

Governance in local government – University partnerships: smart, local and connected?

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Abstract:

In 2011 Macquarie University completed a memorandum of understanding targeting development of a long-term, research-based partnership with its local government authority, Ryde City Council. This new relationship draws on the significant local knowledge resources of the Council's professional staff, the research expertise of university staff and both institutions' commitment to developing strong frameworks that support a strategic vision of sustainable local community. Of particular value is the university's innovative student engagement program which facilitates longer-term research and service commitments. Drawing on this experience in Sydney, this paper reviews the issues affecting development of partnership between local governments and universities as more than conventional 'town-gown' relations. It concludes that governance and a scaled politics of local-global thinking need to be taken seriously by all parties in new generation partnerships.

Keywords

Local Governance; Research Partnerships; Student Engagement; Scale Politics; Interdisciplinarity

Universities and their Cities

Universities are important elements of their host communities because they build regional competitiveness, social capital, employment, initiative and cultural change (Williams and Cochrane 2013, see also Goldstein and Glaser 2012). For example, in 2000 Boston's eight leading research universities purchased goods and services from local sources at a cost \$1.3 billion, spent \$850 million on construction, employed close to 50,000 people and supported a further 37,000 regional jobs. About 310,000 alumni of the universities resided in the Boston area and they generally "sustain a vigorous intellectual community and ... a healthy and vibrant regional economy" (Simha 2005). Governments and industry expect – and even insist – that urban and regional development should be a normal part of university performance (Hölttä and Pulliainen 1996, Kantanen 2007, Karlsson et al. 2007, Mattar 2008, Hershberg et al. 2007). Despite such expectations, however, universities often remain poorly integrated into urban governance, planning and management (Humphrey 2013).

In contemporary higher education institutions, particularly globally-oriented research universities, high priority is given to research performance portfolios. Learning and teaching portfolios are also valued in institutions' strategic profiles. 'Professional service' and 'community engagement', however, are typically the poor cousin in most universities' performance portfolios. For local governments, the global research university is a rather intimidating neighbour. University sites are often exempted from local government planning regulations or treated as a special case. So, while universities may be "key institutions in processes of social change" (Adomßent 2013), they can also be poorly connected locally. Under pressure to compete globally, an institution's local footprint can seem strategically unimportant in a portfolio that emphasizes global research rankings, government quality assessments and the changing dynamics of the student marketplace. Yet the university campus and its connections to place are an important intersection of local, regional, national and global realities. This paper considers three discursive threads to explore how universities engage with local councils and communities and the implications for urban management and planning:

- 'the engaged university';
- 'knowledge-based urban development'; and
- 'edge cities'.

In the global higher education industry, universities often see themselves as somehow 'extra-local' – above and outside their local settings. University geographers may well understand the complex scale politics of the 'local in the global' (Massey 2005, Howitt 2003), but many other university stakeholders have little understanding of how to be simultaneously local and global. In this setting, it is easy for local councils, community groups and agencies to be seen as marginal to university strategic thinking, and for local engagement to be seen in terms of rather marginal charitable, service or voluntary contributions. Seen in this way, engagement becomes a top-down relationship of the university giving a gift on its own terms. Not surprisingly, this is not appreciated by many locals.

Using the example of Macquarie University's efforts to develop a partnership relationship with Ryde Council in northern Sydney, this paper argues for a different approach to understanding universities' local footprints and developing strategic orientations that situate local engagement in a more sophisticated scale politics of urban change, globalisation and integration across portfolios of research, learning and teaching, and service. The paper first engages each of the discursive threads referred to above and considers their utility in framing and reframing Macquarie University's engagement with its local context. This leads on to a broader discussion of University-Community Partnerships, which notes the need to integrate across commonly held categorical approaches to 'planning', 'teaching' or 'service' issues, illustrating this with recent experience in the Macquarie-Ryde Futures Partnership. Finally the paper considers the practical challenges faced in making such partnerships actually work as partners hope.

