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Building capacity through sustainable engagement: lessons for the learning community from the GraniteNet Project

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This paper reports an exploration into critical success factors for the sustainability of the partnership between the University of Southern Queensland and the Stanthorpe community during the GraniteNet Phoenix Project – the first phase of a three-phase participatory action research project conducted during 2007–2008. The concepts of learning community, social capital, university-community engagement and partnerships, and co-generative learning through participatory action research and evaluation are brought together to provide a framework for evaluating the sustainability and efficacy of the university-community relationship in the context of the GraniteNet project. Implications of the findings for the ongoing

sustainability of the partnership are discussed, as well as for the relevance and utility of identified critical success factors. The paper also discusses implications of the findings for university-community engagement partnerships that utilise participatory action research and evaluation processes to build capacity through co-generative learning.

Introduction

According to Kilpatrick, Jones and Barrett (2006: 36), 'research that engages communities presents many opportunities for regional universities and their communities to learn together'. Focusing specifically on evaluation of the university-community partnership in Phase I of the *GraniteNet* project, this paper aims to add to the existing body of knowledge on university-community engagement through an exploration of factors that both contribute to and undermine the sustainability of this partnership. It also identifies implications for the practice of university-community engagement that seeks to build capacity and support development of the learning community. Critical success factors for sustainable community-university engagement emerging from a review of the relevant literature are discussed and a set of 13 factors is developed as the basis for evaluation of the university-community engagement relationship in *GraniteNet* Phase I. The paper reports the processes and outcomes of the evaluation, and discusses issues impacting on credibility and trustworthiness in practitioner research as well as strategies implemented to address them. Implications of the findings for the ongoing sustainability of the partnership are discussed, as well as for the relevance and utility of critical success factors for university-community engagement. The paper also examines implications of the findings for university-community engagement partnerships that utilise participatory action research and evaluation processes to build capacity through co-generative learning.

Background to the *GraniteNet* project

As part of a community development initiative, the Granite Belt Learners (GBL) group was established in 2001. During Adult Learners' Week celebrations in September 2005, the initiative culminated in Stanthorpe Shire Council declaring the shire to be a learning community. Stanthorpe Shire is located on the Granite Belt of South East Queensland, with a population of 10,600, of which half live in the town of Stanthorpe with the remainder dispersed throughout the fifteen surrounding farm properties covering a geographical area of 2,669 square kilometres. Typical of smaller, rural communities west of the 'great divide', the town has an ageing community, a low median income, a lower proportion of the population with post-compulsory education qualifications and lower use of information communication technologies (ICT) in comparison with Brisbane metropolitan and larger coastal centres in Queensland (ABS 2001, 2006, cited in Cavaye 2008), all of which are considered risk factors in terms of the community's continued prosperity and longer term sustainability.

Informed by the principles of lifelong learning and learning communities presented by Kearns (1999), Longworth (2007) and others, the Granite Belt Learners group identified information communication technologies as a potential tool for supporting the learning community initiative and proposed the re-development of *GraniteNet* – an existing but disused virtual community portal. The group, however, recognised the need for additional expertise and through the benefit of existing relationships, a research and development partnership was established with the University of Southern Queensland (USQ) which adopted a participatory action research approach to the design of a three-phase project that would culminate in the development and implementation of a virtual community portal designed to support Stanthorpe's development as a learning community.

The group worked with researchers and discipline experts from the university for a period of 12 months, engaging in participatory action research involving a series of facilitated workshops and focus groups that combined the local knowledge of community members with the knowledge of discipline experts and the broader research community to generate foundation concepts, principles and frameworks that would, hopefully, serve to inform the development of a sustainable community portal. Outcomes of this phase of the project included community engagement and governance frameworks, specifications for functional requirements of a community portal, a community portal prototype and a number of recommendations around critical success factors and sustainability. Subsequent funding submissions to the Queensland Department of Communities have been successful and the project is now entering its third phase. The focus of this article is on evaluation of the university-community engagement partnership during the first phase of the project.

