

**Mainstreaming Social Engagement in Higher Education:  
Benefits, challenges, and successes**

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## ABSTRACT

Contributing directly to national and local development is seen as a core mission of higher education institutions throughout the world. This mission may be referred to as "community service" or by some other term. Whatever the terminology, many universities, and the societies that support them, recognize that providing long-term benefits to society through detached teaching and research, though of undeniable and fundamental importance, is an insufficient intellectual response to pressing social needs. If we are not to be overwhelmed in the short term by complex, deep-seated problems caused by, and reflected in, poverty, exclusion, injustice, and environmental destruction, then universities must become directly engaged with civil society and government in finding and applying solutions.

Institutions of higher education have much to learn from each other about social engagement benefits, challenges and successful strategies. Many different approaches to community service are being taken, and to some degree universities are documenting and reflecting on their experiences. For example, in recent years: "community service-learning" has been receiving increasing attention by North American institutions, such as the University of British Columbia; with funding from the Canadian International Development Agency, Vietnamese and Canadian universities have experimented in building their capacity to collaborate with local agencies in reducing poverty; and, universities in Thailand have joined national government programs to support students as they assist, and learn from, rural communities.

While differing in provenance, programmatic approach, and national context, the above examples are illustrative of a common desire by a number of higher education funders, administrators, faculty and students not only to strengthen their institutions' social engagement, but also to integrate it more effectively with teaching and research. To them, the notion that students should simply absorb knowledge generated and imparted by professors, then wait until they graduate before applying it, reflects an incomplete conception of personal and social learning processes. They are finding that pedagogy, discovery, and access to higher education are all enhanced when universities and their members become directly involved with social problem solving, especially when the involvement is made an integral component of teaching and research rather than being relegated to the academic side-lines.

Despite the increasingly evident benefits to social engagement by institutions of higher education, there remain many challenges to raising its status and effectiveness. Some of the most difficult challenges are those posed by traditional academic culture and governance, but others can also be identified.

More systematic reflections within institutions, and more international mutual learning among institutions, about the benefits, challenges, and success strategies associated with social engagement could be of significant value to universities and their societies. Creative possibilities for encouraging reflection and mutual learning are currently being considered in some circles. These may be of interest to a wider international audience.

## INTRODUCTION

Recent experience in Vietnam, Thailand, Canada and other countries shows that universities have the potential to make significant contributions to development by engaging with social problem-solving in collaboration with communities and government. This potential role of universities goes beyond standard teaching and research.

In the standard perspective, university contributions to social problem-solving are diffuse and long-term. The expectation of students is that they will only make their contributions to society after they have completed their studies and apply to their careers what they learned in class; the expectation of scholars is that they will investigate phenomena with detachment to yield truths best left for others to act on. In this traditional division of academic labour, students are restricted to consuming knowledge, scholars to knowledge production and dissemination. Neither are involved in application of knowledge to social problems. At the same time, their learning does not benefit from direct encounters with society.

The growth-with-trickle down concept that dominates economic development discourse seems implicitly mirrored in the standard perspective on universities. The assumption is that by generating knowledge for its own sake, or for the sake of various powerful interests, universities help society as a whole become smarter and richer, and thus inevitably benefit all. However, the advancement and dissemination of knowledge, and the economic growth it spurs, can in some cases actually exacerbate poverty—in the short term (for example, by taking away traditional livelihoods) or over the long term (for example, by inducing climate change).

An alternative view of universities, now emerging, locates them more centrally and directly in the development process. Teachers, researchers and students are seen as development actors, collaborating with others to help meet urgent social needs, and in the process enriching their own learning and that of the diverse people they work with. Community service by academics moves from the margins of the university, from being defined as a charitable donation of time over and above what academics really get paid to do, to become an integral part of intellectual discovery. In short, universities become socially engaged.

In this paper, we explore the benefits that can be achieved through social engagement, and the challenges that engagement can face and present. We review experience in three different contexts, focusing on one case in each context. The contexts and cases are: 1) Community service-learning in North America, with a focus on the case of the Learning Exchange at the University of British Columbia; 2) Canadian universities' involvement with international development, with a focus on the Localized Poverty Reduction in Vietnam (LPRV) program; 3) Thailand's government-sponsored programs to promote academic social engagement, with a focus on the experience at Walailak University.

By social engagement we are referring to academics (students, teachers, researchers) working, as academics, with non-academics (community members, government officials, etc.) to analyze and solve social problems in a spirit of continuous mutual learning, i.e., engaging in collaborative action-research oriented to social learning.

Academic social engagement, as we understand it, avoids didacticism, polemics, and polarization in favour of consensus-building. It is grounded in a post-positivist recognition that there are different ways of knowing, and in a belief that the academy has a responsibility to address critical social issues through dialogue. It often is connected to local poverty reduction and strengthening of marginalized communities, as the examples presented in this paper indicate. However, it can also be connected to issues ranging across sectors as diverse as health, urban transportation, food security, human rights, and governance. It can involve academics in problems ranging from local to national to international scales.

## ACADEMIC SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

While universities are among the most viscous of institutions, they do change.

From the middle of the 19th century to the middle of the 20th, the central question for universities was whether to educate a well-rounded renaissance intelligentsia, the role famously articulated by Cardinal Newman in his 1852 "The Idea of a University"—a place where young men would be equipped "to fill any post with credit, and to master any subject with facility"—or, following the 19th century path blazed by German universities, to promote advanced specialized research and professional training in response to the needs and opportunities of the modern scientific era.

By the middle of the 20th century, Newman's idea, if not outright rejected, had been relegated to setting curricula for the increasingly denigrated "liberal arts" or "general arts" first degree. Specialization and professionalism had triumphed. Canadian political economy departments, for example, were split into economics, political science, sociology, and anthropology. Faculties were established for business training. New schools opened for emerging professions: rehabilitation therapy, librarianship, social work, urban planning, public administration, and so on. A University of California president could logically refer to his institution as a "multiversity."

