

Engaging Communities Through Educational Precincts

Poole M E*, Garnett P J*, Quin R & Tracey J

Edith Cowan University, Perth Western Australia, Australia

Abstract

Engagement is a two-way process, relying on a mutual exchange of ideas between a university and its various communities. Edith Cowan University (ECU) has developed an approach to community engagement that reflects this concept, but which also recognises the competitive environment in which universities operate.

ECU's community engagement is based on the OECD concept of a learning community (OECD 2001) and consistent with Longworth's definition, "a city, town or region which goes beyond its statutory duty to provide education and training and creates a vibrant, participative, culturally aware and economically buoyant human environment" (Longworth 1999, p. 112).

ECU is developing its three campuses using a unique precinct approach which strongly encourages community engagement. The term 'precinct' has the advantage of pointing to more than just the facilities of the university. The term reflects the need for planning to encompass not only the campuses themselves but also their surrounding regions and key stakeholder relationships. ECU's vision, focussing its activities around its three precincts, has facilitated the University's development across the broad range of university activities and underpinned the University's growth and implementation of its strategic plan.

This case study will demonstrate the effectiveness of ECU's precincts approach in building stronger links with the local community, its success in developing strategic relationships with its precinct partners, recognition of the different community needs of the regions in which the campuses are located and the importance of the unique identity which is being developed for each campus.

Keywords

Engagement, precincts, partnerships, learning communities, clusters

Introduction — Engagement as a core value

Expectations on universities are higher than ever. Industry, government and the community expect higher education institutions to make a valuable and tangible contribution to regional, national and international growth and wellbeing, and at the same time to produce graduates with skills and attributes that are relevant to the workplace. Value is placed on research and knowledge that is 'socially robust', i.e. that has practical application. Universities are also required

to be engines of economic development, and to provide social and cultural benefits to their region.

In addition to their core business of teaching and research, universities therefore have been seen as having a wider social role within their communities. Historically, universities have discharged this responsibility through undertaking 'community service'. Increasingly, this approach is being seen as paternalistic and uni-dimensional, and new models have emerged to assist universities fulfil their social and cultural missions. The notion of 'engagement' is central to this new approach. Engagement relies on mutually beneficial interactions between the academic community and the wider society.

This approach to engagement is advocated by the Association of Commonwealth Universities. It is a much more comprehensive concept than 'service' and is genuinely a two-way process. Engagement relies on a *mutual* exchange of ideas between the university and its multiple communities, involving "the exchange of thinking across the boundary between academy and the rest of society, between thinkers and practitioners, researchers and innovators-on-the-ground [and] is essentially synergistic — it yields more than the sum of the thinking of both undertaken separately" (Wedgwood 2003, p. 126). Barnett (2003 p. 253) defines engagement as "a coming together, a merging, a fusing...not just a coming together but an interaction". He states that in the process of this interaction, one party, at least, becomes somewhat transformed.

ECU has therefore developed an approach to community engagement which reflects this process, but which also recognises the competitive environment in which we operate. Our community engagement is based on a theoretical framework that will help us to meet community expectations, whilst providing the differentiation the university seeks.

The work by the ACU on engagement as a core value has informed what we do at ECU (Bjarnason and Coldstream 2003). The ACU definition of engagement implies strenuous, thoughtful, argumentative interaction with the non-university world in at least four spheres:

- Teaching and learning that is relevant to the needs of the community
- Dialogue between practitioners and researchers
- Setting universities' aims through its mission, plans, policies and procedures
- Forming alliances and accepting wider responsibilities as neighbours and citizens.

For engagement to be a core value for a university, it must drive all aspects of its endeavours.

Engagement, and teaching and learning

The interaction between teaching and learning activities and the professional application of theory ensures that teaching is relevant and practical. The value of networks and 'network thinking' is fundamental to facilitating conditions for cooperation, consensus building and joint problem-

solving. This networking informs the teaching and learning activities of the university so that knowledge transfer between the university and the student, and the university and its community can occur.

