; Goos, Lowrie, & Jolly, 2007). A framework for the development of partnerships, including a model for evaluation which heightens and measures the degree of communication within organisations, and across partnerships, provides a starting place for dialogue.

The Bradley Review of Higher Education in Australia (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008) saw the growth of incentive schemes and programmes to encourage universities to reach out to external communities, especially those in lower socioeconomic regions. While identifying the fiscal and scholastic benefits of these initiatives, Jongbloed, Enders, & Salerno (2008) acknowledge that such processes can create barriers to the development of truly collaborative linkages. Convergence and collective learning, with a focus on a transdisciplinary approaches to content and structure, provide a viable base and framework for formation and sustainability of partnerships within the rural space. From initial investigations and evidence, rural University-School partnerships grounded in strong and considered collaborative development appear to be sustainable.

STEM Outreach partnerships and (Educational) outcomes for rural youth

The factors, actions and considerations required for a holistic approach to the formation and maintenance of University - School partnerships are summarized in *Figure four*. This *Action, Capacity, Impact* model is a starting point from which to begin to address the difficulties documented by schools in regional Australia: employing and retaining educators who are qualified to teach in STEM; building consistent student attendance; increasing student engagement with STEM subjects; motivating and encouraging high achievement; broadening of aspirations and providing a foundation on which students can meet their potential (Karmel & Lui, 2011).

Connected and balanced University-School Outreach partnerships have the potential to increase student engagement through connected learning and teaching, thereby instigating a positive impact on regular student attendance, providing a climate of

high expectation in regard to achievement and creating experiences that foster situated and realistic aspirations. A report from the Chief Scientist's Office (2014) states too few high-performing STEM students aspire to teaching careers and many graduating teachers bypass STEM altogether. A new norm is being reached in STEM; teaching 'out of field' (Office of the Chief Scientist, 2014: 21). For educators involved in partnerships, alternate viewpoints, new discipline content and renewed confidence may emerge. For students, increased awareness and an expanded view of the world, potential careers and lifeworld can be reframed by the combined resources and new perspectives provided through partnerships. In the longer term, continuing University-School partnerships have the capacity to impact on developing the resilience and the sustainability of rural communities.

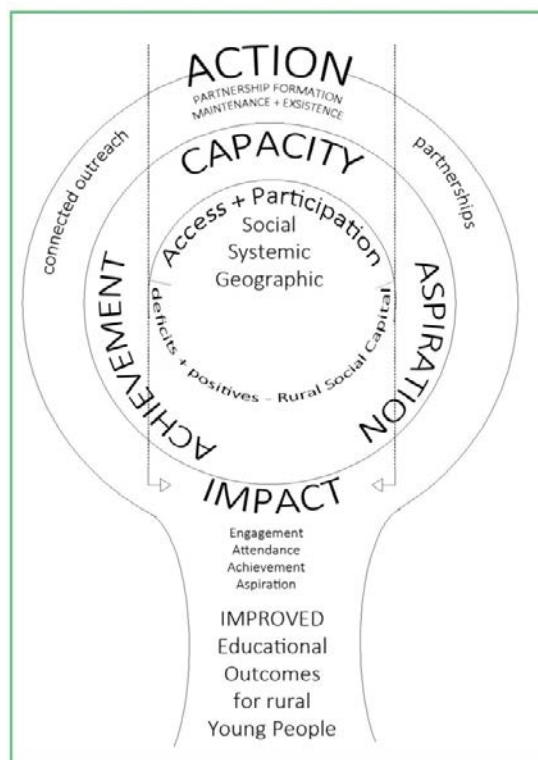


Figure four: Action Capacity Impact – achievement of aspiration model considerations for the formation and maintenance of University - School partnerships (Mosse, Bottrell, Lyons, & Skourdoumbis; in preparation)

Partnerships between universities, discipline specialists and schools in rural communities have been shown to engage students, build capacity of educators and inspire achievement (Rennie,

2012; Sheehan & Mosse, 2011). The quality of outcomes is dependent on attention to detail and clear communication. The gathering of economic, academic and environmental evidence using a ‘rural’ perspective is vital to the sustainability of STEM partnerships, and will inform future relationships with regional partners, whether industrial or educational. For university decision makers, a research agenda that includes systematic evaluation of university partnerships has important implications for governance and accountability arrangements. Reciprocity exists in research, scholarship and partnerships that seek to recognise the unique nature of different rural communities and to identify a two-way investment of trust and mutuality. A partnership structure that clearly defines the purpose of the program, or project, and an analysis framework to address and evaluate the features of effective partnerships, is enabling and collates evidence for future funding.

Conclusion

University-School partnerships must be established with a view to the development and maintenance of strong respectful relationships that accommodate the complex nature of rural communities. For STEM partnerships, there is a need to better document, understand, and plan the response to the key pressures which influence the aspirations of young people, and the future of their rural communities. Open communication, improved access to expertise and resources, and increased engagement can create an environment for conversations around barriers and enablers, addressing perceived obstructions to aspiration, at school and beyond, so that students are enabled to be ambitious in career and life pathways, within or away from their community.

A barrier to determining the extent of strong and considered collaborative partnerships is the absence of rigorous, relevant & consistent evaluation of program outcomes in relation to resourcing.

An effective evaluation model must be built around notions of equity and collaboration and directly address those factors identified as crucial to the success of University-School partnerships, with equivalent contributions from key stakeholders. Such an evaluation model can build trust, increase community connectedness to program outcomes and guide the direction of future partnerships.

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Arts-based service learning with First Peoples: Interlocking Communities of Practice

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Abstract

The core of service learning in post-secondary education is a range of partnerships between higher education institutions and communities, as co-generators of knowledge. This paper, reporting from a national arts-based service learning project involving three Australian universities, is concerned with communities of practice that influence stakeholder values and attitudes as well as enhancing the work readiness of pre-service teachers and university students in music, screen arts and journalism. It builds on seven years of practice and research in arts-based service learning with Aboriginal communities (2009-2015) and a nationally funded project that

entailed service-learning programs at three Australia universities in partnership with Aboriginal communities in regional and metropolitan areas Australia (2011-2013). Drawing on the concept of *Ubuntu*, or humanness, the paper discusses the benefits and challenges of working as an interlocking community of practice. Within this community, inter-relationships underpinned members' understandings of self as researchers, educators, learners and human beings, and as part of a network of inter-dependence through which our understandings of being human were troubled by our need to rethink our sense of community, culture and history.

Keywords: *Service learning, Communities of practice*

Introduction

The concept of a community of practice was initially introduced as a way of thinking about knowledge management, reflection and learning within commercial organisations. The term “communities of practice”, a phrase coined by Wenger (1998), emphasises that learning is an intensely social practice and that this is so for all learners - even, and perhaps especially, adults and professionals. Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) argue that informal social networks which form around (or perhaps despite of) individuals and institutions can be profound sites of learning where communities, social practices, meanings and identities intersect in productive and sometimes unexpected ways. As Wenger (1998, p. 215) writes:

... learning transforms who we are and what we can do, it is an experience of identity. It is not just an accumulation of skills and information, but a process of becoming – to become a certain person ... a specific kind of person.

Communities of practice challenged conventional boundaries and created the possibility of what Wenger (1998, p. 118) described as a new “landscape of practice”. Analysing this landscape, Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) noted that organisational practices took on a community dimension when different people, with different expertise, worked together on common tasks and learned from each other. The communities of practice approach is, consequently, an organic one, using qualitative data from work on which partners have collaborated to extract how such partnerships are best conceptualised and cultivated (Hart & Wolff, 2006).

This organic approach within a landscape of practices describes how our arts-based service learning (ABSL) research with communities of First Peoples has been conducted and disseminated. Research across the three Australian programs at Griffith University, University of Western Sydney and Curtin University has also shown us how a relationship-focused, strengths-based approach, underpinned by

community leadership and critical reflection, can lead to transformational learning experiences (Bartleet, Bennett, Power & Sunderland, 2014). This paper extends our research and thinking through consideration of interlocking communities of practice: communities that, whether school based, studio based or print media based, intersect in a network that has enabled the communities to share their learning and to learn from each other.

Drawing on the concept of *Ubuntu*, or humanness, the paper discusses the types of learning we have acquired by working as an interlocking community of practice. Within this community context we describe how inter-relationships underpinned members' understandings of self as researchers, educators and learners, and as part of a network of inter-dependence through which our understandings of being human were troubled by our need to rethink our sense of community, culture and history. Emphasising the *process* of *Ubuntu*, or humanness, we also discuss three interconnected ways of learning: namely, *Ways of Knowing*, *Ways of Being*, and *Ways of Doing*

(Bartleet, Bennett, Marsh, Power & Sunderland, 2014). Finally, we draw on our experiences of community to consider how university-based service learning can best be positioned for longer-term community engagement.

Theoretical framework

In this paper, we combine a range of conceptual-theoretical resources with the experiences of students, community members and educators. We also draw on insights from the critical service learning approach we have used in our practice, because it enables us to focus the development of intercultural relationships on authenticity, social change and agency: "... to analyse the interplay of power, privilege, and oppression at the service placement and in their experience in that placement" (Mitchell, 2008, p. 65).

