

A University without walls

Profile of the University of Western Sydney (Australia)

By David Watson (based on field visit 4 and 5 August 2009)

Origins and history

The University of Western Sydney (UWS) was created in 1989 as a coalition of three existing higher education institutions across Greater Western Sydney (GWS). The oldest, an agricultural college, was formed in 1891, and the younger two in the 1970s. In 2001 the partner institutions merged, creating what is now, in government-funded student places, the fourth largest of Australia's 39 universities. Its six campuses draw from a catchment of almost 10,000 square kilometres. In the words of the Vice-Chancellor and President, Janice Reid, "The University of Western Sydney was founded to provide high quality and accessible higher education and research in a region historically under-resourced and under-valued." Its mission is captured in its motto, "Bringing Knowledge to Life". It thus has a powerful sense of both place and purpose.

There is strong evidence that it has succeeded in its aims. The Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) concluded an audit in 2006 by describing it as "a university of the people." The Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Engagement), Barbara Holland, appointed in 2007, has been able to draw on scholarly and practical experience in the United States and elsewhere to reinforce civic and community engagement as a highly distinctive feature of the University's policy, practice and performance. In its research and teaching the University is addressing key issues of social, economic and environmental sustainability as they affect a rapidly growing urban area.

GWS is the third largest regional economy in Australia (behind the neighbouring Sydney city and Melbourne). It is one of the most culturally diverse regions in Australia, with the highest percentage of urban Indigenous residents, newly arrived refugees, and resettled migrants and their descendants in the State of New South Wales. It has significant pockets of both urban and rural deprivation, but also hosts the headquarters of 150 of the nation's largest 500 companies. It is growing quickly: Sydney's population is anticipated to grow from its present 4 million to 5.5 million in the next 15 years, and two-thirds of that growth will be in GWS. This combination of growth and diversity presents constructive challenges to an engaged university on a number of fronts, among them:

- student recruitment and widening participation;
- social justice, integration and inclusion;
- accommodating difference and diversity;
- complex local politics (with stakeholders across 14 local authorities, 28 State Parliamentary electorates, 14 federal electorates, and two federal Senators);
- substantial areas of high unemployment, poverty and social disadvantage,
- salience within the national policy framework, and
- its standing as a relatively young university.

The large footprint of the University brings benefits and challenges. Long-serving Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Rhonda Hawkins, said that its oft-cited aim of “making a difference” captures its values and has informed successive plans and budgetary decisions. UWS is one of very few universities in Australia whose legislation mentions its regional mandate. However, she also reflected on the demands of working productively with more than 40 politicians from different parties, who are important supporters and conduits to government, but can be energetic critics when they think the University has failed any of their constituents. “It’s an exquisite juggling act of local interests, ideologies and expectations” she said, and also demands tactful judgment calls when election campaigns overlap with politicians’ visits to campuses and advocacy for the University.

Among the several imaginative initiatives that UWS has devised to meet its challenges, the following stand out:

- a Schools Engagement Strategic Plan, which has a coordinated focus on a region of more than 900 schools and is guided by a Schools Engagement Reference Group, composed of external education leaders and stakeholders and convened quarterly;
- a Refugee Action Support program developed by teacher Loshini Naidoo, and recognised with a national citation for excellence. It currently involves 85 Master of Teaching students mentoring 200 refugee school students, primarily from war zones in the Sudan and Middle East.
- a standing University Indigenous Advisory Council and an Indigenous Engagement and Employment Advisory Board, and dedicated courses of study for Aboriginal students.
- the Whitlam Institute, which is named after the reforming Prime Minister whose electorate was in the region. It offers programmes on contemporary social issues such as the “What Matters?” schools writing competition, judged by established authors, for which students are invited to write short essays on what matters to them in today’s world.
- SMExcellence (www.smexcellence.com.au), a free interactive learning platform, designed and maintained by students and staff mentors. The project sets out to improve the business skills of the region's myriad small business owners and managers, estimated to be in excess of 240,000, working closely with the Commonwealth and State Governments and private sector.
- UWSCollege, a not-for-profit University-owned company that provides academic pathways into the University for students not fully prepared for first year study and for international students who need to gain appropriate English language and study skills, as well as specific vocational courses and an Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP).

