Chapter 6
University–Community Engagement: Dislocation of Theory and Practice

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6.1 Introduction

> Universities should aim 'to be of and not just in the community; not simply to engage in "knowledge transfer" but to establish a dialogue across the boundary between the university and its community which is open-ended, fluid and experimental'. (Watson 2003, p. 16)

> 'Communities do not know what universities can provide or how to contact the right people to ask the question' whilst 'Universities do not know what the needs of the community are: and the community finds it difficult to articulate those needs in a way the university understands'. (Charles 2007, p. 15)

It is a familiar argument that universities should engage with local communities, to be 'of' and not merely located 'in' their locality (Chatterton 2000; Watson 2003; Bond and Paterson 2005). In the United Kingdom, a raft of policy has given this notion practical urgency for universities (Higher Education Funding Council England (HEFCE) 1999; HM Treasury 2003 and 2004; Scottish Executive (SE) c; HEFCE 2005; Scottish Executive (SE) 2007a, b; Joint Future Thinking Taskforce on Universities 2008). But how exactly are universities responding to and understanding the demand to engage with communities? Whilst conventionally identified as a 'third strand' what does this mean in practice? These are not new questions (Chatterton 2000, Bond and Paterson 2005, Watson 2007) but following the persistent policy focus on university–community engagement revisiting the subject is timely.

Research in Scotland aimed to reassess the contemporary university–community engagement landscape. More specifically it looked for evidence of corporate commitment to community engagement beyond more traditional outputs (service learning, Continuous Professional Development (CPD), volunteering and, more recently, widening access) as well as beyond the traditional 'expert-supplicant relationship that typifies much university–community engagement' (Charles 2007, p. 16). Evidence of a more 'radical' understanding of community engagement was sought (Laing 2009), one intrinsically adding-value to universities' core business.

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A survey of university–community engagement policy and practice across Scotland's universities revealed a diversity of corporate approach and strategy alongside individual academic and managerial commitment and leadership (cf. Chap. 5). But it also revealed persistent pressures and tensions (external and internal) that continued to restrict institutional engagement practices and understanding. Examples were found of successful university–community engagement activities that delivered mutual benefits for all participants. But their success had been largely secured by individual academics *despite* corporate commitment and leadership. This chapter presents an in-depth study of a celebrated university–community engagement project that reaffirmed this conclusion. Far from being trivial, the pressures and tensions surrounding higher education have to be acknowledged and challenged for community engagement to play an integral role in future university missions.

6.2 Problematising the Policy Context

The contemporary visibility of university–community engagement is indicative of wider changes around Scotland's higher education (HE) sector. In particular, higher education's marketisation has produced competition for students and resources; forcing universities to reconsider their future functions and roles (Chatterton 2000; Watson 2003; Charles 2007; Browne 2010; cf. Sect. 1.2). Competition has sharpened the challenge of declining student demographics and its attendant necessity to widen future recruitment pools (Scottish Executive (SE) b; HM Treasury 2006). In particular, reconfiguration of 'new' universities has brought communities to the fore of both policy and practice. For many, community focus builds on institutional histories and existing disciplinary strengths in vocational disciplines that can be repackaged as 'unique selling points' to a more diverse set of potential students. It also offers additional funding for universities often disadvantaged with respect to research-intensive institutions.

Scotland's HE sector has followed a broader UK merging of universities into a 'triple helix' with government and business (Charles 2007): HE is subject to national policy objectives; primarily aimed at economic development (Scottish Executive (SE) 2001, b) but balanced by HE's contribution to the learner and wider society (Scottish Executive (SE) 2001, 2003a, b, c, Scottish Funding Council (SFC) 2006). Scotland has a distinctive lifelong learning framework for HE (Gallacher 2007) directly linking lifelong learning to economic development as well as demands for 'active citizenship' and 'social justice' (Scottish Executive (SE) c). Most prominently lifelong learning is linked to notions of 'employability' (economic development) and 'widening access' (social justice), with universities active alongside further education, vocational training and community/voluntary education in their delivery (Gallacher 2007). In practice, there are four Regional Access Forums, which link these four education sectors and act as the key drivers and funders of university participation.

However, despite its policy prominence, 'community engagement' has been inconsistently defined. As elsewhere in the United Kingdom, primary attention has been placed on 'business engagement' (Bond and Paterson 2005; Charles 2007). Hence increasing pressures on universities to reach-out to businesses (Scottish Executive (SE) 2001, 2003b, c; Joint Future Thinking Taskforce on Universities 2008) beyond the traditional service delivery curricula; accompanied by funding support for such as Knowledge Transfer Partnerships', work placements, and Continuous Professional Development' (CPD) programmes. Whilst community engagement has been linked to wider audiences and issues (culture; social inclusion; widening access), the privileging of business engagement has restricted community focus, practice and understanding.

6.3 Community Engagement in Practice

At the time of the research university–community engagement was in its infancy in Scotland. Many of those interviewed argued that given time universities would become more conversant with both its concept and practice, and that as a consequence, community engagement would become more integrated into future culture and structure. However, this optimism did not take into consideration some rather fundamental external and internal constraints that inhibit major change in comprehension or incorporation.

6.3.1 External Constraints

The policy context was a major external constraint on university–community engagement. Given the prioritisation of business engagement, it was hardly surprising that most universities viewed community engagement through the lens of business and thus commercial criteria and interests. Indeed there had been a consistent government steer on business engagement in contrast to mixed policy messages surrounding wider community engagement application. Hence, a number of universities had conflated business and community engagement.

Although Scotland provided additional funding for cultural engagement the type of activities identified within its remit were restricted; in the main aiming to open-up cultural facilities to the public and the provision of funding for small research projects. Also, despite the accompanying monies, 'cultural engagement' was not deemed a policy priority. Likewise, involving higher education into an infrastructure of lifelong learning and widening access, with accompanying funding streams, siloed community engagement within the correspondingly restrictive practices of such as CPD. Although notions of community engagement were central to both undergraduate and professional curricula, the definitions and activities were also restricted to relevant funding bodies and employers specific demands, such as the National Health Service (NHS).