Our thinking for this paper is underpinned by the African philosophy of *Ubuntu*. In his review of the philosophy, West (2014, p. 48) cites definitions including "humanism or humaneness" (Mnyaka &

Motlhabi, 2009) and “the process of becoming an ethical human being” (Mkhize 2008). Mkhize’s focus on process is particularly pertinent to our service-learning work because it is in the social process of being and becoming that our understandings of self as researchers, educators, learners and human beings are troubled and (re)framed. According to Ramose (1999, in West, 2014, p. 48), “Ubuntu is best understood as a combination of ‘ubu-’ meaning ‘being’ or ‘be-ing becoming’, and ‘-ntu’ representing ‘being’ taking concrete form, or ‘temporarily having become.’” In contrast with Western individualism, *Ubuntu* emerges as theoretical framework in which the process of being and becoming human can be examined in relation to its social construction and its enactment within interlocking communities.

Approach

The notion of a community of practice and its foregrounding of learning as social practice, as identity work and as being and becoming

human, underpins our attempts to further theorise service learning. Here, we were guided by two studies of learning communities consisting of supervisors and postgraduate students (Bennett & Male, forthcoming; Harrison, Pithouse-Morgan, Conolly, & Meyiwa, 2012) in which *Ubuntu* was employed to help understand the community and its relationships. Participant experiences are drawn from interviews, journals, digital stories, and written reflections completed by all stakeholders as part of the service-learning project.

Once ethical approvals were granted, students were invited to participate in one of three service-learning programs in which they would work with Aboriginal community members on community-led projects. Two of these were located in Tennant Creek in Australia’s Northern Territory, and the third was located in metropolitan Perth, Western Australia. Students at the Queensland Conservatorium Griffith University (QCGU) worked with artists at the Winanjjikari Music Centre, where they recorded music, attended song-writing workshops, and helped with the Barkly Regional Arts Desert Harmony Festival.

Each program incorporated intercultural training and orientation together with discipline-specific and general support for students.

Pre-service music and drama students from the University of Western Sydney also worked in Tennant Creek and surrounding areas, where they taught in schools, interacting with welfare initiatives and contributed to community programs with the Australian Literacy and Numeracy Foundation. The Curtin University program involved students from screen arts and journalism, who worked for a semester with local Aboriginal communities to help document and report programs relating to community concerns such as grief and loss, health and wellness, and negative reporting of Australia's First Peoples in the mainstream media.

The team undertook three waves of analysis. Thematic discourse analysis commenced with formative work conducted by team members (see Bartleet, 2012; Bartleet & Carfoot, 2013; Bartleet, Bennett, Marsh, Power & Sunderland, 2014) and this provided an initial thematic coding schema that was adopted and refined to meet the needs

of the national project. Aboriginal people on the team's advisory board advised and gave feedback on all aspects of the study, including language and research approaches. The team has acted on the belief that cultural settings are significant drivers of methodology. Next, qualitative data (interviews and focus groups with students, teachers and community members) were analysed using NVIVO (version 10) software. The number of interviewees was 124 over a period of three years in 2011-2013. The analysis involved inter-rater checking of coded material at regular intervals. Finally, the coding schema was streamlined to develop interdisciplinary interpretations of the full dataset. Analysis of the data revealed key themes: building relationships; reciprocity; and reflection. Other related issues included the importance of sitting down on country, respecting diverse cultures and worldviews, and engaging in critical reflection. Expert peers evaluated the final dataset before the team adopted it.

Findings and Discussion

Discussed earlier, we have drawn on the philosophy of *Ubuntu* to help explain the social process of being and becoming that underpins our understandings of self as a network of researchers, educators, learners and human beings. In seeking to trouble and (re)frame dominant and/or unconscious beliefs we have also been inspired by Aboriginal scholar Karen *Booran Mirraboopa* Martin's (2003) descriptions of a *Quandamooka* worldview, which highlight three key ways in which the process of learning can occur. Our combined dataset revealed three of these interconnected "ways of learning" to be common across each of our programs: namely, *Ways of Knowing*, *Ways of Being*, and *Ways of Doing*. These insights have formed the basis of the Framework shown in abridged form at Table 1 (Bartleet, Bennett, Marsh, Power & Sunderland, 2014), which aims to promote reflection on how to support respectful and mutually beneficial learning partnerships with First Peoples.

Table 1 Abridged Ways of Knowing, Being and Doing

Ways of learning	Ways of engaging	Key insights derived from the project
Knowing	Sitting down on country	Whether the ABSL program involves travelling to a remote, far away country or rediscovering the country that one regularly lives on, a very necessary step is to slow down, observe and connect with the country and its people. This will most likely ensure a much deeper engagement for all concerned.
	Respecting culture & First Peoples' worldviews	When value is placed on respecting and learning about Aboriginal cultures and worldviews from Elders and the artists themselves, we begin to take a vital step towards embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander curriculum content in a way that privileges the holders of that content.
	Transforming understandings & worldviews through critical reflection	When critical reflection accompanies the embodied and emplaced learning experiences in ABSL programs, participants have the potential to experience deep and long-lasting lessons that radically transform their understandings of themselves, their arts-practice, and the world around them.
Being	Building and deepening relationships	Taking the time to develop trusting relationships with people and partners is the most fundamentally important part of this work. These relationships underpin everything that is learned and experienced on these ABSL programs, and without them any kind of meaningful engagement is not possible.
	Learning & sharing in reciprocal ways	Embracing an asset-based approach to ABSL programs allows us to become attuned to the reciprocal and mutually beneficial ways in which participants learn from one another in these contexts. When viewed this way <i>all</i> participants are active learners with something valuable to share.

To illustrate how our interlocking communities of practice influence stakeholder values and attitudes as well as enhancing the work readiness of pre-service teachers and university students, we first discuss the different types of learning we have encountered as an interlocking community of practice. Next, we align this learning with our mission to ensure that our students become work ready. We then explore the inter-relationships within this community and how they underpin members' understandings of self as researchers, educators, learners and human beings. Within this we give examples of how, through a network of inter-dependence, members' understandings of being human were troubled by the need to rethink our sense of community, culture and history. We end with recommendations for how these insights might be applied to practice in other settings, programs and contexts.

Working and learning as interlocking communities

The notion of communities of practice and its foregrounding of learning as a social practice and as identity work leads us to consider how we might further theorise service learning. In this paper we highlight the way in which each of our programs has learned from those in previous years (longitudinal community learning), has learned from the other contemporaneous programs within our national project (intra-community learning), and has learned from the First People's communities with which we have worked (inter-community learning).

Longitudinal learning

Longitudinal community learning is perhaps most evident when people from a completed service-learning experience come to speak to a subsequent group. In this sense, even within university-based communities of practice where student members may be active members only for a specific time, the community remains an agile,

member-based organisation within which knowledge is transferred according to the needs of its members.

When this learning is scheduled rather than opportunistic or fluid, as is often the case within time-constrained service-learning programs, the value of new learning is sometimes not realised by members until some time in the future. This was evidenced by student teacher Ellen, who reflected on the point at which the relevance of earlier learning has been realised:

The guy who talked about his experience last year, Paul, said, “It’s all about the kids”, and I didn’t get it then. But he’s right. When you get here, it’s all about the kids. Teaching here’s so different – physically different. It would be good to show the way kids react to teaching, such as the amazing things you see in that music room. It would be good to show the way kids behave differently –

there’s an entirely different culture. I think the language to describe it is really limited.

Music graduate Greg described a similar experience when he returned to the program two years later as a peer mentor:

I’ve changed a lot in two years and I think ... it’s just re-cementing the values which I learned last time but may have forgotten. ... There are just so many layers and so much depth within every different part that you can be learning for years and still only scratch the surface. I guess that was a learning curve in itself, just the only way that you immerse yourself in a different culture is just by taking the time to learn. I feel like I’m better at communicating with the guys as well, and being a part of the team again, which is – I’ve done a lot of work by myself or in very small groups and just “troubadouring”

around and having to find that social skill set just to make all the bits work. That was a bit tough at the start for me but I think I grew into it.

Intra-community learning

As in any community of practice, intra-community learning occurred between all stakeholders. On our case this occurred in formal modes relating to technical, cultural and discipline-specific knowledge, and in formal modes relating to these aspects and more. With the pre-service teachers, for example, even in the first year of the program the importance of the evening meal and debrief was evident:

It did not happen every night. When the team would come together, the sharing not only of the meal but of the preparation of the meal was important. Then everyone around the table would have a chance to speak – what their

class was like, how their teaching was progressing, what resources they were thinking of using. (Anne)

In very practical ways, the debrief sessions were experienced by students as an occasion for supporting one another. Debriefing enabled the students to critically observe their own and others' practice: to "think for themselves, question and engage in dialogue" (Trede & McEwen, 2012, p. 29). One example of this comes from pre-service teacher Terri, who had decided to make a tree shape she called a 'poe-tree' (poetry), on whose branches she wanted to hang the printed poems written by her class. Another member of the group had carpentry skills and helped construct a simple tree shape from plywood. The collaboration and shared practice was valued by the group, one of whom wrote:

Speaking about the people on this team, I've got so much time for them and so much respect. It's been an amazing experience making friends with them. (Lee)

Inter-community learning

The community learning experience *within* student cohorts (intra-community learning) was also felt *between* communities as the relationship of trust developed between those who had come from the universities, either as undergraduates or post graduates, and the broader community. This inter-community learning emerged from candid and empathetic discussions (McDermott, 2000) about what the members wanted to achieve, what they were enjoying, and what challenges they had faced. The journalism and screen arts students worked together in inter-disciplinary teams, and they found new value in working beyond their regular discipline communities:

... it was a group ... able to bounce ideas off each other, I think that really helped quite a bit. ... journos and FTV [film and

television] students coming together to form a group instead of just isolating them apart, having that difference. (Cabe, journalism)

Similarly, pre-service teacher Lynne, who wanted to give her students the opportunity to perform a new dance as a “flash mob”, was pleased that her teacher peers went along to support and encourage her and the students. She was, however, surprised that interlocking community relationships—what she described as an “outer community”—stepped in to enable the event’s success:

I always expected the students to be really close like a family, but I have realised that they really care and look out for each other within their school community and outer community. It is wonderful to see the students connect and work together in such a way.

