UOW BATEMANS BAY ENGAGEMENT WITH LOCAL ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY PROJECT

A PARENTS AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PROJECT FUNDED BY THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT

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Terry Parsons
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“Before we begin the proceedings, I would like to acknowledge and pay respect to the traditional owners of the land on which we meet; the Walbanga people. It is upon their ancestral lands that the University of Wollongong Batemans Bay Campus is built. As we share our own knowledge, teaching, learning and research practices within this University may we also pay respect to the knowledge embedded forever within the Aboriginal Custodianship of Country.”
INTRODUCTION
This Project was established to bring together members of the Aboriginal community, specifically parents of school aged children, with key stakeholders to look at ways to enhance connection between the community and UOW Batemans Bay with the aim to:

- support Aboriginal students and community members to achieve their aspirations
- provide Aboriginal students and community members with a range of opportunities and guidance toward higher and further education outcomes
- to excite and empower students and community to consider staying at school in order to go on to further education.

To achieve these aims, the Project established an Advisory Committee (which will continue beyond the life of the Project) to offer advice and consultation to the University regarding engaging with the local Aboriginal community and encouraging more Aboriginal people to consider education beyond school.

This Committee along with the University planned and conducted a number of activities designed to bring community members into the University. The aim was to make the Campus accepted by the community as a place to encourage community members to consider studying beyond school.

BACKGROUND
Prior to this Project UOW Batemans Bay had limited direct engagement with the local Aboriginal community. Some strong connections had been established through individuals, particularly with Aboriginal Education and Indigenous Studies subjects taught at the Campus. Also UOW’s Woolyungah Indigenous Centre has had some involvement with the community but in a limited capacity. However no local Campus wide engagement had taken place. Whilst the Campus has above sector average of Indigenous students (3%) this does not reflect the local population and also fluctuates from year to year.

The 2012 Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People emphasises the need for Universities to take a whole of institution approach, not just relying on Indigenous support units. A multifaceted approach to access and ongoing support is required for optimum success for Indigenous students (Behrendt, Larkin, Griew, & Kelly, 2012, p. xii).

A recent report from the Closing the Gap Clearing House emphasises the importance of meaningful ongoing engagement with community in order to facilitate successful educational outcomes. Specifically the report notes the importance of appreciating cultural competency, contemporary social dynamics and to the diversity of Indigenous communities with particular emphasis on valuing the cultural skills and knowledge of
community organisations and Indigenous people. Furthermore, effective engagement requires “long-term relationships of trust which involves Indigenous agency and decision making, a deliberative and negotiated process, not just information giving or consultation” (Hunt, 2013, p. 2).

Underpinning the approach of this Project was the importance of: Connecting with community investigate the particular local attitudes and barriers to higher education Acknowledging the uniqueness of the local Indigenous community by exploring the history and culture and how this relates to attitudes to education and the University. In particular, acknowledging the importance of the land on which the Campus is situated. Engaging in a respectful and effective way with the long term view of creating meaningful relationships with community.

WHAT HAPPENED

PROJECT COORDINATOR
The Project commenced in June this year with the appointment of an Indigenous Project Coordinator. Her role was to make contact with various key stakeholders in the community and to encourage attendance at Committee meetings and Workshops. She also completed a variety of administrative tasks on all aspects of the Project including minute taking, filing and documentation.

ADVISORY COMMITTEE
The fundamental aspect of the Project was the establishment of the Higher Education Advisory Committee. This Committee was open to all members of the Indigenous community and others interested in Indigenous education. This Committee drove the Project, but also provided the environment for community members from a variety of agencies, backgrounds and interest to provide insights, ideas and feedback on increasing participation. It was also an invaluable opportunity to raise awareness about higher education opportunities both at the local campus and beyond.

During the life cycle of the Project the Committee was formalised including the appointment of a Chairperson, establishment of terms of reference, membership rules and forms. A long term strategy was devised for the ongoing life of the Committee.

Five Committee Meetings were held over the course of the Project with a total of 22 individuals participating.

HANGING ROCK INTERPRETIVE SIGN
Another key aspect of the Project was acknowledging the history of the Country on which the Campus is situated. Understanding the cultural and historical significance of Hanging Rock became a key part of the Project as it became clear through early
consultation that there is residual unhappiness about what happened to the Rock and the lack of understanding in the community regarding the past.

“Hanging Rock itself was an ironstone pillar, said to have been as tall as a nearby power pole. The name evolved to describe how the rock towered or hung over the creek below. Once a sheoak tree grew out from around the rock, making the rock appear to hang out of the tree. Hanging Rock took on its own identity as a place of significance, primarily due to the social life that surrounded the site, which was widely recognised as a meeting place for Aboriginal people residing and passing through the area. Hanging Rock was removed by the Eurobodalla Shire Council in 1997 / 1998 to make way for traffic lights. The Aboriginal community has not emotionally recovered from the devastating effects caused when Hanging Rock was damaged. Large sections of the rock lay on the road verge on the banks of Hanging Rock Creek.” (Donaldson, 2006, p. 46)

This part of the Project was important on a number of levels because it:
- drew community together at the University
- created opportunities to share stories and histories
- acknowledged cultural expertise and local history

