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# **Community Engagement - a worthy aspiration for higher education**

## **An example from Monash South Africa**

**Debbie Lees, Lorraine Bennett and Craig Rowe**

### **Abstract**

While most university mission statements refer to values such as ‘advancing the human condition’, ‘social responsibility’, ‘social justice’ and ‘public good’, in practice it is often more difficult to identify and measure systematic and comprehensive examples where universities are addressing, operationalizing and sustaining these values within their education and research strategic plans and programs. This paper examines the concept of ‘community engagement’ and its potential to contribute to the values of sustainable social justice and ‘public good’ by drawing on the Monash South Africa Foundation Programme as an example. This program has prioritized community engagement and building community capacity by providing an opportunity to those who would have otherwise been denied access to higher education.

In South Africa, as in the rest of the world, acceptance into higher education is principally determined by a student’s academic performance at secondary school. One of the legacies of apartheid in South Africa is that the majority of South African learners have been disadvantaged by the school education system. As a result many thousands of students continue to be denied access to higher education every year. For the same reason, students who are admitted perform poorly as a general rule in their first year at university. The Monash South Africa Foundation Program (MSAFP) was conceived and implemented in 2002 to provide access as an alternative pathway to Monash University for potential students who lacked the academic skills required for direct entry into first year undergraduate study.

The MSAFP prepares students for the pace and depth of undergraduate study as well as for the social transition into higher education. Its strategies to increase student engagement include a generic focus in the curriculum and includes one degree credit-bearing unit. A highly successful

tutor-mentor programme, a formal tracking system for 'at-risk' students, a volunteering scheme and a Service Learning component provide opportunities for participants to acquire values such as equity and service enjoy high participation rates.

The outcomes of the MSAFP are outstanding. Pass rates are between 75-90 percent. MSAFP students who progress to a degree have first year average marks and average progress rates no different to those entering through direct entry. Program students are clearly being well equipped for successful higher education. The MSAFP is evidence that an alternative pathway can successfully provide opportunities for disadvantaged groups to succeed in higher education. The MSAFP received a commendation in the 2007 AUQA audit and in late 2009 received a highly prestigious Australian Learning and Teaching Council national award for Programs that Enhance Student Learning: The First Year Experience.

The MSAFP is an example of community engagement in action. The success of the program has broadened who benefits from higher education and demonstrates the transformative potential of community engagement to increase the capacity of developing countries to contribute to their own future.

This article serves as an example of good practice in assisting students in their transition to higher education. Practitioners in higher education institutions could apply successful aspects of the MSAFP into their own foundation programmes or tailor them to suit specific programme or institutional needs

### **Universities and 'Public Good'**

The concept that universities have a service or social responsibility to contribute to society, the so-called 'public good' view is not new. Understanding the history of universities and how they function is paramount to understanding that universities were set up to manage information and knowledge. One of the ways that universities do this is by using knowledge and expertise to serve the community (Perkins, 1966:9 –10).

Historically, institutions of higher education have been perceived to be isolated from the real concerns of the world. They have appeared to be ivory towers and bastions of knowledge to which mere mortals can only aspire. From the origins of Oxford and Bologna, to the German research university model, to the American model born in the Truman years, universities have always evolved. (*Monash University strategic plan 2012*).

The very early universities regularly defined their role and charter in terms of contributing to the next generation of leaders. This was particularly evident when only the elite few had access to a university education. The emphasis on 'public good' tended to be interpreted in a narrow, paternalistic way, whereby the public would benefit from those who had a traditional university education. It was a one-way street designed to reinforce the establishment's thinking. In the 'Rules of the University of Paris' (early 1200s) we perhaps have the pillars of community engagement being formed: "donations of clothing or other things as has been customary, or more, we urge should be made, especially to the poor." (Chartulary of the University of Paris, L.Thorndike in Ross, J & Mc Laughlin,1949)

In the late nineteenth hundreds and moving into the twenty-first century, as the nature of universities evolved so to did their interpretation and approach to 'community service'. Significant clues to this can be found by reviewing the changes in university participation in 'public good' activities and by analyzing the evolving terminology that is used to describe university involvement in community service over time. In the mid-nineteen hundreds, when universities were still primarily elite academies of learning, their manifestoes often referred to community obligations in terms of nation building, promoting statehood and educating the lawyers, doctors and politicians of the future. The nineteen sixties and seventies saw universities take a different direction with respect to social responsibility, almost an anti-establishment stance. University staff and students were key players in shaping and influencing society attitudes and behaviour through active participation in anti-war, nuclear disarmament, affirmative action, feminism and individual freedom movements.