A related type of learning experienced across our community of practice work relates to the interactions between First People's teachers and their communities. Heather, a teacher working in Elliott, north of Tenant Creek, talked of needing to engage in inter-community learning in order to strengthen ties with the community in which her school is located. For Heather, the development of what Wenger (2010) calls "regimes of competence" was essential in order to meet the community's expectations of competence and, as a result, to gain membership:

When I came up here, a lot of the old people that I met, we used to go out for culture trips with the school. They were strong in believing "you've got to learn to say it, you've got to learn your own language". They used to get me to say words that I didn't know. Then I learned. (Heather)

It is from demonstrations of ways of learning and from the strong beliefs of Indigenous communities that we have drawn our plans to make projects enduring and sustainable. Our programs have always been delivered in consultation with the communities in which they are situated. In each project, relationships have driven our agenda, determined our community activities and underscored our intra- and inter- community interactions. Community members have valued the engagement that is central to a community approach, reflecting that "a lot of the time, people go through these experiences - they have the opportunity, they look, listen and they learn, but they don't have that opportunity to engage" (Kate, community member).

An enduring sign of this learning is the way in which some of our student and pre-service teacher participants have been given "skin names" relating to Aboriginal kinship groups. This complex system determines how people relate to each other and their roles, responsibilities and obligations in relation to one another, ceremonial business and land. In line with *ubuntu*, skin names helped students to

realise the inter-connectedness of people and place. As such, skin names prompted students to focus on their process of becoming by reframing each “action already performed, an enduring action or state of be-ing, and the openness to yet another action or state of be-ing (Ramose, 2003, in West, 2014, p. 49). Along with the students, we have been trusted with a sense of the community that is how First Peoples care and interact with each other and their country.

Communities of practice and developing work-ready graduates

As educators working in higher education, we are concerned with how such experiences help students to develop their work readiness in terms of intercultural competencies: what experiences shape the commitment and capacity to challenge inequality and injustice, and how these relate to students’ experiences within the communities of practice. The reflections of all those who have engaged with First Peoples’ communities illustrate that these experiences are transformative for them personally and professionally. Working and

learning alongside experienced teachers, musicians, journalists and community Elders has brought about change in the ways of thinking, worldviews and values of all stakeholders.

In terms of the students, these regimes of competence were achieved through *engagement* with others, *imagining and locating* one’s self as a professional, and *aligning* one’s self as a learner, professional and human. The transformative learning that arose from students’ lived experiences within these communities resulted in or what Denzin (1989, p. 70) has called illuminative epiphanies: “interactional moments and experiences which leave marks on people’s lives”. Community members valued these outcomes, relating them most often to experiences that might prompt students to rethink the dominant discourse about Aboriginal people. Community members were particularly keen for students to consider “who is heard in the media and how they are heard and represented” (Thomson, Bennett, Johnston & Mason, 2015, p. 145). This is seen in the following quote from community member Craig:

This is good for say Aboriginal black fella and white fella relations ... the students, when they come to an Aboriginal blackfella community, they've no idea what it is. The only sort of stories they have is what they see on the news and what other people tell them about blackfella communities. So when they come here it's really good for them - it gets them to learn first-hand and, you know, and they get involved. Then they go back with different ideas from what they come with in the first place. (Craig)

As a result of this thinking, professional identities have broadened and deepened to allow for enriched cultural meanings shaped by intercultural relationships. For journalism student Tabitha, recognition of the uninformed assumptions about Aboriginal people had prompted her to rethink her own position, and that of the mainstream media. In one reflection, she wrote:

...there just needs to be some sort of cultural understanding. Because it's not just about Aboriginal Australians, it makes you rethink your attitudes towards every other race. It's not always like blatant racism usually; it's the assumptions that you've made. (Tabitha)

Music student Kim also reflected on coming to a more respectful view:

...the culture of these Indigenous people is so different from my prior understandings about what their culture was, and they have been blown out of the water. I've learnt so much about who they are. I sort of - yeah, I just felt a lot of respect. (Kim)

Reflections also motivated action, seen here in the comments of pre-service teacher Bronte:

I think it means not trying to push my ways, but try to understand why things are the way they are. The root of the problem is bigger than me coming in for a time to educate in the classroom. But you hear people say, and I was one of them, “Yes, the government’s giving them more money and they don’t need it”. But having seen it, it’s certainly not the picture that we’ve had painted for us. I should be ready to stand up with them. (Bronte)

These three reflections demonstrate some of the changes that have taken place in thinking: the acknowledgement of former assumptions, the admiration and respect for culture, and the intention to “stand with” Aboriginal people, shoulder-to-shoulder, in empathy and collaboration.

Some students began to think about how they might effect change, and to do this they imagined themselves in positions of

influence. This was particularly true for the students of journalism and screen arts, whose future career may lie in the media:

... it really made me think if I was ever in some - if I was an editor or responsible, even as a sub-editor, I would be extremely conscious of the way that other stories - the way that stories come out. ... it has made me want to get into a position where I can have influence over writing. (Lizzie)

I think it did make me identify the power we have as journalists more. I’m much more critical of the news because it’s just small decisions that if you don’t know better, can shape the whole way a person interprets a story. ... It might just be a crime story or something, but as soon as you make it about another culture it changes that whole view. It shouldn’t be an issue of what colour the person’s skin was. (Sam)

For these students, interdisciplinary teams will be the norm once they enter the graduate workforce. As such, the teams made a practical contribution in terms of work-readiness; however, as Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002, p. 5) have observed, the benefits to members were broader than this: members became “become informally bound as colleagues who understand each other’s perspectives and of belonging to an interesting group of people”.

Research link in interlocking communities

Over and above these examples has been the way in which the research team has also been a research link in the interlocking communities of practice. While we are all musicians and educators, we had varying levels of experience in working with First Peoples communities. We came together as a team to decide on the research instruments, to gather the reference group and to plan when and how we would share our data.

We came together to present our research at conferences and to disseminate our findings through papers and an edited book (Bartleet et al., forthcoming). Our practice unconsciously drew on the pedagogy of writing groups that provide such powerful opportunities for learning (Aitchison, 2009). When we collaborated in writing, we sent drafts to each other and shared the responsibility of lead author, in the manner of chamber musicians moving to cue each other (Neidlinger, 2011). We shared new literature to inform our practice, and we shared our challenges and doubts.

Our collaborative work has had many chamber music moments, where one of the group members will commence with a theme and others will enter in with a commentary and counterpoint to it. It is no accident that chamber music has been called the most spiritual form of music (Tovey, 1944). This seems to neatly return us to *Ubuntu* and to our Framework especially in terms of our understandings of self and

the spirit that makes us human, our deepening of relationships and our sharing in reciprocal ways.

Conclusions

In this paper we have explored the inter-relationships within our broader community of practice and how these underpinned members' understandings of self as researchers, educators, learners and human beings. Within this exploration we gave examples of how, through a network of inter-dependence, members' understandings of being human were troubled by the need to rethink our sense of community, culture and history.

In each of our projects, we have had the experience of watching aspiring professionals refashion their worldviews as a result of their interactions with each other, with us, and in particular with First Peoples communities. We have also observed and documented four kinds of learning that occurred within these communities of practice. The ongoing sharing of information from one year to another among

the university graduates and post graduates is a powerful way in which they share “the practical aspects of a particular practice, everyday problems, new tools, developments in the field, and things that do and do not work” (McDermott, 2000, p. 2).

The internal support between concurrent members emerged as a different and more intense community experience overlaid with the emotions stirred by intercultural encounters. Moreover, by interacting with their local communities, students and student teachers demonstrated different ways of learning, grounded in strong beliefs that were developed through a process of deconstructing worldviews and beliefs. Through these networks of inter-dependence these young professionals developed work-ready attributes such as intercultural awareness, and they began to imagine how this might be enacted through professional advocacy.

As educators we have also encountered “interactional moments and experiences which leave marks” on us as scholars, educators and humans (Denzin, 1989, p. 70). These have occurred in

our own relationships with First Peoples colleagues and our relationships with one another, with students and with community. They have been strengthened by our increasing advocacy role as we, like the students, imagine and then activate opportunities for increased advocacy and action. And they have informed our own learning through our collaborative community of practice as we share the findings of our research.

