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Collaboration and community: Building strength in tertiary education

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Our tertiary education sector incorporates institutions that vary greatly in their composition, purpose and approach. Although they operate in a competitive context government funding strategies, globalization and international competition have encouraged greater consideration of how the sector might work more effectively across institutions to increase national effectiveness and reduce costs. The changing emphasis offers some enticing views of possible ways in which national communities for learning, research and knowledge sharing might be cultivated. This presentation examines the potential for collaboration both within and beyond our institutions. It further explores the role of academic leaders, academic developers and higher education societies in promoting stronger collaboration across discipline and organizational boundaries. The presentation will promote some new perspectives on how we structure our professional work contexts and perspectives.

Keywords: academic development; higher education development; collaboration; academic leadership

Introduction

I was delighted when the planning committee first suggested the theme of *Engaged Communities* for this conference. Communities are the heart of knowledge-intensive environments like universities and other further education institutions. Our sector is predicated on its capacity to create, collaborate, generate opportunities for learning and exchange knowledge. These are the key characteristics of communities as defined by Brown and Duguid (2001).

Community and collaboration underpin many aspects of our sectoral activities. Teaching and research both aim to build connections between learners, colleagues, compatriots and potential partners. The major outcomes of tertiary education are to promote learning and social communities.

Despite the importance of this central philosophy, the regular challenges of working in a rapidly changing sector have sometimes obscured our consideration of how we might operate as effective knowledge communities or collaborate to improve our contributions to society.

This is a good stage for us to review how we operate as learning communities and as collaborators across the sector. This is a complex challenge, as it requires a consideration of how we operate as a sector as well as institutionally. The processes and messages from each organisation are strong influences on our responses to broader educational drivers, as well as responsive.

This presentation will therefore focus on three areas: first, the national context in which collaboration and community interaction might operate, second, the processes by which these values may be cultivated in each university, and third, the ways in which HERDSA can contribute to this evolutionary process.

Competition and collaboration in the tertiary sector

Each year we see increasing pressures on our academic communities as they grapple with the challenges of creating a quality educational environment with depleted resources. The exigencies of working within a constrained resourcing context have encouraged us to “bunker down” in our own local settings and focus on survival. We have thus tended to operate as individual organisational entities that work in competition with other institutions in our countries. In Australia, this is particularly evident in the categorisation of universities according to their research intensity, regional locations, technical derivation or some other form of differentiation. The distinction between higher and further education is another strong element of difference in Australia, although we are seeing some strong successes for dual sector institutions as they work through the complexities of operating across two educational sectors with different funding and regulation requirements. (In New Zealand, this particular challenge is less pronounced, as the tertiary sector has integrated a smoother linkage across these two levels of education.)

The pressure to attract students, staff and funding has encouraged institutions to differentiate and mark out their territory. They have actively sought to create points of difference, although a review of the slogans and mission statements of universities demonstrates similar language and foci across many different institutions (and countries.) We all aim to build stronger communities; to be seen as excellent education providers, research active centres and good employers who attract the best talent. The quest for excellence, differentiation and distinction has been further exacerbated by the various league tables that now guide our understanding of how we are faring. In this context, the enactment of a national tertiary education community has become more challenging, not less, despite the advances in technology and reduced costs of working across borders.

Fortunately, despite this competitive climate there are many promising signs of cross-institutional collaboration.

The Australian Learning and Teaching Council (<http://www.altc.edu.au>) has promoted a stronger focus on collaborative endeavour through its funding of many collaborative projects. Some of the more seminal work on teaching and learning has been drawn from projects funded by the ALTC. In recent times it has expanded its focus to enable more knowledge exchange on an ongoing basis by combining two important initiatives into a Learning Network to promote discipline-based and cross-disciplinary collaboration on learning and teaching across the national community (see <http://www.altc.edu.au/carrick/go/home/pid/528>). The creation of a national platform is an important advancement in encouraging a national teaching and learning community that overcomes discipline confines. *Ako Aotearoa*, the New Zealand equivalent of the ALTC is also promoting collaborative projects to advance learning and teaching scholarship and practice through regional hubs (see http://www.nctte.co.nz/regional_hub_project_funding.php).

The promotion of Cooperative Research Centres (CRCs) similarly encourage talented people to build a strong research focus across institutional boundaries (see: <https://www.crc.gov.au/Information/default.aspx>). These centres are well sponsored and serve to draw our best researchers together as a focal stimulus to generate more comprehensive research outcomes. In Australia there has also been a considerable push for some years on promoting Linkage grants where university researchers collaborate with industry partners on common research interests.