The paper advocates an approach to engagement with local government that conceptualizes the university's front door (ie. its local neighbourhood) as the first step on a pathway to the world. It argues for engagement across scales in ways that recognize the embeddedness of national and global issues such as technological change, adaptive responses to climate change, human rights and food security in local settings such as neighbourhood responses to refugee accommodation, cultural diversity, land management and transport and land use planning. That is, the key issue is not to prioritize local scale partnerships above other sorts of engagement, but to situate them in a more nuanced and connected strategic matrix that integrates the core missions of scholarship. Similarly, the issue is not to single out the site-context planning issues around urban design and site management for attention, but to address the contributions across a range of research, curriculum and site concerns.

The Engaged University

Boyer's acknowledgement of the field of scholarship as including a 'scholarship of engagement' (eg. Boyer 1996) has provided impetus to the notion of the engaged university (Hollander and Saltmarsh 2000, Mayfield 2001, Watson 2011, Benneworth 2013, National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement 2010). Many universities are pulled in multiple directions, with engagement focused more on immediate problems, or charitable contributions to neighbours. In the United States, the notion of the engaged university has increasingly emphasized ideas of "active neighborhood involvement" (Breznitz and Feldman 2012: 140). These activities bring universities into various sorts of relationships, activities and collaborations with a range of local stakeholders, including local governments, state agencies, landholders and community organisations. For Clark (1998), it was knowledge transfer and links to industry that was crucial and the entrepreneurial university epitomized responsiveness to external pressures and opportunities, while for Etzkowitz, the 'triple helix' of university-industry-government relations provided the core focus for a shift from the 'ivory tower' to the 'university of the future' (Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff 2000, Etzkowitz et al. 2000). Boland identifies a range of approaches to building the 'engaged university' that encompass all the traditional core functions of higher education institutions, but recognizes that "[b]uilding collaborative partnerships with community, whether in the context of teaching and learning, research, outreach or other public engagement activities, is demanding and challenging" (Boland 2011: 113). Whatever is involved, the horizon for engagement is well beyond old-style 'town-and-gown' relationships (Wang et al. 1996, Brockliss 2000, Mayfield 2001, O'Mara 2012).

In this new approach to civic engagement, it is acknowledged that the role (and impact) of the university extends well beyond the local neighbourhood. The scope of engagement can encompass research collaboration with community, industry and local government. Research contributions of regional, national and global significance can quickly expand the scope of thinking about engagement to respond to wider-than-local horizons. If the institutional vision of engagement is limited to something like student-based activities and modest local contributions to avoid being “bad neighbors, imposing the negative externalities that come with co-location” (Breznitz and Feldman 2012), these wider elements of engagement are left outside the scope of engagement per se, and addressed through more central strategic priorities of research. Yet there is a need to recognize that the distinction between local and wider scale engagement is conceptual and contextual rather than categorical. As an urban developer, as an education provider, as a source of social information, and as an enhancer of social capital, universities have substantial footprints at multiple scales. Thinking about engagement across multiple scales rather than relegating engagement to a modest ‘local’ scale concern, will allow universities to develop strategic relationships that connect rather than fragment the core activities of learning and teaching, research and community service.

At Macquarie University, engagement has been addressed institutionally through the social inclusion portfolio (Macquarie University 2013a). A significant element of this has been the Professional and Community Engagement (PACE) program (Macquarie University 2013b), which is a significant departure from sector norms in Australia. PACE was one outcome of a 2008 undergraduate curriculum review. Along with a commitment to studying people and planet, commitment to participation as a marker of the undergraduate experience at Macquarie was identified as a pillar of the undergraduate curriculum. These three pillars of people, planet and participation ensure breadth across social and scientific understandings, application of discipline- and program-specific learning to a variety of contexts, and engagement with practical settings for the application of knowledge. All undergraduate students are required to complete an approved participation unit as part of their first degree. The PACE program offers a wide range of study options, including international and domestic activities. It is built on a variety of partnership arrangements aimed at supporting sustained student engagement activities and contributing to long-term outcomes which encourage principles of social and environmental responsibility and contribute to a distinctive international reputation for excellence for the university. Fostering strong local partnerships capable of supporting high levels of student involvement in participation activities is central to the success of this program, but building such partnerships is far from straightforward.