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Embedding an Empowerment Evaluation Framework to create a ‘Win-Win’ Engaged Research Partnership with communities

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Abstract

The academic literature and public debates are comprehensive, expressing how higher education internationally is undergoing operational and cultural change, with fiscal challenges placing immense focus on competition and rankings (Hall, Tandon & Tremblay, 2015; O’Shea & McDonald, 2015; Watermeyer, 2015a; 2015b). The rhetoric of a ‘budget emergency’ has also become embedded in Australian political discourse. Universities across Australia have not been immune to these shifts with re-intensified stringent funding changes having an impact (Davis, 2015; Hill, 2012). Universities are now being asked to do more for less and engage and

respond to multiple stakeholders. This paper outlines our experiences working within a regional Australian university to embed engaged research at a time of significant flux, both internally and externally. The paper argues that a clear evaluation framework to embed and develop a ‘win-win’ partnership is missing from the literature and within strategic and engagement plans when undertaking engaged research partnerships in community. We present our initial attempts to embed an empowerment evaluation framework at the commencement of an engaged research program.

Keywords: *Community Capacity Building, Engaged research, Relationship Building, Regional Australia, Evaluation*

Introduction:

Significant changes and new demands are confronting universities. Within the literature there has been significant coverage of this with a specific focus about how universities can respond to the “grand challenges” of our time, and demonstrate value for money (Adshead, 2015; Brewer, 2013; Hall, Tandon, & Tremblay, 2015; O’Shea & McDonald, 2015; Smith, 2015; Watermeyer, 2015). Universities are responding with an increasing focus on collaboration where academics are required to be willing to work with a number of competing stakeholders (Bartkowiak-Theron & Anderson, 2014; Barnett, 2011; Brewer, 2013; Burton & Postle, 2014; Gallagher, 2013; King, 2013;). This paper draws extensively on the experiences of two academics and a supporting research officer on their community capacity building efforts to build long-term reciprocal research partnerships with community. We stress that relationship building and time are the key components in building a successful ‘win-win’ research partnership. We argue that this relationship building process

is often not reflected enough upon within the literature and within university practices.

This paper outlines our experiences within a regional Australian university undergoing significant internal reform in building research capacity (O’Shea & McDonald, 2015). Central to the focus of this paper is the relationship building we undertook with external partners prior to any research being undertaken. We present our initial attempts to embed an empowerment evaluation framework at the commencement of our engaged research as a template for consideration. While recognising that community “is often described as a particularly vague term” (Dervin & Korpela, 2013, p. 2) for the purpose of this paper we recognise it as any external group for and with which we as academics and researchers engage.

Why are Universities shifting to long-term reciprocal research partnerships?

A significant amount of the literature has outlined that traditionally academic research has been seen as an impersonal activity with researchers expected to approach their studies objectively and to adopt a stance of distance and non-involvement whilst undertaking their research. This dilemma has been addressed in particular by several feminist scholars and researchers (Byrne & Lentin, 2000; Harding, 1991; Lather, 1991; Lentin, 1993; Lynch & O'Neill, 1994; O'Neill, 1992, 2000) and more generally (Barnes, 2003; Bivens, Haffenden, & Hall, 2015; de Koning & Martin, 1996; Oliver, 1992). The exclusions are best summarised by Bivens, Haffenden, and Hall (2015):

The dominant mode of production of academic knowledge is of a colonized variety. The Western canon, that European based knowledge arising from the enlightenment and disseminated around the world over the last 500 years, has resisted the inclusion of diverse knowledge systems from Indigenous and

other knowledge systems and has collaborated in what de Sousa Santos (2014) calls epistemicide, the killing of knowledge systems. This is true from a global context where the global North dominates the journals, the web sites, the encyclopaedias, the book publishing industries and the research funds. But it is also true within the global North from the perspective of gender, social location, racialization, and more. The voices of Indigenous people, the poor, women, the differently abled, and the homeless are missing from the dominant knowledge systems (p. 8).

More recently there is now an expectation that publically funded research must contribute to multiple stakeholders and when possible respond to the “grand challenges” of the twenty-first century (Butterworth & Palermo, 2008; O’Shea, 2014; Watermeyer, 2015b). Recent studies have focused on outlining the changing role of universities and their contribution, in particular, to economic

development and national innovation systems (Holmwood, 2014). Internationally, funding streams have started to support this “applied” focus (Smith, 2015). In the European Union the launch of *Horizon 2020* a funding instrument (2014-2020), with an €80 billion budget, aims to deepen the relationship between science and society. In Australia, the federal government’s focus appears to be on forging stronger links between university researchers and industries to drive economic growth and innovation by establishing particular growth centres (Inside Publishers, 2014). This has resulted in a number of policy responses by universities such as the recent report by the Innovative Research Universities (IRU, 2015) proposing policy recommendations to enable better integration between industry, universities, and researchers. Universities are establishing the structures to undertake more collaborative and applied research. Southern Cross University is the most recent example with the launch of the online ‘Live Ideas’ noticeboard (SCU, 2015) - a “one stop shop” for external communities to propose an idea for collaboration.

Within the academic literature there is now the significant focus on mapping these shifts that has occurred in academia on developing innovative and long-term research partnerships with external partners (Adshead, 2015; Hickey, 2015; Postle, Burton, & Danaher, 2014). Collaboration has been defined as an “interactive process that enables people with diverse expertise to generate creative solutions to mutually defined problems” (Van Garderen, Stormont, & Goel, 2012, p. 483). The outcomes and benefits of collaborating for those within universities and for external partners are evident within the literature. As Adshead (2015) outlines the benefits of undertaking external research in partnership include:

The respectful nurturing of good relationships between researchers and participants (and the communities from which they come) means local people become active and willing collaborators in research. These relatively small-scale community oriented projects are significant opportunities to

incubate new research teams and to test out potential research collaborations. In short, fostering mindful engagement is a practice that is as good for internal faculty collaborators as it is for external community collaborators in developing effective research partnerships (p. 15).

These forms of partnership between higher education and the external community is classified by the Carnegie Foundation (an United States based independent policy and research centre focused in particular on teaching and learning) as the “broadest conception of interactions between higher education and community to promote inclusivity” (Driscoll, 2008, p. 5). The majority of Australian universities in their strategic and engagement plans have a clear focus on engaging with their communities and developing mutually beneficial outcomes (Carman, 2013; Le Clus, 2012). Carman (2013) in a comprehensive review of Australian universities strategic plans found that there was “a lack of value placed on community engaged research in practice’ and there were ‘important gaps in policy itself between

stated commitment and robust implementation systems” (p. 10). Whilst the literature is diverse and plentiful in mapping the types of community-university engagements there are also significant contradictions and disconnect to be found (Adshead, 2015). It is therefore evident that a clear evaluation framework to embed and develop a ‘win-win’ research partnership is typically missing from university strategic and/or engagement plans.

This paper outlines how we as a group of academic professional staff within a regional university have developed our community-based research collaborations. We begin by outlining some of the major shifts within the region we work. We then discuss an empowerment evaluation framework as a tool for creating sustained and engaged “win-win” research partnerships with community.

Significant Shifts in a Regional City

Significant shifts continue to occur within rural and regional Australia due to the impacts of the resource boom, drought, climate

change and population shifts (Hogan & Young, 2015; Morris, Gooding, & Molloy, 2015). Regional capital cities across Australia offer a unique role:

By providing a central point of access to essential infrastructure, services, business, employment and education. They support not only local residents but the whole network of surrounding towns and rural communities (Morris et al., 2015, p. 10).

The city and surrounding areas of Toowoomba offers such an example. Located 125km west from Queensland's state capital Brisbane with a population of over 158,000 residents it is the second biggest inland city in Australia (Toowoomba Regional Council, 2014). Historically the city serviced a strong agricultural base. More recently there has also been a significant mining and coal seam gas boom within the Surat Basin area which has almost \$200 billion invested in projects (Toowoomba Regional Council, 2014). Significant infrastructural investment is ongoing with the recent opening of Australia's first privately owned airport (Wellcamp Airport) in 2014 and the planning

approval of a \$1 billion solar farm, the largest in Australia (Silva, 2015). Wilson and Hewitt (2014) outline how these significant developments could impact the community:

It is not surprising that when there is considerable churn in the region, there will also be anxiety. Uncertainty is sometimes seen as a catalyst for innovation but it can also be disabling, and can undermine the trust and mutual respect which is central to cohesive social dynamics, identity and partnership development. Making the most of efforts to build community capacity depends on decisive and visionary regional leadership (p. 51).

It is within this shift that a university can have a significant role to play in building community capacity. The University of Southern Queensland's central campus is based in Toowoomba. Like other Australian universities a major part of the university's community engagement activities are in the form of engaged research and engaged

learning and teaching (Postle & Garlick, 2014). The University of Southern Queensland has asserted a prioritised shift toward “its core area of agriculture and the environment and emerging areas of regional systems, digital futures, computational mathematics and bio medical sciences” (USQ, 2013, p. 4).