Literature review and conceptual framework

Conceptualising the learning community

The learning communities movement emerged during the 1970s in response to a perceived need for rural and regional communities across the world to adapt to significant changes in the structure of their economies as a result of globalisation, the impact of technological innovations and changing demographics (Longworth 2006; Candy 2003). Learning communities, cities, towns and regions adopt a

learning-based approach to community development ... within a framework in which lifelong learning is the organising principle and social goal, [and] explicitly use lifelong learning concepts to enable local people from every community sector to act together to enhance the social, economic, cultural and environmental conditions of their community (Faris 2005: 31).

The so-called 'wider benefits' of this increased participation in learning are often defined and described in terms of enhanced human, social and economic capital as well as improved health and wellbeing (Schuller, Preston, Hammond, Bassett-Grundy & Bynner 2004). The concept of and rationale for the learning community of place, or geographic learning community (as distinct from online learning communities, communities of practice, communities of interest) draws on a number of theoretical constructs that are inextricably linked. These include:

- the notion of the community as a subset of society and related concepts of community development and renewal, individual and community capacity, active citizenship and civil society;
- the various forms of capital (social, human, cultural and economic) available to individuals and communities; notions of place and place management;
- theories of lifelong and life-wide learning;
- and, more recently, the role of information communication technologies in supporting networked learning and connectivity in order to bridge the so-called 'digital divide' that is said to exist between urban and rural communities (Bourdieu 1983, Putnam 2000, Candy 2003, Kilpatrick 2000, 2005, Knox 2005, Longworth 2006, Duke, Osborne & Wilson 2005, Williamson 1998).

Importantly, the notion of learning in a learning community is viewed from a social-constructivist perspective and is therefore seen to occur through the interaction of relationships and knowledge 'constructed as a product of the interaction and dialogue that occurs between specific actors, conceptualised as a complex diffusion rather than a systematic transfer of information' (Scoones & Thompson 1994: 43). A review of key concepts underpinning the Stanthorpe learning community initiative articulated in 'Learning for life on the Granite Belt: a community learning strategy for 2003–2008'

(Cooper 2003) reveals the premises underpinning the Stanthorpe learning community initiative to be firmly located in this theoretical framework.

The scholarship of university-community engagement

As institutions of formal learning that lie ‘at the hub of local life in all sectors of activity’ (Longworth 2007: 119), universities find themselves under increasing pressure to remain viable and relevant in the changing global environment and in particular to their local communities. Enhanced connectivity between universities and their communities ‘is the basis for accessing disparate sources of knowledge for new ways of thinking (“learning”) and acting (“enterprising”) to address regional futures’ (Garlick & Langworthy 2004: 2). Adopting a leadership role and utilising effective engagement processes, universities can work with their communities to explore problems relevant to those communities, facilitating problem-solving, fostering innovation and supporting capacity-building through the dissemination of ‘new knowledge, understanding and insights to the whole community’ (Longworth 2007: 118). Boyer (1996) used the term ‘scholarship of engagement’ to describe a range of scholarly activities that ‘connect the rich resources of the university to our most pressing social, civic and ethical problems’ as well as the creation of a

special climate in which the academic and civic cultures communicate more continuously and more creatively with each other, helping to enlarge ... the universe of human discourse and enriching the quality of life for all of us (p. 148).

Community engagement, defined from a meta perspective (Garlick & Langworthy 2004), provides a number of principles and frameworks from which to conceptualise and potentially measure aspects of engagement and evaluate their success. However, it is arguable whether the current spectrum of engagement has the capacity to allow for a comprehensive evaluation of both the explicit and implicit

assumptions underpinning community engagement projects such as *GraniteNet*. Moreover, Garlick and Langworthy (2004) have identified a number of institutional, structural and philosophical barriers to effective university-community engagement including the narrow view of regional development that sees university–regional engagement as ‘project and discipline specific, small scale, and university dominated’ (p. 4). At a national symposium on community-university partnerships in 2003, Holland *et al.* (2003) noted:

A major challenge for our field is to derive principles and best practices from across this evidence base to facilitate the ability of emerging and existing partnerships to translate these into practice and policy, and to identify unanswered questions for future study and policy development ... [as well as to] ... strengthen the research and evaluation components of community-university partnerships for the purposes of continuous quality improvement, knowledge advancement and new partnership development (p. 2).

It is the aim of this paper to contribute to this evidence base.