As formation of welfare states accelerated from the 1950s into the 1970s, universities in the industrialized societies, added to their central specialized research and training mission, and to their vestigial culture-preservation and general education roles, a new social function: mass education in the interest of preparing a productive workforce and knowledgeable citizenry. Thanks to abundant government funding, whole universities and colleges, not only the departments and schools within them, proliferated. Enrollments soared as tuitions were generously subsidized.

Faculty and students, imbued with the spirit of democracy and reacting to the quietism of the early Cold War period, came increasingly to see their individual social responsibilities as extending beyond the lab and the classroom. Many decided that they also had a responsibility to apply their intellects to social movements concerned with civil rights, nuclear disarmament, the war in Vietnam, poverty, decolonization, and national democracy.

Combined with off-campus activities were efforts to democratize the university itself (e.g., by providing for student representation) and to provide forums (e.g., “teach-ins”) for citizens struggling with current issues. However, these efforts did little to link regular curricula and research programs with social issues. Few could conceive of education for a university degree as including learning from and with people without degrees, or of advanced research as including average citizens and officials in formulating research questions, let alone in the devising of methods and the analysis of results. Much of the professorial activism at that time was in the form of their lending to political movements their superior knowledge and intellectual credence—a kind of intellectual noblesse oblige.

By the 1980s, while the dramatic forms of political energy disappeared from many campuses, social concern was not necessarily abating: for many students and faculty, it took the form of feminism or environmentalism. Respectively, these concerns led to fundamental rethinking about the nature of knowledge and learning, and thus about the role of the university. Participatory action–research was promoted by feminists, and whole–systems thinking by environmentalists. The academic canons of detachment and specialization, and the associated comforts of positivism, reductionism, and technocracy, which serve to buffer experts from controversy and complexity outside their fields, were challenged on epistemological grounds.

A small but growing number of academics now feel that their academic responsibilities to democracy are not fully met by being good scholars engaged only with their specialist peers or with buyers of their expertise. Social engagement is also required. For instance, the growing awareness that health is in large part determined socially and environmentally is producing a growing awareness that for the academy to make its maximum contribution to health promotion, at least some of its members need to put at least some of their energies into action-research involving collaboration not only of healing professionals and life scientists, but also community developers, economists, traffic engineers, air pollution modelers, and so on.

As will be seen from the experiences reviewed below, academic social engagement provides rich opportunities for multi-layered learning, but the opportunities are not easily captured, and they can come at a price. There is still suspicion of engagement in some academic quarters.

In the paper’s Conclusion, we will set forth some of the many questions still to be answered about the possibilities for enhancing the efficacy of social engagement, and will

propose a process for addressing these questions themselves in a spirit of social engagement.

## COMMUNITY SERVICE-LEARNING IN NORTH AMERICA AND THE UBC CASE

**The United States:** An increasing number of universities in the United States are committing to the practice of “engaged scholarship” (Boyer 1996; Maurasse 2001). This commitment takes a variety of forms including community-university research partnerships focusing on particular social issues, community service-learning, and other forms of outreach (Bringle and Hatcher 2002). This section of the paper focuses on Community Service-Learning.

Community Service-Learning refers to an experiential learning approach that combines classroom learning with intentional voluntary service that meets community needs. Real-life experiences in the community are linked to academic content through processes that encourage critical reflection including journal writing, small group discussion, and the writing of analytical papers.

Community Service-Learning programs in US universities have grown significantly over the past ten to twenty years, in part as a result of substantial funding provided by the last several federal administrations. This support was intended to address concerns about diminishing civic participation among young people. The strengthening of young people’s engagement with community organizations was seen as a way to create a “domestic peace corps.”

Umbrella organizations such as Campus Compact<sup>1</sup> act as clearing houses, central communication hubs, and catalysts for the growth of service-learning programs. Community Service-Learning is sometimes linked to a university’s broad institutional goals regarding community engagement. For example, both the University of Southern California and the University of Pennsylvania have extensive community programs designed to strengthen inner city neighbourhoods adjacent to the university campuses.<sup>2</sup>

**Canada:** While some Canadian universities have long histories of community involvement of various kinds, Community Service-Learning is relatively new in Canada. St. Francis Xavier University initiated a service-learning program in 1995 with both local and international components. The University of British Columbia initiated the Learning

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<sup>1</sup> Campus Compact, an American coalition of more than 900 college and university presidents “committed to the civic purposes of higher education”, has compiled a list of some of the definitions of CSL. For additional information, see: [http://www.compact.org/publication/s-l\\_toolkit/definitions.html](http://www.compact.org/publication/s-l_toolkit/definitions.html).

<sup>2</sup>University of Southern California’s Joint Educational Project: <http://www.usc.edu/dept/LAS/jep/>  
University of Pennsylvania’s Center for Community Partnerships: <http://www.upenn.edu/ccp/>

Exchange Trek Program in 1999 (as discussed in more detail below). Other Canadian universities have begun to develop Community Service-Learning programs in the past few years. A new national association, the Canadian Association for Community Service-Learning (CACSL) has recently been formed. CACSL has received funding from the largest private foundation in Canada to enable the emerging national coalition to promote Community Service-Learning programs across Canada. CACSL intends to build on the lessons learned through the US experience but to develop uniquely Canadian models for Community Service-Learning that are congruent with the Canadian sociocultural context and that focus on the strengthening of civil society generally and the cultivation of the qualities of global citizenship among young people.<sup>3</sup>

