Two Steps Forward, One Step Back

Achievements and limitations of university-community partnerships in addressing neighbourhood socioeconomic disadvantage

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In this article, we discuss a university-community partnership that had broad goals to promote social, economic, educational and cultural links between the university and people living, working or studying in Carlton, a suburb of Melbourne, Australia, with particular emphasis on engaging with disadvantaged and marginalised communities who had limited contact with the university. This population could potentially benefit from having access to the educational, research, employment and infrastructure opportunities available at the university. Known as the Carlton Tripartite Partnership, it involved the University of Melbourne, the City of Melbourne and the Carlton Local Agencies Network (CLAN), an affiliation of local community-based organisations. At the time of writing, the partnership is faltering, after a period of encouraging consolidation. Key objectives of the partnership were strongly aligned with the university's core activities (research and teaching), but also included aims that appealed to its civic obligations. In particular, this involved creating local employment opportunities and facilitating access to university infrastructure. These diverse objectives reflected incongruent, but not incompatible, aims for the partnership and some proved difficult to achieve. While the partnership reflected the potential of inter-sectoral collaborations and the value of making the university's diverse resources available to impoverished communities, it encountered notable limitations. Insights from partnership activities are important to consider because they suggest the ways in which the value of universities as civic institutions that generate public benefits is being eroded through the influence of neoliberal policies.

CONTEMPORARY CONTEXTS FOR UNIVERSITY-COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

There are growing expectations that public universities (in particular), as generators and repositories of knowledge, should strive to ensure equitable access to their intellectual and scholarly resources and assets. This obliges universities to consider the barriers that communities and populations may encounter in

securing such access. There is a growing body of work claiming the value of university-community partnerships for both universities and civil society in facilitating access to diverse university resources, and ensuring that universities are responsive to public issues. Potential benefits include enriching student experiences, creating knowledge flows that stimulate creativity and innovation, directing scholarly expertise to address real world issues, and building public trust and respect for higher education institutions (NCCPE n.d.). Increasingly, these public benefits are in tension with other institutional objectives formulated within recent processes of restructuring that in turn have been strongly influenced by various interpretations of neoliberal ideology. The unfolding and troubling implications of neoliberal policies in universities are galvanising some commentators to remind us, and reimagine the potential, of universities as institutions that are orientated to generating public benefit (for varied discussions see Holmwood 2011; Jones & Shefner 2014; Marginson 2011; McIlrath & Mac Labhrainn 2007; Thornton 2014).

In Anglophone countries, the various impacts of neoliberal policies are part of continuing processes in which enduring institutions such as universities respond to contemporary contexts and demands. Nevertheless, alongside the inevitability of change, the concept of the modern university as an institution combining scholarship, teaching and research has remained consistent, at least since the beginning of the 19th century. It is conventionally associated with the founding of the University of Berlin in 1810, with the model further developed in the United Kingdom (Collini 2014). It emerged when the Prussian ideal of the state-sponsored university was grafted onto extant models of universities as self-governing communities of scholars. This evolving model produced tensions that remain evident, including the view that universities are in part driven by human curiosity and transcendent of the interests of the state or other structures of power while being partly regulated and supported by the state. Since the early to mid 20th century, universities have been influenced by socially progressive movements and policies, such as the New Deal in the United States (Jones & Shaeffer 2014), with effects of heightening tensions between intellectual leadership and political authority, the scholarly pursuit of knowledge and forms of knowledge on which economic success is dependent.

More recently, the influence of neoliberal ideology, seeking to advance the unfettered operation of free markets, is evident in the growing corporatisation of universities, which are being remodelled by administrators in the image of international business corporations. In Australia and elsewhere, this promotes versions of what Slaughter and Leslie (1997) characterised in the title of their book as 'academic capitalism', further intensifying tensions between economic performance and civic obligations of universities to contribute to the public good. The corporatisation and commodification of educational and knowledge-generating

activities is associated with declining institutional interest in, and capacity for, partnering with communities when there is little prospect of financial gain for the university (Thornton 2014). Partnerships with disadvantaged, marginalised and under-resourced communities, which require considerable investment of time, have become ever more difficult to justify within institutions. The increasing orientation to global markets and rankings leads to the significance of partnerships with neighbourhood communities being readily overlooked, even though they are critical sites for demonstrating commitment to civic obligations and conducting scholarly work that seeks to understand how processes of globalisation manifest in everyday ways (Bivens 2014; Jones & Shefner 2014).