These constraints were compounded by the fundamental dislocation between policy demands and available community engagement resources. There were very limited direct engagement funds available whilst the university funding model ensured that community engagement was an unrealistic unit of resource. All community engagement activity had to be separately funded, costing time and producing insecure, peripheral activities. Community engagement funding competed with other income streams (knowledge transfer, international recruitment, taught postgraduate courses, research training, Ph.D.s). And since community engagement (as out-reach, business engagement, widening access) can be a costly exercise, given tight HE budgets, focusing on activities producing immediate pay-back (international recruitment, PG courses, Ph.D.s) is the norm.

The funding model failed to adequately reflect the complicated and time-consuming nature of community engagement. Contact-making and relationship-building with relevant community organisations and representatives is labour-intensive, fraught with cultural misunderstandings, even distrust and require careful as well as sustained management of community expectations and possibly competing interests. Successful engagement often relied on dedicated individuals (both inside and outside the university) working together beyond the scope and timescales of funded projects and research. Yet such long timescales can be underestimated within funding criteria; often restricting input to certain organised sections of communities (the 'usual suspects') and a corresponding absence of wider, unorganised communities and voices.

Reinforcing these constraints is the public management culture currently driving university strategy, which demands that a business case has to be proven for all outputs including community engagement. Yet national funding agencies have no way of valuing community engagement through current metric systems that look to prove quantifiable outputs, whilst external funders likewise demand measured evidence of impact. The Research Assessment Exercise excluded community engagement activity, and marginalised its practice and practitioners. Whilst quantitative measurements, such as student, volunteer and CPD numbers, or employment creation indicators are much easier to determine and assess than qualitative impacts of 'social capital' or 'well-being'. Indeed, the difficulty in enumerating community engagement was viewed by many senior managers as responsible for relegating its profile and status within institutional mind-sets.

6.3.2 Internal Constraints

Some external inconsistencies had limited institutional understanding of community engagement and thus evidence of an incoherency of thinking and practice. Simple frameworks had been adopted to manage engagement or it was subordinated into existing structures and interpreted through the lens of more familiar objectives. Whether aligned with delivery priorities (teaching and research), marginalised within specific activities (business engagement, CPD, lifelong learning, widening access)

or incorporated within various managerial remits ('communications and marketing', 'corporate social responsibility', 'public relations' or 'corporate marketing') the implication was that community engagement was an 'extra', a 'theme' (even if cross-cutting), a 'tool', something 'to sell' to the general public and targeted stakeholders and even disposable. As a consequence, community engagement activities had to take a subordinated position, having to add-to and comply with the core missions of research and teaching.

Those celebrating their vocational curricula were keen to note the subsequent economic and social contributions of their professional teaching programmes. It was also a common practice across universities to require student placements or encourage volunteering in community workplaces. Both activities were accepted as beneficial to the curriculum, students and the external communities involved. For many students service learning or volunteering provided a unique experience of community diversity. From a labour market perspective, engagement was not merely a formative process but viewed as integral to employability.

However, what about community benefit? Service learning, community placements and volunteering were organised around academic demands and timescales; the risk being that students didn't take community placements or volunteering seriously, perhaps valuing the course credits more than the engagement itself. Several courses (Active Learning in the Community, Stirling) and community-oriented work (The Law Clinic, Strathclyde) had specifically addressed these issues. Vocational curricula also align academics and students to specific groups (social care), employers and funders (the NHS), limiting university–community reach to specific areas and communities. Most pertinently, universities are student-focused and fee-paying students expect this to be the case, whilst student employability prioritises the individual over the community, which may impact negatively on any genuine attempts to deliver community benefit.

There was also an obvious vacuum between senior management commitment and engaged academics, with the former largely unaware of the extent of community activity of the latter. Arguably the lack of senior management awareness of such work has always been the case but one would have expected evidence of increased perception given the greater visibility of community engagement as accepted practice. Some senior managers were aware of a few high-profile, centrally funded and tightly managed projects, but remained largely unaware of the much more diverse and wider spread of grassroots activity.

There was also a vacuum between senior management strategies for community engagement and middle management delivery of operational plans. Commitment to community engagement was often expressed at senior management level within strategic plans but its translation into more precise resource allocations, timetabling or other delivery targets was less evident. There was also little evidence of community engagement being acknowledged within promotion or reward infrastructures, thus denigrating the status and value of engagement and engagers, creating barriers for staff committed to community engagement (such as through workload models), and undermining wider academic buy-in.

Wider academic scepticism was clearly an issue, especially amongst those outside of the social sciences and just as prevalent in the 'new' universities despite their celebration of community engagement expertise. Despite the 'Third Strand's growing profile, there was considerable academic resistance to engagement, with its practices viewed as a dilution of academic standards. The 'excellence versus engagement' argument was commonly invoked, suggesting that engagement is incompatible with serious scholarship, parochial and thus contradictory to the global arenas within which universities are active. Engagement was likewise aligned with specific agendas and voices and therefore incompatible with notions of academic freedom. Academic scepticism reinforced a presumed distinction between engaged research and teaching and academic research and teaching with the former viewed as lacking intellectual quality.

Thus community engagement thinking and practice was evolving within a contradictory and strongly constrained environment. Despite its acclaimed profile in the case of the 'new' universities, and numerous successful community engagement stories, the identified constraints both confined and marginalised engagement's outputs and staff beyond service delivery. But how did these constraints play out in terms of the delivery of intended and/or potential community benefit? To explore this question, I present an example of an in-depth study (February–March 2009) of a successful, and officially celebrated, university–community project.

