Title: Making community engagement core business
Author: Anne Langworthy, Centre for Regional Development, Swinburne University of Technology, Lilydale, Vic, 3140, Australia

Abstract

Universities have a long tradition of engaging with industry in order to develop both research opportunities and enriched learning experiences for students. Increasingly both universities and government understand the importance of engagement with the wider community but often engagement is peripheral to mainstream university activity. The key to wider university community engagement is focus on building graduate attributes in our students. This paper shares the journey of an outer urban campus in setting out to listen to students, business and the community in order to come to terms with what effective engagement means and begin the journey towards making this engagement core business.

Introduction

With origins as a technical college established in 1908, Swinburne University of Technology has grown into a multi-campus multi disciplinary and intersectoral provider of tertiary education. In 1992 Swinburne became a university specifically charged, by Act of the Victorian Parliament with providing higher education to the three municipalities of Outer Eastern Melbourne. The Lilydale Division was established in the same year to meet this legislative obligation, to develop the university’s presence in the outer east and to fulfil the university’s community and regional mission. As was hoped by those in the community who had lobbied hard to have the university located in Lilydale, the majority of those first enrolled came from the region.

Relationships with key regional stakeholders were established and the first adjunct professors were local industry leaders. Faculty members participated in local associations like the Chamber of Commerce and were very active in working with local secondary schools.

The Growth and Development Partnership with the Shire of Yarra Ranges has encouraged a range of joint projects, the Town and Gown lecture series and joint ventures exemplified by the Reconciliation Week program, as one example.

The university has strong relationships with regional organisations and undertaken a number of major projects on behalf of these organisations. At first blush, the Division could be seen to be engaging well with the community. However, as the first decade of operation approached, enrolments grew to over 2000 and the Division expanded to offer post graduate courses, the proportion of local students diminished to just over 40% of total enrolments although it should be noted that the actual number has fallen only marginally. With growth and the strong Divisional emphasis on multimedia and innovation in teaching, faculty members had less time to engage with schools or take on projects. Much of the significant engagement work undertaken by the Division was peripheral to the mainstream or the core business of learning and teaching.

A regional community engagement initiative

The downward trend of local enrolments and an increasing national focus on university community engagement caused the Division to propose a regional engagement strategic initiative which was funded by the Vice Chancellor in 2003.

As part of that initiative, much work has been done in the Division over the past two years to understand the experience of our students and the role the university plays regionally.

Underpinning research examined the demographics of the region, industry and employment trends and skill shortages identified by industry. It looked at the wider context of global drivers of change, the future of work and models of university community engagement in Australia. Most importantly it focused on students, the current cohort enrolled at Lilydale, graduate outcomes and regional VCE graduates and secondary school students.
Within the Division, a multidisciplinary regional engagement team met regularly to both consider the research findings and to examine the ways that the Division currently engages with the community. It became apparent that issues of student engagement and graduate outcomes were central to this discussion. Although all members of the team engaged with the community in various ways and there was a collective sense that the Division was doing well, it became clear that there was not a shared understanding of the terminology around regional or community engagement or what engagement at a high level would mean in practice. It also became clear that we needed further data and thus three research projects were undertaken: a study of student engagement where 136 students participated in semi structured interviews designed to ascertain current student perspectives of their studies in relation to other priorities in their lives; a study of community perceptions of the university where 30 business owners and community members were interviewed and a graduate outcomes project that examined graduate employment and the services offered by the university to maximise these outcomes. A Divisional Retreat held at the beginning of 2004 and 2005 focused on research findings community engagement and student engagement and graduate outcomes and engaged staff in prioritising action.

Engaging to maximise graduate employment

Since 1906 in the United States of America and arguably earlier in Europe, institutions of learning have been implementing cooperative education in an effort to prepare students for the world of employment (Sovilla, 1998). The implementation of work placements as a component of higher education programs has become widespread and has been an accepted part of a large number of undergraduate programs in Australia and beyond. Martin (1998) noted that work placements are a component of approximately 60% of Australian bachelor-level programs. At Lilydale, work-based learning takes two forms, one an Industry Based Learning year or half year in industry and the other a Work Integrated Learning subject where an industry or community based subject is undertaken by cross-disciplinary teams.

The benefits both of engaging with industry in order to provide work related student experience is well known. There have been a large number of studies that have shown the positive impact of cooperative education programs on the academic and employability outcomes of student participants (Martin, 1996). At Lilydale student interviews confirmed the positive contribution made by the work related learning experience but not all students undertake work related learning subjects.

Employability has become a clear focus or government and education alike. Whilst the Commonwealth has investigated and identified skills required for business and industry in the future (DEST 2002), many universities like Swinburne have articulated desirable graduate attributes with the same end in view. Excellence in each discipline area is a clear goal and each subject articulates the graduate attributes that the subject intends to foster at Lilydale. However, what became clear in the investigation was the fragmentary nature of the services provided, the lack of student awareness of services offered and the need to develop a cohesive approach that builds graduate attributes and professionalism throughout the curriculum. Thus the challenge of reviewing curriculum and assessment in terms of articulated graduate attributes and engaging with business and industry to do this has become a priority for the academy at Lilydale.

However, this work needs to be done in a context of understanding the life experience of our students.