- The Badanami Centre under Dean Michael McDaniel which coordinates outreach and support of Indigenous students and coursework on Aboriginal social history and culture for students in mainstream degrees. Badanami also offers dedicated teacher education bachelor awards for Indigenous students.
- a program to recruit Indigenous trainees and interns to work at UWS and with willing partners in industry and government, developed by its Director of Indigenous Employment, Melissa Williams, in collaboration with the elders. It provides a culturally-sensitive mentoring program and work experience for those who would otherwise struggle to enter and succeed in the workforce, encouraging them in turn to become role models for others.

The University's Research Centres embody priorities that begin with the region and its needs, notably:

- Cultural Research;
- Contemporary Muslim Societies;
- Plant and Food Science;
- Urban Research;
- Citizenship and Public Policy;
- Complementary [including traditional Chinese] Medicine;
- Civionics Research;
- Educational Research; and
- Auditory and Cognitive Research;

The Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Research), Andrew Cheetham, estimated that together these Centres supported 360 jointly-funded collaborative projects with community, industry and government, and many more applied research partnerships primarily resourced by UWS.

It is significant that the University incorporates a Medical School, which opened in 2007. The Vice-Chancellor has stressed the politically contingent nature of the

sudden decision of the Commonwealth Government to fund its establishment, rather than increasing student numbers in the two long-established medical schools in the city. The rapid development of this new facility not only rounds out the comprehensive nature of the UWS engagement portfolio, but also recognises UWS' public responsibility to respond to the urgent shortage of doctors, especially within the GWS region.

Unlike the more prosperous eastern part of the Sydney basin, the region has always suffered acute shortages of general practitioners and medical specialists, and, consequently, over-stretched health services. One of the factors considered in assessing applications from prospective medical students is a demonstrated understanding of, and commitment to, the region and its health challenges. This has resulted in up to 70% of students each year coming from the region and praise from experienced clinical teachers for their commitment, educated commonsense and ease with the varied patients they meet in hospital and community settings.

In its present form the University is celebrating its twentieth anniversary. Its pre-history is, however, important. The Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic and Enterprise), John Ingleson, describes how, for at least two decades before its establishment, the local community "knew that they wanted a university," and lobbied hard for it. They now take palpable political and community pride in "our" university. It is also his view that one of the challenges for the University is to overcome a "dated" view of what it can offer, particularly in comparison with long-established universities, as its standing, and the breadth of its disciplines and research continue to grow. In this context, the Dean of the College of Arts, Wayne McKenna, emphasised the reality and importance of having a "mission-driven university," that regards its mandate as opening the doors to higher education for many who would otherwise not have the chance to study at university.

Strategic integration

UWS attempts to meet these challenges by ensuring that the priority and practice of engagement is thoroughly embedded across its strategic objectives and carefully monitored. It is described as a "whole of university agenda." The Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Quality), Geoff Scott, emphasised what he called the "triple bottom line" of "social, economic and environmental sustainability," and the University's responsibility as one of the largest organisations in the region to model best practice in infrastructure development and greening of its campuses and work environment.

The Director of the Urban Research Centre, Phillip O'Neill, put the integration and sense of mutual reinforcement well when he described his and his colleagues' responsibility for "research, professional training, and public discourse." The Centre was formed *de novo* to bring greatly needed educational expertise and applied research in urban planning and management to the region. Recently, for instance, it was commissioned to provide advice for the development of strategies to generate 280,000 net additional jobs in GWS by 2030, to support the re-engineering of the region's urban structure away from a job-poor sprawl towards economic competitiveness and an improved quality of life.

