RESEARCHING A UNIVERSITY’S ENGAGEMENT WITH THE INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES IT SERVES

Matthew Campbell
Remotelink, Community and Access, Charles Darwin University

Michael Christie
School of Education, Charles Darwin University

Abstract

Charles Darwin University (CDU) is committed to community engagement and is developing ways of embedding this role within university structures and processes. One strategy to achieve this was the Indigenous Community Engagement (ICE) research project, conducted in 2007 and 2008. The ICE Project aimed to document and make explicit the engagement embedded within past and ongoing projects with Indigenous people as a way of informing the development of CDU’s community engagement strategies. This paper documents the origins, methodology, findings, recommendations and implications of the ICE Project.

CDU has a long history of conducting successful teaching and research projects with Australian Indigenous people. A key assumption underpinning the development of the ICE project was that there were numerous examples of good existing collaborations between CDU staff and Indigenous communities that the university as a whole could learn from. One of the critical aspects of the project was to create space for Indigenous people, from both within and outside the university, to participate and tell their stories of engagement, including what they consider it to be and what the preconditions are for good community engagement.

The ICE Project demonstrated that good community engagement with Indigenous people is an emergent process embedded in respectful relationships between individuals. Successful Indigenous community engagement depends on recognising Indigenous knowledge and its practices and Indigenous identity as central to the development of partnerships and collaboration between the university and Indigenous communities. Successful Indigenous community
engagement also requires that university staff see their professional relationships with Indigenous people as extending beyond the life and concerns of individual projects.

**Keywords:** Community engagement; Indigenous knowledge; cross cultural research

**Introduction**

Charles Darwin University (CDU) is committed to community engagement and sees it as core business (Charles Darwin University, 2006a). Good engagement with Indigenous people is central to the achievement of CDU’s vision which is “to be a thriving university that dares to be different and takes advantage of its unique geography and demography to benefit the whole community though education, research and community engagement” (Charles Darwin University, 2008a p xxviii). However, formal procedures and strategies at CDU for developing partnerships with Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory (NT) have not yet been developed.

CDU aims to “draw on its own rich cultural and social environment to provide solutions to complex issues in cross cultural environments, particularly those where traditional Indigenous knowledges and western knowledge systems meet” (Charles Darwin University, 2008b). One significant hurdle CDU faces in achieving this goals is the ongoing marginalisation of Indigenous perspectives and voices growing out of the fact that Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies are poorly understood, and Indigenous ways of knowing are widely regarded as deficient within contemporary Australian society (Sunderland, Muirhead, Parsons, & Holtom, 2004; Verran, 2002). The university is acting to address this and recently appointed a Pro Vice-Chancellor for Indigenous Leadership whose multiple roles include: incorporating Indigenous perspectives into mainstream University core business, enhancing key relationships between the University and its Indigenous stakeholders, and ensuring CDU is the leader in providing outcomes for Indigenous students (Charles Darwin University, 2009). Community engagement is also increasingly seen at CDU as one vehicle to assist in building awareness of the value of Indigenous knowledge, and as a way of developing mechanisms whereby the tensions between Indigenous and western ways of knowing can be discussed. One strategy to develop CDU’s knowledge of community engagement as it relates to Indigenous people was the Indigenous Community Engagement (ICE) project.

Charles Darwin University was formed in 2003 as a result of a merger between the Northern Territory University and Centralian College (Charles Darwin University, 2008c). Charles Darwin University is the only university in the Northern Territory and has campuses in Darwin, Alice Springs, Nhulunbuy, Katherine and Tennant Creek. In addition, staff deliver
Vocational Education and Training (VET) and Higher Education (HE) to many of the 641 discrete communities within the NT, most of which are Indigenous communities (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2007). This means that CDU’s ‘region’ is roughly one sixth of the Australian continent.

Indigenous people comprise almost a third of the NT population (the highest proportion of any jurisdiction in the country by a significant margin) and 80% of Indigenous Territorians live in the regional and remote areas of the NT (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007; Barnes, Condon, Cunningham, & Smith, 2004; Productivity Commission, 2009). Many Indigenous groups in the NT continue to live on their ancestral lands, speak Indigenous languages and continue to live in ways informed by traditional rules and understandings (Bird-Rose, 1992; Christie, 1994; Swain, 1993). They are also some of the most disadvantaged groups in Australian society, with high unemployment, poor health, and high rates of incarceration (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, 2008; Productivity Commission, 2009).