These two examples illustrate how Government funding has cultivated a focus on national capacity building. The Australian government has also influenced other forms of collaborative learning and endeavour. The Group of Eight universities, for example, have developed a strong collaborative project to build researcher capabilities. The project has generated a suite of learning modules on research project management which will be made available to all universities from 2009. Called the *Future Research Leaders Programme*, this complex project engaged Deputy Vice Chancellors (Research), Human Resource Directors and university developers in the design, trialling, validation and implementation of nine blended learning modules. (see: <http://uwa.frlp.edu.au/uwa/content/index.html>). This is the first time these universities have focused on a joint outcome of this nature, illustrating the push to work in more collaborative ways to achieve better outcomes for all. Funding from the Australian government in the form of Workplace Productivity Programme grant was an instrumental catalyst in leveraging the project from a development concept to a full-fledged programme.

The programme has been an important case study for other groups hoping to collaborate at a national level and across functional roles within universities. The lessons learned from this project have been significant. They have, for example, illustrated the costs which must be recognised in building ambitious projects, and the roles leaders play in nurturing and championing the ideas. Similar issues have arisen in the ALTC collaborative projects, where many senior academic developers have overseen major initiatives. With the Go8 programme, the costs of meeting, evaluation, quality control and building a technological infrastructure have all been significant, as has the in-kind support. This project also relied heavily on a project manager to coordinate the many inputs of the eight universities. The project has been a very complex but exciting initiative which demonstrates how other groups might collaborate on joint ventures.

These three examples are all powerful illustrations of cross-institutional collaboration, but it is interesting to note that the catalyst for each initiative has been funding from a government source. The decreasing sponsorship by government for such wide ranging projects is concerning, given their power in driving innovation and collaboration. The ALTC, for example, has received a cut in funding since the new Australian government was appointed, despite its many demonstrable successes.

While government sponsorship may not be readily available in the immediate future, it is imperative that we not lose our momentum. Collaboration across the tertiary community must continue as a high priority. What options might there be for collaboration which is not resourced from an external agency? Is it possible to build national communities that can work within their existing resources? There are many ways which might be explored. Here are a few thoughts to stimulate our ideas.

Tertiary education is experiencing unprecedented change and pressure to reform. This is likely to escalate considerably over the coming years in Australia as a new government introduces a range of new initiatives, including a new research evaluation system and a structural reform blueprint. We have many specialist groups and societies working collectively but with little sharing of knowledge or strategies with other allied parties who fall outside their immediate community. As the imminent changes to higher education emerge, we have an ideal opportunity to share our knowledge and learn from other colleagues who may be working on similar agendas. We need to move beyond an exclusionism philosophy to generate more opportunities to collaborate, jointly lobby on issues and identify ways in which we can mutually promote more effective tertiary outcomes. At present, there is little connection or collaboration evident, although an inaugural meeting of presidents of higher education societies last year was a good beginning in exploring how different but allied communities might possibly collaborate. HERDSA is also actively connected with ICED, the Consortium for Educational Development, an international collaboration of society presidents which draws its members from every continent. This is a worthwhile model for us to emulate within our national boundaries.

A second example relates to collaboration across the higher and further education sectors. In Australia we operate two sectors with different accountabilities and variant funding models. This has had major implications for the ways in which we collaborate or in the case of dual-sector universities, operate. Again, the focus has generally been on how we differ. At a recent higher education conference in Australia, I was intrigued to hear a further education leader speak of their applied research and the need to have it recognised as an element of the Technical and Further Education (TAFE) agenda. It pushed me to review what I understood about the TAFE sector and its place in tertiary education. This was further compounded by a discussion with a number of TAFE senior leaders about the teaching and learning issues that are being experienced in that sector. Again, there are more commonalities than differences, and yet, we have rarely engaged in discussions which help to tease out those issues in a more comprehensive manner. It was clear to me that those of us who have benefited from the long-term exploration of learning, teaching, research and academic development in universities have an obligation to partner our colleagues in this related sector to share what we have learnt and in turn, to learn how we might better integrate vocational and work-related skills into our undergraduate teaching.