6.4 The University: Background

The university gained its status in 1992 and like many 'new' universities has an avowedly vocational curriculum. It 'prides itself on close links with industry, professional bodies and the communities we serve', whilst the afore-mentioned policy context was evident in its Strategic Plan. Hence the university 'will rise to the challenges presented by the continuous transformation of higher education and the needs of the communities it serves'; it will 'focus on practice, informed by theory' as well as 'research which emphasises relevance'; and be connected to its various territorial constituencies 'and ... valued by them' because of its applied knowledge transfer. Widening access, flexibility of learning provision (providing a choice of place and time of study for busy professionals), the extension of continuing professional development (in markets of high demand) and enhanced knowledge transfer activities (reaffirming its strong links with business) are all identified sites through which the university aimed to match its objectives to the wider political context. A 'Widening Access Strategy' sought to clarify the university's aims and objectives as well as specific measures to be taken in line with the Strategic Plan. Collaboration and partnership were also identified as the key objectives in seeking to make a contribution to the economic and social fabric of Scotland.

6.4.1 Community Engagement

Its 'community engagement' was viewed within a social inclusion agenda that focused on widening access and participation, and thus engagement with schools, colleges and voluntary sector groups. A dedicated Lifelong Learning department worked to help both inform the university curriculum and tailor learning to local community needs. The work of the department was deliberately aligned with wider political aims governing lifelong learning as well as corporate social responsibility, skills development and volunteering.

The university had developed a range of community taster courses for returners to education with financial support from the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), European Social Fund and private funders. These courses were delivered off-campus and disseminated through links developed with the voluntary and community sector (VCS) and other agencies. Lifelong learning staff had initiated a number of successful projects, including the subject of this case-study. Research had long been utilised as an engagement mechanism of engagement. And in determining the priorities for its research activity it is claimed that 'the parameters of social relevance, quality and sustainability will be paramount'.

Community consultation and partnership had recently become central to university management. During a campus development process, management had become aware of the need to consider community views and established a 'Stakeholders Advisory Group' including local business, community and public sector representatives. Community engagement had been a subject for senior management discussion and policy, with a Vice-Principal tasked with leading a 'Community Engagement Strategy (CES)', and a project group of senior managers and staff selected to devise a phased approach to its strategic delivery.

In July 2008, a paper was presented to senior management outlining the rationale, objectives and proposed outcomes of a (CES). The paper's purpose was:

> to more clearly define community engagement, to outline a vision for Community Engagement . . . to explain the reasoning for taking a geographical approach and to illustrate how this approach will complement other work across the university.

Its communities included:

> social enterprise companies, voluntary and community organisations, public and private sector organisations, stakeholders, business and industry, government, other education providers and learning organisations, community learning and development partnerships and citizens "that are near a university campus".

A CES would likewise help to articulate the aims of its estates strategy as well as facilitate consultation over future public use of its campuses. Ultimately,the aim was to embed a culture of community engagement through staff and student activities as part of curriculum development and through commercial engagement to 'ensure that [the university] . . . becomes a hub for social and educational integration and a catalyst for commercial growth in the region'.

A timetable of activities (July 2008 to July 2012) detailed the intended work programme that would translate the Strategy's vision and objectives into institutional and cultural practices. Activities included the expansion of partnerships, the development of a communications strategy to help promote community engagement, a centrally-driven community engagement philosophy and the setting-up of an extensive community engagement infrastructure. Progress on each activity would be measured through the Scottish Executive's community engagement 'National Standards'.

The paper noted the limitations to its outlined aspirations, most specifically that there is 'no core funding and limited activity throughout the university for staff to pursue activities'. There was no mention of a reallocation of discretionary funds to support its intended work programme. Other constraints included a 'lack of awareness by academic colleagues of what is possible in terms of innovative and enterprising opportunities for engaging their learners in community learning environments'. It also acknowledged that the university had been missing opportunities to align with communities through linking students and curricula activity.

Whilst the paper was visible evidence of managerial intentions to provide community engagement leadership, its primary focus was on raising awareness of engagement practice in research projects and the appropriation of engagement activity within existing research and teaching agendas. Despite aspirations for a centrally driven community engagement philosophy and infrastructure the relevant staff were grappling with its definition and implementation beyond the confines of SFC-funded programmes.

6.4.2 The Project

6.4.2.1 Origins

This chapter focuses on a community arts project initiated in 2001 and headed by a university lecturer qualified in a range of arts subjects as well as interior/furniture design. This lecturer also had a long history of community-oriented work which had brought him into contact with communities and community organisations surrounding the university. In 2000, one such organisation contacted the university to suggest the development of a formal programme of university–community education that would align with widening access objectives. The aim was to extend access to higher education (HE) for individuals from disadvantaged communities located in close proximity to the university. The organisation would recruit students and the university would design, accredit and deliver a range of modules. Individuals would choose modules of interest to work towards a university-validated 'combined studies' degree. The initiative would provide HE in a community setting rather than on campus because of a strongly-held belief within the organisation that potential learners

> would be intimidated . . . and [therefore] wouldn't set foot inside the university.

Known for his community work the lecturer, Alex[1], was asked if he wanted to explore the viability of the proposed initiative. He readily agreed and over a period of 6 months liaised with the community organisation, utilised community contacts to find premises and developed a number of arts-based modules suitable to both community and university objectives. Once the modules were approved (but not accredited at this stage) Alex designed and disseminated publicity material for the courses. Distributed in local doctor's surgeries, libraries, book shops and supermarkets, the completed flyers emphasised the support for those who had no experience of arts. And, in the pursuit of widening access, they promoted both informal drop-in sessions (flexible to suit people's commitments, health and skills) as well as formal teaching.

Classes opened in 2001 with 20 local residents as students. Modules covered ceramics, water colour painting, interior design, public art and drawing and media studies. The local community venue helped to publicise both the university and the project to a wider community audience. As its reputation and numbers increased classes extended to 5 days per week. Classes were also open on Fridays to school children as an after-school initiative. Around 12 young people attended accompanied by family members in a supervisory capacity. Project attendance grew to around 90, covering a range of ages and backgrounds, with many more on a waiting list of people wanting to enrol.

