

Case studies in Australian University-Community Engagement 2008: The Deakin University DHS (Barwon South-Western Region) / Partnership

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Abstract

The formal, ten-year-old Partnership between Deakin University's Faculty of Health, Medicine, Nursing and Behavioural Sciences and the Victorian Department of Human Services (Barwon-South Western Region), based in Geelong, aims to bring together the knowledge, experience and resources of the Department and Deakin University for the benefit of the people living in that region, as well as for the mutual benefit of both organisations. Three significant activities occurred in 2007 that have formed the basis for this AUCEA case study. Firstly, Butterworth and Austin reported to the AUCEA national conference on the restructuring of the Partnership at the AUCEA national conference. Secondly, the Partnership was used as a qualitative case study as part of substantial research conducted to assist Deakin University's Planning Division to explore best practice in monitoring and evaluating its community engagement agenda as part of the development of Deakin's new Strategic Plan. All five of AUCEA's broad goals for community engagement were used to guide Partnership interviewees in reflecting on the Partnership's scope, activities and outcomes. Thirdly, AUCEA's five broad goals were shared with Deakin University as potential benchmarks. For these reasons – and because the Partnership endeavours to facilitate outcomes systematically across all five goals – all five will be reported against in this AUCEA case study.

Background

Deakin's new Strategic Plan 2008-2012 is titled "Delivering Effective Partnerships". University personnel consulted during 2007 for the development of this Plan felt strongly that Deakin plays a leading role in the arena of community engagement and partnerships. This strength has since formed the basis of Deakin's Mission Statement and Core Commitments. The Strategic Plan makes it clear that partnership development and community engagement is an approach to delivering the university's core business. As such, this activity is spread throughout the University and is the domain of all personnel.

DEAKIN UNIVERSITY MISSION¹

Deakin University aims to be a catalyst for positive change for the individuals and the communities it serves. This will be achieved by ensuring that Deakin's teaching, its research, its partnerships, its international programs and the services that support those activities are:

- Relevant
- Innovative and
- Responsive

By pursuing these objectives, Deakin aspires to be recognised as Australia's most progressive university.

CORE COMMITMENTS²

Deakin University has identified six core commitments that shape its distinctive position in higher education in Australia. These core commitments guide every aspect of the University's activities:

- Rural and regional engagement
- Continuing education and life-long learning
- Equity and access for individuals and groups who might not otherwise enjoy the benefits that flow from participation in higher education
- Research that makes a difference
- Contemporary and flexible teaching programs
- An international outlook

Partnerships and Engagement

Deakin University's new Strategic Plan, released on 12 May 2008, goes to some length to define Community Engagement, particularly in the context of Partnerships. For the purposes of this case study, it is therefore instructive to quote directly from the Strategic Plan. 'Delivering Effective Partnerships' is ...

"... based on the premise that Deakin can best achieve its goals by working in partnership. In many cases the partnerships will be with people and groups external to the University. The partnership concept is also important in relation to the sense of community that the University wishes to develop for its staff and its students."³

... Some partnerships rightly involve no more than networking or a sharing of information, and thus a non-binding memorandum of understanding may be executed. However, true partnerships go

¹ Deakin Strategic Plan, page 2

² Deakin Strategic Plan, page 3

³ Deakin Strategic Plan, page 8

further; they involve collaboration and, in such circumstances, the partners may execute a binding agreement. Many partnerships will commence at the networking end of this continuum; some may not proceed beyond this, but it is hoped that at Deakin a number of key partnerships will develop into collaborative arrangements. Indeed it is hoped that they will go further to encompass the sharing of information and resources, the modification of activities and a willingness to increase the capacity of both the partner and the University for mutual benefit and a common purpose. If the partnership reaches this point, it can be characterised as involving "engagement".⁴

The language of community engagement and partnerships used in Deakin's Strategic Plan was influenced by Butterworth and Palermo's (2008) research for the Vice Chancellor⁵ that explored the development and application of indicators for measuring Deakin's service to international, national and local communities. This work in turn owed much to the influence of internationally-renowned thinker on university-community engagement, Prof Judith Ramaley, who visited Deakin in 2006 as a Fulbright Visiting Senior Specialist. Butterworth and Palermo also drew strongly on the Victorian Health Promotion's respected partnership development resources⁶. A lead document in all these endeavours, however, has been the new Business Plan 2007-2010 for the Deakin University + Department of Human Services (Barwon-South Western Region) Partnership.