These tensions are evident in the University of Melbourne's vision statement that prefaces its current strategic plan. It is an uncomfortable amalgam that attempts to reassure widely different constituencies that are at times agonistic. It includes the goals of being considered among the world's eminent universities while being 'fully engaged in the life, culture and aspirations of Melbourne and the regions we serve' (University of Melbourne 2015, p. 5). The social mission statements of entrepreneurial neoliberal universities are also becoming more ambiguous because of their 'extractive' tendencies. This refers to preferences for supporting civic obligations that are calculated to have institutional benefits (financial, reputational and status) rather than contributing to generalised social beneficence (Barnett 2007, p. 31). Even universities that express explicit commitment to their civic obligations can have ambivalent commitment to social missions because of the complex social and economic dynamics in which they are positioned. These tensions are not unfamiliar. Universities have long been institutions that both reinforce and challenge inequalities (Reay 2011), and these effects may be polarising in times of widening socioeconomic inequality.

The partnership we discuss brought these tensions and issues to the surface. It aimed to promote cooperation between the University of Melbourne and communities living and working in its neighbourhood, with particular emphasis on communities living in nearby high-rise public housing estates. The positive outcomes that were generated suggest the potential to generate mutual benefits through university-community partnerships with communities that are being progressively cut off from social and economic resources and opportunities. A key finding highlighted the significance of community development approaches that were sensitive to the circumstances of local populations and offered strategies for bridging marked differences in the power and resources available to the respective partners. The difficulties in achieving some objectives pointed to the challenges of addressing the structural factors contributing to socioeconomic disadvantage, and outlined tensions in the institutional logics under which the university is operating.

CONTEXTS FOR THE CARLTON PARTNERSHIP

The main university campus is partly located in the inner urban suburb of Carlton, a diverse suburb with significant populations of students (including growing numbers of international students) and low- and high-income households (ABS 2013a, b). There are relatively high numbers of overseas-born residents living in Carlton, mainly comprised of international students and residents of the high-rise public housing estates. This local diversity contributes to a vibrant neighbourhood, and the commercial and cultural precinct of Lygon Street attracts large numbers of visitors and tourists. It also renders the suburb vulnerable to social fragmentation.

There is a history of friction among residents who hold differing ambitions for the suburb, and between Carlton residents' groups and local institutions. On several occasions the university's ongoing expansion has resulted in local heritage buildings being demolished, incurring the ire of residents and contributing to persistent views among residents that the university is indifferent to its local community. Findings from a survey commissioned by the university noted a predominant impression among those who lived or worked in Carlton that it was viewed as an 'elitist, arrogant, detached, exclusive and self-absorbed' institution, a 'walled city' that was unconcerned with and removed from the everyday lives of its neighbours. (This quote is from an internal document produced by Open Mind Research, 2006, that was influential in persuading senior people at the university of the potential value of the partnership for improving local relations.)

Local contexts and history formed an important backdrop to the Carlton Tripartite Partnership, which was established in response to worsening socioeconomic disadvantage among some populations. Particularly affected were migrant-background residents of the public housing estates who were struggling to find employment, despite many gaining additional qualifications since living in Australia. Their experiences of social and economic exclusion were compounded by lack of access to infrastructure and services, issues which the partnership was created to address (for expanded discussion see Warr & Williams 2014). Around the time that the partnership was established in 2011, the university's Knowledge Transfer Office was redesigned as the Melbourne Engagement and Partnerships Office (MEPO). Its purpose was to broker and manage university-wide partnerships between the university and organisations in the corporate, government and community sectors, and it was given responsibility to coordinate the university's involvement in the partnership at an operational level. There was a lack of clarity, however, in articulating a broader institutional rationale for the work of MEPO, leaving key staff to rely on the diverse professional experience and skills they brought to their roles. In 2014 a new engagement portfolio was created in the chancellery and MEPO was disbanded. Over time, the university's perception of the importance of relationships with

local communities has strengthened. Its current strategic plan states that 'The University will deepen its social compact with its local communities … Working collaboratively with communities of place or interest provides the opportunities to match our values with the operations of a large and complex organisation' (University of Melbourne 2015, pp. 24–25).