Its early success, however, was marred by criticisms from both university managers and the community partner. Most notably, although the previous Vice Principal had been keen to use the community organisation to engage with local communities others were not convinced of its status as an instrument of university-level education. There was a reluctance to validate the modules, not awarded until 2003, which effectively undermined the project's aims of progression. To help offset managerial scepticism and to raise project awareness with the new Principal (2003), Alex organised a public exhibition of the students' work. Opened by the self-same Principal, it was a huge success in both raising the project's public profile and highlighting the projects' participants learning achievements. But on-going funding remained contentious, particularly the covering of Alex's salary, which led to his eventual move to the Lifelong Learning department.

During this period, tensions developed between the community partner and Alex as the university's voice. The partner wanted ownership of the project; 'adamant that it should be a community driven thing'. But given that the university was providing Alex's salary he insisted that it had a say in the project's development and delivery and was credited for its community outreach initiative. Some community organisers were determined to fold the programme into their wider community/political objectives and used classes to discuss organisational business. It was not only disruptive but the majority of students were not involved with or interested in the community organisation.

Alex was thus forced to clarify the boundaries of the project, which soured relations. From the organisation's perspective Alex was being disloyal. But for Alex it was important 'to keep the university on side'. The two could not be reconciled and

[1] The name of the lecturer has been changed to retain anonymity.

the organisation withdrew from the project in 2003. 'Loyalties are very fierce in the community': At that time, participants 'had to come down on one side or the other'. A few people did leave but the vast majority continued to attend classes and support the project.

Rather paradoxically, once the challenge of senior management support and internal accreditation had been addressed its funding, mainly covering rent, came to an end. The university agreed to cover rental costs for a further 3 months but no more. This forced Alex to reconsider the projects' future. Discussions with all participants revealed the majority wanted the classes to continue, prompting the search for alternative and affordable premises. Support came from both participants and interested staff in lifelong learning. Two alternative sites were identified, refurbished and secured: one at a local school (Group 1); the other on-campus (Group 2). By the end of 2003 both the project and Alex's time were divided between classes at the two sites.

6.4.2.2 Consolidation

Over the next 5 years (2004–2008), both groups studied a range of accredited modules and exhibited their work at a number of project and public exhibitions. One project exhibition saw over £ 4,000 of artwork sold to a mixed audience of individuals, businesses, university staff and local politicians with 25 % of the money raised donated to the 'Amos Trust'[2] in South Africa. Group 1 organised painting holidays and day trips and submitted a successful lottery bid (*qv*). Participants in Group 2 had contributed to an outdoor mural in the local 'Teaching Gardens' and, in collaboration with the Scottish National Gallery, worked on a community project involving thousands of local people using disposable cameras to create a photographic record of local life. More recently, one member used the credits gained to apply for a foundation degree, due to begin in 2010.

> I've just been accepted to do my degree foundation in art and design for next year, but you see that's because I went to [this group]. You sort of start off in a group like that and then you think well yes I can do that and maybe I can do more .... And they are talking about going to ... university after that and I think well why not. Age is not a barrier these days is it?

Both groups had evolved from art classes to being financially and managerially independent: Group 1 in 2003 and Group 2 in 2008. Independence for Group 1 followed its move to the school premises. Led by two individuals, it devised a constitution, agreed a system of fees and income generation, opened a bank account and organised a managerial structure around an elected committee. These same two individuals continued to lead the Group as chair, secretary and treasurer. As others became more confident, additional responsibilities were identified (exhibition organisation, stock controland library maintenance) and participants elected to the committee for these roles.

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[2] A world-wide organisation that promotes human rights and local responses to situations of injustice. See: http://www.amostrust.org/ (Accessed 22 July 2009).

Independence came much later for Group 2 after being forced to vacate the campus site at the end of 2007 in preparation for university redevelopment. Faced once again with the possible closure of an integral part of the project a number of participants first secured internal (Group) support for its continuation and then, with Alex and a lifelong learning colleague, found alternative premises. The short notice period and lack of funds were challenging, particularly in finding local premises to accommodate 25 students and their equipment. The lifelong learning colleague used community contacts to find a room in a local arts and leisure centre and negotiated an affordable rent. The university covered the first 3 months' rent, providing breathing space to develop financial sustainability and management structures, including a written constitution required by the centre for the rental contract.

The constitution, agreed on 15 February 2008, outlined the group's formal title, aims, fees regime, membership and formal management structure. Ultimately the group aimed:

> To promote and support the participation of quality art experiences for the community .... To facilitate lifelong learning and training in all mediums of art. To develop the memberships skills in arts and encourage members to produce work which can eventually be shown at venues throughout [the community] and beyond.

As with Group 1, two participants led the administration and management vital to its successful transition to independence. Indeed at this stage both groups were effectively independent of the university. Both also had long waiting lists of people wanting to enrol for their classes.

6.4.2.3 And Extension

As a deliberate strategy to widen its geographical spread Alex extended the project to a third (early 2008) and fourth (November 2008) group. In keeping with its widening access aims, both new groups were sited in disadvantaged communities, with classes held in a church and community centre respectively. For Group 3, the premises were offered free in Alex's Church and his links with the local Church community made it easy to recruit new group members. To recruit for Group 4 advertisements for the classes were placed in the local community newspaper, which attracted around 12 people. Word of mouth soon increased group numbers to around 25.

Given their recent formation, Groups 3 and 4 acted more as traditional classes, although Alex encouraged group interaction to combine instruction with individual initiative. Despite their infancy there was already evidence of education/skill development, and like Groups 1 and 2; there were waiting lists of people wanting to join the classes.