As university education continued to move away from education for the privileged to education for the masses other themes quickly filled the social responsibility space. Among these were

environmental concerns sponsored initially by the green movement. Themes which are particularly visible in the twenty-first century include graduate employability through to issues of sustainability (framed by climate change), civic education, volunteerism, health and well-being, social justice, access and equity and inclusion.

Many of these themes create dilemmas and tensions for university leaders and decision makers. For example, on the one hand there is the social responsibility imperative to provide access to a university education to students from poor socio-economic or under-privileged backgrounds and on the other hand there is a need for the university to derive almost half of its revenue from external sources, primarily student fees.

The use of such terms as ‘community engagement’ and ‘social engagement’ are more recent additions to the ‘social responsibilities’ vernacular and agenda and represent a shift in thinking and approach. As the dialogue with stakeholders grows, driven in part by external pressures from government and audit agencies seeking evidence of accountability and quality assurance, the notion of ‘engagement’, often formalized in arrangements such as partnerships, collaborations and alliances is emerging. No longer is a university’s role in contributing to the public good viewed as a one-way street. The expertise and legitimacy resides in both the university and the community and engagement is the catalyst for the learning and growth for all stakeholders.

When discussing the virtues of ‘community engagement’ one of the key challenges facing contemporary universities around the globe is how best to embed and disseminate ‘community engagement’ into university teaching and research programs. In the United States of America groups such as The Higher Education Network for Community Engagement (HENCE) and the Wingspread agenda are advocating ‘community engagement as a core element in higher education’s role in society’. HENCE is challenging universities to actively engage staff and students with communities.

We are currently witnessing a shift in thinking with respect to addressing responsibility of ‘public good’. No longer appropriate to view university as the purveyor of all knowledge and wisdom. Universities need to draw inspiration from community engagements and

connections/networks both at the local and global levels. The learning is a two-way street – the community is enriched and strengthened by engagement with academia and academia benefits and learns from engagement with authentic experiences.

### **National and Institutional responses**

Both the South African and Australian Government acknowledge that many groups are presently under-represented in Higher Education. To this end, Monash South Africa and Monash Australia have successfully responded to national and institutional imperatives to provide access to students who would have otherwise had no means to gain access into higher education through the provision of contextually relevant pathway programmes.

At an institutional level the Monash University Education Strategic Plan (2011 – 2015) has responded to government imperatives such as the Bradley Review (2008) which set a target of 20 percent of lower socio-economic undergraduate enrolments in higher education by 2020. Enabling strategies and institutional priorities include, but are not limited to, the university mission of advancing the human condition by advancing knowledge and fostering creativity...through a commitment to social justice, human rights and a sustainable environment. Monash University's goal of Excellence ensures that university places go to the most academically talented students regardless of their circumstances and backgrounds. In terms of the University's goal of Engagement Monash is ideally positioned to contribute to both the Australian and South African government agenda's of wider participation and social inclusion. Key strategies for attaining this goal are 'a renewed focus on the student experience, including the transition and first year experience, with a particular emphasis on understanding the diversity of backgrounds, experiences or circumstances of Monash's local and international students and the implications for their progress and success'.

At the local South African level Monash South Africa has responded to the South African government agenda and in turn significantly contributes to the broader Education Strategic Plans of Monash University. The purpose and operations of the MSAFP aligns with the Higher Education Act of South Africa (Act 101 of 1997), the National Plan on Higher Education (2001), the Bradley review – Review of Australian Higher Education – Final Report, Dec 2008, Australian Government and the Human Resource Development Strategy for South Africa (HRD-SA) 2010 - 2030

The programme was specifically designed to address some of the socio-political goals of the Higher Education Act of South Africa (Act 101 of 1997), in particular, “...equity of access and fair chances of success to all who are seeking to realise their potential through higher education, while eradicating all forms of unfair discrimination and advancing redress for past inequalities”.

Other distinctive aspirations for the conceptualisation of the programme were derived from the same Act:

- Promote the values which underlie an open and democratic society based on human dignity, equality and freedom;
- Respect and encourage democracy, academic freedom, freedom of speech and expression, creativity, scholarship and research;
- Pursue excellence, promote the full realisation of the potential of every student and employee, tolerance of ideas and appreciation of diversity<sup>1</sup>

The National Plan for Higher Education (NPHE), 2001, also provides the agenda for higher education restructuring in South Africa. It makes the point that the ‘...role of academic development (AD) in improving the efficiency of the higher education system in terms of graduate output is critical’<sup>2</sup>. A significant number of former students who pathwayed from the MSAFP into undergraduate study graduate from Monash South Africa each year (30 – 35% of total graduating cohort)

