Developing a sustainable model for fostering inter-cultural understanding and building cross-cultural capability through learning in multicultural communities

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Aim and rationale
Students and staff in higher education acknowledge the importance of cross-cultural skills, knowledge, attitudes and dispositions for future graduate employability and citizenship and value the opportunity to learn from diverse ‘others’. However, the relationship between diverse student groups on university campuses is characterised by voluntary social segregation. Cultural boundary-crossing may be better facilitated in authentic community settings (rather than contrived classrooms). Therefore the aim of this project is to engage students, members of staff and representatives of community organisations in considering the development of a model for student learning in multicultural communities to foster inter-cultural understanding and develop cross-cultural capability.

Institutional context
Leeds Metropolitan University is a civic ‘modern’ university serving approximately 28,000 students of whom about one third are part-time and 15% are postgraduate. Less than 5% of the student population was classified ‘non-European’ or ‘international’ in 2008-09 (HESA, 2008-09). While international student numbers are relatively low the university stands at the heart of a city which is home to over 130 different nationalities and it is estimated that by 2030 the black and minority ethnic population in Leeds will have increased by 55%. The city is also one of great contrast. While being a key centre of commerce and culture Leeds also faces significant socio-economic challenges with over one third of its children and young people living in deprived areas.

The ethos of the University in respect of internationalisation has traditionally embraced essential principles of diversity and inclusion. An international volunteering scheme introduced in 2007 is complemented by aspirations to provide inter-cultural learning at home through engagement with people from other cultural backgrounds. In the past two years, the university has undergone a process of ‘realignment’ but the commitment to diversity continues to pervade the institution and its relationship with the outside world. A continuing commitment to community is also apparent in aspiring to be a catalyst for social and economic progress in and for the region, nationally and internationally.

Management of the project
The project involved collaboration with colleagues at the University of South Australia (UniSA) which provided opportunities to explore practice and processes outside the UK and enable a comparative approach. While operating in different national contexts Leeds Met and UniSA are both located in fast changing and culturally diverse urban settings and share similar characteristics in terms of institutional mission and values particularly in the internationalisation context. Although UniSA hosts some 36,000 students, with about 6,000 classified ‘international’, a major difference in comparison with Leeds Met is transnational provision which across Asia accounts for about another 6,000 students.

Researchers at Leeds Met and UniSA conducted face-to-face interviews with students, university members of staff and representatives of community organisations. In addition, focus groups were held with students and
interviewees from community organisations were recruited via an initial mailshot of a short online survey. Data collected at UniSA was transcribed, analysed and interpreted by researchers at Leeds Met (lead institution).

The project was planned in four overlapping phases, the last two of which are ongoing: initial project set-up - which included ethical approvals at both institutions, mini-literature review and desk research to determine trends in policy and practice; data collection and analysis (40 plus stakeholder interviews, 20 focus group participants and online survey distributed to 200 community organisations); developmental activity - including presentation of initial finding to a university/community event for feedback and developing a good practice guide and finally, wider dissemination via conferences and other events and publications. The overall approach to evaluation was formative with a project steering group meeting at regular intervals. Informal ongoing evaluation was provided by colleagues within Leeds Met’s Centre for Social and Educational Research across the Life Course (SERL).

**Selected outcomes**

The project has raised awareness of dispositions among key stakeholders and has highlighted some important conceptual distinctions in developing a sustainable model for inter-cultural understanding through community learning. It has also revealed the importance of an eclectic approach in designing appropriate interventions and located the key concepts of inter-cultural understanding and community engagement within a wider discourse in HE that is challenging the classroom boundaries of learning and acknowledging community as a site of knowledge creation.