The Deakin University + Department of Human Services (Barwon-South Western Region) Partnership⁷

The formal Partnership between Deakin University and the Department of Human Services (Barwon-South West Region)⁸ exists to protect and enhance the health and social wellbeing of all people living in the Barwon-South Western Region. To achieve this, our organisations work together to support each other in performing our core business. Our Partnership integrates research, teaching, and practice to help create supportive environments, strengthen community actions, develop personal skills, ensure quality services and build healthy public policy.

The Partnership works to achieve its Mission by:

- Brokering and collaborating in innovative interdisciplinary research across Faculties that: engages members of the community; supports evidence-based practice and policy; and encourages inter-sectoral action on the social determinants of health;
- Ensuring a skilled and responsive local workforce through the provision of dynamic professional development programs and industry-based student placements and internships;
- Providing public health forums, accreditation, training courses for workforce teams, short courses, community education and other opportunities for lifelong learning;
- Facilitating cross-partnership representation on audit panels, course advisory committees and other strategic planning activities.
- Developing useful community resources

The Deakin/DHS-BSWR Partnership was initiated in 1998. This followed the identification of regional and rural public health goals, recognition of the potential mutual benefits to each organisation, and a

⁴ Deakin Strategic Plan, page 9

⁵ The research report was written for Deakin Senior Executive; however excerpts are being prepared for publication, including the 2008 AUCEA national conference.

⁶ VicHealth (2005). Partnerships fact sheet. Available:

http://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/assets/contentFiles/Fact%20Sheet_Partnerships.pdf. Accessed 26 May 2008.

⁷ Much of the material included in this case study has been located within (i) Butterworth & Austin (2007); and (ii) the Deakin University & Department of Human Services Business Plan 2008-2010, launched in March 2008.

⁸ See: <http://nps718.dhs.vic.gov.au/dhsregions/regional/riip.nsf/Page/RWPB32E274FF62B8C74CA2570C2000ACBDE>

desire to respond by building capacity to meet identified goals. A shared geographic region and similar professional and academic interests, as well as the need to operate within a shared environment of broader reform, have stimulated and directed the development of the collaboration.

The Partnership embarked on an extensive review in 2006, with a view towards establishing more sustainable funding, planning and governance structures. The review process became more focused following a special workshop for Deakin and DHS staff facilitated in November 2006 by Prof. Judith Ramaley. Prof Ramaley argued that community engagement is simply a different way of doing familiar things, including: learning differently; working together differently; and making a difference. The Business Plan represents a renewed effort to strive for a deep form of university-community engagement. Partnership coordinators agreed that DHS and Deakin University had an opportunity to work together to bring together the resources of an entire community. To do this, stakeholders acknowledged the need to achieve several key outcomes, including: moving from an opportunistic to a strategic way of working; developing a deep sense of purpose; developing symbols for this relationship; and presenting a set of clearly articulated values. At a 'Visioning Workshop' in February 2007, key participants from each organisation helped to develop a new vision, mission and a range of priorities for the Partnership that integrates education and research with professional practice, which Prof Ramaley described as the cornerstone of robust community engagement.

Strategies 2008-2010:

Four detailed strategies are outlined in the Deakin/DHS BSWR Business Plan 2007-2010:

- *Public Health Forums:* Enhance the public's awareness and knowledge of public health matters by promoting professional development and knowledge via Public Health Forums
- *Teaching and Workforce Development:* Improve the capacity of the human services sector workforce to respond to changing sector and professional needs by collaborating on professional training and placement activities
- *Research and Evidence-based Practice:* Improve health and wellbeing outcomes, particularly for disadvantaged people and places, by brokering action research activity, which aligns with DHS' strategic priorities and which contributes to the evidence-base of human services practice.
- *Health & Wellbeing/Health and Community Services:* Establish the Partnership as a key player in the formulation of regional health and wellbeing initiatives by engaging with key bodies responsible for planning and policy development

Stakeholders:

Many people and organisations have an interest in the activities and achievements of the Partnership. These include:

- The residents and communities of the Barwon-South Western Region
- Deakin University Faculty of Health, Medicine, Nursing and Behavioural Sciences, the Schools within the Faculty, and other related Faculties
- Research Clusters within Deakin University's Health and Wellbeing Research area, located within the Faculty of Health, Medicine, Nursing and Behavioural Sciences
- Program areas within DHS (BSWR)
- Staff of Deakin University and DHS
- Students of Deakin University
- Workforce within the Barwon-South Western Region
- Regional planning bodies (state and local government; NGOs)
- Health policy, planning and service coordination networks
- Other relevant partnerships with current Memoranda of Understanding (e.g. Deakin University-City of Greater Geelong Partnership)

