

Challenges for community engagement: An Australian perspective

Author

Kearney, Judith

Published

2015

Journal Title

Educational Research for Social Change

Version

Version of Record (VoR)

Rights statement

© 2015 Kearney. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/>), which permits unrestricted non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

Downloaded from

<http://hdl.handle.net/10072/105750>

Link to published version

http://ersc.nmmu.ac.za/view_edition.php?v=4&n=1#

Griffith Research Online

<https://research-repository.griffith.edu.au>

Educational Research for Social Change (ERSC)

Volume: 4 No. 1, April 2015

pp. 26-39

ersc.nmmu.ac.za

ISSN: 2221-4070

Challenges for Community Engagement: An Australian Perspective

Judith Kearney

Griffith University

j.kearney@griffith.edu.au

Abstract

This exploratory paper identifies three challenges for community engagement in an Australian context. These are 1) institutional perceptions within the higher education sector when engaged approaches are not well understood or valued, 2) community perceptions based on distrust, and 3) a lack of support structures for sustaining engagement. I consider these challenges by reflecting on my own experiences of community engagement. I present a case study of a long-term community–university partnership with data comprising observations and field notes, individual interviews, group discussions, and participant reflections. This partnership aims to enhance educational opportunities for a Samoan-heritage community as it seeks to address significant resettlement issues in Australia. I respond to the three identified partnership challenges as follows. For the first challenge, I consider conditions inside universities that support mutual engagement and suggest how academics might develop as engaged scholars. For the second challenge, I explain the need for a methodology that builds relationships among community and university members, where mutuality and reciprocity, transparency, trust, and respect are valued. For the third challenge, I identify conditions on both sides of the partnership that sustain community engagement practices. The paper concludes with learnings that can usefully inform community–university partnerships and the planning of leadership teams within universities that seek an engaged approach for mutually productive linkages with community.

Keywords: community engagement, community–university engagement, engaged scholarship, higher education, partnerships

Copyright: © 2015 Kearney

This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial License, which permits unrestricted non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

Introduction

In Australia, organisations such as the Australian University Community Engagement Alliance (AUCEA, now Engagement Australia) have supported the collective interests of Australian universities by advancing a shared understanding of community engagement as a core responsibility of higher education—within communities and in higher education institutions. AUCEA’s (2008) position paper promoted community engagement as “knowledge-driven partnerships that yield mutually beneficial outcomes for university and

Educational Research for Social Change, April 2015, 4 (1)

Faculty of Education: Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, Port Elizabeth, South Africa

community” (p. 1). Contemporary concepts of engagement focus on engaged scholarship (Boyer, 1996), a practice that situates engagement as knowledge creation and learning that are “participatory, process-oriented and relationship-based . . . reflective and iterative”, where “quality is both academically defined and socially accountable” (Cuthill & Brown, 2010, p. 130). However, while community engagement and engaged scholarship as an expression of community engagement are commended in practice, they are ideals fraught with challenges for academics and, at times, for communities, both of whom share responsibility for successful and sustained outcomes.

In this paper I explore three challenges that I identify as forefront to addressing for mutually rewarding community engagement. I also consider how each might be addressed. The first two concern misperceptions of community engagement on each side of the partnership. One challenge is therefore within the higher education sector where university agendas traditionally have prioritised research and teaching as scholarly activity and have relegated engagement with community as “community service” (Buys & Bursnall, 2007). As such, community engagement is usually undervalued, poorly supported and rewarded, and not recognised as an alternative form of, and valuable contribution to, research and teaching (Cuthill, 2008; Moore & Ward, 2010). Here the challenge emerges when an understanding of engagement is not clearly articulated or shared within the institution. The second challenge concerns community misperceptions. Where community perceives that a partnership serves a university’s interests, rather than or more than its own, the community will distrust the partnership, its processes, and results (Cherry & Shefner, 2004; Holland & Gelmon, 1998). This often eventuates when university members conduct research *on* communities rather than *with* communities. A third challenge concerns sustainability of outcomes (Kearney & Zuber-Skerritt, 2012). How can partnerships and programmes be designed and conducted so that mutually beneficial outcomes for all interested parties can be sustained?

I consider these challenges and ways to resolve them through discussion of a case study where I have firsthand experience. It involves Griffith University where I work in Southeast Queensland, Australia, in a long-term partnership with members of The Voice of Samoan People (VOSP), a community organisation serving the needs of Samoan-heritage families in Southeast Queensland. Data collection involved methods appropriate for the qualitative research of this study, including participant observations, informal interviews, minutes from meetings, field notes, and personal reflections. In this paper, I develop a case study narrative to present experiential learnings that I consider in the context of the community engagement literature.