The Indigenous Community Engagement project was conceived as a result of a conversation between the authors after a trip to Walungurru (Kintore) in the Western Desert by Campbell to teach units from the Conservation and Land Management (CLM) National Training Package. From the perspective of a CDU Land Management Lecturer the visit was very difficult. While the students had a vast knowledge of their country, the requirements of the training package could not to be achieved in any real sense because remote Indigenous students’ understandings of the world were completely different to those embedded in the curriculum materials. On the lecturer’s return from the trip the authors talked about the dilemma this appeared to present: should we refuse to offer further training as it would only lead to failure on the part of the students; or should we deliver relevant training largely unrelated to the curriculum? Neither of these two approaches was a solution to the more fundamental problem of the knowledge traditions being unable to be effectively reconciled within a training situation. The authors decided that the theories emerging around community engagement nationally and internationally might be useful as a way to work through the issues presented by these divergent knowledge systems having no effective meeting points and began researching community engagement and developing a literature review.

Before long the authors concluded that, given the lack of relevant literature examining situated Indigenous community engagement in practice, research was required on the particular issues facing the university’s engagement with Indigenous people, and at the same time take up the opportunity for CDU to contribute to the engagement literature through documenting examples of community engagement already embedded in CDU projects. The ICE project was
designed to document existing practices, and to provide opportunities for CDU staff and Indigenous community members to contribute their engagement stories.

The ICE project was funded by the office of the Pro Vice-Chancellor for Community and Access, and office whose purpose is to act as a broker of relationships between various sections of the Northern Territory community and the university (Charles Darwin University, 2008d). The project looked specifically at the history of successful CDU engagement with Indigenous groups to identify what characterises good Indigenous community engagement, what enables it within the university and what makes engagement difficult. It also sought to make recommendations to improve Indigenous community engagement practice within CDU. The following section will detail the methodology and findings of the project, highlighting those factors that research respondents identified as key elements of Indigenous community engagement.

**Methodology**

The project methodology consisted of three key strategies, creating opportunities for university staff to be involved in the project in a variety of ways. The first aspect was a questionnaire, asking any staff willing to reflect on their experiences working with Indigenous people and their communities, to contribute their understandings of community engagement, and what it might require to be effectively institutionalised at the university. This questionnaire was sent via email to 140 teaching and research staff that through their work had some contact with Indigenous people or groups. The second strategy was to invite these same staff to complete a case study on Indigenous community engagement, with funding available to pay Indigenous partners to collaborate with staff to tell their stories of their engagement experiences. The third aspect was a strategy whereby through a series of meetings, CDU staff and Indigenous community members collaboratively identified key findings as the project progressed.

45 people participated in the project in some way. 16 people responded to the questionnaire, with five of these respondents going on to produce a case study for the “Indigenous Community Engagement at Charles Darwin University” research report (Campbell & Christie, 2008). Responses to the questionnaires were summarised and can be found in the research report. The responses to the questionnaires provided the basic framework for the findings and recommendations and highlight that good engagement in Indigenous contexts means recognising that Indigenous views and day to day realities are not obstacles to be overcome, but realities to be accommodated if fruitful collaborations are to be produced.
The collaborative meetings to identify emerging findings brought together CDU staff that completed the questionnaires and/or produced a case study with other CDU staff and Indigenous community members who had not. These were informal meetings where we presented summaries of the questionnaire responses and asked those present for their reactions to those responses. We made notes on these discussions and provided feedback to those who attended with invitations to make further responses or contributions. This process had a number of iterations over a six month period and assisted us to refine our understanding of Indigenous community engagement in the CDU and NT context. The only significant difference arising in the range of discussions about community engagement between Indigenous and non Indigenous participants were that Indigenous participants focused on the foundations of good engagement (including shared commitment and acting in good faith), whereas the non Indigenous participants were more focused on engagement as a process to produce good outcomes.