PROMOTING A COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT MODEL

From the outset CLAN emphasised that the partnership needed to be grounded in community development principles. Community development is more a practice philosophy than a defined process, characterised by frequent reference to social equity and social justice. It is helpful to understand the attributes of community development in order to grasp potential dissonance with university processes and structures. Community development fosters 'bottom up' processes to harness local knowledge and expertise, and promotes community-led organisation and advocacy to achieve a more equal distribution of resources and access to infrastructure. A core principle is the importance of community control over how problems are defined and the solutions that are devised to address them. It seeks to build self-reliance, recognising and building on existing strengths rather than identifying deficits to be rectified. It acknowledges that contest and conflict are as much part of a functional community as consensus and cooperation, and that all communities contain multiple realities and inconsistent narratives.

Community development practitioners maintain that effective participation should begin at the earliest stages of problem identification. Increasingly, however, policy makers, administrators and funders are likely to defer to 'expert' opinion (Green 2005), or agree that community participation is important but impracticable because it is slow and time consuming. It is also often at odds with high-level political contingencies. The work relies on building and maintaining working relationships within long-term developmental perspectives. It relies on local knowledge, which is depleted by the high staff turnover inherent in short-term projects and employment contracts endemic in social policy implementation. Community development is also highly relational, and the experience and skills of the employees involved are thus critical. Effective community development depends on partners having shared understanding of, and commitment to, its key tenets. For these reasons it is often incompatible with the fragmented, managerialist product approach to social problem solving.

METHOD FOR THE EVALUATION

The evaluation of the partnership was funded as a Vice Chancellor's special initiative and focused largely on partnership processes. Although the partnership fostered a broad and diverse range of activities, four keynote projects were selected as 'critical case' studies that represented strategic partnership aims. Flyvbjerg (2001, p. 78) defines critical cases as those which exemplify

characteristic aspects of the general issue under investigation. Figure 1 summarises the case study projects that represented contrasting objectives of the partnership. Data were collected through key informant interviews, documentary analysis and participant observation.

Figure 1: Description of case study projects and objectives

Case study 1 (Infrastructure): Promoting social inclusion through sport
Objectives: Promote the university as a public space and enhance the ways in which it can make a positive contribution to local intellectual, social, cultural and economic life. Specifically, develop sport and recreation activities that reflect community interests and facilitate public access to university recreational infrastructure.

Case study 2 (Learning): Bridging the digital divide
Objectives: Promote the potential for student learning to serve public ends and bridge the 'digital divide' in Carlton by providing low-cost computers for people on low incomes, training programs, marketing information resources and a community website through student placements and other contributions.

Case study 3 (Employment): Promoting employment and training opportunities
Objectives: Explore opportunities for the university, as a major employer in the City of Melbourne, to generate employment opportunities for local populations from Horn of Africa countries.

Cast study 4 (Research): Research and learning engagement in an educational setting
Objectives: Enhance research relationships between the university and the community, and promote the potential for university-based research and student learning to serve public ends. Specifically, promote research and learning activities between the university and a nearby school that has an ethnically diverse community of children living in low-income households.

Key informants had direct involvement in project activities and a total of 20 interviews were completed with 23 informants; nine were employed by community organisations (some of whom were also local residents) or local government, five were employees of the university or a subsidiary, seven were students of the university, and two were from small student-run businesses. One interview was conducted as a group interview with students and two interviews involved two informants. A range of documentation from the case study projects, including relevant evaluations, was identified and reviewed. This material was used to provide contexts for partnership activities and insights into outcomes. Researchers also attended planning and progress meetings and community events over the course of developing and conducting

the evaluation. Conversations at these events were not recorded but were drawn upon for general impressions of how issues played out and were resolved over time. Approval to conduct the research was gained from a university Departmental Human Ethics Advisory Group.

Data from key informant interviews were coded for content and themes, and early analysis used to inform subsequent recruitment of informants and interview content. Discussion of the case studies draws on these analyses to consider the partners that were involved, outcomes that were achieved, challenges that were encountered and other relevant observations and insights. In keeping with the ethical principles of the design, informants were able to review drafts to ensure they were satisfied with the ways in which their comments were represented.

