

How Universities Can Enhance Sustainable Development through Successful Engagement with their Regional Communities

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Abstract

Regional universities are expected to more closely engage with their local communities than their larger, older and often better resourced counterparts in the major population centres. 'Community engagement' is confused with many activities such as service, consultation and public relations. Engagement depends on productive partnerships that yield mutually beneficial outcomes to the university and community alike. Such outcomes for the community can include regional economic growth, research and innovation, and development of human and social capital.

It has also been suggested one outcome can be progress towards sustainability, although there has been little evidence documented to support this claim. Certainly progress in sustainable development is best achieved through partnerships. Universities can contribute in many ways: by producing knowledgeable and skilled graduates who are practitioners in sustainability, through research, by providing best practice in their own activities and through partnerships. Here we outline some case studies in community engagement that brings substantial progress towards sustainability and illustrate how productive collaboration can benefit the community, business, industry and government while simultaneously meeting universities' strategic goals.

Keywords

Sustainable development, universities, regional, community engagement

Sustainability and sustainable development

Sustainability aims to meet the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. The concept gained prominence in the report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (the Brundtland Commission), which stressed the need for inter and intra generational equity whilst emphasising the maintenance of ecological processes (WCED 1987). It is a complex concept; thus "Sustainability is an economic, social, and environmental concept. It is intended to be a means of configuring civilization and human activity so that society and its members are able to meet their needs and express their greatest potential in the present, while preserving

biodiversity and natural ecosystems, and planning and acting for the ability to maintain these ideals indefinitely. Sustainability affects every level of organization, from the local neighborhood to the entire planet” (Wikipedia 2005, p. 1). Sustainable development is the pathway to achieving this goal.

Ecological Sustainable Development (ESD) is a more frequently used term in Australia. The Australian Government’s definition of ESD is “using, conserving and enhancing the community’s resources so that ecological processes, on which life depends, are maintained, and the total quality of life, now and in the future, can be increased” (Commonwealth of Australia 1992, p. 1).

Universities are particularly well placed to engage in the scholarship of sustainability. Their core roles in teaching and learning, in research and knowledge generation and in community relationships means they can make valuable contributions to enhancing progress towards sustainability. It is the purpose of this paper to describe how universities can make significant contributions towards sustainable development in their regions of operation.

Regional universities and community engagement

While most Australian universities are based in the metropolitan capital cities, many have smaller campuses in regional or even rural centres.

The Australian Government recognises universities represent important intellectual, academic, cultural and recreational assets to their communities, especially in smaller cities and rural centres (Nelson 2002). There is also a growing awareness of the need for universities to better engage with their communities for the mutual benefit of both groups. Furthermore, because the government provides additional funds to regional universities via a loading, there is an implied expectation that these universities are even more obliged to work closely with their respective communities. For example, “Higher education institutions need to be responsive to the social, economic and cultural needs of the communities in which they are located and foster a more active engagement with these communities. The obligation for community engagement is one that rests with all higher education institutions, but regional institutions and campuses have a special responsibility to their communities” (Commonwealth of Australia 2002, p. 32).

Government policy promotes such engagement. Thus the recently established Collaboration and Structural Reform Fund offers AUD\$33.6 million over the next three years and one of the three priorities of the fund is for projects that involve collaboration between universities and their communities, especially those in regional Australia.

What is community engagement?

'Community engagement' means different things to different people. It is much more than community participation, community consultation, community development and public relations, which Sunderland et al. (2004) claim have been rebadged as community engagement in some contexts. It is also different from community service, a term that describes the altruistic and philanthropic actions of university personnel for the good of sections of the community, or "the one-way, paternalistic actions" of the university (Sunderland et al. 2004, p. 58).

This one-way traffic concept has been noted by Garlick and Langworthy (2004) as an opportunity to "prop up their civic capital in the community... to mine student enrolment ...and as a source of research funding" (p. 16). It seems especially common when metropolitan administrators and researchers use the regional communities for their own benefits without really appreciating what is really needed and desired by the communities.