The HRD-SA (2009) is explicitly intended to contribute to the attainment of the following national goals:

- To urgently and substantively reduce the scourges of poverty and unemployment in South Africa
- To promote justice and social cohesion through improved equity in the provision and outcomes of education and skills development programmes
- To substantively improve national economic growth and development through improved competitiveness of the South African economy

In 1997, the Department of Education published the White Paper for the Transformation of Higher Education, which challenged the institutions to redress the inequalities of the past and to be agents of change and transformation in the higher education system. There is currently still a call in South Africa for education that is relevant and applicable to the development of our nation. Community Engagement is one of the approaches that MSA uses to link “traditional domains of foundational knowledge and professional knowledge with a new emphasis on socially responsive knowledge” (Altman in Kenny & Gallagher, 2000:1).

South Africa faces many challenges. Le Grange (2007:11) suggests that “educating students about these problems can be dangerous,” because students learn just enough about the problems to pass their examinations without having to do anything about the challenges. MSA recognizes that community engagement is a strategy that is positioned to “produce powerful transformative effects for learners, teachers, schools, universities, communities and policy-makers” (Le Grange, 2007:8).

### **The Monash South Africa Foundation Programme**

This section of the paper focuses on the Monash South Africa Foundation Programme (MSAFP) as an example of the University’s potential through internationalization to contribute to the values of sustainable social justice and ‘public good’. This program has prioritized community engagement and building community capacity by providing an opportunity to those who would have otherwise been denied access to higher education.

Monash South Africa (MSA) recognizes that the world faces huge challenges around economic and environmental sustainability as well as social inclusion and equity. MSA aspires to contribute substantially to overcoming those challenges. The integration of the three pillars of higher education, teaching and learning, research and community engagement by educating students who will tackle the challenges society faces and by developing “out the box ideas” and applied knowledge themselves. MSA wants to see a deep understanding and knowledge of the local contexts and research priorities of the communities in which they operate cultivated.

As stated earlier, higher education institutions in South Africa are faced with issue of access of students. The South African Higher Education Act (Act 101 of 1997) put forward the proposition of “equity of access and fair chances of access and fair chances of success to all who are seeking to realise their potential through higher education”. Monash University has responded by investing huge resources into the MSAFP to increase access for those students who show potential but would otherwise not be accepted into mainstream undergraduate study.

There are a number of clear objectives and purposes which underpin the uniqueness and distinctiveness of the Monash South Africa Foundation Programme (MSAFP). As part of the policy of internationalisation, Monash University opened a campus in South Africa in 2001 as a long-term commitment by Monash to the future sustainable development of South and Sub-Saharan Africa, through the provision of education. Because many potential students lacked the high academic skills required for direct entry, the Foundation Programme was conceived and implemented in the following year to provide access to degree programmes as an alternative pathway to Monash University for those students who have not met the minimum degree entry requirements.

The goal of Monash’s policy of internationalisation is to provide its students with international educational perspectives and experiences that prepare them for the global knowledge economy and to be constructive world citizens. It seeks to harness global movements of students to

transform the role of the university in contributing to global well being.<sup>3</sup> With these goals in mind, a programme to cater for the African situation had to be engineered. Over the last ten years the MSAFP has shed ‘many skins’ to become what it is today. The MSAFP prepares students with the requisite academic skills necessary to complete degree programmes.

In South Africa, as in the rest of the world, acceptance into higher education is principally determined by a student’s academic performance at secondary school. However, one of the legacies of apartheid in South Africa is that the majority of South African learners have been disadvantaged by the school education system. As a result many thousands of students continue to be denied access to higher education every year. For the same reason, students who are admitted perform poorly as a general rule in their first year at university. The MSAFP was formed with the intention to provide access to degree programmes as an alternative pathway to direct entry to Monash University for those students that had not met the minimum degree entry requirements.

Monash South Africa and the MSAFP have recognised the importance of academic development and support for students who show potential but have not been taught the foundation skills that prepare them to succeed in complex, demanding courses, or the social skills to settle into new campus routines with new peers and pressures. The MSAFP programme prepares them by addressing these broad needs to ensure that students succeed in their first year of study.

The enabling Programme has allowed thousands of students who show potential but do not have the requisite scores for entry into higher education, to be given the opportunity to receive a university education at Monash South Africa and other Monash campuses internationally.

