Establishing research partnerships with regional schools: from wattle seeds to acacias

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Abstract

The education and training of the young people of the region is crucial to the future viability of the region yet retention is an issue for secondary schools. More students apply for than are offered tertiary positions and fewer students take up these tertiary positions. Based on tertiary application rates and numbers of students who do not complete VCE, many students do not aspire to further education. Whilst many students are employed post Year 12, the nature of the jobs is of concern. Given that a significant number of people travel out of the region each day to work and the declining number of large employers, the region will rely on skilled educated workers and enterprising residents to survive and thrive.

Regional principals identify areas of common concern: student attendance (in general but particularly at Year 9 level); Year 12 results; student retention; tertiary pathways; student well-being and connectedness; and student insularity. Student engagement is also a concern for the university.

As major education providers schools and universities have a common mission but seldom work together collaboratively. This paper outlines the process undertaken by a university to establish research partnerships with regional schools and other key stakeholders to address the issue of student aspiration and enterprise. From small beginnings, the partnership has built to a significant regional research project that has established real collaboration and outcomes that promise continued collaboration that is address a key regional sustainability issue.

The paper also identifies critical success factors to successful partnerships with schools including: university investment; winning trust and confidence; project ownership; project governance; and developing opportunities for mutual benefit.
Introduction

The Lilydale campus of Swinburne University of Technology is located on the urban fringe of outer eastern Melbourne. The campus was established to develop and provide “educational, cultural, professional, technical and vocational services to the community” (Object nine of the 1992 Swinburne University of Technology Act). The Act further specifies this community to be the three municipalities of the Outer East: Knox, Maroondah and Yarra Ranges. Object eleven goes on to charge the university with “the maintenance of close interaction with industry and the community and the development of associations or agreements with (other) educational, commercial, governmental or other institution(s)”.

Thus from establishment, relationships with regional schools was important to the university. Although academics were involved with school visits in the first years of campus operation, the focus of these visits was largely recruitment and this function quickly devolved to the Marketing Department with the strongest relationships being developed with careers teachers.

In 2002 a round table discussion was held with school principals to explore the regional role of the university. This round table established that issues of student engagement and aspirations were as much a concern to secondary school staff as university staff. Thus the idea of closer collaboration was very appealing to principals. Seven local schools had partnered in a Victorian Government Leading Schools initiative and welcomed Swinburne as a partner. Swinburne staff assisted with the preparation of the successful submission to State Government. This initiative sowed the seeds of the university school research partnership that has now extended beyond the Yarra Valley eLearning Community project, to a study into Year 10 student entrepreneurship and aspirations, a Learning Communities action group with a wide range of regional educational stakeholders represented at the table, a Vocational Education and Training research project for the Eastern Metropolitan Regional of the Education Department and the development university/school student projects.

This paper describes the process that moved the relationship with schools beyond marketing and recruitment to the establishment of partnership.

Why engage with schools

The importance of university-community engagement has become increasingly apparent over the last decade. This has been driven by an acknowledgement of the role that universities can play in the development of civil society and in building sustainable communities and regions whose endogenous attributes, particularly knowledge, creativity and enterprising action, enable them to withstand the pressures of the knowledge based global economy and socially challenged world.

Early last century, William Rainer Hartley identified the importance of American universities as strategic agencies to bring about democratic change. For Hartley the school system can be seen as a leading societal subsystem and its
continuing development mandatory for democratic progress. Further Hartley theorised that the performance of the school system in this regard was a major responsibility of universities (Harper cited in Hartley, Harkavy & Benson, 2005).

The increasing spatiality of universities and growing pressures on them by funding agencies to be viable, unique and competitive in the face of reduced public funding and the internationalisation of higher education has resulted in a strong interest in building relationships of mutual benefit.

Both levels of government promote the development of these relationships of mutual benefit. The State Government sees a crucial role for universities not only in responding to the knowledge and skill demands from community and industry but because the "hopes and aspirations of young people depend on opportunities to improve their education" (Kosky 2005). And to maximise these opportunities schools and universities need to work together.

