Engagement with music communities:
A case study of practice in regional Australia

Professor Ryan Daniel

James Cook University
Ryan.Daniel@jcu.edu.au

Abstract

Tertiary music departments or schools within institutions of higher education are key exponents of community engagement, despite the fact that on many occasions these links are often informal and undocumented. While there is arguably a wealth of activity, published research that deals explicitly with this area is very limited, with few documented case studies of practice or research that underpin and/or define the nature of community engagement as a third stream activity. This paper provides an overview of the manner in which a small group of full-time staff from a regional institution have attempted to incorporate community engagement initiatives within academic workloads. It then documents a case study of practice, where one academic as researcher established a formal engagement with a key community resource in the form of an internationally renowned music festival, and which sought to establish mutual benefit for all participants. The data presented within this paper offer insights into the ways in which academics working in a regional area undertake and address community interaction, both broadly speaking and specifically through the case study analysis.

Introduction

Higher education music institutions, regardless of whether they are classified as schools, colleges, departments within Universities, or as stand-alone organisations, interact with their music community on a regular basis. This community includes amateurs through to professional organisations in industry. Regardless of the definition of the relevant music community, it is reasonable to argue that the majority of music institutions in this country have significant links with their local orchestras, choirs, music teacher groups (and individuals), professional groups, festivals and arts groups. These links take many forms, and include the use of spaces (e.g. rehearsal rooms, performance halls), equipment (e.g. instruments, recording facilities), expertise (e.g. staff as performers, consultants, researchers, collaborators, teachers), and general support (e.g. institutional brand support, office space, funds, direct and indirect marketing).

While interaction between music institutions and the wider community is arguably straight-forward and logical given the nature of the art, which is typically people-oriented from the creation point of view and audience-oriented in terms of delivery, such interaction often relies on the passion and support of individuals within the institutional support structures in which they operate. These individuals operate in institutions that house resources, expertise and opportunities not typically available to the wider music community, and this is particularly the case in regional areas where community infrastructure is often less substantial than in metropolitan centres.

On the other hand, while music institutions typically have the resource base and infrastructure, they often rely on the community to provide personnel (e.g. performers), or the audiences to support their creative outputs, hence any interaction with the community is a mutual relationship that requires nurturing. This is particularly the case as institutions of higher education in Australia are faced with an increasing set of expectations and policy frameworks in which to operate. Cope & Leatherwood (2001) and Temple *et al* (2005) discuss the increasing pressure on academics who are now required to balance teaching, research, administration and community engagement, within their institutional policy settings and strategic priority areas, and amidst an increasingly demanding and accountable sector. Taking this argument further, Winter, Wiseman & Muirhead (2005) even suggest that the recent focus on competitiveness and commercialisation is in fact a threat to community interaction and engagement.

Despite these views, Langworthy (2006) suggests that "the importance of University-community engagement has become increasingly apparent over the last decade", hence its relevance in the current higher education sector. Evidence of this is the fact that all Australian Universities have a substantial policy or statement related to community

engagement, and the need to invest in initiatives that both support and promote links with the wider community. For example, a brief survey of the principal Queensland Universities'[i] web sites and e-documentation reveals that each has a distinct policy or strategic plan that both supports and encourages community interaction and engagement as a third stream activity.

There is no doubt that further challenges have recently been added to the life of a tertiary institution and its academic profile (Sunderland, Muirhead, Parsons, & Holtom 2004). Apart from the widely acknowledged decrease in government funding over time in relative terms, and the recent challenges in attracting students to undertake study in a more competitive employment market, such factors as the Research Quality Framework, scheduled for introduction in 2008, add further layers of complexity. This planned framework for assessing the success of government investment in research not only has the potential to positively reshape the place of music and the wider creative arts within higher education, but also involves particular challenges for the creative arts given the need to evidence and explicate the direct impact of practice and/or research outputs, and which includes activities that engage directly with communities.