A total of 14 CDU staff took up on the offer to produce a case study for the research. These staff either: produced their own case study; worked with staff from other institutions to produce one; or worked with members of Indigenous communities to produce one. The list below represents all the case studies produced for the first stage of the research.

The case studies prepared for the project cover a wide range of CDU projects and activities. Around half of the case studies are based on engagement practices that surround individual projects, examples include: “Djelk Rangers and Charles Darwin University: what can we learn about Indigenous community engagement?” (Williams, 2008); “Restoring harmony: a case study of Indigenous community engagement at Wugularr” (Anderson, 2008); “Community engagement in a health project in Gapuwiyak” (D. Campbell, 2008); “Technology for community engagement at Djurranalpi” (King, 2008); and, “Community engagement: on whose terms?” (Greatorex & Murakami-Gold, 2008). These examples document the situated and unique engagement practices that grew up in particular places, showing that engagement with Indigenous people is an emergent practice necessarily growing from the particular situations that people find themselves in. They also suggest that good engagement is responsive to changing demands.

Another set of case studies look at more general lessons learned about community engagement drawing from a range of projects and situations. They include “Research, collaboration and community development: a holistic approach” (Gorman & Garnett, 2008); “Is it the community, or is it something else (that we engage with)?” (M. Campbell, 2008) and, the case study entitled “Working from our strengths: Indigenous community engagement through enterprise development and training” (Wallace, Manado, Curry, & Agar, 2008). These case
studies draw out broader factors that underpin good engagement, in particular demonstrating that community input and ownership, and an understanding of how communities are constituted, were crucial to effective engagement.

The last set of case studies look specifically at how Indigenous knowledge can be accommodated within projects undertaken by the university and include: “Engaging with Australian Indigenous Knowledge Systems” (Christie & Verran, 2008); the case study “Respect” (Gaykamangu et al., 2008); and “Investment in Yolngu community engagement: the case of an Indigenous ‘Market Research’ consultancy” (Christie & Greatorex, 2008).

The three strategies to collect information for the research each produced useful data. Yet the questionnaire (which could be completed in around 15 minutes) had a limited response when compared with the case studies (which were much more time consuming). Our approach to the research was to provide opportunities for anyone interested to participate. We considered that having a range of strategies was a good way to do this, however from the responses it is clear that some strategies were more useful than others. Having the three strategies interweave was a useful approach, for example the collaborative meetings were a good way to build on the limited data extracted from the questionnaire responses while also providing a space for case study ideas to be discussed and developed. This suggests that employing only one of these strategies alone would have been insufficient in terms of producing meaningful information.

Findings

The project findings were drawn from three sources: responses to the questionnaires; the 10 case studies prepared for the project; and, staff and Indigenous community member participation in collaborative feedback meetings. The findings can be broadly grouped into three sections:

- what is good Indigenous community engagement in our context
- what are the preconditions for successful engagement with Indigenous communities, and
- what enables or inhibits engagement within the CDU context

1: What is good Indigenous community engagement in our context?

The first finding was that there are four main elements to respondents’ understanding of community engagement. One element is that engagement is centred on relationships between individuals (rather than the university as an institution). The second is that engagement is an ongoing process, part of everyday life and something that extends beyond the life of individual
projects. Thirdly, engagement requires the recognition of Indigenous identities and knowledge and a commitment to serious engagement with them. Finally, respondents perceive that community engagement is about creating time and space where knowledge systems can interact respectfully. These four elements will now be discussed in some detail.

**Relationships between individuals**

One of the major themes to emerge from the research was the engagement is centrally about relationships between individuals. This resonates with the finding in the Foundation Paper that “engagement ‘happens’ in the spaces between persons in the social medium in the present and over time” (Sunderland et al., 2004 p.16). The significance of this finding about the perceived importance of relationships for community engagement with Indigenous people lies in their understandings of the rights and responsibilities that inhere in relationships. Relationships within the Indigenous sphere are the lifeblood of Indigenous identity and create and sustain the mechanisms through which people understand themselves and those around them, and what their rights, responsibilities and behaviour in relation to others needs to be as a result (Christie, 1994). University staff must be aware of the reciprocal nature of these relationships and understand that in turn these relationships link them with other Indigenous people. As Ian Gumbula commented in the seminar given by the Yolngu consultants, “we only know we can respect that person through the connection with other people that we have been working with in the past” (in Gaykamangu et al., 2008 p.29). University staff members wishing to engage respectfully with Indigenous communities need to be willing to take on the responsibilities such relationships with Indigenous people create above and beyond the life of their project/work.