As context for understanding the community partnership in this case study and why it was begun, the paper first turns to the challenges facing Samoan-heritage families living in Southeast Queensland, especially those who have relocated to Australia as New Zealand citizens through the Trans-Tasman Travel Arrangement³ and are thus not legal immigrants per se. It then turns to the partnership between VOSP representing this community, and Griffith University as the local higher education institution. It overviews the initial purpose and outcomes of the partnership and outlines a major strategy to widen participation in higher education, which has been inspired by the partnership over time. This strategy encourages appreciation of, and aspirations for, university study within the community. It builds the capacity of current and future students, and enhances community engagement with higher education. Having set the stage for this discussion, I explore the three challenges that I believe are central to success of community–university engagement and the work of engaged academics. Responding to these challenges, I offer a set of learnings for partnerships developing and sustaining engaged practice as university core business. I then conclude the paper.

³ The Trans-Tasman Travel Arrangement legally allows citizens of Australia and New Zealand to live in each other’s nation indefinitely and to engage in most types of employment. This residence is not immigration per se because it does not directly involve acquisition of citizenship and the rights, entitlements, and obligations that citizenship entails.

Resettlement Challenges for Samoan-Heritage Families in Australia

Community–university partnerships are usually inspired by mutual need. For the growing Samoan community in Southeast Queensland, concentrated particularly in Logan city on the southern outskirts of Brisbane, the community was growing quickly and their needs were palpable. Since the national government’s introduction of the Trans-Tasman Travel Arrangement (TTTA) in 1973, Australia has been an attractive destination for New Zealand citizens, providing employment and other opportunities and the economic and other benefits these can generate. In 2014 some 650,000 New Zealand citizens reside in Australia (Schultz, 2014). A significant share has Polynesian ancestry, with Samoan ethnicity most prevalent. One of the several places where these people have settled in Australia is Logan, where Samoan is the most commonly spoken language other than English (Logan City Council, n.d.).

Two particular challenges are central to Samoan-heritage families who have relocated in Australia. One is that demographic information for the group is unreliable, making identification of the nature and scale of problems all the more difficult. Samoans with New Zealand citizenship are not obliged to register for voting rights and often don’t contribute to census surveys undertaken by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, so their numbers are likely to be underestimated. If they do contribute to census surveys, they are likely to identify as New Zealanders rather than Samoans. Without accurate data for Samoan communities in Australia, their needs cannot be identified accurately and are likely to be neglected.

A second major challenge for this community emerged in 2001, when the Australian and New Zealand governments changed bilateral social security arrangements. The move impacted unfavourably on New Zealand citizens arriving in Australia under the TTTA, who included a large share of Samoans with New Zealand citizenship. Reclassifying their visa status as temporary residents of Australia rather than as permanent residents disqualified these people from the many benefits for which permanent residents of Australia are eligible. One valuable benefit of Australian citizenship is the Higher Education Contribution Scheme-Higher Education Loan Programme (HECS-HELP), which entitles Australian citizens to defer payment of university fees to complete an undergraduate degree until they have gained employment with at least a certain level of income. University students without Australian citizenship are not eligible for HECS-HELP and must pay full university fees up front. Many Samoan-heritage families with temporary-resident status who therefore do not qualify for HECS-HELP find this expense prohibitive, so their children are denied higher-education opportunities.

Many who arrive with temporary visas are unable to meet the stringent criteria to qualify for permanent resident status, let alone the costs associated with gaining Australian citizenship. The complex adjustment problems associated with different language, culture, education practices, income earning opportunities, and so forth that the Samoan communities were already experiencing in Australia prior to 2001 were further compounded by the new visa status imposed upon them. In the face of increasing issues, which included a concern about employment and educational opportunities, leaders of the Voice of Samoan People (VOSP) approached the University to assist in resolving these issues.

The Partnership between VOSP and Griffith University

The original aim of this community–university partnership was to improve educational opportunities at all levels for Samoan communities in Southeast Queensland. Partnership participants included diverse members of the Samoan community including titled elders and church officials along with academics and postgraduate students of Griffith University. Working within a framework of participatory action learning and action research (PALAR), participants identified community concerns and agreed on four related goals: increasing parental involvement in their children’s education; improving communication among stakeholders, especially teachers, parents and children; enhancing young people’s sense of belonging; and promoting cultural understanding across generations within Samoan communities and between Samoan and other cultural groups. With these goals in mind, participants envisaged a process for change and

developed and implemented an action plan involving four project subgroups. Each project subgroup focused on one of the four identified goals.

At the end of the first year, programme participants reported a set of intangible learning outcomes. These involved changed attitudes for all stakeholders, especially parents' willingness to engage with their children's education, improved understanding of intercultural issues on the part of teachers, enhanced relationships among parents, teachers and students, improved behaviour and learning outcomes for students, and more confident and capable leadership practices for community leaders. Tangible outcomes identified students' improved participation and performance at school via quantitative measures. Student participation at after-school study centres increased, parents were more involved in school events, grant applications to expand project work were submitted to funding agencies, collaborations were formed with government agencies, and Pacific Island Liaison Officers were appointed in schools and at the university.