Using participatory action research and evaluation in community engagement to build community capacity and social capital

Participatory action research is described by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988: 5) as ‘collective, self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social ... practices’ (cited in Hughes & Seymour-Rolls 2000: 1). According to Merrifield (1997: 2), participatory action research ‘starts from the premise that research should be owned and controlled not by the researchers but by people in communities and organizations who need the research to act on issues that concern them’. As one of the scholarly activities referred to by Boyer, community-based, participatory action research and evaluation ‘presents many opportunities for regional universities and their communities to learn together’ through local research projects that ‘explore issues of national and/or global relevance in local

contexts ... and provide an opportunity for regional communities to examine their practices through a different lens' (Kilpatrick, Barrett & Jones 2006: 36). Insights gained from previous participatory action research and evaluation projects conducted as a partnership between the University of Southern Queensland in Toowoomba and the Stanthorpe community support these claims. For example, data from project evaluations indicate that successful engagement of the university with the community through ongoing cycles of collaborative, participatory action research and evaluation projects can indeed serve to build community and university capacity through co-generative learning (Elden & Levin 1991) and enhance social capital by using 'brokers' to establish 'bridging and linking ties' between the formal education institution and the community (Kilpatrick 2000: 6, Arden, Cooper & McLachlan 2007, Arden, McLachlan, Cooper & Stebbings 2008).

Bringing together the concepts of learning community, social capital, university-community engagement and partnerships, and co-generative learning through participatory action research and evaluation, provides a useful framework for conceptualising as well as evaluating the sustainability and efficacy of the university-community relationship in the context of the *GraniteNet* project.

Methodology

Research paradigm

In dealing with a level of social reality focused at the interface between the *meso* level of the learning community and the *micro* level of the individuals who are actors within that community, the evaluation is firmly located in a paradigm that values and seeks to understand relationships. These are found among people in communities and between people and the 'formal and informal infrastructure' of their communities, as well as the nature of actions and interactions that are conducive to achieving positive

outcomes for individuals and communities. These occur through civic engagement, participation in lifelong learning and the building of social capital (Kilpatrick 2000: 4). Accordingly, the evaluation methodology adopted draws on models of participatory action research and evaluation (Wadsworth 1997, 1998, Elden & Levin 1991, Adult Learning Australia 2005) designed to model as well as foster effective community engagement practices by actively involving community members as research partners (see Arden, Cooper & McLachlan 2007).

Adopting a practitioner or participant researcher approach presents a number of challenges and dilemmas for the researchers in terms of ethical issues, research quality, trustworthiness of findings and ultimately, the credibility and utility of the research (Groundwater-Smith and Mockler 2007, Edge and Richards 1990, Wadsworth 1997). As practitioner and participant researchers cognisant of these challenges, we have attempted to address some of them through a systematic approach to each stage of the evaluation with a view to ensuring equal representation of 'insider' (community) and 'outsider' (university) perspectives. We hope this will go some way to mitigating the tendency for overly-subjective interpretation of data that would render the evaluation of limited credibility and utility. In addition, we have adopted a critical stance and dialogic process in the analysis and interpretation of the data that we hope will enable the evaluation to move beyond what Groundwater-Smith and Mockler (2007: 205) describe as a 'celebratory account' towards an 'emancipatory account ... that attempt[s] to address the more difficult and challenging substantive ethical concerns in relation to the wider social and political agenda'.

Evaluation design: purpose, questions and processes

The purpose of the evaluation was twofold:

- to evaluate the effectiveness of the relationship between the university and community in Phase I of the *GraniteNet* project against a set of critical success factors for sustainable university engagement, with a view to recognising strengths and addressing weaknesses; and
- to 'validate' this set of critical success factors by determining the extent to which they were seen by stakeholders as being important in the partnership.

Building on earlier work on critical success factors for university-community engagement undertaken by Garlick and Pryor (2002, cited in Garlick and Langworthy 2004) and a review of literature focusing on university-community engagement (CDC/ATSDR 1997, Harkavy 2006, Holland, Gelmon, Green, Green-Moton, & Stanton 2003, Woolcock & Brown 2005) as well as participatory action research and social capital (Wadsworth 1997,1998, Elden & Levin 1991, Kilpatrick, Barrett & Jones 2006), a set of '10 critical success factors for university-community engagement' was devised against which an initial analysis of two community engagement projects was undertaken (see Arden, Cooper & McLachlan 2007). Some initial propositions were developed about the relevance, utility, validity and importance of these factors which resulted in the construction of an expanded set of 13 'critical success factors for *sustainable* community engagement'. These differentiated between implicit and explicit (or tangible and intangible) factors that were seen, in combination, to be important to the sustainability of the university-community partnership. It is this set of critical success factors shown in Table 1 below that has been used for the purposes of this evaluation. (The numbering of the various factors in the table reflects the order in which they were progressively added to the list.)

