

## **Leaders in the Civic Engagement Movement: April 2015**

Co-edited by Lorlene Hoyt and Amy Newcomb Rowe

April signals the tenth edition of the expanded series. This issue includes an introduction to Australia and two engaged universities: Charles Sturt University and University of Western Sydney. Interviews include **Vice-Chancellor Andrew Vann (CSU)**, **Vice-Chancellor Barney Glover (UWS)**, **Professor Loshini Naidoo** and **Community Partner Eric Brace** from the Australia Literacy and Numeracy Foundation.

### **Australia**

Australia is the sixth largest country in the world. Thousands of years before the first British settlement, indigenous Australians, who spoke more than 250 languages, inhabited Australia. After the European discovery of the continent in 1606, Australia's eastern half was claimed by Great Britain in 1770. In 1901, the Commonwealth of Australia was formed with six colonies federated. Since Federation, Australia has maintained a stable liberal democratic political system that functions as a federal parliamentary democracy and constitutional monarchy comprising six states and several territories. Sydney and Melbourne are considered the largest cities in Australia.

Tertiary education in Australia consists of both government and private institutions. In 2009, the Australian higher education system consisted of 41 universities, of which 37 are public institutions, two are private, and two are Australian branches of overseas universities; three are self-accrediting higher education institutions; and non-self-accrediting higher education providers accredited by State and Territory authorities, numbering more than 150. These include several that are registered in more than one State and Territory.

Decision-making, regulation and governance for higher education are shared among the Australian Government, the State and Territory Governments and the institutions themselves. Some aspects of higher education are the responsibility of States and Territories. In particular, most universities are established or recognized under State and Territory legislation. States and Territories are also responsible for accrediting non-self-accrediting higher education providers.

### **Charles Sturt University**

Charles Sturt University (CSU) is an Australian multi-campus, public university located in New South Wales, Victoria, and the Australian Capital Territory. Established in 1989, it was named in honour of Captain Charles Sturt, a British

explorer who made expeditions into regional New South Wales and South Australia.

The university has six local campuses (Albury-Wodonga, Bathurst, Dubbo, Darlinghurst, Port Macquarie, Wagga Wagga). In addition to campuses in Canberra, Goulburn, Parramatta, and Ontario (Canada), a study location in Wangaratta, a specialist centre in Manly, and Study Centres in Sydney and Melbourne.

CSU also has various course delivery partnerships with several Technical and Further Education institutions across the country. CSU has four Faculties (Arts, Business, Education and Sciences), each offering a range of courses and discipline opportunities. There are over 21,000 enrolled students at CSU, and approximately 2,000 administrative staff.

### **CSU Community-University Partnerships<sup>1</sup>**

CSU's university mission is focused on meeting particular needs and aspirations of the people of regional Australia. CSU's innovative Community-University Partnerships program (CUP) provides grants through a handful of rural-based development programs. The program is coordinated by a central university committee and administered at a regional level by the leaders on each participating campus. The grants represent an investment in community-university partnerships, and the goal is to support the development of regions through contributions to cultural, economic, sporting and related activities and build higher education awareness particularly amongst young people in rural and regional communities.

### **University of Western Sydney**

The University of Western Sydney (UWS) was officially established in 1989 upon the Hawkesbury Agricultural College campus originating in 1891. In 1995, UWS became a federated university system comprising four offices: Office of the Vice-Chancellor, UWS Hawkesbury, UWS Macarthur, UWS Nepean. The principal advantage of the federated network structure was the opportunity to build on the individual strengths of each member university, and through the university as a whole to define and achieve objectives that the individual members might have found unattainable. Starting 2001, the UWS operated as a single multi-campus university rather than as a federation. In 2014, the UWS celebrated its 25th anniversary as a statutory institution.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.csu.edu.au/about/community/partnerships>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.australianuniversities.com.au/info/94/uws/>

With over 40,000 students, the UWS is the fifth largest university in Australia. There are over 2,800 international students from 70 different countries. UWS is a young, energetic and rapidly growing university with six campuses located in Sydney's Greater West region (Bankstown, Nirimba/Blacktown, Campbelltown, Hawkesbury, Parramatta and Penrith). UWS has a reputation for research and academic excellence. The lecturers are innovative and highly qualified. The University encourages staff to respond to changing technological and theoretical trends and to apply the knowledge gained in their teaching programs.