Academic access is provided through the curriculum design and delivery in the MSAFP unit offerings. Since 2002, a major shift is in the fact that the curriculum has moved away from ‘content-rich’ syllabi to syllabi that encourage critical inquiry, independent thinking and working

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<sup>3</sup> Stephanie Fahey Rethinking international engagement in Africa, May 8 2008. Accessible at <http://www.monash.edu.au/international/dvc/assets/rethinking-international-engagement-in-africa.pdf>

Accessed July 6 2009

with others. The curricula of the MSAFP successfully bridge the gap between the world of the teacher (who represents the university) and the student. Staff are aware that generic skills and strategies to cope with undergraduate study are necessary but these are not taught in isolation. These skills and strategies are taught through the disciplinary content which acts as the ‘vehicle’ for learning. With the help of experienced teachers, students are able to explore academic concepts and gain understandings of what counts as ‘appropriate’ in the building of academic knowledge and academic texts.

On commencement in 2002 the programme used imported curriculum from a similar Monash pathway programme as a starting point. Two weeks into teaching of the 1<sup>st</sup> semester it became clear that the type of student entering this programme had unique needs. Their knowledge bases and frames of reference were completely different to Australian students. The courses of the MSAFP needed to be redesigned to suit their needs, in particular to be contextualised for learning in an African context.

By the end of 2003 all curricula had been rewritten for this purpose. The new curricula aimed to bridge the gap between the knowledge bases of students and their own academic frames of reference as opposed to teachers’ frames of reference for teaching for academic success in a university context. Local textbooks were sourced so that case studies, examples and references could be made contextually relevant.

The MSAFP now provides an enabling, relevant and challenging curriculum to which students respond well. The MSAFP provides a strong grounding for academic transition from secondary school to higher education. However, one of the lessons from the Programme was that it was not only academic competence that needed to be addressed by the Programme: the psychological and social aspects of transition into higher education also needed to be considered. As is now recognised, student engagement, both academically and socially, is a major indicator of a student’s success at university<sup>4</sup>. The extent to which students feel welcomed by their institution, feel comfortable on a campus they attend regularly, develop meaningful interactions with their peers and perform well in their studies are critical measures of success.

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<sup>4</sup> Scott, G, ‘Accessing the student voice – using CEQuery to identify what retains students and promotes engagement in productive learning in Australian higher education’, Department of Education, Science and Training, Barton, Australian Capital Territory, 2006, viewed April 27 2008, <[http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/higher\\_education/publications\\_resources/profiles/access\\_student\\_voice.htm](http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/higher_education/publications_resources/profiles/access_student_voice.htm)

Teaching methods include: introductory research activities (exploring various media), per assisted learning, role play, group work, blended learning is incorporated into teaching activities to enhance student learning

Students entering the MSAFP choose to enter into a Social Science, Information Technology, Health Sciences or Business and Economics Stream depending on the field of study they wish to enter for undergraduate study. On successful completion of all units and a 50% average, students may gain admission to one of the undergraduate degrees on offer at Monash South Africa, or into an equivalent undergraduate degree at Monash University, Australia.

As a result of rapidly increasing numbers over the last eleven years the MSAFP has evolved to meet the demands of a diversifying student cohort to ensure that the students are effectively prepared for undergraduate study. One measure of the success of the Programme is that 75–85% of Foundation students progress into first year university. The 2006 AUQA audit commended Monash University for its pathway programs — Monash College and the Academic Development Program (former name of MSAFP) at Monash South Africa — which effectively prepare its students for further study and facilitate the transfer of students to the University. Through the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Quality) at Monash University the MSAFP was invited to participate in the AUQA Good Practices Online Website to share its best practice. The AUQA Good Practice Database, is an online searchable collection of systems and activities that are relevant to quality assurance and good outcomes in Australasian higher education.

The programme makes a contribution to MSA financially in terms of income derived from student fees. The programme is financially self-sustaining. As the Programme has evolved and staff have reflected upon its operation, it has become clear that replacing ‘content-based’ units with ‘skills-based’, generic units will provide a more appropriate foundation for academic success in undergraduate study. An example of this evolution has been the introduction of Service Learning within ‘stream- specific’ units which further serve to address specific community, curriculum and student needs.

In terms of co-ordination the Programme is led by a full-time Programme Manager. There are currently 12 full-time staff members including a full-time Programme Administrator. Two common hours are earmarked for all MSAFP staff in their weekly timetables for internal staff meetings, staff development and general Monash South Africa staff meetings. Four to five

meetings per semester are held between elected class representatives and MSAFP staff to improve two-way communication on teaching and learning matters.