> You know ... the things that he's taught us, you wouldn't believe it. I have been going to art for 3 years and the things I didn't know, the things I am still learning, it's incredible, honestly. The things I have learned in the 6 weeks since I came here are unbelievable ....

> It's good to show somebody I've never done this before in my life and you're never too old to learn. I think that's quite an important thing. It shows anybody can start and achieve something they never thought they could

> I had no talents whatsoever and said there was no way I could draw or paint but … since then I have amazed myself with the paintings I have done and that people want them

By early 2009 the project had an overall attendance of around 80 local residents every week. Course content was based on the accredited modules, which had been rewritten by Alex to fit the university's new approach to a 20-credit (from 15-credit) syllabus. These modules were pending university validation.

6.5 A Successful Model of University–Community Engagement?

6.5.1 Project Successes

> Everyone has loads of talent; I just unlock the door and let them in[3]

> This is a highly original programme that has established a strong network of external partners. Its impact is clear and likely to increase further in the future[4]

By 2007 the project had been officially recognised and rewarded as an 'innovation' in helping 'people build their self-esteem and discover their creativity through painting and drawing'. Its community base and reputation extended the university's reach to both wider audiences and across geographic locations surrounding its campuses. It had raised awareness of the university amongst local stakeholders and residents and had clearly widened access. Its participants, many of whom had never picked up a paintbrush or thought themselves creative, had followed a range of accredited courses, with progress evident in public showing, and sale, of their work.

> I had never had an art lesson in my life, I just fancied it in my old age, and it's very therapeutic. I have no talent, but I can paint. I get encouragement and it's thanks to [Alex] … and everyone else.

> I discovered that I can actually paint. It's very satisfying to discover when you've never really done anything creative all your life.

> It's good to show somebody I've never done this before in my life and you're never too old to learn. I think that's quite an important thing. It shows anybody can start and achieve something they never thought they could.

But alongside educational progression the project had also become a site of collaboration, companionship and support. Less quantifiable characteristics, including confidence, initiative and well-being, had increased alongside knowledge and formal qualification, facilitated by Alex's teaching style. Combining group interaction with

[3] A comment made by Alex when interviewed.

[4] Noted by the judges when selecting the project as winner of a national award in 2007.

formal instruction he encouraged an exchange of experience, knowledge and opinion amongst participants. His style and personality produced an easy-going and flexible context across classes, which encouraged and facilitated collaboration. Members therefore learn both from Alex and from each other.

> Yes we all have different talents within art. . . . We all work together and everyone asks each other different questions. We also walk round and look at each other's work

> This class is hugely supportive. It doesn't have a lot of tutoring but people will help me and make suggestions and they ask my help . . . even though I've only been painting a couple of years. Occasionally I am sometime able to help someone else.

Through such collaboration there was evidence of broader skills sharing amongst participants, primarily in the long-established Groups 1 and 2. As the number of groups increased Alex's time constraints forced him towards a more mentoring role in Groups 1 and 2, further encouraging skill sharing amongst the respective participants themselves. In Group 1 Alex taught one member framing, who, in turn, framed a number of Groups' work in preparation for exhibitions. This same member also used skills learnt at a computer course to design and maintain the Group's website. Another member used experience with the British Legion to decide to apply and succeed with a lottery funding application. One Group 2 member with administrative skills helped organise and manage the independence process, passing those skills on to others motivated to take responsibility for group maintenance.

> I learnt computing . . . . I was a self-employed taxi driver and I did the accounts every year and so now I can do them on the computer . . . . I thought it might be a good idea to set up a website for the group . . . [and now] keep the website going.

> Everyone is active and doing different things. . . . We have all come together with different skills . . . the development is great.

The collaborative ethos and practice impacted on confidence both inside and outside the classes, bolstered by their public exhibitions and praise from friends and family:

> I really lack confidence in everything I do and I think this group gives you confidence. Everyone helps each other in this group, if you are stuck they all come up with suggestions, they boost your confidence. It's unthinkable for it to stop.

> For me it's given me confidence for things I wouldn't have done and you get a lot of confidence from people; obviously from [Alex] but also from other people in the class.

> I think it makes me more sociable. . . . I go to dancing as well and I feel I am more sociable than I would normally be. They inspire confidence in you and that's what you take outside into your other life.

> The very first watercolour I ever did is now hanging above one of my friend's fireplaces; she bought it from me you know and I was gobsmacked . . . .

The growth in confidence helped a number of participants to contribute and become more visible in other community activities. A number of women had instructed other arts classes on particular techniques introduced by Alex; one woman used project contacts to organise jewellery-making classes for local residents; another sought to offer art as a therapeutic tool in a voluntary sector setting; another found the

confidence to volunteer as a student welfare officer. The project was therefore both a site of skills sharing and skills transference.

The project was also a successful site of social networking and support. Whilst social aspects were expected from longer standing Groups, companionship and friendship were also evident in the more recent Groups. Indeed the classes' social nature was highlighted by all participants as one of the project's most positive aspects. Group 1 socialised outside classes and had organised painting holidays both in Scotland and Spain. Both Groups 1 and 2 had extended social networking to other community activities and through the showing of their work at public exhibitions across Scotland.

> It's not just the art that keeps you together it's the social thing. You can come in here and talk about anything, there is always somebody there to listen .... It's something else; it's a whole group of people you get on with. For a start how many groups do you get where everybody gets on? I thoroughly love this group.

> It's a social thing I think. You come here and meet your friends because we are all friends and you have a little chat. You might paint a little bit you might not but the social aspect is the biggest thing.

> Apart from the art I think that they get the social integration. People like to talk with others and ... because we've known each other for a long time ... it makes it easier to talk with people and you can see how people are.

But equally important the Groups acted as support networks, and for those managing ill-health were crucial to their recovery and continued well-being:

> People are aware of the needs of other people so you know somebody is ill or somebody for instance needs a lift somewhere; you know people are interested in each other as people.

