Sustaining community-university partnerships

Simon Northmore
Angie Hart

Community University Partnership Programme and
School of Nursing and Midwifery, University of Brighton

One consequence of the development of community-university engagement over the last decade has been a growth in the academic literature exploring the role of universities in developing community partnerships. Much of the focus is on practice-based engagement, for example, on project work (Fogel & Cook 2006; Lerner & Simon 1998); 'communities of practice' (Hart & Wolff 2006); and 'clusters' (Fielden et al. 2007). The issue of sustainability is not generally reflected in the literature, although one recent exception considers the role of universities in building sustainable communities through engagement in the Australasian context (www.aucea.org.au/wp-content/uploads/autumn-20113. pdf). More often, however, where there is a focus on sustainability, it is concerned solely with a specific program or intervention. Writing in the context of social work education, for example, McCaslin and Barnstable (2010, p. 3) argue that 'most analyses of community/ university collaborations ... focus on the benefit to agencies', especially in terms of improving practice and creating a pool of qualified staff. Stirman et al. (2009) similarly emphasise agency policies in sustaining university public health initiatives. An alternative focus is on the sustainability of specific health behaviours. In the field of community health, where partnership approaches are increasingly combined with other interventions, project evaluation is often limited to changes in population health status while 'broader contextual questions that may illuminate mechanisms for change across ecological levels and project sustainability may not be addressed' (Kelley et al. 2005, p. 1). Environmental and social sustainability is a developing field that requires strong partnerships between ecologists and land managers (Castillo et al. 2005; Grainger, Sherry & Fondahl 2006). Here, the focus of attention is on the different perceptions of partners and the impact this has on environmental management.

At the University of Brighton in the UK, the Community University Partnership Programme (Cupp) has been working in the field of community engagement for several years and Brighton is one of a small number of UK universities with an established institution-wide program supported by a dedicated structure. Like

many of our colleagues working in this field, Cupp's initial focus was project based, and we have tended to think of sustainability in terms of the need to ensure the continuity of projects and therefore continuity of funding. For example, a book produced by Cupp in 2007 was based mainly on practical accounts of early projects (Hart, Maddison & Wolff 2007), while the sustainability of some of our Cupp-supported projects has been achieved through their integration into individual departmental or academic portfolios. The latter has certainly been a successful strategy. However, following a period of rapid expansion, resources have become tighter. As the UK enters a period of major social and political change, we are increasingly having to consider sustainability in broader terms: in particular, those fundamental elements – other than funding – that will ensure our long-term survival. That is, the reciprocal relationships and mutual benefits that exist between community and university partners and their institutions. This is not to say that funding is not important. Rather, that it is not the end of the story. In terms of Cupp's brokerage role and the partnership projects Cupp leads on, we are fortunate that community engagement remains a strategic priority for the University of Brighton and that senior management has committed to core-funding Cupp for the foreseeable future. Whilst we have also secured external funds to support our community engagement work, it is of great benefit to have a relatively stable base funding, even if modest. This has contributed, undoubtedly, to the success of our work, particularly in terms of our capacity to maintain links over time with different communities, university personnel and students. This situation is fairly unusual in the UK: most universities fund community partnership activities via external grants, with almost all personnel on short-term contracts.

Sustainability, however, requires a more holistic, long-term approach. Vogel, Seifer and Gelmon (2010), discussing sustainability in the context of service-learning, suggest that between five and 10 years are needed to fully establish the building blocks that influence long-term sustainability. As Green and Kearney (2011, p. 47) point out, project-based initiatives 'typically address discrete aspects of more complex issues where results can be reported in a relatively short time period'. They suggest that an alternative approach is to think about the sustainability of the desired *outcomes* of project work. It is to the wider social impact of community-university partnerships that we now turn.