In terms of opportunity for community engagement, music institutions arguably have an advantage over many other discipline areas in higher education, given the social and cultural impact that occurs through the various activities inherent in the art form in such activities as collaborative performances and community workshops (McCalman 1998). It becomes challenging however when attempting to define the value-adding component or *impact* of some outputs designed to engage the community, for example, a combined University staff/student and community member performance of an original composition. While the intrinsic developmental opportunities and synergies experienced

seems clear to the participants, it is more complicated to assess how this activity has directly contributed to community capacity building or social/cultural development. Indeed, and as argued by Winter *et al* (2005), the "social and cultural role of Universities as contributors to community engagement and a social justice agenda is difficult to quantify" (p. 65).

Probing the literature on community engagement

There is a general view in the literature that the challenges Universities have faced in recent times and continue to face are both significant and multi-layered, be they in relation to key drivers such as government policy, funding, technological developments, standards, commercialisation or definable impact beyond the institution (Lowe, 1994; Sharpham & Harman, 1997; Marginson, 1997; Coady, 2000; Inayatullah & Gidley, 2000). The relationship between 'town and gown' has arguably never been an easy one, given the fact that Australia's first Universities in the late 1800s, such as Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide, were initially unpopular with some areas of the public given their detachment and minimal direct return beyond the institution to the community (Macintyre & Marginson, 2000). Indeed, the relationship between the University and its public has at times remained tense, as institutions struggle to respond to the various arms of the public they serve, including government, industry and the broader community. Macintyre and Marginson (2000) even propose that the recent acceptance of reduced public funding, the move towards autonomy and the "transformation of education into a business" (p. 69), has eroded the capacity of the sector to contribute to civic life.

Regardless of what in some ways is a relatively gloomy perspective, higher education has in recent years seen a concerted focus on and effort towards community engagement

(Temple *et al* 2005). Evidence of this in Australia includes the recent formation of the *Australian Universities Community Engagement Alliance* (AUCEA, 2007). This recent focus has led to debate and attempts to clarify the types and attributes of the range of community engagement activities occurring in the sector, be this community service, consultation, development, participation, or knowledge transfer.

Several authors offer insights into the nature of community engagement from the perspective of the institution. Wildman (2000) argues that because Universities are largely centres of thinking rather than doing, the University-community relationship is predominantly one-way (i.e. students to University), rather than a "two-way capability building process" (p. 106). Sunderland *et al* (2004) agree with this view to some extent, arguing that regardless of the level of interaction with the community, engagement is predominantly from the "inside-out perspective". Sunderland *et al* (2004) however propose a new 'friendship' perspective on engagement, which is based on something that "both parties share in common rather than on what one party (the University) does to purposefully try to connect to the other" (p. 13). This view of the relationship leading to mutually beneficial outcomes is supported by Langworthy (2006) for example, who refers to community engagement as featuring a "strong emphasis on co-operative development and mutual benefit" (p. 1). It is the latter theme of mutual benefit and its implicit outcome of knowledge transfer that is receiving the focus at present and is potentially of most relevance to the higher education sector during the next period (Wallis 2006).

While the published literature relating to music activity in the community engagement area is recent, and yet to be underpinned by specific research methodologies and evidence-based outcomes, there are a small number of published examples that reflect

the activities and opportunities occurring within the discipline. For instance, the collaboration in Darwin between the University and the community to form an active performing orchestra provides developmental opportunities and mutual benefit, not only for the participants, but audiences and the wider community (*Music provides longest-running community engagement*, 2007). The examples encapsulated in the case studies report presented by Queensland University of Technology offer an additional strategy for direct engagement, where communities are engaged and positively changed using creative sound technologies (Harrold 2005). Finally, reports from such institutions as the University of Sydney (*Community engagement and outreach*, 2005), which highlight their provision of arts and culture through performance venues and concerts, is an additional example of the way in which institutions contribute to the social and cultural fabric of the community.