Before discussing the findings, we flag potential limitations of the study. Available resources and concerns around understanding the implications of potentially competing motives for engagement activities led us to focus on understanding partnership processes rather than measuring specific outcomes and impacts, although these would have offered crucial insights for appraising the effectiveness of partnership activities. It is also possible that relying on key informants with stakes in the projects may have influenced their perspectives on issues. These risks were mitigated by relying on evidence to support claims that were made and the benefits of generating usable insights into partnership processes that could inform ongoing activities (Riggs et al. 2013). A more substantial limitation centres on the meaning of 'community' in the evaluation. The interpretation of 'community' embedded in the partnership included local community organisations that provided services to residents. The partnership involved these organisations but not residents, trusting the organisations' knowledge of their clients. The evaluation brief echoed this distinction. Only residents who were associated with partnership members were included as informants. The decision by the university to work with local organisations is consistent with community engagement principles, but the result is that the data include community organisations speaking on behalf of residents.

INSIGHTS FROM THE CASE STUDIES

Promoting Social Inclusion through Sport – The Carlton Sports Carnival

First staged in 2012, the sports carnival became an annual event. It was originally conceived by the community to develop opportunities for sport and recreational activities for children and young people. The carnival involved primary schools from the local, metropolitan and even rural areas in a football tournament. A locally based non-government organisation, Sports Without Borders (SWB), was funded by the City of Melbourne to manage the project. Drawing on community development models, SWB uses sport as a vehicle for building individual and community

capacities, social connections and social inclusion, with a particular focus on working with migrant-background and refugee communities. An organising committee was formed, including representatives from a broad range of partner organisations and a team of three young people living in the Carlton Housing Estate (who were resourced and supported by SWB to take on these leadership roles). The Victorian Multicultural Commission provided funding and scholarships for some of the young people to maintain their participation in sport.

Informants reported that the sports carnivals achieved some significant outcomes. A community worker explained that the broad involvement of partners and schools 'brought a whole lot of diverse players together, people who don't normally always interact with each other … who all bring something unique and something important' to the project. The events offered young people living in the Carlton housing estate leadership opportunities and the chance to work with diverse partners to exchange insights and build skills. Held on university grounds, they facilitated community access to university infrastructure and an occasion for local housing estate residents to visit the university, as one of the informants explained:

> *People enjoyed it … we had a good turnout from the community, the young people really enjoyed being a part of it, and for a lot of people, a lot of the kids especially, it was the first time that they'd even been to the University. So you've got kids [in the nearby high-rise housing estates] living a hundred metres, three hundred metres away from the university who have never even been a part of it* (Community worker).

University staff and students worked cooperatively alongside community workers to run the carnivals. University students became involved through the Student Ambassador Leadership Program (SALP), which assisted in hosting the event. Families were curious to ask students about their studies, and were astonished by the university's fine buildings, expansive grounds and sporting facilities:

> *I think the population, the cohort that was coming here, were really surprised that they could just walk onto campus. It wasn't, you know, I mean, that's about breaking down the ivory wall or that perception that there is an ivory wall* (University staff).

Challenges were encountered early in the project. The involvement of Melbourne University Sport (MUS), which manages sport and recreation facilities on the campus, was critical. MUS is a semi-autonomous business unit of the university that is required to be financially independent and thus needed to recover its costs in hosting the event. This contributed to perceptions that the university was not supportive of the project, particularly as community partners were themselves contributing work-time hours which constituted considerable in-kind support. Despite their central role in the project, to minimise costs MUS

staff had limited capacity to attend planning meetings and this placed further burdens on community-based workers who experienced difficulties in navigating the university's complex organisational arrangements.

Many organisational challenges were addressed as the role of MEPO in supporting partnership projects grew over the three years covered by the evaluation. Most significantly, MEPO began actively recruiting staff with community development skills and experience. From the perspectives of community-based partners, this was 'a very significant plus and it certainly had a big impact on this process' (Community Worker). Over successive events, there was a general feeling that the community sports carnivals were a success in achieving their social objectives. A university staff member highlighted the symbolic importance of residents of the public housing estate being invited by the university on to its campus:

> [T]he kids came and they played and they were so at home on our campus, and so did their parents. Mothers sat there chatting all day, and you know, it's taken a lot of work to get to that point where we're accepted even at that level (University staff).