These two examples are strongly focused on sharing knowledge and insights. But there are many other opportunities for building collaboration in a more tangible and applied manner. Here is one practical example to illustrate how resources might be better employed through collaboration. Tertiary institutions have generally put considerable energy into working offshore, particularly through building a presence in other countries. Unfortunately, that presence is not always as worthy as it should be. While some universities have developed impressive offshore campuses, many of our institutions have established a minimal presence at a number of overseas locations. Students consequently experience limited access to decent library resources, a paucity of contextually-relevant educational resources and insufficient assistance in building effective learning skills. Staff who travel and work in those regions can also feel isolated and under-supported during their visits. Our institutions have generally found it difficult to marshal sufficient funds to build a singular presence in these locations as student numbers preclude that level of investment. The development of collaborative

international educational centres to support Australian and New Zealand institutions working offshore would considerably reduce the costs and quality issues which currently abound (Debowski, 2008). Jointly-owned facilities and services that represent several institutions operating in a region would be a cost-effective and educationally-valuable option for areas where several universities have an educational presence. This is not impossible to envisage, but of course, it is only achievable if the institutions are able to cultivate a collaborative focus rather than remaining competitors.

These are but a few of the many examples I could use to illustrate the greater potential for sectoral collaboration. However, a shift to cross-institutional collaboration, while readily acknowledged as valuable by most tertiary education stakeholders, also places some extra pressures on those involved. The capacity to reduce start-up costs, increase knowledge exchange and share diverse perspectives and experience can generate many benefits for all concerned but they require considerable effort on the part of those committed to the projects. The initial need to persuade senior university leaders that a project is in the institution's interests as well as the national or sector's interests is a necessity with most collaborative projects. This lobbying can take considerable time and may require the cultivation of one or several champions, particularly if the lobbyist is a mid-level professional. The identification and preservation of corporate know-how and commercial knowledge must also be managed with care by those involved in collaborative projects. The process may be likened to a delicate dance where some knowledge is shared, but other knowledge must be securely preserved. The political acuity of the players can be critical to the successful negotiation of the project outcome. The additional workload associated with collaboration may also need to be absorbed with little or no additional resources. There is little recognition of the complexities that emerge from working across institutions. The project leaders and managers also need to be cognizant of the different cultures, expectations, systems and involvement of the various players.

The challenges of leading and managing complex collaborative projects have been only marginally acknowledged to date. This is a field of research that requires considerably more focus to help us understand what is needed to successfully meld disparate partners into a common focus and agenda.

Collaboration and community within institutions

In looking at the sector as a whole it has been implied that we have a readiness to embrace national collaboration and community building as desirable practices. However, this could be a dangerous assumption: perhaps universities are not quite ready for this level of engagement?

It is not unusual to experience challenges when attempting to work within and around the various political and resource-based structures in our educational institutions. Universities have long been recognised for their close integration of organisational structures based around disciplines and hierarchies. University funding, recognition schemes and sponsorship of activities frequently reinforce those associations and can deter people from moving beyond their disciplinary or specialist confines.

There are many impediments to intra-organisational collaboration (Sabherwal & Becerra-Fernandez, 2003). Structural barriers, for example, can divide academic and professional staff, emphasising their difference and dissimilarity rather than their unified commitment to their institution (Bleiklie, 2003). Discipline styles may impact on perception of common concerns (Huber, 2003). Budget allocations may also encourage fiefdoms that work assiduously to preserve defined academic territories. University work practices can be strongly influenced by contractual arrangements, industrial agreements, stipulated work roles and task-focused management. Strategic planning is firmly ensconced in university settings despite its decreasing life cycle in a rapidly changing higher sector. These plans can be useful in establishing priorities, but also potentially reduce an organisation's capacity to be flexible and responsive to new opportunities (Kanter, 2008; Porter, 2008).

Cultural mores within the university setting can also limit collaborative associations with those outside the local community. There is widespread evidence of a culture of stress, overwork and isolation of university staff (Houston, Meyer & Paewai, 2006). Of particular concern is our reduced capacity to build social communities (Staber, 2003) in university settings. Social networks induct new members into the culture, provide emotional support, sponsorship and other forms of affirmation that ensure employees are resilient and confident while acculturating. There is increasing recognition of the importance of promoting effective social and knowledge communities in tertiary education if we are to meet the many challenges that are emerging (Debowski, 2006; Janz & Prasarnphanich, 2003). To achieve this goal we need effective leadership that advocates strong and robust communities.

