Towards More Effective Campus-Community Partnerships: The Experience of the Goodna Service Integration Project (SIP)

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the key learnings about campus-community relationships from the innovative Goodna Service Integration Project (SIP) 2000-2003, a complex, whole of government project designed to test and demonstrate how community and government and non-government agencies can work together to improve sustainable community well-being in one of Australia's most disadvantaged suburban locations. Through providing a series of both formal and informal learning opportunities, a local university campus was able to substantially contribute to the achievement of the project outcomes whilst simultaneously promoting the importance of sustaining empowering relationships between universities and locally disadvantaged communities.

1. GENERAL

The Goodna Service Integration Project (SIP) was a pilot project established in 2000 in south-east Queensland, Australia. It developed during a series of meetings which were held in the aftermath of a local crisis in 1999 when an elderly resident of Ipswich (40 kilometres west of the capital Brisbane) was violently assaulted by a group of young people on a busy city centre street. He died from his injuries. These meetings highlighted some shared concerns regarding the need for:

- more integrated and preventative human service responses and strategies across agencies,
- an enhanced focus upon community capacity building,
- a more rigorous approach to place-based planning, funding and delivering of government services and
- improved funding certainty for non-government providers.

2. SETTING THE SCENE

Following a series of Ministerial deputations, support was obtained for the development of a pilot project that sought to promote the improved integration of government services in the community of Goodna. The positional leaders of key agencies in the Region were enlisted to the Project Team and a decision made that the Chairperson and Vice Chairperson roles should rest with non-State Government agencies.

The Service Integration Project Team has included as its members employees of Commonwealth, State and Local Governments and higher education institutions. A full membership list is provided in Table 1 of the SIP Final Report (Woolcock & Boorman 2003).
Primary funding for the SIP was received from the Department of Families and the Department of Housing’s Community Renewal program to employ a Project Officer and a Research Officer respectively from September 2000-March 2003. Additional funds were also made available through the Department of Employment and Training to employ an Administration Trainee in 2001 and another in 2002.

The SIP focussed specifically on Goodna for several reasons including the long recognised problems stemming from significant socio-economic disadvantage in Goodna. It was also important to gain an understanding of the impact of the institutional precinct on the Goodna area. With Goodna already a hub for many Commonwealth, State & Local Government services, there was also an essential opportunity to have front-line staff participating in the Project. The importance of having a single location to which the project's multiple activities all had to be ultimately accountable became increasingly evident as the project evolved.

Intent on understanding what constituted the leading evidence for undertaking a service integration project and a determination to not repeat the mistakes made by other similar initiatives, the SIP Team drew on several domains of literature and undertook to identify as many examples of best practice with regard to service integration. However, with no standard template to guide effective human service integration research and practice, the Goodna SIP needed to ‘write its own book’ when it came to developing a integrated system of human services that improved sustainable community well-being.

3. LAYING THE GROUNDWORK

With operating funding and staff secured, the SIP Team set about establishing a mutually acceptable operating framework, a decision-making protocol, a communication strategy and an overview strategy and action plan, all critical steps taken over several months in 2000-2001. The original thinking was that three key work areas defined the SIP’s focus including a) experiential learning/ applied research via targeted integration projects b) relationship building (with community, frontline staff, within participating organisations and within SIP Team) and c) measurement and modelling. From here, the SIP Team was allocated into three strategy groups for SIP – Learning, Relationship Building and Measurement & Modelling, followed by agreement on a project vision: “Working better together for sustainable community well-being in Goodna”.

Whilst the title of the Project pointed to a clear focus on “service”, it was acknowledged that change to the system of service provision necessitated a review of the policy and funding frameworks within which both agency ‘core business’ and ‘special projects’ are defined and delivered.

The SIP thus established a set of outcomes which were influenced by the primary aims of each participating agency. Furthermore, the SIP sought to align these outcomes with 1) the Queensland state government’s draft
managing for outcomes (MFO) performance management framework and 2) the eighteen priority needs and aspirations of the Goodna community as expressed through a series of consultation processes held in the Autumn of 2001.

The overall aim of the SIP then became one that sought to develop a sustainable system of human service provision (including design, funding, delivery and evaluation phases) by:

- aligning the needs and aspirations of the community of Goodna, the strategies of service agencies in the Region and the priority outcomes of Government and consequential resource allocation processes that support that alignment

- building social capital, responding to community well-being and facilitating the integration of human services and,

- building relationships, promoting learning processes and giving emphasis to measurement and modelling as three critical and inter-connected strategies to create systemic change to facilitate community well-being.