The sports carnivals aimed to have multiple impacts, including benefits for universities in enriching students' experiences and learning, and facilitating local community access to university resources. It is clear from the improvement in the organisation between the first and subsequent events that the university and the Carlton community had each gained skills and capacity. Students who were involved spoke of acquiring event management skills, learning how to work as part of a team and the importance of relationships. Significantly, opportunities for public housing residents to visit the university and meet staff and students introduced them to a largely unfamiliar environment. The event generally promoted social interaction across diverse groups of primary students, although it remained difficult to engage local primary schools in Carlton's affluent neighbourhoods. The event provided opportunities for student-run social enterprises to participate and make a valuable contribution to the success of the day. Processes improved over time and there is high potential for the initiative to evolve into long-term collaborations. The case study suggests this potential and also demonstrates the challenges of negotiating with the university, as an entity with multiple organisational parts and divisions that are increasingly positioned within contrasting operational logics. For example, MEPO was tasked to promote partnerships to achieve varied community and university objectives, while MUS was obliged to operate on a business model.

Bridging the Digital Divide

The second case study focused on the 'Carlton On-line Opportunities and Learning' [COOL] project, which was designed to support a coordinated, intergenerational approach to 'bridging

the digital divide' among residents of Carlton. Data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics showed that less than 40 per cent of public housing tenants in Carlton had an internet connection, which compared to 86 per cent of households in Carlton and 72 per cent across Victoria (Simons & Kimberley 2013). The COOL project provided people on low incomes with low-cost computers, training programs, volunteer support and a community website. The computers were supplied by a social enterprise, Estate Computers, a subsidiary of COOL, which refurbished ex-government and ex-university computers. Its coordinator was an estate resident. In contrast to the sports carnival, the university was not a lead partner, although it contributed to the project in a range of ways.

A key contribution was made through student volunteering, including SALP students and SIFE (Students in Free Enterprise). The latter is an international student organisation that promotes free market solutions to achieve social and economic outcomes. The students worked as consultants on specific tasks that included producing a marketing plan for Estate Computers, information sheets for estate residents and a pamphlet publicising the COOL project. The coordinator of COOL explained how the engagement of the university had helped the project:

> [O]ne of the students … did a very good proposal for marketing. It was an eye-opener, you know, when you don't have a marketing background and also you don't have the time to actually focus on that, when someone actually focuses on these few things it kind of gives you something to think about … also we had a, actually a very good student … and he was someone who was very, you know, keen, liked computers, and he used to come every week and help me set up computers and deal with the customers (Community worker).

The university also encouraged student and staff volunteers to work on short- and long-term community-based programs for residents of the housing estates, including a homework club for children and computer and IT skills training for adults. MEPO provided assistance in coordinating this involvement, and international students were particularly enthusiastic volunteers. The students reported gaining valuable experience and critical real-world learning opportunities through their volunteering activities:

> My whole involvement in SIFE has been very useful just to get to know the local community, how to reach people, how to help people … and in my case it's also been a way to develop communication skills, teamwork, all of those things. I believe when I came here I was very shy and now I feel that I am, that I can say things that I'm thinking, not just to be quiet. And I think this project was like the beginning of a big change in terms of my personality (University student).

An evaluation of the COOL project conducted by the auspicing agency showed that the project had positive impacts for

residents (Simons & Kimberley 2013). Ongoing challenges included getting the right fit between the skills, experience and availability of the volunteers and the needs of community-based organisations.

Volunteering was most successful when there was a good match between the nature of the tasks and the skills and availability of volunteers. For short-term specific tasks that were not dependent on established relationships, student volunteers proved effective. For tasks that relied on longer term relationships, the demands of the semester cycle meant that students were often unable to provide the necessary continuity:

> I think with students [there are] limitations because they move on … they have a shorter life [as a volunteer] because, first of all, they're tied to semesters, and the[n] they're going off to do other things. So they're very valuable, but you have to see a place for them. I think retired local residents are often much more reliable as volunteer tutors (Community worker).

Volunteers need some preparation for their roles, particularly if they are unfamiliar with the social and cultural contexts in which they will be working. Some local organisations allocated resources to recruit and support volunteers, but the resources available were insufficient if there was a high turnover. Some university-based organisations, such as SALP and SIFE, provided support for student volunteers which was important, particularly as it offered students crucial personal and professional experiences. Some informants noted that volunteering was most effective when it was grounded in mutually respectful and cooperative longer term relationships between university and community members. This minimised the potential for students and staff to view their roles and partnership activities from a welfare perspective and to assume that poor communities would be grateful for whatever they were offered. Projects that involve engagement over time between individuals in divergent social circumstances must emphasise the importance of according dignity to all participants, otherwise the risks of reinforcing social distinctions experienced by members of marginalised communities can outweigh potential benefits of building confidence and skills.