### **Community Engagement at University of Western Sydney<sup>3</sup>**

The UWS Engagement website provides a virtual platform for activities involving the community and creates opportunities for developing relationships and interaction with community partners. The University has a team of Community Engagement Facilitators working with Directors of Engagement to respond to local issues and acts as a focal point for the community, business, industry and government to access the institution and its educational, research and consulting activities.

Engagement at UWS is viewed as a partnership for mutual benefit between the university and its communities regionally, nationally and globally. Engagement at UWS is also seen as a distinctive way of carrying out research, teaching, learning and service. Through community-based activities, UWS aims to contribute to the development, wellbeing and prosperity of the communities and regions it serves, starting with Greater Western Sydney. UWS provides opportunities for community organizations, businesses and services to be linked to the university through joint research projects, engaged learning opportunities and community engagement activities. UWS also institutes a life-long learning strategy called Education for Sustainability seeking to grow and develop citizens with creative problem-solving skills, scientific and social literacy, and commitment to engage in responsible individual and cooperative actions.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.uws.edu.au/community/engagement>

## Andrew Vann, Vice-Chancellor and President of Charles Sturt University

By Lorlene Hoyt



*“We need to do research that helps the economy and society thrive.”*

Professor Vann joined Charles Sturt University (CSU) as Vice-Chancellor in December 2011. An engineer who emigrated to Australia in 1996, he is committed to rural and regional engagement due, in large part, to an innate drive to “achieve something practical.” Raised by parents who trained as aeronautical engineers during the Second World War, he too was “infatuated by technology.” At the helm of CSU, the largest distance education provider in Australia, he puts his passion and knowledge to good use by increasing access to higher education for non-traditional students, including the Wiradjuri (First Nations) peoples.

CSU’s motto, “for the public good,” honors Charles Sturt’s lifelong focus on learning, inquiry, and discovery. About his commitment to exploration, soldier Charles Sturt wrote, “A wish to contribute to the public good led me to undertake those journeys which cost me so much...” Today, a multi-campus public university, CSU has a long and “strong track record of rural and regional engagement,” explains Vice-Chancellor Vann. Tracing back to the establishment of Experimental Farms in Bathurst and Wagga Wagga in the 1890s, the university’s focus on developing “human capital” by way of “access to the university” is deep-seated. CSU has the “highest number of enrolled First Nations students in the whole of Australia” and many are non-traditional – mature in age, or first-generation university students, according to Vann. Remarkably, more than two-thirds of its 39,000 students are “studying by distance.”

The university reaches its unique and geographically dispersed student body by taking advantage of current technologies, though distance learning has been a major forte for decades. Traditionally, CSU printed and “sent enormous amounts of paper” to students. Today, there is a “blended approach,” says Vann. Numerous technologies serve to create a community for students who may otherwise have “a lonely experience.” While CSU values face-to-face interactions, much of the learning and exchange for distance education students now takes place by telephone, online and by way of video conferencing. In 2014, CSU established a think-tank for innovation in online learning called [u!magine](#), which is working to spread leading-edge practices throughout the university.

For Vice-Chancellor Vann and his predecessors, indigenous people and particularly the Wiradjuri are at the center CSU’s expansive community. The Wiradjuri nation broadly coincides with CSU’s geographical footprint. Efforts to

create a supportive institutional climate include cultural competency training of university staff, faculty as well as leadership at the top. Additionally, CSU's Graduate Certificate in Wiradjuri Language, Culture and Heritage connects students directly with the Wiradjuri community and culture. It also raises awareness of the conditions caused by colonization, dislocation and dispossession. By way of the Wiradjuri Language and Cultural Heritage Recovery Project, university members work in collaboration with the Wiradjuri elders and community to preserve the language and culture for generations to come. Impressively, CSU is also working to instill the Wiradjuri ethos by incorporating their language and ideas about how "to live well in the world" into its public mission statement, part of which reads, "Acknowledging the culture and insight of Indigenous Australians, CSU's ethos is clearly described by the Wiradjuri phrase: 'yindyamarra winhanga-nha' ('the wisdom of respectfully knowing how to live well in a world worth living in')..." explains Vann, "We are not doing this *for* them, we are doing it *with* them."