Regardless of the debate and discussion concerning the role of the University and the future for higher education in Australia, it is clear that the community is a primary stakeholder and each institution will continue to be required to clarify and demonstrate how they contribute to the life of the region and/or people they serve. For example, Nicholson (2000) argues that an essential element of a 21st century institution is a "measurable contribution to societal progress and societal benefit" (p. 200). As the current federal minister for education asks: "What is the value of a University which does not strive to strengthen regional economic and social capacities?" (Bishop, 2006). Temple *et al* (2005) highlight the fact that once engagement moves from a one-way model to one which features mutual benefit and cooperation, it will be arguably easier to promote to the community the value of the precious resources being diverted to higher education. While there is a recognised need, this brings additional challenges, with Sunderland *et al* (2004) proposing the view that when an institution "actively

engages with its community, its responsibilities in this area become simultaneously more complex and widespread" (p. 17).

The key issues and debates identified in the literature propose a number of questions and opportunities for reflection for music institutions in terms of community interaction and engagement:

- To what extent do music institutions engage and interact with all forms of their music community, be they amateur groups, not-for-profit organisations or professional industry bodies?

- What is the nature of these engagements (i.e. service, consultation, development, participation, knowledge transfer etc)?

- What data is there to both document practice and evidence the value of the current community interaction and engagement strategies?

- In what ways can music institutions further evidence the value and contribution of their community engagement activities as a mechanism for endorsing the role and value of the arts in higher education?

Each of these questions is worth considering and reflecting on as institutions embrace the next challenging period for higher education.

Exploring a regional institution's engagement strategies

In terms of the potential for institutions in Australia to engage with the community, regional Universities are arguably both advantaged and disadvantaged by their location. While critical mass and access to metropolitan infrastructure are disadvantages, the significance of regional Universities in terms of their opportunity to contribute to the life of the region is the key advantage. They not only offer a significant financial boost to regional economies, provide advice and support to local businesses and industry, but

they contribute to the "cultural and social development of a regional community …

[and] add value to the quality of life and experience in the region" (Nairn, 1997, p. 199).

James Cook University is a medium sized institution that predominantly services northern Australia. One of the characteristics of the institution's aspirations is "regional responsibility and focus" and a clear sense of "local ownership" of the University (*JCU in the third millennium*, 2005, p. 8). Further, one of the priority objectives for the institution is "Engagement", with a sub-strategy objective to "promote and support the concept of community engagement amongst staff, fostering a culture in which the JCU community identifies with the engagement objective in practical terms" (2005, p. 9). All staff prepare a set of actions and activities for community engagement as a normal part of their yearly academic workload and report on this plan as part of performance management, which given the location of the institution within a large regional area, is considered a reasonable expectation and part of normal academic life.

Staff initiatives and activities

The music and digital sound area at James Cook University is currently staffed by three full-time academics, with the support of a small cohort of sessional staff[ii]. In order to consider the manner in which the full-time staff has achieved a series of interactions and engagements with community groups, it was decided to explore this via a semi-structured interview and discussion of the key issues. The work historically and currently undertaken would be documented and considered as an example of current practice, as well as providing insights into the manner in which academics currently attempt to balance commitments across a range of areas, and address the needs of the institution and the broader music community which they serve.

The full-time music academics were subsequently interviewed in early April 2007 using set questions with room for open discussion. In addition, the researcher contributed to the data collection by reflecting on the same issues as part of the discussions. All three full-time academics had been teaching at the higher education level for over ten years. The outcomes from the interviews and reflection process yielded a range of interesting data. In order to synthesise the various data to emerge from the interviews, Table 1 below highlights the key issues to emerge in relation to community engagement (see Appendix 1 for the full list of questions).