Community engagement involves the establishment of partnerships between the university and its (regional) community that bring genuine mutual benefits (Langworthy 2003). Benefits to the university involve the institution being better able to meet its strategic goals in terms of teaching and research, as well as providing additional resources.

The benefits that flow to the community can include:

- productive research outcomes
- regional economic growth
- linking the community and the world (boosting local/global connectivity)
- social capital and community capacity development
- human capital development
- development of corporate and private citizenship attributes
- driving social change (Anon 2003; Charles 2004; Sunderland et al. 2004; Duke 2003; Holland 2005).

And more recently:

- progress towards environmental sustainability (Charles and Benneworth 2002; Allan et al. 2004; Institute for Rural and Regional Research 2003; Sunderland et al. 2004).

Some consider community engagement involves a new paradigm in the way universities go about their core activities. Holland (2005) believes community engagement articulates a university staff's intellectual impact on community building and improvement through knowledge-based partnerships. It involves universities undertaking scholarly activities within the community and the research paradigm she describes involves an approach that stresses

multidisciplinary, collaboration through knowledge-based partnerships and community building.

Universities and their contributions to enhancing regional sustainability

We believe universities engage with their communities in four main ways in order to assist in the progress towards sustainability. Furthermore, because universities in regional settings are more likely to closely engage with their communities than those based in large capital cities, we maintain they can be effective in enhancing progress towards sustainability in their actual region of operation.

1. Through best practice in sustainability

Campuses may themselves be exemplars in sustainable practices. Sustainability is considered to have four dimensions — environmental, social, economic and institutional (or implementation) (South West Sustainability Partnership 2003). Thus universities can have high levels of environmental performance, be economically self-sufficient and able to afford sustainable practices, have demonstrable social equity policies and practices and have a system to ensure effective implementation of sustainability policies.

A number of universities promote their commitment to sustainability. These include the University of British Columbia, which was Canada's first university to have a sustainable development policy and a Campus Sustainability Office (University of British Columbia 2005). There is a very strong emphasis on environmental issues (the running score of paper, electricity and water used at the campus on the website is striking) and students are encouraged to sign a sustainability pledge that requires them to consider the social and ecological consequences of all actions. Michigan State University also has an Office of Campus Sustainability and its Campus Sustainability Report certainly describes social and economic as well as environmental indicators of performance (Michigan State University 2003).

Hong Kong University (Hills 2003) is also committed to producing a 'sustainable university', with an excellent website and booklets promoting environmentally sustainable practices. However, there is less obvious stress on the economic and social aspects of sustainability — perhaps understandable as the report was originally subtitled the UHK Environmental Report.

The UHK now promotes a set of Sustainability Goals and its Sustainability Policy commitments. The most recent Sustainability Report adopts the Global Reporting Initiative guidelines for public sector organisations that stresses the economic and social contributions the university makes to its communities as well as the environmental performance and resource management measures (Hills 2005).

The International Institute for Sustainable Development lists some 71 universities and colleges worldwide that have policies on sustainable development, procurement, energy management, environmental performance or education for sustainable development (IISD 2005).

The Talloires Declaration of 1990 is a global action plan that incorporates environmental responsibility into curricular, research, operational practise and partnerships with private and public institutions. By 2000, more than 250 universities from 43 countries had signed the Declaration. However, a survey by Walton et al. (2000) found many institutions do not yet have an embedded environmental culture and lack mechanisms to produce a whole of organisation response to environmental issues.

There is thus an emerging recognition of the need for universities to demonstrate a commitment to sustainable development. However, Bekessy et al. (2002) questions the adequacy of reporting on the sustainability implications of their institutions' activities and note that in Australia, triple bottom line reporting and public distribution of environmental audit reports by universities is lagging behind reporting activities of the private sector.