On the question of challenges, Vice-Chancellor Vann provides two crisp examples. He explains, "The power in Australia is concentrated in the cities on the seaboard. I find it is a struggle to be heard." He therefore engages with other regional leaders, gathering and presenting information to demonstrate the vitality of regional Australia (for example, two-thirds of Australia's exports come from its regional areas). He is a staunch advocate for Australia's rural and remote areas, continually emphasizing in the public realm the "need to support all people." The other "battle" involves the establishment of a medical school. "Currently, more than half of all regional general medical practitioners are recruited from overseas. Far too many Australian graduates go on to practice in Australian cities." As Vice-Chancellor, he envisions a future when medical students are recruited from the regions and "go back to do regional practice," where the demands for care are many.

When prompted to comment on what the Talloires Network should emphasize in the future, Vice-Chancellor Vann says, "You are doing it," referring to the importance of identifying and sharing best practices as well as providing a support network. He then spoke of the challenge of university ranking systems based predominantly on research, noting, "they need attention, they are not helpful" with regard to making university engagement a priority. "If this is how universities compete, resources will go to the wrong places," he says. The question is: "What do communities need and how can universities meet those needs?" Rather than advising academics solely to "formulate theories and publish in esteemed journals," he says, "we need to do research that helps the economy and society thrive." The Talloires Network is committed to influencing the global university ranking systems to take civic engagement seriously and to reduce the negative effects of the ranking systems on the public service responsibilities of higher education; the challenge was identified by leaders from 134 universities and higher education partner institutions from 40 countries in the 2014 Talloires Network Leaders Conference's [Call to Action](#). Vice-Chancellor

Vann, a newly elected member of the Talloires Network's Steering Committee, may play a vital role in such efforts. As our conversation drew to a close, he alluded to the recent passing of Professor David Watson, a dynamic and highly influential champion of university civic engagement. Vice-Chancellor Vann applauded Watson's numerous contributions to higher education, stating powerfully and succinctly, "He had a great conception of how universities work and was a tireless advocate for improving them. I learned a lot from him and his work."

*Vice-Chancellor Vann holds a PhD from the Civil Engineering Systems Group at University of Bristol. He has served in various senior academic and administrative roles at Central Queensland University before joining James Cook University in North Queensland in 2004 as Pro Vice-Chancellor Information Services and Technologies, subsequently Pro Vice Chancellor and, from 2008-2011, Senior Deputy Vice-Chancellor with responsibility for the Faculties and Teaching and Learning. He has also held a number of board and community leadership roles, is a Fellow of the Australian Institute of Company Directors, a Fellow of the Australian Institute of Management, Associate Fellow of the Australian Rural Leadership Foundation and a Fellow of the Institute of Engineers Australia. Vice-Chancellor Vann was elected to a three-year term on the Talloires Network Steering Committee, beginning January 2015.*

## Professor Barney Glover, Vice-Chancellor of University of Western Sydney

By Lorlene Hoyt and Amy Newcomb Rowe



*“We must inform and support research and teaching which embeds civic engagement, we cannot leave it on the margin.”*

Professor Barney Glover is the Vice-Chancellor and President of the University of Western Sydney (UWS) in Australia. He is a published mathematician with experience in university management and leadership, intellectual property management, and technology-based learning.

Professor Glover grew up in rural Victoria, Australia. He started his career by teaching math at University of Ballarat. He later connected with Perth's Curtin University of Technology, serving as Pro Vice-Chancellor of Research and Development after 10 years, and was then appointed Deputy Vice-Chancellor of Research at the University of Newcastle. In 2009, Professor Glover moved to Australia's Northern Territory and became Vice-Chancellor at Charles Darwin University (CDU). The Northern Territory spans a vast area of regional and remote Australia and is home to large number of indigenous people. He describes his tenure at CDU as a period of time when he was “intimately connected with these communities.” Focused on community-based health and education for remote families with limited access, CDU hosts one of the Australia's most significant Schools of Indigenous Knowledge and Public Policy.

Some of his proudest achievements at CDU, according to Professor Glover, include playing a major role in the social, cultural and economic life of a vast and sparsely populated region. This is crucially important for regional universities that risk isolation without the community. Under his leadership, CDU established the Australian Center for Indigenous Knowledge and Education with a large grant from the Commonwealth – an iconic commitment to support the recognition of indigenous knowledge and its relationship with western knowledge systems. Another substantial achievement involves providing through the University support for indigenous Australians to obtain both higher education qualifications and vocational training. This epitomizes the role of CDU in relation to Aboriginal people, as well as education and research in the context of regional Australia.