Evaluation of the MSAFP has covered a number of aspects:

- The staff of the MSAFP are invited annually to fill in a Staff Attitude Survey which provides them with an opportunity to provide feedback on their experience of working at Monash South Africa and ultimately as employees of Monash University.
- Unit Evaluations (an institution-wide instrument to ensure the systematic evaluation of all units at Monash for quality assurance and improvement purposes) are conducted for each of the 15 units of the programme each semester. Staff members are asked to draw up improvement plans based on these evaluations each semester. The same applies to Monquest Evaluations (also an institution-wide instrument structured to enable student feedback on specific aspects of a staff member's teaching so they can be a source of useful feedback for him or her).

The teachers of the Foundation Programme are appointed on their track records of teaching excellence in secondary schools and/or in similar tertiary pathway programmes in South Africa. Teachers have a degree and a teaching qualification. Monash South Africa fully supports those teachers wishing to pursue higher degree qualifications.

### **Practical strategies introduced to successfully transition students into Higher Education**

The Tutor-Mentor Programme was developed for students because of the diverse cultural and social backgrounds of the MSAFP student body. Concomitant problems arising from cultural and societal diversity as well as varying academic levels, leads to academic and psychosocial disengagement that can affect the desired academic outcomes of the course. These challenges as well as the numerical growth in the MSAFP student body led to the development and successful implementation of a tutoring and mentoring programme at Monash South Africa specifically for use by MSAFP teachers and its students. A policy and guidelines for tutor-mentors and staff have been drawn up and approved.

The role of student tutor-mentors is to give guidance to their peers so as to assist them in making an easy transition into student life. Such assistance includes academic as well as emotional and

social support and practical assistance to help them become familiar with the ethos and practices of the University and the campus. Under the Programme, undergraduate and/or postgraduate students of MSA, who have been through the MSAFP, tutor MSAFP students under the guidance and direction of unit teachers. This may take the form of individual tutor-mentor partnerships, or small tutorial groups that cover academic study material.

Potential tutors must have achieved a minimum of a distinction grade in their tutoring subject. Extensive training and guidance is provided to teacher tutor-mentors. They must also attend a full one-day tutor and facilitator training before the start of semester.. The material (portfolio) and assessment requirement (classroom observation) for this course are revised and updated each year. Examples of topics and themes include the following: the qualities of an effective tutor; roles and responsibilities; expectations and preparation; classroom management; best practice; multiple methodologies; understanding (your) learners – learning styles and implications; asking and managing questions and handling difficult situations. Students are also required to develop tutor portfolios which are assessed by the Teacher and Student Support Officer of the MSAFP. Once a potential tutor has fulfilled all the assessment requirements and completed the observation assessment they are awarded a Monash South Africa Certificate of Competence. This is awarded to relevant students at a prestigious Student Awards function which is held each semester. The Tutor-Mentor Programme has enjoyed much success since its inception in 2003 and has become an essential part of the quality teaching and learning cycle on this campus and students are keen to register and participate. Students sometimes learn most effectively with their peers and this relationship does much to ease the sometimes difficult transition from secondary school to higher education. Evidence for the quality and effectiveness of the programme within the MSAFP is that the Programme received a commendation in the 2007 HEQC/AUQA audit.

Another informal tool implemented within the MSAFP to enhance the student experience has been the establishment of a Class Representatives Forum in 2006. Previously the MSAFP staff had limited opportunities to meet regularly with students to receive and give feedback on teaching and learning matters. Apart from the initial week of orientation there were limited opportunities for teaching staff and students to communicate on teaching and learning issues outside the classroom.

Class representative meetings allow for regular communication on academic programme matters. They allow for collaborative problem solving where necessary and to the opportunity to celebrate and share good practice in classrooms. New class representatives are elected in the MSAFP each semester. Their main purpose is to gather the issues of teaching and learning of their peers and convey these constructively at meetings planned and attended by fellow class representatives, staff of the MSAFP and the MSAFP Manager. The meetings are held at regular intervals during the semester. Class representatives discuss any teaching and learning issues which have arisen and report back to their constituencies. The meetings are an opportunity to put forward the representative's class' views on the learning and teaching they are receiving. Participants discuss how the courses are going generally and consider any issues arising from student feedback. Examples of recent issues and feedback include: students asking staff to hold voluntary presentation skills workshops for MSAFP students at the beginning of each semester; a request for more time in the Academic English unit (ADP 1025) to be spent on developing referencing skills; suggestions to write all tests in a common timetabled 'window' built into all students' timetables; and introducing a possible 'flexible week' in the semester where consolidation of learning and revision takes place.