The partnership is now in its fifth year and has extended beyond the Samoan community to include a range of Pan Pacific ethnic groups. A participation programme to encourage and enrich Pasifika⁴ students' participation in higher education at Griffith University was inspired by the original partnership with VOSP. It currently operates as a University Student Equity Services initiative (see <http://www.griffith.edu.au/student-equity-services>), and comprises three main initiatives:

- the Griffith Pasifika Association (GPA), which provides activities to facilitate the transition, engagement, and retention of current Pasifika students;
- the Pasifika Cultural Graduation, a significant annual celebratory event for Pasifika students and the wider Pasifika community that honours cultural identity, encourages student progression, and recognises their success;
- and the LEAD (legacy, education, achievement, dream) programme for secondary school students, which is delivered in partnership with local secondary schools.

Video 1: Pasifika Cultural Graduation www.youtube.com/watch?v=j7xjdI5P89s



[Video 1](#) includes segments from the inaugural Pasifika Cultural Graduation in 2011. This, now annual, event encourages extended family participation in a valedictory event. It provides an opportunity for community acknowledgment of both the graduand and the family: "Once a student has graduated, the WHOLE family graduates" (Graduate, 2012). Strong evidence of community–university engagement is indicated by the high attendance numbers at the graduations. Venues have been booked to full capacity by attending students, siblings, parents, and community members without need for event advertising. Graduation ceremonies are vital in raising awareness of the educational possibilities and pathways that Pasifika members have successfully journeyed, and to convey that attending university is achievable for community members. As one of the graduands in this clip commented, "the graduation night was so overwhelming for

⁴ Pasifika is a term used widely in New Zealand to identify those who identify with the Pacific Islands because of ancestry or heritage. It is now often used in Australia. It equates with the term, Pacific Islander.

me as my family and loved ones celebrated my achievement. My teenage children commented on how they now have a great desire to study at university". This message is particularly important given the significant underrepresentation of Pasifika students in higher education in Southeast Queensland and elsewhere in Australia.

Video 2: LEAD Programme <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MYET8fSOP1M>



In [Video 2](#), university staff and Pasifika students share key features of the LEAD programme. The target group of Pasifika youth coming towards the end of high school clearly valued the LEAD initiative. This is a typical statement by a LEAD participant in 2012 who had become a university student in 2013:

LEAD taught those who were there that higher education is achievable if you have the drive and passion in yourself. . . . I believe that LEAD was that final push that I needed to steer myself towards the university life and prepare myself for it.

LEAD has produced strong evidence of its intrinsic motivational value and capacity to enhance awareness, aspiration, leadership ability, and achievement of high school students. Including action learning projects was recognised as the optimal means to create ownership, engagement, and authentic learning by students, building on the PALAR model underpinning the initial community engagement strategy with VOSP.

Feedback from the partner schools attests to the positive and sustained impact of LEAD on student engagement and learning. Participating students and school staff reported being inspired and motivated: "None of them had any aspirations to study or to seek higher education, however, that's all changed thanks to the LEAD program" (Cultural Liaison Officer, Secondary School, 2011). The principal of another participating secondary school reported significantly improved aspirational and academic outcomes for Pasifika students graduating from high school:

Over 100 of our Pasifika students have attended LEAD over the past three years. LEAD has had a very positive impact on our students and school. It has not only built aspiration for our students to pursue further education but it has also instilled confidence and vision in our young people. Our senior students who participated in the LEAD program in 2012 all graduated with a Queensland Certificate of Education (QCE), some have successfully been offered tertiary placements, and others are engaged in traineeships and apprenticeships. (Secondary School Principal, 2013)

Surrounding these outreach initiatives is a discipline of engaged scholarship where members of the community and the university work collaboratively with a research agenda in response to community

Educational Research for Social Change, April 2015, 4 (1)

Faculty of Education: Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, Port Elizabeth, South Africa

needs, particularly concerning education. Members have produced collaborative writing and joint publications. On several occasions, the partnership as a collective has contributed to public policy dialogue. One example concerns proposed changes to the Higher Education Support Act 2003 to provide access to HECS-HELP for all graduates of Australian secondary schools, so that dependent minors with New Zealand citizenship are also eligible for this benefit. As another example, members of the partnership coauthored a Samoan cultural profile that is now used as a training document by Child Safety Services, a state government agency within the Department of Community Services. Ironically, this government agency had initially approached academics within the university to provide this information, privileging the university over the Samoan community as a source of expert knowledge of Samoan culture. Our partnership challenged this misguided assumption with a proposal that our members develop the profile collaboratively. Both community and university were involved in the creating knowledge for this cultural profile.