Table 1: *Critical success factors for sustainable university-community engagement*

More tangible factors (explicit)	Less tangible factors (implicit)
1. Written agreement (MOU/Contract)	3. Evidence of trust
2. Clear and agreed purpose to the relationship	6. A shared vision
4. Results orientated to meet community defined priorities	8. Sharing of knowledge, expertise and resources
5. Demonstrated commitment of resources and leadership	9. Commitment to learning
7. Interdisciplinary (university) and broad community involvement	10. Acknowledgement and respect for 'insider' and 'outsider' roles, knowledge, expertise and perspectives
11. Demonstrated mutual benefit (university and community outcomes)	12. Effective communication
13. Ongoing evaluation	

The evaluation process was designed to achieve formative, summative and research evaluation purposes:

- **formative** insofar as project participants, through the process of review and reflection on the partnership, would be able to identify emerging issues impacting on the sustainability of the relationship that could be addressed in Phase 2 of the project;
- **summative** in that conclusions would be able to be drawn about key factors impacting on the effectiveness of the partnership during Phase 1; and
- **evaluation research** in terms of the learnings from the field that might contribute to the broader university-community engagement knowledge base.

A questionnaire was devised in order to investigate the perceptions of key community and university stakeholders about the strengths

and weaknesses of the partnership during Phase I, and to identify emerging issues. The intent was to focus on understanding the more implicit, less tangible factors of the partnership and to facilitate a reflexive engagement with these issues through a follow-up workshop. A set of 10 questions was devised to draw out information relating to the identified critical success factors without actually making these explicit to respondents – a strategy which was adopted in order to achieve the second purpose of the evaluation outlined above (that is, to determine the extent to which each of the 13 factors actually emerged in the data and which, if any, were seen to be of importance to the respondents). The questions were designed to be as open as possible and to seek feedback on what respondents saw as the strengths and weaknesses of the relationship, the nature and extent of the investment from each of the partners, the benefits and outcomes achieved for each, and finally, what the respondents would identify as critical success factors for the partnership.

Questionnaires were issued to 10 community members and four university staff who had been closely involved in Phase I of the project. Of these, eight community responses were received and two from university staff. A number of attempts were made to organise the follow-up workshop, however this did not eventuate due to time constraints and other factors. The impact of this on the quality of findings is discussed in the following section on limitations. The process undertaken to analyse and interpret the questionnaire responses was as follows. Both researchers collaboratively reviewed and summarized the responses to each of the 10 questionnaire items, then subsequently independently reviewed and interpreted this summary against a previously devised set of seven critical questions designed to draw out the substantive issues in relation to the two evaluation purposes identified above:

1. How important are the identified critical success factors to the sustainability of the university-community engagement partnership?
2. Are there other critical success factors emerging from consultations with university and community partners that have not been identified so far?
3. Which factors are perceived as being most important from the different stakeholders' perspectives, and why?
4. What is the value placed by the respective parties on the ongoing sustainability of the relationship?
5. What are the perceived risks and barriers to the ongoing sustainability of the relationship? How can these be addressed?
6. What have we learned from this experience about successful university-community engagement?
7. How can we ensure that we incorporate this learning into future community engagement projects?

The two researchers then met again to discuss their respective interpretations of the data and emerging issues, a summary of which is reported in this paper.

