Policy Paper #2

Strengthening university engagement with communities

November 2023

Professor Andrew Harvey

Pathways in Place
Co-Creating Community Capabilities

A partnership between

mitchell INSTITUTE | VICTORIA UNIVERSITY MELBOURNE AUSTRALIA

Griffith UNIVERSITY Queensland, Australia

Funded by

paulramsay FOUNDATION
PARTNERSHIPS FOR POTENTIAL

For enquiries regarding this publication:

contact: andrew.harvey@griffith.edu.au

Suggested citation:

Harvey, A., 2023. *Strengthening university engagement with communities*. Pathways in Place, Griffith University, Logan, Australia.

Disclaimer:

Table of contents

Introduction: the case for place

This paper outlines principles to inform university engagement with communities, with a view to widening participation and promoting equity, diversity, and justice. An expansion of community engagement could be facilitated by measures such as the proposed mission-based compacts, or partnership agreements. However, engagement with diverse communities, and the organisations that represent them, includes a number of risks around equity, ethics, and effectiveness. This paper articulates how universities could be encouraged to expand their community engagement, and how such work could increase student equity and diversity in Australian higher education.

Reflections here are informed by our experience in the Pathways in Place program. Pathways in Place is funded by the Paul Ramsay Foundation and involves Griffith University and Victoria University working across two respective sites – Logan in Queensland, and Brimbank in Victoria. At Griffith, we have focussed on a mission of empowering Indigenous, Māori and Pasifika communities within (and beyond) Logan. Communities can be defined in various ways around shared identities, but we focus here on place-based communities given 'there is a persistent relationship between location and educational outcomes' (Halsey 2018, p.4) and growing geographic inequity (Holmqvist & Wiesel 2023).

Research increasingly suggests that place-based approaches are vital to addressing geographic disadvantage and to empowering communities (Geatches et al. 2023; Attygalle 2020). Programs such as Stronger Places, Stronger People, Empowered Communities, and the proposed National Centre for Place-based Collaboration (Nexus Centre) highlight a growing emphasis on place-based approaches nationally, as does the recent introduction of the Australian Carnegie Community Engagement Classification within higher education. The Australian Government itself recently pledged an expansion of the regional university centres and a commitment of nearly $200m for place-based initiatives. Within higher education, an expansion of place-based strategies could encourage both diversity of institutional mission and widening of university participation.

First Nations First

The interim report for the Universities Accord rightly foregrounds the need to prioritise First Nations people. Beyond specific initiatives, prioritising means ceding power, and ensuring that Indigenous leaders are empowered to develop and oversee institutional policies, approaches and strategies. As the Interim Accord report notes, 'Australia's educators, researchers, and institutions have a role to play in realising this vision by ensuring First Nations people have a greater say in the decisions that affect them' (Australian Universities Accord 2023, p.36).

Several principles can support this objective within place-based work. First, Indigenous leaders can help universities to better define place, consistent with traditional lands rather than colonial borders. Much of the current place-based work, both within and beyond the university sector, necessitates working across multiple Indigenous countries because the 'place' has been defined by local, state, or

federal government boundaries. Such work can be challenging, and a 'First Nations First' approach would include the involvement of First Nations people in defining the communities and nations to be served. This represents a transition from simply renaming the map to reshaping the map.

Relatedly, university structures could elevate First Nations staff and community leaders in the identification of place-based priorities, and in the subsequent design of place-based work. Helpful to this objective is the 2020 National Agreement on Closing the Gap (Agreement). The Agreement recognises that First Nations peoples have been calling for:

- a greater say in how programs are delivered;
- recognition that community controlled Aboriginal organisations deliver the best services and outcomes;
- government agencies to promote cultural safety and transfer power and resources to community, and;
- access to the same information and data as governments. (Australian Governments and Coalition of Peaks 2020, Chapter 4).

Our approach within Pathways in Place in Logan has focused particularly on the second principle outlined here, namely recognising the centrality of Aboriginal community-controlled organisations (ACCOs), both in their own right and as models for migrant and other community groups. Indigenous health, justice, and education outcomes in Logan are challenging, in a context where these policy areas have themselves been defined along western lines, and operate in western cultural ways. Some outcomes have nevertheless improved markedly in areas where community-controlled organisations have led reform of service provision, and this empowerment typically includes a more holistic understanding of wellbeing.

