

Looking forward: Community Gateways at Victoria University

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The mission and values of Victoria University provide the underlying criteria for the development and implementation of the Community Gateways initiative, which aims to transform the lives of those living in the west of Melbourne through the power of further education. Community Gateways takes the university into the community by providing career education and counselling, skills recognition, recognition of prior learning, workshops and short training opportunities to engage the community 'on their own turf', and to support their access and success through career-aligned course choice.

To be truly effective in the community, Community Gateways has utilised a cooperative approach to engage with over forty community organisations, including community centres, neighbourhood houses, local councils, youth centres, libraries, and ACE and ACFE providers. A resurgence of interest in values

associated with community, social cohesion and cultural diversity has provided the platform for these relationships to develop.

Community Gateways strengthens access to learning and employment in the region for many people who currently are unsure of how to access education and training opportunities. Through the provision of complimentary, professional careers counselling, community members are encouraged to consider their career options as the basis for making appropriate training or further study decisions. In this paper I will explore the development of the program and share the learning and achievements to date.

Introduction

The mission of Victoria University is to transform lives through the power of further education, vocational and higher education, and research. We work collaboratively to develop the capabilities of individuals, enterprises and communities within the western Melbourne region and beyond to build sustainable futures for ourselves and our stakeholders.

Victoria University is a multi-sector university with integrated further education, vocational education and higher education (through course work and research) and is located in the western metropolitan region of Melbourne. With eleven campuses, four of which are in the central business district of Melbourne with seven located across the western metropolitan area from Newport in the south to Melton in the North West, Victoria University is well placed to provide tertiary education in the region.

Victoria University has both a global and local presence and remains committed to providing education to the western region of Melbourne, with half of its students residing in the region. The multi-

sector nature of the university provides advantages in course design and delivery and study pathways that provide unique opportunities for cross-sectoral development and delivery.

The western suburbs of Melbourne are being reshaped by rapid growth, gentrification and housing development. The local economy and labour markets have been influenced by the departure of its former manufacturing strengths and the development of new industries such as transport and logistics. As with all areas that experience periods of rapid growth there is a mismatch in the region between the demand for and the supply of services, facilities and amenities.

Victoria University's Community Gateways

Victoria University's Community Gateways was proposed as a collaborative initiative. The strategy is part of VU's mission to reinvent and enhance VU's delivery of education in the western region and to create partnerships with an alliance of local interests to 'build the west together'. VU also regards the Community Gateways initiative as an opportunity to complement the state government's 'whole-of-government' initiative by working with government departments and local communities to achieve a seamless approach to educational delivery.

The population of western Melbourne is characterised by high numbers of culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) and low socioeconomic status (SES) people. VU Community Gateways focuses on programs and services to attract and engage non-traditional university entrants, many of whom are young and disengaged, mature aged and/or recent arrivals to Australia.

Community Gateways strengthens access to learning and employment in the region for many people who currently are unsure of how to access education and training opportunities, by taking the university

out into the community space. A range of services are provided, including careers counselling, assistance with recognition of prior learning and skills recognition, as well as programs that will enable the community to experience education in a setting close to their homes, in partnership with other community providers and businesses. Through engaging with the community 'on their own turf' with learning and service provision, Community Gateways supports individuals' engagement with education and training in their local setting, and provides support for their access and success through career-aligned course choice.

To be truly effective in the community, the Community Gateways initiative has utilised a community development and capacity-building approach to engage with over forty community organisations, including community centres, neighbourhood houses, local councils, youth centres, libraries, and ACE and ACFE providers. While each local government area in the west and north-west of metropolitan Melbourne has been engaged with Community Gateways, further development will occur in 2011 to ensure all ACE and ACFE providers have had the opportunity to become part of the Community Gateways initiative.

A resurgence of interest in values associated with community, social cohesion and cultural diversity has provided the platform for these relationships to develop. The goodwill developed through Community Gateways has nourished the development of partnerships that will enable the creation of pathways between the university and community providers. These partnerships enable us to work together to develop the capabilities of individuals, enterprises and communities and has generated much interest and enthusiasm with ACE and ACFE providers.

Community Gateways will provide three levels of primary services that reach further into the communities, better preparing and equipping individuals to enter education. These comprise:

1. career education through group workshops and individual professional careers counselling, advice on study pathways and course information, and referrals to appropriate education and training providers
2. recognition of prior learning, skills assessment through Skills Stores, English language and numeracy assessment, and referral to gap training courses within the community or at Victoria University
3. short courses, and general and further education programs with referral through pathways to VU and other partner providers.

Community Gateways is collaborating with local communities utilising three models for delivery as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Community Gateways delivery models

The Portable

The portable booths can be set up in shopping centre malls or other community spaces, and are equipped with electronic and other resources. They provide professional career counselling for individuals.



The MGV—Mobile Gateway Vehicle

Mobile access is provided through a state-of-the-art classroom housed in a ten-metre-long truck, the Mobile Gateway Vehicle, referred to as the MGV. It can be used as a flexible delivery space, and it is equipped with computers and lecture chairs or tables. The wheelchair lift ensures access by all to a range of delivery options that can occur within the community space.