The outcome of this part of the Project was the design of an interpretive sign which will tell the history and stories gathered during the Project and acknowledge the importance of the land on which the Campus is situated. This sign will greet visitors to the Campus and invite them to see where the Rock was situated. It will serve as a reminder of the past, but also acknowledge the rich cultural heritage which continues in the community today. It will be a visible welcome to all visitors to the Campus.
This part of the Project involved a “Yarn-up” with over 90 attendees including local Elders, community members, high school students (from Batemans Bay High school) and staff, TAFE students and staff, university students and staff and members of the public. Following this meeting, three workshops with Elders were held to work on the design and wording of the sign. A graphic designer and cultural consultant were contracted to work on the sign and run the workshops.
CHILDREN’S ARTWORK

As part of exploring and acknowledging the history of Hanging Rock, the children’s artwork project brought local Elders together with primary school students, staff and parents. Students were brought on site for a campus visit and were taught about the history of the area and about its current use as an educational facility. Students were invited to draw their interpretation of the area. This artwork will be compiled and used in pull-up banners which can be used on Campus and off site.

Two workshops were held with an Indigenous Consultant and local Elder. 18 school children from Batemans Bay Public School were involved (a mixture of Indigenous and non Indigenous students).
POSSUM SKIN CLOAK DISPLAY
During the life of the Project a number of other initiatives were supported. A group of community members created a possum skin cloak earlier in 2013 and the University had received a request to display the cloak on Campus. A workshop was arranged for University art curators to travel from Wollongong to discuss with the Cloak working group on the best way to preserve and display the Cloak.

1 workshop was held involving 4 parents and 3 community members led by two University consultants from the Wollongong campus.
OUTCOMES

Evaluations from the Project were gathered through oral and written feedback. The Project’s aim was to raise awareness about University and higher education options with the local Indigenous community. Those individuals involved expressed a definite increase in their awareness and understanding but perhaps more importantly, they expressed a change in their perception of the University. There was a sense that the University cares about the Indigenous community and genuinely wants to engage. The Elders involved continually emphasised the importance of keeping culture and stories alive and helping the youth find better futures. They believed that the University had an important role in both these areas and that the two were intertwined.

Some feedback from the “Yarnup”:

“Congratulations on your enormous effort and organisation for the Yarn Up. I would like to express my sincere thanks for your dedication and commitment to what I found to be a very rewarding and exciting event. I heard many positive comments and this truly reflected the University of Wollongong and its achievement within our community.”

“Loved the day and thought it was fun”

Feedback regarding the Project:

“I think it is a very important project because of the history of the rock and the Aboriginal people in the area. It is important because it was demolished so that people can see the reason why the area is called Hanging Rock, because tourist and people now wouldn’t know why it’s called Hanging Rock.”

“You need to bring the Koori kids here for events so they know what University is like.”

“Get younger kids involved in Uni to see what’s going on around the area. We want to stop the kids going to prison and do something with their lives.”

“Let the kids and school know what we have done here, that might encourage them.”

“To the Aboriginal children, I ask you all to attend schools and universities where I am hoping you will learn and be taught Aboriginal history. It is for your own benefit that you learn these things and listen to your teachers and Aboriginal elders.”
Participating in the various events and visiting the Campus during the Project encouraged participants to change their perceptions of the University and increased their knowledge and understanding of:

- UOW Batemans Bay, what courses are offered and how they are offered
- the various pathways to university entry
- support available to Indigenous students, both financially and for their study, particularly at a local level

This was achieved by specific exchange of information but also through exposure to the Campus facilities, staff and students. Perhaps more importantly, through the acknowledgement of cultural heritage and history and closer engagement with community, the perception of the Campus changed so that Elders and parents now expressed that they felt it was a place they felt confident encouraging their children to attend.

A key success factor for the Project was the open and cooperative partnership between parents and community and the University. This partnership was achieved through a genuine mutual desire to communicate and cooperate to broaden awareness regarding the educational opportunities that are available to the Aboriginal community locally and beyond. Many barriers and influencing factors were identified and discussed and many constructive suggestions were raised to address these issues to improve access and broaden participation.

Specific outcomes include:

- Establishment of an the Dhuril Gadhu Aboriginal Higher Educational Advisory Committee which will meet on a regular basis to provide advice and support to the Campus on Indigenous issues.
- Establishment of a skills audit and contact list for future cultural events.
- Employment of an Indigenous Administrative Trainee to have an Indigenous presence at the Campus in an ongoing capacity. Trainee to be employed to commence in Jan 2014.
- Visible acknowledgement of Indigenous culture and heritage:
  - Flags in the foyer
  - Design of an interpretive sign at the entrance
  - Design of pull up stand with children’s artwork
  - Consultation regarding an appropriate display for the possum skin cloak in the foyer of the Campus
  - Display of the “History of Dhurga Speaking People" in the foyer of the Campus
- Planning of future events to acknowledge Indigenous culture –
  - Specific local Walbanga “Welcome” and “Acknowledgement” of country protocols and wording.
  - Participation in NAIDOC, Sorry Day and Reconciliation Week events.
• Creation of a web page to collate information from the Project and provide links and information for the Indigenous community. bbay.uow.edu.au/aheac

Figure 11 Flag display in the foyer (Lesli Kirwan and Jessica McGann)

Figure 12 Dhurga Speaking People display in foyer (Terry Parsons)

WORKS CITED