Progress is visible in initiatives such as the Birthing in Our Communities (BiOC) program led by the Institute for Urban Indigenous Health (IUIH) (Kildea et al. 2019). Pathways in Place resources are supporting an expansion of the BiOC program to include a Health Justice Partnership in Logan, in which dedicated legal resources support women's perinatal experiences, recognising the prevalence of unborn child notifications and the close relationship between health and justice in Indigenous maternity experiences. Similarly, we support a local Aboriginal community-controlled organisation, Gunya Meta, in their Early Childhood Education (ECE) work including intergenerational playgroups and transition to school programs. The gap in Indigenous kindergarten attendance is narrowing, but attendance remains significantly lower in several states and regional areas (Australian Government 2020). Other Indigenous-led partnerships such as the Munarra Centre for Regional Excellence in Shepparton provide models of collaboration across multiple sectors and stages of education.

The Closing the Gap Implementation Plan (2023) acknowledges that 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations have a critical leadership and service delivery role across the country supporting the safety, wellbeing, health and development of children in their early years' (Commonwealth of Australia 2023, p.50). More broadly, the Implementation Plan also commits the Commonwealth to 'working with the Coalition of Peaks to identify evidence-led approaches to applying a 'meaningful proportion' of funding to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations'

(p.21). The need for 'First Nations people to have a greater say' is thus consistent across early childhood education, schools, and higher education. The Commonwealth reviews of each education sector could reflect not only the connections between the sectors, including acknowledgement of pipelines of disadvantage, but the need to empower Indigenous communities in order to raise education attainment at all levels. Such empowerment would include the allocation of some funds directly to Indigenous communities, including through Aboriginal community-controlled organisations.

Identifying and supporting underserved groups

The student equity framework remains limited by its exclusive focus on six identified equity groups. As we have outlined previously (Harvey et al. 2016), the framework and associated data provide little space to interrogate the access and success of groups such as: students from refugee backgrounds (Terry et al. 2016); care leavers, i.e. people who have transitioned from foster, kinship, and residential care (Harvey et al. 2015); military veterans (Harvey et al. 2018; Wadham et al. 2022); specific migrant groups who face higher education challenges across the student life cycle, e.g. Māori and Pasifika (Gerace et al. 2023), African-Australians (Mekonnen 2020; Harvey et al. 2020); parents (Andrewartha et al. 2022); carers (Andrewartha & Harvey 2021); neurodiverse people (Miller et al. 2021); estranged students (Stevenson et al. 2020); LGBTIQ+ students (Grimwood 2017); incarcerated and justice-impacted students (Martinovic et al. 2018); and multiple other groups. Addressing structural inequity remains critical to widening participation, but the promotion of more distinctive institutional strategies could also increase student equity and diversity.

Within Pathways in Place, we are specifically focussed on Māori and Pasifika communities, in addition to First Nations people. Logan includes the largest proportion of Māori and Pasifika people within any local government area in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2021). Despite extraordinary community cultural wealth, these groups face health and education challenges (Gerace et al. 2023), partly because of provisions of the Special Category Visa under which most arrived in Australia. Until 2023, this visa precluded access to income-contingent HELP (Higher Education Loan Program) loans, among other services, until ten years of residency. Policy reform has reduced the waiting period to four years in line with other permanent residents, but it remains problematic that permanent residents, of whom there are over one million in Australia, lack access to HELP loans (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2021). Other specific challenges in Logan include the paucity of services, including early childhood education and care, that are offered to culturally and linguistically diverse communities (Zanus 2022), let alone provided by those communities.

While Australia has now exceeded the Bradley target of 40 per cent of people (aged 25 to 34) holding a bachelor degree or above, Māori and Pasifika attainment remains below 15 per cent, most similar to First Nations people and markedly different from other migrant communities (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2021). Within Logan, Griffith University has been able to support a Pasifika-led organisation, Village Connect, to develop a Pasifika-led Registered Training Organisation, in order to increase tertiary opportunities and pathways into university for community members. The employment of a

Pasifika community research fellow within Pathways in Place further helps to ensure that collaboration is authentic, ethical, and community-led at each stage. These approaches reflect principles that could be adopted more widely under partnership agreements. Principles include the active employment of staff who represent the communities that universities claim to serve, respect for sovereignty of data and intellectual property (Walter et al. 2020), and adoption of community-led methodologies and ways of working (Ponton 2018; Fainga'a-Manu Sione 2023).

Recent research commissioned by the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education also confirmed that humanitarian migrants 'were clearly disadvantaged in relation to attaining higher education qualifications: they were approximately half as likely as Australian-born individuals to have a university degree, a third as likely as family migrants and a fifth as likely as skilled migrants.' (Perales et al. 2021, p.1). Similarly, research has confirmed the particular challenges faced by African Australian communities. Mekonnen highlights the gaps in both university access and completion for refugee background African youth, noting that around one fifth of humanitarian migrants are from sub-Saharan Africa and that 'only one in ten refugee-background African youth (aged 18–30) transitioned to higher education within the first five years of their arrival. The group also lagged well behind the general population in terms of undergraduate course completion' (Mekonnen 2020).