As part of this shift in 2014 the university launched the *Institute for Resilient Regions* focused on supporting “the capacity of regional communities to deal with risk and adapt to change so as to preserve the core values and attributes of their region while exploiting new opportunities” (USQ, 2014, p. 1). The University has strategically invested \$3 million to position the institute as a “national leader of research in resilient regional systems” (USQ, 2014, p. 2). The Community Futures research program commenced in January 2015 and is funded through the University’s strategic research funds. The program is focused on how regional communities learn to respond to change and uncertainty. The Community Futures research program is

a newly formed multidisciplinary team of anthropologists, archaeologists, historians, psychologists and ethnographers (Figure 1). We examine ways we can engage communities in research that is of value to them and to the University. All members of our team have a record of community involvement in their research and through working more closely together we are aiming to develop new cross-disciplinary synergies. The research program is built around three key bodies of expertise, including:

- Social inclusion: Interactions between new and temporary workforces;
- Heritage: The expression of cultural identifies and histories in changing regional landscapes; and
- Skills: Skills needs for changing industries, technologies and communities.

Figure 1: Community Futures research program 3 Bodies of Expertise



The Community Futures research program is committed to social justice and the rights of all people in community. The research team works specifically with marginalised, disadvantaged and other isolated or “at risk” groups. What has been central to developing this strategic research focus has been the development over a number of

years of significant community capacity building with our partners. This is often overlooked in the literature. Hounslow (2002) outlines our working definition of community capacity which is “the degree to which community can develop, implement and sustain actions that allow it to exert greater control over its physical social, economic and cultural environments” (p. 1). This definition provides particular challenges and opportunities for universities seeking to engage effectively and ethically with their respective communities (Inman & Schuetze, 2010). One challenge is the lack of articulation and implementation strategies of interacting with external communities in ways that create win-win or reciprocal partnerships. To this end, we outline our strategic response to this challenge, presented as an empowerment evaluation framework that should be considered by *academics* and relevant *support staff* within the academy before the research partnership can commence.

Using an Empowerment Evaluation to create a ‘Win-Win’ Engaged Research Partnership

While the community plays a central role in community engagement ensuring that symbiotic relationships are instigated and supported, establishing a sustained and mutually beneficial research partnership can be challenging (O’Neill, 1992). The literatures concludes that partnerships of this nature are often imbalanced and challenging (Butterwoth & Plamero, 2008; Casperz et al., 2012; Inman, 2010). In their meta-analysis of 133 case studies of collaborative projects, Mattessich and Monsey (1992, p. 7) defined collaboration as “a mutually beneficial and well-defined relationship entered into by two or more organizations to achieve common goals”. Much of the literature has focused on how to define these “mutual goals” or “win-win” partnerships with an agreement that regular monitoring and open discussion needs to occur to ensure that all partners remain committed

to the research relationship (Postle et al., 2014; Secret, Abell, & Berlin, 2011).

The Community Futures research program grew from the concept of Community for Community (C4C), a model for a regional Australian university to effectively engage in successful community capacity building activities in its local region. C4C was a “ground-up” collaboration between academics and the community to address the broad themes of social marginalisation and isolation and enabled communities to come together to address issues of local importance (Burton & Postle, 2014). C4C focused on developing relationships with community partners over a number of years. Burton and Postle (2014) emphasise that this “takes time, as building partnerships requires a spirit of collaboration based on trust and openness” (p. 61). This was the case in the Toowoomba region, where the research team engaging with the local community often heard examples of “drive in-drive out” research that was never fed back to the community. Recognising the

different approaches to external engagement, Charles and Wilson (2012) stress the importance of embedding an approach that captures the quality of the engagement. As a response, Secret et al. (2011) argues that there is a need for further inclusion of evaluation strategies when undertaking applied research with external partners.

While many definitions of evaluation are used, the term generally encompasses the systematic collection and analysis of information to make judgements, usually about the effectiveness, efficiency and/or appropriateness of an activity (Australasian Evaluation Society 2010; The Sphere Project, 2015; Owen, 2006). Evaluation defines process efficiency, or (more specific to the disaster context) performance and effectiveness. Evaluations can be internal or external, but they always seek to be systematic, objective and credible (The Sphere Project, 2015). There has been significant agreement within the literature on the need to establish research partnerships that have a shared commitment to achieve a mutually agreeable goal (Beere,

2009; Secret, et al., 2011). Within the establishment phase it is critical that outcomes and goals are agreed upon by all partners. According to Kania and Kramer (2011), research shows that successful collective impact initiatives typically have five conditions: common agenda, shared measurement systems, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication, and backbone support organisations. The core of the USQ Community Futures program is to respond in partnership to the agreed requirements of external partners and therefore increase the relevance of our research within communities. One way of tracking these goals is by using an empowerment evaluation a framework to monitor and engage our research process and outcomes with our community partners.

Rooted in empowerment theory (see Zimmerman, 2000) empowerment evaluations involve the transfer of basic research knowledge to service providers as the latter develop their evaluation expertise. Such models use both the process and the product of

evaluation to improve program services (Secret, Jordan, & Ford, 1999) or to “link evaluation results to political action” (Mertens, 1995, p. 92). Empowerment evaluation (EE) is guided by organising principles on evaluation ideology and practice as presented in Table 1. The core values category is central to the philosophy and practice of the evaluation. The second category includes principles relevant to creating a culture that is able and interested in improvement. The final category includes principles that stress how EE is a cyclical and developmental process (Wandersman et al., 2004, p. 141).

Table 1 Ten Principles of Empowerment Evaluation (EE) Framework

Core Values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Principle 1. EE aims to influence the quality of programs, • Principle 2. In EE. The power and responsibility for the evaluation lies with program stakeholders. • Principle 3. EE adheres to the evaluation standards.
Creating a Culture that is ready and interested in Improvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Principle 4. Empowerment evaluators demystify evaluation. • Principle 5. Empowerment evaluators emphasize collaboration with program stakeholders • Principle 6. Empowerment evaluators increase stakeholders’ capacity to conduct evaluation and to effectively use results. • Principle 7. Empowerment evaluators use results in the spirit of continuous quality improvement,
Empowerment Evaluation is a cyclical and developmental process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Principle 8. EE is helpful at any stage of a program development. • Principle 9. EE influences program planning • Principle 10. EE Institutionalize self-evaluation

Source: Wandersman et al., 2004, p. 154

The EE framework is focused on ensuring the likelihood that projects and partnerships will achieve their aims by focusing on creating a culture that is able and interested in improvement. It is important to focus on “creating a dynamic community of learners-a community where people are willing to share both successes and failures, to be honest, and be self-critical” (Fetterman, 2001, p. 6). A noteworthy focus is reflecting on positive and negative outcomes; the empowerment evaluation process is applied to improve the project, enabling “difficult conversations” to be undertaken.

The benefits of undertaking an empowerment evaluation are clear for the external partner as Wandersman et al. (2004) note it allows them to be invested in the process thus sharing the responsibility for the integrity of the partnership:

Because EE establishes a culture that welcomes and is ready for evaluation, the evaluation process can be sustained, even when

those with formal evaluation training having exited the process. Ultimately, this results in a greater likelihood of achieving desired results (p. 155).

Key to the success of the empowerment evaluation is that time has to be spent undertaking capacity building and developing trust between all partners. This was a key finding of the literature, however, this process is often overlooked especially when there are funding constraints and time limits on partners. The empowerment evaluation framework has been used in a number of projects. In particular, Gavriilidis et al. (2014) utilised empowerment evaluation in the development of a gender equity plan in Malmö, Sweden and concluded that this process allowed for a more “participatory, community enriching and effective” outcome (p. 6).

Conclusions

Clayton, Bringle, Senior, Huq, and Morrison (2010) capture the potential types of relationships between universities and the

communities to which they belong as being “exploitative, transactional, or transformational” (p. 5). As Adshead (2015, pp. 15-16) outlines, undertaking community based research can often be “a steep learning curve” for academics and may “often be too much to expect without appropriate institutional support”. It is clear from the literature and from our own anecdotal evidence from engaging and working within regional Australia that these relationships can often be viewed – rightly or wrongly – as exploitative. To enable universities to move away from this requires a recognition and investment in the need to support long-term research partnerships with the community. This will enable the creation of “win-win” partnerships. However, the empowerment evaluation process is not a simple process as it takes time to build trust and respect that underpin the capacity building processes. Despite these challenges, there are specific benefits to community-university partnerships. In particular, it enables external partners to reflect on their interests to ensure strong resonance and engagement. As funding

opportunities continue to be curtailed, having authentic relationships with external partners is paramount.

We are mindful that our reflexion is written from our personal academic and research support perspective and lived experience at an Australian regional university. Staudt and Gonzalez (2011) argue that contemporary universities and academics must be supported to “build bridges to opportunity, bring research to the solution of social problems, and bring interdisciplinary perspectives to bear on the challenges in contemporary society” (p. 65). It is clear from the academic literature, and within policy changes at the national level and within universities, that there is a significant focus on establishing and sustaining long-term partnerships with external communities. This shift is clear within funding opportunities now focusing on working in multidisciplinary environments that are connected and engaged with the external community so that complex problems can be addressed. However, it does take substantial time and capacity building investment

to create sustainable partnerships. For an empowerment evaluation to be effective it does require a strong commitment and resourcing by both internal and external partners (Smith, 1998). Criticisms of empowerment evaluation within the literature has noted that the process is resource and time intensive (Campbell et al., 2004; Secret et al., 1999). Whilst recognising this we believe that universities are best placed to embed such a framework. Having outlined within this paper our efforts in sourcing the strategic and resources support provided by the University we are able to further engage with our external partners. Lynch (2014) argues “academics need to reinvigorate the vision of the university as a place for universal learning, for challenging received orthodoxies, and for promoting social justice” (p. 13). The next stage of the community futures program is to test the efficacy of the empowerment evaluation framework via our ongoing research partnerships. We believe that our model of community engagement has the potential to build social capital by partnering with the community to tackle issues of genuine local relevance. Applying the empowerment

evaluation framework will enable us to determine our success in achieving this goal.