Limitations impacting on the findings and emerging issues

As novice, qualitative researchers, we acknowledge the significant limitations of the study and their impact on the quality of the findings. As stated above, the lack of a follow-up workshop with respondents impacted on the sufficiency and richness of the data that were able to be collected and precluded the possibility of adequately and authentically representing the individual voices of the respondents – that is, of telling their stories. It could further be claimed that the trustworthiness of the findings is questionable as we did not re-check our interpretations with respondents. As a result, the following questions must be posed and answered: 'What warrant do we have for the statements we make? Why should people believe our version of

the story? What difference does our research actually make?’ (Edge & Richards 1998: 349). Groundwater-Smith and Mockler (2007) maintain that ‘in the end, the quality of evidence ... will rest upon the ways in which it has been collected and the purposes to which it will be put’ and pose a series of ethical guidelines for practitioner research which they maintain ‘underpins an orientation to research practice that is deeply embedded in those working in the field in a substantive and engaged way’ (p. 205). They maintain that the research should ‘observe ethical protocols and processes ... be transparent in its processes..., collaborative in its nature..., transformative in its intent and action,... and be able to justify itself to its community of practice’ (pp, 205-6). While acknowledging the limitations of the research which means that the conclusions that are able to be drawn can only be tentative, we stand by the processes undertaken in terms of ethics and transparency, as well as a genuine attempt to ensure that both community and university perspectives are equally represented, and a degree of confidence that the insights gained as a result of this investigation serve the purposes for which the study was designed.

Discussion

Factors contributing to and undermining the university-community engagement relationship and implications for the ongoing sustainability of the partnership

Factors seen by respondents as strengths and benefits of the partnership related to the sharing of ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ knowledge and expertise, a demonstrated commitment to and focus on opportunities for learning, and a demonstrated commitment of time, resources and enthusiasm from both partners towards the achievement of shared goals and mutually beneficial outcomes. There was an acknowledgement of the element of reciprocity in responses from both university and community stakeholders – that is, that there were benefits on both sides as a result of being involved in the project. Community members valued the contributions from

university staff of specialist knowledge and expertise that enabled the progression of an ‘idea’ or ‘vision’ towards a more concrete reality. University staff likewise valued the commitment of time, energy and enthusiasm from members of the community as well as the contribution of local knowledge. The roles of the three major players in the project (USQ Chief Technology Officer and Project Manager, Community Development Worker and USQ Researcher and ‘Broker’) were noted as being important to the success of the project. Overall, the responses indicate an acknowledgement of commitment and enthusiasm from both parties and a general recognition that all participants made a valuable contribution considering time and resource constraints.

An analysis of responses to various questions on the survey alludes to the presence of the following critical success factors having impacted positively on respondents’ perceptions of the partnership:

- A clear and agreed purpose to the relationship
- Demonstrated commitment of resources and leadership
- Demonstrated mutual benefit (university and community outcomes)
- A commitment to learning
- Acknowledgement and respect for ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ roles, knowledge, expertise and perspectives
- Sharing of knowledge, expertise and resources

The strong focus on learning emerging in the responses from both partners is seen as significant and is discussed in more detail later in the paper.

Moving on from this admittedly ‘celebratory’ account, analysis of responses about the factors seen to be problematic in the relationship is revealing. It highlights the potential significance of evaluations such as this, not only in terms of understanding the impact of less tangible

factors on the engagement relationship, but also for challenging inherent assumptions and power inequities.

When asked about what did not work so well in terms of the community-university relationship, responses from community members almost invariably expressed the strong perception that the university was dominating the process ('felt sometimes as if USQ was running the show') and that university staff needs were privileged over those of community members. This appears to have manifested in a perceived lack of availability of university participants and lack of communication which resulted in 'disquiet and confusion' on the part of community participants. Interestingly, responses from university staff expressed a degree of frustration with waxing and waning levels of participation and engagement on the part of community members which required people to be 're-engaged and updated'. What is clear from the data is that differing levels of involvement and accessibility of stakeholders at various stages, combined with communication breakdowns and lack of information sharing along the way, contributed to a 'muddying of the waters', a diffusion of the vision, and created opportunities for misunderstandings to occur that resulted in an eroding of trust and feelings of resentment. This alludes to the importance of the following critical success factors for sustaining the partnership over the longer term:

- Effective communication
- Acknowledgement of and respect for 'insider' and 'outsider' roles, knowledge, expertise and perspectives
- Evidence of trust

Issues hinged on the communication processes that enabled the development of relationships based on trust and respect. This in turn facilitated effective learning processes whereby knowledge was shared for mutual gain (reciprocity). Where critical stages were impacted on through lack of availability of either party, the relationship was seen to stall. Seddon, Billett, Clemans, Ovens, Ferguson & Fennessy

(2008) believe that social partnerships are susceptible to these types of instabilities because of the absence in many community settings of the strong routines and resource buffers available within organisations and institutions. Moreover, given the perceived low status of community–university engagement in the tertiary sector at the present time, there is a concern regarding sustainability of projects that rely heavily on key leaders within universities who may well change over time.