A more recent community–university collaboration explored the postsecondary destinations and educational pathways of almost 500 Pasifika youth. Church communities were central to this research project because the regular attendance of young people from Pacific Island communities in their local congregations meant the churches could provide access points. Through these experiences, I am confident that members of universities and communities can work together as partners in learning, research, knowledge creation, and publication.

The examples discussed above are vignettes of the widespread positive change that has come about in community and university, as pursued collaboratively through partnership activities. The partnership now has many more participants as well. Yet because of what it has achieved we should not simply assume that it has proceeded free of challenges. For example, finding time for collaboration has continued to be a major issue because participants juggle various roles as workers, parents, partners, and members of community organisations and church groups, among other roles and responsibilities. Meetings were scheduled outside work hours so we were usually tired. When meeting, we often struggled to respectfully align different sets of cultural protocols. I was frequently anxious about the amount of time I was spending with project teams and how this might affect evaluation of my performance as an academic subject to competing research and teaching expectations. This concern inspired me to recognise a need within the university and the higher education system at large for better understanding and valuing of community engagement as valuable academic work associated with knowledge creation and learning. Let us turn to consider the three major challenges participants have worked through to strengthen and sustain this partnership and the positive outcomes produced through its programmes.

Challenge 1: Institutional Perceptions

Perceptions of community engagement as a concept and as practice are inevitably vital to the success of community–university partnership programmes. Programmes need to be perceived as legitimate, worthwhile, and with the imprimatur of leaders on both sides—otherwise they cannot gain traction among potential participants. In the context of higher education institutions, community engagement invokes the concept of engaged scholarship. Boyer (1996) proposed this concept as an expression of community engagement and as a core responsibility for American universities. Engaged scholarship—or the scholarship of engagement—is now recognised and used more widely in the discourse of community engagement. According to Barker (2004), it consists of:

research, teaching, integration, and application scholarship that incorporate reciprocal practices of civic engagement into the production of knowledge. It tends to be used inclusively to describe a host of practices cutting across disciplinary boundaries and teaching, research, and outreach functions in which scholars communicate to and work both for and with communities. (p. 124)

Indeed, alongside the expansion of engaged scholarship discourse, engagement of communities and of scholars is reaching ever further across the world conceptually and in practice. In recent times, there have been similar calls to engaged action in the Australian context (AUCEA, 2008). Many Australian universities have expressed increasing interest in community engagement, addressing it at least rhetorically in mission statements and strategic plans (Cuthill, 2008; Winter, Wiseman, & Muirhead, 2006). But mobilising the interest off the page and into practice in Australian universities and communities is quite a different story. In considering the engagement agenda in Australia's higher education system, I believe we need to distinguish not only between rhetoric and actual practice but also between community engagement and engaged scholarship. For academics within universities—those who are potentially engaged scholars—community engagement generally refers to the overall task of the university and community, whereas engaged scholarship entails an intrinsic personal choice for academics. This choice is rooted fundamentally in one's beliefs or worldviews. As such, engaged scholarship is not just an approach to scholarship, but an approach to professional life as an academic and community member.

With multiple work demands upon them, most academics still do not view community engagement as a priority in their work performance (Buys & Bursnall, 2007). Neither do they fully recognise engaged scholarship as a legitimate approach that may be appropriate for their own academic practices or for usefully enriching their understanding of scholarship. Resistance to these ideas (Holland & Ramaley, 2008) may be partly because community engagement and engaged scholarship have not been institutionalised within the higher education system. Institutional frameworks to support the engagement rhetoric have been absent (Cuthill, 2008), as is recognition of engaged scholarship in the promotion and tenure process (Moore & Ward, 2010). Without structures to embed the acceptance of engaged scholarship conceptually and in practice—institutionally within the higher education system and personally and/or professionally among academics—dialogue that leads to a shared understanding of engagement will be discouraged. This will hinder the acceptance and advancement of engaged scholarship and engaged scholars in the higher education system, despite the official rhetoric.