**Awareness of dispositions among stakeholder groups**

- students’ involvement in community is largely based on personal interests, experiences, values and beliefs. Some international students actively seek out university-organised opportunities to engage with the local community while others independently approach high-profile charities like Oxfam, Cancer Care UK etc. Mature students (international and home) can be particularly pro-active in their communities establishing representative groups like Residents’ Associations. There are however, those who aspire to community engagement but lack the confidence to ‘go it alone’;

- local community participation is a means of transcending compatriot student communities, gaining ‘authentic’ exposure to the local culture and society (while sharing and sometimes promoting their own culture), enhancing language and other transferable skills, and feeling more ‘at home’. For PhD students in particular community engagement serves a ‘life-balancing’ purpose enabling them to ‘break-out’ of the relative isolation of the research experience. It is interesting that students saw this project in itself as a gesture of institutions valuing their efforts within the community for the first time and felt that participation had enabled them to understand how on reflection, their community involvement represented a learning process which engaged their sense of self and related to both life and career aspirations;

- despite the apparent benefits for graduate employability traditional ‘community service’ does not necessarily suit all students, therefore any scheme of community learning to foster inter-cultural understanding would have to offer a wide range of diverse opportunities appealing to different disciplines while encouraging heightened self-awareness and learner autonomy - attributes valued across the disciplinary spectrum. There is evidence of breadth and variety of links between academic disciplines and extra-curricular activities
beyond the ‘usual suspect’ areas of (primary, secondary) education, social work, public health, policing, etc. For example, communal museum trusts and heritage institutions have particular multi- and inter-disciplinary appeal;

- community groups cited the impact of the perception of transience among the student population which limits their sense of place and detracts from any kind of sustained community engagement. Particularly within city districts densely populated with students the negative impact of the ‘Town and Gown’ scenario could be reduced through community learning. Similarly with increasing numbers of international students, local communities could benefit from the diverse knowledge, skills and expertise that they have acquired. However, the scholarship of engagement which can deliver benefits requires a climate in which academic and civic cultures communicate continuously and creatively building sustainable relationships, based on trust and mutual respect and equality of status and commitment.

Key conceptual distinctions and connections

- Community learning and public engagement as part of a wider discourse acknowledging the value of learning outside formal environments
  The project has revealed how community learning and public engagement are part of a wider discourse in higher education tending towards acknowledging the value of learning in community, workplace and other settings and the importance of the community as a source of knowledge in itself. For example, the ‘Recognising Prior Learning’ (RPL) movement which supports transitions between formal and informal learning is gaining momentum across Europe see: http://www.scqf.org.uk/RPL The ‘funds of knowledge’ paradigm which represents a form of culturally responsive teaching, inviting educators to enter students’ diverse communities as learners, discovering the resources available and embedding them in formal learning processes as cultural and cognitive assets is being explored and applied in multicultural environments. Furthermore, the employability agenda is shifting emphasis from ‘technical rationality’ to recognising the value of importance immersing students in ‘critical places’ where they have the opportunity to begin to develop deep personal inter-cultural relationships, to begin to know and challenge themselves, to understand how they fit into the world and to explore the implications of shifting political, economic and cultural interrelationships for local communities.

- The key distinction between multi- and inter-cultural education
  Multicultural education is often driven by a concern for student engagement among diverse cohorts which is reflected in the current interest in the complexity of student identities. Curricula and learning and teaching practice in the field often rely heavily on interventions which celebrate difference and maintain national particularities while recognising and valuing non-dominant cultures to foster an atmosphere of mutual tolerance. Such interventions however fail to acknowledge cultural practices as emergent, dynamic and ever-changing. In contrast, inter-cultural education is based on the premise that cultures are not entities that can be taught in a formulaic way but are mutually influencing and intertwined. Inter-cultural understanding is the product of negotiated and shared symbols and meanings and inter-cultural education is focused on developing ‘relational identity’ which supports inter-cultural interaction.

