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Establishing a regional enabling pilot programme through university-community engagement

Michele J. Fleming
University of Canberra, ACT, Australia
Michele.Fleming@canberra.edu.au

Barbara Cram
University of Canberra, ACT, Australia
Barbara.Cram@canberra.edu.au

Glenys London
University of Canberra College, ACT, Australia
Glenys.London@canberra.edu.au

Carole Kayrooz
University of Canberra, ACT, Australia
Carole.Kayrooz@canberra.edu.au

National research indicates that levels of educational access, participation and achievement for those living in regional and rural locations in Australia are around half the levels of their metropolitan counterparts (Australian Government, 2008; Vinson, 2007). Regional disadvantage occurs across all educational sectors and is characterised by low retention rates at school, low participation rates of students from low socioeconomic status in diploma level programmes (Wheelahan, 2009) and low university access and participation rates for Indigenous and regional populations.

The UCan REACH enabling programme was established by the University of Canberra in 2011 to raise access and participation rates in regional South East NSW. The programme is an adaptation of an on-campus enabling programme offered by the University of Canberra College. The programme was developed after extensive regional community consultation and was delivered in situ in Merimbula.

This paper provides an overview of the programme, including details of the programme development and delivery, and the results of the programme evaluation.

The results indicate that regional communities place high value on university-community engagement that delivers tertiary level programmes locally. Participants reported increased confidence, raised insight into their academic ability and a significant increase in their academic skills. Broader outcomes in terms of social and community benefits, personal-family benefits and financial benefits were also reported. The lessons learned from the pilot programme will not only inform delivery of future UCan REACH programmes but also provide transferable lessons for other providers.

Keywords: equity, outreach, educational access
Introduction

Following an external review of Australian Higher Education (Australian Government, 2008), the Commonwealth Government has set the ambitious target of 20% of domestic undergraduate students being from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds by 2020 (Australian Government, 2009). Participation by low SES students in Australia sits at around 15% of all domestic students. Currently, Australian students from high SES backgrounds are three times more likely to attend university than those from low SES backgrounds.

The Australian Government has three key initiatives designed to achieve its goal: a review of the way low SES is measured; a new funding programme for universities, the Higher Education Participation and Partnership Program (HEPPP); and ‘compacts’ with each university that include a performance funding scheme that rewards achievement of social inclusion targets.

All Australian universities are now required to meet agreed participation targets for students from low SES backgrounds, with achievement of these targets resulting in reward funding. Additionally, universities may choose a second equity group on which to focus, and for which they will be rewarded with performance funding if agreed targets are met. The University of Canberra chose regional students as its second equity group. In Australia, people aged 15-64 years who live in regional or remote areas are less likely to engage in higher education than those from urban areas, with 28% of Australians in that age group living in regional or remote areas but only 19% of higher education students coming from regional or remote areas (Australian Government, 2010).

According to Vinson (2007), there is a strong link in Australia between low educational attainment and ongoing intergenerational poverty. In order to break this cycle of poverty, individuals need to be encouraged and supported in their return to education. Much research, particularly in the area of widening participation for people from low SES backgrounds, indicates that barriers to higher education include cost, time and distance restrictions, low academic achievement and low expectations and aspiration (see Gale et al., 2010 for review). Undoubtedly, many of these same barriers and challenges exist for people from non-urban areas.

In light of what is known about barriers to higher education, programmes need to be established that can be delivered ‘in-place’ to reduce costs for students and to reduce time and distance restrictions; moreover, these programmes need to build both aspiration and achievement. In order to provide programmes in place, authentic community partnerships need to be established. Gale et al.’s (2010) review indicates that in order to support access to higher education by people from low SES backgrounds, programmes need to be collaborative, to recognise the value of difference, to be academically challenging, to be long-term, and to include information about higher education and visits to university campuses (Gale et al., 2010). Further, research by Munford and Sanders (2011) indicates the important role that community organisations and agencies can have in facilitating a return to education by early school leavers.