At ECU the dialogue between the university and the community informs course and curriculum development. Our pedagogy emphasises an authentic curriculum building on work-based experiences to develop job-ready graduates. Founded on professional practice, in many cases including practicums, internships or industry placements, our programs equip graduates with many of the skills they will need in order to succeed in their chosen careers. Course Consultative Committees, comprising external representatives of the professions, ensure that the quality and content of our programs remain relevant. Graduates leave ECU not only with qualifications which are immediately recognised by professional groups (including meeting professional accreditation standards, where applicable) but also with a commitment to self improvement and lifelong learning.

Engagement and research

The dialogue between researchers and practitioners enables the development of practical understanding. Communities increasingly demand research that is socially robust, i.e. knowledge that is valid outside the laboratory (Gibbons 2005). Research undertaken by a university must be seen by all sectors of society as a contribution to practical forms of innovation that lead to economic growth, further industrial development and improve the quality of people's lives.

ECU has a strong tradition of applied research. Working closely with professional groups, our staff collaborate on issues that confront our communities. Working on joint projects with the nursing, teaching and police professions, we investigate the relative health of these professions; we research bullying in our schools and have developed practical training and kits to assist schools; we work on the underlying issues affecting literacy and develop strategies to assist teachers; we work with palliative care professionals to develop guidelines and nationally adopted practices to better help both the patients and the carers; we undertake research into the role of exercise in improving the health of seniors — these are all examples of applied research with immediate benefit to our community. ECU believes one of our strengths is our ability to work with our partners, and we back this belief with specifically funded research grants to encourage our most promising researchers.

Recognising and supporting engagement

The mission, policies and internal procedures of the university must support and reward this engagement. An organisational commitment to engagement must include appropriate staff recognition and reward processes.

Within ECU our probation and promotions policies support community engagement activities. Our Strategic Plan stresses professional and community engagement and partnerships. Our Research Plan emphasises collaboration, and matching funding for collaborative research is provided through the ECU–Industry Collaboration Scheme Grants

Strategic alliances with industry and business also provide opportunities for students to experience the practical application of theory and learning, whilst enhancing knowledge transfer into the local community.

Regional capacity building

ECU recognises and values its role in regional capacity building. It is well recognised that universities have an essential role in the maintenance and development of social and economic wellbeing: “In the global environment, higher education and research have become central to the health and sustainability of the economy, to social well-being and to cultural life in every nation” (Marginson 2002). Alliances and partnerships with local government bodies within each of its campus locations are important relationships for ECU.

ECU and engagement

At ECU community engagement has long been a central theme. The 1998–2002 Strategic Plan identified professional and community engagement as a central element in the university’s claim to differentiation. Key strategies included:

- special funding for ventures that fostered ECU/industry integration and collaboration
- strong emphasis on the incorporation of practicum components into courses across the university
- a policy of appointing adjunct staff drawn from government and industry
- the development of global networks, and international research projects.

The 1998–2002 Strategic Plan also laid the foundations for the university’s precinct approach to community engagement by encouraging each of our three main campuses to develop mutually beneficial relationships with their local communities.

Our 2003–2007 Strategic Plan built on this foundation. It has five priorities. Two of these — Engaging with the Professions and Professional Life; and Building Partnerships, Pathways and Precincts — are directed towards community engagement.

Community engagement therefore takes on a more extensive matrix of relationships. Engagement is based on the principles of:

- a two-way process
- co-location locally
- win-win/mutuality

- networks and knowledge clusters
- local and global focus/hubs
- basic and applied knowledge
- community building
- capacity building
- driving the knowledge economy and engagement with the knowledge society.

At ECU we have built on these principles to develop an approach to community engagement using the concept of 'Precincts'.

Development of Learning Precincts

One of our major strategic priorities is Building Partnerships, Pathways and Precincts. Precincts are the mechanism that ECU has chosen to use for focussing much of its engagement activity, particularly around the Joondalup and South-West campuses. This paper will focus on our three Precincts concept to illustrate how we have conceptualised, and put into practice, community engagement at ECU.

In 1992 the OECD¹ adopted the concept of a learning city/community. Learning cities/communities acknowledge that social cohesion, regeneration, environmental awareness and economic development are closely related to the knowledge, skills and participation of community members.

A learning community is focussed on addressing the needs of its locality and developing genuine, workable partnerships with stakeholders. These include education providers, business and industry, the service sector, local governments, voluntary organisations and sports and leisure centres.