**Beyond the life and scope of individual research and teaching projects**

The second element of engagement identified in the research, was its embeddedness as an ongoing process entrenched in everyday life. University staff are often called upon by their Indigenous students and co-researchers to do more than is required by the university. They may often need to address agendas quite different from what the actual work demanded by the university’s imperatives. This was found to be equally true for lecturers as for researchers. Good engagement may mean assisting people with day to day problems such as banking issues, transport or the provision of food. This process of responding to the real world issues presented by working with Indigenous people is not an optional add on, it is central and without it engagement would be “superficial, relationships temporal and the outcomes less than satisfactory” (Williams, 2008 p.19). Further, respondents were united in their belief that the real world relationships through which engagement happens must be ongoing; they are in a sense
above and prior to the university work that staff do with Indigenous people. As one respondent wrote ‘relationships have to be maintained before, and after particular projects to keep the trust that is part of the relationship” (in Campbell & Christie, 2008 p.8).

**Taking knowledge work seriously**

The third element of respondents’ understanding of community engagement is that Indigenous identities and knowledge must be recognised. Some respondents saw this as the most important element of what characterises Indigenous community engagement. This finding highlights the importance of recognising the divergent nature of western and Indigenous knowledge systems. To do this requires that university staff recognise that Indigenous knowledge and Indigenous identity are inextricably linked and mutually reinforcing; Yingiya Guyula stresses the importance of his identity and its role in developing new opportunities for himself: “I am now at the stage where I have become a teacher from what I’ve learned from our old people...maybe through new technology there could be linkages where you can understand the way we feel about our land and our culture” (in Gaykamangu et al., 2008 p.28). It also means that university staff need to recognise the entrenched practices that marginalise and silence Indigenous people through rendering their knowledge as deficient and unable to effectively address contemporary issues (Sherriff, 2000; Sunderland et al., 2004). The ICE research clearly showed that in the NT Indigenous people continue to practice their own knowledge traditions, systems that have vastly different ontologies and epistemologies to those on which western knowledge is based (Verran, 2002). Good Indigenous community engagement involves serious engagement with divergent knowledge practices and the collaborative articulation of new forms of pedagogy and research (Christie, 2006).

**Time and space**

The fourth element of engagement articulated by respondents is the creation of time and space where representatives of divergent knowledge systems can interact respectfully. Establishing time within projects for Indigenous people to articulate their knowledge requirements so that they can be taken seriously within the academy requires explicit planning. The research found that unless this time and space was deliberately created it was very difficult to adequately attend to issues created by tensions that inevitably arise in work of an intercultural nature. Sometimes this work involves waiting for the agreement or contribution of a clan elder before travelling to a particular place, or sharing knowledge about a particular issue. Sometimes it involves travelling to a particular place in order for the place itself to become an active agent in the production of knowledge. Regardless of the reason behind the tensions that might arise in
projects, the research found that trying to create time for negotiation within already established projects was far more difficult than factoring it in at the start.

2: Preconditions for successful engagement

The understanding of engagement being ongoing relationships embedded in everyday life and nurtured within spaces created for intercultural knowledge building leads to the second set of findings: the preconditions that enable engagement to happen. Successful engagement between Indigenous communities and the university depends on three main factors respect, ownership and long term and focused commitments.