Strong and engaged university-community partnerships need to value authentic, reciprocal arrangements that broaden the knowledge base and align the university’s strengths with community contexts (Australian Universities Community Engagement Alliance, 2008). An important aspect of university-community partnership is the development of human capital, through education and training that helps retain local graduates, and social capital, including networking to generate technological, commercial and social benefits for the community (Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2002). Healthy community partnerships are characterised by shared goals, values, responsibilities, communication channels, governance,
leadership and a building of trust (Seddon et al., 2008).

In order to increase participation of low SES and regional students, noting that many people from regional communities suffer financial disadvantage, the University of Canberra has developed a range of programmes and initiatives. Many of these initiatives are funded via the HEPPP and others have been undertaken as part of the University’s Entry Pathways to Enhance Regional Participation (Regional Pathways) project, which was supported through a Diversity and Structural Adjustment Fund grant from the Commonwealth.

The project aims were to:

- develop a framework for university-community engagement aimed at increasing equity group access, participation and attainment;
- design sustainable educational pathways and programmes to facilitate regional participation in tertiary education;
- design community capacity-building programmes with regional communities;
- promote access and academic support programmes to regional communities; and
- undertake collaborative research in the regions.

One of the initiatives undertaken in 2011 as part of this project was the development, establishment and implementation of the UCan REACH programme, an initiative of the University of Canberra undertaken in collaboration with the University of Canberra College. UCan REACH is an enabling programme designed to break down barriers to higher education and raise aspiration, achievement and access to higher education for people from regional communities. The pilot programme was developed in close cooperation with members of the Bega Valley community to meet their needs.

Given what is known about barriers to accessing higher education for people from regional areas, the approach taken was to deliver the programme in Merimbula rather than asking people to come to Canberra. In this way, jobs could be maintained, families remain in place, and the problems of time, distance and cost were significantly minimised.

The UCan REACH programme offers an opportunity for students to develop the skills needed to succeed at university; moreover, it offers a pathway to the University of Canberra.

The present study

This paper presents an overview of the development of the UCan REACH programme, a description of the programme and an evaluation of the programme from the viewpoint of the participants and other community stakeholders.

In developing the programme, a key goal was to ensure that local community organisations and agencies were consulted in depth to ensure that the programme met the community’s needs. In terms of the programme itself, the key goal was to ensure that the programme resulted in enhanced educational achievement for the programme participants, as measured by successful completion of the programme.
Method

Participants
A total of 22 students commenced the UCan REACH programme, with 16 students completing (male = 6, female = 10). Of these, 13 completed the University of Canberra programme evaluation survey. Participants ranged in age from 20 to mid-50’s, with a mean age of 34 years. Three of the participants identified as Indigenous and four identified as having a disability.

Additionally, an external evaluation was undertaken of the UCan REACH programme and another programme undertaken as part of the Regional Pathways project (a Certificate IV in Training and Assessment in Batemans Bay). This external assessment included telephone interviews with stakeholders, including non-government organisations, local government and local businesses (N =11), and a focus group undertaken with UCan REACH programme participants (N = 10).

Materials

The University of Canberra programme evaluation asked a range of demographic questions, and asked how participants had found out about the programme. Moreover, participants were asked about their educational qualifications, whether they thought the programme would help them get into university, whether it would improve their job prospects and what aspects of UCan REACH they found helpful or rewarding.

Stakeholders (N = 11), excluding participants were asked how they assessed the overall impact of the Regional Pathways project in terms of adding value to the local community and their own stakeholders in terms of educational benefits, economic/financial benefits, employment prospects, personal/family benefits, and community/social impacts. Stakeholders were also asked about ways to improve the programme.

Participants in the UCan REACH focus group (N = 10) undertaken by the external evaluators, were asked what had been the greatest benefits to them personally in attending the programme and about ways in which the programme could be improved.

Programme development

The UCan REACH concept built on successful enabling programmes that have been taught though the University of Canberra and the University of Canberra College for a number of years. The course structure and curriculum was developed through consultation with University of Canberra academic staff, University of Canberra College academic staff, community liaison officers, the in-community teachers and members of the local community. A Regional Pathways project manager undertook extensive and ongoing communication with community stakeholders to develop the programme and to ensure that the programme remained on-track from beginning to end.