The role of university leaders in collaboration and building communities

Tertiary leaders can significantly influence an institution's willingness to collaborate and cultivate effective communities. At the senior-most levels in universities, the executive send strong messages as to the prevailing culture and values. This is translated by deans, heads of school and other leaders in the community – through their own responses and actions, as well as their verbal interpretation of the senior leadership messages.

Leaders across the university play an important role in determining how it will operate as a community – both within its particular confines and beyond, in the wider sector. One of the critical issues many institutions are grappling with relates to the type of environment that should be cultivated. With the current focus on retaining staff and knowledge held by staff, the focus on community building is shifting markedly. Some priorities for universities now include building cultures which are:

- Open to different perspectives and views of the organisation;
- Willing to accept diversity and integrate different areas of expertise to achieve alternative solutions;
- Respectful of the skills, knowledge and talents of others;
- Embracing of new staff, ensuring they are welcomed, guided and assisted in their exploration of the new workplace;
- Questing for new, innovative or improved modes of working, particularly through collaboration with others;
- Willing to question current practice and build better practice;

- Strongly and positively interacting across age, gender, professional and academic divisions;
- Interpreting and adapting roles and functions in a flexible and responsive manner to reflect the changing circumstances.

The concepts, drawn from learning community literature, emphasise the need to be respectful, adaptive, creative and innovative. They also reflect a desire to build a strong environment which draws in new members, encouraging knowledge exchange on an ongoing basis. Essential to the process is the creation of both physical and temporal spaces for collaboration. The opportunity to meet, explore issues, share perspectives and challenge assumptions is critical to building engaged and lively academic communities (Organisational learning and the future of higher education 2003). The importance of leaders in promoting a community focus cannot be underestimated. And yet, the critical role that those leaders play is largely left to chance.

As leading communities in the educational sector we need to ensure our leaders are well supported for their critical role. Not all universities offer effective support for their leaders. Support needs to operate across three aspects: clarifying and guiding effective leadership practice; assisting leaders in their roles as they guide and shape their communities and encouraging the building of collaborative networks to support each individual. Leadership development programmes for heads are offered in some institutions, but not all. These are important sources of guidance and peer support, enabling greater understanding of how the institution and its mission operate. The encouragement of communities of practice for heads has proven very successful in several of our universities, particularly in promoting collaboration and knowledge exchange (Debowski and Blake, 2007). Informal mentoring relationships also emerge from these networks. However, these collaborative communities are unlikely to emerge without some focused support from a third party. Heads do not have time to manage or coordinate regular meetings, but they will participate if they are offered the opportunity to meet with their colleagues. A broker to plan and host any network meetings is the primary way in which these communities can be sustained (Debowski and Blake, 2007). This implies a need for ongoing investment by the organisation in building and sustaining leadership communities.

The role of university developers in collaboration and community development

One outcome of the Group of Eight *Future Research Leaders Programme* has been the increased recognition of the need for stronger collaboration by developers working in different functional areas within each university. The need to build collaborations across human resources, academic developers and research developers was one of the most challenging elements of that particular project – possibly because each group worked under the direction of different members of the university executives. There were clear indications that many professionals who work in teaching and learning, student support, research, human resources or faculties were remote from each other, with little appreciation of the work being done by their colleagues or the potential for collaboration. In some cases, this may be due to a perceived difference between academic and professional roles, the preferences of the executive members under which these groups operate, or the perceived differences in

content focus that each group emphasises. Looking more creatively though, can we not see these as different constructs of educational development? It is interesting to note that those involved in university development activities reflect a reinforcement of difference similar to the old disciplinary divides that used to limit research and teaching collaboration in previous years. It is certainly time to recognise the similarities and common concerns rather than the differences across these specialist support groups.

The work of university developers is expanding in importance, as evidenced by the increased numbers of advertisements for talented people to undertake these roles. But it is likely that the expectations of these positions will shift in emphasis toward collaborative initiatives and a stronger focus on community engagement. In recent months some universities have taken decisive action to change the composition of their academic developer cohort to emphasise faculty development. This has been traumatic and dramatic, but the message has been clear: there is a need to change the way in which the organisation was being supported. It is possible that these changing expectations will generate a stronger consideration as to what background and skills our developers bring to their work. Are they sufficiently grounded with respect to community development, collaborative project management and other changing responsibilities to meet the imminent challenges of working across the educational community? And are they willing to embrace those changed roles, or are they more likely to remain allied to the traditional tasks and activities that have been long established? These are most important questions, as they will determine the degree to which developers are valued and perceived to be part of the future, not part of the problem. The opportunity to meet, explore issues, share perspectives and challenge assumptions is critical to building engaged and lively academic communities (Organisational learning and the future of higher education 2003). HERDSA needs to play a major role in promoting this debate and possibly, in guiding those new to the field as they become more au fait with their potential roles and the necessary capabilities.