> I remember one person whose son has alcohol problems; I remember just sitting talking to her in the middle of the class and everybody else just got on and ignored us. There was something valuable being done. That's not what I expected; it's relaxed, it's not competitive.

> We are quite a close knit group, we know that if any of us has problems we can talk to each other; to me it's like a second branch of my family I've got close to them.

The project can thus be regarded as successful from a number of perspectives. For a university aiming to be 'a hub for social and educational integration' and encouraging a culture of community engagement through staff activities, this project appears as a good practice model. At the time of the research, it met both institutional policy and practice on engagement and contributed to widening access and social inclusion objectives. It continued to be a formal part of the university's widening access and lifelong learning programmes, and was institutionally recognised after winning a national award in 2007.

From a participant perspective, it was an engagement model that delivered personal benefits of knowledge, skills development, socialisation and support, and subsequently confidence, identity, qualification and overall well-being. For many in Groups 1 and 2, it contributed to individual and Group empowerment; their independence demonstrating how local people 'can take ownership of something and literally run it themselves'. From a wider community perspective, it had

contributed to Putnam's (2000) bridging social capital (through transference of skills and well-being). Overall the project was a prime example of the mutual benefits that arose from university–community engagement in practice.

6.5.2 Project Limitations

However, its successes could not disguise project limitations. Most notably, some successes arose automatically from its location in disadvantaged communities, but even its location did not mean that its members were representative of those communities. There was also a lack of diversity of participant, with the majority in each group being female, retired and white, and comfortable with further and higher education. Whilst many were intimidated by the thought of a formal university course, the vast majority had enjoyed a long-standing relationship with education, wholly unrepresentative of the type of communities the project was located in and aimed to reach.

Alex was aware of and concerned about the unrepresentative nature of the current Groups. He was especially keen to encourage the participation of young people, noting that many of school age were not aware of the opportunities offered by the creative industries'. He had visited a number of local schools and suggested linking them to the project but:

> they [had] been really slow to take it up, if they have bothered at all. . . . It was almost as if there was some kind of resentment that we were offering. . . . Yet everyone is getting extra maths or English yet some arts departments couldn't handle that you could do it with art. . . . We just have to keep plugging away at the community and offer it through all channels

On a more practical level the classes were held in the mornings and afternoons and therefore were not accessible to a wider range of potential participants, for example, those attending school, those with care responsibilities or those in employment. And only one of the current premises was accessible in the evening. All classes had maximum numbers, which limited further growth. Also, the success of the classes meant that no existing participants left, which prevented new recruitment. Additional classes were possible, and Alex was enthusiastic about extending the project's reach, but this required additional funding; and it was funding that was a major limitation on the sustainability of existing Groups 3 and 4. As Alex and others noted:

> we are very much the poor relation . . . . I haven't time to think about where the money is coming from and how much we have to spend, I just know that I have never had any so what you've never had you don't miss . . . . . I just thought I . . . just have to make some money and so I figured a way to do it and when I do need some materials I just cost it up. . . . I'm just flying by the seat of my pants and doing the best job that I can under the severe financial limitations, it's just a miracle how we keep going and have so many people.

> [Alex] . . . has struggled financially and I think that's sad that he's grabbing at straws rather than getting support to run the project, which can eventually support itself.

> [Alex] works his socks off to get things from the university, they don't offer they only give when he asks and pleads. . . . They don't think we better help them because it's a good idea,

> they take the kudos when [Alex] wins an award . . . then they put it on the back burner and let [him] get on with it.

The lack of funding had ensured that the project had become disproportionately reliant on individuals' ability and commitment, in particular Alex, but also specific participants in Groups 1 and 2. As already noted, there were four members who were and continued to be central to these groups' sustainability. Indeed, despite institutional recognition and Alex's unstinting efforts it is likely that the project would have ended in either 2003 or the end of 2007 if it were not for the commitment of these group participants. Whilst others in both groups have expressed an interest in taking-up greater responsibility for the maintenance of their respective Group there arguably remains a disproportionate level of reliance for continued leadership and management on the same few people.

A number of staff in the lifelong learning department had also been supportive at times of funding shortages and when the project was forced to seek alternative premises. But success was primarily attributed to Alex as both project driver and tutor. Participants in all four groups praised his skills as an artist and his teaching style.

> I have tried painting before; I have tried on two occasions at two different places . . . and I was terrible. I never learnt anything. . . . So I thought I couldn't paint. And when I came to [Alex's] class he showed us, he did demonstrations and lo and behold I could paint.

> I have always loved art and I always drew, I never painted. At school when I was asked to paint it always intimidated me; I felt insecure, so I just drew. . . . When I first brought the stuff in [Alex] said it was good, better than good, it's really good. I heard him but I didn't feel it. Now I feel and see what he's saying; if you can draw you can do anything. I could not relate drawing with painting, but now I do.

> Alex's got both; he had an educational background and he's a very good teacher. That's the sort of people you should first present to people coming into the university. . . . You need a good teacher to develop people.

But success was also a consequence of his level of project commitment, evident in the time and effort he put into supporting the groups beyond class attendance and instruction. He was instrumental in refurbishing the majority of rooms as project studios, and had worked in his own time on organising exhibitions and installing a permanent gallery at a local community centre (the site of Group 4). And he had raffled his own paintings to raise money for the project. His biography as a practising Christian may go some way to site his motivation for community-oriented work: Alex utilised church contacts to both recruit for, and, in the case of Group 3, host the project. But faith alone is an insufficient explanation for Alex's specific commitment to the creative industries and particular skills in art-based teaching.

It is also an insufficient explanation for another key feature of the project's success: his personality. All participants commended Alex's ability to communicate instruction and nurture confidence. He was especially praised for his consistent encouragement and the fact that 'he was never critical'. Through observation it was evident that he was both caring and engaging; essential ingredients to not only the degree of progression developed but also the collaborative and supportive nature of the groups.