Whilst the support of the local high school principal and teachers was essential to reaching students it was clear that using the facilities of the local school would not necessarily be appropriate. Students who have struggled to succeed at school may be intimidated by the institutional look of a school. For this reason, it was decided to deliver the programme at the premises of a community college initially and then after its closure, at the premises of a community-based not-for-profit organisation.
An experienced course writer was engaged to adapt and expand existing programmes to suit off-campus, regional audiences. A textbook was chosen and an experienced Merimbula-based lecturer employed and inducted. Members of the local community, including schools, training providers and the shire library were consulted throughout this process and the local community college offered its premises for the course. Several local organisations offered their support as guest speakers, including Eden Lands Council, Bega Valley Shire Council and the local library.

The course calendar was developed in collaboration with the community to ensure that it met community needs. For example, coastal towns derive most of their income in school holidays; consequently, the teaching calendar was kept clear of NSW and Victorian school holidays.

The programme was promoted through the Bega-based partnership broker South Coast Workplace Learning and the Eden Community Training Partnerships, an industry-supported community group. Flyers were distributed, email alerts sent out and extensive support provided by the local newspaper and ABC regional radio. When the community college closed unexpectedly, other community members intervened to find an alternative venue and to contact people in the community who might benefit from the course.

Programme description

In the UCan REACH programme students undertake three subjects: Learning at University, Communicating for Professional Futures and Understanding Community. The subjects introduce students to the basic skills needed for university study; provide understanding and analysis of the range of text types students will be introduced to in undergraduate study; and assist in the development of critical analysis, active participation, independent learning, primary and secondary research, and academic literacy. The programme was offered free-of-charge to Australian citizens, permanent residents of Australia and New Zealand citizens living in the Bega Valley region.

Programme delivery

The programme was delivered over 14 weeks from September to December 2011 via face-to-face seminars lasting three hours held on two nights each week. A local lecturer was employed to deliver the programme and guest speakers from the University of Canberra home campus and the Eden Lands Council also participated in the programme delivery. Drop-in support was provided to students by the Merimbula branch of the Bega Valley library. A tutor was also employed for in-home development of academic literacy skills for the Indigenous students in the programme. Textbooks were provided for the class and assessment was cumulative and was structured so that students submitted drafts for feedback before final submission. One assessment task, a research project with report, involved group work. The course convener, based in Canberra, was available to provide support to the local lecturer, as was the Canberra-based project manager.

Early in the programme, students had a full day visit to the University of Canberra home campus to undertake a range of activities and to tour the campus. Students met with support staff from the University’s Academic Skills Centre, the University Library, the Ngunnawal Centre and the UC AccessAbility unit. Transportation and meals were provided free-of-charge.
The partnership broker, South Coast Workplace Learning, provided transport and other individual personal support to participants. Additionally, taxi vouchers were provided to students who did not have a car but had to travel half-an-hour or more to the course.

Results

A total of 22 students commenced the UCan REACH programme, with 16 students completing (male = 6, female = 10), 14 successfully. Each of these 14 successful completers had achieved the University foundation course qualification and qualifications for entry into an undergraduate programme at the University of Canberra. The students ATAR equivalent for entry to the University of Canberra was dependent upon their grade in the UCan REACH programme.

Of these 16 programme completers, 13 completed the course evaluation (male = 5, female = 8).

Source of information about UCan REACH

Participants reported that they heard about the course from a variety of sources as shown below in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Friend</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>38.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school or former teacher</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>23.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local newspaper</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>23.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple sources</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Highest level of educational attainment

Eight of the participants who completed the survey reported that they had completed Year 12, with the remaining five participants reporting that they had completed Year 10. Details of participants’ highest level of post school qualification can be seen in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Qualification</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Certificate II</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>15.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certificate III</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>23.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certificate IV</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>15.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diploma</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>15.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>30.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Benefits of UCan REACH

Twelve of the 13 participants felt that completion of UCan REACH would assist them in gaining entry to a University course and eight (61.5%) of the participants felt that UCan REACH would improve their job prospects. All participants who completed the University of Canberra survey felt that UCan REACH had been a helpful or rewarding experience. Details of the type of help or reward are provided in Table 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive Aspect</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learning good study skills</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improving academic literacy</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>92.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling I have capacity for tertiary study</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>84.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting fellow students in UCan REACH</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>76.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning good research skills</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>69.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning better time management</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>61.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As part of the independent evaluation of the UCan REACH programme, students participated in a focus group in which they commented on the benefits of increased self confidence, the learning of new skills, the learning of academic skills, greater awareness of their own strengths and weaknesses and increased social connectedness.

