

Curtin Community Leaders' Forum

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Abstract

A challenge to university involvement in community is the need to hear community voices and build partnerships. Faculty, staff, and students also participate. Curtin University of Technology uses invitational forums to involve community leaders in facilitated discussions about the future directions and opportunities for the region and for the University. After the first two forum discussions, the community participants report they are ready to be involved in a specific university-community partnership project.

The Curtin Community Leaders' Forum is an initiative arising from Curtin University of Technology's Community Relations Plan. The concept was originally proposed by a community member of Curtin's governing Council, Dr Eric Tan, to provide a mechanism for the University to listen to the voices of community leaders about future directions and opportunities for the University. At the first Forum held on 3 May 2002, the Vice-Chancellor outlined the major opportunities that he saw ahead for Curtin University of Technology, and asked for feedback from those attending. Attendance at the Forum was by invitation only; 110 community leaders contributed to the outcomes of the Forum through facilitated discussion groups. The second Curtin Community Leaders' Forum was held on 7 October 2002, at which the Vice-Chancellor reported on progress made following the inaugural Forum. Participants then considered additional matters considered worthy of the University's attention in advancing partnerships with the wider community.

The mission statement of Curtin University of Technology articulates the University's commitment to the cultivation of responsive and responsible links with the wider community, and this is further elaborated in the University's Community Relations Plan.

The Community Relations Advisory Committee (CRAC) provides advice to the University concerning the implementation of the Community Relations Plan to enhance the quality and impact of community service and community linkages. One of the important functions of CRAC is to prospect for new opportunities for the University to further develop its own sense of community, and to interact with the wider community. Currently, the Community Relations Plan calls for development of a regular forum for community leaders,¹ that will allow them to express the aspirations of their communities, and to form links with overseas students studying at Curtin.

¹ A Community Leader is defined as someone who holds an influential position in the service of various sections of the Australian community.

Objectives of the Curtin Community Leaders' Forum

The objectives of the Leaders' Forum are:

1. to provide an opportunity for the University to interface with the wider community via various leaders;
2. to provide a mechanism for the University to listen to the voices of community leaders about future directions and opportunities for the University. This will be helpful in strategic planning, positioning, and promotion;
3. to provide Curtin students and staff (including researchers) with access to resources in various communities;
4. to link international students with their local communities; and
5. to demonstrate Curtin's credentials concerning its community links—that it welcomes formal input from key community groups.

The Inaugural Forum

More than 100 community leaders were identified and sent an invitation to participate in the Inaugural Forum held on 3 May 2002. They included:

- Leaders from Ethnic Communities and Chambers of Commerce
- Mayors and Shire Presidents from Perth and regional WA
- Leaders from Aboriginal communities, Youth Advisory Councils and Seniors groups (such as the Positive Aging Foundation)
- Major employers, union leaders, outstanding community leaders in their own right
- Notable alumni from Australia and overseas

In addition, another 100 participants were invited from the Curtin community, including John Curtin Medallists, Honorary Doctors, key student leaders, members of Council, members of Academic Senate, and the Community Relations Advisory Committee, plus other students and staff wanting to interact with the wider community.

The Vice-Chancellor, Professor Lance Twomey, opened the Forum by outlining the opportunities he saw ahead for Curtin, and invited the 110 participants present to give him feedback concerning their perceptions of the University, and in particular how Curtin could collaborate with them to better serve the wider community.

Participants were then randomly divided into discussion groups of about 12 people, each facilitated by a community leader, and asked to report on opportunities they saw for further interaction between the University and the wider community, which might, in particular, lead to improved learning and research of benefit to all. Individuals were asked to provide written feedback on how the operation of the Forum could be improved and enhanced.

Recommendations from the Inaugural Forum

As can be imagined, the ideas and proposals flowing from the discussion groups were many and varied. However, an analysis showed that there were two main channels of thought: *Reaching Out to the Community*, and *Bringing the Community onto the Campuses* (Curtin has three in Perth, three in regional areas, and one overseas); and five overall themes, which are listed below.

1. Curtin needs to improve the way it communicates with the wider community, and a starting point would be to clarify what Curtin means by “community,” and whether the University is really serious about the “community” commitment in its mission statement. By this is meant, is its commitment obvious in the goals and outcomes of students’ courses of study?
2. Curtin needs to reach out to groups, go out to them, and not expect them to always come to Curtin. It should use more guest lecturers, and provide better community access to its physical assets.
3. Curtin should build relationships with the community that enhance students’ and graduates’ experiences, and, at the same time, enhance the experiences of those in the community with whom they work. It needs to look at building in a life skills approach into all courses, by inclusion of, and provision of credit for, volunteer and community work.²
4. Curtin has not harnessed the potential of its alumni in implementing the three points made above. Alumni also expressed a keenness to work with the University in helping to enhance the perception of Curtin in the community.
5. Curtin can improve the experience of its international students by purposefully immersing them in the local community, through the support networks of local ethnic cultural and business associations, as well as through engaging in community service experiences with Australian students.

