

Network Mawson Lakes: International and Local Links

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Abstract

Recent studies show that connections made with the local community are a natural and effective way for international students to learn about cultural norms, gain social support and enrich their study abroad experience. However, many international students have limited opportunities for meaningful interaction with locals.

The Network Mawson Lakes Project is a unique model of collaboration between local residents, clubs, businesses, schools, the university, the police, the council and international students. It has facilitated connections between international students and local residents through a variety of initiatives. It has brought social and economic advantages for international students and local residents through volunteering opportunities, collaborative projects and partnerships. These opportunities also support a deeper understanding of other cultures and lifestyles and thereby create greater harmony, understanding and tolerance in the local community.

Through a discussion of the history and evolution of the Network Mawson Lakes Project this paper explores how a community development approach can be a useful tool for developing practical solutions that assist international students to have greater interaction with local residents. It will demonstrate how community development principles such as community ownership, networking and sustainability have been the essential tools underpinning the framework for this process and are useful tools for building international and local links.

Key Words:

community development, collaboration, social support

Introduction

Australia is the third most popular destination in the English speaking world for international students, with 237 235 international students studying at Australian institutions at April 2004, (IDP, 2004). All students who embark on a program of study in a foreign country face a period of adjustment both to the new institution but more so to the new country. Many report difficulty in being able to interact and meet local students and residents.

Research suggests that international student's difficulties in adjusting to university can be exacerbated by the extra demands of adjusting to life and study in a new language and a different cultural setting (Armitage, 1999; Smart Votel and Ang, 2000). In a study by Walker (1999) students interviewed about non-academic factors that impacted on their academic achievement identified social needs as issues affecting both academic performance and adjustment to university life. Other research stresses the importance of social links for international students and highlights the connection between social networks and international student's successful adjustment to their new cultural environment (Kim, 1994; Pedersen, 1991).

In addition, recent studies show that connections made with the local community create long term personal ties which bring both social and economic advantages to both parties and can be a natural and effective way for International students to find out about the cultural norms

which will not compromise their peer relationships with other students, (Gresham, 2003). These links can also benefit the local community. An evaluation of their International Student Care Program at the University of Newcastle found that it was the members of the local community who expressed that they got more out of the experience than the international students. The study also found that through this program the local community gained a better understanding of the challenges faced by international students, and a greater knowledge of different cultures. The process also assisted to reduce incidences of harassment and discrimination in the community while bringing about greater tolerance and better information. (Grisham, 2003).

In this paper, I will discuss the Network Mawson Lakes Project which offers a practical model for increasing and enhancing opportunities for social contact between the local community and international students and encourages the involvement of international students in local community life in a way that enriches their opportunities for meaningful interaction with locals and their social and cultural experience as well as their educational one. I will provide an overview of the framework and the principles that underpin this project and demonstrate through examples and a description of the process utilised how this type of approach can be a useful model that is not resource intensive for helping to develop sustainable community structures that support international students to develop social networks that extend beyond their educational institution.

Description of Mawson Lakes Community and the Mawson Lakes Campus

The Mawson Lakes campus is one of the four metropolitan campuses of the University of South Australia (UniSA). It is located around 15 kilometres or 25 minutes north of Adelaide city centre. Mawson Lakes is the main campus for the Division of IT, Engineering and the Environment with nearby Technology Park. The campus also houses a number of research institutes and centres and a range of education programs are now offered in brand new buildings. There are around 5 147 students and approximately 1 400 of those are international students. Many of the international students are postgraduate course work students. There are over 20 cultural groups represented on this campus. The cohorts of international students have expanded rapidly over the past three years due to the growing demand for specific programs offered on this campus.

There is student accommodation available for students wanting to live in Mawson Lakes via the Mertz apartments. The Mertz apartments consist of 39 apartments within walking distance of the Mawson Lakes campus, which can house around 90 students. The apartments mainly attract international and rural and interstate students.

The Mawson Lakes community is a new community which is part of a housing development by Delfin. In the past 4 years the population of Mawson Lakes has grown from 938 persons in 2001 to 3917 persons in 2005. Due to its rapid expansion and growth the community is still in the process of setting up residents associations and clubs. There is a limited number of community organisations that operate in this area. Issues include limited public transport to the campus and Mawson Lakes itself, especially after hours and on weekends and limited opportunities for social entertainment.