- Community service-learning as distinct from community service and volunteering
  Increasing community and campus diversity in terms of culture, religion and ethnicity requires that the knowledge created by universities should be ‘socially responsive’ rather than simply ‘foundational’ or
'professional'. This implies challenging the polarisation that often exists between the ‘local’ and the ‘international’ and the attendant privileging of one over the other. Inter-cultural understanding among diverse student groups requires educational awareness of society and culture which derives from contact as well as concepts where the site of engagement is not only a place to apply existing knowledge, but to develop new knowledge. Internships and work placements which tend to be ‘skills-based’ might provide opportunities to negotiate cultural difference, if relationships go beyond superficial mixing, co-curricular volunteering can enable international students to integrate into community settings but does not necessarily foster inter-cultural understanding and enhance the possibilities for inter-cultural interaction which require a deeper understanding of the host culture. Service-learning founded on unification of thought and action which engages students in an intimate way so that they are ‘of’ and ‘with’ a community rather than merely in it, provides a seamless approach to learning that blends engagement and diversity, connects with social and natural contexts while confronting the public relevance of the disciplines. The service-learning paradigm therefore offers unique opportunities to develop inter-cultural understanding among diverse student cohorts.

- **Locating learning in multicultural communities within a wider literature to inform interventions**

  Crossing cultural boundaries is psychologically intense and designing appropriate interventions to enable students to develop inter-cultural understanding requires new approaches to learning. Much of the literature regarding inter-cultural competence is however, dominated by a training model, with the notable exception of the work of Darla Deardorff (2006; 2009) whose ‘Inter-cultural Competence Model’ assumes a ‘process’ orientation, acknowledging the interplay of cultural self-awareness, deep understanding of culture and the skills of observing, listening, and interpreting in order to analyse, evaluate, relate and ultimately think inter-culturally in a rapidly changing world. This project suggests that the efficacy of interventions engaging diverse groups of students in community learning can be equally understood through engagement with the ‘cosmopolitan-local’ construct within sociological theories of role orientation, which has been applied widely in for example, organisational studies, studies of professional identity, international team working and studies of mobility and travel within contemporary youth transition. Another key area of inquiry to inform practice is the literature on inter-cultural friendship development.

**Key outputs**

- the project has generated a range of data collection instruments and a catalogue of community organisations associated with Leeds Met University (including the details of academic colleagues who act as directors and board members to various local organisations) which can be used to take this project forward;
- a good practice guide which is informed by the full range of outcomes in UK and Australian contexts and details wide-ranging recommendations for developing a sustainable model for inter-cultural understanding through community learning will be made available on HEA and UKCISA websites;
- an open event involving students and members of staff from universities and community groups and organisations across the region is planned. The event will serve to launch the guide, share good practice and develop the networks necessary to take the project forward.

**Challenges that have been overcome**

- **Recruitment of participants** representing three stakeholder groups in a relatively short data collection time period (March to July) was a significant challenge particularly in light of the time required to secure
ethical approvals at two universities. For students, the challenge was overcome by intensive, university-wide promotion drawing on the support of key staff in for example, the ‘job shop’ postings to university online networks and appropriate student mailing lists, direct approaches to students in hospitality and other social areas of the university. For member of staff direct approaches were made to academic colleagues known to have an interest in pedagogy and practice which might indirectly relate to the focus of the project and to other colleagues operating within relevant professional areas e.g. international student support, international and community volunteering, equality and diversity, employability etc. Community participants were recruited via wide distribution of a very short online survey to groups and organisations identified by students, by members of staff and by web search. The response rate was approximately 10% but engagement might have been higher had we worked with and through a high-profile community organisation rather than ‘cold calling’.

**Enabling ‘mission shift’ while avoiding ‘mission drift’** was another challenge since the project focus has required engagement with a wide literature to connect the concepts of inter-cultural understanding and community engagement. Furthermore, community engagement is multi-faceted and at times there can be a problem of definition. The emergence of the ‘engaged campus’ has generated a quite vast literature which is largely concerned with institutional structures rather than specific aspects of the student experience. Maintaining focus on inter-cultural understanding as a key concept has been challenging since in some ways the project is breaking new ground. Saltmarsh and Zlotowski (2011) suggest that the next-generation work in service-learning and civic engagement must ‘…connect the local and international in ways that acknowledge the global realities of the twenty-first century’ (p362)

**Sustainability**

In addition to the outputs mentioned above the project will be sustained through developing relationships with ‘champions’ identified within academic schools and professional services at the two universities involved and with ‘Connections’ grant holders engaged in developing learning materials and other resources which can support this initiative. Coincidental with the project, Leeds Met has recently introduced an ‘Employability and Enterprise fortnight’ to all levels of study within undergraduate programmes. Approaches will be made to the senior management team for support in developing a pilot intervention to deliver a student experience of community engagement to foster inter-cultural understanding.