Knowledge-Based Urban Development

A second burgeoning literature points to the importance of universities and other research institutions as drivers of knowledge-based urban development (Romein et al. 2011, Yigitcanlar 2011, Heijer and Magdaniel 2012, Yigitcanlar and Lönnqvist 2013). This discursive community highlights the importance of local partnerships between universities and their host communities as central to universities’ strategic futures (Anderson et al. 2013, see also Martin 2011, Burnett 1998, Gascon 2013, Barber et al. 2013). There is, however, inconsistency in policy communities’ acknowledgement of the influences and constraints facing universities in making sustained regional development contributions. As Bramwell and Wolfe put it, “the presence of a leading research university is a critical asset for urban and regional economies, it is not sufficient in itself to stimulate strong regional economic growth” (Bramwell and Wolfe 2008: 1175).

The link between urban planning – generally an issue for local councils under state government control in the Australian setting – and the development of robust knowledge economies is strong:

A knowledge economy is one that is innovative, that understands and utilizes networks, that has the capacity to be transdisciplinary and has a strong facility in applied cultural knowledge. Being competitive in this knowledge economy is not like running a race where all the competitors are independent or have an equal chance ... Rather, it is like thriving in an ecology where everything is connected, and

success depends on how you relate, how you build resources over time, and how every layer of the ecology supports you (Hearn 2008: xxiii).

Reviewing the examples of University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (USA) and University of Utrecht (Netherlands), Goldstein and Glaser identified both hierarchical and heterarchic structural arrangements and differing degrees of institutionalisation of university involvement in regional scale governance. Success in universities' roles in local institutions, they concluded, relied heavily on "the leadership abilities and interpersonal skills of the heads of the key organizations" (Goldstein and Glaser 2012: 173).

For Macquarie University, its situation in Sydney's knowledge economy is unique and compelling. It is located at the northern end of Sydney's 'global economic arc', the surrounding suburb of Macquarie Park hosts a diverse hi-tech industry precinct, transport hub and rapid economic, residential and commercial growth, with all its accompanying complexities and challenges (Searle and Pritchard 2005, 2009). The university was established with a view to creating a strong local link between industrial development, economic growth and university research (Mansfield and Hutchinson 1992), but investment reflecting that link has been slow in being realised. In March 2013, the Herring Road Precinct of Macquarie Park, including the parts of the University site, a public housing estate and major retail outlet and rail-bus interchange site was classified as an Urban Activation Precinct – a state planning classification that prioritizes infrastructure improvement, networking and liveability (New South Wales Department of Planning and Infrastructure 2012). The role of the university in fostering strong research linkages to organizations in Macquarie Park is seen as central to the success of this urban design exercise not only by the university, but also by Ryde Council, the NSW Government and other local stakeholders. Simultaneously, the university's success in managing integration of its land, environmental and built environment assets into a vibrant and viable commercial, cultural and transport hub will be central to the future success of the university.

The Edge City

A third discursive thread relevant to the issue of university partnerships with local government raises issues of urban design. In the early 1990s, US journalist Joel Garreau asserted the emergence of a 'new urban frontier' in North American cities, where high density business districts were developing in unexpected suburban or urban periphery settings:

... we Americans decided to change just about all our routines of working, playing and living. We created vast urban job centers in places that only thirty years before had been residential suburbs or even corn stubble (Garreau 1992: xx).

Garreau's eloquent commentary on changing North American urbanism hit a chord that "helped focus popular, academic and governmental attention on the restructuring of metropolitan space" (Freestone and Murphy 1993: 184). The characteristics of the new urban form, the 'edge city' was unlike the more familiar city centre. For Garreau, edge city reflected commercial imperatives in property development more than urban design and planning processes; it did not conform to existing suburban governance structures; it was characterized by car parks and dependence on private car use; it had large amounts of office space and retail space; it hosted more jobs than bedrooms; it had become a destination for a regional population for work, shopping and entertainment; and it was different to the old urban form (Garreau 1992).