Staff:

A 'Strategic Management Team' was established to commence in 2008, comprising a Coordinator role each within Deakin University and the Department of Human Services (BSWR) and a Project Officer. Both Deakin and DHS Coordinator roles are situated in a strategic location within the respective organisations (e.g. at the Faculty level at Deakin University, and within the Quality Unit at DHS BSWR). The Coordinator positions are pivotal in linking each organisation to the Business Plan Strategies and fostering sustainable collaborative efforts between the business units.

The Deakin Coordinator provides academic leadership in promoting research, education and professional practice, with a strong emphasis on encouraging inter-sectoral collaboration to promote health and wellbeing in the BSW region. The Coordinator contributes to the Faculty's research, program development and service at a national and international level.

The DHS Coordinator builds collaborative relationships between regional business units and Deakin University across the Business Plan's strategic areas. The DHS Coordinator will support the development of regional university partnerships to enhance regional capacity to develop, plan and evaluate service models and systems.

The Project Officer provides executive support to the governance structure of the Partnership. A key role includes building and managing significant relationships within the Partnership structure and with external stakeholders. The Project Officer aims to divide his time equally between the Quality Unit at the DHS and Deakin University.

Governance:

The Executive consists of six positions. These members have contributed financially and have a substantial commitment to the Business Plan; hence they operate at the 'collaborating' end of the spectrum. The Project Officer provides secretariat support to the Executive. Executive meetings are held quarterly. The Partnership Executive consists of:

- Regional Director, Department of Human Services (BSWR);
- Dean, Faculty of Health, Medicine, Nursing and Behavioural Sciences;
- Manager, Quality Improvement Unit, Department of Human Services (BSWR);
- Associate Dean (Development), Faculty of Health, Medicine, Nursing and Behavioural Sciences;
- Deakin/DHS Barwon-SWR Partnership Coordinator, Deakin University;
- Deakin/DHS Barwon-SWR Partnership Coordinator, Department of Human Services (BSWR)

The core membership is presently being recruited from representatives from the advisory groups or partnership groups and/or partnership groups affiliated with the Business Plan strategies. This level of membership will be consulted for progressing the Business Plan and will be part of the evaluation. Core Membership meetings will be held approximately twice a calendar year.

Other associate members of the Partnership can include academic staff from other faculties, human services agencies, businesses, government departments and even interested members of the community. They may be interested in the Partnership activities and value the 'networking' opportunities, however the work may not directly relate to their core business and therefore do not want to invest the time into the development of the Business Plan. They are willing to have their contact details registered, as they are typically interested in the Public Health Forums and other activities of the Partnership including research.

Strategic Advisory Groups assist Partnership coordinators in planning and managing the ongoing business of the Partnership. Key representatives will form part of the Core Membership. DHS and Deakin staff 'cooperate' on various projects that have a common link with each other's priorities (i.e., DHS (BSWR) regional priorities and Deakin research priorities). They will achieve the Partnership strategic objective of identifying evidence, which informs policy and practice to build community capacity and reduce disadvantage and inequality. They will also assist the Partnership in the areas of teaching/workforce development and community engagement more generally. Funding for these

activities will be as per the usual funding sources; however the DHS (BSWR) regional office is committed to supporting research activity based in the Barwon-South Western region.

Performance of this Partnership against AUCEA goals

This section includes data gathered through interviews in 2007 with seven key people in both organisations involved in the BSW-DHS/Deakin partnership, and documentation of Partnership activity during 2008. The following examples serve to illustrate the benefits of the whole-of-Deakin/DHS approach taken by the Partnership:

1. Facilitating and encouraging community debate and dialogue on significant issues

For several years, the Partnership has been organising public health forums to inform the community and to encourage community members to become more involved with the Partnership. The public health forums have gained considerable media attention and have encouraged debate. Up to 200 people have attended public health forums on some occasions, and DHS have used the forums as a form of professional development for their staff. Partnership personnel have also encouraged significant debate in all the other fora in which we participate – as described below.