Our own research has found that, for Somali Australians, graduate outcomes are extremely poor relative to other graduates. Indeed, 'a Somali Australian with a bachelor degree is about as likely to be unemployed as another Australian who has left school at Year 10 or earlier' (Harvey et al. 2020, p.6). This employment gap exists despite relatively high access and participation rates (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2021). Similar education gaps exist among many other groups such as care leavers and veterans, as outlined above, and compacts provide an opportunity to identify and empower these groups in similar ways. Notably, many of these marginalised groups are located primarily within particular states, cities, or regions. Around half of the African Australian population, for example, resides within Victoria (Harvey et al. 2020). The extent of locational disadvantage in Australia, and its overlap with certain underserved groups, suggest that partnership agreements could be both place-based and community-empowering.

Better data is also critical to identifying and serving marginalised communities. Education research, including recent work by Morey et al. (2022), clearly shows that there can be no equity without data equity and that failure to collect detailed data can represent a form of structural racism. To this end, the Australian Government could move to establish incentives, guidance and templates for universities and tertiary admissions centres to capture application, enrolment, and success data for underserved groups. Partnership agreements could also encourage universities to focus on specific underserved communities within their catchments, including those from refugee backgrounds, veterans, carers, parents, Māori and Pasifika students, incarcerated and justice-impacted people, and others. Further, governments could promote the establishment of university employment goals wherever underserved groups are prioritised, so that university service to such groups includes capacity building, community leadership and research, and a 'nothing about us without us' principle.

Empowering communities

The marginalisation of underserved communities typically extends to an absence of representation on reports and publications about them. Central to serving minoritised communities is the task of promoting their own voice and agency to enable self-empowerment. For universities, this process means moving beyond consultation and even co-design, instead promoting end-to-end autonomy, sovereignty, and authorship. Approaches such as mission-based compacts could provide an opportunity for institutions to support communities through: the employment of people with lived experience to co-lead outreach and broader programs; the employment of school and community research fellows to co-author research; the democratisation of data; the protection of data sovereignty; and related capacity building and professional development. This work could include the co-development of micro-credentials and qualifications around community leadership, and the creation of data justice hubs to serve communities, e.g. the Los Angeles Data Justice Hub.

Consistent with principles outlined in the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, we also advocate direct support for community-led organisations, including those representing migrant communities, people with a disability, and regional and remote communities. Raising the participation of marginalised groups requires new approaches that are empowering and that can shift the narrative of 'university is not for people like me.' Part of this work involves the employment of diverse student mentors and staff who can conduct outreach in secondary schools and provide role models for prospective students. However, a university shift is also required from working primarily with secondary schools to broaden engagement of communities, including for-purpose, spiritual, linguistic, and other organisations. University engagement needs to meet communities where they are at (both physically and strategically) and also to recognise and address the inherent power imbalance between a large organisation and smaller, community-led ones. Respecting voice, promoting agency, and protecting intellectual property are critical.

Research is also central to empowerment. Employment of community research fellows can help both to elevate local voices and to ensure that research is conducted in culturally respectful ways. Ethics provisions and agreements that protect the intellectual property of communities in any co-research projects are also important. Better connections with existing institutional research centres would also strengthen equity. Many universities support internationally leading research centres in areas including disability, neurodiversity, employment, migrants and refugees, and Indigenous health. However, institutional research is often only indirectly connected to institutional practice. Approaches such as mission-based compacts could encourage universities to better connect their externally funded research centres and institutes to institutional practice, inspiring research-informed practice and supporting the access and success of more people from underserved communities. Widening participation requires changes to outreach and admissions practices, but also strong, diverse and ethical research leadership (and inclusive teaching and learning practices).

Soft diplomacy, and connecting the local to the global

Place is often considered to be a 'container' of disadvantage (Fincher 2021). Deficit-based perceptions of place continue to bedevil policy and entrench marginalisation, but many places of educational disadvantage are characterised by mobility, linguistic and cultural diversity, and international connectedness. Pasifika communities in Australia, for example, frequently send substantial remittances back to Pacific homelands, while Samoan remains the second most widely spoken language in Logan (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2021). Further, nearly 20 per cent of Māori people now live in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2021), providing opportunities for cultural connection and international Indigenous learning. The Interim Accord report includes a vision that 'Australia's international education sector has helped Australia pursue its global priorities, including through soft diplomacy' (Australian Government 2023, p.26).