In his book *Edgeless Cities*, Robert Lang acknowledges that "Garreau had it right—or at least partly right. Edge cities represent one suburban future, but only one" (2003: 3). He distinguishes between "two types of suburban office development: bounded and edgeless" (2003: 5). While Australian cities differed, Freestone and Murphy suggested that there were "garreauesque edge city clusters" developing in Australian cities (Freestone and Murphy 1993: 188). They went on to specifically identify Macquarie Park, the industrial park adjacent to Macquarie University, as one of those clusters (Murphy and Freestone 1994). The absence of universities from both Garreau's and Lang's cityscapes is notable, and in contrast to other commentaries about industrial clusters in knowledge-based industrial cityscapes (Youtie and Shapira 2008, Mattar 2008, Jong 2008, Østergaard 2009).

More recently, Zarafu et al (2013: 89) have contended that Macquarie Park “has all the characteristics of a typical ‘edge city’”.

As every 'edge city', the place is characterised by an ineffective local public transport service, large building footprints, and lack of pedestrian and cycleway access. Historically, Macquarie Park Centre has attracted businesses by offering larger sites at lower prices compared to other regional centres, and very high levels of [free on-site] parking .

While this captures many of the challenges facing further development in Macquarie Park, simply defining the area as an ‘edge city’ fails to actually explain anything. It certainly fails to address some important characteristics of Macquarie Park from the vantage point of the council-university partnership such as the attractiveness of the area as a gateway for international migrants (both permanent and temporary), its development as an important public transport hub, and the increased engagement of the university with industry through research and property development. It is also of little use in framing the roles of the university in its neighbourhood. This is partly governed by broader planning and marketing developments, including the university’s own masterplan (Macquarie University 2009). All these elements require an engagement with formal metropolitan scale (New South Wales Department of Planning 2010, New South Wales Department of Planning 2013) and local government (City of Ryde 2010) planning processes. As the principle planning authority, Ryde City Council, has developed specific controls in the Macquarie Park precinct and undertaken extensive studies (eg. Butterworth 2009, Bitzios Consulting 2011, City of Ryde 2012a, City of Ryde 2012b). The Council’s vision for the precinct focuses on developing: premium location for globally competitive businesses; high-quality, well designed, safe liveable environment that reflects the natural setting; three accessible and vibrant railway station areas; strong links to the University; and integrated residential and business areas (City of Ryde 2012a: 6). The state government has recently included the Herring Road and North Ryde precincts in Macquarie Park in its urban activation precinct strategy (New South Wales Department of Planning and Infrastructure 2012).

University-Community Partnerships

In this context, Macquarie University’s partnership with Ryde Council has, not surprisingly, needed to engage with a wide range of urban planning and community development issues, even though it was initiated as a research-based partnership intended to develop a range of joint projects building on a range of research strengths at the university. As part of the wider social inclusion and institutional development process underway at Macquarie, the partnership is fundamental to a wider vision social responsibility – much more than some simple “token goodwill efforts to improve relations between town-and-gown” (Miller 2008: 78).

Many university-community partnerships are focused on service learning arrangements with community organisations in human services or community development roles (Cherry and Shefner 2005). What emerges in this complex urban and community development is that local partnerships between universities and their host communities need to be seen as central to both the universities’ strategic futures and the future development of the community in the local neighbourhood (Anyon and Fernández 2007, Hamann and April 2013). Partnership with local councils face specific issues.

In December 2011, Macquarie University completed a memorandum of understanding targeting development of a long-term, research-based partnership with its local government authority, Ryde City Council. Building relationships with local government has not commonly been a focus for Australia’s globally oriented universities, but the local footprint, town-and-gown and community relations issues encompassed in these relationships are increasingly relevant to operational success and the vision of an integrated mission addressing learning and teaching, research and service. The dynamics of the local government and community sectors are complex themselves and often poorly understood in universities’ administration. Macquarie’s partnership with Ryde targets a long-term, research-based collaboration. While Macquarie University is driven to compete as a global university, Ryde Council must be local. The Council and the University approach partnership very differently. In thinking about just what kind of global university

Macquarie wants to become, current discussions under new institutional leadership have put this local-global tension into sharp focus.