The developer role has already evolved as it integrates a number of new responsibilities such as brokering community networks; encouraging leaders to reflect, review and redesign their approaches; facilitating the reshaping of the university context to better enable academic engagement and identifying new and different mechanisms by which groups and individuals may share knowledge and generate social community (Blackwell & Blackmore, 2003). We are also seeing more specialist roles being introduced into university communities, with each emphasising the specialised content knowledge rather than a professional pedagogy.

The expansion of the groups who support university development and increased expectations as to how those roles will be fulfilled (e.g. Hatala, 2006) poses additional challenges for the sector to consider. The various groups could remain segregated, thereby risking marginalisation over time, or instead, might move toward a more cohesive consideration of how they might collaborate and work together. Many universities, for example, employ experienced organisational developers in their human resource areas, and this is one mechanism for expanding the capacity to meet the needs of a more engaged community (Baron, 2006). Conversely, many of those organisational developers are being recruited from the public sector and have little background in the academic world. They would greatly benefit from stronger

collaboration with academic developers who know the language, culture and context of higher education.

There are also implications for the preparation of academic developers: are they provided with the right grounding to respond to the emergent needs of their engaged communities? This is yet another discussion the sector needs to have.

The role of HERDSA in promoting collaboration and community

Previously the linkage of HERDSA to other societies was highlighted. There is considerably more scope to build a stronger community of societies and associations. The progressive development of the Australian Learning and Teaching Council's Learning Networks project is another area in which HERDSA might play a strong role. We welcome other forms of collaboration with national learning and teaching bodies and related societies so that duplication is avoided and knowledge is shared more effectively.

HERDSA also aims to provide other forms of bridging between its members as part of its commitment to collaboration and community building. The fellowship scheme, for example, incorporates a triad learning community for new fellows to ensure they are supported and continue to engage with the emergent issues from across the sector. The long-standing publication of HERD along with a large series of HERDSA Guides have been instrumental in promoting wider sharing of scholarship and research on higher education practice. We are particularly excited at the launch of our newest publication which has captured the histories of most of our life members. These stories reflect an enduring interest in building university communities and promoting university development.

The last few years has also seen a growth in our branches and a related increase in local membership events. The work of those local communities and their regional executive are particularly important in supporting individuals and the local educational institutions. In some cases, the HERDSA meetings are the primary source of succour to those new to academe. We strongly encourage local regions to build their communities as we believe this is one of the most valuable ways in which HERDSA can operate.

The enhanced website and new occasional publications are also directed toward promoting greater learning and collaboration across our widespread communities. Our Visiting Scholar scheme is also being reinstated in an effort to promote wider cross-fertilisation of ideas.

One possibility for us all to explore is how we might focus more attention on emergent issues that are being addressed across our various nations. The large number of Australian higher education reviews now being launched requires considerable thought by us all as it allows our HERDSA community to have a say. Now is the time to be more vocal about how our sector should be supported in the future. We need to become lobbyists and to share our perspectives on the ways in which our tertiary education setting might be enhanced. Various issues need to be addressed: funding models, the valuing of teaching, student support... all of these issues and more are critical elements that need to be reviewed in this time of change.

Are there other ways in which HERDSA might promote collaboration and communities? We would welcome ideas and input from our members - as well as the sharing of any innovations which might be of interest to other members of the society.

Conclusion

Collaboration and community are important words in our higher education vernacular. We are at the point where the benefits of collaboration need to be recognised and cultivated to reduce wasted effort and resources. The creative benefits of working together are evident in some of the national strategies that are currently on display. We need to re-orient considerably if the gains from collaboration are to be truly recognised and promoted. Leaders and university developers have a major role to play in the enhancement of tertiary education. Government funding needs to be leveraged to a more realistic level where the quality of education becomes a priority yet again. As a first step let us look within our own university communities to review how well we promote and support the principles of collaboration and community. Strong tertiary communities lead to strong nations. And strong societies like HERDSA are important partners in this process.

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