Respect

Respect is a concept that is not easily translated between cultures: it is inferred from peoples’ behaviour and different cultures require different practices of respect. The research highlights that respect in Indigenous engagement was found in things like sitting down and talking together, letting others know what is happening and acting in ways that recognise each persons rights to speak (Campbell & Christie, 2008). Further, respect is demonstrated through the recognition of the centrality of Indigenous knowledge in doing cooperative projects. This manifests itself through understanding negotiation as central to Indigenous knowledge production, ensuring that the projects the university invests in work with the Indigenous governance structures that exist within Indigenous communities (Campbell, 2007). The research found that Indigenous people within the NT rarely articulate their group identities at the level of the community. Communities are often old missions or government stations, and people invest their identities in more traditional clan and family groupings. This has profound implications for how organisations work with Indigenous people and groups and suggest that more effort is required to identify and work with existing governance. One case study documented the significant efforts Indigenous people went to in developing contemporary “community” governance that drew on traditional governance structures (D. Campbell, 2008). This suggests that through thorough processes initiated and owned by Indigenous people new governance arrangements (that draw on and respect traditional arrangements) can be developed which respond to the desire of governments and others to work at the “community level”.

Overwhelmingly the failure to embed new projects within the already present governance structures was seen as disrespectful and a failure of engagement (Campbell & Christie, 2008). Failure to negotiate respectfully manifests itself in many aspects of everyday community life. Council offices are full of unopened letters to students telling them of their results or their enrolment status. While Indigenous students in remote communities are mostly happy with their
lecturers, they generally have little idea of where they are in their courses, and feel disrespected by incomprehensible bureaucratic letters composed by computers being sent to them as a substitute for proper face-to-face engagement.

Ownership

The unequal distribution of power that attends most interactions between the university and Indigenous people has the potential to silence or marginalise Indigenous perspectives. Without paying careful attention to how power operates in intercultural settings, activities justified under the banner of engagement can be simply ways of the university achieving its own ends with impunity. Respondents to the research saw genuine ownership of projects by Indigenous people as a key to addressing this concern. It was noted that this is not necessarily an easy thing to achieve as it requires addressing basic but potentially difficult issues such as: whose knowledge is being utilised, how to recognise and incorporate different ways of making knowledge; and, perhaps most significantly, how do we know that what we are doing is “mutually beneficial”? This is a particular danger for the university as often its involvement in teaching or research projects in Indigenous communities is predicated on producing outcomes largely predetermined by funding arrangements.

Creating the conditions through which Indigenous people have a sense of ownership of projects was identified as a critical success factor. Creating this sense requires university staff to be flexible, recognising that “successful” university work is that which meets the needs of the students/co-researchers and their communities as well as the institution. Often it meant that university staff had to understand that the “community” is not a useful level on which to constitute Indigenous groups. Indigenous people are often more comfortable being engaged at the level of the family or clan, meaning that university staff had to move past democratic notions of working with the community so that they could be effective.

Lastly the university needs to guard against using this notion of ‘ownership’ as a code for requiring communities to be accountable for the failure of teaching or research work. Joint ownership of engagement practices requires the university to be accountable to its students and co-researchers and their communities, and the building of formal practices in the community to monitor, acknowledge and reward those successful relationships.

Long-term and focused commitments

The third key precondition for high quality engagement with Indigenous people is staff making long term commitments to working with particular groups of Indigenous people. This directly relates to relationships being the cornerstone of engagement. The research found that
staff with long term, trusting relationships were able to more effectively respond to community concerns, more able to work within the governance structures already in place, and as a consequence were more likely to be able to ensure that the work that they did as employees of the university enabled local ownership and investment. Their ability to work effectively with Indigenous people was built on the work that they had done previously, with some working in the same communities for over 30 years. Obviously the university cannot mandate staff’s continued involvement, however the knowledge and respect that individual staff build up over time is an asset that the university relies upon to generate both good engagement and good outcomes. Through discussion the researchers and academics together negotiated a range of strategies which could enable longer-term commitment of university staff to particular regions and communities.

3: Making it happen – enablers and inhibitors

The third set of findings relate to the enablers and inhibitors of engagement at CDU. Things that were identified as supporting and enabling engagement include: the presence of a School that specifically recognises Indigenous knowledge and works to ensure its use and transmission within CDU (the School for Australian Indigenous Knowledge Systems - SAIKS); the Yolngu studies program run by SAIKS; recognition of community engagement contributions through university structures including promotion and professional development; the recognition that Indigenous people need to be paid properly for their contributions to collaborative work; and, the growing awareness of community engagement as a central aspect of CDU’s activities which is being fostered by the Community and Access portfolio and the Community Engagement coordinator in particular. These enablers will now be set out.