The Macquarie-Ryde Futures Partnership specifically encompasses:

- Research, including identified short-term projects, student research projects, external and collaboratively funded projects, regular and longitudinal data collection, analysis, evaluation as well as development of broader open-ended and long term research agendas;
- Planning, including institutional engagement around issues of strategic planning, place management, site development, community impacts, use of technology, leadership/workforce development and sustainability;
- Development, including workforce planning, community engagement programs and student-based engagement in and service to the City of Ryde and its communities through programs and projects across the curriculum; and
- Funding commitments from each partner, as support for publication of outcomes.

In the context of the preceding discussion, several elements of the partnership emerging between Macquarie and Ryde are notable:

- Integration of research, learning and teaching and community service aspirations of the university in the partnership and its oversight by a steering group of senior executives from both the university and the council has produced a means of integrating across both university and council portfolios and activities;
- Major urban planning issues on the university's doorstep in Macquarie Park draws the university's academic mission along with its property and major projects portfolios into a significant conversation with the planning priorities of the City and its engagement with major areas of state policy (eg economic development, labour force planning, transport and infrastructure, community development and urban design); and
- The holistic approach of both parties to the partnership has meant that progress has focussed on ideas of place-making, capacity-building and strategic planning to conceptualise the partnership rather than relying on 'commissioned research' or specific projects.

The local context for global change is always important (Massey 2004) – and the local setting at Macquarie University, Ryde Council and the locality in which the university operates will be influential on the evolution of this innovative partnership. The Macquarie-Ryde Futures Partnership is likely to evolve as an important element of the sense of place that develops around the campus and the urban precincts of which it is part. Changes in infrastructure, employment and planning controls as well as student recruitment and local demography are all driving local change. Alongside the broader precinct-scale planning issues, there are a number of new university-industry-government partnerships on the campus and in the nearby area. Including the Macquarie Park Transport Management Association, an innovative local government-state government-industry transport partnership (<http://www.connectmacpark.com/>), the new Macquarie University Hospital (<http://www.muhs.org.au/>) and the Australian Hearing Hub (<http://hearinghub.edu.au/>), and the recently constructed global headquarters of Cochlear Ltd. The local residential population is also changing rapidly. This change includes influences from the university's large international student population, and the increasing attractiveness of the area's combination of employment, accessibility, retailing, education and entertainment for residential investment. As shown in Table 1, the local area is younger, growing faster, has more expensive rents and a higher proportion of overseas born residents than the wider local government area, Greater Sydney or the state as a whole.

In this complex setting, there are a range of opportunities and challenges. In building productive long-term relationships, the university's focus cannot be on developing its links to the local council as a research funding stream. While there will be some research income derived from joint projects, there is more at stake than money and research performance indicators. For example, there is a complex set of issues surrounding student housing, and the impact of students on the

neighbourhood – including concerns about illegal and unauthorised boarding houses. Thus, the place of local knowledge in the partnership needs to be negotiated, and needs to consider a range of hidden relationships. For example, the large local Chinese community is serviced by an innovative Chinese Community Language School (<http://www.fenghua.com.au/>) in which many of the university's Chinese students work as part-time teachers, and many of our future domestic students study Mandarin language. This situation gives the university an opportunity to engage simultaneously with the interplay of longstanding prejudices in the Anglo-Australian community, concerns about the impact of illegal boarding houses growing locally to meet demand for housing for international students, and the difficulty of providing local cultural engagement for international students. This interplay certainly points to the need to develop local partnerships that respond to the complex interplay of local and global forces as they are mediated on the ground around the university – to recognize, nurture and value the links that are already developing between the community language school, its host community, our students and the campus.