Table 1: Views from the coalface – music academics and community engagement

Area discussed	Synthesis of views from music academics
Current issues affecting music academics	• Increased pressures due to funding challenges • Heavy workload but this goes with the job • More to do with less time • Retaining specialisation is difficult with pressures to cover broad areas • There is a tendency to diversify but economise at the same time and there are a lot of people grappling with this issue • Embracing the challenge of either going down the conservatory path or developing an alternative focus is an ongoing issue
Future challenges	• How to balance a professional career with the job as an academic • Likely to become more challenging as institutions address the increasing focus on outcomes and outputs e.g. RQF, Learning/Teaching performance fund • Impact of government on policy settings is an ongoing challenge
Definitions of community engagement	• Occurs at various levels, e.g. participating in community groups, giving workshops and mentoring teachers, adjudications, volunteering at events • Anything involving the community • Activity that engages the community in a mutually beneficial way
Types of community engagement activities	• Eisteddfod and/or competition adjudications • Community band/orchestra/ensemble performances • Workshops for teachers and community groups • Recording of events for community groups • Provision of lessons and learning experiences • Dissemination of research findings and information sharing
Benefits for the community	• Breaks down the natural barrier between academics and the community • Becomes a way of developing skills • Develops confidence in the institution and keeps the community up to date • Can benefit groups financially e.g. recording sales, increased audiences due to sponsorship etc.
Benefits for the institution	• Community embraces the institution in a more whole-hearted way • The community is often very pleasantly surprised that we are prepared to go out and contribute or offer something • Becomes a publicity exercise and information sharing opportunity
Views on "mutual benefit"	• Motivates the way I approach some creative outputs or work focus e.g. adjusting creative outputs to assist the development of resources for teachers • Should be there wherever possible even though implicit at times • Can be very strong depending on the project or type of engagement
Frequency of requests for engagements	• Several times a month and can be anything from adjudicating, to workshops etc. • Quite frequently, say once a fortnight, but it depends on how active I want to be • On average, once a fortnight but it depends significantly on how active and participatory I wish to be
An "ideal world" view on community engagement	• The balance is ok but we could probably do more • It is a hands-on thing that requires persistence and nurturing • It is unwise to spend too much time in this area as it is not necessarily rewarded • The institution doesn't necessarily put enough emphasis on the value of community engagement given the pressures to teach and research

Table 1 reveals the following broad themes in relation to one small group of staff

working in a regional institution:

- Academia in the 21st century has a specific set of challenges and demands which are likely to continue during the next short-term period;

- Community engagement in music occurs at various levels and is wide ranging in nature and scope;

- Engaging with the community offers various benefits for the parties involved, although the extent and detail of mutual benefit and/or knowledge transfer is arguably different each time and in many instances, based only on anecdotal evidence;

- The level and amount of engagement is largely driven by the individual academic, although it is agreed that in general, there is a certain volume of engagement that is appropriate in relation to overall workload and the institution's expectations and reward structures; and

- For this small group of academics, documentation of community engagement as a third stream activity yielding specific evidence-based and definable outcomes was not a feature of their practice to date.

Winter School – a case study of engagement

In addition to this investigation of the broad issues by a small group of academic staff, and in order to offer a window on a specific example of engagement, the researcher proceeded to document as a case study the leadership of a Winter School for a renowned annual chamber music festival held in a regional city (Townsville). This became an ideal opportunity to explore the manner in which such a role might a) reflect the institution's strategic goals for community engagement, b) lead to mutual benefit - including knowledge transfer - for the various participants and c) provide a documented example of practice with definable outcomes and further research directions.

In early 2006, the researcher was approached to undertake the role of Director for the Australian Festival of Chamber Music "Winter School", which included responsibility for the design, implementation and review of a program of rehearsal, coaching and performance for selected students from local, national and international settings. The role involved balancing the interests of local community groups and practitioners alongside the goals of high-achieving students and artists engaged in an intensive 10-day period of rehearsal, performance and workshops (master classes).