In Situ—VUHQ

Located on Flinders Street in Melbourne’s CBD, the in situ Community Gateway is spacious and modern and has been developed in the VUHQ space shared with Student Services and VU International.



Evaluating the effectiveness of Community Gateways

The use of online systems has enabled Community Gateways to record data on all interactions with individuals and community organisations from the implementation of the program. Early indicators provide evidence of the success of Community Gateways, with over 800 career counselling sessions conducted with individuals in our community through one of the flexible delivery models described above. Currently there are 40 active and developing relationships with community

organisations, adult community and further education providers and government agencies, and confirmed activity schedules to the end of January 2011.

An evaluation strategy was developed at the commencement of the Community Gateways program, and achievements against the key performance indicators were reported to the university community in September 2010. This has measured the effectiveness of the Community Gateways program during the initial year of operation against its objectives, which include:

- improve access of community members from the western and north-western region to information that can assist their decisions on future career, education and training needs
- provide workshops and short courses through the mobile or in situ gateways
- provide public spaces that are recognised as being open and inviting and offer high quality career counselling opportunities
- build active engagement with selected networks of adult community and further education providers and government agencies
- develop partnership schedules with a select number of enterprise/business stakeholders, and
- develop an effective and efficient service model that provides sufficient return on investment to VU.

A range of qualitative and quantitative measures are used to ensure the continued effectiveness of Community Gateways, including qualitative surveys to assess the satisfaction of career counselling clients. Follow-up online surveys are used to determine successful outcomes of these interactions, or the requirement for further support.

Table 2: Evidence of community connection to Community Gateways as at 1 July 2010

Counselling appointments	730
Enrolments to semester 2, 2010 (annual KPI for 2010: 10%)	88 or 12%
Career education workshops conducted	22
Community centre staff workshops	6
Community organisations working with Community Gateways	45
Identified opportunities for faculty use of MGV	23

Currently over 800 individuals have received a minimum of one hour of professional careers counselling, some with more than one session where it has been required. To ensure future provision, career education workshops are offered with client groups at individual community centres to enable participants to commence the career education journey prior to their individual career counselling appointment. This approach has been well received by the individuals and the community centre staff, who have indicated a desire to develop their own skills to a level where they can support this initial stage in career education. This valuable work is attributed to the passion and community spirit of the small but dedicated Community Gateways team.

Victoria University College is now planning a professional development opportunity for community centre staff early in 2011 in collaboration with the regional ACFE network and the community providers. This will enable the community centre staff to have the knowledge, skills, delivery plan and exercises to be able to provide the career education workshops themselves, and offer a 'triage' role prior to the professional career counselling sessions undertaken at their centres.

Community collaboration

Through the provision of Community Gateways services in community settings, strong collaboration is developing with

particular community and business organisations. The GPT Group, which provide centre management for the Highpoint Shopping Centre, have been a partner of the Community Gateways program since its inception. The GPT Group provided six weeks of prime retail space within the malls of the shopping centre, enabling the Community Gateways program to reach many clients in the western region, and to provide over one hundred career counselling sessions per week. In conjunction with the Business Enterprise and Small Business Management staff in the Faculty of Workforce Development, business breakfasts and other workshops will be conducted for store holders and staff within the Highpoint Shopping Centre. Negotiations are currently underway that will hopefully bring a new and innovative approach to the provision of Community Gateways in early 2011.

A partnership with Westpac through the Western Region Managers' Network has provided opportunities for the distribution of Community Gateways information into all communities in the west through the branch network. In addition, Westpac has offered financial sponsorship for the program and support for the delivery of financial literacy programs through the flexible delivery approach provided by the Mobile Gateway Vehicle.

The services offered by Community Gateways have provided the foundation for collaboration with adult community and further education (ACFE) providers in the Werribee and Melton regions. Partnerships are developing which will lead to formalised pathways between the community providers and courses within the university. This is evidenced by the developing cooperative arrangements with the Werribee Community Centre and Djerriwarrh. While at an early stage, it is envisaged that pathways will be formalised providing benefit to both the university and the community provider.

The benefits of Community Gateways partnerships

Community Gateways has facilitated the development of partnerships with a range of community providers and organisations where they had not been formalised previously. As the initiative evolves

beyond its early implementation phase, further relationships and partnerships with community and business organisations will develop that will be of mutual benefit to all parties involved.

Community providers are able to enhance the employment possibilities for their clients through Community Gateways professional careers counselling, providing more focused course choices for their clients, leading to successful retention, completion and focused employment opportunities. Through this process unmet demand for programs can also be identified which will be of benefit to the community provider as well as the university. Early discussions with the ACFE providers indicate that they are particularly interested in opportunities to develop pathways with the university and this will continue to develop and be formalised in 2011.

Community Gateways makes a very real and robust contribution to social inclusion, by offering opportunities and support for students who come from backgrounds of educational disadvantage and who may have had prior barriers to education, be potential early school leavers or be vulnerable to early attrition. Community Gateways will continue to contribute to the improvement of social, cultural, environmental and economic sustainability of the enterprises and communities with which it works.

About the author

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