What is clear is that the development and maintenance of the trust relationship that is critical to sustainability of the partnership is dependant on clarification and management of expectations, acknowledgement of and respect for the circumstances and constraints under which each partner is operating, as well as a commitment to effective communication that demonstrates respect for the other party as an important and valued partner. What is also clear is that those community members who had a consistent level of involvement in negotiations and discussions at all stages of the project were less likely to express mistrust and more likely to attribute responsibility for feelings of frustration and confusion to issues of communication and information sharing, rather than mistrust *per se*. Nonetheless, the issue of the power imbalance inherent in the relationship is not one that is easily addressed and will also be discussed later in the paper.

In terms of the implications for the sustainability of the partnership, it appears that clear articulation and management of expectations – at the outset of each project or project phase, and revisited on a regular basis – is critical. This is not new knowledge, as Holland *et al.* articulated exactly these sentiments back in 2003 on the 'ideal characteristics of effective partnerships':

In particular, there is continuing difficulty around the issue of partnership goal setting and the articulation of one's own expectations of the partnership. Too often, partnerships

are launched with a focus on a specific project or funding opportunity, and too little attention is given to the deeper and broader goals and expectations that participants bring to the table. In such a case, partners may assume they understand each other's motivations and rush on towards project and proposal planning. Absent an upfront and continuing investment of time and energy into a candid and comprehensive reflection on the goals and expectations of each partner, all the other features associated with effective partnerships will be difficult to implement and sustain [*sic*] (p. 3).

Implications for the scholarship of community engagement

Avoiding 'the missionary position'

In *Campus review* (1 July 2008), McNulty, chief executive of Trafford Borough Council in Manchester in the United Kingdom and 'visiting UK expert in lifelong learning' called on universities to 'have a little bit of humility – to work with each other and respect what we can learn from each other', rather than seeing engagement with their communities as 'a one-way activity ... simply outreach from a missionary obligation perspective' (p. 6). The data from this study show that the value of the relationship for the community participants was gauged by how it made them feel – the lack of communication (for information) produced insecurity for those who may not have participated as much as others or who were not in the 'inner circle' of responsibility and served to foster the perception of inequity in the relationship. It would appear that recognition and acknowledgement on the part of the university, not only of its responsibility to 'grapple with problems of relevance and significance to the local community' but to recognise that 'grappling with significant, local problems also has the capacity to begin mending a fractured academic community because the very enterprise depends upon the participation of a multiplicity of faculty and administrators from across the university' (Harkavy 2006: 19), is an important first step in addressing the problem of power imbalance in the relationship that inevitably breeds misunderstanding and mistrust.

Validity and utility of critical success factors confirmed

The evidence suggests that the critical success factors used to evaluate the university-community partnership were relevant and important to the respondents. In identifying the top three critical success factors, responses were consistent with the barriers mentioned by many of the community respondents and are listed in order of those mentioned most frequently:

- Open and effective communication and dialogue
- Shared vision and understanding
- Clear and realistic expectations and roles
- Commitment of project team members
- Identification and demonstration of tangible and measurable outcomes and achievements
- Respect

What emerges as a particularly interesting finding is that, without having explicitly asked respondents about whether or not, and what, they may have learned from their involvement in the project, and to what extent a commitment to learning may or may not have been important for success of the project, responses to questions about the strengths and benefits of the partnership consistently reflected a valuing of the opportunities that the project presented both parties for social and transformative learning, as illustrated in the comments made by both community and university respondents as shown in Figure 1.