**The State of the Art:** As the practice of Community Service-Learning grows, increasing attention is being paid to the pedagogical outcomes of the approach and to its theoretical dimensions. Some research shows that Community Service-Learning increases students' grades, (Astin and Sax 1998; Gray and Ondaatje 1998), promotes increased clarity about career choices (Vogelgesang and Astin 2000), enhances personal competencies such as communication, critical thinking ability, and leadership skills (Eyler and Giles 1999), and leads to increased engagement in civil society after graduation (Astin, Sax, and Avalos 1999; Mabry 1998; Giles and Eyler 1994). Academic journals such as the Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning provide a forum for discussions of best practices and theoretical frameworks intended to guide service-learning programs. For example, some authors argue that service-learning and other university outreach programs should take a social justice approach to community development. This approach is viewed as representing an advancement over approaches based on a charity model (Marullo and Edwards 2000). Other authors (e.g., Morton 1995) argue that social justice and charity approaches should not be placed on a continuum since they each represent distinct paradigms. Morton (1995) adds a third paradigm (i.e., the project-based approach) and proposes that regardless of the paradigm the goal should be to "thicken" the nature of the engagement by intensifying reciprocal relationships between community and university partners.

While scholarship about the social engagement of universities is growing, the field has not attained maturity. Much of the literature simply describes programs and provides pragmatic advice based on lessons learned through program development. While these examples and prototypes are useful as guides to practice, it is time for the field to strengthen the connections between specific program experiences and relevant theory (e.g., theory related to experiential learning or social change) and to broader social forces (e.g., the links between poverty in inner cities and economic globalization).

**The UBC Learning Exchange:** The UBC Learning Exchange is an outreach initiative located in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, an area well-known for being Canada's poorest neighbourhood. The Downtown Eastside is infamous because of the visibility and concentration of its problems—boarded-up storefronts, homelessness, open drug use, and street prostitution—all in a relatively small geographic area close to Vancouver's downtown core. As a result of intense media scrutiny and stereotyping, the Downtown

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<sup>3</sup> Margo Fryer is the chair of CACSL's steering committee.

Eastside has taken on enormous sociocultural significance not only in Vancouver, but across Canada. As one professional said when UBC first began developing the Learning Exchange, “The Downtown Eastside is like society’s black hole. All the issues society doesn’t want to look at end up here—poverty, mental illness, alcohol and drug use, prostitution, and violence.” (Fryer and Lee 1999).

UBC decided to establish an outreach centre in the Downtown Eastside as a result of an institutional strategic visioning process that identified the development of a stronger presence in the off-campus community as one of its five central elements. When the public announcement about the outreach initiative was made in 1998, many people in the Downtown Eastside and within the university were highly skeptical. The social, cultural, and economic differences between the Downtown Eastside and UBC, a large, research-intensive university with a reputation for being conservative, seemed too vast to bridge.

Despite the challenges, the Learning Exchange has achieved important goals, including creating significant momentum for the adoption of Community Service-Learning at UBC. The number of students involved in the Learning Exchange program that brings students to community organizations to do volunteer work has doubled each year since the program’s inception. Last year, 650 students engaged with 35 different community organizations. Half of these students worked in inner city schools. Twenty-five percent were involved as part of an academic course.

Students’ involvement in community service brings significant benefits. Students learn first-hand about community issues and get to know the people behind the stereotypes; students have an opportunity to clarify their own educational and career goals; and many students find that their assumptions and preconceptions are profoundly unsettled and their perspectives on life are transformed. In addition, community organizations have more energetic, committed, and skilled people to help them improve existing programs and develop new ones. Faculty members report that some students doing Community Service-Learning produce more insightful assignments and have a stronger capacity for critical thinking. Having seen these benefits develop, UBC has committed to engaging 10% of its student population (i.e., 4,000 to 5,000 students) in Community Service-Learning by 2010. UBC now sees Community Service-Learning as an effective way to cultivate the values of a civil and sustainable society among students (and faculty) and as a means to develop the capacities of global citizenship.

Two examples will serve to illustrate our experiences with Community Service-Learning domestically. Two graduate students from the first author’s course on Community Economic Development were asked to spend time at the Learning Exchange storefront in the Downtown Eastside and explore ideas for initiatives that could mobilize the talents of local residents and help strengthen the community. Through their engagement with local residents, the students decided to pilot test an “English as a Second Language (ESL)” program. This program trained and supported local English-speaking residents to lead conversation groups with local immigrants who needed to practice their English skills. Over the course of two months, 19 local Downtown Eastside residents facilitated 200 conversation sessions with 67 immigrants. This pilot had significant outcomes. Demand

for the sessions was so high among immigrants that additional sessions had to be added and an ongoing, more structured program is due to start in January.

The experience had profound outcomes for local residents and immigrants as well as for UBC's students. The participatory nature of the program's evolution and planning had residents feeling a strong sense of responsibility and ownership. The success of the program boosted residents' self-confidence and their belief in their ability to make a contribution to their community. For people who are receiving welfare or disability payments who are frequently accused of being lazy and worthless, this is a significant achievement. Many immigrants reported that they felt safe and comfortable in the Learning Exchange environment and, for the first time since arriving in Canada, felt that they had made Canadian friends. The conversation groups not only taught people about vocabulary or pronunciation. For example, after a class with an Iranian immigrant, an Iraqi refugee and a Japanese student, one ESL Facilitator commented that,

We went from learning from the book to learning about each other. I learned what I take for granted in Canada . . . like the fact that I don't have to worry about witnessing a school being blown up or being conscripted into the armed forces. It was cool 'cause everyone just looked past cultural tensions and honestly just wanted to learn from each other. It went from an ESL lesson to a lesson in real life.

The UBC students, too, benefited from their experience. As one student said,

Transformative is the one word I would use to explain my experience with the pilot project. As a student of community planning, this experience opened my mind to new ideas of planning practice and knowledge(s). As an individual, it forced me to look inward and examine my inner landscape—my biases and judgements. As a human in search of social connection, it led to the growth of deep friendships. As an activist of global citizenship, it changed my visions for the future.