Enabler: A school dedicated to Indigenous knowledge

Engagement at CDU was seen to be enhanced by the presence of the School for Australian Indigenous Knowledge Systems (SAIKS). This school, unlike any other in Australian universities, is a site supportive of Indigenous knowledge and providing Indigenous studies and importantly is also a site that demonstrates CDU’s commitment to embedding alternative knowledge practices within its structure. This commitment has seen the emergence of situated Indigenous methodologies resulting from work between Indigenous researchers and Indigenous knowledge holders, and places CDU at the forefront of developing processes to work through the ontological complexities presented by seeking to connect disparate knowledge communities (see for example Christie, 2006).
The Yolngu studies program, based within SAIKS is an example of knowledge work that is faithful to both academic and Indigenous knowledge perspectives (see Yolngu Studies Program, 2008). This program has been going for more than ten years and has been widely recognised for its unique approach that places Yolngu epistemology at the centre of the learning process. The program was developed and implemented under the guidance of Yolngu elders and continues to be overseen by them, and informs the ongoing research and consultancy collaborations (see Christie, 2008).

**Enabler: Recognising community engagement action**

CDU has also made efforts to recognise community engagement formally as a critical aspect of the university’s responsibilities. It has done this through the development of the Community and Access portfolio whose role is to act “as a broker of relationships between the various sections of the Northern Territory community and the university” (Charles Darwin University, 2007). CDU also has a dedicated coordinator whose role is to sensitise staff to the possibilities and responsibilities of community engagement and, amongst other things, draw together engagement stories from within the university and disseminate them via the CDU website.

CDU is also embedding community engagement within university systems such as promotion and professional development. CDU staff undertake regular performance review and planning through the Performance Review and Development System (PDRS). This is completed annually and gives staff and their supervisors the opportunity to discuss work related achievements and goals. The PDRS is based around the four core business areas of CDU: Teaching, Research, Community and Access, and Business Development. Staff are expected to outline their goals in each of these areas with the opportunity for staff to articulate goals relating to community engagement (within the Community and Access core business area). Achievement of goals are recognised at subsequent PDRS meetings and form the basis for ongoing planning and professional development. If a staff member does undertake and document their action in the area of community engagement action, then this is able to be used in applications for promotion. Again achievements in the four core business areas form the foundation for applications for promotion.

**Enabler: Acknowledging and paying for Indigenous knowledge contributions**

CDU works to meet the engagement challenge by acknowledging and paying Indigenous people for their contributions to collaborative projects. This acknowledgement often involves more than recognising Indigenous people as experts within their own knowledge domains,
something many organisations are now doing (see for example Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre, 2008). It also means ensuring that they are paid properly for the intellectually complex work they do, the authority they show, and the accountabilities within their own communities which they take on in the interdisciplinary knowledge space that attends some projects. Although CDU is getting better at recognising the contributions that Indigenous people make, in practical terms the systems to make payments to them simple and efficient have some way to go.

However it must be acknowledged that the enablers that exist at CDU are not yet enough to promote widespread awareness of the unique characteristics of what engagement with Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory entails. This is partly due to the emerging nature of community engagement as a core responsibility of universities in Australia, and partly due to confusion about what taking engagement seriously really involves. Many of the inhibitors of community engagement are embedded within systems (such as funding and information dissemination) that are not designed respond to the unique knowledge needs of Indigenous communities.

This provides particular challenges to organisations such as universities, whose traditional mission is based on providing expert advice, or training or education that is premised on their superior knowledge. If the goal of the university is to become “engaged”, the traditional position of the university as the “one who knows” must be reconceived to that of a partner. It is a ‘both-ways’ transdisciplinary learning process (Christie, 2006)

**Inhibitor: Funding systems not designed to cater to Indigenous needs**

Our research made clear that successful engagement is not something that happens only at the beginning of projects; it is something that runs throughout and beyond projects. However the university does not receive funding to support such engagement work. This is compounded by the additional work CDU must undertake to cater for Indigenous people for whom English is often a second language and who do not have an in-depth understanding of the university system. This is a particular issue for Indigenous VET students, where the success of their training in part depends on the work that lecturers do in customising course content for their specific needs. Without additional funding, lecturers cannot do the up-front work required to build relationships through which they can identify and support the aspirations and needs of their students, nor can they do the time consuming customisation work to mould a course to meet their requirements. The current VET system is designed only to fund delivery, based on timelines set
for students without additional support needs. Thus CDU must allocate additional funds if staff are to undertake engagement action that surrounds the work they are funded to do.