COMMUNITY-UNIVERSITY PARTNERSHIPS IN THE CURRENT ECONOMIC CLIMATE

Globally, the sustainability of community-university partnership working presents a mixed picture. In the US and Australia, university-wide structures that provide ongoing support for activities intended for cultural or social benefit are relatively well developed. In the UK they are still quite rare. Internationally, higher education institutions incorporate civic engagement and

community service into their research and teaching in a wide variety of ways depending on the character and priorities of their region or nation (see The Talloires Network website: www. tufts.edu/talloiresnetwork/). Despite this apparently healthy diversity, the contemporary debate about the role of universities and their relationship to local communities is nonetheless a contested one. For example, the current UK Higher Education sector does not look set to prioritise the mainstream funding of community engagement as core university business. As we, and others, have argued elsewhere for this to change, universities need to more actively demonstrate the added value they bring when addressing complex social problems in partnership with local communities (Mulvihill et al. 2011a). Furthermore, the coming era of privatisation and high student fees in the UK could positively benefit community engagement if universities can convince students that their engagement in community-university partnership working is valuable. Community-university partnerships thus have much to offer to the debate about the future of universities in a time of uncertainty and decreasing resources.

In 2010 the President of the International Association of Universities reiterated the importance of the role of the university in addressing major global issues:

> *What has become clear is that none of these major issues on the global agenda will be resolved without the participation of universities, since they are the environments that foster not only knowledge, thought and research but also proposals for social action (de la Fuente 2010).*

As well, universities can offer more stability than many other organisations within a given community. As Budd Hall (Director, Office of Community Based Research, University of Victoria, Canada) puts it: 'Higher Education Institutions may be one of the largest, relatively untapped resources that our communities have' (www.coastalcommunities.org.uk/films.html).

This is not to suggest that local communities are somehow the 'weaker' partner in community-university partnerships. Communities can also be important sources of stability and are often much more nimble footed than universities or other professional gatekeepers.

As 2011 draws to a close these raised expectations coincide with a period of global economic recession and huge reductions to budgets for national public services. This is a difficult environment in which to build community-university partnerships. The depletion in public services will add to the demands made on the very local voluntary and community organisations that form the majority of university partners, while for universities the costs of higher education for many sections of the population seem likely to increase and funds for research are likely to be severely

diminished. At the same time, as universities decide where to focus limited energies for maximum effect, they will, more than ever, need evidence-based research and up-to-date knowledge.

The issue of sustainability is therefore central. While it may be easier to measure the results of short-term project interventions, it is this longer term perspective that is likely to improve both the quality and impact of community-university partnerships. If the current economic crisis provides the impetus to reconsider and reshape relationships between local communities and their universities, as well as to develop new collaborative partnerships between universities, then there may well be an opportunity here, not just a tightening of budgets.

In the next section we examine what such a reshaping and developing of sustainable partnerships might involve, drawing on the articles in this volume of *Gateways*. The articles here tackle the core research question that concerns us: how do we address the challenges of building sustainable community-university partnerships, especially with disadvantaged and excluded communities who have limited resources of their own? The large number of submissions received indicates that this is an important area for exploration by both academics and community partners. We hope that the analysis presented in this introductory chapter and the articles that follow will provide *Gateways* readers with a better understanding of the issues that contribute to sustainable partnerships.

OVERVIEW OF THIS VOLUME

As has been suggested, the majority of the literature on community-university partnerships is concerned with practice development and this is reflected in this special edition of *Gateways*. In part it is inherent in the nature of the work. Most community-university partnership projects, as with the current contributions, are concerned with local initiatives; have a specialist focus; and aim to address the needs of particular communities.

The community needs described here range from the specific needs of Chinese elderly (Dong et al.) to those of extensive regional communities such as the San Joaquin Valley in California (London et al.) and the coastal region of the southeast of England (Pratt et al.). The geographical spread is wide, although the contributions here are all from North America, Australia and the United Kingdom, and the absence of articles describing the experiences from less economically developed countries is a notable gap. A number of articles, such as those by Pratt et al., Russell et al., Shea, and Ellis and Leahy, adopt a regional level perspective, suggesting that the focus of engagement work may be shifting away from being on an individual university.

The range of specialist topics is also broad, including service-learning (Vogel & Seifer); youth mentoring (Jones, Keller & Wheeler); the University of the Third Age (Ellis & Leahy); community arts (White & Robson; Vazquez Jacobus, Baskett &

Bechstein); environment (London et al.); and health (Wright et al.). They comprise a rich array of ideas and descriptions about different types of partnerships and recent project work that will be useful for readers interested in empirical detail and the diversity of methodologies employed.