For the purposes of this paper, the remainder concentrates on the particular learning initiatives created and sustained during the SIP.

4. LEARNING STRATEGIES: THE GRADUATE CERTIFICATE

The Graduate Certificate in Social Science (Interprofessional Leadership) was the first accredited learning program initiated through SIP and hosted by the Community Service & Research Centre (CSRC) at The University of Queensland's Ipswich campus.

The Graduate Certificate was created as a critical driver of change in Goodna. This is a highly diverse and disadvantaged community which has been the subject of numerous government and community development initiatives over the years. However, residents had reported that they see little evidence of any change in their quality of life. Key indicators of disadvantage such as income levels, unemployment and crime rates lend some support to the communities' perception.

The Goodna SIP was established in direct response to this need to "do things differently". Support for the Graduate Certificate as an innovative and practical component of this Project stemmed from a recognition of the need to learn from the past, to avoid making the "same old mistakes". At the same time, the course was designed to capture the best and most promising of emerging knowledges from other places about how to work effectively with people in multiply disadvantaged communities to collaboratively shape a new and inclusive future.
This part-time, cohort based program conducted over a 12 month period involved three cohorts over the duration of the SIP including four separate courses:

- SOSC6500 Practice Frameworks & Interprofessional Communication.
- SOSC6501 Professional Values & Interprofessional Collaboration.
- SOSC6502 Social Innovation & The New Professional.
- SOSC6503 Collaborative Service Learning Project (CSLP).

Interprofessional collaboration has gathered a large following in the US particularly in the social science and human services field. The term refers to a collaborative of individuals from different professional backgrounds with a common goal or problem to be solved. These people undertake activities that have a common theme relating to all the professions "at the table". In the human services, this generally relates to the community that they are serving.

Each individual in an interprofessional collaborative has a number of spheres of identity that interrelate. Of those, their professional identity is likely to be the most problematic in terms of the interprofessional collaborative process. A socialisation process that begins with the education of the individual helps to develop the professional identity of each. This is often a source of conflict between professionals in an interprofessional context.

The argument for collaboration or service integration versus a categorical (traditional) view of service delivery is largely based on the

- natural and undeniable interconnectedness between service providers, trainers, clients, families, communities and other stakeholders in society and that the current education and human service system fails to acknowledge or operationalize the connections while providing unacceptable and undesirable social products (Udas, 1997).

In short, no one discipline has all the answers for addressing service delivery needs, yet the current practice of human services specialists suggests they do. Meanwhile children and families, particularly those with multiple problems, continue to be failed by the system. It therefore seems a logical progression to integrate the services each discipline can provide.

Managers, staff and community members enrolled in the Graduate Certificate in Social Science (Interprofessional Leadership) came to recognise the need to unlearn old ways that have been reinforced and rewarded for years, and to practice new skills relating to collaboration, inter-professional communication, community engagement, distributed ownership and capacity building.

However, the benefits of conducting the course have extended well beyond the skills gained by the participating cohorts. In particular, it engaged a diverse range of people in learning including very senior managers, frontline staff, central office staff and community members, including the office bearers of important local agencies and networks. Significantly, it enabled members of
highly disadvantaged communities, not only Goodna, to access the Graduate Certificate. Of the four community members who enrolled in the second cohort, three were the only people within their extended families to have ever studied at university. The course also offered opportunities for community members to be engaged in designing, teaching and supporting higher education initiatives in the Ipswich Region. Generous grants from the Community Renewal Program in the Department of Housing meant that many community members in the region were able to participate.

Furthermore, by introducing an eligibility policy that recognised “significant management experience”, and by developing a targeted learning program, the Community Service and Research Centre has been able to provide access to tertiary study for at least 5 senior government managers who had previously not participated in higher education.

Perhaps the most effective outcome from the courses has been their capacity to develop targeted learning activities in direct response to community/agency requests. The local regional government managers network agreed towards the end of the SIP to broker the full semester collaborative “practicum” in which students are expected to apply theory to practice to resolve a real community issue, thereby directly linking learning to practice. At the very least, the course has created opportunities for networking, relationship building and collaboration which have had enduring and diffuse benefits.

The course has been widely acknowledged by various teaching awards. In 2002, the Graduate Certificate program, in conjunction with the Collaborative Short Courses, the Learning Breakfasts, Learning Circle and action learning projects was awarded by the University of Queensland for “Group Excellence in the Enhancement of Student Learning”. At a National level, the program secured runner up position in the prestigious Australian Awards for University Teaching in the Category of “Innovative and practical approach to the provision of educational services to the local and/or regional community”.