Conversely, the class representative meetings are an opportunity for staff to share / disseminate important information to students and an opportunity to clarify programme matters. Examples of this include clarification of course rules and regulations; matters regarding satisfactory attendance in tutorials; working with peers and accepting diversity and individual differences; and roles of students and staff in their interactions with one another.

Class representatives who perform their duties satisfactorily are awarded certificates from MSA for their contribution to fellow students and staff.

Mathematics and Accountancy have been identified as subjects which MSAFP students struggle with academically. To this end, the MSAFP has introduced 4 hours of extra Mathematics tuition per week for students over and above their 4 hours of normal contact time since 2011.

Attendance is taken at these classes and focused tuition is provided by a specialist Mathematics teacher and qualified student tutors. The unit, re-named Mathematics Essentials (previously Mathematics Enrichment), was introduced three semesters ago and is timetabled for all Mathematics students. The target students are GDE and IEB Mathematical Literacy students and

IGCSE Mathematics Core students are also targeted as the at-risk students in this regard. Third semester students are also encouraged to attend these classes.

Accountancy has been allocated an extra hour for those students in need of extra tuition. This intervention, to be named Accountancy Essentials, is in place from the start of semester 2, 2012 and is being introduced due to the success that has been noted in the extra Mathematics classes.

It must be noted that students are specifically individually assigned to these extra hours of teaching. It is not a choice for some students.

Three years ago the need was established to have one experienced teacher take the reins and responsibility for overseeing the general wellbeing and academic progress of students. This led to the creation of a full time Teacher and Student Support Officer position. This person works closely with staff members to provide targeted guidance, academic and psycho-social support and advice to students. Under-performing students are guided toward planned, tailored interventions suited to their needs. There is not a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to student intervention in the MSAFP. Different students have different needs and so unique guidance and support is provided to various students in various ways. For example, some students are referred to the Student Development Department where formal counseling advice can be provided. In this instance, there is an ongoing working relationship between the two department to ensure that the student is then provided with appropriate support, for example, more time to complete outstanding work due to extenuating circumstances. Some students are referred to peer tutors for academic support. In some cases the Teacher and Student Support Officer will negotiate extra consultation time with teachers. From Semester 2, 2012 this staff member, along with a few experienced staff members, will have a 'Re-Orientation' with 'new to course' students in week 3 of the semester. The demands of making the transition to university is often overwhelming and students very often do not 'absorb' all the important information given to them during the initial orientation week.

In line with the MSAFP's vision for holistic development of students a MSAFP Student Tracking Database has been created to serve the specific needs of MSAFP teachers and the Student Support Officer.

The needs addressed by the data base are:

- 1) A sustainable web based device to monitor at risk students.
- 2) A data base that supports easy and quick access to measure attendance in all units at one glance (the MSAFP have an 85% attendance requirement for examination entrance).
- 3) A data base that is designed as a support function for teachers and the Student Support Officer.
- 4) A data base that could engage with students quickly and effectively.

The data base is designed with two critical inputs:

- 1) Absenteeism per unit: teachers input absentees in tutorial classes
- 2) Marks capture: teachers enter all marks (including benchmarks, which are not calculated for a final mark)

Teachers are able configure class lists (as students may move between tutorials during week 1 and 2 of the semester). Absenteeism can also be recorded as arrived late, left early or excused absent. Different colours denote different students (for example, green would indicate a student who is in his/her third semester). As marks are recorded teachers can track overall averages and weighted averages per student. Comments can also be made to specific assignments. Also, comments on particular students can be made and can be supplemented by evidence in the form of a file upload.

The data base can configure a number of reports:

- 1) Consolidated report: in this report a student's academic and attendance progress can be monitored.
- 2) Absentees summary report: in this report an absentee summary for a tutorial group or the unit can be monitored.
- 3) Risk absenteeism report: in this report students, who are absent, can be monitored. This report has administrative access only.
- 4) Risk marks report: in this report students with low marks can be monitored. This report has administrative access only.

- 5) Student units and semester report: in this report a global view of 4 units for each student can be monitored. This report has administrative access only.
- 6) Absentee capture report: this report is still being developed.

The data base is still in development, but its numerous features and related benefits have already been used in the MSAFP. For example, the student view of the data base was added in Semester 1, 2012. This enables students to view and monitor their recorded absent dates and marks. This will ensure transparency in the use of this database.