In part, too, the tendency to focus on practice is related to the complexities involved in undertaking partnership work. In different ways the contributors to this volume encounter the challenges of maintaining funding; dealing with issues of unequal power (real or perceived) between community and university partners; the difficulties of information sharing across institutional and organisational boundaries; and working with multiple partners. Unsurprisingly, this sometimes leaves little opportunity for critical reflection. One purpose of this special edition was to encourage contributors to reflect on their work and, rather than assume that sustainability has an intrinsic value, consider the notion of sustainability. Notwithstanding the practice-based nature of the articles, a number usefully address the concept of sustainability or utilise other theoretical perspectives to investigate sustainability, for example Boyle, Ross and Stephens' application of stakeholder theory. Nonetheless, the contributions are very much from a university rather than a community perspective. This is not to censure the current authors. Community partners do not have the same time or motivation to write about their work and it requires a good deal of support (Hart, Maddison & Wolff 2007). We are therefore very grateful for the number of contributions that have been co-written by community members and academics.

The diversity of content presented us with a challenge in terms of ordering the articles. Rather than including a detailed résumé of each paper we decided on a more thematic approach, which is presented in the next section as a series of cross-cutting issues.

CHARACTERISTICS OF SUSTAINABLE PARTNERSHIP WORKING

Sustainability and partnership working are inextricably intertwined. As Boyle, Ross and Stephens observe, while community-university partnerships have become an increasingly common approach to tackling difficult social problems, '*Partnership sustainability appears to be as complex as the problems the partnerships are designed to address*' (p. 116), and our understanding of both is incomplete. With this caution in mind, the current collection of articles does suggest some common characteristics that underpin sustainability. These include:

—genuine reciprocity
—a creative approach to partnerships
—mutual learning and recognising the multiple purposes of partners
—building 'bridges' within and between organisations
—funding.

We explore each of these further.

Genuine Reciprocity

The idea that partnership working should be based on reciprocal relationships and that this is an important factor in building sustainability may appear self-evident. However, the reality of community-university partnerships is of unequal power and legitimacy between higher education institutions and many community partners, particularly where those partners represent socially excluded or disadvantaged communities. Vazquez Jacobus, Baskett and Bechstein refer to the '*well intentioned [but] … sadly, a familiar bias in the attitude of some academics – that community partners are the feeble-minded, albeit stout, cousins to the intellectual inhabitants of the ivory tower*' (p. 70). A major challenge facing universities, therefore, is in addressing these attitudes and inequalities: how to engage communities and individuals who are least likely to have had a formal relationship with higher education in a way that embodies genuine reciprocity.

The partnerships represented here provide some clues as to what a more inclusive practice might entail. Boyle, Ross and Stephens, in their comparative study of three partnerships, argue that leadership is a critical factor. The mere fact that individuals may have a stake in the success of the partnership will not make it sustainable. Whether the partnership is led by a faculty or community member, sustainability will benefit from '*[an] embedded, well-connected leadership, with expertise in the social issue at hand*' (p. 114). It is this that creates the legitimacy necessary to support a sustainable partnership as well as legitimacy in the eyes of policy-makers and other stakeholders.

A second aspect of mutuality is respect for the different modes of knowledge of community and university partners, where the community partner is '*regarded as an equal, not merely a mechanical agent of the university partner*' (Vazquez Jacobus, Baskett & Bechstein, p. 70). London et al.'s account of a participatory action research project looking at the social and environmental impacts on health in the San Joaquin Valley, California, demonstrates how partnerships can go beyond simply documenting community knowledge to promote mutual co-learning between academics and community partners. Such co-produced knowledge both creates more rigorous and relevant research and provides community partners with '*opportunities for self-empowerment through the documentation and critical reflection of their environmental knowledge*' (p. 27). Elsewhere, Dong et al. and Wright et al. emphasise that mutual learning also involves a culturally sensitive approach, embracing diversity and respecting cultural, linguistic, racial/ethnic, gender and other differences.