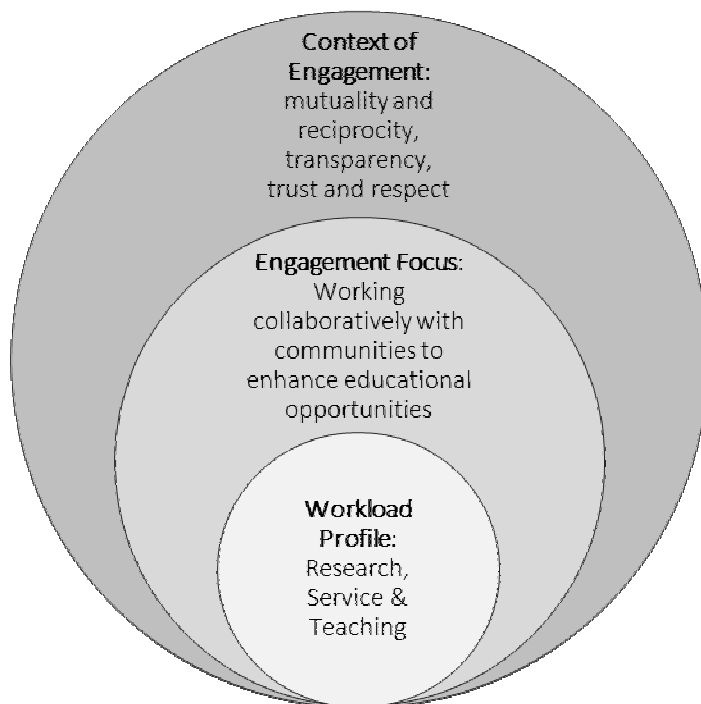
When Cuthill and Brown (2010) investigated senior managers' perceptions of engagement in a research-intensive Australian university, they identified three distinct groups that they called sceptics, utilitarians, and missionaries. Sceptics perceived engagement as outside the core work of the university. They adopted a traditional view of engagement as community service and regarded it as an additional activity that should not affect the "real" work of universities, namely, research and teaching. Utilitarians saw engagement as useful in some contexts and as a strategic means for individuals to achieve research and teaching outcomes. They regarded engagement as the practice of individuals rather than a priority as a university strategy. Missionaries supported the university's civic mission and considered engagement a moral imperative. They emphasised collaboration and respectful relationships that are mutually beneficial. These three perspectives among university senior managers suggest the need for informed understanding of an engaged approach to university work and the distinction between traditional and engaged approaches.

Traditionally, university work has been considered as three separate elements: teaching, research, and service—where teaching and research are prioritised as scholarly activity and service is perceived as giving to the community (Moore & Ward, 2010). Service as a form of engagement is often undervalued relative to teaching and research and not supported or rewarded by the institution or the university system in which it operates (Boyer, 1990). From a traditional perspective, community–university partnerships involve a one-way transfer of university resources and expertise to the community as a gathering of passive recipients (Butcher & Egan, 2008; Holland & Gelman, 1998). Typically, in a traditional approach, the university identifies a research focus and offers a researched solution based on community support. Knowledge is seen as something created within the university for the benefit of communities beyond, and the quality of knowledge is academically defined (Moore & Ward, 2010).

In contrast, an engaged approach emphasises engagement with the community as core business for the university. Here, engagement is perceived as a feature of research, teaching, and service, and as providing a focus for scholarly agendas (Buys & Bursnall, 2007). Partnerships sustain a mutually beneficial exchange of resources and expertise where communities are repositioned as experts. Commonly, the community identifies the need and collaborates with the university to achieve a researched response. Knowledge is co-constructed and the quality of knowledge is both academically defined and socially accountable (Holland & Gelman, 1998).

Some observers recognise that an engaged approach brings about positive transformation for both community and university (Butcher & Egan, 2008). However, an institutional context that supports an engaged approach is not achieved easily because it usually requires shifting from a traditional approach that is entrenched and resistant within the university system. It requires a shift in paradigm and in practice where power relations are disrupted and redefined. It therefore reconstitutes knowledge creation processes and thus, what knowledge is created. Nonalignment of institutional context with a context of engagement is a major impediment to community engagement. As illustrated in Figure 1, a context of engagement relies on a climate where mutuality and reciprocity, transparency, and trust and respect are encouraged and valued. This type of context encourages academics to specify an engagement focus. This is similar to a statement of intent and provides a unifying purpose for an academic's work, which in most cases is classified as research, service, and teaching activities. As Figure 1 portrays, an engagement focus facilitates a work profile that features engaged research, service, and teaching activities.

Figure 1. Context–Focus–Profile Model



A university can sustain a context of engagement when its leadership teams favour and institutionalise an engaged approach rather than a traditional approach to university work. This can be identified at first glance in mission statements and strategic plans but it will also be evident in a visible, practicable framework for implementing these strategic plans to promote, realise, and sustain this engagement. It will be acknowledged in a shared understanding of engagement—how it's done and why. It will be evident in opportunities for staff to be recognised and rewarded for their community engagement activities. Community–university partnerships will be valued, for if they are not, an engaged approach will not be sustained. Without these institutional arrangements and philosophy, the stated goals and beliefs are empty

rhetoric. Community engagement will remain a slippery concept and will be practised sporadically only by isolated individuals who are philosophically committed to the approach (Holland & Ramaley, 2008).