The concept of a learning community was consistent with what ECU wanted to achieve with its campus consolidation program — where we would move from five fairly disparate campuses to three key centres. Campus consolidation was a significant exercise for the university. Our location across five sites, some of which were beginning to fall short of the quality we wanted in terms of teaching space, did not provide the environment ECU wanted. A decision in the late 1990s to consolidate on three main campuses — and importantly to shift the main operations to a new campus — created an opportunity for ECU to develop a new vision for its campus development.

The three campuses that would emerge from this process of consolidation would be quite different in character — the Joondalup Campus in the north-western growth corridor of Perth was located in a peri-urban location. The South West campus in Bunbury (two hours south of Perth)

was in a rural location, giving access to students from both rural and remote locations. The Mount Lawley campus located close to the Perth central city provided a metropolitan location. Co-location of the campuses with other service providers (in Joondalup, a TAFE and the WA Police Academy; in Bunbury with a local health campus and TAFE; in Mount Lawley with the local high school) provided unique opportunities for synergies. These will be considered in more detail later in this paper.

We considered examples in Europe, Canada and the UK where tertiary institutions had become leaders in the formation and development of 'learning regions'. In the UK alone we found more than 100 cities and towns that had grasped the concept of 'learning towns' — including Edinburgh, Glasgow, Southampton, Sheffield and Warwick. In Australia we considered the developments in such areas as Geelong ('Smart Geelong — the learning city') and Ballarat (a learning city).

We adopted Longworth's definition of a learning community to be a city, town or region which goes beyond its statutory duty to provide education and training for those who require it and instead creates a vibrant, participative, culturally aware and economically buoyant human environment (Longworth 1999).²

At the same time our partnership with the city of Joondalup (home of our new campus) developed an economic strategy around three principal concepts:

- A learning city
- A living city
- An online city connected to specific global networks.

The time for developing ECU's 'learning precincts' was therefore right.

ECU was also working on its academic profile, leading to the development of a number of knowledge clusters to support our precinct developments. Clusters consist of concentrations of interdependent, innovative organisations that are active in the same industrial sector, are located within a limited geographic radius and around R & D facilities.³ Building on the work of Porter (1999), the concept of clusters has been adopted as a means to support knowledge driven economies. Increasingly, sources of innovation and creativity are found in these knowledge networks (Cook 2002, cited in Peters 2005). Clusters also provide the opportunity for tacit learning to occur between cluster members (Cook 2002). This two-way exchange of information is consistent with the notion of engagement.

¹ Cited in Faris (1998), <<http://members.shaw.ca/rfaris/docs/learningcities.pdf>>.

² Cited in Faris (1998), <<http://members.shaw.ca/rfaris/docs/learningcities.pdf>>.

³ International Conference on Technology Clusters, held in Montreal, 2003.

ECU adopted the concept of cluster to meet its needs and to reflect the needs of the communities in which it is located. We have focussed our course offerings as we developed the precinct concept further around strategic areas of scholarship, or knowledge clusters. The strong and strategic areas which were identified are:

- Education (Mount Lawley, Joondalup and South West)
- Health (Joondalup)
- Environmental Science (Joondalup)
- Information and Communications Technologies (Joondalup and Mount Lawley)
- Business (Joondalup)
- Law & Justice (Joondalup)
- Communications and multimedia (Mount Lawley)
- Performing and Creative Arts, (Mount Lawley)
- Community Services and Cultural Studies (Joondalup)
- Regional programs (South West).

Enablers to support professional engagement include our Research Centres (such as the Institute for the Service Professions), strong relationships with professional bodies, co-location with the WA Police Academy (Joondalup) a major health campus (Bunbury) and strong links with local councils and authorities (such as the Joondalup learning precinct).

Through campus consolidation, we are developing each campus using a unique precinct theme, which encourages community and professional engagement. They are based around our knowledge clusters and support local and global partnerships.

The term precinct has the advantage of pointing to more than just the facilities of the university — it conveys a notion of ECU's presence that doesn't stop at the geographical boundaries of the campuses. The term reflects the need for planning to encompass not only the campuses themselves, but also their surrounding regions and key stakeholder relationships. The vision of three precincts allows ECU to develop a more complete picture for growth and change.