Engagement with regional schools has a six fold benefit for the university:

- schools are a key regional stakeholder with whom long term relationships can be built. Building student projects with schools is practical in that curriculum (ongoing experiential learning) and protocols can be constructed for the long term as opposed to one-off projects for which support is extremely resource intensive;
- university student learning will be enhanced by a teaching/mentoring role in schools;
- student projects in schools will have a major impact on secondary school student educational aspirations (Holland, 2005; Harkavy, 2005);
- the relationship has the potential to impact long term on regional and community sustainability. Schools have the natural potential to be a focus for community and thus the partnership can promote wider learning, research and community development;
- it refocuses student recruitment, shifting the emphasis from marketing and advertising to maximising educational synergy; and
- in addition to enhancing learning and teaching and building the curriculum, the research agenda of the University can be significantly enhanced.

**Why research partnerships**

For universities, ‘the agenda has moved on from a desire to simply increase the general education of the population and the output of scientific research; there is now a greater concern to harness university education and research to specific economic and social objectives’ (OECD, 1999, p9). A new responsive model for higher education is required and central to the development of this new model is the development of partnerships.

Universities have a role to play in improving the quality of life for their local communities and do this best through their core business of learning and teaching and research. In order to do this, university staffs need to not only understand, value and support the principles of engagement, but they also need to work actively to develop processes that are enabling. Therefore, an engaged university is one that develops solutions with its community to address strategic
problems as a function of its core business of research, teaching and learning activity. An organisational structure and culture that ‘permits, encourages, facilitates and sustains harmonious relationships among all groups and individuals within the university’ will enable optimal engagement (Benson and Harkavy 2002, p. 45).

Successful Partnership

Much work has been done in identifying the elements of successful partnerships (Koteinikov and Ten3 East-West, 2003; Cave, 1999; Hamer, 2002; Brown and Waddell, 1997; Walker, 2000). Successful partnerships usually include the following characteristics:

- they are developed from identified needs and priorities;
- they have shared goals, objectives and responsibilities;
- there is a clear understanding of the constraints and capabilities of each partner, the resource commitment (information, human, financial and technical) and the need to engage the whole of organisation rather than just individuals;
- there is regular, open, transparent communication and accountable structures for joint decision making and conflict resolution;
- the relationship has been developed in a way that engenders trust between all partners, effective informal networks and strong working relationships which underpin formal agreements (and support the evolution of the partnership in response to learning and change);
- there is a focus on the need to achieve results and not be just a “talk fest”;
- and
- there is evaluation and celebration of success.

Because local government in Australia and the United Kingdom has been increasingly concerned with community engagement, much recent literature relating to the nature of partnership has derived from this sector. For example The Local Government Association in the United Kingdom describes five characteristics of successful partnership as described in Figure 1 below.

Gray (1989) defined collaboration as ‘a process through which parties who see different aspects of a problem can constructively explore their differences and search for solutions that go beyond their own limited vision of what is possible’ (p.5). Thus partnerships can seek to solve a common problem which is one key driver of university community engagement where “innovative people come together and pool their ideas to generate non linear solutions [contributing to] their local communities becoming better places” (Garlick & Pryor, 2002, p.4). But the “coming together” is not always as easy as it might seem.
An article, Trust Building: The Secret to Highly Collaborative Partnerships (Simpson, Mercier, Streit and Hill, Metropolitan Universities, January 2002), includes the headings “Only Fools Rush In” and “Mission Nearly Impossible”. The message is that building successful university community partnerships is a long process that involves influencing but also being influenced and learning from experience. Universities are large institutions which can be intimidating and bureaucratic and they may have a reputation in the community deserved or undeserved, that creates a barrier. At Columbia College Chicago, the key learning is that “learning how to partner has been the most challenging feat” (p46).

At the Centre for Regional Development, Swinburne University, the work with schools had a very slow beginning. The problem was twofold; clearly identifying the problem and building the trust necessary to productively work together. Building the trust required a demonstration of faith; it was by freely offering assistance in areas that the schools themselves identified as priorities that a foundation of trust was laid.
The Wattle Seeds in the Outer East

Identifying the problem

The Centre for Regional Development has worked in collaboration with the three municipalities of the Outer East and regional stakeholders in developing a suite of regional sustainability indicators. One of the indicators causing stakeholders most concern is the learning community indicator. The education of community members is vital for the sustainability, health and well-being of the community. Educated people are more likely to contribute to a culture that is inclusive, creative and innovative. Thus the low levels of existing education qualifications and the low participation rates in higher education in the region have caused this area has been flagged for immediate regional action.