If supportive university structures for an engaged approach are in pockets rather than university wide, individual academics may collaborate with like-minded colleagues within their faculty or school. In my school, colleagues agreed on a vision: “To be a dynamic community of scholarly professionals leading socially just educational and cultural change through engaged critical thinking” (see website, <http://www.griffith.edu.au/education/school-education-professional-studies>). This vision directed collaborative activities that led to our joint creation of the following mission statement:

The School of Education and Professional Studies is committed to connecting people and shaping futures. Our mission is to make meaningful and significant contributions to education and allied professions through engaged teaching, research and service with colleagues, students and communities. Committed to diversity and the pursuit of social justice, the School is an agile organisation that can respond to change in uncertain times. We equip students to be future orientated in meeting the complexities of shifting praxis in local and global contexts. We are a sustainable enterprise fostering learning across the lifespan, maintaining high standards of performance, professionalism and the pursuit of social justice. Our graduates are capable, critical and creative. (see website, <http://www.griffith.edu.au/education/school-education-professional-studies>)

This statement encouraged a context for engagement. It allowed me to confidently develop an identity statement as an engaged academic. As suggested in Figure 1, my engagement focus was “working collaboratively with communities to enhance educational opportunities”. This was the focus that had driven my work with Pacific Island migrant communities for the last five years. I felt passionately about this as a goal for my academic work. It was important to me as the embodiment of my values and professional goals. However, I needed to align my engagement focus with my workload profile so that community engagement provided a unifying theme for my research, service, and teaching. I needed this work to be recognised within the university as a valuable professional commitment towards advancing education for people of need, and to play a major role in shaping my workload profile.

This encouraged me to reflect on my work as an academic with research, teaching, and service responsibilities. My research involved collaboration with communities of need in response to issues of importance that they identified. My service and teaching aligned with my research activity. For example, my service activities often included opportunities to share collaborative research findings in professional and public forums. Much of my teaching provided opportunities to engage preservice teachers in problem solving and discussion around authentic community issues that related to their future work. My teaching also included supervision and mentoring of Pacific Island postgraduate students whose research focussed on community-related issues. I was able to self-identify as an engaged academic and confidently state:

As a community-engaged researcher, I work collaboratively with communities locally, nationally, and internationally to address real problems in the public domain, especially equity issues. I therefore use participatory action learning and action research (PALAR) as an effective methodology to deal with social complexity. By encouraging communities themselves to identify and explore key issues and enact their own solutions, by favouring transparency, reciprocity, and mutual respect among those involved in the research, by observing possibility rather than deficiency, PALAR has enabled me to achieve significant outcomes. Findings of my research that identify ways to improve schooling and develop educational and employment opportunities for migrant communities are now in practice in schools and community programmes and informing policy decisions. By identifying the settlement challenges these

groups face in Australia, my research has also helped draw needed political attention and is being used to inform policy and action. My research work therefore creates practical and conceptual knowledge, improves intercultural understanding within communities and professional and government agencies, and usefully informs practices and policies. (Personal academic portfolio, 2014)

Challenge 2: Community Perceptions

Just as university perceptions of community engagement are vital to the success of community–university partnership programmes, so too are the perceptions of communities. Partnership programmes need to be recognised on both sides as mutually beneficial and based on mutual trust and respect. Community distrust in a programme undermines engagement, and is likely when community members perceive that universities or academics are using the partnership primarily for their own ends, such as responding to a community’s problems to secure research funding for the academic or university without regard for how the community can benefit from the partnership (Cherry & Shefner, 2004). In such situations, community members are reluctant to enter into collaborative partnerships (Holland & Gelmon, 1998). Trusting relationships need to be restored between communities and universities—rebuilt through mutual trust and respect, and reframed in mutually agreed goals (Bernardo, Butcher, & Howard, 2012). As the partnership proceeds, processes need to be clearly defined (Baum, 2000) and establishing relationships where mutual trust and respect develop will take time (Holland & Ramaley, 2008).

In the initial VOSP partnership, negative community perceptions were not a problem. The community sought collaboration with the university to improve educational opportunities for its members. We were fortunate that the community was motivated by hope and goodwill; it did not feel a need to avoid collaboration with our university because of distrust. Sustaining the community’s hope was important for the partnership and its programmes, and participatory action learning and action research (PALAR) as the methodology informing our processes enabled us to do this. As explained previously, PALAR involves collaborative action learning (AL) and (AR), participatory action research (Kearney, Wood, & Zuber-Skerritt, 2013, p. 4):

People involved in PALAR projects are interested in participating (P) and working together on a complex issue (or issues) affecting their lives, learning from their experience and from one another (AL) and engaging in a systematic inquiry (AR) on how to address and resolve this issue (or these issues).