The precinct concept incorporates a mix of student culture, a distinctive academic profile, teaching and research, focussed regional partnerships, strong local research partnerships and regional demographics that provide each campus with a unique identity that is nevertheless in keeping with the overall mission, brand and values of ECU.

By using the Precinct Framework as a key planning tool, the needs of each community and region are at the forefront of the ECU planning agenda and also work to create a unique identity in a competitive sector.

What follows is a brief overview at each of our three precincts, their unique needs and how engagement with their communities has helped shape them.

Joondalup/Wanneroo — the North-Western Metropolitan Precinct

Joondalup may be described as peri-urban, located 30 minutes' drive north of Perth's city centre, in an area that is growing strongly. Joondalup and the north-western metropolitan region is one of the fastest growing regions in the Perth metropolitan region and in Australia.

Recognising that “many needs of a knowledge based society will be met only by increasingly complex and significant forms of learning partnership” (National Board of Employment, Education and Training 1998), ECU has sought to develop strong partnerships with key co-located bodies.

ECU has particularly strong networks in the north-western metropolitan growth corridor. The university is part of a tripartite alliance with the Western Australian Police Academy and West Coast College of TAFE. The three institutions are co-located and form the Joondalup Learning Precinct. ECU has representation on the Joondalup Learning Precinct Board, which facilitates collaboration between the three institutions and the City of Joondalup.

Several collaborative projects have been developed through the Joondalup Learning Precinct. These include:

- a pilot Peer Mentoring Program which involves staff from the institutions sharing knowledge and skills through a share-and-learn program
- a Leadership Centre that will meet the professional development needs of senior management working within the service professions, in addition to meeting the professional development needs for the institutions. This is the partners' first attempt to develop a collaborative commercial venture.
- the development of a shared childcare facility. The first phase of the project has seen the Joondalup Learning Precinct Board engaging the services of a Consultant to undertake the initial feasibility study.

The partnership continues to promote the sharing of services and facilities between the three institutions. During 2004 this arrangement was expanded to include: access to library facilities; sharing of teaching space (for example, ECU law students will have access to the Police Academy's mock courtroom and crime scenario village); provision of bulk photocopying on a cost neutral basis; staff from the three institutions have been invited to attend professional development courses offered by the other partners; use of medical facilities; and staff from TAFE and the Police Academy are offered the same discounted rates as ECU staff to join the university's gymnasium.

The university also works closely with local government and business on a number of initiatives such as:

- the Twin Cities Portal Project — ECU (through the School of Management Information Systems) has contributed to the development of a portal and internet training for the local community and businesses in association with the cities of Wanneroo and Joondalup. Joondalup city is twinned with the Hyogo Prefecture in Japan and with Jinan (Shandong Province, China)
- the Smart Growth Strategy — ECU is working with the City of Wanneroo on this initiative, which aims to ensure sustainable development in the region
- the Joondalup Business Incubator — an ECU/City of Joondalup initiative, which supports innovation and enterprise within the region
- a range of local events (e.g. the Joondalup Festival, Joondalup Business Association Small Business Awards, Careers Expo)
- the Sellenger Centre, which collaborates with the Western Australia Police Service to promote professionalism in policing through education, research and development
- ECU has set up a unique articulation program, which allows senior police prosecutors the opportunity to gain entry into the LLB program on a non-award basis, and then articulate into the LLB provided they meet certain conditions
- *Smart Training in Small Business* — a research project to develop a framework of training needs for older small business owners and establish how these differ from other sectors of the business population
- pathways and articulation between ECU and TAFE in the areas of nursing, sports science, hospitality and tourism and security and policing
- the Fogarty Centre, a new research and professional development facility for the education profession
- the ECU Psychological Services Centre and a Joondalup Rehabilitation Centre, which offer fee-paying services direct to the community.

Bunbury — the South West Precinct

ECU's Faculty of Regional Professional Studies is located in Bunbury, Western Australia's second-largest city, two hours' drive south of the metropolitan area.