Overall, the participants who provided feedback on the Forum itself were quite satisfied with the way the Forum was run, except that almost everyone complained they needed more time in the discussion groups. Several expressed the hope that something positive would come from the proposals that had been made, as it was felt that busy community leaders would not wish to continue attending “another talk-fest.”

² In this regard, the Australian National Training Authority’s 2002 report “Due Credit” may provide a starting point for discussion.

The Second Forum

The second Forum was held on John Curtin Day, 7 October 2002, immediately after the annual ceremony associated with the awarding of the John Curtin Medals to several outstanding citizens whose vision, leadership, and community service provides an inspiration to others.

It began with the Vice-Chancellor reporting back on action arising from the recommendations of the Inaugural Forum held in May, after which the external participants had the opportunity of meeting in affinity groups with relevant staff and students for dialogue, exchange of ideas, and proposals for further collaboration.

The actions taken include:

1. Describing the way Curtin defines “Community” as follows:
Curtin University of Technology aims to maintain and build strong and distinctive collaborative partnerships with key communities at many levels, through its students, staff, alumni, benefactors, and other friends, in ways commensurate with the University’s mission and goals. Curtin’s interface with the community involves
 - *Identifying and pursuing common purposes for mutual benefit, and*
 - *Sharing skills, knowledge, and resources with local, regional, national, and international communities, to enhance the quality of university and community life.*
2. The University has expedited its plan for a new Corporate Communications portfolio within the Office of the Executive General Manager.
3. The University is examining ways to expand John Curtin Day so that it becomes a special form of an “Open Day,” which takes students into the community to practice their professional skills, for mutual benefit.
4. The University will develop a catalogue of major outreach activity between each of its Schools and various community entities to showcase its responsible and responsive links with the wider community.

After further facilitated discussion, participants recommended that Curtin should:

- develop better relationships with different entities in the community, such as Chambers of Commerce, business groups, and ethnic organisations;
- establish its own global position, to “develop a brand and become world class;”
- facilitate greater interaction between academics and business, and between Australian and international students;
- facilitate greater interaction between Curtin and local government councils;
- encourage more positive community leadership on Curtin’s governing Council;
- give a greater emphasis to value-adding programs such as Curtin Volunteers;
- promote available community volunteering opportunities; and

- that relationship building be built into staff job descriptions so that they have time to build and maintain pathways. Each relationship should have a designated relationship manager.

Feedback from Participants in the Second Forum

Participants were asked to give their feedback on two matters.

*The Public Participation Spectrum*³ (Table 1), allowed participants to identify where, on a five-point scale, they would like to see the Forum positioned in the long term: whether Curtin should Inform, Consult, Involve, Collaborate, or Empower community members.

Participants indicated a very strong preference for Collaboration, followed by Involvement.

Evaluation of the Second Forum elicited a range of opinions.

Most *staff and students* who had attended the previous Forum were satisfied their expectations had been met, and all but one were happy with the way for Forum was run. However, two were “slightly dissatisfied” and reported a lack of opportunity to speak about specifics.

Most *external participants* stated they were satisfied with the University’s initial response to the outcomes of the inaugural Forum. All stated they were satisfied with the format and the running of the Forum.

The discussion group facilitators met after the second Forum to review what progress had been made since the inaugural Forum. Their view was that there was a strong sense of *déjà vu*. Curtin should now have sufficient information about the areas of likely common interest and common purpose with the community as represented by the external participants on two occasions. What now seemed to be needed was a focus on one or two areas for further action (action being expected now rather than more talking at a similar Forum), and then inviting community leaders to join in planning and executing a specific project.

³ Figure 2 from page 4 of “Consulting Citizens—A Resource Guide”, published by the Department of Premier and Cabinet, WA, April 2002. (Originally sourced from IAP2: the International Association for Public Participation.)

Acknowledgements

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Table 1 The Public Participations Spectrum

Public Empowerment increases from Left to Right in the figure below.

INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER
Objective	Objective	Objective	Objective	Objective
To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them with understanding the problem, alternatives, and/or solutions	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public issues and concerns are consistently understood and considered	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution	To place final decision making in the hands of the public

Promise to the public	Promise to the public	Promise to the public	Promise to the public	Promise to the public
We will keep you informed	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and issues are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision	We will look to you for direct advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible	We will implement what you decide
Example tools	Example tools	Example tools	Example tools	Example tools
Fact Sheets Web Sites Open Houses	Public Comment Focus Groups Surveys Public Meetings	Workshops Deliberative Polling	Citizen Advisory Committees Consensus-building Participatory Decision Making	Citizens' Juries Ballots Delegated Decisions