The second example comes from students' engagement with inner city schools in Vancouver. The Learning Exchange focuses much of its energy on its relationships with schools because of the potential for the activities of students—tutoring, mentoring, and doing special projects that complement public school curricula—to prevent some of the social problems all too evident in the Downtown Eastside. Two UBC students organized an after school music appreciation course for elementary school children who attend an inner city school where the majority of parents are unemployed, where many students go hungry on weekends when the school meal programs are not available, and where the principal has to patrol the playground at recess to keep the drug and sex trade recruiters away from her students. The two UBC students taught children to play the recorder and introduced them to music from different eras, genres, and cultures. A small number of children also received private piano lessons. The children went from being inattentive and frustrated about their limited ability to play music to being able to sing and play at least one piece confidently. In addition, they acquired patience, perseverance, listening skills, and teamwork skills. The UBC students learned a new respect for people beyond stereotypes. As their project report said,

They have taught us to appreciate what we usually take for granted, such as family support, economic stability, and participation in many extracurricular activities. They have given us a new perspective on life, that there are far more important things in life than material possessions. We were extremely fortunate to learn this valuable lesson from the students as well as to have the opportunity to be a positive influence in their lives and to help them grow as individuals.

Several factors have been crucial to the early success of the Learning Exchange. First, UBC's President, Dr. Martha Piper, is a strong champion of the initiative and of Community Service-Learning. Perhaps more importantly, she is also a strong and articulate advocate for the view that universities should play a role in the strengthening of civil society. Second, adequate funding has been secured from the university and private donors to enable the creation of a solid infrastructure for the Learning Exchange and its growth. Third, the Learning Exchange has been given the autonomy to respond quickly and strategically to ideas and opportunities that emerge in the community and within the university. Fourth, the Learning Exchange has been careful to build relationships with individuals and organizations based on mutual trust, the achievement of shared goals, and open communication. Fifth, UBC's students have acted as ambassadors for the university and their enthusiasm and energy have been crucial to the process of breaking down resistance and suspicion within the Downtown Eastside community.

But, it is important to acknowledge that there are complex tensions and contradictions behind the scenes. These subterranean influences have significant implications for the sustainability and long-term impacts of universities' engagement with communities that are typically seen as needing some kind of intervention. Two examples will serve to illustrate these tensions. First, while the Learning Exchange has enjoyed significant support from UBC's senior administration and from students, it exists on the margins of the university and it focuses on a highly marginalized community. While this position between various interstices of power can be a strong position for a change agent, it is also a place of vulnerability. It is unlikely that the Learning Exchange would survive a situation where representatives from the entire campus had to choose between funding the Learning Exchange and funding an initiative that enhanced research in the "hard" sciences. Similarly, while the Learning Exchange is becoming increasingly seen as trustworthy and an accepted part of the Downtown Eastside community because of its careful, respectful, collaborative approach to program development, that acceptance will continue to be provisional for many years. Initiatives such as the Learning Exchange will continue to be vulnerable to changing academic strategic priorities and to the vagaries of community opinion until values about social and global responsibility become mainstream in academic environments and until academic institutions consistently embody those values in skillful ways.

Second, the Learning Exchange is built on the premise that many different kinds of knowledge have value and legitimacy and they all need to be incorporated into attempts to resolve social problems or implement effective development strategies. The Learning Exchange tries not to privilege academic knowledge or scientific knowledge over knowledge developed through experience or wisdom gained through the navigation of difficult life situations. This perspective is at odds with the views of many, perhaps most, in the academy. If professorial knowledge is not superior to the knowledge of "ordinary" people, why should we send our young people to be educated in universities and why should enormous amounts of public money be directed towards the support of universities.

THE LOCALIZED POVERTY REDUCTION IN VIETNAM PROGRAM, AND  
OTHER CANADIAN UNIVERSITY EXPERIENCES  
WITH INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

While Canadian universities are only now starting to actively explore the potential of service-learning through engagement with local communities, Canadian universities have for several decades been actively involved with overseas development thanks to generous funding being provided for this purpose by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA).

**LPRV:** An instructive example of how Canadian universities can partner with overseas universities to foster local social engagement by the latter is provided by the Localized Poverty Reduction in Vietnam program (LPRV). It is instructive of what can be achieved when universities apply themselves to development, and of opportunities and constraints universities face when they take on a development role.

LPRV brought together Canadian and Vietnamese institutions to build the capacity of five Vietnamese universities to contribute to poverty reduction by developing, testing, teaching, and applying participatory methods for project planning and policy assessment. It received CIDA support from 1998 to 2003.

The program drew on a decade of collaboration between the University of British Columbia and Vietnam's National Centre for Social Sciences and Humanities (now the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences) related to capacity-building and research projects funded by CIDA and the International Development Research Centre. LPRV expanded the UBC–NCSSH collaboration to include Université Laval, the World University Service of Canada, and the Vietnamese universities at Thai Nguyen, Vinh, Hue, Dalat, and Ho Chi Minh City.

The LPRV strategy was to develop Centres for Poverty Reduction at each of the five Vietnamese universities, to link them through NCSSH into a mutual learning network, to undertake learn-by-doing commune-level pilot projects through the CPRs in collaboration with local officials and community members, then draw lessons together about the effectiveness of various participatory approaches and methods for ensuring women, ethnic minorities, and the poorest of the poor are meaningfully included in planning, local projects, and institution building. The pilot projects (related to small scale irrigation, livestock raising, micro-credit, eco-tourism, etc.) were to be implemented primarily with local resources and through local authorities. They were not to be off-the-shelf suggestions from outsiders but instead grounded in local aspirations, conditions, opportunities, knowledge and skills.

The program thus fell within what might be called the social development (as opposed to growth-with-trickle-down) approach to poverty reduction: it sought to enhance the capacity of community leaders, local officials and academics to work with the poor in identifying locally specific causes of poverty, considering optional solutions, and making

action decisions or policy recommendations that are effective and fair. It tried to build social capital as it built knowledge and skills.