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Of the Inherent Flaws in the University–Community Engagement Evaluation Controversies: Opportunities for a New Path Forward

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Abstract

There now exists much industry and government documentation on industry-community engagement initiatives and their transferability into a variety of contexts. This documentation provides readers with insight and running commentary on the measurability of community-engagement initiatives (in the form of advice on 'hard' data and 'softer' (albeit equally important) measures), as well as their short and long term impact on all stakeholders. However, there remain difficulties in measuring the various processes

and outcomes attached to community engagement within a university context. Existing initiatives that feature elements of university-community engagement allow us to reflect on what is easily measurable, what is more difficult to assess, and what requires downright creativity in evaluation techniques. This paper argues that current debates about the lack of university-community evaluations is misplaced, and examines the scope and nature of existing evaluations of university–community engagement. The examination of vocal and extended disputes revealed the inherent flaws in the debate and how it needs to be fundamentally rethought. In this paper, I offer some solutions to pave the way for university leaders and middle managers to acknowledge the prevalence, relevance, and measurability of university–community engagement for organisations and their partners.

Keywords: *community engagement, measurement, evaluation, controversy*

Introduction

Academic commentators often make observations about the lack of robust evaluations of university–community engagement. Their criticisms often surface in forums such as the annual Australasian university–community engagement conference or in various academic journals dedicated to education or health. At the same time, the difficulty in measuring the various processes and outcomes attached to university–community engagement and service learning is widely acknowledged. Constant prompts for stronger track records in university–community engagement, or for a consolidation of research in university–community engagement, were the genesis of a recent multi-disciplinary collection on community engagement, building on Australian case studies (Bartkowiak-Théron & Anderson, 2014).

In this paper I examine the wide-ranging critique of the evaluation of university–community engagement (or more specifically, the lack of evaluation altogether). I disagree with the overall perception that university–community engagement is not assessed, and provide a

different view about university-community engagement evaluation literature. Contrary to current beliefs, many journal articles in disciplines such as health, education, policing, criminal justice, and policy *refer* to evaluations of university–community engagements, although the evaluations may not be the core of these articles. Therefore, this paper essentially refocusses current debate about university-community engagement, and addresses what has become disturbing and uninformed ‘white noise’ around a lack of community engagement evaluation as a whole. I hope this contribution provokes more in-depth discussion about what academics, practitioners, and community members do and say they do about community engagement, and unveils what was previously not identified as a significant conundrum in university–community engagement evaluation literature.

Background

Community engagement is now arguably a part of academic life, and much literature has now been dedicated to the topic of university–community engagement (Hart & Northmore, 2011; Le Clus, 2012; Ockene, 2013; Bartkowiak-Théron & Anderson, 2014; Szilgyi et al., 2014). More importantly, though, community engagement is now a current feature of universities' missions (Akpan, Minkley, & Thakrar, 2012). Indeed,

community engagement [is] consistently found to be addressed in mission statements and strategic plans, and some universities have developed distinct community engagement mission and policy documents (Winter et al., 2006).

Australian universities have a relatively good track record for engagement, and their engagement with professions and communities of practice has been supported and documented in literature since the 1990s (Turpin & Aylward, 1999). University policies outline community engagement as a core activity of academia, and identify it as one academic activity against which faculty members may claim a promotion, with specific (albeit limited) mention of its importance and measurability (Le Clus, 2012; Bartkowiak-Théron & Herrington, 2015). These policies reflect some academic practices, within which many activities of university teaching and learning, research, and business, have developed through longstanding exchanges of knowledge between stakeholders, resulting in beneficial outcomes for all (Adler & Goggin, 2008; Australia University Community Engagement Alliance –AUCEA2008; Hart & Northmore, 2011).

In light of such documentation and historical tradition of social involvement, it is puzzling to see that community engagement rhetoric

has constantly been lagging behind its teaching and research counterparts:

Community engagement is becoming a core activity of universities [in Australia] and overseas. However, community engagement is not always arranged organisationally in a way that reflects its strategic importance or maximises benefits to the community (Elliott et al, 2005).

The politically correct reference to the organisational arrangement of university–community engagement is heavy in connotations. It refers to the fact that the benchmarking exercises that academics are subjected to in their annual performance reviews with regard to teaching and research do not transfer to their engagement with communities. In a nutshell, whilst academics are supposed to engage, there exists no specific performance indicators against which they can

gauge their engagement activities (as opposed to such things as student evaluations to gauge teaching, or publications and grants to assess research performance).

In light of such a gap in university policies, it is not surprising that a large amount of the literature contains complaints about the lack of evaluation (Le Clus, 2012) of university–community engagement. The problem is significant and presents academics with a complex web of considerations that is difficult to disentangle. Because community engagement is not the object of specific key performance indicators, academics hesitate to become involved in it or its evaluation altogether. The vicious circle presents itself as follows: if academics focus on engagement activities with no demonstrated outcome, it will be gauged against teaching and research efforts ‘wasted’ on other, deemed unimportant or superfluous, activities; on the other hand, academics may still be put under the spotlight for not engaging.

The hesitation is understandable though, as community engagement is no panacea, and there is some selfish comfort in

retreating behind the safe, silent, and unassuming walls of the infamous ivory tower (Bartkowiak-Théron & Anderson, 2014). This juggling act between wanting to engage, not being able to demonstrate the actual worth of engagement, the complex logistics of engaging, being scrutinised for not engaging and the comfort of not engaging at all, is so widespread that three separate international literature reviews extensively document this wide-ranging problem in areas as disparate as criminal justice/policing (Myhill, 2006), higher education (Le Clus, 2012), and health (Johnson, 2015).

These reviews are subtle in unveiling where the evaluation problems lie, and that it is not the engagement activities or outcomes that attract criticism (Szilagyi et al., 2014); rather, their *systematic* and *consolidated* evaluation is lacking. As highlighted by Le Clus (2012), since universities make a commitment (at least via their public policy documents) to community engagement, they should insist on documenting the relevant activities, develop their capacity to develop a track record of this commitment, and provide academic staff with

guidance as to the assessment of impact and outcomes. The lack of current evaluation guidance in community engagement is in contrast not only to universities' positioning on teaching, learning, and research, but also to the kinds of activities routinely embedded in discrete disciplinary work, where specific protocols are a commonplace element of evaluation. Social work initiatives have to meet specific benchmarks, policing activities are usually gauged against inputs and outputs, with attention directed at the range of evaluative tools available to researchers (from attitudinal research to evidence-based research); in macro and micro-economics, some strict evaluation procedures the return on investments to be evaluated, and so on.ⁱ

The evaluation controversy lies in the following undeniable fact. The literature is littered with articles about community engagement project evaluation, as demonstrated in the review by Hart and Northmore (2011). Journals in higher education have seen a proliferation of articles relating to student evaluations of service learning (a branch of community engagement in some disciplines such

as teaching or medicine), client satisfaction surveys, impact statements, stakeholder reflexivity, and qualitative and quantitative appraisals of initiatives. So where does the problem lie?

The answer to that question is as follows. The debate should not really focus on whether there is evaluation of university–community engagement or not. There is, and others have established that. In reality, the problem lies in the visibility of these evaluations, and this problem is three fold. First, the institutionalisation of UCE is important but secondary to the nature and impact of community engagement initiatives. AS a result, the expression ‘university–community engagement’ seems to call for an institutional embedding of engagement (which would inform the ranking of the university itself as an engaged institution on international listings such as the Shanghai ranking of universities; Hart & Northmore, 2011; Le Clus, 2012). This institutionalisation is important, but is secondary to the nature and impact of these initiatives, and to the activities of individual staff members (in their professional capacity) in engagement initiatives,

without which the overall engagement of the university as an institution would be void. Second, the debate focuses, arguably justly, on the resulting absence of any consolidated approach to university–community engagement, due to the sheer variety of initiatives, activities, outcomes, impact, inputs/outputs that need to be taken into consideration. Finally, the problem lies in the scattered nature of community engagement evaluations across different disciplinary fields. As evaluations are dispersed throughout different areas of specialisation, the community engagement aspect of some initiatives is diluted in the midst of probably more important disciplinary foci (such as impact on health, resource sustainability). This scattering across all possible academic disciplines is compounded by inconsistency in terminology. Hart and Northmore (2011, p. 35) point out that they had to include, in their literature review, expressions such as ‘university public engagement’, ‘community–university collaboration’, ‘evaluation, audit, higher education’, ‘evaluating university–community engagement’ and ‘evaluating public engagement’ (they

reveal subsequently that the Boolean terms ‘evaluating university engagement’ and ‘evaluating public engagement’ produced only 5 articles). Similarly, Akpan et al. (2012, p. 1) observed that university–community engagement terminology is ‘subsumed under concepts such as ‘community service’, ‘university–community partnerships’, ‘social responsiveness’, academic citizenship’, and ‘service learning’—expressions that contribute to this colourful patchwork and indicate how difficult and futile any semantic tracking exercise would be.