5. LEARNING STRATEGIES: THE SHORT COURSES

With the first cohort comprising all the regional managers of participating SIP agencies and assessment tied directly to the work of SIP, this was a fundamental catalyst for all of SIP’s future progress. As the popularity of the Graduate Certificate grew and community demand for enrolment increased, new concerns relating to equitable access to learning and capacity building inspired the CSRC to develop a series of short courses in Community and Interprofessional Leadership in 2002.

New concerns emerged in the community relating to equitable access to learning and capacity building. These concerns inspired the Community Service and Research Centre (CSRC) to develop a series of Collaborative short courses in Community and Interprofessional Leadership. The aim of the short course program was to make the learnings of the unique Graduate Certificate available to a wider audience.
The five Collaborative short courses are: Collaborative Skills, Collaborative Practice, Collaborative Learning and Research, Collaborative Leadership, and Applied Theory into Practice.

The appropriate permissions from the University of Queensland continue to be sought to enable short course participants who successfully complete the assessment option, to use their results as a way of assisting in the eligibility requirements for undergraduate University entrance. Planning is also underway for those suitably qualified short course participants, who successfully complete the assessment option and, who are interested in undertaking the Graduate Certificate, to receive some sort of recognition for the work of the Graduate Certificate.

The short courses provided a way for nearly 50 public sector employees, and nearly 30 community members – many of whom might not otherwise be eligible for entry into the Graduate Certificate - to access the learnings of the Community and Interprofessional Leadership program. The learning options were more flexible and involved less time commitment than the Graduate Certificate. Similar to the Graduate Certificate, there were ample opportunities providing access to information but also opportunities for networking, relationship building and collaboration that could be accessed by larger numbers of community members. Over time, these short courses have come to be offered in communities outside of Ipswich, or within Departments as stand-alone, professional development activities.

6. LEARNING STRATEGIES: THE LEARNING

Part way through the Graduate Certificate course, members of the Goodna SIP Team who were enrolled in the first cohort confirmed that certain members of their staff who were, or were likely to become involved in integrated services would also benefit from undertaking this course. The students in the first cohort were also committed to providing opportunities for community members to undertake the Graduate Certificate alongside agency representatives. The Community Service and Research Centre agreed to offer a second cohort and recruitment and selection processes were initiated within participating agencies and the community.

Many of the students accepted into the 2nd cohort, had not undertaken tertiary studies for many years, and a limited number of others had significant life experience but had not previously attempted tertiary study. For some, the reality of tertiary study was expected to be daunting and a preparedness to provide peer and learning support and debriefing was canvassed. The SIP “Learning Circle” was established with the support of students. The “Learning Circle” was deliberately facilitated by a community representative (not an academic) and offered in a community setting (not the university) to enable students to consider a range of issues on ‘safe’ and ‘comfortable’ ground. “Learning Circle” agendas were developed by the students, were largely informal and played a key role in supporting people to complete their studies.
A number of benefits emerged from undertaking the Learning Circles including:

- Developed a mechanism which supported students to share readings and gain different insights into set texts
- Built relationships in a stress-free environment
- A ‘value added’ service that built shared understanding by ‘bouncing’ ideas around in different contexts/environments
- The ‘Learning Circle’ acted as an “equaliser” – everyone was trying to complete the Graduate Certificate and this united people making professional and academic backgrounds irrelevant
- Could share experiences and fears and gain confidence by becoming aware that others also shared these
- Broke down barriers by linking community members and SIP Team members in a community setting
- Built participants’ willingness to ask questions – this was confidence building and reassuring
- Prompted people to do research on their own
- Peer support
- Helped to integrate learning with the ‘real’ lives of participants.

Overall, the Learning Circles demonstrated that learning can be fun whilst reflective skills were improved, including skills that apply more broadly to life experiences. The freedom to speak openly prompted a deeper level of understanding and learning was able to be shared amongst diverse community members, professional people and academics in a way that everyone got something out of it. In particular, participants learnt content information from the course and had an opportunity to understand information that could not always be absorbed during the contact days.

They also showed that learning can break down barriers with the importance of allowing a safe space for ‘debriefing’ and discussing the impact of study and other activities on daily life and interactions never underestimated. The importance of informal learning activities should not be overlooked but rather, planned for and accommodated, having unstructured time to counterbalance and reflect on the more structured university processes.

