

Community Engagement by Tertiary Institutes

1. Brief Background to The Hornery Institute

As CEO and Chairman of Lend Lease for over 20 years, Stuart Hornery always had a passionate interest in the welfare of employees and their skill development. This interest manifested itself in employee ownership and the establishment of the ACTU-Lend Lease Foundation, arguably the father of Group Training in Australia. These and other initiatives were probably behind Kim Beasley's request for him to be an inaugural member of ANTA and subsequently Chairman for several years.

Upon his retirement from Lend Lease, the shareholders and employees each contributed \$5m to establish The Hornery Institute (THI). It is a not for profit entity which has as its charter the objective of securing a better deal for communities. Over several years, it has been retained on projects that have a collective end value of several billion dollars. Its clients range across the board, including property developers, government agencies and mining companies. Its work is informed by the various communities that it finds itself in and they are all different.

The better deal it seeks for them almost always includes the need for a learning dimension. In the context of learning, "them" includes any group whose life would be enhanced by better access to learning environments.

Our community research always reveals that people do understand that education not only contributes to an "economic good", for themselves and the nation, but also a "social benefit".

In a bigger picture sense, the Institute has also discovered the following. They are relevant to all aspects of the public realm, its creation and subsequent management. However, they are particularly relevant to the needs of our emerging learning environment:

- (i) where companies and/or institutions are prepared to engage faithfully with communities then better outcomes are secured.
- (ii) where the private and public sector comes together with a common vision, the same applies.
- (iii) the above is just as applicable in a regional/rural context as an urban one.
- (iv) there is a significant and growing cohort of people who will only respond to a more personal, flexible and informal learning environment. This reflects the change in demographics, lifestyle, and work patterns.

2. Preface

In the Government's "Review of Higher Education" the working group established by the Deputy Prime Minister Julia Gillard refers to "a trend amongst many universities towards a third function". This third function is described as community engagement, and is in addition to the two traditional functions that underpin most universities: teaching and research.

Because "community engagement" is a rather generic phrase, all universities could produce a list of activities that would fall under such a loose definition. These would be more in the nature of providing support for their traditional functions, rather than making for a "third force".

That said, there are a few examples in Australia, and many overseas, where a third force does exist. This allows a university to punch well above its weight in adding value to a greater variety of stakeholders and circumstances that exist in the region or market in which it operates. In fact, given the dominant role that tertiary institutes play, it's hard to imagine why any of them would not be required to play a broad ranging "community leadership" role.

In the USA, 800 university presidents have signed the "Presidents' Declaration on the Civic Responsibility of Higher Education", committing themselves "to helping catalyse and lead a national movement to reinvigorate the public purposes and civic mission of higher education". As the declaration concludes, "we believe that now and through the (next) century, our institutions must be vital agents and architects of a flourishing democracy". Despite this noble purpose, many universities in the US (and in Australia) are still seen as walled off cities, and many who support the purpose remain sceptical. Notwithstanding there are lots of examples of how this noble purpose manifests itself. These range from acting as a catalyst for inner city redevelopment through to partnering with a range of other entities to get better learning outcomes for everyone, not just the privileged. This role is consistent with the various statements from the Deputy Prime Minister.

The University of South Australia is a good illustration of what could happen more widely in Australia. It appears to have a comprehensive engagement with schools and TAFE and clearly prides itself on its focus on the educationally disadvantaged. It has the largest cohort of indigenous students, the highest number of students with a disability, and the second highest for school leavers with a low SES. Over 40% of UniSA's students have one or more of the nationally identified equity characteristics. It does all this while producing a significant surplus which seems to give the lie to the "we need more money to engage with communities".

This paper provides a few insights as to how the Government might use its budgetary process to encourage greater attention to the subject of community engagement. To ensure adequate focus, and to limit platitudes the definition has been appropriately reduced to encompass a few meaningful initiatives.

This would ensure that “community engagement” is strongly linked (at least initially) to core activities – teaching, learning, research and knowledge diffusion rather than an end in itself. This approach should not pose a threat, but would encourage tertiary institutions to build a focused engagement from whatever position they currently find themselves in. A cross section of community engagement as practised in some 10 tertiary institutions is contained in Appendix A.

Finally, to put this in a global context, we have included in Appendix B and C, a random cross section of institutions that have chosen to position themselves in a much more dramatic way. This might be summed up as follows:

“Universities are inherently an important potential institutional base for helping community based economic development in general, and civically engaged development in particular”.
US article, “Universities and Community Partnerships” Appendix B.

3. Recommendations

- (i) In order to provide a broader higher education model to a larger number of Australians, some TAFEs and universities should be required to develop integrated curricula, pathways, and accreditation. The emphasis will require a University and a TAFE getting together to develop programs from the beginning, using the strengths of both, rather than simply providing advanced standing, with some credit towards a university program. In this way, adequate thought and attention needs to be given to the demands of industry and students, with appropriate emphasis on transition and continuity of the main subject themes.

In addition, there are few occupations that wouldn't be enhanced by the incorporation of an on the job industry component in the learning curricula. Care needs to be taken that the industry management structure is capable of making this a worthwhile experience.

Finally, under such a University/TAFE/Industry regime, the opportunity exists to incorporate learning modules that still address the technical, but in a way that incorporates life and work skills, the combination of which is designed to give greater confidence and competence to students about to enter the workforce.

- (ii) There needs to be a strong relationship between the entities in (i), the surrounding High Schools, the surrounding enterprises, and the surrounding community organizations, including the local councils.
- (iii) We think that Australia should move towards a personalised model that includes a pathway and a learning passport. This should begin at pre-school, but let's say Years 10, 11 and 12. Case management should be introduced as early as possible. Inevitably, this will require greater application of “bite size” modules that respond to the “just enough, just in time and just for me” dictum.

- (iv) All tertiary institutions should demonstrate that they are prepared to offer learning to any Australian, mature aged, disabled or otherwise, as does the University of South Australia (Uni SA).
- (v) TAFE institutions should be required to increase on the job training to 20% of its activity (cf Swinburne).
- (vi) If a “pot of money” was to be allocated, then any application must be accompanied by a business plan, the means by which progress is to be measured, with evidence of a “community oriented” subcommittee of the University Council. Consideration might be given to granting two-thirds up front, and a progressive release of the remaining one-third on the attainment of agreed targets. Variations might include “credit trading”, or bidding for funds.
- (vii) Incorporate a stick (mandating) and a carrot (incentive).
- (viii) We would be talking about a gradual cultural change, not a quick fix. So a longer term horizon with incremental steps will be required.

4. Some Practical Illustrations (all requiring Business Plans and Governance Arrangements)

- (i) Require (x)% of universities to implement a program for the disadvantaged as practised by the University of SA and Bradford.
- (ii) (5) universities to be identified to join with (5) TAFE colleges as earlier envisaged.
- (iii) Each university must establish a working relationship with (10) high schools, including the facilitation of Years 10, 11 and 12 learning on campus.
- (iv) (5) universities to establish High School Specialist Academies on their campus, such as that at QUT.
- (i) As a pilot “bigger picture” initiative, encourage (3) University/TAFE partnerships (eg in Newcastle) to contribute to the regeneration of their city centres.