### **The Context of Engagement at Monash South Africa in addressing the inequalities and access to higher education**

The call for access, social inclusion and engagement will only be successful if there is a partnership between MSA and a variety of other role players in the community. MSA is working at fulfilling the Department of Education's (DoE) mandate to "lay the foundations for the development of a learning society, which can stimulate, direct and mobilize the creative and intellectual energies of all peoples towards meeting the challenge of reconstruction and development" (Department of Education, 1997:5). At MSA the partnership between the university the public and private sectors to "enrich scholarship, research, and creative activity; enhance curriculum, teaching and learning; prepare educated, engaged citizens; strengthen democratic values and civic responsibility; address critical societal issues; and contribute to the public good" (CIC, 2005: 4) is supported and encouraged.

At MSA learning has been identified as a key form of leverage in developing contexts to promote civic engagement, responsibility and awareness. MSA through its Foundation Program it is making inroads in addressing the inequalities of the past. The challenge that MSA faces, is how as an engaged universities "it can best serve society by preparing students to be active, principled citizens and by linking knowledge to public good through engaged scholarship" (Zimpher in Carriere, 2006:13). However, there should be a balanced approach in that community engagement and Foundation Program intervention should not be perceived to be the provision of

“a panacea for the deep-rooted socio-economic and educational problems of communities” (Hay in Erasmus, 2007:37). At MSA community engagement is defined “as actively engaging within and outside the university across local, national and international contexts with the aim to exchange knowledge, learning and cultural understanding for the benefit of society” (2011:1). Through the Foundation Program opportunities to access higher education has been created. Therefore at MSA the “combination and integration of service with teaching and learning, professional community service by academic staff and participatory action research applied simultaneously to identified community development priorities” (CHE, 2004:12), has addressed the priority it places on Social Inclusion.

Pioneering work has been undertaken by the staff of the MSAFP and the Community Engagement Department regarding Service Learning. Service learning is defined in the criteria for Institutional Audits by the HEQC (June 2004) as “applied learning which is directed at specific community needs and is integrated into an academic programme and curriculum. It could be credit bearing and assessed, and it may or may not take place in a work environment.” Service Learning was successfully piloted in the MSAFP in 2006 in a number of units and was assessed as part of students’ Continuous Assessment. In 2009, in conjunction with the Community Engagement office at MSA and the Students in Free Enterprise (SIFE) approximately 400 students in one of our fundamental Computer units have been designing websites for NGO's and NPO's in the physical vicinity of MSA.

Service learning has a significant role to play in the MSA community engagement sphere and the MSAFP has taken up the batten and has run with it. Understandably this is a process and there will involve a learning curve for the teachers as they find out what works and where the pitfalls are. Critical to the success of taking up this cause is to develop a sound platform for open discussion, reflection and sharing of best practice in an environment of mutual trust and respect. It is as important for projects and their benefits to be sustainable over a time period as it is for the projects to remain pedagogically sound in order to retain the value associated with the units. Service Learning was formally introduced into the MSAFP in 2011 in one unit of each academic stream. Every single student passing through the MSAFP has the opportunity to engage with a Stream-specific Service Learning project built into existing units.

Many scholars and philosophers have confronted and addressed the issue of learning and community. Dewey challenged the traditional principles of education that were prevalent in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. His focus was the process of lifelong learning and learning through experience. According to Bringle & Hatcher (1999), Dewey provides a foundation for significant student learning to take place. Such learning would be accomplished when emphasis is placed on the student's reflection with regard to the experience that was gained through service rendering and the application of theory.

All Service Learning projects within the MSAFP included a range of assessment instruments such as rubrics and importantly, opportunities for reflective learning as it was seen as critical that students be given the opportunity to reflect not only on their involvement, group participation, the evolution of the project, and the degree of perceived success of the project but also on the benefits of making a contribution to communities by engaging with them through service learning. Students, in their reflections were also able to make insightful observations about their own learning and how such learning was unlikely to have been possible in a project that did not engage other parties in real world contexts. Largely the student feedback was very positive with students being surprised at how much they were personally stretched in their learning or by the what they learned through working collaboratively on solving a real life problem or by the value they attached to being able to contribute to others through their work. From this perspective the projects were successful and careful consideration of student feedback and personal reflection on the part of the teachers will ensure that in coming semesters the element of assessment and feedback can be harnessed even more effectively.

At MSA there is a relationship in and with communities that has to be negotiated by forming partnerships between all the role players. Wenger (1998) has coined the term 'community of practice' for the learning that occurs within a social context. Learning, according to Wenger (1998), advances through collaborative social interactions. It is a function of the activity, context and society in which it occurs. A key principle of learning is that it has to be presented and learned in an authentic context. Wenger (1998) indicates that significant learning takes place in our lives through the various social contexts within which we exist. Members of a community

are bound together into a social identity by mutual accountability. Relationships of mutual accountability are established through interaction and engagement. As people function, there will be diversity and differences which can either lead to “a greater development or the breakdown of a community.” (Rowe, 2011) MSA strives to embrace these differences and create further opportunities for students and communities to develop.

