

Civic engagement expert interview

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1. What is the mission of the Regional Sustainability Research Group? How is the Group engaged in the University of the Sunshine Coast's surrounding communities?

The Regional Sustainability Research Group adopts a transdisciplinary and multi-method approach to focus on sustainable communities and sustainable environments from both physical and metaphysical perspectives.

The work of the Group seeks to advance theory, policy and practice in the interconnected themes of sustainability and regional engagement (e.g. sustainability science, resilience, adaptive capacity, social learning, social and human capital, regional development theory). Some of the areas of focus of academic staff in the Group include wildlife welfare, coastal management, climate change, water management, natural and cultural heritage, innovation, adaptive growth, and community wellbeing. In this way the research concentration addresses real on-the-ground concerns of society and the environment in the local and regional situation and in regional situations elsewhere.

A good example of some of our work that connotes these linked themes is “The Ecoversity: Beyond the green campus”. This project is ostensibly about engaged learning in the regional context to address various issues about sustainability that are physical and relational. At its simplest the project seeks to bring new thinking and action into the sustainability of the campus estate and its infrastructure. However we are going much beyond this by seeking to embed engaged learning about sustainability in the university curriculum, with the university reaching out to collaborate with the surrounding regional community to jointly address issues of sustainability, and by building international partnerships to enable a globally networked approach to regional sustainability questions through engaged learning. This is not a simple process – until the ecoversity initiative the ‘estate’ thinking was stuck in the management/measurement paradigm – the ecoversity seeks to draw in an association with social/learning/theoretical perspectives.

2. In light of the recent tragic fires in southern Australia, what do you see as the role of universities in disaster relief efforts?

The disastrous impact of the Victorian fires on human life and property and on animal life and the environment has highlighted a number of important issues that need to be examined in much more detail. Some of these include: the standard of building design and construction in fire risk areas, the lack of effective and timely information about fire risk; uncertainty about how residents should implement their fire plans and whether they should stay and fight the fires around their houses or leave early to be sure they will be

safe; the capacity of entry and exit roads to small communities to deal with the load capacity of large scale hurried evacuation; local government planning regulation; the effect of excessive exposure to smoke; and the psychological impact of being in a situation of risk and where others have lost lives.

While these issues and others will be dealt with by the Royal Commission set up to investigate all aspects of the fires, there is no doubt universities, with their communities, government and other agencies, can assist disaster situations like this by:

- reviewing policies and procedures such as emergency communication and emergency services response and investigating emergent problems with existing communication
- undertaking R&D into more accurate weather forecasting and scenario modelling that can be used for early warning
- undertaking R&D into forests management
- researching health related questions that are both physical (eg burns treatment) and psychological (eg grief, post traumatic stress conditions)
- undertaking R&D into housing design, materials and construction to improve fire protection
- reviewing planning approvals processes for risk fire areas
- investigating water supply pollution resulting from fire

3. How have you managed to combine your interests in wildlife welfare with regional development and university engagement? What kinds of projects are you working on currently?

My wife and I have been rescuing and rehabilitating Australian native animals for ten years now, as long as I have been pushing the university regional engagement agenda. We specialize in injured macropods (kangaroos, wallabies and wallaroos) and wombats and have a fully equipped rehabilitation centre with enclosed areas where the animals can recover before being released back into the wild. Sometimes an animal can be with us for two years, others just a few weeks. We have a specialist wildlife veterinarian that visits the Centre every two weeks. We have had up to 65 animals in care at any one time and in the past 12 months we have released more than 50 back into the wild. The feeding, medication, physiotherapy, cleaning and the other tasks and the considerable cost to us associated with all of this make this much more than a casual hobby.