Background/ history of the Network Mawson Lakes project

The Network Mawson Lakes project began in 2004 with discussions between University staff, UniSA Student Association staff and the Elizabeth Community Police Branch. The initial project group recognised that due to its location there were limited opportunities for international students' living in Mawson Lakes to participate in social activities. The local student population at Mawson Lakes frequently travelled large distances to get to university on top of juggling study and part time work which limited their opportunities for socialising while on campus. There were also limited opportunities for social interaction outside of

university at Mawson Lakes, with the only social venue being the local pub and no access to public transport after hours. In addition, feelings of isolation and alienation and were further exacerbated by some break-ins and thefts that occurred at Mertz apartments. This resulted in international students being socially isolated, feeling unsafe and having limited opportunities to interact with Australians, improve their language skills, learn about the culture and develop their own support networks. The absence of such networks affected their ability to adjust to life in Australia. Subsequently, this impacted on their ability to study and perform academically.

As both the community and the student population were relatively new to the area and were in the process of establishing themselves the initial project group viewed this as a timely opportunity to establish constructive links between the newly settled residents and the rapidly expanding cohorts of university students who were moving into the area

What were the aims and intended outcomes of the project?

The Network Mawson Lakes Project aimed to foster cross cultural interaction through inclusion of International students in the wide range of activities being developed as part of the new neighbourhood. The vision was that the inclusion of students through the Network Mawson Lakes Project would foster cross cultural understanding, racial tolerance and add to the diversity of the community which would enhance the community as a whole.

The intended outcomes of the project were to:

- Increase interaction between members of different cultures.
- Increase community activity in both variety and numbers
- Develop a sense of cultural harmony as an essential element in this newly emerging community.

These were to be measured by:

- Attendance at functions
- Number and variety of opportunities to link.
- Evaluation of experience by participants.

The group was successful in obtaining funding grant of \$3 000 for the project from the Mosaic Police fund to commence the project.

Framework

A community development framework forms the basis of the approach utilised in this project. This type of approach was selected because we wanted to develop a process that would build a sustainable community structure that supports international students and provides opportunities for them to become involved in the community that extended beyond and independent of the university. We believed that engaging and working collaboratively with local groups and the people who live here provided us with the best opportunity to achieve this.

The principles that underpin this approach include sustainability, collaboration, community ownership and the valuing of diversity, with an emphasis on consultation, networking, inclusion, building of partnerships and participation. There is also a strong focus on the process of various groups in the community working together to develop solutions that are tailored to the resources available and aim to benefit the community as a whole.

The principle of valuing diversity pervades the entire process and has underpinned the practical aspects of how the project unfolds. It is important for this particular project as it reinforces that one community does not have to be like others. This means that there is no one “right” way of achieving the goals and no single model that will necessarily meet the goals

for this project. Rather the focus is placed on working together and valuing different perspectives in order to find a way that works for this particular group and this particular community.

The principle of collaboration and community ownership are also important. Collaboration highlights the importance of involving all relevant stakeholders and creating a mechanism by which they can work together. For this project this has involved identifying the relevant stakeholders in this new emerging community, building relationships with them, engaging their participation and developing a process for us to work together in a constructive way. The Network Mawson Lakes project is a shared project with shared goals that go beyond individual stakeholders. Through this a sense of ownership has developed as all members in some way own the project and have a say. This has required us to be flexible and open to new ideas or suggestions and prepared to change out approach based on feedback from the community and the student body.

A collaborative approach is a cooperative exercise involving all people concerned. To engage participation there must be benefits for those involved. For residents of Mawson Lakes interaction with students offers the advantage of keeping these students in the local area which enhances business activity, assists the development of community organisations and provides opportunities for community members to share their lives and culture with international students and learn more about other cultures. Having students involved also had the potential of providing access to a wide range of activities and perspectives using the universities facilities and opportunities for students to contribute their professions to the community. The students benefits were that this project created the opportunity for them to participate in a range of activities, develop connections, interact with people who live in the local area and gain first hand knowledge of the principles and procedures generally followed by organisations in Australia. In addition, becoming involved in extra curricular activity offered opportunities for personal and professional development providing an advantage in future employment and applications for permanent residency.

The strengths of valuing collaboration and encouraging community ownerships have been that we have engaged the participation of diverse range of people and interest groups in the community and come up with some creative ideas as to how we may address certain issues that can be sustained in the long term. We have also been able to pool skills, knowledge and resources without the constraints of a single organisation. This has included tapping into a number of resources that the university was not aware of prior to this in order to benefit the whole community. The benefits of community ownership have been that all members take responsibility for the success of initiatives and contribute to problem solving of issues. All members also take pride in what we have managed to achieve as a group.