While Vice-Chancellor of CDU, the University's Lakeside Drive Community Garden won third place in the Talloires Network MacJannet Prize for Global Citizenship in 2011. The outreach program, supported by the CDU Office of Community Engagement, enables students, staff, local government, community

members and organizations and local businesses to work together to enhance tropical food production and sustainable living education. Another impressive program engages University students and faculty with secondary schools in the Greek community. More advanced students function as mentors working with primary school students and encouraging Aboriginal children. Role models play an important part in University student learning and even more so among Aboriginal leaders and youth. CDU was proud to provide the technology enabling remote schools to connect to University learning resources, empowering students and teachers. A joint medical program is another successful achievement with a high number of Aboriginal medical students working in remote areas with the help of impressive facilities opened by the Australian Prime Minister in 2011. Also CDU's teacher training program called "Growing Our Own" supports upgrades for teaching qualifications for indigenous teacher assistants in remote communities and provides an important contribution to sustainability in the region.

A "natural step" to take from CDU, Professor Glover took the reigns of UWS in January 2014. As one of the largest of Australia's 39 universities, each of the University of Western Sydney's six campuses aims to be a "university without walls" (Reid, 2012). Former and longtime Vice Chancellor, Jan Reid, worked relentlessly to provide opportunities for university students while demystifying higher education. This was achieved, in part, by the Refugee Action Support Project (RAS). Through the RAS University students provide one-on-one language and literacy tutoring at participating schools in the Sydney region and rural New South Wales, creating a safe environment for dialogue and exchange. The program provides the next generation of Australian teachers an appreciation of other languages and cultures as well as an opportunity to develop the knowledge and skills of how to teach the English language. The program is large and ambitious. Launched in 2007, it involves multiple universities – University of Western Sydney, Charles Sturt University and Sydney University. In 2013 alone, 11 primary schools and 18 high schools hosted 260 tutors who worked with more than 600 young people. Despite these noteworthy accomplishments, challenges persist. For example, more schools and more university students want to be involved than what the program can realistically support.

University community partnerships are challenging and require sustained commitment. Professor Glover continues to look to community leaders for regular contact and relationship management to increase vision for community and government partnership with the University. It is not always easy if leaders lose sight of what the other partner is doing, or if there is a lack of senior leadership to work with from the start. He explains, "While at CDU, we didn't make as much traction in central Australia as I would have liked; due to some lack of involvement. When I reflect on the activities where there is good will, it can still be difficult to connect. You need buy-in from people who are the direct points of contact and you need to monitor them and report on barriers."



It is also essential to provide incentives for engaged teachers and staff. Professor Glover believes “it is important to connect to the core functions of the university, which are teaching and research.” Engagement with communities must inform and support research and teaching; this enables community engagement to become embedded in the institution, not positioned on the margin. Professor Glover explains that leadership with “strong priorities and direction” produces focused results. Looking ahead, Professor Glover is interested in internationalization in higher education. He believes UWS cannot do justice to local community engagement if it isn’t seen “on the world stage as a serious contributor to research and teaching.” Professor Glover hopes to see UWS engage internationally in Asia and beyond. “I want to continue the great work done by Jan Reid,” he says, “and she is a hard act to follow!”

Keeping his sight on flexible technology-based learning and in furthering Indigenous knowledge, Professor Glover is keen to see the role of the university evolve in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. It’s true that universities understand the importance of opportunity and research, but how will technology allow education to occur in new flexible ways? It is a great challenge for universities and community engagement. “When we are changing the way that students engage with research and teaching, it will affect engagement,” says Professor Glover, “There will be significant opportunities here; university civic engagement can flourish because technology does enable connectedness,” he continues. Professor Glover is making strong connections to business and research, especially in the field of information technologies. He reminds us that the first group of millennials born in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be commencing at university from 2017, and their expectations and capabilities are much different than ever before. He concludes, “Social media and global networks are now a hugely important part of life and the civic engagement implications of this are key.”