In the area of research this can be less of an issue; applicants for research funding can include engagement action as part of their research submissions. Nevertheless the reality that engagement commitments often calls on CDU staff to do more work than is “professionally required” means that it is difficult to plan adequately and fund engagement work. Further, the emerging nature of community engagement as a core responsibility of universities means that many research staff still do not see engagement as central to their work, and are thus less likely to include a component in their budgets to allow for it.

**Inhibitor: lack of systems to provide or elicit feedback from Indigenous partners**

Funding systems are not designed to accommodate the engagement needs of Indigenous people. Nor does CDU have good systems in place to provide or elicit feedback from Indigenous partners. One of the main findings was that a lack of credible and comprehensible feedback to Indigenous people undermines a lot of the good teaching and research work being done. This lack of feedback is partially due to the funding systems (mentioned above) which do not provide the additional resources required to do engagement work. This means that schools and VET teams within CDU must allocate additional funds to undertake feedback. Understandably, from a financial point of view, many sections within CDU feel that they cannot follow through with feedback due to the cost and resource implications. The university itself has few mechanisms to allow it to monitor the nature or success of its engagement practices, meaning that lessons that arise from CDU’s successes and failures in Indigenous communities are not being documented and are therefore unable to be shared around the university. The end result is that students in remote places are often in the dark as to exactly what course they are studying, or how well they are doing, and university staff remain in the dark as to how to best negotiate to meet their needs.

**Recommendations**

The Indigenous Community Engagement research project made recommendations directed and enhancing the quality of our engagement with Indigenous communities. These recommendations range from practical steps requiring little change in structures or processes, to those that have implications for national level university policy. The main recommendations revolve around meeting the accountabilities required by respect in the intercultural context.

At the broadest level the research shows that investments made by staff in Indigenous community engagement link strongly with successful outcomes. In order to build on this success,
and to achieve the community engagement goal of “mutual benefit”, CDU must position community engagement generally, and Indigenous community engagement in particular, as standard practice. The overarching recommendation arising from the research is for community engagement to be explicitly repositioned as an integral part of all work involving Indigenous communities. However it must also be noted that Indigenous people want to work with people who are interested in getting to know them, not just deliver them a service. This has implications for how Indigenous community engagement must be positioned if it is to ensure accountability to the communities it is intended to serve.

**Develop formal feedback requirements for teaching and research**

CDU needs to take action to ensure that the requirements for feedback about the results of research and teaching are more systematically followed up and to develop systems to enable better flow of information between the university and the Indigenous communities with which it works. This may involve augmenting the responsibilities of staff already within the university and setting out the requirement for community engagement to be formally included within research and training programs. This would assist in moving community engagement from its current position as an optional extra that self selecting staff undertake, to a core responsibility of all staff who do face to face work in Indigenous communities.

**Position Indigenous community based work as a privilege (not a right)**

Indigenous respondents put respect as the most fundamental requirement of successful engagement. This is a precondition of the mutual benefit criteria that defines community engagement, and contrasts with the service delivery approach that underpins traditional university teaching and research. Indigenous respondents made clear that they do not want to work with people who are not interested in getting to know them, in learning from them ‘both ways’ or respecting them. Positioning work in Indigenous communities as a privilege (rather than as a right or a responsibility) would assist in creating the conditions through which successful community engagement becomes an integral part of all CDUs work in Indigenous communities.