Finally, the principle of sustainability pervades the whole process. It highlights the importance of ensuring that activities are viable in the long term and not simply in terms of their immediate role and function. In practice it means that the project needs to be able to support itself in its own way in the long term and cannot be resource intensive. This principle has guided our approach and the type of model that we have developed. As part of our commitment to sustainability we have utilised the links and local knowledge that we have gained to look for opportunities to tap into existing structures and processes that are supported by organisations or groups rather than try to establish our own. Working collaboratively has really enhanced this. It has also provided us with opportunities to pool resources in order to expand existing programs and initiatives without too much burden being placed on any one specific organisation or group. Therefore, part of our role has been to identify opportunities, strengthen or develop links with what is already out there and work collaboratively to enable students living in the area to access these opportunities.

The Approach

This project has utilised a process based approach. In a process based approach the emphasis is placed on the process of a group and the community working together. There are similarities and differences between a process and an outcome based approach. Both are interested in achieving outcomes. However, an outcome based approach tends to be focused on quite specific goals with particular approaches or strategies developed to achieve each goal. In a process based approach outcomes tend to be quite broad and although there are clear goals and a clear purpose the way to achieve these can be diverse and may change over time due to the ongoing input of a range of stakeholders. The process of working together is also valued in its own right as through this relationships and social capital are built. “The sum is greater than the number of its parts” concept.

The benefits of this type of approach in a project aimed at developing links between students and the community have been that by engaging a range of stakeholders we have been able to map the resources available in the community, share information and ideas, build partnerships, discuss issues and hear from a range of perspectives before deciding on a way forward. We have not had to have all the answers but rather an approach that values ideas and suggestion proposed by others. Utilising a process like this has ensured that we have had commitment from students and the community to initiatives and support from the stakeholders involved in developing, supporting, promoting and participating in activities. As a result we have achieved many positive outcomes for the community and the students without it being resource intensive for any one single group or organisation.

Overview of the Network Mawson Lakes Project

At this stage I would like to provide a brief overview of how the project commenced to illustrate how a process based project based on community development principles operates.

The project commenced with meetings between university staff and international students living at the Mertz apartments to gauge interest. The students were interested in being more involved in the local community and proposed a range of ideas and identified some opportunities for becoming involved in the local community. Key students were also consulted on their perceptions of the interaction between the students and the local community, their concerns and issues. The students identified the following issues:

- A high turnover in the occupancy of student’s apartments resulting in students not knowing each other and the apartments lacking a sense of community,
- Lack of interaction between international and local students living in the apartments and
- Limited knowledge of what was available in the community and how to tap into it.

They suggested that as a first step the students who lived in the Mertz Apartments needed to get to know each other and needed to bridge the gap between the local and international students. As part of our initial steps the students were provided with the opportunity to meet each other via a ‘Meet your Neighbours’ Barbeque organised by a group of interested students and, funded by UniSA Students Association and Learning Connection. The BBQ was attended by around 40 students and was held at a park in front of the apartments. At the BBQ we also further canvassed the idea of developing something further to assist students to become involved in local social activities and received a positive response and a list of students who were interested in participating, which included local and international students.

In addition, we began to identify and network with key stakeholders in the Mawson Lakes community and the university in order to engage their participation and involvement in the project. We focused on those in close geographic proximity to the apartments and organizations that were socially active. The key stakeholders were invited to attend a meeting to discuss the proposed ideas on how we could proceed. Those who attended included Delfin (developers), principal of the local primary school, the police, Chair of Mawson Lakes

Residents Association, Rotary club representative, UniSA Students Association student's representatives and students living at the Mertz apartments. At this stage the group was really enthusiastic about the project and agreed to form a group which would act as a steering committee for future initiatives and provide a way to work collaboratively, pull knowledge and resources and drive the project. The group was named the Network Mawson Lakes. This group provided us with links to the local organisations and groups and access to a wide range of skills and resources in additions to the grant.