*Professor Barney Glover is the Vice-Chancellor and President of the University of Western Sydney. Prior to this appointment, he served as Vice-Chancellor at Charles Darwin University from 2009 to 2013. He has also held the positions of Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Research at the University of Newcastle and Pro Vice-Chancellor, Research and Development at Perth's Curtin University of Technology. Dr. Glover has had several positions at the University of Ballarat in Victoria and served as chair on the boards of Innovative Research Universities, Rare Voices Australia, and the Australia-Indonesia Business Council. He holds a PhD in Applied Mathematics from the University of Melbourne.*

## Professor Loshini Naidoo, Senior Lecturer and Researcher at the University of Western Sydney

By Amy Newcomb Rowe



*“If we can make a difference in the life of one person in a community, it is a small yet significant step to empowering a whole community.”*

Growing up in South Africa and making her way to Australia as a postgraduate student, Professor Naidoo is a naturally gifted teacher of teachers. Her work focuses on preparing pre-service teachers who eventually become secondary school teacher and tertiary educators. She brings to the classroom the

strong belief that educators should be connected with and integrated in their communities.

We first became familiar with Professor Naidoo’s significant contributions to university civic engagement through the [Regional Perspectives on University Civic Engagement Research Group](#) in which she joined 15 colleagues from seven countries to discuss and document their exemplary programs, including her groundbreaking work with the Refugee Action Support Program in Sydney. Professor Naidoo describes her approach to action research as a, “commit[ment] to sharing what I bring – knowledge, resources and skills – and listening to and learning from the expertise and insight of the different and in particular refugee communities with which I engage. What I learn, I use to inform my research and the education programs that I teach.”

The [Refugee Action Support Program](#) began in 2006 at the University of Western Sydney (UWS) and later became a collaborative initiative with Charles Sturt University (CSU), Sydney University (SU), the [Australian Numeracy and Literacy Foundation](#) (ANLF), and the New South Wales Department of Education and Communities (DEC). The program initially recruited 35 tutors to support 65 literacy students in four schools. Since 2007, the program has grown exponentially with the UWS School of Education and involved over 600 tutors who have collectively provided over 30,000 hours of support to over 1,000 young people. Additionally, the successful program was replicated in rural locations and expanded to primary schools since 2010. In 2014 alone, 18 high schools and 11 primary schools in urban and rural locations hosted 300 tutors who provided support for more than 600 youth that year. Over the course of the program’s history across all sites and partnerships, approximately 1,400 university students have been involved. This is quite a record for the ambitious program and clearly shows the great need for community educators.

And why the great need? Currently, refugee background students in Australia represent a high-risk group, who face great challenges in terms of adaption to the school system, social adaptation, English language learning, and eventual academic success. Between 2004 and 2010, the number of refugee background students increased considerably with almost 43% of all humanitarian arrivals under the age of 18 (Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2012). Many refugee background students have been subject to war, destruction of their homes and communities, violence and forced separation from loved ones, political and societal instability, food deprivation and malnutrition, conscription and rape and sexual assault. As such, refugee background students in Australian secondary schools encounter significant barriers in educational transition because they must adapt to expectations and culture of a formal education system, knowledge of which is taken-for-granted by those already learning in the system. Adaptation is further compounded for them by having spent prolonged periods of time living in refugee camps or in a transient existence (Naidoo, Wilkinson, Langat, Adoniou, Cunneen & Bolger, 2015). For some, often operating within an extremely disadvantaged framework, the process of language and literacy can take up to ten years to develop. Thus, many refugee background students are expected to acquire social communication and academic writing while catching up to their native-speaking peers. Each year government schools enrol more than 1,300 refugee and humanitarian entrant students. Of the total population of refugee students enrolled in public schools in the state of New South Wales, 81% of refugee students attend schools in Greater Western Sydney.

Professor Naidoo teaches a course called *Diversity, Social Justice and Equity* that equips students who may also be RAS tutors with strategies and pedagogies for addressing social and educational difficulties of marginalized students. Refugee program tutors, as a result of the community engagement, begin to seriously think about their philosophy of teaching and the social conditions of educating.

“Many see a much larger function of teaching that transcends institutional walls,” she explains, “This practical experience is a stepping stone to developing theoretical competence in citizenship and civic education. Tutors move from the *what* of teaching to the *why* of teaching and in this way develop a sense of what it means to educate for democratic citizenship.”