The Innovative Research Universities (IRU) stocktake on Pacific activities (Newton Cain et al. 2023) highlights the extent of university engagement in the Pacific. However, there are clear limitations of current programs and settings. While substantial funding supports initiatives such as the training of Pacific professionals, typically within Australia; research to mitigate climate change; and the accreditation of Pacific university courses, such processes can contribute to a brain drain and often reflect a one-way notion of knowledge transfer (Ahluwalia 2023). An engaged strategy would promote more reciprocal relationships in the Indo-Pacific, including opportunities for Pacific diaspora students and academics in Australia to engage with their homelands in co-production and comparative work. There are over 400,000 Māori and Pasifika people in Australia (Gerace et al. 2023), who represent a resource that could be further harnessed by governments.

Similar opportunities exist in regions such as Asia, Africa, and South America. For too long, Australian higher education's internationalisation strategies have consisted primarily of recruiting fee-paying students with little regard to concerns of equity. Australia has both an obligation and an opportunity to serve its neighbours and other nations by embedding student equity in its approach to internationalisation. This approach could include a diversification of admission scholarships and criteria for international students, but also promotion of relationships between diasporic staff and students in Australia and their homelands, and targeted exchange programs that support collaborative, co-produced research. Such strategies would move beyond a traditional model of governments funding the training of Indo-Pacific leaders in Australia, to the promotion of deeper and more reciprocal relationships. Models such as the Scotland Malawi Partnership, and the reciprocal Malawi Scotland Partnership, exemplify a structure of international partnerships that aims to move beyond developmental assistance.

Conclusion

Universities can help to strengthen local communities, many of whom are marginalised. As large employers with high status and global reach, the partnership of a university can provide unparalleled support to underserved groups and their representatives. However, policies to expand engagement

need to be framed and monitored carefully to reduce the risks of community exploitation and marginalisation. To operate ethically and effectively, institutions will need to: prioritise First Nations first; identify and empower underserved groups, and the community-led organisations that represent them; promote the connections between local and global; and commit to social justice in their own employment, research, and outreach practices. An expansion of such ethical engagement would increase student equity and strengthen both universities and communities.

References

Ahluwalia, P., 2023. *Strengthening Partnerships with Pacific Island Nations.* Presentation to the Indigenous Research Universities Annual Conference, Brisbane, September.

Andrewartha, L. & Harvey, A., 2021. *Supporting carers to succeed in Australian higher education.* Report for the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, Curtin University. Melbourne, Centre for Higher Education Equity and Diversity Research, La Trobe University.

Andrewartha, L., Knight, E., Simpson, A., & Beattie, H., 2022. *A balancing act: supporting students who are parents to succeed in Australian higher education.* Report for the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, Curtin University. Melbourne, Centre for Higher Education Equity and Diversity Research, La Trobe University.

Attygalle, L., 2020. *Understanding community-led approaches to community change*. The Tamarack Institute. https://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/hubfs/Resources/Publications/2020%20PAPER%20%7C%20Understanding%20Community-Led%20 Approaches.pdf

Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021. *National census data*, www.abs.gov.au

Australian Government, 2020. *Closing the Gap Report 2020*, Canberra School Attendance | Closing The Gap (niaa.gov.au)

Australian Government, 2023. *Australian Universities Accord Interim Report*, Department of Education, Canberra.

Australian Governments and Coalition of Peaks, 2020. *National Agreement on Closing the Gap,* Canberra, https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/national-agreement

Commonwealth of Australia, National Indigenous Australians Agency, 2023. *Commonwealth Closing the Gap Implementation Plan.* https://www.niaa.gov.au/sites/default/files/publications/closing-the-gap-implementation-plan-2023.pdf

Fainga'a-Manu Sione, I., 2023. The Fala methodology. *Waka Kuaka: The Journal of the Polynesian Society* 132 (1/2): 237-256. https://doi.org/10.15286/jps.132.1-2.237-256

Fincher, R., 2021. *Interpretations of "Place" in Place-Based Social Policy*. Life Course Centre Working Paper Series, 2021-05. Institute for Social Science Research, The University of Queensland.

Geatches, L., Preston, C., and Putnis, A. for Equity Economics and Development Partners (2023), Where are we? Place-based approaches to tackling community challenges in Australia. Prepared for the Paul Ramsay Foundation.