Expanding ideas to include people from out of town makes us think carefully

Excellent presentations (workshops)

Practical experience of working in groups

Sharing knowledge generously with community

Recognition and acceptance by all of the importance of a community-owned and driven project

Realisation of the complexity and difficulty of achieving project objective

Model of engagement used (participatory action research)

Commitment of community based on Stanthorpe being a learning community

Successful combination of local knowledge and outside expertise

Loved the learning and ability to contribute to community project

Liked hearing different ideas and being part of groups

Interested in online conference – potential benefits of ideas for other communities

Data for USQ about community needs adds to body of knowledge over time

Process streamlined and crystallised into a step-by-step process

Project brought a concrete reality that could be described with confidence and authority to others

Community engaged and evolving (learning)

Figure 1: Responses to questions about the strengths and benefits of the GraniteNet Phase I partnership

Overall, the results appear to indicate that, while the less tangible critical success factors are considered by respondents to impact significantly on the quality of the university-community partnership, and that a commitment to learning is seen as a significant success factor for all participants in the project, the achievement of tangible and measurable outcomes is also critical, particularly for community members, and is linked – along with a visible ‘in kind’ contribution from the university – to the building of the trust relationship. As mentioned earlier, differing – and often unrealistic – expectations of individual community and university participants of the levels of commitment, participation, in-kind contribution, and resources that would be contributed by each of the parties, along with the different value placed by individuals on process (less tangible) and outcome (more tangible) factors, in combination, appear to have been significant in their ability to undermine the relationship.

Implications for subsequent project phases

There are a number of critical issues that have emerged for the researchers as a result of this evaluation, not the least of which is the need to ‘begin with the end in mind’ as noted earlier by Holland *et al.* (2003) and ensure that time and resources are allocated at project start-up to making the implicit explicit through ‘a candid and comprehensive reflection on the goals and expectations of each partner’ (p. 3).

In relation to critical success factors, it is pertinent to ask: at what level are these critical success factors gauged? At what point do trust and respect become counter-productive and lead to a lack of critical questioning around processes that undermine achievement of objectives? Close-knit networks can in fact impact on an individual’s ability to remain impartial and to be critically honest regarding the nature of interactions or problematic situations. Ongoing examination of how these factors play out in context will help us to better understand and transform our engagement practice.

In this sense, the willingness and capacity of the participants to engage in reflexive learning through formative evaluation has not yet been fully examined. The recognition of this fact will be used to guide the strategies and tools for evaluation that will be used in Phase II of the project to ensure that a greater emphasis is placed on making explicit the learnings that occur formatively as well as summatively. As important as the findings in relation to the identified critical success factors is the realisation that there is much more work to be done and, given the already mentioned perceived time paucity of participants, it will be necessary to involve participants in a discussion regarding the implementation of more in-depth evaluation processes.

Conclusion

What has clearly emerged from this study is the importance for the success of the university-community partnership of an explicit focus on learning through the adoption of participatory action research and evaluation processes. As stated by Garlick and Langworthy (2004),

regarding all participants in an engagement process as learners in a learning situation, all bringing a different set of skills and experiences, is a way of minimizing impediments to dialogue and enterprising action that can result from the cultures and norms of different organization involvement (p.14).

The findings of the evaluation clearly validate the importance of critical success factor number 9, commitment to learning, and support the claims made by Garlick and Langworthy (2004), Kilpatrick, Jones and Barrett (2006) and others about the benefits for universities and communities of undertaking engagement projects using participatory action research and evaluation. It is through ongoing, sustainable engagement projects such as these that the capacity of universities and communities for sustainable engagement will, over time, be built. This will only occur, however, if critical success factor number 13, ongoing evaluation, is addressed through,

as recommended by Garlick and Langworthy (2004: 1), '[b]uilding a culture of improvement through evaluation in university/regional community engagement'.

What we see as critical to the sustainability of the relationship is to take the time to make explicit the less tangible factors related to management of expectations and communication and to explore strategies for working with university and community stakeholders that will encourage a critical reflection on and questioning of their own assumptions about working with one another and how this, in turn, impacts on their engagement practices, particularly in relation to communication. We therefore recommend the addition of two critical success factors to our list of 13:

- Clarification and management of stakeholder expectations
- Avoiding the missionary position

This last factor we see as being particularly useful for attempting the challenging and uncomfortable task of raising and discussing the power imbalance which, although normally unspoken and unacknowledged, is nonetheless an ever-present factor that serves to undermine sustainable and effective partnerships between universities and 'their' communities. It remains to be seen whether or not, and to what extent, this will serve as a useful recommendation.

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Trevor Cooper is a former Shire Councillor and Deputy Principal of the local State High School. He has been an advocate of lifelong learning for many years, and has been instrumental in the development of Stanthorpe as a learning community. Trevor's research interests include e-democracy, community and civic engagement and learning.

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