### **Dynamic Approaches to learning at MSA enhances success**

In the context of learning and change, Dewey emphasized the relationship between the school and society. It is apparent that he saw them as being closely related. Dewey and other educational theorists continued to “emphasize that important knowledge advances occur when educational institutions focus on key issues facing modern society” (Elwell & Bean, 2001:48). Dewey held the conviction that “we learn in the process of living” (Saltmarsh in the CHE, 2006:15). The approach of MSA to this process has led to some of the success of the students. A number of learners from a range of underperforming schools were engaged in an intervention initiated by Monash staff, students and community partners. Over a period of 3 years 6 of those students have matriculated, completed the Foundation Program and have past their 1<sup>st</sup> year at undergraduate level. These same students having been tutored themselves are now tutoring other learners from underperforming schools.

This has emphasised that parents, lecturers, peers and others people all fulfill a potentially significant role in the life of the learner. This notion is important because communities as well as learners are considered to fulfill equal, but specific, roles in the learning process. All these parties fulfill a part in the development of the learner’s knowledge and thought patterns. They are all partners in the journey of learning. Although a variety of people have an educational role to play, the value of the knowledge gained cannot supersede the value of the relationships that that are maintained and through the systems implemented in the Foundation Program these have proved through the data and research to be one of the reasons for such a good pass rate. This relationship or interaction in the learning context is a fundamental departure from the notion that “mental functioning must occur first and foremost, if not only, within the individual” (Wertsch & Tulvista, 2005:61).

## **Conclusion**

The most encouraging aspect of the MSAFP is the transformation it has made in individual lives by providing higher education to those who would not have the opportunity to benefit from it. The potential of each student to enable transformation in their society from which they originate is inspiring. Senior Management both at Monash South Africa and Monash Australia have strongly supported the Programme from its inception. The step to introduce a credit bearing unit in the MSAFP through close collaboration with Monash Gippsland staff is testimony to the fact that Monash is truly a global university, where the potential and ability to engage across international campuses and learn from one another is endless. The programme was initially conceptualised as part of Monash's policy of internationalisation, which seeks to harness global movements of students to transform the role the university can play in global educational and societal development. It is one demonstration of the transformational potential of internationalising education.

The programme continues to evolve to meet the needs of its growing cohort of students. The curriculum changes on a semester basis through unit improvement plans drawn up by teachers and collaboration with relevant undergraduate staff to meet student and undergraduate needs. New forums continue to evolve and systems gradually become more sophisticated.

The staff continue to upgrade their qualifications and to gain valuable experience for our campus and country in dealing with the type of students the Programme admits. Arguably, the most rewarding experience for staff in the MSAFP is to bear testimony to the growing number of former MSAFP students who graduate each year from Monash South Africa. The academic skills coupled with the graduate attributes they acquired in their undergraduate studies are taken back to their developing countries where these, we trust, are put to good use.

The challenges that are presented by the African situation have warranted the development of a MSA Foundation Program educational model. The way we think, reflect and respond could influence how we experience the relationships that we form, the work situations in which we find

ourselves and every other aspect of our lives. The assumptions that we make, the values that we hold and our everyday actions would continually be challenged if we were to continually reflect on our lives. Change and development is possible through the application of the principles of learning in a community of practice and linking the learning process to new knowledge being constructed in a dynamic social context.

The way that the MSA continues to respond to the directive in the next few years will set the trend for the decades that follow. Through a commitment to excellent teaching and learning, partnerships, governance and management, volunteerism, and research MSA can provide a platform and a context for students to reach the destiny that is possible. There are many shoulders that are attempting to work together to move this vehicle forward. The possibility of co-constructing the journey ahead is a real one. There is the opportunity for transformation to take place, through collaboration and multi-sector partnerships. At MSA we should not shy away from issues that affect society that closely, but embrace and challenge them. (Odora-Hoppers, 2011). There is the potential for higher education to play its role on the South African stage, but it will take an “unwavering commitment to academic excellence and dynamic reciprocal partnerships” (Rowe, 2011) for this goal to be achieved.

An underlying message of this paper is that if the role and benefits of a university education are valued only for their economic contribution to the individual and society we are the poorer for it. The Monash South Africa experience, although still in its infancy clearly demonstrates that community engagement is indeed a worthy aspiration for higher education. It puts the humanity back into education and research successfully enriching the lives of the students who pass through our university corridors.

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