A Creative Approach to Partnerships

One of the key themes running through the projects presented here is the importance of creativity in sustaining partnerships. Personal relationships, supported by effective leadership, are crucial to this. There are numerous examples of how good personal relationships create the necessary flexibility, adaptability and persistence to

counter the inbuilt differences of power and legitimacy between partners and their multiple starting points and purposes.

Such relationships, however, take time to develop. As Phipps and Zanotti suggest, this is likely to be an evolutionary process, where trust and shared understanding develop through a series of collaborations over time. In this way sustainability '... *is not an end in itself. Sustainability is a by-product of a successful relationship*' (p. 209). They highlight the interplay between the micro and macro levels of partnership working, suggesting that in paying attention to the 'little things' – supporting each other in the day-to-day interactions of meetings, events, presentations, writing and so on – the 'big things', like sustainability, will naturally develop.

Once trust and good working relationships have been established, they need to be maintained. Shea points out that the arrival of newcomers to the group or partnership will necessitate revisiting past discussions to build trust and achieve a new consensus.

Mutual Learning

All of the partnerships described here aimed in some degree to develop mutually beneficial co-learning. As London et al. observe, community-university partnerships: '*[do] not merely document community knowledge, but can promote mutually beneficial co-learning between academics and [community] advocates*' (p. 23). This takes a variety of forms, including a service-learning approach (Vogel & Seifer); learning through art (White & Robson); participatory research (Boyle, Ross & Stephens; Dong et al.; London et al.; Wright et al.); older adults learning through U3A (Ellis & Leahy); and practitioner development (Jones, Keller & Wheeler). A common concern, however, was how to evaluate the impact of that learning, whether on students, faculty members, or community partners.

Evaluation has an important learning purpose in providing clear feedback to all partners involved. However, the diversity of engagement activity requires a diversity of measurement tools and it is likely that different judgements will be made by different stakeholders (Hart, Northmore & Gerhardt 2009). Another issue in evaluating community-university partnerships is the need to distinguish between evaluating the impact of the partnership on its stakeholders, for example staff and student engagement, or on institutional prioritisation, teaching and learning or levels of community engagement, and evaluating the *social impact* of university-community initiatives (Mulvihill et al. 2011b). These dilemmas are apparent in the projects described here.

A variety of methodological approaches were employed. These variously focused on the perspectives of different partners; the processes involved in the partnership; and evaluating the social impact of a program, though few involved a formal evaluation of the partnership model. This makes it difficult to draw general conclusions. Nonetheless, some important broad-level issues emerge in relation to partnership sustainability.

Firstly, as Wright et al. point out, the definition of 'success' may be different for new or emerging partnerships and for established partnerships, '*since time plays an important role in the impact of the partners' activities and in the quality of the partners' relationships*' (p. 88). Second, '"*success", corresponding to desirable outcomes, is a challenge to objectively measure*' (Vazquez Jacobus, Baskett & Bechstein, p. 78). While there is a need to develop appropriate and manageable outcome indicators (and this will be increasingly important as universities look to measure the strategic and financial return on their investment in engagement), if, as Phipps and Zanotti argue, the goal is to leave a legacy from which others can learn, it is important to collect the stories as well as the outcomes (p. 211). In their terms, community-university partnerships are as much about the 'journey' as the 'destination'. Finally, an important characteristic of community-university partnerships is their interdisciplinarity. Many involve a range of professional, artistic and academic disciplines, as well as diverse cultures, languages, ages and abilities. This can produce a rich learning environment but it can also bring with it the danger of over-extending those involved (Vazquez Jacobus, Baskett & Bechstein). While this could seem a potential threat to sustainability, the opposite may be the case. As Vazquez Jacobus, Baskett and Bechstein conclude: '*What has seen us through the challenges [of interdisciplinarity] is a resiliency in the fabric woven by our common ideals*' (p. 73).