The student experience

Whilst the scenarios of the futurists emphasise the need for future workers who are adaptable, attuned to lifelong learning, and innovative, university students are also more time poor, less engaged with their study and more vocationally focused. In the context of a deregulated educational industry, students are increasingly considered to be consumers within a marketplace that tailors educational services to fit the needs of its client base. Students increasingly expect the University to fit with their lives rather than vice-versa (McInnis, 2001:3).

Interviews with 136 students on the Lilydale campus over the last two years confirm wider research findings. Students are spending less time on campus, more time in paid employment, and an increasing
number of activities and priorities compete with the demands of University. Students have indicated that they find it difficult to find the motivation to study, are less likely to study on weekends, find the study workload difficult to manage, miss classes and increasingly rely on friends or online facilities for course materials (McInnis, James, and Hartley 2000:xii; McInnis, 2001:4; McInnis and Hartley 2002:37&44; Langworthy and Howard 2005).

Academics are increasingly concerned at what they see as resultant trends; students doing the minimum of study to get by, not achieving the standard of work of which they are capable and not able to engage in deep or reflective learning (McInnis and Hartley 2002:48).

David Watson, Vice Chancellor of Brighton University in the UK urges academics not to focus on the deficits of today’s students seeing the modern student as a “canny consumer” who as a workforce entrant will be competing with an increasing proportion of other graduates. For Watson students are “more effective readers of both social change and the related employment scene than either the providing institutions or external stakeholders such as government and employers” (Watson 2003, p3). Contextualising university studies in terms of the development of graduate attributes and employability skills becomes an obvious means to engage students and maximize deeper learning. In addition to the development and assessment work in each discipline area, the Division has decided to develop a “capstone subject” that will provide an opportunity for third year undergraduate students to synthesize their learning from all subjects and reflect on their resulting skills and abilities to use this information to focus on planning for their careers and lifelong learning.

Engaging to contribute to regional community development
The importance of links with industry can be well explained in the context of preparing students for employment. However, the wider impact of universities upon regions and communities has become increasingly apparent over the last decade. This impact goes beyond development of human capital evidenced in graduates and beyond the economic impact described a number of studies which fail to fully address the contribution these universities make to regional development, in the development of civil society and in response to the pressures on communities arising from knowledge-based global economy (IRIC 1999; IRIC 2000).

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.

This model acknowledges that the learning institution is doing more than prepare students for employment; it is also preparing them to be fully functioning members of the community. The model could be seen to challenge the traditional view of excellence in universities (research funding, doctoral degree programs, entry scores, scientific discoveries, for example). The new model has an intentional balance between teaching, research and engagement activities. Importance is given to undergraduate learning and there is an emphasis on performance and accountability. Outcomes are articulated for teaching and research that are responsive to emerging issues.

“The engaged institution is committed to direct interaction with external constituencies and communities through the mutually beneficial exchange, exploration and application of knowledge expertise and information. These interactions enrich and expand the learning and discovery functions of the academic institution while also enhancing community capacity…The interaction also builds greater public understanding of the role of the university as a knowledge asset and resource.” (Holland, 2001; p.7)

Yet despite the efforts of the Lilydale campus to engage with its community, trend throughout the targeted community interviews indicate that the University is not generally perceived to have an active presence within the community. Whilst little appears to be known about university activity, there was a general perception that the presence of the University in Lilydale is positive because it has provided...
increased educational prospects for local students, and has indirectly caused an increase in local business activity generally.

Educational qualifications in the region are below that of the State on average and Lilydale round table discussions with business noted that much regional employment did not require tertiary qualifications but still required development and training. It was felt that there were opportunities for collaboration and partnership but that cultural change needed to occur for the community to embrace education. It was felt that universities needed to be more accessible and that perceived barriers needed to be removed. One way of engendering this cultural change is to engage our students with the community and to embrace issues of citizenship and the development of civil society in the curriculum.

The Scholarship of Engagement
Ernest Boyer proposed four necessary and interrelated forms of scholarship - the scholarships of discovery, integration, application and teaching. Together they have become known as the scholarship of engagement (Boyer 1996). For many this work underpins all work-related learning and includes a sound basis in the literature, application and reflection. It has inspired over a decade of service learning internationally where community service as a scholarly activity is promoted by the university as a means of teaching social responsibility and a means of shaping future citizens.

The concept of the scholarship of engagement is an important one in the context of making community engagement core business at Lilydale.

Where to from here
The two Divisional retreats have provided the opportunity to focus whole staff attention on the issues of engagement and the development of an action plan post the 2005 retreat has set the agenda for ongoing deliberation. It is clear that community engagement is necessary to enhance the student experience and continuous improvement of the curriculum and we must make every effort to draw closer to our community to make student projects, work experience and service possible. It is clear that the Division must have an holistic view of student graduate attribute development and in order to do this we must continue to review and evaluate our performance and continue to seek information from our students and our community.

References
Department of Education Science and Technology (2002). Employability Skills for the Future
Mc Innis C (2001). *Signs of Disengagement? The Changing Undergraduate Experience in Australian Universities*, The Centre the Study of Higher Education Faculty of Education University of Melbourne


The Institute for Research into International Competitiveness (IRIC) (2000). *The Economic Impact of Edith Cowan University on the Western Australian Economy*

The Institute for Research into International Competitiveness (IRIC) (1999). *Contributing to the Community Through Education and research; Quantifying the Economic Impact of Curtin University of Technology on the WA Economy*