**Develop processes to sensitise staff to Indigenous community engagement**

Given the complexity of community engagement in an intercultural context in the Northern Territory it is critical that the difficulties that staff face in engaging are explicitly addressed. One strategy to further embed Indigenous community engagement practice at CDU is to develop processes (that may include workshops, seminars, and the buy-out of staff time) to sensitise staff to some of the philosophical work entailed in the equitable engagement of
Indigenous knowledge practices into their teaching and research work. This is seen as a way of addressing the overwhelming bias of knowledge work within the university towards western modes of knowing, and goes some way to opposing the forces of silencing that marginalise Indigenous perspectives within the academy.

**Increase long-term focused CDU investment in Indigenous communities**

CDU currently “invests” in the communities it works with in a variety of ways. Given the importance of generating a sense of community ownership of CDU activities taking place in communities, efforts must be made to build on the existing investments. There should be an increased focus on building human resource capabilities both within CDU and the communities it works within. This means supporting individual CDU lecturers to focus on particular communities or groups of communities through professional development activities such as language courses or to broaden their skill base. It also means supporting people within communities to become CDU contact people, who can be contracted to support CDU staff during their visits, to provide follow up, to assist with the contextualisation of VET courses and to provide training (where they have the appropriate skills and qualifications).

**Implications for community engagement policy**

The ICE research project has some important implications for engagement policy within the university and in terms of community engagement with Indigenous people more widely. Firstly, the research highlights that links between university activities and the development aspirations of Indigenous communities need to be more comprehensively explored. This is because all respondents generally perceive engagement to be inextricably linked with the overall development of communities. However, this community development role is not currently considered core business by CDU, nor is it considered a key role of universities as Sunderland et al note: “little consideration has been given to the role of higher education as a vehicle for building or strengthening local communities” (Sunderland et al., 2004 p.56). This suggests that the university needs to find ways in which it can support Indigenous communities to articulate their aspirations and develop mechanisms to act on these aspirations collaboratively. This, according to the respondents of the ICE research should be the university’s community engagement core business.

The recently finalised Review of Australian Higher Education recommended that there should be no explicit funding for community engagement “given that these activities are an integral part of an institution’s teaching and research activities” (Bradley, 2008 p.xxviii). This provides challenges to universities such as CDU which operate in a vastly different knowledge
context all other Australian universities and which are still working through what the recently articulated “requirement to engage” (Commonwealth of Australia, 2003) means in practice. The danger of positioning community engagement as an embedded rather than explicit university activity, without a clear articulation of what CE is and how to achieve it, is that all activities that are not strictly teaching or research come to be labeled engagement without due consideration of their role in producing mutual benefit. The ICE research suggests that more needs to be known about the nature of community engagement in practice in order for it to be effectively embedded within CDU’s teaching and research activities. This points to the need to build a CE evidence base that links inputs with outcomes and impacts. The development of tracking and measurement tools will assist with the task of assessing the nature and type of investment required to achieve effective engagement. It also suggests that more research is required to monitor the impact of existing engagements over time, identifying both key start up and ongoing processes that enable universities and their communities to engage sustainably over time for long term mutual benefit.

**Conclusion**

The ICE project at CDU was an opportunity for university staff and Indigenous community members to document and reflect on the community engagement aspects of their shared work. It revealed that awareness of and respect for Indigenous knowledge and governance is the major precursor for successful engagement. It showed that when engagement met the needs of each party, fruitful collaborations would ensue that were faithful to the knowledge and governance traditions of each. The research showed that Indigenous knowledge and ownership are key to successful intercultural undertakings, and that the university is well placed to build on the successes it has achieved. However there are hurdles that need to be overcome; Indigenous knowledge continues to be marginalised by processes entrenched in wider Australian society that see it as deficient and irrelevant to the development needs in places like the NT. Further, national level systems that the university works within, set up to create consistency of outcomes nationally, are not well suited to meeting the knowledge needs of Indigenous people with their vastly different understandings of the world, and the very different lives they lead, and hope to lead. The ICE project demonstrates that CDU has implemented a range of actions and projects - from complex transdisciplinary work to simple and respectful engagement that attends vocational training - which show that community engagement, when taken seriously, can meet the challenge of producing mutual benefit for both CDU and the Indigenous communities it works within. The next challenge is to implement changes to policy and practice so that the lessons learnt allow further development of the community engagement agenda for the benefit of Indigenous people in the NT.
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