At the same time the University's approach to developing teaching and research which is engaged is to consolidate and focus on a carefully selected set of overarching themes. These are intended to draw on expertise and resources across the University and to promote step-wise and strategic "multi-year" initiatives. At present they focus on:

- schools
- the environment;
- cultural understanding; and
- small and medium-sized enterprises

However, these areas of focus do not limit the freedom of academic staff nor the efforts of the University to pursue a wide array of community engagement activities. To capture these a sophisticated tool for "Tracking and Integrating Community Engagement" (TICE) has been developed to record the great diversity of "academic partnerships" in teaching and research, as well as "public service" activities. A second instrument to capture community partner feedback and impact data is under development. Geoff Scott underlined the drive across the University for robust "user-centred data" to support continuous improvement and the measurement of outcomes.

"Making the difference"

One of the strategic goals of the university is that there should be "experiential learning in every course of study." It is well on the way. The College of Business has incorporated 'engaged' units into its largest undergraduate courses, which will see the current cohort of more than 5,000 students undertake a work-related community project in their final year of study.

The School of Education also requires its students to undertake community service placements in schools or working with young people that are additional to their standard classroom teaching practice. These include, for example, tutoring in community homework centres, assisting with gifted and talented student education programs, mentoring disadvantaged youth in leadership, buddying with students of non-English speaking backgrounds to increase their academic and cultural skills in the Australian setting, working with children with special needs and helping with primary-to-high-school transition programs.

The testimony and evidence of students, staff and community partners underline the "engagement" dimension of this educational priority. They also affirm that it is a two-way street: the University is as keen to learn from the community as it is to take its skills and knowledge outside. It is the spirit in which students have

begun working with the “Street University”, a not-for-profit drop-in centre for disengaged young people in one of the poorer city neighbourhoods. It is this objective of mutual benefit and genuine partnership that characterises the UWS engagement agenda.

A powerful example is the contribution over the past eight years to the Students in Free Enterprise scheme (SIFE). Somewhat at odds with its name, SIFE is part of “Learning through Community Service”, an elective academic subject open to UWS undergraduates in nearly all programs, where teams of students undertake one- or two-semester community projects in areas as diverse as empowering children to “read for life”, running school drama and performance programs, working in community language centres and helping young refugees and newly-arrived migrants understand their educational and employment options. As explained by students Lauren Chapman and Marny Yu and their academic mentor, Diana Whitton, the UWS SIFE operates not only with local and regional groups (like “résumé rescue” for recently arrived migrant groups and “pins and needles” for an African sewing group) but also international projects, such as raising funds for a school in Ghana or helping to sell Cambodian women’s handicrafts in Australia.

Similar projects are also directly bound into the curriculum across many disciplines. Ned Doyle, an academic staff member in Marketing described how his course marshals over 200 students in teams of five to help local enterprises (including some not-for-profits) with their promotion and marketing functions. Computing students spend 120 hours each helping local schools and not-for-profits with IT systems operation and maintenance.

During the site visit, a group of ten students from across the University reflected on the pattern of self-interest and altruism involved in these types of curriculum-based engagement activities. They saw themselves as both contributing to and learning from the community. They also valued a “grown-up” relationship with their teachers, born of working alongside them in many of these projects. Anna

Krjatian, a media and arts student who had worked in television through the University's community TV station said "they treat us like equals."

The reach of the University is wider than just the region. For instance, the University hosted Australia's 2009 *Power Shift* Conference in partnership with the Australian Youth Climate Coalition. This was one of a series of national conferences held across the world in the lead-up to the UN Climate Change conference in Copenhagen in December 2009. UWS media students filmed the speakers and their material was uploaded to You Tube, bringing the highlights to youth across the world.

Reflecting the multicultural mix of the Sydney population UWS also hosts the Aurora Music Festival which celebrates music composed by people from the wide range of communities and language groups in Sydney. In the *Cantata Project*, Associate Professor Hart Cohen worked with the Ntaria Indigenous Ladies Choir in central Australia to bring a cantata in the Aboriginal Aranda language to the Sydney Opera House, which was filmed by the ABC, the national public broadcaster and beamed to a national audience.