One area of challenge that Professor Naidoo takes very seriously is the difficulty in engaging university staff with refugee background students in particular. In many instances, university staff are constrained by their teaching and research schedules, and some are simply unaware of the difficulties refugee background students have due to their prior life experiences or the processes of support for a particular cohort of students outside the classroom. To counter this challenge, an implementation guide for academic staff on how to support refugee background

students with university study was produced from a research project, “Supporting school-university partnerships for refugee students’ access and participation in tertiary education”, which Professor Naidoo led, and both case study report and implementation guide were sent to universities in Australia and to Deans of schools at UWS. Professor Naidoo wants to engage more academics in professional development programs, action research and linkage projects with community partners and funders.

Her thoughtful planning has paid off. Professor Naidoo and colleagues involved in RAS at other universities were awarded a Federal Research Grant from the Office of Teaching and Learning to investigate ways to support refugee students’ access and participation in higher education. Additional in-kind support provided by UWS, ANLF and participating schools enabled Professor Naidoo and her colleagues to further develop their community work. Moreover, these developments were facilitated through findings from University-led evaluations and case studies of effective refugee programs in schools to improve the initiative (Ferfolja & Naidoo 2010; Naidoo 2012).

When considering the notion of defining civic learning outcomes, Professor Naidoo is quite clear on her approach. Terms such as active citizenship, democratic values, linking theory and praxis, social justice, and reciprocity with community emerge clearly in her vision. For UWS, defining and measuring civic learning outcomes is also a priority and performed through online technology, exchanges in global networks and supporting efforts in the local region through [Engagement Australia](#), the official regional network of 22 engaged universities.

Professor Naidoo explains, “Community engaged teaching allows me to engage with stakeholders with similar interests outside of the university. It aims to help my students acquire, use, and apply knowledge, ideas and skills in ways that shed light on social, civic or ethical problems or contribute to the wellbeing of communities and individuals.”

*Professor Loshini Naidoo is a senior lecturer in social justice education at the University of Western Sydney, Australia. Her academic areas of interest include social and cultural diversity and difference and transnationalism. Her current research is related to refugee and indigenous issues particularly literacy among newly arrived refugees in Greater Western Sydney secondary schools and literacy needs of Aboriginal students in the Northern Territory, Australia. In 2008, Professor Naidoo received the Vice-Chancellors Excellence Award for Community Engagement as well as a Highly Commended for Teaching with the College of Arts Dean's Award. She was the recipient of a teaching program and excellence award from the Australian Teaching Learning Council for her outstanding contribution to student learning in 2010 and 2011 respectively. In 2012 she won the Vice-Chancellor's Professional Development Scholarship and the Outstanding Individual Educator (International) Award from the International Centre for Service Learning in Teacher Education (ICSLTE) at Duke University*

North Carolina, USA. That same year (2012) won a large, prestigious federal government research grant to support pathways for the transition of refugee students from high schools into tertiary education. Professor Naidoo received her Bachelor's, Honours and Master's degrees in Durban, South Africa and her PhD from the University of Western Sydney. She edited the following books: [Education Without Borders: Diversity in a Cosmopolitan Society](#) (2010) and [An Ethnography of Global Landscapes and Corridors](#) (2012). She co-edited *Crossing Borders: African refugees, teachers and schools* (2011). Professor Naidoo participated in the [Regional Perspectives on University Civic Engagement](#) workshop co-hosted by the Talloires Network and the Kettering Foundation (2012-2014).

## Eric Brace, Executive Educational Advisor at the Australia Literacy and Numeracy Foundation (ALNF)

By Nadine Salib



*“Universities that represent the perspectives of diverse learning communities are places which are more inclusive, dynamic and relevant.”*

The Australian Literacy and Numeracy Foundation (ALNF) was established in 1999 with a commitment to improving literacy and numeracy standards in Australia by developing and facilitating projects providing educational initiatives, training delivery and engagement in research. As a national charity, the Foundation is a vehicle through which members of the community and organizations can join together to help break the cycle of poor literacy.

Being aware of the University of Western Sydney’s (UWS) reputation for civic engagement, Eric Brace, Executive Educational Advisor of the ALNF reached out to staff at the university to discuss the possibilities of establishing a sustainable partnership to help young people of refugee background in Western Sydney. In 2006, the ALNF and the New South Wales Department of Education and Training as well as representatives of the UWS developed a steering committee in order to establish the Refugee Action Support Program, a program through which pre-service (trainee) teachers are recruited to provide additional literacy and language support for young refugees. In 2007, the program was formally launched. Each semester since then, university students (the “tutors”) have been able to acquire academic credits by volunteering 60 hours of their time for this community engagement opportunity with schools throughout the local area.