The members of the group identified many opportunities for students to become involved in the local community. These included:

- An opportunity for a student representative to become a member of the executive of the Mawson Lakes Residents' Association
- Possibilities of a number of collaborative projects with the local primary school which was located between the Mertz apartments and the university campus
- Volunteer opportunities at the nursing home located across the road from Mertz
- Meals with local families
- Community sporting events and
- Holding a Multicultural fair to promote cultural understanding

However, the Network Mawson Lakes identified that in order for the students to be recognised in the community they needed to have a collective voice. As a result the students involved in the network decided to form a club which would be affiliated with UniSA Student Association.

Mawson Students Network (MSN)

The students who organized the BBQ initiated the formation of a club for students of varying cultural backgrounds living at Mawson Lakes. The aims of the club was to provide new International and local students with opportunities to meet locals, take part in local sporting and social activities, develop new skills by becoming involved in community projects and volunteering opportunities and create a wide network of friends in the local community. The club was student driven and aimed to give the students a recognizable body that has an identity within the Mawson Lakes community and a voice in community affairs through representation on community associations and committees. Shortly after its formation the president of MSN, an International student was elected onto the Mawson Lakes Residents Association executive giving students a voice in local affairs. Students from the club also became a part of the Network Mason Lakes and contributed a student perspective to the issues discussed. In addition, with the support and funding from the Network Mawson Lakes MSN began to plan a Multicultural Quiz afternoon aimed at celebrating diversity and providing students living in the area, local residents and university staff to meet and have fun together.

Through the process of consultation a structure was developed for the project by those involved, which included a steering committee consisting of representatives from local organisations and groups, students and the university. The students had formed a more unified body through the club which provided them with a stronger identity in the community. The steering committee envisaged that its members would work on developing links, opportunities and initiatives that the student club could link into or develop further such as the Multicultural Quiz afternoon. New students to the area could link into local initiatives and obtain information through the club and feed ideas and suggestions back into the community through the steering committee.

Role and skills of the Worker

A worker in the role of trying to establish and develop this type of project requires to have a clear vision of what the project is trying to achieve and a commitment to community development principles. I have viewed my role as someone who has assisted in facilitating the process for this project and has helped this process along with the aim of enabling others to

become actively involved rather than being the person who does everything. There is a specific set of skills that this requires. Essential skills that I have identified along the way include:

- Facilitation skills – to facilitate discussions, meetings in a way that ensures that everyone is heard yet also being able to pull out and identify common ground and facilitated the process of developing ideas into practical actions
- Networking and the ability to communicate and establish relationships with a range of people of diverse personal and professional backgrounds
- Social Animation – the ability to inspire, enthuse, activate, stimulate, energise and motivate others to action. The aim of such a project is to enable others to become actively involved in a community process rather than being the person that does everything.
- Negotiation and mediation skills – especially being able to deal effectively with conflicting interest and values.
- Being able to provide support to a whole range of people - this involves affirming people, recognising, acknowledging and affirming their value and the value of their contribution, giving encouragement and being available to people when they need to talk or ask questions
- Identifying and utilising skills and resources available in the university and the community
- Mentoring and assisting others to develop skills
- Knowing when to let go and let other take responsibility
- Critical Reflection
- Problem solving and
- Research and publicity

It is also important to have the flexibility to work with local resources and ideas presented by others. My aim has been to work towards eventually eliminating the need for my role in this project. This will take place once sustainable structures and processes are developed and established and mechanisms put into place that automatically provide opportunities for students to be linked into the community by university support services and local organisations.

What has been achieved so far by the Network Mawson Lakes Project

Since it's beginning in April 2005 the network has achieved many positive outcomes for the community and students living in the local area. There are many initiatives that have occurred, however, I will only focus on our achievements in relation to initial intended goals. It has been successful in:

1. Giving international students a voice in the community and community affairs.- Representation on the Mawson Lakes Residents Association has enabled students to gain insight into community based organizations but also given them the opportunity to have a say in local affairs and be recognised as an important interest group in the community.
2. Developing a positive profile of international students in the community and highlighting the strengths, talent and skills that they bring. - This has occurred through the students' involvement in the network. We have evolved this further by a series of articles in the local paper written by students about their experiences here and their contribution to the community.
3. Raising awareness in the community of the experiences of students, the challenges they face and developing options to address these.

4. Strengthening the relationship between the university and the community.
5. Building of relationships between students, local organisations and residents.
6. Organising a successful community event to encourage the development of relationships between students and community members and promote cultural understanding and tolerance.