The Faculty is co-located with the South West Regional College of TAFE and the South West Health Campus. In July 2003, ECU signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the South West Health Campus and St John of God Hospital which formalised agreements on a range of cooperative research and professional development opportunities. Examples of community engagement in the South West Region include:

- active involvement by the community in the development of a range of regionally accented courses designed to meet the needs of the local economy, including Wine Marketing and Management, Regional Business and Surf Science

- the Centre for Regional Development and Research, based at Bunbury campus — recent research projects undertaken with wide benefits to the local economy and society of the South West include Community Capacity Building in Yarloop — a partnership with Alcoa Alumina to improve infrastructure in a small rural township dependent on primary industry
- meeting the needs of the local Indigenous population in the South West. Guided by indigenous involvement in the university, a range of courses and services have been established at the Bunbury Campus to facilitate social inclusion and provide beneficial learning outcomes for Indigenous students.
- regionally focussed programs in health services management and rural social work, tailored to meet the needs of rural and remote communities
- a variety of local services and cultural activities
- the state government has provided funding for the appointment of a Professorial Chair in Regional Development and jointly funding the appointment of a Post-doctoral Research Fellow
- agreement with the South West Area Health Service to establish two jointly funded position in Health Services Management to provide leadership training in Health Services.

Mount Lawley — the Central Metropolitan Precinct

The Central Metropolitan Precinct centres on the Mt Lawley campus and increasingly caters for the growing number of professionals working or residing in the inner city suburbs and the central business district. It is our most multicultural campus, with over 16 per cent of students at Mount Lawley speaking a language other than English.

The Mt Lawley High School is co-located with ECU, within the newly developing Mt Lawley Learning Precinct. In close proximity to the campus is the Central Metropolitan College of TAFE, located in central Perth.

Examples of collaborative activities between the precinct partners include:

- In 2001 the university signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Mt Lawley High School, which served to formalise the relationship between the two institutions. The MOU facilitates close collaboration with an emphasis on areas considered mutually beneficial (e.g. resource sharing, technology and enterprise, research and development in education). In 2004 a major new sports centre, shared by ECU and the high school, was opened. Future building plans include a multi-level car park.
- The Mt Lawley-based School of Indigenous Australian Studies, Kurongkurl Katitjin, engages with the local Indigenous community on several levels. The university invites community members to events and ceremonies throughout the year which celebrate and showcase Indigenous culture.
- The K-7 Compact Education Practicum partnership is a project drawing on dialogue with local education professionals and the state government. ECU revised the way practicums were

incorporated into teacher education courses, offering students better supported practicums with the opportunity to build longer relationships with workplaces and participate more fully in the life of the school community.

- Certificate III courses for the high school students in Jazz and Music
- Joint dramatic productions with the high school
- The Institute for the Service Professions has a very strong focus on professional engagement and is involved with a wide variety of research projects within the professional groups represented at ECU, particularly police, education and health
- ECU recognises the need to develop further strategies for engagement in the Mt Lawley precinct. The university is looking to strengthen its historical links within the Western Australian performing and contemporary arts scene and to establish new links in the expanding inner-city region.
- International networks include work with the United Nations (WA branch), research collaboration with international partners in Interactive Technologies and the Screen Academy — a regional hub for professional development for screen industry personnel.

Benefits of the Precinct Strategy

At ECU we have worked to make engagement a core value through our Mission and Strategic Plan. By identifying professional engagement and the building of partnerships, pathways and precincts as key strategic objectives, we have placed engagement as a central aim of the university.

The OECD learning city/community concept has been adopted to shape distinctive precincts. Using knowledge clusters and partnerships, we have been able to achieve a distinctive flavour for each of our precincts. The networks we have built, using the advantages of co-location are beginning to yield real benefits to our stakeholders.

The outcomes of this engagement are:

- the development of a distinctive identity, and a point of differentiation
- graduates increasingly seen as ready for the workforce
- the generation of useful and applied knowledge, through our research, consultancy and work-based learning
- capacity building — human and social capital as well as economic development — at a regional level
- managing community expectations and setting mutual goals through close community involvement in planning and strategy.

ECU's approach to community engagement was driven not by economic concerns, but rather a desire to embrace the notion of a learning community as a means of defining our role within our

local, national and international contexts. It has provided a focus for our strategic alliances, provided a point of differentiation and added value to our other core activities.