At the time of writing, two of the students had commenced degree programmes at the University of Canberra. A number of others have signalled their intentions to commence a degree when the time is right.

Community benefits of the Regional Pathways project

As part of the external evaluation, a group of community stakeholders (not programme participants) commented by telephone on the Regional Pathways programme in terms of its benefits for participants and/or the local community. Results are shown in Table 4 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Very positive or positive impact</th>
<th>Response count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Educational benefits</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic/financial benefits</td>
<td>83.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment prospects</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal/family benefits</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community/Social impacts</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Improving the programme

As part of the external evaluation, stakeholders, including participants, were asked about ways the programme could have been improved. Overwhelmingly, better publicity and promotion of the programme was cited. For participants, improved internet access was a recurring theme.

Discussion

The goal of ensuring that the UCan REACH programme was based on the community’s needs was achieved. Initial community consultations verified community members’ support for the programme and their belief that UCan REACH would enhance education and training opportunities for the community. The programme involved extensive community collaboration throughout the development and delivery phase.

The UCan REACH programme also succeeded in creating enhanced educational achievement for programme participants. It allowed people who might otherwise not have had the opportunity for further education to improve their skills within their home community. A small number of the participants dropped out in the first few weeks; however, of the 16 that persisted and completed the programme, 14 successfully passed the course, allowing them automatic entry into the University of Canberra. Although the programme was not specifically geared towards improving the participants’ job prospects, eight (61.5%) of them felt that UCan REACH would assist them in gaining a job. Participant feedback on the benefits of the programme was overwhelmingly positive – not only in terms of academic achievement but also in terms of building confidence, self-knowledge and social-connectedness. Even for those participants who do not go on to higher education, benefits in terms of enhanced literacy skills, enhanced critical thinking skills, enhanced esteem and confidence will undoubtedly stand them in good stead in other life and employment endeavours.

The success of the programme was based on a foundation of strong community consultation and engagement. Community support was essential not only in terms of the development of the programme but also in terms of attracting students to the programme. Identifying the right community groups and individuals with whom to work was essential to programme success. The programme required extensive input from the project manager both in terms of initial and ongoing community consultation and thereafter in terms of ongoing support for programme participants. The project manager ensured that a strong link with the home campus in Canberra was maintained and that students benefitted from the support services available at the University of Canberra.

For universities, regional engagement is in part concerned with promotion, brand management, recruitment and achievement of equity targets. The university-community engagement approach adopted by the Regional Pathways project worked to engage at a deeper level by building partnerships through engagement with numerous community stakeholders in each targeted community. Long-term engagement activities aim to create mutual benefit, build community trust and manage community expectations while ensuring programme sustainability. Communities gain from new knowledge, the inclusion of local perspectives and enhancement of existing skills and infrastructure. In turn, the University gains from an approach that builds on local strengths and opportunities to design new teaching and learning programmes.

The results indicate that regional communities place high value on university-community engagement that delivers tertiary level programmes locally. Broader outcomes in terms of social and community benefits, personal-family benefits and economic benefits were also reported.
The UCan REACH programme will be delivered in other towns across the region in 2012 and 2013. The lessons learned from the pilot will inform future programme development and delivery. Extensive consultation with community stakeholders will be undertaken in advance of programme delivery and better publicity and communication will be a feature of the programme planning and implementation cycle.

The results of this evaluation are of potential interest to policy makers and educators in universities. The achievement of a fair, equitable and meritocratic education system is a challenge for all education systems. This study indicates that carefully designed programmes can have a positive effect in terms of raising both aspiration and achievement through building community partnerships.

Acknowledgements

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References


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