**Selected recommendations**

**Making strategic connections**

- Re-visit key policies and strategies including Internationalisation, Equality and Diversity and Learning, Teaching and Assessment to embed the principles of community engagement to foster inter-cultural understanding and develop community partnerships that address the HE curriculum itself as well as the traditional areas of economic development and technology transfer.

**Incremental change and development – avoiding ‘silver bullets’**

- ‘Community service’ and ‘community volunteering’ tend to be understood as extra-curricular activities by staff and students. From the institutional perspective they also reflect notions of corporate social responsibility and the need for universities to maintain good relations with their surrounding communities. Inter-cultural understanding is however, a key component of positive relationships within diverse student cohorts, between them and diverse surrounding communities and it is a key graduate attribute underpinning disciplinary and professional practice. Community service and volunteering should therefore be developed
incrementally along the lines of the service-learning model where the community benefits while acting as a site to challenge and develop diverse students’ disciplinary knowledge, appeal to their wider interests and enhance inter-cultural understanding through authentic engagement with difference at the local/global interface.

Centralised support for community engagement to foster inter-cultural understanding

The project has revealed a tendency for engagement between university and community to be conducted in a piecemeal and ad-hoc fashion therefore developing centralised support is recommended to:

- work with student unions and university staff to discover the full extent of students’ community engagement, raise awareness among the student population of the academic relevance and value of such engagement, broker new learning opportunities, provide comprehensive information on the opportunities available within and across the disciplines and organise confidence-building activities such as workshops and networking events where students can be introduced to community groups and organisations;
- encourage long-term, sustainable collaborative relationships between university departments and community partners which acknowledge equality in partnership arrangements, countering the tendency for universities to engage in a market-driven ‘consultancy’ approach and community organisations’ reluctance to work within overtly ‘academic’ and complex, bureaucratic university structures;
- co-ordinate and publicise activities and programmes in order to avoid duplication of effort, consolidate initiatives and act as a ‘familiar face’ point of contact for community organisations and groups;
- foster collaboration with surrounding universities and FE colleges at city/regional levels to develop and consolidate practice in students’ community engagement, identifying common interests, partnerships etc. and collaborative schemes which provide a wide variety of community learning opportunities and enhance the richness and diversity of the student learning experience;
- identify and build on connections with key institutions and agents outside the university which play an important role in community life particularly schools and faith-based organisations which may have wide appeal and play a decisive part in community outreach and engagement both socially and strategically. There is also a case for forging closer ties with the agencies of local and regional government to actively integrate international students in urban communities and public life in the spirit of a forward-looking ‘open-city’ policy embracing international alumni as ambassadors in their home country;
- create new disciplinary connections, encouraging community engagement with a direct link to discipline and academic studies and to forge connections which support interdisciplinary real-world experiences for students. Currently, community engagement tends to be mainly associated with students’ civic, personal and professional development but university staff members also require support in order to engage in collaborative community learning with their students, realise the benefits of community engagement and act as role models for future cohorts;
- draw on, disseminate and learn from emerging good practice and research in the areas of service learning and universities’ community engagement.

Further information

Websites

The National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement

Established in 2008 as part of a £9.2 million Beacons for Public Engagement initiative the NCCPE promotes best practice in public engagement operating through a network of six ‘beacons’ or university-based collaborative centres. The centre has been responsible for some seminal work in the field including for example:
While few links are established between public engagement, increasing internationalisation of UK HE and notions of inter-cultural learning the review does usefully acknowledge recent literatures exploring inclusion, equality and diversity in HE both as requirements and barriers for integrating community engagement in curricula.