The researcher proceeded to undertake a series of steps in developing the 2006 Winter School program, using a range of research techniques and data-gathering strategies over a three-month period, including:

- Analysis of anecdotal feedback obtained by the Festival office from former student participants over a period of 3-5 years but which was not yet collated or analysed;

- Discussions with key Festival staff including the Board of management and administration team in order to establish a framework for the goals and aspirations of this organisation and Winter School in particular;

- Discussion with a number of key community stakeholders including past student participants, music teachers, local performers and supporters of the Festival;

- Research into existing models of practice e.g. Dartington and Tanglewood Festivals, as a means of benchmarking; and

- Reference to broad principles of effective pedagogy gained over a period of years of research in learning and teaching environments for music instruments.

The outcomes of this initial research and development phase provided a framework of evidence and data to underpin the design of the final Winter School program. The various initiatives and interactions involved in this program included:

- A series of private coaching sessions and master classes for participants and which included a small number of local high school and tertiary musicians;

- A series of public master classes, which were designed to provide an opportunity for interaction with the wider music community as audience participants and learners;

- An official Winter School orchestra which engaged in a series of performances with Australian and international artists, thereby allowing developmental opportunities for the students involved;

- A series of "emerging artist" concerts as performance opportunities for these students, whereby growth and development could be tested in a public environment;

- An opportunity for student participants to attend all public concerts free of charge, in order that they view the outcomes of the artists' rehearsal procedures;

- A range of informal learning experiences for the students and community e.g. social occasions where the Winter School students and community members were in a position to discuss issues with professionals from a range of international settings; and

- An opportunity for the participants to provide direct feedback on their experiences via the completion of an anonymously completed questionnaire.

In addition to these activities which directly informed the design of the Winter School, the researcher contributed advice and research-based evidence to support a number of additional community engagement strategies for the Festival, such as a workshop for local music teachers on topics developed and chosen by these members and a high school orchestra program which included the input of selected Winter School participants in workshops and rehearsals. At all stages of the design process, it was

intended to promote mutual benefit for all parties concerned, be these the student participants, the community, the Festival management team or the University.

The Winter School took place in July 2006 and twenty-seven of forty-five participants (60%) provided anonymous feedback to the Director. On receipt of this data, a report analysing the feedback and commenting on various operational aspects of the Winter School was provided for the Board of management. This enabled the researcher to present a number of recommendations to the Board that were based on the activities of the consultancy role itself and the findings to emerge from the feedback received. These recommendations were related to issues of:

- marketing and clarification of the nature of the learning provided for Winter School participants;

- logistics including scheduling, travel, rest periods, fees and support mechanisms;

- reaction(s) to the various Winter School public presentations, including an analysis of audience numbers and anecdotal feedback presented;

- individual artists' impact on students' learning experiences and the potential role of the contracted artists in future Winter School activities;

- students' reactions to the broad range of learning opportunities presented; and

- strategies by which to further enhance the opportunities presented to students within the relatively intensive 10-day time frame.

The Board subsequently sought a formal meeting to explore these various recommendations in depth and to discuss potential changes to the Winter School for the ensuing year. This open and frank discussion and review of the report allowed both parties to explore various aspects of process, including participant experience, community reaction, and realised outcomes as compared with initial goals. These findings would then feed into the design of the program for the following year.

One of the fundamental goals of this community engagement activity was the provision of mutual benefit for all participants. The feedback and recommendations outlined above and made to the Board of management offered this organisation an opportunity to gain direct feedback of the extent to which the intended goals of the Winter School were achieved. While these may be seen as an obvious outcome relevant to an event of this nature, it was the first occasion that the Board had the opportunity to review comprehensive data, evidence-based findings and a series of reasoned proposals and/or recommendations. The presented report also gave the organisation an opportunity to use the data in official reporting to government and other funding bodies and which might potentially strengthen their position in future applications for support.