2. Ensuring the University is accessible, outward reaching, and responsive to its community

Through the Health and Wellbeing / Health and Community Services' strategy, the Partnership has begun to make some significant contributions to the Region. These include:

- Exploring ways in which the Partnership providing capacity building training and support to the Regional Managers' Forum (RMF) – a network of senior personnel in state and local government. Deakin/DHS Partnership personnel have been invited to share perspectives and insights, and share ideas for building up knowledge and skills of RMF stakeholders and other personnel across the Region.
- A new Planning Partnership has been established between the State government and the City of Greater Geelong, to oversee the development of a major urban development in Geelong. This development, on over 4,000ha of land, is likely to house up to 15,000 people over the next 15 years. As a result of the many engagement activities of the Deakin/DHS Partnership, the State Government has formally approached the Partnership to help broker discussions with senior Deakin personnel to explore an ongoing, long-term engagement in this development.

3. Increasing social, environmental and economic value of research to its communities

Through the Deakin/DHS Partnership, personnel across several Faculties have been exploring ways to forge an ongoing collaboration between the Neighbourhood Renewal (NR) initiative⁹ and Deakin University. NR has been so successful in northern Geelong that its Community Reference Committee (CRC) is poised to become an overarching community governance structure for a suite of other current, major, long-term initiatives in this district. These interdisciplinary initiatives have an estimated combined investment in the order of \$500M. Despite the individual involvement of some Deakin personnel, it would appear that Deakin's engagement with these major initiatives is currently far from systematic. Substantive long-term teaching, research, internship and other opportunities are presently being mapped. The Partnership coordinators are now working with the Vice Chancellor's office and DHS senior executive to explore the development of a strategic, on-going alliance between Deakin and the governance and support of these initiatives.

4. Working with University governance, management and administration process to support effective engagement

The new Advisory Groups, under development since the successful launch of the Business Plan in March 2008, have attracted the interest of diverse, senior Deakin and DHS personnel from across many Faculties and DHS program areas. Stakeholders in local government, NGOs and local

⁹ <http://www.neighbourhoodrenewal.vic.gov.au/home>

services have also indicated their interest in helping to set the agenda for the Partnership over the next 12 months. It can be seen from the other examples of Partnership activity that Partnership coordinators are working closely with senior Deakin – and DHS – personnel, in order to ensure that the Partnership’s engagement agenda can include, support, and be supported by, senior executive in each organisation.

5. Designing and delivering high quality teaching that responds to community needs and produces graduates that are ethical, employable and engaged citizens.

The Partnership encourages and facilitates a large amount of exchange between students and staff. Interviewees felt that the success of this approach was demonstrated by the fact that the BSW region is the only region in the state with full employment and no vacancies. For example, Many Deakin students embark on placements at DHS, and DHS staff members provide guest lecturers or course advisors at Deakin. During 2007 and 2008, the Partnership has strengthened this approach, and has helped facilitate a new ‘Human Services’ major stream within Deakin’s Bachelor of Health Sciences. For this, several senior DHS personnel have indicated their willingness to share their skills with students. During 2008, the Partnership has developed a draft DHS Student Placement Protocol for discussion. Development of this protocol is set to streamline student placement activity. This project has engaged senior personnel across Deakin and DHS BSWR, and has reached the attention of DHS central administration.

Conclusion

Inspection of the examples provided above against the five AUCEA goals shows that community engagement activity, if planned and implemented systematically, can produce positive outcomes across all of the five goal areas. This is reflected in the Partnership’s monitoring and evaluation strategy, which maps Partnership activity and outcomes against a community capacity framework. Community capacity has been defined as ‘characteristics of a community that enable it to mobilize, identify and solve community problems’ (Goodman et al., cited in Kegler, Norton & Aronson’s substantive evaluation of the California Healthy Cities and Communities initiative, 2003, p.3¹⁰). Community capacity has been used to assess the impact of community-building initiatives by including measures of: civic participation; mechanisms for community input and for the distribution of community power; skills and access to resources; sense of community and social capital/trust; social and inter-organizational networks; community values and history; and capacity for reflection and learning (for more detail, see Butterworth & Austin¹¹). We trust that this case study serves to illustrate the interlinkages between all of AUCEA’s five goals, and how a substantive community engagement initiative needs to find ways to generate positive, complementary change across each goal.

¹⁰ See <http://www.civicpartnerships.org/docs/publications/evaluation.htm>

¹¹ See <http://130.194.156.169:8080/db/attachments/website/53/1/e-journal%20spring%202007.doc>