Australia has a very poor record with regard to its wildlife, not only in the loss of species which has been large, but in the cruel and sometime brutal way this loss occurs. Institutional failure, a culture of cruelty among some sections of Australian society and a general disregard towards wildlife by many others is a real concern. One can only shudder as to what might be the end result of this condoned cycle of wildlife disregard. In an urbanizing society the divide between humans and non-human animals continues to

widen. Education is a significant determinant in building a culture of respect, ethics and kindness to wildlife. Most education however deals only with the biophysical aspects of animals and moral and ethical concerns are generally not considered. We advocate a relational approach to education that seeks to incorporate an understanding of animals and a willingness to co-exist with them in the context of our shared environment. We have evolved the concept of the ecoversity in a practical way whereby the university can engage in learning with the community about the context of nature and the animals that reside there. Engaged learning with a relational ethos towards wildlife offers a practical pathway for universities to play their role in contributing to a changed societal culture of respect, kindness and ethical and moral value in local and regional communities.

4. What advice would you give to faculty members who would like to start a community engagement project connected to their field of interest?

Importantly, there needs to be a culture of real partnership respecting that knowledge in the community can be as valuable as knowledge in the academy, thereby encouraging a ‘doing with’ and not a ‘doing to’ approach in the way the university engages with its community. Connections between the local and the global community are important in engagement to ensure not only that the best processes and outcomes can be arrived at for the local situation, but that local ‘good practice’ may be used to benefit other communities with ‘like’ issues. The engagement process needs to be mutual, respectful, ethical, meaningful and sustainable and these principles need to manifest in the involvement and contributions of those involved. There needs to be recognition and reward of achievement by faculty staff and those in the community so as to generate improved practice. Finally from an institutional perspective, community engagement needs to be explicitly recognized in the university’s mission statement, operational strategies and in faculty recognition and reward practices.

5. One challenge of implementing civic engagement projects at a university is ensuring that such activities can be evaluated. How can administrators approach evaluation? What tools would you recommend institutions use?

Over the past two years the Australian Universities Community Engagement Alliance (AUCEA) has been developing a framework for benchmarking university community engagement for its 34 member institutions. This comes in response to university administrators and government funding agencies wanting to know three things:

1. Return on Investment - Is community engagement generating a satisfactory return not only for the institution but for the community in which it is located?
2. Best Practice - How do universities, funding organisations and the community assess and evaluate community engagement activity and ensure these activities are based on continuous improvement leading to ‘best practice’?

3. Learning Networks – How do universities build connections with other institutions and their communities seeking to address ‘like’ community and institutional concerns from which they might learn?

The AUCEA community engagement benchmarking framework, now nearing finalization, draws on examples of evaluation from around the world as well as the experiential input of member institutions. The framework comprises three tools, viz: an institutional questionnaire containing around 24 key measurable questions; a partner perception survey; and feedback from universities and their community partners about what they believe to be ‘good practice’ examples of community engagement. Through this framework we have a balance between university and community partner qualitative and quantitative assessments. The framework and tools were tested through a pilot study of 12 institutions and their community partners.

6. You are currently the Vice-President of the Australian Universities Community Engagement Alliance. In your view, what is the importance of building alliances such as AUCEA?

AUCEA is a facilitating body whose task is to encourage and provide support to its member universities so that they might pursue ‘good practice’ engagement with their respective communities. Now in its sixth year of operation, AUCEA (www.aucea.net.au) has 35 member universities from the total of 40 public and private Australian universities. Each year the Alliance runs a National conference to showcase scholarship in community engagement. The best of the peer reviewed conference papers, along with other invited papers are selected for inclusion in the AUCEA electronic journal, the *Australasian Journal of Community Engagement* published twice a year. AUCEA sponsors a visiting scholars program which provides a vehicle for overseas experts in community engagement to meet with member universities; and it encourages the publication of on-line discussion papers in various areas of community engagement. A newsletter is produced four times a year to keep members up to date with new developments and emerging policy and practice nationally, internationally and in institutions and communities. Later this year AUCEA plans to run a symposium on university community engagement to inform higher education policy in the wake of the recently released *Bradley Review of Australian Higher Education*. AUCEA is also finalising its community engagement benchmarking framework so that its member universities can better identify where they might put their engagement resources to achieve the best outcomes and where they might improve what they do in working mutually with their communities.

In providing these services to its member universities, AUCEA is seeking to build university expertise and professionalism in community engagement, and to strengthen local and regional outcomes through university scholarship.