This framework document considers outcomes like ‘working across cultures’ and ‘operating in complex interconnected environments’ which can be evidenced via reflexivity embracing ‘the recognition of conflicting goals’, students’ critical assessment of ‘context’, ‘perspective’, ‘value systems’, ‘emotions’ and developing a sense of place within community settings.

A substantive report, presenting the findings of a mixed-method style research on community volunteering among 4000 students and 6000 graduates at six UK universities, as well as a host of university participants including academics, pro-vice chancellors and university of students’ union-based volunteer coordinators. Website: http://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/

Institute for Community Cohesion (iCoCo)
The Institute of Community Cohesion based at Coventry University is a’ not for profit organisation’ established in 2005 to provide a new approach to diversity and multiculturalism. iCoCo’s resources include good practice case studies, publications and toolkits which can be explored by theme (including inter-cultural dialogue) , group region and sector. Resources include for example:

This substantial report includes a host of valuable recommendations and particularly acknowledges good practice and policies relating to the community experience of international and other ‘minority’ students in the UK.

Institute of Community Cohesion (iCoCo) (2012) Cohesion, Integration and Openness: From ‘Multi’ to ‘Inter’ Culturalism Available at: http://www.cohesioninstitute.org.uk/Resources/Publications
Discussing the ‘failure’ of multiculturalism in western countries in an era of accelerated globalisation, cultural exchange and mobility, this publication builds on the virtues of cohesion, interaction and inter-cultural dialogue as key pillars to engender policies of integration and openness for and with communities in the UK.

**Journal of Higher Education Outreach & Engagement**
This interdisciplinary journal aims to advance theory and practice related to all forms of outreach and engagement between HE institutions and communities highlighting innovative endeavours and critically examining emerging issues, trends, challenges, and opportunities in the field. It reports on studies of impact in the areas of public service, outreach, engagement, extension, engaged research, community-based research, community-based participatory research, action research, public scholarship, service-learning, and community service.
Website: [http://openjournals.libs.uga.edu/index.php/jheoe/about](http://openjournals.libs.uga.edu/index.php/jheoe/about)

**National University of Ireland (NUI) Galway, Community Knowledge Initiative (CKI)**
The CKI was launched at NUI Galway in 2001 to underpin and realise civic mission as part of the core activities of the university. The initiative’s website comprises three main areas covering volunteering, service-learning and community. The service-learning pages are particularly useful in recommending recent journal publications in the field and providing case studies of service-learning within different disciplines and programmes of study. Details of specific service-learning modules can also be accessed.
Website: [http://www.nuigalwaycki.ie/index.asp](http://www.nuigalwaycki.ie/index.asp)
Website: [http://openjournals.libs.uga.edu/index.php/jheoe/about](http://openjournals.libs.uga.edu/index.php/jheoe/about)

**National Service-Learning Clearing House**
NSLC based in the USA supports the service-learning community in HE and other educational sectors. The resources pages provide among other things, effective and sustainable examples of service-learning initiatives. The pages can be browsed by topic, resource type and/or ‘what you do’. A useful recent addition to the site is a series of fact sheets detailing a variety of service-learning or related programmes offered at different US institutions in different disciplinary contexts.
Website: [http://www.servicelearning.org/](http://www.servicelearning.org/)

**Campus Compact**
A website based in the USA Campus Compact helps campuses to forge effective community partnerships, and provides resources and training for faculty seeking to integrate civic and community-based learning into the curriculum. While university-community service has a long 150 year history in the US, Campus Compact has been instrumental in raising the profile of learning in the service context and reflects the evolution from volunteerism to service-learning and civic engagement. The resources pages of the site are particularly well organised and classified by stakeholder group, discipline, topic etc.
Website: [http://www.compact.org/](http://www.compact.org/)

**Selected publications:**