PALAR values are those associated with a context of engagement: mutuality and reciprocity, transparency, and trust and respect, as noted in Figure 1. This set of values associates with *talanoa* [the sharing of stories, or yarning] approaches advocated by Pacific Island researchers (Vaiolenti, 2003) and underscores the need for equality, sensitivity, and relationship building if we are to learn with and from each other. This could have been especially challenging for our community–university partnership because there are many differences among the partners’ members in terms of cultural orientations and educational and life experiences. But while we were mindful of this diversity, we also recognised it as a source of strength that would help to sustain our partnership. I noted in my personal reflections:

Each of us has learnt about the power of people to bring about change. My university colleagues and I have resources that are necessary but not sufficient to bring about improved educational opportunities for Pacific Island communities. VOSP is in a similar situation. However, when we combine these resources we have a recipe for change: knowledge, networks, energy and beliefs. (September, 2010)

Challenge 3: Sustaining Community Engagement

Sustainability is a requirement and a challenge for any project. However, in this community–university partnership positive outcomes have been sustained so far for five years. The key factors that have contributed to this outcome have been expressed elsewhere as the 3Rs: relationships, recognition, and reflection (Kearney, Wood, & Zuber-Skerritt, 2013).

Relationships

Without doubt, the quality of relationships within a partnership is very important. As emphasised in the literature (Butcher & Egan, 2008; Howard, Gervasoni, & Butcher, 2007), partnerships characterised by authentic relationships and strong communication strategies enhance sustainability of community initiatives. In the context of an engaged approach, such relations are emphasised with elements of engagement noted as reciprocal and mutually beneficial (CIC Committee on Engagement, 2005).

Recognition.

Also necessary for sustainable outcomes is members' preparedness to track and evaluate outcomes and to recognise what has been achieved. At the end of the first year of our VOSP–university partnership we held a public celebration to recognise our collective achievements. This was well attended by family and friends of community members and colleagues from the university. Before the celebration, I had thought of the event as an opportunity to celebrate what had been achieved and to bring a degree of closure to activities conducted throughout the year. Instead, the celebration created new beginnings as guests from the community asked to be involved in future activities and suggested ways they might contribute. That evening, when members of the partnership reflected on their experience, they spoke about a positive future for the partnership. Their enthusiasm encouraged university managers attending the celebration to allocate resources to a widening-participation strategy, which included the appointment of a Pacific Island Liaison Officer within the university's student equity services team.

Reflection

Perhaps the most critical factor in sustaining the partnership was our commitment to a lifelong-learning approach. We expected to learn from our experiences in the partnership and appreciated that PALAR encouraged an iterative process of reflective learning. As few of us had used a reflection diary, we used a set of resources provided online by the Global University for Lifelong Learning (GULL).⁵ The first of these was a template for a personal learning statement (www.gullonline.org/affiliate/getting-started/index.html) that encouraged us individually to consider what we did well in our lives, what we wanted to change, and what we wanted to learn over the next six- to 12-month period. We used a second set of templates to record daily reflections. These encouraged us to consider the following: What had gone well and why? What didn't go well and why? What could have been done differently and how? Additional templates provided on the GULL website allowed us to synthesise reflections on a weekly and monthly basis. Through this process we developed reflective practice, which is the ability to consider experience thoughtfully. We also adopted a coaching process where we made a commitment to support each other in a process of action learning to achieve goals we had set in personal learning statements. In this role, each of us listened carefully and asked questions that enabled colleagues to articulate ideas and their own solutions to problems. The use of particular questions (for example, What have you learnt about yourself? What led you to think this way? How will this affect others?) helped us to become more critically reflective by moving beyond our own experience to appreciating its effect on others.

The coaching component worked well and served to strengthen values of mutuality and reciprocity, transparency, and trust and respect. The process was transforming and allowed us to appreciate the

⁵ GULL's mission is to provide an inclusive, practical, affordable, and credible alternative to traditional forms of education and development. As a non-profit, public corporation, it has been operating throughout the world since 2007. See www.gullonline.org

meaning of Leo Tolstoy's words when he claimed, "Everybody thinks of changing humanity, and nobody thinks of changing himself" (1900, p. 255). It seemed very clear to me that transformational change personally, provided the much-needed precedent for transformational change at a community level.

Members of our partnership recognised that changes had been made. When we considered our initial personal learning statements along with our final learning summary statements, we were able to better understand how we had developed as a sustainable learning group that had learnt new ways of doing, knowing, and being. In finding new ways of doing, we had become far better communicators and collaborators, and better able to use action learning strategies to identify and solve problems. We identified new ways of coming to know about our own self and others, especially through processes of reflection and coaching each other. We had discovered new concepts that now informed our partnership work. We also discovered new ways of being. We were able to recognise attributes such as optimism, motivation, resilience, confidence, persistence, and practices such as reflection that helped us to sustain the partnership.

Conclusion

This paper has described the challenges for universities and within communities that may prevent engaged partnerships for effective community engagement. Here I have offered responses to these challenges, illustrating through the case study of a long-term community–university partnership seeking to address problems concerning education for a Samoan community in Southeast Queensland. In this discussion I identified the following needs for collaborative partnerships:

- a vision and associated goals that are defined, shared, and endorsed by both community and university;
- a methodology that nurtures a context of engagement, emphasising values such as mutuality and reciprocity, transparency, and trust and respect;
- a set of goals that can be appreciated in both community and university terms, that is, they are mutually beneficial and their achievement can be identified; and
- a strategy for sustainability that is informed by the 3Rs framework of relationships, recognition, and reflection.