The education and training of the young people of Outer Eastern Melbourne would seem crucial to its future viability and yet student retention is an issue for secondary schools. Retention rates are defined as the percentage of students entering year 12 as a proportion of enrolments at Year 10. School retention rates in the Outer East are 78% (70% boys and 86% girls). Although the retention rate has improved it is still below that State average of 84% (78% boys, 90% girls). Less year 12 graduates go on to university than the State on average and more students apply for than are offered tertiary positions. Of those students who are offered tertiary positions, fewer students take up them up compared to students in the state of Victoria on average. Whilst this is true for all higher education, it is particularly marked in the TAFE sector where the region has the highest number of young people refusing TAFE offers through Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre.

This demonstrates that many students in the Outer East do not aspire to further education. On Track data suggest that many students are employed post VCE. However the nature of the jobs is of concern, given that much of the employment is low skill, perhaps part-time and/or casual in nature (The University of Melbourne, 2006).

A recent Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (2005) report ‘Snapshots from the edge: Young people and service providers in the urban fringe of Melbourne’ found young people and services providers both agreed that there were limited employment opportunities within their local communities, young people experienced an additional financial burden associated with having to travel further for work and although young people can find work locally, they felt restricted by the variety and type of work and that to get a ‘real job’ they would have to travel closer to the city.

Demonstrating faith

Whilst the university and other regional stakeholders were sharing a concern about regional education, there was no direct connection with schools. Earlier discussions with regional principals canvassed ideas but resulted in little action. In 2004 university representatives joined the principals of seven regional schools who had collaborated in the development of a joint submission to the Victorian State Government Leading Schools Fund. Their initial submission
had been unsuccessful but the Department of Education and Training was supporting them to develop an alternative proposal. The university provided demographic data and an evaluation plan in addition to committing to a role in project evaluation. Through this process, the principals of Croydon High School, Healesville High School, Lilydale Heights Secondary College, Mooroolbark College, Pembroke Secondary College and Upper Yarra Secondary College identify areas of common concern: student attendance (in general but particularly at Year 9 level); VCE results; student retention; tertiary pathways; student well-being and connectedness; and student insularity. The schools were substantially funded to establish the Yarra valley eLearning Community.

Subsequently, meetings were held with two of the principals whose enrolment was drawn from some socio-economically challenged areas in the region. The Centre undertook to develop regional profiles and overview factors relating to school success in such environments.

As a result of this work relationships were established and both principals subsequently became steering committee members for the Student Aspirations and Enterprise project.

Within the university, a visit from Fulbright scholar, Ira Harkavy reframed the purpose of engaging with regional schools. The work with schools undertaken by the Centre and by some other committed academics had made progress but could not be seen to have institutional traction. Harkavy’s presentation demonstrated that a university partnership with schools serves a threefold purpose; it meets regional need, raises student aspirations and contribute positively to both university and school student learning. Working with schools is one key to community engagement. The lesson from the US (Holland, 2005; Harkavy, 2005) is that community engagement is not “third stream” or somehow independent of core business but, like Industry Based Learning and collaborative research essential for the development of graduate attributes and the achievement of graduate outcomes including employment.

Two major initiatives

Learning Communities Group

This group has been established to address the regional priority of lifelong learning identified as a red flag issue because of the poor regional education performance revealed by the Outer Eastern Community Sustainability Indicators. Key educational stakeholders including Adult Community & Further Education, Eastern Regional Libraries, Department of Education, Secondary Schools, the Outer Eastern Local Learning and Employment Network (OELLEN) and the three Local Government Areas (Cities of Knox and Maroondah and Shire of Yarra Ranges), Swinburne University of Technology TAFE and Higher Education representatives have been meeting at the Lilydale campus.

The first meetings explored education and training related issues in the region and in particular barriers to increased participation. It was interesting to note that although most of the participants were directly involved in education not everyone knew of all initiatives and not everyone understood all of the acronyms used. Thus it was not surprising to find that group members felt that pathways were often obscure for young people, parents and the wider
community. In addition to valuable information sharing, the group has identified two projects related to student pathways, retention of young people in education and lifelong learning. These projects include development of a web portal that will add value to the existing OELLEN, Eastern Regional Library, local government, Adult and Community Education and Department of Education sites.

