

MELBOURNE PURE GOOD PRACTICE REPORT

Theme: Social Inclusion

INTRODUCTION

Melbourne PURE has undertaken a series of case studies of regionally-significant initiatives in which higher education institutions (HEIs) have been engaged. The purpose of the case studies has been to understand better the conditions and the factors which shape effective engagement by HEIs with key stakeholders in the Melbourne region. Each case study has been chosen because it contributes to a larger theme which has been identified as a key priority for Melbourne: regional innovation systems; 'green' jobs'; and social inclusion and active citizenship.

The learning from the case studies will be shared with the other 17 regions which are participating in PURE internationally, especially those with which Melbourne has common interests in the key themes. It will be used also to identify opportunities for policy development, for new initiatives, and for enhancing the HEI contributions to the existing initiatives.

The particular initiative which is the subject of this case study, the partnership between the Western Bulldogs Football Club and Victoria University, contributes to understanding of the social inclusion theme. A separate paper outlines the concepts and issues which arise in relation to this theme (see [Melbourne PURE Case Studies - Social Inclusion Theme](#)).

BACKGROUND TO INITIATIVE

The western suburbs of Melbourne have been regarded for many years as one of the more economically and socially disadvantaged areas in Melbourne, Australia. Historically, the west was a primary site of manufacturing industry and a focus of settlement for immigrants coming to Australia under various resettlement programs. As manufacturing industry has declined, unemployment has been a significant and continuing problem.

Yet the west has had a strong sense of identity and resilience. Two of the most significant organisations in the western region, Victoria University and the Western Bulldogs Football Club, have formed a multi-faceted partnership to lead initiatives and develop programs for people in communities in the west. Each has an interest in raising the profile of their own organisation and

being associated with the partner, as well as enhancing outcomes on various arenas. A central focus of the partnership is shared interest in sports science, participation and development of pathways and increased learning and employment opportunities for young people.

Support for the partnership was driven by the senior leaders of both organisations. When commencing, people from both organisations came together for a planning day, sorting out how they would collaborate and the kinds of areas they could focus on. A number of working groups were established to pursue these ideas. Once established, the partnership has grown organically without a central mechanism of coordination, although VU Sports and Fitness and Marketing, and the Bulldogs Marketing sections are important resources.

STRUCTURE AND FUNDING

A Memorandum of Understanding has been negotiated to provide the framework for undertaking the various activities. This is distinct from a sponsorship agreement which VU has with the Western Bulldogs, and a formal contribution from Bulldogs' memberships to VU's Foundation for scholarships. Each of these has their own terms of reference. The Vice Chancellor and the Bulldogs Chief Executive Officer communicate directly, as required, while the University Chancellor is coincidentally also a Director of the football club. The Bulldogs' Chief Executive Officer is a Director of the University's Foundation. Operationally, there are a number of people who work with their counterparts in the other organisation, each working to the mutual requirements of particular activities.

The flexibility is important but it means also that the partnership is continuing to evolve and is also dependent on key people, particularly at the Football Club. Sometimes questions arise about whether proposed activities are part of the partnership, or should be considered as 'fee for service'.

Other linkages are also important. The redevelopment of Whitten Oval, the Bulldogs' administration and training facility has provided accommodation also for the regional office of the Department of Education and Early Childhood.

Student engagement with the initiative is supported through the University's policy on Learning in the Workplace. This requires that 25 per cent of assessment in each course involve workplace or community experience.

MAIN ACTIVITIES

The core of the partnership is reciprocal sharing of sponsorship, facilities and shared research and development activities and projects. These include gymnasium facilities, use of flotation tanks and a 'high-altitude hotel' and the extensive redevelopment of facilities at Whitten Oval to which VU will relocate part of its sports science program, and traineeships. The Bulldogs provide game passes to VU which are used with students, particularly those from international backgrounds. This provides distinct opportunities for them to learn and engage with members of the community.

However, the defining characteristic of the relationship is their mutual interest in elite sport: the University has leading research expertise in the field, while the football club wants to maximise its on-field success. Their focus is on the science of performance, including the use of technology such as GPS, but also sports and event management and massage. A senior VU researcher is a joint appointment; he and two doctoral students are based at the Bulldogs training facilities at Whitten Oval. Apart from formal research initiatives, the Western Bulldogs provide cadetships for the best third-year students, who then return to the University to undertake an Honours degree. There is also a developing relationship with Maribyrnong Secondary College which is being developed as an elite secondary school, specialising in sports science. This emerging 'sports triangle', between the three organisations, provides a substantial platform for engaging young people and offering a variety of pathways.

VU also involve sports historians in the Bulldogs' museum, and has contributed to the Bulldogs' economic and accounting analysis capacity. Other disciplines are getting involved over time.

Several of the initiatives have multiple partners, one of the most substantial which is the schools program, 'Bulldogs Friendly Schools', conducted in conjunction with teacher education at VU. This is the biggest joint initiative, a Western Bulldogs program that is delivered by pre-service teachers. Students are trained in health, diet and coaching and then undertake an eight week placement in schools, supported by appearances by Bulldogs players. The program is linked with schools where the Bulldogs have a particular connection (perhaps separate from the normal VU arrangement), but each partner supports the other in the school environment. From the VU perspective, this is useful work experience for students. The achievements have been:

- School children learning about healthy lifestyles;
- Maintaining children's attention at school;

- An introduction to Australian culture for new arrivals;
- Communal conversations; and
- A stronger sense of inclusion for new arrivals.

The VU School of Education now regard this as part of its fundamental work, and look forward to increasing the number of schools which are involved. State government support will assist this.

The Bulldogs are a Registered Training Organisation and have Spirit West as a vehicle for engaging with disengaged young people and enabling them to gain renewed access to pathways. VU TAFE provides the expertise for a jointly delivered alternative Year 12 sports program, while financial and other support is provided by the Australian Football League.

OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

The Western Bulldogs-Victorian University partnership has delivered significant achievements in both public awareness, and in the specific outcomes from each type of activity. Both the sports science and the outreach programs have been important, although the process has been larger than any one program. There are specific opportunities to pursue, such as expansion of a joint doctoral studies program, possibly involving the football coaching staff.

However, it has not been easy. Both are large, 'unwieldy' organisations (especially the University) with clear goals that have been concerned, at times, with protecting their own interests. Their structures are different, and communication has been uneven, not helped by the increasing competitiveness in both sectors. The nature of the Australian football industry is one of significant, regular turnover in personnel so that there is an on-going process of developing relationships. Financial resources are never sufficient, as is staff workloads; there is never enough time; there is on-going concern about the results being achieved for the dollars which are invested. The development of protocols and procedures has been an important initiative.

Both organisations have very extensive constituencies in the west, and can support each other through networking and mutual support in various programs. Given the commitment of both to community engagement, there is an opportunity for significant innovative activities in the foreseeable future. An important opportunity lies in involving large companies which are based in

the west. This reflects the commitment of both organisations to their region, and their desire to see it prosper with improved quality of life for its communities.

While the focus of the partnership is very much in their shared region, future development could include national and international partnerships. The Australian Community Centre for Diabetes (ACCD) is hosted by VU with the Western Bulldogs as a partner (with Board representation). The University is exploring links with similar ventures based at places like Leeds Metropolitan University and the German Sports University in Cologne. The Institute for Sport, Exercise and Active Living (ISEAL) and Sports West will be important resources for this growth.