> [Alex] is the best tutor I have ever come across; he explains to you and you have an idea what you want to achieve.
>
> [Alex] is a marvellous tutor and he is always positive, never negative; he will always find something [good] in it.
>
> There is definitely something different about this group. You can put the onus all on our tutor because he's wonderful. He's always possible and never negative; nothing is too much bother and he can transform things into beautiful paintings.

Whilst arguably not necessary to the later sustainability of Groups 1 and 2, Alex remained an important figurehead and contributor to these 2 Groups. And he certainly remained necessary to Groups 3 and 4's continued survival. Alex bridged between the four groups and between the overall project and the university. And whilst none of these links may be necessary to retain the project's presence as arts groups it is probable that Alex's removal would distance, if not sever, its university links. Were Alex to leave, a question was raised as to whether his replacement would have the same skills mix and personal qualities vital to the project success.

A key project weakness was that although participants studied for accredited modules, this was not their primary motivation; and only one member had progressed to degree level. Furthermore, despite being affiliated to the university and celebrated as a university-community engagement project, there was no integration between the classes and the university's mainstream curricula. And despite accreditation the project's modules were external to any relevant undergraduate course and were excluded from the 'elective'[5] system integral to undergraduate study. Alex had argued for their inclusion but was told that the classes' off campus locations would be a major barrier to student take-up.

Here a contradiction is evident: the off-campus sitting met engagement and widening access objectives by extending university reach into local communities. But simultaneously it separated its learning communities within the project from the university. On the one hand, courses offered off-campus actively encouraged interested and capable people to access education they would not otherwise have thought relevant or possible. Being off-campus had also helped to encourage participants within Groups 1 and 2 to actively seek independence.

> I actually want to know the techniques in an academic way but not in an academic setting. . . . [If advertised as a university course] I would have thought . . . I can't do that. I know it's ridiculous but it's true.
>
> I would never have had the confidence to go to something that was attached to a university.
>
> I think a lot of times it's the jargon and how you're treated . . . . Sometimes you get stuff and it looks so complicated . . . it's all aimed at the academic . . . . I think that if I'd got there earlier I would have been at university, if I'd had a different background.

But, on the other hand, the physical absence of the university provoked a sense of isolation amongst the groups, reinforced by the university's 'hands-off' approach in the everyday management of the project. With the exception of attendance at public

[5] Demanding that students select 1 or 2 'elective modules' outside their degree discipline.

exhibitions organised by Alex the university was invisible to project participants. As a consequence, whilst grateful for covering Alex's salary, the majority identified only weakly with the university.

Since leaving Alex 'to get on with it' the project was primarily a personal commitment rather than an institutional initiative or continued priority. And although in regular contact with colleagues in lifelong learning, the groups felt a growing disconnect with the institution. This was illustrated by their reaction to the 'Independent Learning Accounts' (ILAs) that staff within lifelong learning had wanted the Groups to apply to for funding. Groups were concerned that this signalled that community education was primarily about raising money for the university, leading to a monetisation of university community-based work[6]. They likewise feared that the focus on ILAs was part of a drive to charge for all community-based work and antithetical to its no-fee ethos.[7]

Hence the four groups expressed mixed feelings regarding the university. Some in the more established groups were overtly aware of and appreciated the university link and its support, both past and present.

> We were always part of [the university] definitely ... and there were times when [it] was really brilliant and there were times up [on campus] that they let us use the canteen facilities and we were a big part of [the university] and it was a bit sad when [they] shut [the room] down to refurbish it. I would have appreciated it if they had found a way to carry on as part of the university.

> We had to be independent as we weren't going to get any help apart from [Alex]. [Alex] was a great help; that was one thing the university have given us and they haven't gone back on that which is great.

> I am absolutely aware it is connected with [the university]. I think it's a terrific thing that [it] can come outside into the various places that [Alex] goes to. I think it's wonderful because half of these people would not go ... to a university.

Some were grateful for support provided by colleagues in the Lifelong Learning department.

> Even though we are now independent you still know you are part of the university, if push came to shove I could phone [lifelong learning] and say could you do this etc.; they never ever say no. You know you always have the back-up from them even if it's not in a monetary value, they maybe give you advice.

But others lamented the increased blurring of the project-university link:

> Sometimes I feel as if I am out on a limb a bit, quite a lot in fact. It's quite difficult to feel that you are part of the university when you are in fact not physically going into it.

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[6] Independent Learning Accounts of £ 200.00 for those earning less than £ 22,000 to access FE or HE (2009).

[7] Indeed, its current 'no fee' agreement is why the project was offered a room at the fourth community site. Alex was concerned that the cost of modules would deny access to the very communities targeted by the widening access objectives. As he pointed out 'unless someone is on an ILA or benefit they have to pay £ 145 per module'. It later transpired that 'leisure industries'were ineligible for ILA funding and so these concerns were unfounded.

> I think it could be more visible. I think the people have just realised that the group is part of [the university] . . . .
>
> We have come to realise that we are not going back to [the campus], we are now our own group . . . so no I think that we are getting out of the idea that we are [part of the university] . . . I mean we won a prize . . . and things like that so we are still part of [the university] and I think we always will be but just not at [the university] anymore.

Whilst many were disappointed by a perceived lack of support from the university. As already noted the only time the university had a visible presence was when the project was in the public eye (public exhibitions and the national award ceremony in 2007).

> I think the university could do much more. I have never thought of [it] as being a particularly elitist university; I would expect [others] to be quite a fuddy-duddy place, too academic inclined. I think [the university] could make much more of this than they have done but . . . they are driven by finance . . . by the expectations of their funding committees . . . by their academic and research . . . [that] is the priority.
>
> I would like to know exactly what [the university] is going to give us in the future. I was going to write to the Principal but I didn't want to get [Alex] into trouble. . . . We have the university'name on . . . the classes and they must be getting kudos for what we are doing. We bought this into the neighbourhood . . . we are doing community work . . . .