In terms of direct benefit for the student participants, anonymously completed feedback sheets included the following sample of comments regarding the direct developmental opportunities provided:

- "I gained so much from the artists"
- "To be able to hear things in master classes but then see people pull it off in live concerts was a fantastic experience and makes it believable"
- "It has transformed my playing and my quartet's playing. We benefited from all artists in some way"
- "It was the most beneficial experience"
- "Artists gave great ideas to help develop our basic concepts of chamber music"
- "The chance to play with [the artists] in the Mendelssohn octet was beyond expectations" and
- "Master classes were engaging and helpful"

In addition to the benefits presented to the organisation and the student participants, the researcher as academic, and therefore the host institution, also gained a number of benefits through the role of Winter School Director, most notably via the:

- exploration of the success and/or impact of the designed pedagogical strategies, learning opportunities and interaction frameworks, these strategies tested via direct participant feedback and review and researcher reflection;

- direct experience of leading an intensive pedagogical program which offered new insights and opportunities for revisiting learning and teaching practices within the music program at the University; and

- documentation of the role as an official activity and case study of community engagement.

Overall, it was a positive experience and engagement in that all parties acknowledged both direct benefits and/or learning opportunities. The overall success of the role is best defined by an invitation to continue the activity in 2007, and which would allow for additional data gathering opportunities and the potential to further evidence and measure both the short-term outcomes and mutual benefits for the participants.

Implications and directions

This paper identifies key issues relevant to music academics working in the area of community engagement in regional Australia and which may be relevant to or resonate with the wider sector. Secondly, it seeks to evidence the manner in which a small cohort of staff in a regional University have set out to engage and interact with their music community, against the backdrop of the institution's expectations and policy settings. Thirdly, the paper provides a case study of direct community engagement via a consultancy role undertaken by one academic for an international music festival held in

a regional city. The principal outcome of this case study investigation is the documentation of an example of community engagement as academic practice, which led to the identification of mutual benefit for the participants involved, in addition to issues to address as part of the continuation of the role.

It is also clear that there is a demonstrated need to expand the existing body of literature in the area of music and community engagement, and specifically, systematic research studies that evidence mutual benefit and knowledge transfer. This might include the documentation and analysis of the various strategies currently undertaken by institutions or new engagement strategies. It may also be driven by the institution that seeks to value their broad contribution as an educational provider or by the individual researcher who seeks to evidence the value and impact of their research and scholarship beyond the institution. Given the plethora of activities and engagements typical of the higher education music sector, there is scope and opportunity for significant research and scholarship in this area.

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Professor Ryan Daniel is currently *Foundation Head of School* of Creative Arts at James Cook University. Refereed publications include *Music Education Research* (2004, 2006), *Asia-Pacific Journal of Arts Education* (2006), *British Journal of Music Education* (2001, 2004), *Effective Teaching and Learning* (2005), *Australian Association of Research in Music Education* (2002, 2004) and *Australasian Piano Pedagogy* conference proceedings (2003).

Appendix A – Interview Questions

1) For how many years have you taught in music institutions at the higher education level?
2) How would you describe the life of a music academic in the current higher education environment?
3) To what extent do you believe the role has changed since you first began working in the field?
4) What do you believe to be the challenges for a music academic over the next short to medium term period?
5) What do you understand to be the definition of community engagement?
6) Describe the types of community engagement you have been involved in since you commenced work in the higher education sector:
7) What do you believe are the benefits for the institution in your engagement with the community?
8) What do you believe are the benefits for the community?

9) To what extent do you believe the community engagement initiatives leads to mutual benefit for the participants involved?
10) How often do you receive requests for work that falls into the community engagement field and what are the types of request that you receive?
11) In an ideal world, what do you believe an institution should be doing in the area of community engagement and music?

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[i] Bond University, Central Queensland University, James Cook University, Griffith University, Queensland University of Technology, University of Queensland.

[ii] One of the full-time staff is the researcher of this paper.