LPRV also promoted local assessment of the impacts on local poverty of higher level (provincial or national) policies so that central policy makers could be better informed about local conditions.

LPRV's focus on participatory planning meant that it paid close attention to gender analysis and equality, and to working respectfully with minority peoples. It also meant that it needed to mirror in its own program management the participatory social development ethos it promoted in workshops and explored in the field. For example, from the beginning, it was agreed that its annual Steering Committee meetings would include at least one woman and one man from each of the partner institutions.

LPRV was structured as an equal partnership among institutions—there was equality in goal setting, strategic planning, adaptive management, and budget control. The idea was to create what Stein et al. (2001) would later term (with reference to experiences other than LPRV) a "knowledge network" rather than the more usual North-to-South project which purports to "train-the-trainers." Each institutional partner had considerable financial and programmatic autonomy within overall guidelines established annually by the Steering Committee.

The degree of autonomy was perhaps unusually high for an international aid project, and was not seen as positive by all active participants; some of them still have well-founded concerns about accountability, effectiveness, and follow-through problems inherent in the network approach. The arguments in favour of the network, as opposed to the hierarchical (Canada- or NCSSH-led) approach on the one hand or total laissez-faire (autonomy for all institutions) on the other, were that functioning as a network should encourage local flexibility and creativity plus mutual learning and responsibility. It also reflects most closely the participation ideals that the program was dedicated to, and it provides opportunities for learning from practice about participatory-planning difficulties (e.g., not enough time in large groups for all to talk), barriers (e.g., women's traditional roles), solutions (e.g., small groups) and benefits (e.g. better plans, more commitment to them).

Canadian and Vietnamese colleagues also made participation a central concept in the curriculum design process and the pedagogy for new courses. The initial idea that Canadians would deliver "training" courses in Vietnam was soon changed to an approach of Canadians and Vietnamese working collaboratively in developing course outlines, materials, and formats.

LPRV strengthened the capacity of the Vietnamese partner institutions to contribute to development through innovative structures (e.g., new university departments and research centres dedicated to poverty reduction), processes (e.g. problem-based pedagogy, better communication channels between technically and socially oriented officials), and perspectives (e.g., commitment to ongoing mutual learning)

More importantly, since the centrepiece of the program was “learning by doing” (learning through cycles of planning-action-evaluation), LPRV generated rich learning. (Initially the explicit purpose of the commune pilot projects, learning-by-doing soon came to be the guiding spirit for all phases and levels of the program.)

First, there was learning by the Vietnamese partners about the specific planning tools (e.g. gender analysis, participatory action research, environmental sensitivity analysis, conflict management), that the Canadians were responsible for introducing to Vietnam through training workshops, etc. This type of one-way teaching and learning had been highlighted in the proposal to CIDA, as is the custom in proposals for CIDA-funded capacity-building projects, and constituted the major activity in the early stage of the program.

Second, there was learning by Canadians from their Vietnamese partners about indigenous Vietnamese approaches to academic engagement with communities’ problem-solving (e.g. Rector-level leadership of flood relief committees, consultation to local Peoples’ Committees, and provision of inter-disciplinary assistance to community-based organisations), and about opportunities and constraints facing Vietnamese academics attempting to engage with communities and officials in project planning and policy assessment.

Third, there was the shared discovery (as opposed to one side learning from the other) that occurred as the Canadians and Vietnamese wrestled together to implement the program. This included not only learning from the pilot projects about the appropriateness of existing international participatory planning tools in the Vietnamese context, but also the discovery of new approaches (e.g., academics collaborating simultaneously with community leaders and local officials) suited to Vietnamese conditions.

Together, LPRV participants learned that universities can strengthen their contributions to development at the same time as they become stronger centres of higher learning if they institutionalize: a) commitments to playing an active development role, especially by collaborating with government and communities; b) action-learning mechanisms for continuous improvement in this role; c) networking with like-minded institutions for mutual support; d) support for faculty members and students to become involved in development work and generate knowledge from it; and e) structures that have social engagement for poverty reduction as their primary mandate—either as new teaching units (such as the new Department of Social Work and Community Development at Dalat University), or interdisciplinary Centres for Poverty Reduction.

Further, the LPRV participants discovered together that structuring international programs as participatory institutional partnerships presents benefits and difficulties parallel to those associated with participatory planning at the community level.

Fourth, from the LPRV experience, the Canadians learned that their own and other Canadian universities could enhance their contributions to international development learning, first by becoming less preoccupied with time-limited projects and paying more attention to building lasting partnerships with developing country universities, and secondly by approaching projects and partnerships in a spirit of mutual learning rather than North-to-South knowledge transfer.

Fifth, at the meta level, LPRV participants learned about ways to strengthen ongoing learning capacities in individuals (e.g., capacity to reflect on and learn from pilot projects) and institutions (e.g., capacity to gain feedback from many perspectives and to adapt management principles and programs in response). In fact, there was increasing realization on the part of active LPRV participants that enhancing learning capacity was the program's most critical outcome. It was not so important that specific skills be acquired as a result of LPRV, but that participants become interested in life-long learning about tools they could invent, adapt and apply to help people solve complex social, economic and environmental problems. It was not so important that a university add a course on gender analysis or participatory rural appraisal, or undertake another poverty-oriented action-research project, as it was for a university to commit to continuously and creatively develop its capacity for doing so.

In sum, the LPRV experiences led its participants to conclude that universities could contribute more to development if they were to commit themselves to: 1) engagement with complex development problems; 2) mutual learning (south-north, intra-university, university-community); 3) collaboration (with government at all levels, communities, NGOs, international development agencies); 4) and institutionalization (of mutual learning, engagement, and collaboration in various teaching and research programs, e.g., through problem-based learning and participatory action-research).