An important benefit that the precinct strategy has provided for partners and for students is the development of articulation pathways. Special articulation arrangements have been established with the TAFE Sector, particularly with our precinct partners. For example, in Joondalup new articulation pathways in Sports Science, Nursing, Security and Hospitality and Tourism have been established with the West Coast College of TAFE. In Mt Lawley, new arrangements have been established with Central TAFE in Network Technology and Screen Studies. Within the Faculty of Regional Professional Studies (Bunbury), arrangements have been put in place with the South West College of TAFE in the areas of Surf Science and Technology, Creative Industries and Computer Technology.

ECU has also participated in the development of a brochure detailing articulation pathways between TAFEWA and all Western Australian Universities. The university is also currently undertaking a mapping exercise linking courses offered at the West Coast College of TAFE to courses offered at ECU. This information will provide the basis of a comprehensive database which will inform future pathway development and associated marketing. ECU's Precincts therefore greatly assist students in making a smooth transition between different education providers, supporting the notion of 'seamless' education.

Our research, teaching and learning are focussed on the professions. Dialogue between researchers and practitioners has enabled us to develop some niche areas of expertise and excellence. We are building a reputation for practical application of knowledge. The interaction between teaching and learning and the professional application of theory enables us to build on this reputation.

Staff clearly understand this. Community engagement is recognised through both the promotions and the management for performance processes within ECU. In addition, engagement is recognised as an activity which should be measured and included in workload policies. Rewards for collaborative research projects enhance both professional reputation and is recognised within ECU. The university therefore aligns its reward structures with its commitment to professional and community engagement.

Our clusters have been used as an internal and external marketing device to highlight areas of expertise within the university. Our approach to community engagement has been an important factor in ECU's continued growth and success. We have demonstrated that it is possible to develop a strategy that will help the university to meet community expectations and fulfil its role as a driver of economic development. Our precincts are doing just that.

Difficulties we have encountered

The establishment of precincts and associated partnerships and alliances is not without its difficulties. Some of the problems that have been encountered include:

- differences in missions — a university sees itself as serving the needs of Australian society for an educated populace, TAFE sees itself as directly serving the needs of industry for a trained workforce, and a high school sees itself as serving the needs of its parent community. These differences are quite fundamental ones and influence decision-making and the politics of engagement. The challenge is to identify opportunities where there is mutual benefit.
- jurisdictional differences — for example, despite the fact that Mount Lawley High School is keen to engage ECU staff in the teaching of some of their students in the performing arts area, staff are employed under quite different employment conditions, making cross-institutional programs difficult to manage. Also there are problems in working across different sectors. For example we have attempted, and failed, to share services such as cleaning and security at Joondalup. Whilst there may be cost savings and benefits to such shared services, the practical and legal issues have made it impossible to effect these shared services.
- building trust in a competitive environment — from time to time issues arise that place precinct partners into competition. For example, TAFE might be concerned that the university seeks to move into areas which it considers to be its ‘territory’ (and vice versa). These concerns would emerge anyway, but they can impede close relationships and sharing when they arise.
- although community engagement figures in our reward systems, staff find it easier and more fulfilling to engage with a community aligned to their disciplinary interests than they do to one that is simply located in the same geographic area. Embedding engagement across the university community is not therefore without problems.
- lack of shared understanding of success factors and agreed KPIs between the precinct partners. Although all the intentions are positive and framed in terms memoranda of understanding, we have no way currently of measuring and evaluating the impact of, or adjusting our level of, engagement with precinct partners. It might be useful to try to formulate some benchmarks for engagement in this paper and measure our progress against them. Some possible benchmarks are:
 - growth in first preference share
 - collaborative research grants
 - basis for admission (proportion of commencing undergraduates who enter the University through different pathways)
 - admission demographics by precinct (proportions of domestic students whose home address is within the local area of each campus).

Conclusion

The precincts concept is serving ECU and its partners well. No relationship is without its difficulties and there is no simple solution to every situation. Despite this, the signs are positive and the MOU between the Joondalup Precinct Partners was recently renewed for an indefinite period. Precinct partners, students and the wider community all benefit from the precinct relationships and the synergies that their collocation and collaboration can achieve.

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