Building 'Bridges'

The barriers to successful community-university partnerships, particularly the inequalities in recognition and resources already mentioned, have led to the development of various models of university capacity building for community engagement. An important focus here is on what occurs at the boundaries between different organisations and the need for 'boundary spanners' who can broker relationships and act as interpreters between partners (Wenger 1999). Alter (2005) emphasises the importance of creating 'enabling platforms' to bring together community-based experience and academic study in a deeper mutual understanding. The notion of 'communities of practice' is one way of handling the different modes of knowledge involved in community-university partnerships (Hart & Wolff 2006). The partnership model of Science Shops is similarly concerned with building up longer term relationships between scientific knowledge and civil society groups to meet local needs (EC 2003). At the University of Brighton we have developed a Helpdesk, supported by a Senior Researchers Group, which plays a crucial role in capacity building both within the university and between the university and the local community (Hart et al. 2009).

The need for an infrastructure to build the necessary trust, relationships, commitment and understanding for sustainable partnerships is emphasised by a number of the current authors. Russell et al. maintain that this should include the

whole university: administrative staff, senior management and academics. Shea argues that institutional level commitment is important for handling issues such as a long-term funding strategy, transition plans and inevitable changes in leadership. Boyle, Ross and Stephens stress the importance not only of an administrative infrastructure but also of faculty involvement. It is the long-term, intellectually based engagement of academics that can create the time commitment and ongoing support essential to sustained community partnerships. Without this, partnerships may be too dependent on particular leaders or funders, who may have short-term horizons.

Funding

Funding is, nonetheless, an important element of sustainability and we were surprised that so few of the articles submitted talked about finance, suggesting that other factors may ultimately be more important to sustainability. White and Robson's account of the revival of a community arts project reminds us that it is easy to underestimate the importance of both a small number of committed individuals and what they refer to as 'the communal will'. Conversely, universities themselves represent considerable resources. Despite the difficult climate in which they operate, Boyle, Ross and Stephens argue that within this climate universities have the potential to act as important 'anchor' organisations for local communities.

While funding may not be the most critical factor in successful community-university partnerships, it is unavoidable. Limited resources and straightened economic times may well generate new creative opportunities (White & Robson; Shea; Pratt et al.) but for many partnerships '*It is the literal buy-in, the delegation of resources and the priority of assets, which we are missing. Unfortunately, it is this financial buy-in that is also required for our sustainability*' (Vazquez Jacobus, Baskett & Bechstein, p. 78).

CONCLUSION

As many of the authors suggest, sustainability is '*not in and of itself an affirmative good*' (Vazquez Jacobus, Baskett & Bechstein, p. 78). The projects described here did not set out with sustainability as an outcome. They set out in a variety of ways to make a real difference to the lives of people in local communities and to the quality and relevance of university research and teaching. In the process they created significant opportunities for knowledge mobilisation and exchange. Sustainability was thus '*... a by-product of ongoing collaborations between organisations*' (Phipps & Zanotti, p. 74). Indeed, for many, it was the collaborative relationship rather than any specific outcome that lay at the heart of sustainability. Equally, as London et al. highlight, a strong partnership relationship can survive setbacks: '*The sustainability of community-university partnerships is not based on a lack of mistakes in the relationship, but instead on the ability to build resilience over time and draw strength from responses to the challenges to be overcome*' (p. 13).

The articles in this special edition provide us with a wealth of detailed material and identify some important characteristics of sustainable community-university partnership working, often in the context of socioeconomic disadvantage. Nonetheless, they remain predominantly descriptive accounts. Given the challenges involved, whether in designing, implementing and evaluating the impact of partnership activities or in establishing genuinely reciprocal relationships between partners with different levels of power, legitimacy and commitment, there is now an urgent need to develop more theoretical models of sustainability that can help us withstand the current economic challenges. Importantly, these models should draw on the experience of sustainable partnership working in less economically developed countries, where the concept of university-community engagement and sustainability will take on different connotations owing to different cultural and political contexts.

Yet the partnerships represented in this collection also demonstrate a creativity, thoughtfulness and entrepreneurialism that suggest that we should not be pessimistic about the sustainability of community-university partnership working. The paradox is that economic crises may help to create sustainability as partnerships between community organisations and universities become more essential to the survival of both.

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