Additionally, many students volunteer for community service activities where no academic credit is involved, recognising the benefits to the community, the university and their own personal and professional development. Students from a range of disciplines became volunteer mentors to senior high school Indigenous students in 2009 because they wanted to learn more about Indigenous culture, and make a positive difference to local Indigenous communities.

One of the explicit goals of the University is to foster student self-confidence, especially in those whose opportunities have been limited. For example, Robyn McGuiggan, explained how the University's Parramatta Community Law Clinic, working in partnership with local law firms and with the patronage of the Attorney-General's Department provides experience for students whose background might

not provide the social capital to find placements themselves in private law firms. They in turn support and advise, under the supervision of qualified volunteer lawyers and their teachers, clients who lack the resources to commission legal advice. Such experiences mean, as Julianne Christie, Senior Policy Advisor for Economic Development at one local government Council (and herself a UWS graduate) stated, "UWS graduates hit the ground running."

Tom Urry, the Regional Director of the Southwest Sydney region of the State's Department of Education and Training (DET) described a "genuine partnership" with the University, "not a master-servant relationship." His counterpart from Western Sydney DET Region, Gregory Prior, observed that "the University had read the demographics and responded appropriately." John DeCourcy, a senior Catholic education manager and member of the UWS Schools Reference Group talked about "a real partnership," not least in the areas of innovation and pedagogical development. From the UWS side, Anne McLean, the Manager of Schools Engagement has outlined how a "trusted relationship" had been built up, based both on over 160 successful projects and the use of the Schools Engagement Reference Group to explore together emerging and often complex or difficult educational issues.

The University and its partners are prepared to take shared responsibility for tough and sometimes intractable issues. One such issue is the perceived deficit in mathematical and scientific skills among students at all levels and in the workforce. Mark Grady, the Coordinator of Lachlan Macquarie College, a specialist secondary college of DET in Western Sydney, described how the University and College work together on STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) programmes for school students, university students, school teachers and faculty members.

An "international framework"

UWS is a proudly multi-cultural institution. Its student body (domestic and international) comprises students from 170 countries. It is one of the most ethnically and religiously diverse communities in Australia. Alongside the more than 4,000 international students, a third of the Australian students are from non-English speaking backgrounds. Across both groups about 10% are Muslim. In recognition of international tensions and in order to build trust and respect locally, the University has created a collaborative Muslim Harmony Group and, among other initiatives, funds a community Iftar feast at the end of Ramadan each year. Its undergraduate prospectus states that the University is "about the community and making a difference all over the world." In the words of John Ingleson, "we must ensure that UWS develops graduates with a strong sense of global citizenship."

A university or a "system"?

The six campuses of the University are not only widely spread throughout the region, but are also the sole higher education providers. They take their "neighbourhood" role seriously, with a senior staff member appointed as "Provost" to each to look after not only campus life but also local community liaison. Genevieve Savundranayagam a post-graduate student working on a civic engagement strategy for the Medical School, pointed to the symbolism of the removal of perimeter fences which had previously seemed to "protect" and separate the Campbelltown campus (in one of the region's most deprived areas) from its neighbours.

These campuses are also one of the University's major economic assets, together comprising a land bank of approximately 1,850 hectares. This provides significant opportunities for partnership development. For example, the University has numerous community "tenants" and activities on its sites, and is involved with the new Western Sydney Australian Rules Football national franchise for

development projects on and off campus with future players, support staff and the junior squads. UWS also works across the full tertiary range, from VET (Vocational Education and Training) in its affiliated pathways college and educational linkages with public technical colleges, to post-graduate and doctoral studies. Putting this alongside its various engagement activities it is emphatically an "all-through-life" learning institution.