As with the sports carnival, the liaison role of the MEPO Partnership Consultants was critical in maximising the benefits for both the university staff and the community. It was particularly critical in coordinating the involvement of various university faculties and units and channelling a range of resources into the projects.

Promoting Employment and Training Opportunities for Migrant-Background Men

The *Horn Afrik* advocacy project was created in response to the particular needs of a sizeable group of primarily Islamic men from Somalia, Ethiopia and Eritrea living on the Carlton public housing estate. The project was managed by a Somali-Australian community development worker. The men had undertaken tertiary

education at graduate and postgraduate levels, mostly in Australia, but had struggled to find employment. A 2011 newspaper article reported that, while unemployment in Melbourne's African community was 26 per cent, unemployment among African-Australian graduates was as high as 90 per cent. It stated that 'commercial pilots, doctors and other professionals who have migrated from Africa find it difficult to get their qualifications recognised here, so they drive Melbourne's cabs as a means to feed their family' (Willingham 2011).

This project had received funding from the City of Melbourne to research the circumstances of this group of men. The findings highlighted related issues, including the loss of status, marginalisation, concern about their inability to provide for their families, the effects of frequent rejection when job seeking, and boredom. There were widespread concerns that African men faced particular difficulties finding suitable work because of racist attitudes.

The *Horn Afrik* project included partners from the finance sector, who established a mentoring program for African refugees. As a result, some of the men found employment in the banking industry. The university, as one of the largest employers in the City of Melbourne, was approached to support the project in the hope it could provide access to jobs by giving special consideration to applicants from the local housing estates. However, this goal conflicted with the university's policy of filling low-skilled casual and part-time vacancies from its student body, and its Indigenous Employment Framework prioritises the employment of Indigenous Australians. Adding to this, the university had steadily outsourced a wide range of services such as ground maintenance and child care that could provide entry-level job opportunities for local residents.

Nevertheless, the involvement of the university led to other possibilities being explored. A consortium of local agencies successfully sought funding from a statewide initiative to establish the Carlton Work and Learning Centre (CWLC) which offered unemployed residents opportunities to learn job interview and presentation skills. The consortium was able to link with the university's human resources department, and department staff used their allotted volunteer time (two days per year) to stage simulated interviews for CWLC clients and offer constructive feedback. The department also provided temporary placements to CWLC clients, and the manager of the CWLC featured in a university HR staff-training workshop. From the perspective of the CWLC, this represented successful (albeit modest) outcomes:

> *Well for me, yes it has [been positive], and I mean we have had one person placed temporarily at the Melbourne University in the HR department during their busy period ... it was a short period but this job seeker in particular hadn't had any Australian experience and to be able to put Melbourne University HR administration officer for*

even a short period spoke volumes when she put her resume through
the next time. And she went on to [other casual positions] and is now
settled into a permanent position (Community worker).

University staff who were involved also recognised the
potential relevance of a key university strategy:

I'm hoping you know, for everybody, it'll broaden our view of the
world and our perspective but it'll, it could also really help with,
I mean I can just think racial awareness, cultural awareness
differences you know, hopefully it'll do a lot of things … It's really
interesting at the moment and there's a lot of cross connections.
There's a program happening in the University – and in fact I'm
going to this – called 'Courageous Conversations about Race' … It's
[about] understanding we all have biases and stuff like that, and
because that's really important in the interview and in the other
contexts as well. So I think this actually supports some of that, you
know, it'll actually be a practical cultural awareness … I think one
of the common things is most people, most people know the need
to have a job, understand that, and what a job can do for you so I
think people will want to help people as much as they can in terms of
achieving that end (University staff).

Aspects of this case study illustrate the importance of the
values and beliefs of the individuals who were motivated to help
others gain access to the benefits of employment.

This case study shows the challenges in creating employment
opportunities both through community-based efforts and in large
organisations such as the university where the outsourcing of
services has diminished institutional influence and disadvantaged
groups are competing for scarce opportunities. Social procurement
policies could be used to stipulate quotas to promote employment
opportunities. This could have important effects because, although
individuals can benefit from programs to improve English
language proficiency, mentoring and other work preparation
programs, these efforts go only so far in the face of wider
socioeconomic conditions. An unanticipated outcome was that
the project raised awareness of issues of racism and discrimination
and highlighted the relevance of anti-racism initiatives within
the university.