6.6 Institutional Short-Sightedness?

The project offers a good illustration of the dislocation between the rhetoric and practice of community engagement across Scotland's HE sector. The most obvious contradiction being that the university simultaneously acknowledged and officially celebrated the project's success at the same time as seemingly prepared to see it close when funding and premises had been withdrawn. Despite its successes from a range of community engagement perspectives it was institutionally marginalised and largely absent from institutional mind-set. Alex accepted some responsibility, admitting that he was perhaps not 'pushy' enough in capitalising on moments of strength, such as when he met with the new Principal in 2003, or when he won the prize in 2007. The university was supportive in covering Alex's salary since 2001 to provide full-time project tutorage. But nowhere was he relieved from having to constantly seek to raise its profile amongst senior management.

Arguably the project's success and benefits were not fully appreciated by the university, both as a model of widening access and as complementary input into a wider curricula and range of policy governing community engagement, lifelong learning and volunteering objectives. In terms of widening access the project could have easily been extended to increasing numbers of communities and potential community learners. The project was scalable, and generated its own word-of-mouth reputation, which would have made it easier—given additional resources—for new classes to have been established in new geographical areas, acting as a source of income as well as creating visibility and progression in higher education. Alex suggested that

the 'blue-print' could be packaged as a tool-kit for purchase by other institutions, thus acting as an additional source of income generation.

The project could have contributed to the wider curricula had its modules and students been incorporated into relevant courses, or as a site of student placement contributing to community engagement and volunteering agendas simultaneously. Greater integration of the project could have challenged non-traditional learners' abiding perceptions of universities as 'competitive', 'judgemental' and 'intimidating places', whilst raising awareness amongst more traditional students of the diversity of learning methods, student ability and experience. It could also have acted as a source of research, a teaching tool and ultimately inform scholarship.

On a more theoretical level, the project provides a critique of dominant learning practice and value. University–community engagement per se reveals fundamental barriers endemic in traditional learning cultures and structures. But the project specifically illustrates the limitations of the existing education system in its suppression of ability besides ignoring, undermining or undervaluing diverse students and learning practice. By valuing certified, centrally accredited education, universities reinforce problems for those intimidated by such methods or who learn through more socialised processes. The project reveals the benefits of a diversity of education access points in encouraging a broader pool of ability and talent into universities. Yet, paradoxically, being off campus does nothing to challenge the notion that higher education is the prerogative of a certain student type.

The project thus reveals both the benefits and limitations of community-based access; indicative of the lack of understanding of community engagement within HEIs. Whilst only one example of university–community engagement, the project illustrates the potential opportunities for both universities and communities arising from a more coherent, integrated and resourced 'Third Strand'.

6.7 Conclusion

Forced onto corporate agendas either through necessity (recruitment, income streams) or policy drivers community engagement was common currency across all types of university in Scotland in 2008/2009. But, as a consequence of inconsistent guidance and inadequate resources institutional understanding of community engagement was limited. The focus, with accompanying funding, on business (commercial) and more recently cultural engagement had both confined its practice and privileged specific 'community' interests and voices. Further emphasis and funding placed on employability, lifelong learning and widening access had likewise restricted understanding and practice to more traditional outputs, such as Continuous Professional Development (CPD), work placements and volunteering; all activity based and viewed as 'add-ons' to the core missions of research and teaching.

For the 'new' universities in particular vocational curricula were celebrated as a commitment to community engagement and benefit, reinforced by applied research agendas. Driven by committed academics both curricula and research were certainly of benefit to the individual student and participating professional bodies as funders

and employers. In some cases funding opportunities as well as individual creativity and commitment had linked community engagement to modular development for both traditional and non-traditional students (including activists as well as practitioners and residents), opened-up cultural facilities to the public, increased university–community dialogue (especially at times of campus development) and encouraged greater coordination and cooperation between universities and other stakeholders. But, despite increasing the profile of universities as 'of' communities, all such activities were also restrictive constraining community engagement to individual recipients.

The dislocation of policy and practice governing university–community engagement was clearly evident in the university–community project case study. Whilst acknowledged as a success from all perspectives (institutional, participants, wider community) the project remained marginalised from mainstream curricula and managerial strategy, constantly threatened with closure because of recurring funding shortages. And rather paradoxically its community base weakened identification with, and provoked distrust towards, the university.

Fundamental constraints (both external and internal) remained largely responsible for the dislocation but arguably institutional short-sightedness was also failing to recognise the potential benefits of university–community collaboration. Communities are sites of economic and social information as well as potential avenues of knowledge exchange, production and transfer. Whilst recognised by committed academics (and some managers), university cultures fail to accommodate, promote or reward university–community engagement or challenge entrenched scepticism of its scholarly worth.

Yet if accepting that universities should be 'of' and not merely 'in' their communities then community engagement cannot remain piece-meal, project-based, primarily attached to sectional interests (employers and employability) or relegated to a supportive role within institutional missions. Likewise, 'communities' must extend to specific geographies as well as interests and identities; to the disadvantaged and unorganised as well as those aligned with the professions and organised representation. Internally, its work needs to be awarded equal esteem, priority and reward and fully embedded within institutional infrastructures.

This more 'radical' interpretation of community engagement challenges many of the traditional cultural mind-sets and structural models dominating HEIs. It is a learning process and will require both corporate leadership and institutional change. Evidence of an emerging leadership was visible in some universities at the time of the research but any broadening of its understanding beyond the identified and restricted practices was problematic. Even those universities aligning community engagement with future survival acknowledged that any further incorporation would depend on resources and the policy context. Ultimately it is the individual student rather than surrounding communities that will continue to dominate corporate attention; a reality that can only intensify if the principles of the Browne review (Browne 2010) are extended to Scotland. It is therefore likely that any future evolution of university–community engagement will remain more aspirational than material, more peripheral than embedded, a strand rather than a mission.

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