LPRV participants also came to understand, as they attempted to maintain LPRV's momentum, that university and CIDA approaches to international development unfortunately tend to favour time-limited one-off projects oriented to "training the trainers" over institutionalization of engagement, collaboration and mutual learning.

For the UBC participants, the LPRV experience was gratifying for the learning it produced, but frustrating because of its dissociation from the mainstream of UBC academic life.

**Other international engagement by Canadian academics:** The LPRV experience parallels that of other Canadian academics who have been involved in CIDA-funded projects overseas, as is indicated by the articles in a 2003 Special Issue of the Canadian Journal of Development Studies edited by Boothroyd and Angeles.

The CJDS Special Issue shows that much of Canadian universities' international development work has been directed to strengthening of civil society organizations (particularly community-based or non-governmental as well as other universities), social learning, democratization of development planning, sustainable poverty reduction, and

gender equality—engagement that goes well beyond the "internationalization" (conceived and practiced as recruitment of foreign students, promotion of internships abroad, and various kinds of intellectual exchange) which has increasingly preoccupied Canadian universities (Knight 2000).

In the introduction to the CJDS Special Issue, Angeles and Boothroyd (2003) identify implications for universities of the lessons learned by Canadian academics who have been active in international development projects. These include:

- Universities need to do a better job of learning from their own international development experiences about thorny issues related to local knowledge, collaboration, empowerment, participation, and diversity, all of which affect the quality of international partnerships, project activities, and project outcomes. Canadian academics involved in international projects and their partners in the South also need to grapple with issues of ownership, voice, ethics in collaboration, intellectual property rights, and financial accountability.
- As Schroeder (1997) and contributors to the CJDS Special Issue point out, universities need to accept community-based participatory action research (PAR) as legitimate academic research. Lack of acceptance can inhibit academic advancement by development-oriented scholars because PAR often constitutes the primary, or even sole, research mode in development projects, especially when development is seen as a process of participatory problem-solving, community-building, empowerment, and mutual learning.
- Universities have not adequately examined the demands and pressures placed on faculty, especially the junior ones, when they take on international development projects along with their other academic roles. Kreber (2000, pp. 79–111) suggests that while universities may promote the integration of faculty teaching, research and community outreach roles, they provide little opportunity or help for faculty members to develop their ability to do so. The nature of development work often does not allow much time for conducting quickly publishable cutting-edge research that is crucial to tenure and promotion. Instead, it requires much attention to organisation of workshops, study tours, field placements and other time-consuming activities essential to successful collaboration and on-the-ground effectiveness. Training manuals and other written outputs have little status compared with that of peer-reviewed journal articles. Former Dalhousie University President Howard Clark (1999:113) put it plainly:

Universities have often welcomed participation in CIDA-funded projects, not because of their academic relevance, but more because of the financial benefits they bring in the form of funding for overhead or indirect costs...

Departmental and faculty tenure and promotion committees have all too often placed little or no value on [international] involvements; they have not been valued as scholarly contributions; and if they are recognised as outreach, that, in turn, is given less recognition than teaching and research. Even where the university's official policy statements require recognition of international involvements when tenure and promotion are considered, these policy statements have in many cases been totally ignored.

Hence, Kassam and Tettey (2003) call for “a redefinition of merit criteria for academics . . . to be assured that their development-support work will not only count as ‘community service’ but will be recognised and rewarded as a valuable part of their intellectual production.”

- A special institutional effort by universities to magnify their contribution to development could make them even better centres of scholarship at the same time as they help make the world a better place. Special institutional effort could involve not only increasing and improving support to development-oriented individual academics carrying out their diverse service, teaching and research missions, but also increasing attention to the ways that these three missions can be better integrated at all institutional levels. Most importantly, special effort would involve applying university resources to the ongoing study of universities themselves and their development roles. One of the most effective forms this self-study could take would be action-research in collaboration with people holding relevant power, resources and knowledge.
- Development funding agencies and universities could benefit from rethinking their relationship. At present, both tend to see research and development as quite separate activities—development as fixing problems, research as studying them, particularly with detachment. Dichotomising research and action in this way makes it difficult on the one hand to attract funding and recognition for research that is action-oriented, and on the other hand, to incorporate systematic, published inquiry into the design of action projects. There would be value in the donors and universities exploring together the potential for a more integrated and collaborative approach to development research and action.

In sum, the articles in the CJDS Special Issue show: 1) universities, as institutions uniquely charged with advanced knowledge production and dissemination, make valuable contributions to international development; 2) their contributions are at present limited by various internal factors and by their relationships with funding agencies; 3) steps can be taken to address the limiting factors (e.g., by establishing more lasting partnerships with developing country institutions and more collaborative relationships with funding agencies, more closely connecting development projects to teaching and research programs, recognizing development work as contributing to scholarship) and to create processes whereby universities continuously strengthen themselves as development actors.

#### THAILAND’S GOVERNMENT-SPONSORED PROGRAMS: WALAILAK’S EXPERIENCE

The LPRV program, like many other CIDA-funded projects involving universities, was initiated, designed, and controlled by universities (Canadian and Vietnamese) themselves. Some recent experience in Thailand, where the national government brought universities

into its poverty reduction work, provides a contrasting, more top-down, example of how academic social engagement can be promoted.

As in other countries, a number of academic institutions and individuals in Thailand have long been socially engaged, without the need for government prodding, on the basis of their own commitments to local development. The Graduate Volunteer Centre at the venerable Thammasat University in Bangkok, for example, has for decades provided students with opportunities to learn about rural life through involvement with village affairs.

Recognizing the contribution that universities can make to local development, the Government of Thailand that was elected in 2001 provided for university involvement in certain of its poverty reduction initiatives. Uthai Dulyakasem, Dean of Liberal Arts at Walailak University in southern Thailand, provides (2003) the following information on two of these initiatives.