Table 1: Summary statistics for Macquarie Park – Marsfield, 2001-2011

	2001 Census	2006 Census	2011 Census
Macquarie Park - Marsfield (Statistical Area)			
Total Persons	17837	18837	20166
% increase		5.6	7.1
% born overseas	41	44	50
Median Age	33	33	33
Median rent (\$/wk)	250	275	385
Median rent (% change 2006-2011)			40
Ryde LGA			
Total Persons	95744	98520	105047
% increase		2.9	6.6
% born overseas	35	37	41
Median Age	36	37	36
Median rent (\$/wk)	220	255	370
Median rent (% change 2006-2011)			45
Greater Sydney			
Total Persons	3,997,321	4,148,574	4,429,034
% increase		3.8	6.8
% born overseas	31	31	34
Median Age	34	35	36
Median rent (\$/wk)	210	250	355
Median rent (% change 2006-2011)			42
New South Wales			
Total Persons	6,371,745	6,585,736	6,958,812
% increase		3.4	5.7
% born overseas	23	24	26
Median Age	35	37	38
Median rent (\$/wk)	170	210	300
Median rent (% change 2006-2011)			42

Compiled from: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Basic Community Profiles for each identified area, including ABS 2012.

Success in such endeavours will, of course, rely on good governance within the partnership and care in developing and maintaining a wide range of thoughtful relationships (Boland 2011, Conway 2011). The Macquarie-Ryde Futures Partnership is governed by a steering group that comprises senior leaders (General Manager and Group Manager level from the Council and Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Pro-Vice-Chancellor level from the University). Perhaps inevitably, high levels of staff turnover in both leadership groups have seen significant change within the governance, but to date no reduction in commitment. In addition, the political intrigue generated by conflict within the council and a subsequent inquiry by the state Independent Commission

Against Corruption has distracted attention from the core business of building the longer term foundations through research, student activities and broadening and deepening the network of engagement between the council and the university. As an external reviewer of the partnership recently observed: “The issue is very much of building a better cultural understanding between two organisations which have sharply different missions and cultures” (Phibbs 2013).

Making University-Community Partnerships Work

Macquarie University’ effort to develop a partnership with its local government is neither unique nor particularly remarkable – although it may be quite rare in the Australian context. It is certainly an interesting innovation in thinking about the place of universities in terms of their place in Australian cities. Like any effort to foster an ‘engaged university’, or to build ‘knowledge-based urban development’, the partnership faces significant challenges. If it is not to sink under the tedious and everyday burden of the expanding academic workloads, increased insecurity and performance management of Australia’s neoliberal and entrepreneurial higher education sector, it will need to ensure that the work required is valued, recognised and resourced. In a review of university-community partnerships in the USA, the Pew Partnership (2004) identified three steps that are required to advance partnerships. They concluded that partnerships need increasing access, increasing rewards, and increasing visibility. In his review of the Macquarie-Ryde Futures Partnership, Peter Phibbs emphasized several key recommendations to strengthen and extend the partnership:

- Breaking down barriers: Understanding each other’s worlds and getting the partners together
- Getting people together
- Increasing participation amongst Macquarie University researchers
- Setting the research agenda and selecting research projects

That is, university-community partnerships need to be smart, connected and local. The development of the partnership at Macquarie University as a foundation for a new imagined geography is a work-in-progress. For the university, the challenge of place is well-captured in the challenges presented by the co-location in Macquarie Park with major planning issues, rapid residential development, significant transport and environmental issues and rapidly changing demography. For Ryde Council, Macquarie Park is just one of its planning responsibilities, and its own governance challenges in that wider community certainly demand that it be seen as smart, connected and local.

A new leadership group is in place at Macquarie and has initiated a significant strategic review that is focused on exactly what sort of global university will be developed on the campus at North Ryde over the next decades. The university’s partnership with the council has already moved well beyond the initial focus on research to begin exploring the interplay of research capacity, learning and teaching, community service, local action research and the management of the site against key strategic priorities such as sustainability and social inclusion. There are exciting times in store and my suggestion would be to watch this space (and place)!

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