Do the examples of universities and their moves towards sustainability illustrate successful engagement between the universities and their wider communities? Do they help bring about behavioural change in a wider setting that engenders regional sustainability? Do they maximise community participation? While universities may pride themselves on their sustainable practices, they may have little effect on changing practices in the wider community. It is important we are able to measure outcomes and progress towards sustainability by campus activities, especially those that have wider consequences than those that are for just the university itself (Fulljames and Wheller 2003).

2. Through producing graduates that are skilled and committed to sustainability

Some universities have programs that produce graduates skilled in the interdisciplinary management of sustainable development. Many such programs are postgraduate, even leading to doctorate qualifications in the case of Colombia's PhD in Sustainable Development. Others have a particular focus. Thus The University of Edinburgh offers an MSc. in Environmental Sustainability, while Nottingham University has an MBA in Corporate Social Responsibility. Undergraduate degrees specifically in sustainability are far less common, although most universities now seem to at least have some units of study that consider sustainable development.

Alternatively, some universities have clearly stated goals to have all graduates become familiar with the principles of sustainable development. For example, our own university in Australia has a suite of generic attributes graduates should have called *The Deakin*

Advantage. One such attribute is “an understanding of the principles and applications of sustainable development”. These are meant to be applied to the graduates’ own disciplinary fields and work situations. Introduction of this commitment proved quite difficult at the university-wide level compared with others such as skills in communication and group work; staff in areas such as drama and dance argued sustainable development was irrelevant to their fields. Interestingly, it required specialists from other disciplines to give examples of how indeed sustainability could be interpreted and applied in all subjects.

However, whilst these sustainability principles have been enunciated and promoted, we have no evidence of the extent of their uptake and use by graduates in their professional careers.

3. Through research

Most universities carry out research. The results of sustainability research can have a major impact on communities and assist in making significant progress towards sustainable development. Gibbons et al. (1994) highlight the distinction between traditional Type 1 research with Type 2 knowledge generation. Type 2 research is problem-driven, applied, multi-disciplinary, iterative and partnership-based in which collaboration is established from the outset, through the problem definition phase, data collection and interpretation.

Sustainability research can be an exemplar of Type 2 research. For example, Deakin University has been the lead agent in the project Regional to Catchment Scale Indicators of Sustainability in Southwest Victoria. The project has 17 local participating organisations. The partners and the community have been intimately involved in the project from the outset that has produced, by consensus, a list of 19 indicators of sustainability the region considers most important.

The 19 indicators are the tools used to establish a baseline of conditions and trends within the region and these have been represented by report cards. These provide an insight into areas where progress is being made and where more work is required to progress sustainability. The project will also consider relationships between the social, environmental and economic indicators and the scale at which sustainability can be measured.

4. Through partnerships

Universities can be the drivers of social change through effective regional community engagement by working with and providing leadership in partnerships that promote sustainability. For example, the South West Sustainability Partnership (SWSP) was established in 1998 and comprises 15 public sector organisations, local government bodies and tertiary education institutions in Victoria, Australia. Its major outcomes include development of a Sustainability Blueprint and Charter to which the organisations have committed. The blueprint adopts four themes: building capacity for regional action; conserving and enhancing the natural resource base; creating greater prosperity through sustainability as

a competitive advantage; and requirements for effective implementation and monitoring. The SWSP has supported specific projects that have wide applicability to south west Victoria. Recently the SWSP has been the basis for the Food for the Future Group that promotes sustainable food production systems in the region, the Sustainability Indicators Project discussed previously, the south west Sustainability Project Inventory and as a participation in the Victorian Greenhouse Strategy Regional Partnerships Program.

Conclusion

Regional universities are expected to engage closely with their communities to bring about mutually beneficial outcomes. Traditionally such outcomes for regional communities have concentrated on opportunities for economic growth, human and social capital development and research benefits. However, universities are also well placed to make significant contributions to enhancing their regions' sustainability, through exemplary practices, research, teaching and in having a lead role in community partnerships that focus on sustainability.

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