Regardless of this complex terminology, the problem is obviously not that there is a lack of university–community engagement evaluation in literature. Rather, what is crucially lacking is a consolidated approach in: 1– evaluating community initiative as a whole (process evaluation: ‘how are universities faring in terms of university–community engagement’); 2– designing reliable and relevant performance indicators for university–community engagement (along the lines of those in teaching and research, and that would be inclusive of components such as impact evaluation, outputs/outcomes,

and evidence of positive change); and 3– embedding such indicators in individual academics’ performance (as is the case in research, teaching, and administration).

How the controversies miss the mark entirely: A step-by-step deconstruction

The controversies about the failings of university–community engagement evaluation are flawed and require a fundamental shift. In the discussion below, I offer three specific ways to reorient the debates on the right targets.

1 – University–community engagement: What the literature actually shows

Academics do a lot of community engagement, according to literature. This engagement is part of their teaching activities, research fieldwork or linkages (especially in certain fields), but its specific

evaluation is probably not a priority, as opposed to other outcome measures.

Indeed, a lot of academic, industry, and policy literature focusing on case studies does contain evaluation components. I undertook a cursory analysis of the contents of the *Australasian Journal of University-Community Engagement* since its inception in 2005. This analysis revealed that every volume and issue featured one or more evaluation articles, for example, evaluation models (volume 1, 2005), case studies (volume 2, 2007), longitudinal evaluations (volume 3, 2008), pilot programs (volume 4, 2009), and impact measure (volume 5, 2010).

A similar cursory look at program evaluation literature also indicates that much is being done in the field of community engagement evaluation. Publications in literature peripheral to university–community engagement (and often in specific disciplines) also provide evaluation components, but only as a final part of the paper, and the

authors rarely expand on the importance engagement in either improving or sustaining process, or in generating outcomes.

Blanket statements about a lack of university–community engagement evaluation therefore warrant further critical, objective analysis and serious reconsideration. In a nutshell, the evaluation of university–community engagement programs is not consistently documented. Rather, many books, journal articles and online blogs are dedicated to the description of community engagement initiatives, how engagement processes unfold, and the documenting of various constructions of partnerships (industry–university; industry–communities; industry–university–communities—see Whitton & Bhamjee, 2014).

There is, somehow, a justification behind all of these things. Since community engagement evaluation has not been strongly embedded in university policy yet, academics have tended to see it as a natural part of their service to the university, part of their research activities (specifically fieldwork) or teaching activities (especially in

the area of service learning, or where practicums are an essential component of learning). Academics have also traditionally enjoyed being engaged with community stakeholders, revelling what was regarded essentially a rather pleasant and useful ‘thing to do’ as opposed to conceptualising it as a rigorous academic exercise, until others started documenting it.

2 – The hidden artefacts of university–community engagement evaluation

Recent political statements about the irrelevance, unimportance and wastefulness of some research are worrying (we refer readers to more useful resources here)ⁱⁱ. While these comments and derisive declarations are not really the focus of this article, many of us think that they should actually boost academics’ efforts in partaking in university–community engagement evaluations, in order to demonstrate the significance of academic projects. Many initiatives across all government areas, and across any discipline, would not have

seen the light of day without university–community engagement, or would not have achieved the same outcomes without university–community engagement components (Hall, 2009). Some academic initiatives have actually failed when community engagement was lacking or altogether absent from the design process. On the other hand, some community initiatives have failed when academics did not bring some added rigour to process and outcomes. Other well-meaning initiatives have simply not met targets for lack of overall expertise, knowledge or engagement in any field.

Academics were not the first ones to formally identify the benefits of knowledge exchanges. Indeed, there now exist much industry and government documentation that provides perspectives on community engagement, and how to evaluate it. For example, the Queensland government put together a very useful package on how to develop assessment frameworks for community engagement initiatives (see: <http://www.qld.gov.au/web/community-engagement/guides-factsheets/evaluating/>). In such documents, community engagement

performance indicators are either provided in the form of 'hard' quotas, or in the form of 'softer' (albeit equally important) measures.

In the arena of academic publications, the disciplines of education and health have paved the way for establishing this literature on community-engagement with robust evaluations of university-community evaluations peppering the broad scope of themes such as service-learning or work-integrated learning, to only quote a few. Most of these contributions to literature build on the benefits from knowledge and expertise exchange (Acworth, 2008), and the impact of that exchange on producing more beneficial outcomes (Hall, 2009).

Existing initiatives that feature elements of community engagement in both grey and academic literature allow us to reflect on what is easily measurable, what is more difficult to assess, and what requires downright creativity in evaluation methodology. Whether we take community engagement as a process or an outcome of research or teaching initiatives, or as an activity in and of itself, the large array of qualitative and quantitative methodologies to borrow from should

allow us to select the best evaluation tools available. The determination of (all over essential) key performance indicators then becomes a rather simple exercise in gauging the aims and objectives of an initiative. A much better job can be done at appraising community engagement, and pave the way for institutional leaders to acknowledge the relevance and effectiveness of community engagement for academic organisations and their industry or community partners.

3 – Taking academic life at face value: Dismantling major ‘status quo’ myths

Taking into account the fledgling grounds on which the blanket critique of university–community engagement evaluation is built, it seems necessary to look at some persisting justifications for that so-called evaluation lag. In this section, I deconstruct the more prominent of arguments that have contributed to university–engagement being put into the ‘too hard’ basket.

Argument 1: The confusion about what ‘community engagement’ refers to

A quick perusal of literature confirms that, like many other things, ‘community engagement’ is one of those expressions used liberally across disciplines and areas of expertise. ‘Lay’ uses of the term resulted in a colourful patchwork of semantics and definitional boundaries about what community engagement is and consists of (Apkan et al., 2012; Hart & Northcote, 2011), and there have been requests for further conceptual clarity (Johnson, 2015). This has been to the detriment of community engagement as whole, with many initiatives claiming to be community engagement, when either the ‘community’ or ‘engagement’, or both components were lacking.

A very specific effort in consolidating meaning was made in the 1990s with the disciplinary field of education uniting worldwide (through several journal articles), and several academic leaders such as Barbara Holland and Sherill B. Gelmon working on the phrasing of a definition spanning several disciplinary and government areas. The

definition of university–community engagement is now agreed upon internationally, with the ‘twin themes of the benefits to both universities and communities of scholarly engagement and the benefits to society more generally from the civic impacts of engagement’ (Hart & Northmore, 2011, p. 34; Driscoll, 2008) being prominent regardless of variations in phrasing. University–community engagement consists of:

Knowledge-driven partnerships that yield mutually beneficial outcomes for university and community (AUCEA, 2008, p. 2).

The principles of university–community engagement are also firmly established, in that community engagement:

- is based on a mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and skills between universities and their multiple communities;

- is based on universities acknowledging community values, culture, knowledge, and skills, and working with those communities to develop mutually beneficial activities;
- supports the integration of engagement into learning and research activities by ensuring that engaged research is designed and managed as a partnership that addresses both academic and community priorities; and,
- [promotes] programs [that] are socially inclusive, designed and managed in partnership with communities, and seek to produce engaged citizens—including students and graduates (Engagement Australia, 2014).

This specific definition and allied set of principles allow for several things. First, the issue of a lack of definition becomes moot. Second, the definition is so specific and comprehensive that there is no doubt as to the criteria that are needed for initiatives to be able to claim ‘community engagement’ status (Driscoll, 2008). For example, many

universities use academics’ features on the news as community engagement initiatives. This should not be the case, as there is (in most cases) no reciprocal exchange of knowledge in speaking on the radio or in answering a journalist’s questions over a few minutes on air. Although an excellent *public outreach* exercise and an overall significant boost in a university’s visibility in the community, the one-way conversation makes the beneficial exchange of knowledge crucially lacking.

Argument 2: University–community engagement is an emerging field

Community engagement is documented in academic literature as a fairly recent phenomenon that attracted further academic interest due to its recent prominence in tertiary education policy. There is some slight veracity in this. Community engagement has expressly been mentioned in professional documentation (or even been part of job descriptions) only recently. However, this in itself is does not constitute a valid justification for an absence of evaluation. First of all,

community engagement has been documented since the early 1960s. In a way, Sheila Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation (Arnstein, 1969) is hailed as one of the building blocks for the conceptualisation of community engagement in all its variety. In the late 1990s, Barbara Holland developed a matrix for community engagement, which was further reinforced by the 1999 Kellogg Commission on engaged universities (Le Clus, 2012, p. 29), and then by the more conceptual Carnegie Community-Engagement classification (Driscoll, 2008). In light of such longevity, it is hard to fathom how people would want more time to start establishing evaluation protocols. Surely, 55 years is more than enough to develop concrete and effective procedures for evaluating university-community engagement. Then, the argument that university-community engagement is a new phenomenon pales in two ways. First, the entire, well-established and highly regarded methodological field of phenomenology would completely serve the purpose of documenting and evaluating of something that has never been observed before. Second, much more recent phenomena (with the

development of new Internet technologies and social media) have already been the object of rather strong evaluation exercises. Let's have as examples: social network analysis, cyber-networks.