Research and Learning Engagement in an Educational Setting
The final case study focuses on engagement with a local primary
school, which is located on a site adjoining the nearby public
housing estate. It is a small school with an ethnically diverse
student population, the great majority of whom live on the estate.
Because of its proximity to the university, it has over the years
had connections with teacher training programs and various
researchers who have conducted studies at the school. School staff
expressed mixed responses on the value of these collaborations.
In particular, there were concerns that involvement in research
projects made demands on the school community, yet generated
negligible benefits. The school was keen, nevertheless, to reactivate

its connections with the university to develop research projects which addressed emerging local issues and used collaborative processes that meshed with the school's philosophy and commitment to local community development. A key shift in the relationship between the school and the university was facilitated by the growing expertise in community development principles among the Partnership Consultants in the MEPO office. These MEPO staff recognised the risks of the partnership for small under-resourced schools:

> They [the school community] really didn't want to be seen as some sort of social laboratory … there are some real pockets of disadvantage in that community and in some respects they might be over researched [but] they do some amazing work [in the community] and they take a real strengths-based approach … they've been bruised in the past by, by stuff that the University has maybe tried to do (University staff).

They focused on developing research collaborations that aligned with the school's ethos and this was noted and appreciated by senior staff at the school who explained:

> [The relationship with the University] didn't start off brilliantly because we weren't well matched in our understandings of community … we had very different expectations and approaches … and at the end of it, I felt we had been used in, in a … [searching for the right word] … it wasn't nice. But anyway … then things changed a lot (Community worker).

> The approach shifted … [they told us] 'I'm here to listen, I'm here to talk, to hear what's happening at grass roots and the[n] we can look at where we can link with the Uni, but it needs to come from you and it needs to be owned by the community sector'. That was a huge shift for me (Community worker).

This shift in engagement styles led to new possibilities for research projects that responded to needs identified by the school. For example, a research project was established to improve language and literacy outcomes for Somali children and address low literacy among Somali parents. Without the Partnership Consultant's relationship with the school, the project is unlikely to have taken place. From this the school developed a direct relationship with the researcher and was planning to continue the project. The researcher explained:

> I just think it's an absolutely fantastic thing to do, and it's probably one of the most effective projects the university could fund in terms of directly connecting children and families and schools, so it's actually quite a simple project, but I think really quite, you know, quite effective (University staff).

Other small projects have also been established in response to community needs, although there are ongoing barriers for researchers seeking to work collaboratively with local community

partners because institutional structures are not geared to support participatory approaches to research (MacLean, Warr & Pyett 2009). Despite the merit of such projects, they present challenges to researchers:

The problem for me was that the grant was actually quite small. I had to put in a lot of in-kind [support], and actually some of my own funding, and just finding the time. I had problems finding a co-worker, because I needed someone with very [particular skills] and once I did find the person that was … fantastic, that person's actually wonderful and keen to keep working with them, um, but finding the resourcing and the time was the biggest challenge (University staff).

This case study provided a powerful example of the importance of community development processes for university-community partnerships to generate reciprocal benefits, and that, in university settings, these are frequently overlooked skills. This was evident when a senior staff member commented:

I didn't really know the depth of [the Partnership Consultant's] experience until one day I was talking to her about some social needs over in [another] area, and she just began to detail, you know, community structures and … which buttons you'd push over there. I just realised she's got this vast experience that you would find hard to normally recruit into a university, and would not normally, but in terms of social partnerships it's just essential (University staff).

MEPO Partnership Consultants were able to promote other opportunities for the school that enhanced learning programs, such as organising donations of surplus university property to the school. With the right processes in place, many of the community informants recognised the value of university connections:

You've got all these professors of planning and engineering and social studies who could come together to support any of the projects that we dream up … providing support through their knowledge and expertise to suggest that this could work or, no, that was tried in France and don't go near it … they've got a whole lot of knowledge that could be harnessed (Community worker).

These case studies also illustrated how, within the parameters of the formal three-way partnership, multiple complex subsidiary partnerships and interlinked strategies developed over time to address a range of situations associated with socioeconomic disadvantage in the local community. The positive outcomes that were generated pointed to the potential of university-community collaborations. Many partnership activities are ongoing and demonstrate the achievements and challenges of inter-sectoral partnerships when there is considerable asymmetry in power, resources and prestige between the partners. The case studies showed the importance of community engagement expertise in navigating this asymmetry.

TENSIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES IN UNIVERSITY-COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

The evaluation suggested the partnership generated positive outcomes for the university and local communities. It showed that partnership processes needed to be sensitive to community perspectives and ways of working. Initially, this required skills and understanding that were hard to find in the culture of a major research university. It was not until the university employed staff skilled in community development that it was able to achieve a substantial shift in its relationship with the Carlton community. Importantly, the MEPO Partnership Consultants offered a portal into the complex organisational structures of the university. They represented a diversification of skills and expertise and facilitated access to the university, which had the effect of enhancing the 'permeability' of the university to the local community (Bivens 2014, p. 223). Permeability enables diverse stakeholders to become involved in university processes with expectations that can challenge and resist the authority of the rationales driving corporatisation and marketisation (Bivens 2014).

In these ways, university-community partnerships can unsettle what has been noted as a growing comfort within universities with the discourse and perspectives of 'management schools, business consultants and financial journalism' (Collini 2011, p. 9). The political challenges inherent to the philosophy and practice of community development approaches may be critical in confronting the growing dominance of this discourse. There was some suggestion that senior staff came to grasp the potential of community development approaches. At the same time, this potential was veiled in the language of 'partnership consultants', and vested in individuals rather than institutional structures that supported its characteristic practices. It is clear that other factors may combine to neutralise the transformative potential of community development approaches, including concerns that, without long-term commitment from the university, the relationships that have been developed will atrophy or be lost. Subsequent restructuring has resulted in the MEPO office being disbanded and key staff relocated to the chancellery. This both presents opportunities to influence key decision-makers and risks that their efforts will be more thoroughly co-opted to serve the university's priorities and interests. Similarly, student volunteering initiatives have since been restructured and centralised too, and the question of how they can be orientated to meet local community needs remains unanswered.

Institutional support that promotes continuity in engagement activities is particularly important in contexts where programmatic funding models, high staff turnover and other factors mean that longstanding objectives of community development leading to sustainable processes are increasingly unrealistic. Notable models of institutional support for sustaining university-community partnerships, such as the multifaceted

Community University Partnership Program (CUPP) at the University of Brighton, have recurrent funding and integrated strategies that support long-term partnership and engagement activities that increase capacities to generate sustainable social justice outcomes (Bivens 2014; Hart & Aumann 2013). Key here is how universities understand their contemporary significance and foundational values. University-community partnerships can be vehicles for driving real social change or designed to serve institutional interests and soften the impact of business models being imposed onto academic activities akin to notions of 'corporate social responsibility'.

Efforts to develop productive university-community partnerships have particular benefits for marginalised communities who otherwise encounter many barriers in accessing universities as repositories of significant intellectual, social, economic and cultural resources. Arguably, there is significant scope for universities, as simultaneously local and global actors (Marginson 2011), to use their economic and social power and status to create these opportunities. Currently, however, there is mounting emphasis on building international reputations and declining interest in addressing local problems. Marginson (2011, p. 413) argues that these tensions can be somewhat resolved by recognising that the distinctive nature of higher education institutions lies in their 'foundational public purpose' and that this may be what ensures their enduring relevance amidst processes of profound social and technological change. Renewing the public purpose of universities increasingly requires, among other things, what Barnett (2007, p. 32) referred to as 'a vision of the almost impossible'. It is 'almost impossible' because it requires contesting dominant and powerful neoliberal rationalities and universities moving to be outside of themselves and engaged with wider society. This engagement dissolves boundaries between university and civic society and has the effect of transforming institutions themselves (Barnett 2007). Genuine and mutually respectful university-community partnerships are key to realising these possibilities.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

University-community partnerships are important planks for universities to demonstrate their commitment to a social mission and remain relevant and accountable to the wider public. They are nonetheless implemented in, and span, complex and divergent fields of practice and meaning, and this means that they can have mixed outcomes and uncertain progress – two steps forward and one step back. They can generate outcomes that would otherwise not have been achieved even if these, at times, fall short of their ambitions.

These are critical times for mounting arguments for the social value of universities as civic institutions, and for the many other ways that universities can generate public benefit. Currently, the social value of community engagement risks being overlooked

and even dismissed. There can be multiple challenges for those working within universities in garnering support and commitment for engagement activities in the face of competing demands and expectations. In marginalised communities, there is hope mingled with despair that situations will change and improve. The next steps cluster around restoring and fostering the capacities of universities to support community-engaged scholarship that contributes to cohesive and just societies.

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