The paper also provides learnings for leadership teams within universities that seek an engaged approach. For this, group planning is required so that:

- engagement is clearly defined within the context of the university's vision, mission statement, and underlying set of values and commitments;
- participants are provided with exemplars of engaged approaches to research, service, and teaching to foster shared understanding of these concepts;
- the university offers opportunities demonstrating that it values an engaged approach; and
- strategies for implementing engagement include ways of monitoring outcomes and impact so that engagement agendas remain responsive to changing community needs.

Certainly, there are challenges for achieving effective, mutually rewarding engagement between universities and communities. Yet as the case study discussed here reveals, those challenges can themselves be valuable learning experiences when participants reflect critically upon them to gain insights for further action and learning. I believe this case study of a Samoan community in Southeast Queensland presents not just useful lessons in community engagement but also recognition that community–university partnerships have great potential to contribute to knowledge creation and to community wellbeing.

References

- Australian Universities Community Engagement Alliance (AUCEA). (2008). Universities and community engagement: Position paper 2008–2010. Retrieved from http://admin.sun.ac.za/ci/resources/AUCEA_universities_CE.pdf
- Barker, D. (2004). The scholarship of engagement: A taxonomy of five emerging practices. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, 9(2), 123–157.
- Baum, H. (2000). Fantasies and realities in university–community partnerships. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 20, 234–246.
- Bernardo, M., Butcher, J., & Howard, P. (2012). An international comparison of community engagement in higher education. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 32, 187–192.
- Boyer, E. (1990). *Scholarship reconsidered: Priorities of the professoriate*. Princetown, USA: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.
- Boyer, E. (1996). The scholarship of engagement. *Journal of Public Service and Outreach*, 1, 11–20.
- Butcher, J., & Egan, L. (2008) Community engagement research: A question of partnership. *The Australasian Journal of Community Partnership*, 2(3), 106–112.
- Buys, N., & Bursnall, S. (2007). Establishing university–community partnerships: Processes and benefits. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 29(1), 73–86.
- Cherry, D., & Shefner, J. (2008). Addressing barriers to university–community collaboration. *Journal of Community Practice*, 12(3/4), 219–233.
- CIC Committee on Engagement. (2005). *Engaged scholarship: A resource guide*. USA: Committee on Institutional Cooperation.
- Cuthill, M. (2008). A quality framework for university engagement in Australia. *The International Journal of Public Participation*, 2(2), 25–41.
- Cuthill, M., & Brown, A. (2010). Sceptics, utilitarians and missionaries: Senior managers’ perceptions of engagement in a research intensive Australian university. *Australasian Journal of University–Community Engagement*, 5(2), 126–146.
- Holland, B., & Gelmon, S. (1998). The state of the “engaged campus”: What have we learned about building and sustaining university–community partnerships. *American Association for Higher Education (AAHE) Bulletin*, 51(2), 3–6.
- Holland, P., & Ramaley, J. (2008, July). *Creating a supportive environment for community–university engagement*. Paper presented at HERDSA Annual Conference, Rotorua, New Zealand.
- Howard, P., Gervasoni, A., & Butcher, J. (2007). *Implementing a university paradigm for effective community engagement*. Paper presented at Australian Association for Research in Education Conference, Freemantle, Australia.
- Kearney, J., Wood, L., & Zuber-Skerritt, O. (2013). Community–university partnerships through participatory action learning and action research (PALAR). *Gateways: International Journal of Community Research and Engagement*, 6(1), 113–130.
- Kearney, J., & Zuber-Skerritt, O. (2012). Creating a sustainable learning community through lifelong learning. *The Learning Organization*, 19(5), 400–413.
- Logan City Council. (n.d.). *Community profile*. Retrieved from <http://profile.id.com.au/logan/language?>
- Moore, T., & Ward, K. (2010). Institutionalizing faculty engagement through research, teaching, and service at research universities. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, Fall, 44–58.
- Schultz, J. (2014). Looking east. In J. Schultz & L. Jones, (Eds.), *Griffith Review 43: Pacific highways* (pp. 7–9). Brisbane, Australia: Griffith University.

- Tolstoy, L. (1900). *Pamphlets* (Translated from Russian). Christchurch, UK: Free Age Press. Retrieved from <https://archive.org/stream/pamphletstransl00tolsgoog#page/n0/mode/2up/search/world+>
- Vaioliti, T.M. (2006). Talanoa research methodology: A developing position on Pacific research. *Waikato Journal of Education*, 12, 21–32.
- Winter, A., Wiseman, J., & Muirhead, B. (2006). University–community engagement in Australia: Practice, policy and public good. *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice*, 1(3), 211–230.