Eric highlights two main objectives from the partnership with UWS. The first objective is to empower participating young people to improve their English language and literacy skills; develop their academic and cultural understanding; and increase their confidence. The second objective is to assist pre-service teachers to develop the skills and understandings to support the learning of refugee background students in schools. According to Eric, “we want students of refugee background to receive additional language, literacy, learning and cultural assistance so as to better engage in their studies. We also want to increase the capacity of our graduate teachers to know the civic role of schools.”

Among the success stories, a university student from a refugee background was able to continue his higher education in mechanical engineering. After the

completion of his degree he said, “The Refugee Action Support (RAS) tutors helped and encouraged me all the time, with essays and assignments, and taught me how to cope.” Another story from a university tutor who said, “I begged to be accepted as a tutor in [the program] because when I came to Australia as a migrant, I had a really tough time growing up. Australia is a great country with a lot of support and resources, but if you don’t speak the language, if you don’t know what the culture is about, it is very difficult. Being a RAS tutor is about being able to be a bridge between cultures and communities. It is a learning process for me. It’s not about teaching, it’s about helping someone learn.”

Over the years, the program has grown significantly. With the assistance of UWS, the ALNF was able to replicate the program in rural locations through a partnership with Charles Sturt University. The program, which initially focused its support for high school aged students, was expanded into primary schools in 2010. More recently, tutors have been recruited from other faculty areas, such as social work and speech pathology. “We started with a small initiative but we grew over time. Case studies and stories of success have shown how effective the RAS program can be and have provided further support to improving the program initiative,” Eric says. From 2007 to the present, a staggering number of university students - over 1,500 tutors – have volunteered their time to assist children and young people of refugee background settle into school in local communities.

In relation to the original UWS partnership, Eric emphasized, “A salient feature of this program is the university’s commitment to community engagement.” The university actively engages with the community of which it is part. UWS does not see itself as being a group of campuses separated from the community. It sees itself as integrated with, concerned about and reflective of the environmental and cultural diversity of the western suburbs of Sydney. Eric explains, “Western Sydney has a high culturally and linguistically diverse population and has been the locality for significant refugee resettlement with almost two-thirds of Australia’s newly arrived refugee and humanitarian entrants settling in the region.”

Typically refugees settling in Greater Western Sydney arrive from Iraq, Sudan, Afghanistan and Sierra Leone. Since 2005, UWS has developed their engagement strategy to raise aspirations of and help the transition for students of low socio-economic background to the university. The strategy aims to implement a system for tracking and improving community engagement. The University currently engages with organizations and individuals in the Greater Western Sydney region on a variety of community and school based projects.

With regards to the future of the program, Eric says that the stability of the partnership with fellow service providers within the region is essential to secure funds to help increase the program in the coming years. Eric would like to see more involvement and more commitment nationwide to expand this program.

Eric believes it is important for universities and communities to partner for two reasons. Within Australia, universities are public assets that should serve to increase the educational capacity of their communities. Universities should also reflect the diversity of the communities of which they are part. Additionally, communities play a key role in shaping further citizens leaders. With both passion and experience on the subject, Eric explains, “There is valuable knowledge in our schools and in our community organizations, which can add value to the depth of learning that occurs in higher education. Universities should be open to this knowledge, and communities should be proactive in sharing this knowledge, experience and expertise.”

*Eric Brace is the Executive Educational Advisor for the Australian Literacy and Numeracy Foundation (ALNF), where he coordinates the Refugee Action Support and Community Action Support programs. Eric has been involved in the education sector since he began teaching in 1998 in the alternative education system in San Diego, California. In Australia, he has worked for the Foundation for Young Australia, where he was in charge of the organization Youth Participation and Engagement Strategies. In addition, he has worked as a literacy and learning support teacher for a diverse range of students, including young people with significant learning difficulties as well as ESL students. His work at the Australian Literacy and Numeracy Foundation also involves activities conducted with remote Indigenous communities. In relation to research, he is interested in the social construction of literacy, particularly in how social interactions influence literacy engagement and perception. Eric participated in the [Regional Perspectives on University Civic Engagement](#) workshop co-hosted by the Talloires Network and the Kettering Foundation (2013-2014).*



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