One initiative, which lasted for ten months in 2002, was known as the Village and Urban Community Fund. Each of Thailand's some 75,000 localities was allocated one million Baht (about US \$25,000) to be managed, within government guidelines, through a committee of seven local women and seven men. To assist these committees, the government funded 15 higher education institutions to offer specialized educational programs, consisting of four courses and a mini-thesis, on Project Management and Evaluation. These programs were offered to people with Bachelor degrees who were prepared to work in the villages where they had been born. Students were paid 6360 Baht per month.

The educational programs placed emphasis on learning in a community setting by helping village fund committees to organize activities and helping villagers to learn about community analysis, business planning, and management. Supervision, training, and theoretical learning was provided to students by the universities (or teacher-training colleges), drawing on local resource persons for assistance.

A parallel government initiative for "Strengthening the Grass-roots Economy" was funded by the Ministry of the University Affairs. Participating institutions were funded to promote networking with local communities, conduct research on economic opportunities, and provide local training on public administration, business management, community development, etc.

Walailak University took part in both of the initiatives. A fairly new institution, Walailak is one of four "autonomous" Universities in Thailand that do not have to strictly follow Ministry of University Affairs regulations. Its personnel are not government officers. Still, it is considered a public university: approximately 60 % of its funding is provided by the Central government.

In relation to the Village and Urban Community Fund initiative, Walailak placed 765 students throughout Nakorn Si Thammarat province under the guidance of 14 university

staff and 77 local resource persons. In relation to the Strengthening the Grass-roots Economy initiative, Walailak worked with three other Universities to train community leaders in resource management and participatory planning, and conduct research related to local agriculture issues.

Dean Uthai has been concerned with identifying the lessons to be learned from university experience with the government initiatives in 2002. He acknowledges that the programs produced some successes in terms of student learning and community development, but he also believes success was limited because of the following factors:

- The specialized education program connected to the Village and Urban Community Fund was "a ready-made" program designed by government without university involvement in curriculum design and without adequate preparation by university faculty who delivered the courses.
- The majority of the students were, as Dean Uthai says, "not really interested either in learning from the villages or actively working for their village Fund Committee." Many students viewed the program as a form of temporary employment; some left when they got better and more permanent jobs; however, 82 % did complete all the program's requirements.
- The majority of the villagers involved with the programs learned little because the students did not contribute much to building the capacity of the village Fund Committee.
- The information gathered by the students, then analyzed and written in the form of a mini-thesis, was seen as superficial and not very useful by villagers.

Dean Uthai, however, notes that despite the shortcomings of these experiences, there was one overarching value to them: university people themselves learned about ways they could be more effective in linking education, research, and service. He says:

I believe that the University people who were involved in this project, at least some of them, have learned that the present public University system in Thailand is not sufficiently equipped to undertake this kind of task. The reason being that the public university is not designed to be accountable to the community where it is located, but rather it is accountable to the Ministry or to the central government. In addition, this kind of work is usually not recognized by an academic community. If we are to make the public university responsive and accountable to the needs and problems of the community where it is located, the public university system must, I think, be changed. It should be under the local administration system so that genuine community participation in the university affairs is possible and the University becomes responsive to local needs and problems.

Another lesson that the University people learned, I believe, is that poverty may not be reduced by simply pumping cash into the villages. In the short term, it may help the villagers to have some money to spend, but in order to sustainably reduce poverty, its root causes must be identified by analyzing the conditions under which poverty is created.

Drawing on these insights, in 2003 Walailak undertook a participatory action-research project, funded by the Thailand Research Fund, to identify the needs and problems of specific categories of people—rice farmers, fruit growers, small fishermen, shrimp farmers, etc.—through the analysis of the villagers themselves. It was found difficult to get academics actively involved with the project because, in Dean Uthai’s view, faculty at “most Universities, at least in present day Thailand, are from the middle or upper class background: they are not very keen on working with rural or marginalized people in their own society.”

Dean Uthai concludes that Walailak’s experiences with social engagement show that “in order to successfully bring about a real change in anything, particularly, the most complex and difficult problems such as poverty, we need to use a ‘Triangle Moves a Mountain’ Approach.” At the apex of his triangle is knowledge and wisdom concerning the problem to be solved, at another angle is social engagement with the problem, and at the third is political linkage to lend support.

## CONCLUSION

Experience at a number of universities reveals a number of challenges facing academic social engagement, but it also suggests a major opportunity.

**Challenges:** Social engagement asks the academic not only to study social problems and the people who experience them directly, but also to study problems **with** these people and the various parties who need to be part of the solution: NGOs, government at various levels, business, and technical specialists. It requires participation in and facilitation of collaborative problem-analysis and problem-solving, i.e., collaborative action-research.

Unfortunately, participation in collaborative action-research has neither the scholarly respectability of pure research nor the commercial allure of contracted research. In fact, it tends to be regarded with suspicion by the academy and as difficult to justify as either academic research or teaching.

Not without reason, collaborative action-research is seen as a very inefficient way to establish a scholar’s publications record: reports have no clear authorship if their collaborative nature is truly acknowledged, and it is difficult to claim they make ground-breaking contributions to theoretical knowledge. However, the academic respectability of action-research can be enhanced if close attention is paid to the research component, i.e., to taking a truly experimental attitude, maintaining discipline in documentation, and going beyond prescription and description to causal analysis of processes.

Facilitation of collaborative action-research, which the international development agencies refer to as “capacity-building” is usually not recognized as teaching by the academy. Teaching is seen as what one does to students enrolled in degree programs, in the classroom or in a thesis advisory role. Even if capacity-building work is accepted as a legitimate academic function, its results are harder to measure than those of traditional

teaching which can produce statistics on numbers of students graduated, qualitative assessments of supervised theses, etc. As well, social engagement experience is typically not well defined as education in disciplinary terms. While such experience can augment classroom learning in many fields of inquiry and practice (social sciences, health sciences, natural sciences, resource management, business administration, etc.) it does not fit well with a systematic and cumulative program of specialized study because formal teachers do not control the learning process. The holistic and student-centred learning strengths of engagement are its weaknesses in a world of increasing specialization.