National Leadership and National Policy

Janice Reid has been one of the strongest advocates for community-oriented higher education, and is a staunch critic of the "implied stratification" which seeks to present the 'third wave' universities formed in the federal reforms of the late 1980s, often in the less prosperous urban frontiers or rural locations, as being of lesser status. She described the fitful emergence of a national movement in the direction of greater recognition of outward-facing university missions that was now gaining strength, not least because of a stronger alignment with current national political priorities. Both she and Barbara Holland played key roles in establishing in 2004 and then hosting the Australian Universities Community Engagement Alliance (AUCEA) at UWS. AUCEA has attracted most Australian universities to its membership and is now working to recruit international members, particularly in Asia, through the Talloires Network.

Such a generous and widely applicable definition of university engagement does not, in the view of UWS, yet animate national policy nor, notably, funding for higher education. They have felt somewhat embattled against a highly traditional definition that focuses almost exclusively on "knowledge exchange" (and within that broad field on "technology transfer" or commercialisation), but see a growing acceptance throughout the Australian sector of the need for a sharper focus on knowledge partnerships which align university expertise with community needs, challenges and concerns.

In responding to the sweeping 2008 Federal Review of Higher Education the Labor government declared that it would expect 20% of university students to come from disadvantaged backgrounds and 40% of Australians aged 25-34 to have a degree by 2025. UWS already exceeds the national target for students from low socio-economic backgrounds. One third of the students are aged over 25 and 40% are the first in their families to go to university (the latter is also true of 52% of its first 100,000 graduates). Some expressed a concern that the belated designation (with a change of Government in 2007) of the recruitment of disadvantaged students as a funded national priority, might favour those universities that are well below this target but can mobilise various strategies, notably monetary, to attract such students.

Conclusions

The main value of the UWS case to the project in comparative terms lies in its disciplined and thoroughly committed focus on civic and community engagement with the State of New South Wales and region (Greater Western Sydney), guided by a strategic engagement agenda embedded in teaching and research and supported by staff and dedicated funding . This is the lens through which all parts of the University view excellence. It thus represents a worked example of Rosabeth Moss Kanter's model of "world-classness" as achieved through "thriving locally" (Kanter, 1995).

Nor is there any evidence that this is a "default" or "second-best" choice. John Ingleson spoke of an explicit effort to encourage University members and their advocates to "stop apologising." and to recognise the national leadership provided by the University. The proposition is that pursuing both equity and excellence in education and research is a fundamental, rational and achievable objective. (The Vice-Chancellor refers to this as "bi-modal" and he as "twin-track"). Several members of the University reflected that the mass media conspired to make this difficult, regarding GWS as "the badlands," reporting almost exclusively on crime and sport and privileging higher education stories

from more traditional universities closer to Sydney's CBD and to the newspaper and commercial TV headquarters. However, the Head of the School of Communication Arts, Lynette Sheridan-Burns, put the point about UWS distinctiveness differently: following a classic design adage, she said, "if you can't hide it, you make a feature of it," drawing on the rich tapestry of people and places in the region. Stuart Campbell also referred to the University's growing reputation among young people: "our viral marketing is good." The Director of the Whitlam Institute, Eric Sidoti, stated that from his point of view, "the University is very brave," in nailing its colours to the mast of social responsibility, public scholarship and research partnerships. These comments reflect a University-wide determination to pursue its vision, even if this means at times going it alone.

A second striking feature is what was referred to by several interviewees as a "whole of university approach." Engagement is widely understood as core business of the University. A further key example of this would be the approach to the Indigenous community, which the Dean, Michael McDaniel, contrasted with that of other universities, describing it as responding to "guidance and leadership all across the University," in order that it should "not be about the education of Aboriginals; it's about the education of the nation."

A third strong theme is their contribution to what we call in our concluding chapter the "public sector alliance." It was acknowledged that this also entails reputational risk, but is pivotal to the institution's role in educating future generations of professionals, such as school teachers and health professionals, and creating close alliances with public sector employers and policy-makers.

Finally, there is the issue of breadth and comprehensiveness. UWS is fully prepared to work outside the conventional higher education envelope when this is indicated by a community need and, in so doing, champion the region and its future. In this sense it is genuinely, in the words of the Vice-Chancellor "a university without walls."