Gerace, G., Itaoui, R., Moors-Mailei, A,. Williams, B., Patu, P., & Ponton, V., 2023. *Pasifika communities in Australia: 2021 Census*. Centre for Western Sydney. https://doi.org/10.26183/9qbb-cy24

Grimwood, M., 2017. What do LGBTQ students say about their experience of university in the UK?, *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education*, 21:4, 140-143, DOI: 10.1080/13603108.2016.1203367

Halsey, J., 2018. *Independent review into regional, rural and remote education: Final report.* Australian Commonwealth, Department of Education and Training, Canberra. Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education - final report - Department of Education, Australian Government

Harvey, A., Andrewartha, L., Sharp, M. & Wyatt-Smith, M., 2018. *Supporting younger military veterans to succeed in Australian higher education*. Report for the Australian Government Department of Veterans' Affairs. Melbourne, Centre for Higher Education Equity and Diversity Research.

Harvey, A., Burnheim, C., & Brett, M., 2016. Towards a fairer chance for all: Revising the Australian student equity framework. In A. Harvey, C. Burnheim, & M. Brett (Eds.), *Student equity in Australian higher education: Twenty-five years of a fair chance for all* (pp. 3–20). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-0315-8_1

Harvey, A., McNamara, P., Andrewartha, L. and Luckman, M., 2015. *Out of care, into university: Raising higher education access and achievement of care leavers*. National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, Perth, Curtin University.

Harvey, A., Szalkowicz, G. & Luckman, M., 2020. Improving employment and education outcomes for Somali Australians, Centre for Higher Education Equity and Diversity Research, La Trobe University.

Holmqvist, M. and Wiesel, I., 2023. Elite Communities and Polarization in Neoliberal Society: Consecration in Australia's and Sweden's Wealthy Neighbourhoods, *Critical Sociology*, vol.49, no.4-5, pp. 767-782. DOI:10.1177/08969205221108656

Kildea, S., Gao, Y., Hickey, S., Kruske, S., Nelson, C., Blackman, R., Tracy, S., Hurst, C., Williamson, D. & Roe, Y., 2019. Reducing preterm birth amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander babies: A prospective cohort study, Brisbane, Australia. *EClinicalMedicine*. *12*:43-51. DOI:10.1016/j.eclinm.2019.06.001

Martinovic, M., Liddell, M. & Douglas Muldoon, S., 2018. Changing views and perceptions: the impact of the Australian Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program on students, *Educational Research and Evaluation*, 24:6-7, 437-453, DOI:10.1080/13803611.2018.1543051

Miller, D., Rees, J., & Pearson, A., 2021. "Masking is life": Experiences of masking in autistic and nonautistic adults. *Autism in Adulthood*, *3*(4), 330–338.

Mekonnen, T. M. (2020). African refugee youth in Australia: higher education participation. Deakin University. Journal contribution. https://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30146804

Morey, B.N., Chang, R.C., Thomas, K.B., Tulua, A., Penaia, C., Tran, V.D., Pierson, N., Greer, J.C., Bydalek, M. & Ponce, N., 2022. No equity without data equity: data reporting gaps for Native

Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders as structural racism. *Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law*, *47*(2), pp.159-200.

Newton Cain, T., Smith, R. & Whelan, J. (2023). *IRU Pacific Strategy: Desktop audit to establish extent of Pacific-focused activities across the group*. Canberra: IRU.

Perales, F., Kubler, M., Xiang, N., & Tomaszewski, W., 2021. *Understanding access to higher education amongst humanitarian migrants in Australia*. National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education.

Ponton, V., 2018. Utilizing Pacific methodologies as inclusive practice. *SAGE Open*. https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244018792962

Stevenson, J., Baker, Z., Harrison, N., Bland, B., & Jones-Devitt, S., 2020. *Positive impact? What factors affect access, retention and graduate outcomes for university students with a background of care or family estrangement?* Sheffield Hallam University, UK.

Terry, L., Naylor, R., Nguyen, N. & Rizzo, A., 2016. *Not there yet: An Investigation into the Access and Participation of Students from Humanitarian Refugee Backgrounds in the Australian Higher Education System*. National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, Curtin University, Perth.

Wadham, B., Andrewartha, L., Takarangi, M., Harvey, A., West, B., Wyatt-Smith, M., Davis, J., & Moeck, E., 2022. Staying the Course: Strategies for Australian Student Veterans in Transition. *Journal of Veteran Studies, 8*(3), 208-221. https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v8i3.357

Walter, M., Kukutai, T., Carroll, S.R., & Rodriguez-Lonebear, D. (Eds.), 2020. *Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Policy* (1st ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429273957

Zanus, S., 2022. *Building the foundation for lifelong learning: An analysis of early childhood service provision and quality in Logan*. Pathways in Place, Griffith University, Logan, Australia.