The second project will involve the design and administration of a Work Integrated Learning (WIL)\(^1\) student project that will determine:

- young people’s preferred mode of communication
- how best the message of lifelong learning and pathways can be communicated to this demographic

This work is a precursor to the development of a concerted regional marketing campaign.

**Student Aspirations and Enterprise in the Outer East of Melbourne project**

The Student Aspirations and Enterprise in the Outer East of Melbourne sought to examine whether extending educational opportunities through enterprise engagement may offer solutions to at least some of the identified regional problems and further play a vital role in stimulating the regional economic fortunes over the longer term.

Funded through a 2005 Swinburne Strategic Initiative, the project also aimed to broaden the network of schools partnering with the university and to provide valuable information for the development of collaborative opportunities. The project, undertaken over a twelve month period, provided an opportunity to build upon the On Track research base undertaken by the Outer East Local Learning and Employment Network, as well as providing valuable data to inform future strategic decision making, not only for the university, but for the wider community.

In summary, the research project sought to investigate:

- The educational and career aspirations of Year 10 students in the Outer East;
- Students’ interest in/intention to run their own business;
- Students’ awareness of job opportunities within the region;
- Students’ willingness or intention to travel outside the region for education or work;
- Students’ awareness of educational opportunities or pathways, particularly those related to career choice and
- Students’ awareness of/interest in enterprise programs or projects

An audit of enterprise programs or initiatives particularly identifying those offered in the Outer East was also undertaken with the view to explore the opportunities that encourage enterprise and innovation within schools and more detailed case studies developed for four enterprise programs.

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\(^1\) Work Integrated Learning is a third year multidisciplinary subject where student teams undertake real projects.
Initially, key stakeholders in Outer Eastern Melbourne were invited to participate on a steering committee. The role of the steering committee was to provide guidance and expertise to the project and the Project Officer. The committee included:

- three secondary school principals,
- the executive officer of the Outer Eastern Local Learning and Employment Network,
- staff from Swinburne University of Technology and the Department of Education and Training.
- For some meetings, two senior teaching staff attended to provide expertise and advice.

Following ethics approval from Swinburne University of Technology, the Department of Education and Training and Catholic Education Office, secondary schools in Melbourne’s outer east were approached to participate in the study. Twenty one schools participated in the project. It should be noted that more schools agreed to participate but were unable to persuade students to return signed parental permission forms. Four hundred and twenty five completed surveys provided valuable regional information to be shared with schools in a forthcoming forum.

The learning

In 2003, meetings had been held with school principals. Already it was clear that foundations were being laid and that “relationship building takes time – an incremental approach that enables all participants to play their role to the fullest. Once the value of the relationship is proven, regional participants are more likely to come to the table to address the big picture regional issues” It was observed then that, although the round table discussions held at Swinburne were successful in engaging community members in a discussion “it should be noted that participants came either because they already had a relationship with the university, or in the case of those who had not been associated with the university before” (Garlick & Langworthy, 2004, p19), because the project resonated with their own identified needs.

Figure two below demonstrates how the partnership has built since the early meetings with principals. The evidence base and collaboration with the wider region established by the Indicators of Community Sustainability the Yarra Valley eLearning Community Project and the demographic profile work proved the willingness of the university to work with schools and contribute knowledge. Within the university work was begun to raise awareness of the benefits of community engagement and in particular working with schools.

The Learning Communities Group and the Student Aspirations Project demonstrated university commitment and capability, and involved a wide range of stakeholders. Representative and skilled steering committees provided both wider group project ownership and clear governance. Arising from this work a number of projects with clear mutual benefit are flowing, the most important of which is the establishment of ongoing student projects in schools.
Figure Two: The process from wattle seeds to very small acacias
Conclusion

University research partnerships with schools have much in common with partnerships elsewhere. They need to have the five C’s – common purpose, commitment, constructive behaviour, communication and capability. However universities have a leadership role and thus must invest in providing the evidence and knowledge base and in providing facilitation. It must be recognised that results will not be quickly attained.

In making the investment in the partnership, in establishing shared ownership and governance, the university opens the door to developing opportunities for mutual benefit.

References


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