Via Network Mawson Lakes project we have also encouraged the participation of local community in orientation activities for newly arrived International students. For example, our last welcome lunch for international students was attended by the local Mayor, and representatives from local organisations and groups and MSN. Students involved in the project have also gaining a sense of belonging and opportunities for participation in local community activities.

Challenges/ Dilemmas

There are some challenges and dilemmas that the Network Mawson Lakes and MSN are facing. These include:

Evaluation of the project at the end of the year

It is not easy to evaluate this type of project as the goals are broad. One of our challenges is how to evaluate and measure what has been achieved. We will need to look into possible models in the next few months. The evaluation has certainly sparked some lively discussion around what members consider to be measures of “success”.

Leadership and practical support for the project

In order to ensure the success of this project it is essential to have someone drive and provide administrative support as this stage of its development. Most members of the network dedicate their time on a volunteer basis. It has been essential to have someone who has the time, knowledge and skills to provide appropriate support which involves administrative tasks such as preparing agendas, booking venues for meetings and preparing minutes from meetings. It is also important to have a contact person who has an overall understanding of the project and can negotiate with other stakeholders, network, prepare proposals, provide publicity and do research into potential initiatives. This ensures that momentum is maintained and tasks are completed. In my experience it usually takes around 3 years for structures and processes to develop and stabilise sufficiently to be able to operate independently. So although we are aiming to ensure that the structure we develop are sustainable in the long term without ongoing support we are not there yet. We need to explore as a group how we can maintain the support required over this time period. Up to now this has been part of my role with the assistance of a social work student on placement.

Challenges for MSN

The newly formed student club faces a number of challenges. At present, the leaders of the club are due to complete their studies at the end of this year. This means that there will need to be a change in leadership at a time when the club is still developing its identity. We have been lucky so far to have very skilled, motivated and committed leaders who have put in lots of time and effort into this year’s initiatives. We will need to support new leadership to develop skills in this area again next year .

The group is currently planning to hold an Annual General Meeting to elect new leadership and discuss future directions for the club. One of the items on the agenda is whether the group will affiliate with Lions. If they do become a Lions club this may provide a new avenue of support for its members but at present there is still a high need for support. One of the ways

that we have managed this is to have a social work student work with the club as part of her placement, however, due to space and VSU this may not be a possibility for next year. The possibility of VSU being introduced next year also poses a whole range of dilemmas for all student clubs and their future.

One of the other dilemmas for the club is its member's commitments and motivation. The executive has found throughout this year that despite suggestions from members for events and lots of initial enthusiasm there is often a relatively low attendance to these compared to its membership. This is an issue that we will perhaps need to do some research into next year to gain a better understanding of the barriers preventing students from attending events. We hope to gain some useful feedback regarding this as part of our evaluation at the end of this year.

Future Directions/ Opportunities

There are many new possibilities, resources and initiatives to be developed. Our future directions include:

- Possible affiliation of the student club with Lions – providing member the opportunity to participate in local events but also to maintain their links
- Building industry links
- Work experience opportunities for students
- Volunteering opportunities – focused on students contributing their skills to community initiatives – especially focused on the local primary school, the nursing home and some local council initiatives
- Invitation for students home alone to attend Christmas lunch as peoples homes or the nursing home
- Home link / Community mentoring scheme via the local Lions club
- Creating opportunities for students to participate in events held in Mawson Lakes, for instance Christmas festivities, spring, summer and winter festivals, science week and so on.
- Great Mawson Race – an idea for an activity as part of orientation for commencing students that would assist them to orientate themselves to the Mawson Lakes campus and the local community.

Conclusion

The outcomes listed and examples provided highlight that a community development approach can be an effective way of assisting international students to make links with the local community that not only benefits the students but also the community. What has been most striking about this project is the openness and willingness of the Mawson Lakes community to support this emerging group and their willingness to work collaboratively and pull resources in order to do this.

The Network Mawson Lakes project has created an innovative model that has enhance the lives of the people living and working in Mawson Lakes for a cohesive and culturally tolerant community and has the potential to produce ongoing, sustainable outcomes that benefit international students, local students and the community. Through the process of consultation, collaboration, the pooling of resources and information sharing the Network Mawson Lakes project has stimulated social action to activate change.

In the past year we have managed to develop new relationships, increase understanding of issues for international students in the community, obtain community involvement and participation at a number of levels and open dialogue between different stakeholders. Most importantly we have worked towards developing a vision for this community which includes cultural tolerance, support and collaboration and a willingness to work together.

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