7. LEARNING STRATEGIES: LEARNING EVENTS

Participating in the Graduate Certificate had heightened the awareness of members of the SIP Team of the importance of learning processes which inform practice. A need was identified to continue to expose members of the SIP Team and others engaged with the SIP processes to contemporary research, practice and content issues. The format for this learning needed to be accessible and mindful of everyone’s many time commitments. The Learning Breakfast format was proposed by members of the SIP Learning Group and adopted by the Team. These breakfasts have engaged a wide variety of people on a range of topics and were continued by the West
Moreton Regional Managers of Government Forum (WMRMF) after the SIP concluded.

The SIP Learning Group was also given primary responsibility for the SIP’s initial action research projects based on the philosophy that learning supports measurement, modelling and scenario testing that informs learning. These action research projects varied significantly in content but they certainly provided ample opportunity for immediately applying the learnings from formal and informal learning events described above.

In terms of learning opportunities alone, through a range of associated SIP learning activities including mentored learning circles for Graduate Certificate students and learning events that highlighted new findings in relation to contemporary research, practice and content issues, learning was established as a fundamental component of service integration in the region.

8. CONCLUSION

Summarising the multiple levels and complexity that was the Goodna SIP was always a challenging task throughout the project, let alone assessing its overall effectiveness. A summary of the tools and processes [Appendix 1] attempts to capture the essence of the SIP story. Although the SIP Team consistently addressed the issue of evaluation, without the resources to fund an external evaluation, the Project was reliant on processes of continuous assessment and learning. These internal evaluation methods were consistent with the action learning processes adopted by the SIP Team and were complemented by the network analysis doctoral research of Robyn Keast (2004). Her case study of SIP showed that although SIP could be regarded as a network structure that had gone beyond co-operation and coordination to demonstrate genuine collaboration, it remained at risk of being judged on traditional measures. Though the SIP clearly changed the way governments and government-funded agencies do business in the Goodna community, there are very few definitive outcome measures commonly utilised by government agencies that can conclusively demonstrate these changes. Governments therefore need to be willing to take some risks to give those involved in service integration endeavours both the time to complete work as was intended but also the resources to demonstrate that such work has delivered effective outcomes.

What has been distinctive about the SIP has not been any single feature alone but rather, the way it has interwove elements essential to community development through regional agency core business and intra-governmental, cross-governmental and government-community relations. The SIP has recognised the importance of building and sustaining sound relationships between Councils, State Government, Communities and other local stakeholders. This project has prioritised time and resources to this essential task in order to ensure that integrated services can be developed, which can respond to local needs and aspirations, and ultimately contribute to enhanced community well-being. The emerging challenge for government and
community agencies is to find ways of further enhancing and sustaining these relationships in the long term.

Perhaps the most critical sustainability question inherent in the work of SIP was that if human service integration mechanisms are established in order to respond to disadvantage, can they, and ought they be, sustained once participants have experienced an improvement in circumstance and the initial “threat” that caused their establishment has subsided? The experience of SIP suggests that to answer such a question requires a more sophisticated evidence base to guide key decision-making accompanied by a learning agenda to reinforce sound theory informing good practice.

The SIP’s intention from the outset was to acknowledge the necessity of all government agencies delivering on their core business outcomes whilst exploring what possibilities there were for enhanced service delivery through collaboration. The growing amount of whole-of-government activity, especially at the state level of government, offers numerous opportunities not only for such collaboration to be more strategically coordinated but also for joint ownership of regional government performance according to its ability to meet the needs and aspirations of communities. As much as SIP created an environment in which these relationships were able to flourish, it was always recognised that the transferability of the SIP learnings would ultimately be dependent on regional governance structures, most notably through the regional governance structures. The extent to which the features of SIP could ever be replicated beyond the West Moreton region will be similarly dependent on regional governance structures and indeed the first question SIP staff would ask of other regions interested in undertaking service integration was how effective was their local regional government managers network.

But the effectiveness of any regional governance structure is dependent not only on the health of relationships between regional managers but the amount of resources that can be allocated to support a long-term plan for collaborative government with clearly defined outcomes. Given that SIP consistently attempted to match its activity with the needs and aspirations of the Goodna community, there is less transferability in SIP’s specific projects than the processes it adopted and maintained. Governments at all levels know that they have to start working together more effectively but they are equally aware of the need to deliver results on their core business. Collaborative governance working well is capable of meeting both ends but the reality in addressing such complex human service issues through the lens of service integration is that there is no single “answer” or magic bullet. SIP’s story is one that instead simply promotes the consistent, rigorous and reflective application of good practice or “Doing What We Know We Should”.

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1 A full copy of the final Goodna SIP report “Doing What We Know We Should” is accessible at [http://www.uq.edu.au/esre/lcandsc/past.htm](http://www.uq.edu.au/esre/lcandsc/past.htm)
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