Argument 3: The burgeoning literature about university-community engagement

Some would argue that because the community engagement literature has been broadly distributed across a variety of disciplines and academic areas, it did not promote the strengthening of any kind of protocol around its evaluation. Although the consolidation of literature occurred only recently by way of several journals dedicating their core focus to community engagement and service learning (such as *The Australasian Journal of University-Community Engagement*, the *Journal of Community Engagement and Higher Education*, and the *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*), there is room here to promote this alleged gaping hole as an opportunity to think

creatively about evaluation processes, and to identify opportunities for further publication.

The very incentive of ‘publish or perish’ should also encourage the publication of evaluation mechanisms and initiatives in high ranking journals specialising in methodology (or any other appropriate fields) and known for their rigour in methodological approaches and peer reviews. Also, the insistence on research ‘impact’ should encourage publications in other government and industry-specific outlets, which would help initiatives and their evaluation reach a broader audience. In a way, rather than a restrictive constraint, nascent literature on university-community engagement should be considered a refreshing new outlook on publication opportunities, with the added benefits of 1– reaching more audiences and cross-disciplinary areas, and 2– from a strictly utilitarian perspective, also counting toward academics’ research (publication) performance.

Argument 4: Community engagement is done in different circumstances, across different environments

The variety of settings in which community engagement takes place should not be an obstacle to any evaluation effort. Ethnographic studies have a long history of factoring in different social or industry settings, and different life stories, which encourages community engagement initiatives to take an ethnographic stance of their own. Social science participatory action research also lends itself to such factorial variations, with mixed methods lending themselves to multi-faceted studies.

More importantly, process evaluation is also a recognised area of academic research, as well as impact research which is more focused on outcomes (Beecham, 2014; Ockene, 2013). Such research allows to gauge the efficacy of initiatives across a range of deliverables, movable contexts, ongoing structural changes and variable outcomes (Beecham, 2014, pp. 60–61); other evaluations, especially in health, look at community engagement according to a three-fold evaluation

framework that comprises structure such as administrative arrangements and stakeholders, process (activities from qualitative and quantitative points of view), and outcomes such as cost savings and health metrics (Szulagyi et al., 2014).

Community engagement is essentially a question of process: if the process is erroneous or fledgling, then initiatives will unlikely meet expectations. However, some process indicators or hints developed by governments or industry (wishing to build linkages with universities) as to ‘how’ to do community engagement, are indicative of what criteria to look for and what specific parameters to include within evaluation frameworks. While a perusal of the Internet indicates that Queensland, Tasmania, and Atlanta, GA provide excellent food for thought on evaluation process, the Atlanta website specifically lists crucial qualitative elements to take into consideration when evaluating community engagement (such as the importance of narratives, the insistence on voicesⁱⁱⁱ).

Argument 5: There is a lack of rigour in evaluating community engagement

I would tend to disagree altogether on this point. This stated problem is not so much one of rigour in methodological approach, as it is with the sheer variety of methods employed to evaluate university–community engagement. While this should be highlighted as a key strength of UCE evaluation, this variety is not to the liking of those who would prefer a uniform approach to evaluation:

While existing engagement measures have been shown to have good and comparable reliability and validity (...) these multi-item measures reflect how ‘engagement’ is a complex construct, which cannot be adequately assessed along a single dimension. The multi-faceted nature of ‘engagement’ is underscored by the fact that different aspects are associated differently with service outcomes (Meader et al., 2012, p. 184).

The preceding discussion has revealed the broad disciplinary areas of academic engagement in communities and communities of practice (such as health, education, policing, criminology, social work). This disciplinary variety does not mean that evaluation efforts are meaningless, futile, or hesitant. Various disciplines require different methodological framework and/or evaluation processes, and different initiatives would focus on different kinds of inputs/outputs: ‘evaluative analysis [of community–engagement evaluation] is therefore likely to be context driven’ (Hart & Northmore, 2011, p. 54). Evaluations should also focus on the positive impact these various efforts on society at large, which should motivate attempts at sustaining the whole process of engagement^{iv}. Therefore, as highlighted by Bartkowiak-Théron and Herrington (2015, 83):

Community engagement as an academic activity needs to be measured in a way that encourages academics to be

accountable for it, and reward those who engage in the social and emotional leg-work required to make it a success. There is, we believe, a need to promote engagement as a professional productivity and evaluation criterion.

Regardless of the argument, though, there is no real excuse for persisting in not evaluating community engagement. Participatory evaluation methods are largely writ in academic literature (participatory action research in particular—Klaebe & Van Luyn, 2014). They easily lend themselves to community engagement initiatives, and have the benefit of empowering research participants or initiative stakeholders in not only the running of an initiative, but also in its evaluation. Case study methodology (Travers, 2001) also allows for limited studies that shortcut any critique for field diversity, as well as interpretivist social research (Hickey et al., 2015). One could even argue that quasi-experiments could demonstrate the value and impact community engagement can make; control sites can be established

specifically to gauge what impact a lack of engagement has on communities, places or industries.

Conclusion: Disciplinary blindness and complacency in status quo:

Moving away from evaluation paralysis

If it is now acknowledged in universities' organisational policies that community engagement is a pillar of academic work (Whitton & Butrous, 2011), either on the same footing as teaching and research, or as a fundamental component of both, its articulation needs to be more explicit in university policies. But since measuring engagement comes with challenges, with various disciplinary idiosyncrasies underpinning these difficulties (Akpan et al., 2012), it is the responsibility of both university leaders and individual academics to not shy away from disentangling qualitative and quantitative performance indicators, and better stimulate this academic field (this is also a point raised by Szilagyi et al., 2014, p. 13).

The formalisation of benchmarking policies in teaching, learning, and research has been perfunctory at best, and current performance indicators are still not perfect. However, strategic plans, staff performance management, and the development of specific benchmarks have been encouraging for academics worldwide, who were pushed to teach better, and publish more. Overall, it can be argued that policy encouraged academic performance in teaching and research. There is no reason why university–community engagement could not be underpinned by such formalisation:

Establishing formal governance and partnership relationships is a way of embedding engagement in the community and in the University, ensuring that collaboration is sustained and outlives personalities and pilot project funding (Elliott et al., 2005, p. 59).

As highlighted by Bartkowiak-Théron and Anderson (2014), the pervasiveness of community engagement makes it either a necessity or a ‘default’ position in academic work, even if *ad hoc*. According to Bartkowiak-Théron and Herrington (2015, 83-84):

It is almost *de rigueur* for research and teaching projects to conclude that there is a need for the development of strong partnerships with communities and communities of practice, and the development of cast-iron community engagement *rituals*. These rituals (for example, the development of flexible research frameworks that can be easily adapted to other contexts or other issues) bring familiarity with processes, and confidence in each other’s capacity to contribute to positive change. In short, one way to measure community engagement is – for want of a better phrase – repeat custom, and some universities have a track record of doing this well.

However, they also cautiously posit that (2015, 84)

whilst organisational sociology suggests that there is no harm in formalising engagement processes (partly through measurement), it also suggests that too much formalisation can be detrimental to the development of more organic networks and engagement, which, because they are often based on relationships, can produce various scale benefits for the organisation itself and can have tremendous impacts on communities.

Some room needs to be allowed for flexibility in the development of networks that will eventually support engagement. Originality and distinctiveness, after all, remain the key aspects of university–community engagement processes. In addition to such flexibility, sufficient incentives for community engagement should be

in place to *permeate the life of the academy* (Watson, 2008) in order to fulfil the aims of academic life.

Consistency in university–community engagement evaluation is not really a relevant issue as long as initiatives are well-evaluated. One of the strengths of university–community engagement evaluation sits in the variety of evaluation/methodologies inherent its nature, and how it transcends disciplines. I can only recommend for academics to look outside their discipline to see how others evaluate engagement, and consider borrowing from or transposing existing evaluation frameworks (for example, social sciences perspectives can benefit from understanding social return on investment, although this can be a term more associated with *economic* return on investment). This is in itself a fascinating methodological exercise.

Refocussing the debate away from the topic of consistency needs to transcend what can be referred to as ‘disciplinary blindness’. University–community engagement naturally falls within all disciplines, and goes across all facets of academic work. Therefore, its

evaluation will naturally be found in a variety of locations, and throughout all disciplinary areas. It is common place in social sciences to have a look at ‘what others have done’, within the discipline and beyond, before tackling any kind of initiative or research. The paralysis that has plagued current statements about lack of evaluation is staggering. It is high time those who complain pick themselves up and review their critical analysis.

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ⁱ There exist similar complaints across other areas of government, where a lack of rigorous evaluation of community-related initiatives is systematically noted. See, for example, literature on community policing, community development, community sustainability, etc.

ⁱⁱ We refer readers to political statements made on the topic of so-called ‘wasteful research’. See, for example: <http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20130905114644195>.

ⁱⁱⁱ At this juncture, it is important to highlight that qualitative data will always be a crucial component of community engagement evaluation research, and that any form of evaluation solely based on auditing or accounting mechanisms will lead to an incomplete picture of engagement. Also, engagement with communities of practice is

better at valuing stakeholder voices than engagement with, say students or communities at large. This is probably due to the direct relevance of research or engagement outcomes for industries.

^{iv} There is probably a point to make here about how current evaluation benchmarks do not really have in mind to put a figure on the actual impact that research has on society as a whole. Rather, research productivity measured in terms of journal impact rankings reflects the number of citations one has across scientific literature. For a reflection on how research is beneficial from a societal or industrial point of view, industrial grants on linkages are probably a better indicator of direct input/output.