Apart from the challenges facing engagement that are posed by its not fitting well with the academy's traditional views of what constitutes productive, and therefore rewardable, research and education, there is the constraint that even pro-engagement scholars may be uneasy acting as co-participants in social development processes over which they have little control—as was the situation with the Thai government initiatives, as is often the case with Community Service-Learning in North America where empowerment of community organizations is the goal, and as is always the case with multi-stakeholder collaborations based on equality of partnership. The unease may stem from lack of experience or comfort with collaboration outside the academy, from concern that the integrity of scholarship will be impugned, or from fear of academic production becoming inefficient.

**Opportunity:** If the challenge facing academic social engagement is grounded in the academy's current image of how it is to promote what all agree is its essential purpose—advancement of learning in the discovery and dissemination senses—then at the same time the opportunity lies in this very commitment to learning. The academy's image of what constitutes research and teaching can be changed if its members commit themselves to learning about learning. Learning about learning includes but goes beyond attention to pedagogy and research methodology and pedagogy; it also includes investigation of how societal learning takes place and the roles that various kinds of inquiry and communication play in producing learning.

One way to advance academic learning about learning would be for interested academic individuals, institutions, and supporting agencies such as UNESCO, to form what a few of us at UBC and elsewhere have started to call a “Conquiry,” i.e., a long-term process where academics collaborate with others to conduct cumulative collaborative action-research on how academic social engagement can be promoted and institutionally legitimated as scholarly research and teaching. This research could be seen as meta-action-research, i.e., research for the purpose of progressively strengthening action-research.

Research agendas could be developed, and results compared, at periodic (say, annual) events structured as conferences, symposia, or more innovative participatory formats, sponsored by research granting agencies and universities willing to apply a small portion of their immense research resources to studying themselves.

The Conquiry could incorporate innovative educational programs. For example, with the universities UBC has collaborated in Thailand, Vietnam, and Brazil, UBC is developing a program for exchange of graduate students and junior scholars interested in learning about, and promoting, academic social engagement.

At the most general level, a Conquiry could explore ways in which social engagement by academics can strengthen their scholarship, and thus their long-term contribution to society, at the same time as it strengthens their immediate contributions to social development and sustainability. Through a Conquiry, academics and others could study academics' present and potential societal roles as teachers, researchers, and providers of "service to the community," addressing themselves to such questions as:

- How can universities as major social institutions charged with disseminating and advancing knowledge, and academics as individuals holding societally supported and privileged positions, be more effective in contributing to social learning about complex problems such as poverty and thus to developing the social-political will needed to reverse Garrett Hardin's Tragedy of the Commons (1968), i.e., the collective tragedy that results from individuals acting in their immediate individual self-interest, and thus encouraging others to do, without regard to the long-term consequences?
- To what extent, through what dynamics, and at what cost, does social engagement by academics assist societies make the transition from technocracy to participatory democracy that is necessary if the Tragedy of the Commons is to be reversed through social learning?
- Does social engagement by academics help civil society become stronger, for example by broadening access to information and knowledge? To what extent does it help civil society become more of a civic-minded society, for example by helping the voices of vulnerable groups to be heard?
- What procedures can help ensure that communities are not left in the lurch after academics have worked with them intensely on action-research projects?
- How can academics best contribute to social learning and policy debates while maintaining the academic spirit of reflection and scepticism? How can they be objective in considering evidence, while still maintaining a commitment to fundamental social justice values? Can academics democratize poverty-oriented research and policy analysis while simultaneously raising the quality of thought and debate? Can they speak to complex issues without lowering the standards of evidence that science has built up over centuries?
- Can participatory research be fairly and accurately credited in identification of authorship and in relation to time spent? Can impact of research on social learning and policies be appraised to the same extent that impact on other researchers (e.g., as evidenced by citations) is now?
- In what ways does social engagement enhance the quality of research on social problems and contribute to the impact of research on decision-making by voters and officials?
- In what ways does social engagement amplify the educational value for students and community members of research and teaching?

- How might universities de-marginalize social engagement, i.e., give it a higher priority in university budgeting, hiring, and promotions?
- What are the relative benefits and costs to the options of promoting social engagement from the top, assigning it to a specialized unit, or leaving it to emerge in a bottom-up fashion?
- Would strategic planning for academic social engagement, with provision for meaningful participation by academics with various views on social engagement, help to marshal resources and expand the indicators of good scholarship?
- Are there academic-culture barriers to social engagement, such as current conceptions of academic freedom, autonomy, and status?
- What lessons are to be learned from innovative programs and structures (such as the Thai, Vietnamese and Canadian examples discussed above) designed to apply university resources to social problem-solving outside the regular curricula and research programs?
- What can be learned from innovative attempts to strengthen social engagement within mainstream university teaching (e.g., through problem-based learning) and research (e.g. through Community-University Research Alliances grants from Canada's Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council)? In what ways have these attempts helped or hindered research, teaching and development effectiveness? What were the institutional conditions and change strategies that produced these attempts?
- What is the potential for augmenting collaborative action-research, and meta-collaborative-action-research, with information and communication technologies?
- What are the pros and cons of various forms of partnership between universities and their action-research collaborators (NGOs, local governments, etc.)?
- What forms of networking and joint programming by universities are found most effective in promoting, supporting, and strengthening academic social engagement?

We suggest that questions such as the above provide the basis for a continuing dialogue about the social engagement role of the university. While consensual answers may not readily emerge, the dialogue may inform and strengthen university action.

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